When teachers are victims: A study of support in Western Australian government schools for teachers who have been assaulted by students

Rebecca Evans

Edith Cowan University

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When teachers are victims: A study of support in Western Australian government schools for teachers who have been assaulted by students.

Rebecca Evans
Bachelor of Arts in Education, Bachelor of Education

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Education

in the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences Edith Cowan University

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ABSTRACT

The aims of this study were to determine the personal effects of student assault upon a teacher and what assaulted teachers feel that they need in the way of support. In particular, I wanted the study to focus on the personal aspects of the cases as I was convinced that assaulted teachers experience similar anxieties, fears and barriers to support and similar difficulties in having those feelings recognised. Many clinical studies of assault victim support have been conducted, however, seemingly none of them are specifically related to assault by a student upon a teacher. This specific type of assault involves distinctive factors which effect the victim, such as the assailant being a minor and the victim an adult and the student being an inescapable part of the teacher’s vocation.

Given these aims, narrative form was considered the most appropriate methodology for the study. Narrative form uses emotive, context-specific language to build meaning, a plot based upon some form of conflict and the use of multiple voices. Thus the participants of the study became characters within the framework of an academic study.

The idea that from the telling or reading of a story a type of truth can be developed is gradually becoming more accepted within the social sciences. This ‘truth’ is created by the reader actively constructing knowledge from constant reflection on the experiences of the characters and then modifying these experiences within the story by using cultural knowledge as a basis for comparison (Gray, 1996, p3).

In this study three individual stories were collected during extensive interviews and were blended by the narrator (researcher) into a story of teacher assault that highlights the effects of workplace violence on the victims and their support needs. The story format allowed the portrayal of the assaulted teacher’s perception and a brief insight into the frustrations experienced by members of the assaulted teacher’s family. The study also developed a program of the types of support that should be provided for teachers when they have been assaulted by a student.
The study revealed that the assaulted teachers experienced many similar anxieties, fears and barriers to support. The need for a specific support program for assaulted teachers was verified, as was the fact that support is currently not being provided. Using information from the interviewed participants, a program of necessary support was formulated. A plan for schools to follow in order to establish effective support programs was also established.
DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a
degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

(ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except
where due reference is made in the text; or

(iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signature ........................................

Date 20/11/100
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In my case, writing a thesis is a difficult task, not just because of the time and research involved, but also because my lifestyle had to change completely during the period of writing a thesis. Whilst I was the one undertaking the study, a number of other parties were deeply involved.

Wade, my husband was the task master, who nagged me to go into my study and work on my thesis each night. Without him it would still be in the draft stage. My parents played the role of support team; there were endless conversations over the telephone, running things by them and asking for help with sentence structures.

Dr. Rod Chadbourne, played an important role as the patient supervisor, who kept me on task and trusted me when I said it was coming. A quick phone call to Rod and I was back on task raring to go.

Finally I need to thank all of the participants who trusted me enough to tell their stories and share their feelings with me. For reasons of confidentiality these characters real names will remain forever anonymous; however, whilst unnamed their stories will not go unnoticed.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

WHEN TEACHERS ARE VICTIMS

I remember it all clearly as if it happened just yesterday. I can recall the smell of him up close in my face, my ears ringing with his taunts and laughter. And I remember the feeling of pure panic, blood pounding my head. It's funny, I didn't realise what was actually happening at the time. I just remember this terrible pain in my side and this cold, cold feeling. It wasn't until he had left that I realised that I was hurt. I looked around and saw their faces staring at me. The laughing had stopped. Why didn't they help me? I couldn't stop him.

(Rebecca Evans, September 1999)

We often envisaged teachers as elderly spinsters or bachelors who live, breathe and sleep education. Children can be shocked to learn that their teacher has a family and as adults we have often remarked on our children's teachers with comments such as, 'I thought they were old when they were my teacher!'

Surprisingly, teachers are human like the rest of us. They are not born as teachers; each has a life other than the school in which they work. Teachers have parents, siblings, friends, and spouses. They talk about work with loved ones over dinner, cry when they are upset and laugh over amusing experiences. They are of all ages and from all walks of life. It may surprise many students and parents to learn that teachers can be as young as twenty years old.

Shakespeare's Shylock said,

'If you prick us will we not bleed?
If you tickle us, do we not laugh?
If you poison us, do we not die?'

1 Shakespeare, W. (1594) The Merchant of Venice. Act 3, Scene 1
This age-old quote can be easily applied to the plight of teachers who themselves are mere mortals and not immune to pain, to hurt and to humiliation. The point I am leading up to is that as human beings we have certain rights, and these rights also apply to teachers as members of the human race. When children hit out at other children an outcry echoes throughout the corridors and irate parents demand protection for their off-spring. However, when a teacher is attacked by a student, parents, colleagues and society believe that the teacher must endure it- it’s part of the job and after all, the attacker is only a child. They all forget that these teachers are somebody’s children too!

Assault is a terrible crime that affects people for the rest of their life. It isn’t just the attack that scars; it is the loss of innocence. The violated individual’s sense of security and feeling of safety are forever damaged and can never be fully repaired. The scene of the attack brings back the fear and the memory of the attacker’s face can bring on night sweats. Some victims of assault will revisit the scene of the crime in an attempt to rebuild their lives. These visits require a great deal of strength and support and they usually occur only once. But what if the attack occurred in the workplace, a place you have to visit daily in order to maintain your lifestyle? Experience is a great learning mechanism. We learn from our past experiences. If we have placed ourselves in a situation which resulted in a negative experience, such as an assault, then we do not put ourselves in that situation again. When an assault occurs in the workplace the victim has two choices; return to the ‘scene of the crime’ where you are again putting yourself in the same position of vulnerability, or change jobs and give up your chosen vocation in life.

This is the dilemma that is faced by thousands of teachers each year. Assault upon teachers is wide spread. In 1995 as many as 13,211 assaults upon Western Australian State School teachers were reported to the State School Teachers Union of WA (SSTUWA)\(^2\). This large number may represent only of a small percentage of assaults on teachers, as the union believes that many go unreported.

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Assaults can vary in nature from the physical to the verbal. A physical assault may result in more visible injuries; however, that does not make verbal assault any less harmful. Parents, colleagues and, unfortunately, children constantly assault teachers. Teachers work in a high stress environment with a great deal of interpersonal contact; therefore confrontation is an everyday occurrence. Many teachers have become so immune to verbal assault that they would not even recognise it as an assault. Sadly more are becoming immune or hardened to physical assault as well. The issue of assault is very widespread and very dependent upon changes in society; therefore we must conclude that assaults will always occur. What we can do is change the way we react to these assaults.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Before I go into a detailed discussion about teacher assault in schools, it is important to briefly outline the background to my study.

Why have I selected 'teacher assault' as my topic of research? This in itself involves an interesting story. I graduated as a teacher with my Bachelor of Arts in Education in 1995. Desperate not to be posted to the bush I decided to complete my Bachelor of Education and work as a relief teacher. This was a real eye opener and I soon learned that there is a difference between textbook education and reality; children are unpredictable. I was twenty when I began my teaching career. Whilst I am not a short person, many of my students were taller than I and a few of the year 12 students that I taught were very close to my own age. I knew I was a good teacher and I had a lot of memorable moments, but what I did not expect was the violence that occurs as an everyday part of life for the schoolteacher.

Unfortunately it was not long before I encountered this violence first hand; a teenage male student who was high on drugs threw a chair at me. The force of the chair was so strong that the leg impaled itself in the blackboard. This time I was lucky, the school was extremely supportive and the student was dealt with immediately by the on-site police officer. This initiation into the dangers of my chosen vocation awoke an awareness in me
and a strength. A later incident at a different school saw the opposite level of support. I believe the school staff would have helped me, but they were frightened. My attacker was an Aboriginal boy and the school feared upsetting the Aboriginal community, so I was advised strongly not to press charges. Perhaps I would have left it there, quietly blaming myself and slinking back to my classroom. However, the principal made a grave mistake when he told me I was over-reacting to "a little tap". I must mention that this 'little tap' resulted in loss of my own blood and numerous trips to the doctors.

Now, I am no Joan of Arc, but the principal's words stirred in me anger so deep that I came back fighting. I was no longer directing my anger at the boy for assaulting me, instead I was angry at the system that did not support me.

I was lucky in that I had a very supportive family. They banded around me and gave me the help I needed. I still sought professional counselling - mainly to help me through the period of anguish whilst I waited for medical test results - but life would have been so much easier if the school had simply acknowledged that my assault occurred and shown compassion while I dealt with my grief.

I became a crusader, a seemingly lone fighter for the rights of teachers who have been assaulted; I wanted to tell the world the injustice of it all. As time passed I became less angry, yet still driven. I did not want the blood of any student who assaulted a teacher, but I did want the world still to realise how important it is to support victims of assault, even when the attacker is a minor. Thus my journey began.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to construct an answer to the following central research questions: What are the personal effects of student assault upon a teacher? And what do they feel they need in the way of support?
Reference to the term ‘support’ refers to various types of support - legal, medical, professional, moral, psychological, micro-political and industrial. The term ‘assault’, for the purposes of the study, is defined as actual physical assault. It is acknowledged that most definitions include verbal assault and occasionally threats of assault. Whilst these have similar implications, the threats and verbal assault upon teachers are too vast for one study. The assaults referred to in my research are only student assaults upon teachers. The term ‘schools’, in this dissertation, refers specifically to state education systems. No schools in the private education sector are used in the research. The term ‘system’ is restricted to the employer (that is the Education Department) rather than encompassing other agencies such as the teachers union.

To answer the central questions I investigate three subsidiary questions, these being:

1. What does it mean for teachers to be assaulted in their own workplace?

2. What do the people within the system do to support teachers when they have been assaulted?

3. What more can be done at the school level to ease the trauma of the assault and to support the victim?

One of my main priorities is not to lose the human aspect of the story. Too many research papers analyse all of the data and forget that they are dealing with real people. People are a variable; they change constantly in response to their environment and experiences. As a result I decided to gather information for my answers through personal interviews with three teachers who have been assaulted by students.

The information is presented using narrative methodology, a format which allows the emotions and experience of the victims to be recorded as authentically as possible. The plot is the story of the assault, from a period prior to the assault, to the incident, then what happened immediately after the incident, and finally the follow up, that is how it effected
their life. Establishing the setting is vital to each story, as the setting is a substantial factor in an assault. A major influence on my decision to adopt the narrative approach was reading Jan Gray's (1996) study on the policy of including children with intellectual disabilities in regular classrooms. A lot has been written on narrative methodology that tells researchers what they need to do. Gray's study goes beyond that by showing researchers what narrative methodology looks like in practice.

So, without further delay I will begin the story.
CHAPTER TWO: THE LITERATURE

THE SEARCH

I started out reading anything I could find on the topic. I attended conferences, made phone calls, spent hours on the internet. It soon became apparent that there is very little published research specific to the area of teacher assault by students. A lot has been written on teacher assault of students or other forms of violence towards the student, but not on teachers assaulted by students. The media became my best resource; whilst they focused on the sensational and were very biased in their reporting, it was still something.\(^3\) I also found primary resources, word of mouth, a valuable tool. Word of mouth may not be as reliable as written text, yet the people I spoke to told a story, their story, and they were all worth listening to. I must admit I was surprised at how desperate many teachers were to talk. Thus I decided upon narrative style as the mode of researching and reporting for my thesis. I had heard of this style and one of my lecturers urged me to explore this relatively unused format of thesis writing. The more I read about narrative the more I realised that it would be appropriate for my study.\(^4\)

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\(^3\) Examples of these include Ashworth, K. (1996) Society mirrored in the classroom. *The West Australian*. June 21\(^{st}\), p.11.

The open nature of narrative methodology offers a freedom for participants to express their perspectives on the teacher assault situation. Adequate data and information on teacher assault is extremely difficult to obtain using more conventional research designs. Whilst my experience of the research methodologies was very new and still limited I believed that quantitative methodology would limit me in translating the strong emotional issues involved with teacher assault. The more I learnt about narrative methodology the more convinced I was that this was the most appropriate approach for my research. I travelled to several university libraries reading as much as I could about narrative methodology. It wasn’t long before I realised that there were a number of ways to interpret narrative. I knew that I wanted to tell the stories of victims of assault, that these stories would be emotive and cover some very sensitive material. But I also knew that I needed to tell these stories as the victim saw it, even if it was biased and touching on the controversial.

NARRATIVE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW.

My study is located within the qualitative rather than the quantitative research paradigm, (Punch, 1998). In recent times the qualitative paradigm has gradually become an accepted method of academic research, however, quantitative research remains the dominant method. Within qualitative research there are many different models (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; LeCompte, Millroy & Pressle, 1992), one of the newest is narrative methodology.

Narrative as a methodology is based on the premise that in the telling and reading of a story a form of ‘truth’ can be developed (Gray, 1996, p3). An increase in its use and success, has allowed it to achieve gradual acceptance as a sound academic research method.

The art of telling a story is by no means new. Narrating about past events is a natural, universal human activity and, as Nelson (1989) indicates, it is one of the first forms of
discourse that we learn as children. Stories are a means by which we learn, experience and discover; they enable the reader to develop a sense of ‘knowing’ through constant reflection and modification using cultural knowledge as a basis for comparison. Graham Swift (1993, p25) describes the power of developing knowledge from stories in his essay ‘Postscriptive Therapy’:

The imagination has the power of sheer, fictive invention but it also has the power to carry us to the truth, to make us arrive at knowledge we did not possess and may even have felt, taking an empirical view of our experience, we had no right to possess.

Whilst narrative as a method of academic research is not a fictitious piece of prose it does share many similarities with the art of fiction writing or story-telling. Jan Gray is one of the foundation Australian researchers in the field of narrative as a methodology. In a paper presented to an Annual Conference of the Western Australian Institute of Educational Research, she identifies some of the traits of narrative as methodology.

Typically the narrative form employs the use of evocative, contextualized language to create implicit meaning, a plot based on some form of conflict within a temporal framework and the use of multiple voices and genres. Generalisation from the sequence of events subsumed in the plot is assisted by the effective development of a ‘real’ culture. (Gray, 1997 p1.)

A story will have a plot, employ evocative language and use a number of voices or characters to unfold the tale. In narrative methodology, as Gray indicates, this basic structure is also used, a plot is developed with a beginning, middle and end. In more traditional qualitative analysis the text is often fractured, bits and pieces of a response are edited out of context. Narrative accounts, however, are more dependent upon sequence and structure to develop meaning and understanding.

Narrative methodology, like stories, relies upon expressive, emotive language and metaphors to convey implicit meaning. The text is rich in description, which helps transport the reader to the world of the character and relate to it. According to Gray (1997, p1), ‘the more effectively the story is told the easier the transformation from plot to consciousness.’ The power of language magically enables readers to transform the story
into 'possible-reality' so that they can identify, understand and empathise with the characters' experiences as they integrate the story with their own experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 1985).

The use of characters, or multiple voices, within a narrative methodology is also strikingly similar to the art of story-telling. However the significant difference is that the storytellers' characters are usually fictitious whilst the researcher uses the research participants as the characters and generally uses his or her own voice as that of narrator.

The telling of a personal narrative is common in research interviews and has been extensively used in the areas of social work and psychology (Gray, 1997; Kohler-Reisman, 1994). When being interviewed participants will often talk at length about their life experiences, so long as they are not interrupted with standardised questions. Often these responses will be organised into stories. As Gudmundsdottir (1996, p295) explains:

It is the phenomenon because the words our informants speak in interviews are often organised in a narrative, and we, in our attempts to understand, 'hear' narratives. It is a method because the whole research process – data collection, interpretation and writing – is essentially a meaning-making process, and has, therefore, important narrative characteristics.

**WHY NARRATIVE?**

Narrative, as indicated previously, is a relatively new method of academic research which, in the past, has not been widely used by post-graduate student researchers. Therefore, why did I decide to use this method of research?

There were a number of reasons, both personal and academic. Firstly, the personal reasons, I dislike reading academic works full of jargon and academic language which can make the lay person feel excluded. If I was going to put effort into writing an academic dissertation, I wanted people to be able to readily access the information within it.
One of my lecturers was supervisor to a student undertaking a dissertation in narrative research. The lecturer explained the various methodologies available to us in detail and then briefly mentioned the 'narrative style' and the pioneering work of his post-graduate student. I was immediately interested as I liked the idea of working with a fresh tool such as narrative methodology. Also, I must admit, I enjoy writing stories, thus the option of structuring my research into a story was personally appealing.

Additionally, as a recent victim of an assault at a school, I was determined to examine more closely the impact of assault on teachers by students and the ways in which the teachers can be supported after an assault occurs. I was aware that the topic of teachers who have been assaulted by students would be a highly emotive. Narratives are an important discourse resource for research as they enable the construction and expression of meaning. Catherine Kohler-Reisman (1994, p59) indicates that the ‘primary way we make sense of our experience is by casting it in narrative form.’ She states that this is especially true of traumatic experiences because, ‘All sorrows can be borne if we can put them into a story.’ (Isak Dinesen. In Arrendt, 1958, p175).

Using victims of assault as the main research participants would mean that I would be asking them to retell some very traumatic experiences. Literature on psychology and social work, (eg. Kohler-Reisman, 1994) indicates that victims of a traumatic experience would feel more at ease if they were able to recount their experience as a narrative. Kohler-Reisman (1994) also suggests that many mainstream methods of research suppress narrative accounts. Thus, by employing the narrative research methodology, I had reason to believe that the participants would reveal their account of the incident more easily than through more traditional research interview techniques, such as the use of standardised questions. As Gray (1997, p5) points out, ‘the telling of a story allows the researcher in the social sciences to reveal new knowledge, new understandings that may be inaccessible to them were they to follow more clinical, ‘objective’ methods of inquiry.’

In summary, the topic I had chosen was highly emotional and needed to be discussed in a form that allowed the emotion to come through.

NARRATIVE AND MY STUDY

I knew that I had to gather information from each participant and translate this into stories. I also know that transcripts can be dry and would need to be edited so that several transcripts would become one succinct story. I paid particular attention during one coursework unit when the lecturer informed us that no research is 100% objective. The researcher's interpretation will always seep through simply by what they include and exclude; the art is to plan to minimise the amount of subjectivity by accurate data gathering tools. Edward Bruner (1993) indicates that, qualitative researchers are not objective, authoritative, politically neutral observers standing outside and above the text; they are all-too-human observers of the human condition.

Various styles of narrative cater for the varying amounts of researcher interpretation. The trick with using narrative methodology appeared to be to tell a true story without crossing into the realms of fiction. As I was using the narrative style to develop my research for a Masters degree I knew that I would be ‘pushing’ the limits if I were to simply add an author’s note at the start of the stories. Or, as John Berendt (1995), states;

‘...where my narrative strays from strict non-fiction, my intention has been to remain faithful to the characters and the essential drift of events as they really happened.’

I must confess that when I first read Berendt’s work I believed it to be a work of fiction. I did not want to embellish the truth, as Berendt (1995) had seemed to favour, but I knew I would need to piece transcripts together, perhaps even change the physical characteristics and locations of the characters, as did Barone (1995), in order to protect the anonymity of my participants.

I started to see that it was not as simple as stating that I would use narrative methodology. To determine which style of narrative to use I asked myself, why do I want to use narrative methodology for this study?

Narrative methodology presented an advantage in that it allowed those involved to relate their story and create a valuable learning tool using personal experience. A study carried out in the narrative form allows the answer to translate knowing into telling. I also felt that the story of teachers who have been assaulted needs to be heard in contextual detail, and not simply be reduced to some numbers on a page. Narrative form is a powerful methodology for this purpose, because it portrays the human dimension of the phenomena. Letting people know the full impact of assault on teachers enables them to appreciate the need for well developed support systems in schools. I wanted to build a picture of the participant’s world as portrayed by his or her own voice. Clandinin and Connelly sum up this objective when they state that ‘the narrative form of research text is crucial to the text finding a place in public discourse’.

It should be stated that the form of narrative research I have chosen is only one of many forms of narrative inquiry. Narrative is not simply a format for emotive writing, and boundaries between fiction and research do exist. The power of a narrative form of inquiry is that it allows the reader to develop an understanding of the phenomenon being portrayed. The author/narrative researcher can influence, but not dictate, such an understanding. The reader’s understanding and the action taken may not be explicit in the terms outlined by the researcher.

Public discourse was one of my main aims; I was determined to write a study that would be read by people other than academics. I wanted change to occur by creating awareness. I decided to develop my study through a number of spontaneous ‘autobiographies’.

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whereby each participant has the opportunity to develop as a character. As the researcher I intended to play the part of the narrator by combining these small stories to tell my overall story of the assaulted teachers' needs and how we can meet these needs in the school environment. I honestly felt that the opportunity for teachers to tell their story exactly as they experienced it would provide the reader with a deeper sense of knowledge and understanding; this would enhance my study as the readers would be able to submerge themselves in the experiences of characters. I thought that through sharing the characters' experiences a deeper understanding of being a victim of assault by a student would develop.

TEACHER ASSAULTS

Over the past decade there appears to have been an increase in violence by students against teachers in Australian government schools. A number of surveys have been carried out in an attempt to obtain accurate data relating to this trend. Numerous papers and media articles have been written indicating that concern relating to assault upon teachers is growing. So what changes have occurred in our society to account for this apparent rise in violence?

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9 Survey examples include:
State School Teachers Union of Western Australia. (1993) Teacher Assault Survey. Copies available from the SSTUWA.

10 Examples of such papers and articles include:
Appleby, B. (1993) Draft 2, 20/08/93: Violence at work. [Available from the Employee Relations Branch of the Education Department of Western Australia.]
Discipline in Western Australian government schools has changed significantly since the early 1980's. On Friday 24th July 1987, Education Act Regulations 33 and 34, which gave authority to schools to impose corporal punishment, were revoked. Consequently schools and communities were given responsibility to develop discipline measures other than corporal punishment. There was considerable resistance to this change because viable alternatives were not provided to replace corporal punishment. In essence a major discipline tool was removed from schools but the staff, who had used this form of discipline for decades, were not given new disciplinary strategies. For some teachers it might have seemed somewhat like removing jails from our society and not replacing them with an alternative deterrent. I must state here that I am not saying children are like hardened criminals. If jails were removed from our society the majority of citizens would still uphold the law and do what is right; however, there is a small percentage of society that would not abide by the rules and as a result they would make society unpleasant for every other citizen.

The increase in violence within the school setting has been a major concern of teachers, union officials, politicians and the media. Health professionals have also raised concern, as many schools have not established support systems for teachers who are victims of violence.

In May 1993 the Education Department of Western Australia (EDWA) established an internal ‘Violence in Schools’ working party to recommend strategies to ameliorate the effects of school violence and where possible eradicate it. The ‘Bullying in Schools’ working party was established in late 1994 to examine system and strategic level responses to bullying. Both working parties were criticised over a lack of widespread representation and a narrow focus on bullying. Consequently the Troublesome Students Reference Group (TSRG) was formed and in 1995 it released a Discipline Review Interim Report. The 1995 Interim Report provided EDWA with 17 recommendations to reduce violence.

violence in the system. Five of those recommendations, numbers 13 through 17, relate specifically to teacher assault.

A report written by the UK based Education Services Advisory Commission [ESAC] (1990) reveals that staff in English schools consider violence at work to be one of the most important problems that they face. The commission claims that an atmosphere of continuing threat can damage morale to an extent where staff do not work to their full potential. The commission's investigations also reveal that a continuing financial cost to the system accompanies the decline in teaching services. It concludes that while there is,

‘...no simple solution to violence, and it is not the role of employers or staff to solve fundamental problems of violence in society, there is plenty that organisations can do to reduce the risk of verbal or physical assault in the workplace.’ (Education Service Advisory Commission, 1990, p1)

ESAC addressed a series of issues relating to what could be done by schools to reduce violence in the workplace, including security, dealing with confrontations, writing assault reports, staff training programs, and the role of the police. Prevention is the best method of dealing with workplace violence and whilst education personnel can not stop acts of violence occurring within the school they can reduce the frequency.

A number of professional reports, such as the ESAC report (1990), have highlighted that even when there is no physical injury, there may still be a high degree of emotional stress. Kate Nancarrow, in an article titled *When the going gets tough* (1993), claims that schools are vulnerable targets and all teachers will face some type of violence during their careers. In Nancarrow’s article, psychologist Sue Hoskings is quoted as saying that the greatest aid to teachers who have been subjected to physical or verbal attacks is simply acknowledgment from the school administration and their colleagues. I believe that the case studies presented in this study reflect similar sentiments.

A survey carried out by the State School Teachers Union of Western Australia (SSTUWA) in 1996 revealed that 989 cases of physical assault were reported by the 161 schools that returned surveys. It found that students carried out 90% of physical assaults
reported. These reports of physical assault included the use of various weapons, such as: sticks, iron bars, rocks, brick pavers, a vase, chairs, desks, axes, hammers, spears, replica guns, a knife and in one incident shots were fired with a real gun into a school. There were also two incidents of attempted strangulation.

The SSTUWA survey revealed that over a six-month period at one high school there had been 53 incidents of staff seeking support for stress resulting from troublesome behaviour by students. Another school reported that eight teachers had left the school as a result of stress caused by student behaviour. The survey found that,

‘Teachers are also unhappy with the level of support being provided by their administration and the Education Department where such incidents occur. One senior high school OSH representative commented that EDWA only provides support when SGC had accepted a workers’ compensation claim. Support at the proper time would most likely be less costly all round’. (Deschamp, 1996, p14)

It is not only the union that has acknowledged the rise in violence against teachers and the inefficiency of poor support. The Sticks and Stones Report on violence in schools reported in paragraph 2.4:

‘...teachers who were assaulted had great difficulty in returning to school. Many of them never returned. It was not always the physical assault that caused the major problems. Verbal assault, or a place in which their security was threatened by a student has a devastating impact on teachers’ confidence and on their ability to feel safe in a school environment. Teachers were sometimes transferred to another school, rather than addressing the violence which had occurred.’ (House of Representatives Standing Committee, 1994, p1)

The SSTUWA has been battling for teacher recognition of the issue of violence against teachers for many years. In 1990 the union felt that there was a seriously high level of violent incidents in schools and thus it made the decision to gather data on assaults against teachers and damage to their property. The return rate of the initial survey was disappointing with only 94 out of 750 schools returning surveys. Fortunately, the union decided to persist in an attempt to gather accurate and adequate data on this issue, especially as antidotal evidence indicated that violence was on the increase and incidents were becoming more serious in nature. At this stage no other organisation was collecting
data on student assaults against teachers, and without hard evidence the issue could be easily dismissed. To this day, almost a decade later, gathering data on the frequency and nature of teacher assault is not an easy task, as many cases go unreported and some schools still fail to complete and return surveys.

Throughout Australia a consistent trend of problematic violence in government schools is evident, particularly a rise in the incidence of assault upon teachers over recent years. This increases the stress levels of teachers and fears for their personal safety within their workplace. The State School Teachers Union of Western Australia claims that it has made a number of attempts to study the extent of the concern relating to teacher assault. However, many issues have impeded the collection of data. These include:

1. Disincentives for staff to report incidents of violence.
2. Insufficient information being made available to teachers regarding their rights.
3. A failure to publicly recognise the problem of rising teacher assaults by various education departments.
4. A lack of support by school administration, colleagues and the system when a teacher experiences assault.

These impediments to data collection have led to a preoccupation with the accuracy of data about specific numbers of assault victims. They have distracted attention from a much-needed look at the humane aspect of this issue; if a teacher is assaulted what should be done to support that teacher?

Schools have policies and procedures to deal with bullying against students and student assault; however, these policies rarely extend to the issue of assaulted teachers. When a student perpetrates an assault on a teacher the psychological impact can be much more severe than other assaults, such as assault by a parent, colleague or stranger. Student-perpetrated assault jeopardises the teacher's position of authority, which is vital to classroom dynamics. It undermines the teacher's confidence when dealing with children and it can imbed a constant fear within the work environment for the teacher. Humility,
anger and fear are emotions present in any assault victim. Violence in the workplace is always traumatic as the person has to either go back to working where the attack occurred or change careers. The difference for the teachers who become victims of violence in the workplace is that they do not get the same public recognition as the bank teller who is held up or the petrol station attendant who is attacked.

Literature on teacher assaults can be located in six main sources: newspaper articles, journal articles,\textsuperscript{12} reports,\textsuperscript{13} legal papers and correspondence, policies,\textsuperscript{14} and surveys.

The following key themes emerged from a review of material in these sources:

1. A rise in teacher assault without a counter-balancing rise in support.
2. A decline in discipline.
3. A denial of the issue.

**The rise in teacher assault without a counter-balancing rise in support**

The Education Department of Western Australia does not have a specific policy relating to teacher assaults; it simply refers to the criminal code when incidents arise. The Independent School Board also uses the criminal code; however, unlike the state school system they, and the Catholic education system, immediately expel any student proved guilty of assaulting a staff member. Currently, according to an EDWA spokesperson

\textsuperscript{12} For Example: The Australian Educator (1993); School Matters (1996); Independent Education Journal (1995); Preventing School Failures (1994)


interviewed for this study, the state school system can allow students who have assaulted teachers to return to the same school after a brief suspension of 2-5 days.

The State School Teachers Union of Western Australia (SSTUWA) does have a policy on the enrolment of students with a record of violent behaviour. It believes that employees have the right to be consulted upon matters with a potential to affect their health and safety at work. The SSTUWA also believes that in order to avoid unnecessary emotional stress it is neither appropriate nor desirable for a teacher who has been assaulted by a student to be working closely with that student. However, this is only union policy, not EDWA policy, and thus only applies for union members.

Decline in discipline

The literature also reveals that discipline in schools is the key deterrent for violence in schools. The unions claim that suspension is the ultimate deterrent; however, this only works for those students who want to be at school or have families supportive of their education. Various media commentaries claim that the decline of discipline in schools began with the abolition of corporal punishment in state schools.\textsuperscript{15} Support for the theory pertaining to a decline in discipline has been strong since the early 1980s.

Denial of the issue

Ten years ago the UK Education Services Advisory Commission (1990) noted that school staff will need to be positively encouraged to report incidents of violence. The commission felt that some staff might be reluctant at first to report incidents, especially verbal abuse, for fear that it may reflect negatively on their professional ability to manage classes. The issue of fear to speak out is common in the literature. Teachers who have been assaulted describe the ‘denial of the issue’ in these terms:

1. The system believes that, ‘if we don’t talk about it, it isn’t there’.

\textsuperscript{15} For example, Day, M. (1994) Authorities wrestle with school violence. \textit{The West Australian}, Tuesday, January 25th p.11.
2. Schools believe that if you tell people that you were assaulted you will give the school a bad reputation.

3. Colleagues believe that if they support you by acknowledging what happened they might be classed as troublemakers.

Various teacher unions in Australia have conducted surveys since 1990. The SSTUWA did so in 1992, 1993, 1995 and 1996. Statistical data is available on the incident of assault against teachers, both physical and verbal, through these surveys. Reaction to these surveys has been mixed. The media embarked on a full campaign of support for the SSTUWA's findings, whilst education systems used their energy to criticise the validity of the data gathering techniques. These reactions can contribute to the problem, particularly when they are underpinned by self-interest. For example, if assault is rampant the media have a number of high interest, controversial stories to increase their ratings and sales. If the assault rate is low, and all is well, ratings go down, as do sales, so stories must be found in some other area.

If the teacher employers acknowledge that teacher assault is rampant in state schools then they admit to placing employees in dangerous situations. This would open up a 'huge can of worms' which could cost the employers millions in lawsuits or increased security measures. If employers also admit that they cannot protect teachers from assault, they imply that they cannot assure parents that their children will be safe. If the system continues to deny that there is a problem, parents and new teachers may remain happy in ignorance whilst those employees drawn into the teacher assault debate are encouraged to keep quiet.

As for the teacher unions, their agenda for highlighting the problem has two possibilities. The first possibility is that they are genuine, the only party involved that actually makes

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16 The following surveys are available from the SSTUWA:
State School Teachers Union of Western Australia. (1992) Teacher assault survey.
the interests of the teachers paramount. However the second possibility is that this is a political stunt, a tactic used to manipulate the system for the purpose of bargaining power over other, more pressing issues.

This study focuses on support for teachers assaulted. It is not an investigation into the nature or extent of assaults on teachers, or the factors relating to assaults. It assumes that teachers will be assaulted but it does not attempt to find ways to reduce assaults. Also, I must emphasize that the research agenda was to look at the issues of physical assault, not stress or verbal abuse. Perceptions and fear are equally as powerful a defining mechanism for perceptions of need.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The story in my study is developed through a number of ‘spontaneous autobiographies’ (Bruner, 1990). As narrator (researcher) I combined these small stories to tell the story of the assaulted teachers’ needs and how to meet these needs in the school environment. The interviews were intentionally open-ended, to encourage stories to be told as the individual experienced it. In my view this is more beneficial to the research as support should be designed for the individual. The opportunity for teachers to tell their story as they experienced it provides a more realistic view of the needs of assaulted teachers.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There is no customised theory that explains the needs of all teachers who have been assaulted by students. It is not possible to validly claim that when a crisis such as an assault occurs the individual experiences xyz, therefore their needs are abc. As a qualitative study my research is based largely on a conceptual framework constructed from data given by participants. It is based on themes and patterns that emerge from the data. It should also be mentioned, however, that as a person who has experienced student assault I developed an embryonic theory or tentative framework, not to shape the study but to provide a starting point.

The areas of support that assaulted teachers need according to my tentative framework are as follows.

*Psychological needs:* self-concept, identity, self-confidence, faith in human nature, outlook on life.

*Legal needs:* knowing rights and responsibilities, entitlements and obligations.
Industrial needs: union support, industrial muscle,

Medical needs: bills, tests, transport.

Micro-political needs: support of colleagues as an alternative or supplement to industrial support; organisations can provide rally in support of a member.

This tentative conceptual framework provides a basis for developing a theory to explain the impact on a person who has been assaulted, the needs created as a result and therefore types of support that should be provided.

DATA SOURCES AND COLLECTION

Data for the study came from two main sources: interviews and documents. Altogether I conducted interviews with twenty-nine individuals who represented a range of people involved in the assault support process. These people were: two lawyers, two police officers, two teachers union officers in both Western Australia (WA) and South Australia (SA), two education officers from WA and SA, two members of a specialist counselling organisations, four teachers who have been assaulted and three principals, three relatives of assaulted teachers and nine secondary and primary teachers who had not been assaulted.

The lawyers were interviewed for the purpose of gaining information relating to legal advice and support available for teachers who have been assaulted by students. The police officers were interviewed to determine the options available, the processes involved with investigating an assault, and the avenues available for support through the criminal code. The other parties were interviewed as they play a more direct role in the support of teachers who have been assaulted. I selected the assaulted teachers through school visits, where I spoke to staff (or wrote to staff via the principal) about the purpose of my study. As a result of these visits and letters a number of teachers contacted me. After obtaining a brief outline of their assault experience, and after I had explained in more detail the nature
of my study, the most suitable participants were selected. Where possible I spoke to the
principals of the school in which the teachers were assaulted. Official policies were also
reviewed and discussed with the principals.

The interviews were recorded on audio-tapes and transcripts of them were made. These
transcripts were then returned to the interviewees for validation. Overall 14 hours of
interview material was gathered. The broad interview questions were based on my
implicit theoretical framework. (See appendix A for a list of these questions). In addition
to interview material, the data for my research included documentation from schools on
behaviour management systems, staff information handbooks and any school-based policy
related to crisis response. These documents confirmed my theory that teachers were not
receiving information and policy guidance on the issue of teachers being assault, although
one school did have a procedure for dealing with teachers who had assaulted students.

DATA ANALYSIS

In a broad sense, data analysis for my study was conducted in line with qualitative
research principles. That is, it was early, ongoing and inductive (Maykut and Morehouse,
1994). An attempt was made to allow patterns and themes to emerge from the data rather
than squeeze them into pre-determined categories. And data were analysed to achieve
what Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1990) identify as one purpose of qualitative data
analysis, namely, that,

‘...the researcher who is primarily concerned with accurately describing
what he or she has understood, reconstructing the data into a ‘recognisable
reality’ for the people who have participated in the study.' (Maykut &
Morehouse, 1994, p122)

However, when it came to writing the stories, the imperatives of narrative construction
took precedence. That is, data was analysed in terms of its relevance for writing a story
that had elements such as - theme, plot, characters, setting, style, tone, and point of view.
Furthermore, the theme had to be consistent with the research questions for my study,
namely: What are the personal effects of students assault upon a teacher? What do assaulted teachers feel they need in way of support? These questions required the stories to present the teacher’s point of view. Three similar, though somewhat different research questions, required the narrator (me, the researcher) to add her point of view. These questions were: What does it mean for a teacher to be assaulted in their own workplace? What do the people within the system do to support teachers when they have been assaulted? What more can be done at the school level to ease the trauma of the assault and to support the victim?

After analysing the data to identify the bits relevant to the research questions, I then constructed the narratives. In doing so I had to adopt a style characterised by concrete images and literary discourse that communicates the depth of experience, emotions and concerns of the assaulted teachers, the perspectives of other stakeholders on teacher assault and my own response (as narrator) to hearing the details of particular cases. Needless to say, the style of writing that emerges from this challenge differs from that of more traditional approaches to research documentation - as should be expected from investigations based on the narrative approach (Barone, 1995; White, 1981).

The final chapter of my dissertation, (chapter six), contains a model for the provision of support for assaulted teachers. It is based on an analysis of implications of the stories told in chapters four and five and several other types of data (eg. documents and interviews with lawyers, police and principals). Developing this model involved making a cross-case (narrative) analysis to identify common elements and a comprehensive range of support measures. My tentative conceptual framework assisted, but did not dictate, the analysis of individual stories and cross-case comparisons.

TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE FINDINGS

For narrative studies, the validity or trustworthiness of the findings depends partly on whether they further the reader’s understanding and make clear what was previously
unclear; that is, whether they portray a recognisable reality for the reader. Cronbach (1977) believes validity for narrative studies is subjective rather than objective and feels that it is the plausibility of the conclusion that counts. Bruner (1986) also informs us that validity is an interpretive concept. In this study, the main method to verify 'correctness' of the stories and trustworthiness of findings involved sending the participants copies of their interview transcript and copies of my interpretation of their experiences for their comment. Most responded with some surprise at the transcripts, as they had not realised they spoke with so many 'ums' and 'errs', however all were satisfied with the accuracy of the information. The reaction to my interpretation was also positive, although two of the participants cried when they read their own story, as they found it difficult to read about their own experiences told so directly. Overall only minor changes were made to the drafts and all participants were satisfied with the end result.

LIMITATIONS

The main ‘limitation’ for this style of research is the lack of general laws formulated. The data obtained from the four assaulted teachers is selective and can be viewed as an interpretation of events as seen by the victim only. In narrative studies, further selectivity occurs as a result of the researcher editing participants’ stories acting as narrator, and reflecting upon the information gathered. On the other hand, narrative methodology did provide me, as a researcher, with an opportunity to ‘practice the self-reflectivity necessary for revealing biases as well as the emergent and evolving nature of my understandings’ (Kathleen Casey, 1995).

I need to acknowledge a missing perspective in this study, namely, that of the student. Whilst it was my intent from the beginning to portray the teacher’s perspective, the voice of the student would have added further understanding to the assault. I decided from the beginning not to include the voice of the student as they are all minors and the ethical and legal complications involved with interviewing these subjects would constitute too great a barrier for my research.
Also, school administrators were not included as major participants for this study. This was not a deliberate exclusion, as I believe that their responses to attacks on their staff would have been very powerful and emotive. In the initial stages of my research I did intend to include the voice of the school administrators as major stories, however, a number of barriers prevented me doing this. Administrators were interviewed for general comments and thoughts on the issues, however, time limitations and logistical difficulties meant that it was necessary to limit the major interviews and thus in-depth interviews with the administrators were not included in the study.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

An inquiry such as this involves ethical issues concerned with confidentiality, the rights of the perpetrator, and trauma as a result of the interviews. To address these issues the following measures were adopted.

The purpose of the study was carefully and clearly explained to all participants. The teachers concerned have not been identified by name. To maintain anonymity of the four teachers and their assailants (minors) the specific details of the assault, the location of the assault, the name of the attacker and any details which may reveal the identity of those involved, were either withheld or referred to by pseudonyms. In short, the rights of each participant were protected as much as possible with regards to anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent. The participants were also informed that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any stage. (See attached consent letters, appendix B and appendix C).

Another type of issue was the possibility of the interviews resurrecting many past emotions for the victims of the assault. In such situations it would not be ethical to simply leave the victims to deal with their anxieties and fears for the second time. At the beginning of the study I was aware that a responsibility fell upon my shoulders to be mindful of this possibility and discuss with interviewees what I could do to assist them to deal with this should the matter arise.
CHAPTER FOUR: TEACHERS' STORIES

THE INTERVIEWS BEGIN

The alarm blasted out its annoying shrill, shaking me violently from the depths of my dreams. For a moment I lay, staring at the ceiling wondering why the hell I had set the alarm, after all it was the first day of the school holidays, a time when alarms and sirens are banished from the teacher’s world. Then I remembered that other part of my life, the postgraduate student. Today was the day I had arranged to meet Rachael. Rachael and I had spoken a couple of times on the telephone and had finally arranged to meet to commence the interviews. I knew Raechel was a young female teacher, who had been assaulted by a student a few years ago; other than that she was a stranger. I carefully selected my wardrobe for the day: a suit said too formal, but jeans inferred that I was taking a casual approach to the whole thing. After a great deal of deliberation I selected pants and a crew-neck jumper with a wool jacket, smart, yet non-threatening. I packed my briefcase, paper, pens, tape recorder with tapes and batteries. I must confess I was so worried that my batteries would run out that I packed five packets of batteries as well as half a dozen tapes. Grabbing the map book out of the car I confirmed my route. We had agreed to meet at a cafe in Fremantle, mutual territory but a quiet cafe that allowed for private conversation.

I arrived with plenty of time to spare and found a quiet booth at the rear of the cafe. Ordering a coffee, I busied myself reading through my prepared questions for the hundredth time.

RACHAEL'S STORY

A neatly dressed woman entered the cafe and scanned the tables. She was of average height and had very petite features. Her face was extremely pretty and many a head
turned as she walked towards my table. Hand extended she introduced herself with confidence, ‘You must be Rebecca, I’m Rachael Turner’. We got over the introductions, ordered a couple of coffees and got down to business. I must confess the more she talked, the more surprised I was. Here was a young woman, extremely attractive and intelligent who oozed confidence and yet she was so obviously upset by an incident that occurred years earlier. My curiosity was aroused, what had happened to this woman to scar her so?

It was my first teaching posting, I was so proud. All of my hard work had finally paid off. I was a real teacher. I remember when I graduated, Mum, Dad and I went out to a restaurant for a really nice dinner. It was a really special moment, I was the first in our family to go to university and I had actually passed.

When I got my posting we were all so excited. As soon as I heard we jumped into the car and drove out to the school. We just walked around it, peering in the windows and getting a feel for the place. It looked nice enough, very little graffiti, the grounds were tidy and the classrooms looked clean. We didn’t know much about the area, so we drove around looking at the houses and people, trying to get a feel for the place.

I rang up all of my friends telling them about my posting. Most were really happy for me... although there was one guy at uni. who made a really odd comment that I didn’t think much of at the time. I was telling a friend about my new school and one of the post-graduate students in ear-shot turned to me and said, ‘Did you say Freely High? [name changed] Have you accepted?’

When I asked why, he said, ‘I probably shouldn’t say anything but it’s a little on the rough side, be careful.’ Naturally I ignored his comment, I was a teacher, a tough 20 year old, and bullets could bounce off me... I lasted three weeks.

It wasn’t that I didn’t try. I was at school every morning really early, I was well prepared and so enthusiastic and I knew I was very capable. My career at Freely was cut short one Monday lunchtime during February.
I can recall that day very clearly. It was a warm day as is common in Feb. My morning classes had gone well and I was in a really good mood. I had worked through recess and was rather parched so I decided to head over to the staff-room for a cool drink. I was walking across the oval...my room was on the other side of the oval...when I noticed a bit of a commotion going on with a group of year 10 boys. Recognising a few of them as my students I walked over to the group to see if everything was all right.

Without warning I was grabbed around the neck, my head forced back as my hair was pulled hard. I fell to the ground as the backs of my knees were kicked, my assailant still gripping me around the neck. Fear filled every cell in my body, I cried out for help, but all I could hear was nervous laughter. Then, when I thought it could get no worse, the unthinkable happened... yanking my hair hard, so that I screamed out in pain, the boy spat in my mouth.

The rest is a little blurry. I remember somehow breaking free of his grasp and I somehow managed to escort him to the office - I guess the adrenaline kicked in there. I marched into the deputy principal’s office and said, ‘I have just been assaulted by a student, he is outside, in the foyer and I want to report it to the police.’

The deputy was an elderly lady - she just stared at me as if I had told her that the sky was green. I asked her, ‘What do I do now?’

She replied, ‘The school can’t do anything really, if you still feel angry you can go to a police station after school.’

Looking back on the situation I must have been in shock, because I walked back to my classroom, had a really good weep in the storeroom and then I carried on teaching. Although, again, I really don’t remember much of that afternoon; who knows what I taught those children?
At the end of the day I got in my car and decided to drive to the police station. That in itself was a problem, as I didn't know where the station was and my hands were still shaking so much that I could not hold the map steady enough to read it. I finally found the station and went inside.

There was a really nice policeman at the desk - I remember his kind smile as I walked in. I walked to the desk and said in the strongest voice I could muster, 'I am a teacher and I have just been assaulted by a student called John Burns' [name changed].

Well the first response was for three other officers to gather around – I was led to a seat and given my first words of comfort for the day. They took a statement from me and I also overheard a female officer saying, 'John Burns - has he assaulted another teacher?'

The police officers wouldn't let me drive home. They phoned my fiancee and asked him to come get me. They told me that it is really dangerous for someone in shock to drive.

When my fiancee came the tears started. It wasn't an act for him, it was just that someone who really cared was finally with me, I was at last safe and I didn't need to be in control anymore. I couldn't stop crying. He took me home and put me in a hot bath whilst he phoned my parents. I was given my first drink of brandy that night.

When I woke up my parents had arrived. I could tell they were worried about me and I knew that they were angry at the school. The funny thing was I really was not 'with it'. I remember feeling really numb as if I was floating and when someone spoke to me it took a while before I could respond, like being half asleep. My emotions were all over the place, I just could not stop crying, the slightest thing set me off.

Mum took me to the doctors; apparently the police had advised her to take me for some tests. The doctor was a softly spoken lady, very kind and seemed genuinely concerned. I felt like a pincushion: tetanus shot, diphtheria shot, Hep B, Hep C and HIV. She explained why they had to do HIV and HEP tests, but also told me that the risks were not high. I
still felt ill with worry. She asked a lot of questions about the assault and was quite animated when I told her the name of the school. She had treated several teachers from that school for assaults by students and she had no less than twenty staff on the books for stress related illness from that school.

Needless to say - I did not go back.

I must admit I sat they in silence for a while, in shock myself. Even though I had personally experienced student assault I was still horrified by Rachael’s story and yet amazed at how quickly she had opened up to me. I had been expecting to meet with Rachael a number of times before she felt comfortable enough to talk about the incident in such detail. It felt like we had an unspoken bond, maybe because we had both been crudely initiated into the league of teachers who had been assaulted by students, or maybe she saw me as a type of therapy, as a person who just wanted to listen to her story. Downing our coffees, we arranged another meeting soon, then parted.

That afternoon I reviewed the tapes and began typing up my transcript. A few days later the job was done and I started turning transcript into story. Hopefully Rachael would be satisfied with my work; I would take a copy to her at our next meeting.

Another meeting was arranged for the second week of the holidays. I had many questions for her. The incident was clear in my mind but the school’s role was not; this was one of my main focuses in our next discussion, the aftermath.

As I said last time, my family was really angry. I personally didn’t feel much, just this airy floating feeling as though my head were surrounded by cloud. It took ages for anyone to get through to me, sort of like a bad soundtrack, you know, like when you leave a tape in the car and it goes all garbled; that’s what the world sounded like.
Mum took me to EASE - they’re a counselling agency at the Department\(^\text{17}\). The woman there was a good listener, but I don’t think that’s what I wanted. I remember thinking at the time, just say something, tell me how bad it was, reassure me. My fiancee phoned the school and arranged an interview with the principal.

Going back was so scary, I remember just keeping my eyes on the ground, not wanting to look in the eyes of any of my colleagues or students - I think I felt ashamed and embarrassed as if I’d failed.

The meeting with the principal did not go well, my fiancee was really calm and he and Dad had made a list of questions, but the principal just seemed to have one agenda.

We found out that the student had been sent back to classes after lunch on the day of the assault, no one had bothered to check who his teachers were that afternoon- I WAS- can you believe it? They sent the student back to my class after what he did less than an hour before. Fortunately the boy was not stupid, he ditched class, I don’t know what I would have done if he had turned up. The principal told us that the student had been suspended for two days. Personally I felt that was very weak - two days after what he did!

My fiancee asked what the school would do to make me feel more secure in returning to the school. At this stage I still had every intention of going back to work - when I felt myself: What I didn’t want was to have the boy in my class when I returned. After all, I was an option subject teacher and there were many other option classes available on that line. I also did not want to do yard duty, a simple request I thought...but apparently it was too much to ask.

The principal felt that the best thing to do was get over it, and get straight back on the horse. He felt that I was making a big deal out of a little thing and that pressing charges would simply upset the students and damage the good name of the school. Basically his goal was for me to stop making trouble

\(^{17}\) Department refers to the Education Department of Western Australia.
I tried explaining to him that to me it was a big deal; having HIV and HEP tests is not a daily experience for me. I also tried to explain that I was scared of this boy - I felt that he may do this sort of thing again or at least intimidate me, especially as I was pressing charges. I mean I would not even go to the shops in the area in case I bumped into him. I would drive forty-five minutes to the next shopping centre just to buy my groceries; even then I would not go by myself. The meeting with the principal just left me feeling as if I was in the wrong, that I had been responsible for the incident. He made me feel as if I was just a young trainee who mustn’t be any good as I did not handle it right.

Was it me? Did I write something on this boy’s homework that offended him? Self-doubt began to set in.

I wrote down some notes after the meeting. When I read them now I am reminded of how angry I was with that principal:

- His attitude was ‘don’t make waves’.
- Told me to ‘get back in the saddle’ - deal with it.
- Felt like we were an irritation to him. Kept us waiting outside his office like naughty kids and gave us only five minutes, as that was all he could ‘fit us in for’. NO CONSIDERATION!
- Told me that when I was ‘brave enough’ I should get back to my job - patronising bastard.
- Told me that he had felt similar ‘stress’ but he didn’t need time off - he had become ‘tough over the years’.
- Told me that if I had felt so bad after the incident I should have gone to see the nurse.
- Was unaware that the incident had occurred until our phone call to him. Spoke to the boy who had said that he had swung around and didn’t know I was there. THAT DOESN’T EVEN MAKE SENSE!
- Could not assure me that it would not happen again, if the boy did do something to me again I should tell him straight away.
- Felt that there was little need for major change and could not foresee any occurring.
My fiancee was angry, my parents furious and my brother wanted to hunt down this student and principal and give them some of their own medicine. I think that’s one of the things that a lot of people forget, assault doesn’t just happen to an individual, it effects their whole family. I mean how would you feel if it happened to your mother or sister, if they were violated whilst at work, Christ, we’re meant to live in a civilised society! What really got to my family was that they were been patronised and treated as if they were troublemakers, when all they wanted was to be reassured that their child would be safe at work.

I was a mess, scared, hurt, nervous and believing it was all my fault, it was time for the family to take control of the situation. Dad phoned the school and spoke to the headmaster. He informed them that there would be no more meetings and that I would be submitting a worker’s compensation form for stress as a result of the assault. He also told them that I would not be returning to that school and had applied for a transfer. Dad then took pen to paper and wrote a letter to the Minister of Education.

Rachael’s father provided me with a copy of a facsimile that he sent to the Minister of Education after his daughter’s assault. With his permission I have included a copy of this fax and a follow up fax in this study. Names and details, which may reveal Rachael’s real identity, have been removed from the letter.

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FAX

"URGENT"

TO: Hon. Colin Barnett
Minister of Education

CC: Hon. Richard Court
Premier of WA

FROM:  

Facsimile No.
DATE:       
SUBJECT:    TEACHER ASSAULT

Sir,

I write to you not only as a concerned father but also as a concerned member of the public insomuch as teachers’ health and welfare are being put at risk due to inadequate forethought of the Education Department.

My daughter recently accepted a full time teaching position after spending the last year as a relief teacher whilst completing her second degree. She was offered a position at Senior High School and commenced at the beginning of this term after relocating to the area. On, barely one month into her new job, she became the victim of an unprovoked attack by a student whilst undertaking her duties. The school took little notice of the incident as it appears to be common place at this particular institute, however my daughter being young, upset and frightened proceeded to press charges with the Police against the offender. The following day she had to visit her doctor who administered a number of injections to prevent various illnesses and advised her to return in three, then six months for further checks against life threatening diseases.

In the first instance, the Police knew the offender and advised that he had previous criminal convictions including an attack on a Primary School Teacher, secondly her doctor advised that he had treated many teachers from the same school for similar incidents of assault.

Now it appears to me that the Education Department are well aware of the problems that exist in this particular school but have made no effort to remedy them, such as a Police presence, stronger discipline or expulsion of dangerous students. When issuing postings the Education Department appears not to look at the person but merely to fill the position, for example who in their right mind would place a 21 year old new teacher in a school with such a violent track record of teacher abuse. If my daughter had been advised of the past history of this institution she may have chosen to opt for another school. As such I can only conclude that the Department of Education is negligent under the Occupational Health and Safety Regulations of WA for placing an employee in a hazardous, high risk area without any form of protection or advice that such a hazard exists.

My daughter has since approached the Education Department’s Counselling unit but remains in a state of fear that retribution may take place at the school, at her home or even at the shops. She is a dedicated teacher who is studying Education Policies intending to make a career in Education but she is absolutely terrified of returning to Senior High School where her assailant will be present. I contacted Mr, Liaison Officer Department of Education yesterday, who advised me that should apply for a transfer under stress through her Principal however, quote “she will have to join the long queue of other teachers at the school already on the list” unquote.

This is totally unacceptable to my daughter and I. We have a young dedicated asset to the Western Australian Department of Education virtually being told to return to the scene where a criminal offence was committed and to continue having to teach the assailant until a suitable relocation is found sometime in the future.
I appeal to you as the Minister responsible, to intervene in this situation and assert your authority in providing a safe place of employment for my daughter by finding an alternative placement at the earliest possible instance.

I can be contacted if necessary during business hours via facsimile number ••••, telephone •••• or alternatively at home on ••••.

Trusting that a mutually beneficial agreement can be promptly reached to avoid me pursuing other avenues.

Yours faithfully

Having received no response to his fax Rachael’s father sent this second plea:

FAX

TO: Hon. Colin Barnett  
Minister of Education  
Fax: ••••

CC: Hon. Richard Court  
Premier of WA  
Fax: ••••

FROM: ••••  
Fax: ••••

DATE: •••• {approx. one month later}

SUBJECT: TEACHER ASSAULT.

Sir,

Further to my fax •••• regarding the above subject, I wish to enquire what positive actions have been taken by the Education Department regarding the assault of my daughter.

To date she has received positive action from the Police, her doctor, counselling services and her Union who are supportive and concerned that situations such as this often get "swept under the carpet". Please be advised that the Police have charged the offender following third party advice, her doctor acknowledges the stress involved with such an attack and has made certain recommendations to the Worker’s Compensation Board, the counselling services are aghast with the lack of support from •••• Senior High School and the Union is taking a particular interest in the outcome of this case.
It is appreciated that Education is only one of your portfolios and that this may appear to be insignificant on your list of priorities, however it is of considerable importance to my daughter and her family.

Your comments would be appreciated.

Yours faithfully,

We eventually received a reply, it stated that the department was satisfied that the school principal had provided adequate counselling for me and that the student’s two day suspension was again satisfactory. Two months later I received notice that I had been transferred to a different high school in the metropolitan area. I was glad that I didn’t have to go back to that school, but I also felt like a failure that had been honoured with a second chance. I knew my file was marked, and that all I would receive for the rest of my career was contract work; I had won the battle but lost the war.

I felt an immense sadness for Rachael. She was a strong woman yet had been made to feel as if she had done something wrong. I went home that night depressed and angry, the world was not such a nice place after all. Would things have been different if she had been a man or an experienced teacher? I would have answers to these questions soon.

MARK’S STORY

Mark and I had met through a mutual friend. Whist he was no longer working as a teacher he had worked as a history teacher for nearly twenty years. A short, middle aged man, with hair that was starting to thin on top, he seemed unapproachable. There was definitely a wall put up around this man. I presumed that he would be one of these ‘old school’ teachers, the sort that takes no nonsense and is addressed as sir. I found myself very intimidated by Mark. His voice made me sit up straight in my chair, eyes to the front, very reminiscent of my own school days. My friend told me that he had a great sense of
humour and was a really nice guy, but I am sorry to say that I could not ever see this man as the humorous type. I tried to lighten up the situation with a joke, but my attempt at humour with Mark made me feel like an insolent child.

Mark and I spoke on several occasions, firstly, at our friend's house, then over the telephone and also at the cafe, as I had arranged with Rachael. It took at lot longer for him to open up to me than it had with Rachael. Through several interviews and discussions I have constructed Mark's story.

I started teaching in 1975 in England. I went into teaching because I felt that it was an admirable occupation and I had a passion for history, thus I became a history teacher. Teaching was never an easy ride, the students could be very challenging, but there was always a certain level of respect for the teacher when I first started teaching. That's what society is lacking today, respect. The children of today can only be described as feral; some people have no concept of just how totally lacking in morals these children can be. I blame the breakdown in the home life, some parents just have no control over their offspring; how can they look after their children when half of them can't even look after themselves?

I immigrated to Australia in 1989 with my wife and two children. We moved for the warmth and to give our children more opportunities. Australia has a lot to offer, I really believe that and don't regret moving here at all.

My experience and my willingness to be posted anywhere meant that I found work easily. After a few contracts and a small period of relief teaching I was appointed as a history teacher in the outback mining town of Canoola [name changed]. It was very trying on the whole family. We didn't really expect the culture to be so different from our own and we had never experienced a country town before; even in England I had always worked in the city. We gradually settled down. Being a small school, the staff were very friendly, and everyone in the town knew each other.
Teaching is the same wherever you go and you always find the same type of students around; the studious type who are outcasts amongst their peers; the sporting types, who spend most of their time in training and the rest socialising with the females; and the hard balls, the type who do not want to be at school and because they are miserable they try to make everyone else unhappy.

Barry Jones was his name; they used to call him Bazza [name changed]. I just thought here is another hard ball, I've seen your type before. Well, Bazza swaggered into my classroom, full of himself, and ceremoniously found a seat at the back of the classroom. I knew he would be a challenge, his type always was, it was nothing I couldn't handle, I had been teaching for nearly twenty years and had experienced a few Barry Jones over the years.

Little things started happening at first, like my chalk would go missing, or I would find my pens taken. Then it started to get more obvious; the teacher's chair would have chalk dust on it, so that when I stood up my shorts were covered in chalk. Then the projectiles began, spitballs would splatter against the blackboard whilst I was writing or I would feel hard little bits of rubber hit the back of my head. I could never catch him, but I knew it was Barry.

It did affect me, I know that it shouldn't, but I started getting aggro at home, snapping at the wife and kids for the smallest thing. My work was affected too, I just used to try to survive that year nine-history class rather than try and actually teach. That class saw so many videos and worksheets that term. I was ashamed that a fourteen-year-old could intimidate me so much. Here I was a grown man with a wife and kids, and yet this boy was able to have such an effect on me. None of my usual strategies seem to be working.

It got to the stage where I would walk to my car after school and see him with his little gang watching me from a distance, and whilst on duty he would follow me again with his gang. When I went into the main street with my wife and kids I would see him watching us, playing his little games.
One morning I woke up to find the front of the house and my car covered in eggs, another time the mailbox was knocked over and potted plants were smashed. My wife knew something was wrong, but I felt that I could not tell her about it. I was the one who had to deal with it.

Eventually, after another row with my wife over my attitude at home, I went to see Kim, the head. I was uncomfortable asking for help, but I felt that Kim and I got on well enough for me to ask for his advice.

Kim seemed surprised that I was having trouble with a year nine student. He told me that I had to stand up for myself; I was a grown man and should not let the situation get out of hand in the classroom. He suggested that perhaps I had not been consistent enough in my classroom management. He also asked me if I was having problems at home. I left his office feeling like my teaching ability was in question.

Unfortunately Kim must have also had a talk with Barry, because things started to actually get worse. I had the aerial snapped off my car and rumours started flowing around the town about my capability as a teacher. I found locals would stop talking when I walked by and their eyes followed me. Even at work the staff seemed to treat me differently; maybe it was in my mind, but I really felt as if my professionalism was in question.

I dealt with it by withdrawing into my shell. I was not going to go back to Kim and I even started avoiding my colleagues. Many a lunch was eaten in the classroom whilst I attempted to make myself look busy with administrative work.

To Barry it was all this big game; he was enjoying himself at my expense. I couldn’t understand why I was so intimidated by him. He was just a boy, I was the man. I think that’s what made it worse.
One day Barry and his gang wandered in late to class, making a big disruption so the whole lesson had to be stopped until they were settled. I had had enough, my life was going down hill and this kid didn’t care, he was enjoying watching me squirm. Taking his usual seat at the back of the room he leant back on his chair and put his grubby feet up on the desk. I was fuming.

'Barry, take your feet off the desk and get your books out.'

'Yeah, gunna make me?' A titter of laughter erupted around the room.

I knew I should have stopped there, but the whole class was waiting, this was my last chance to stand up to the boy, to claim back some of my dignity. I marched up to his desk and violently thrust his feet off the desk causing him to fall off the chair. Again laughter erupted, this time they were laughing at Barry.

I turned my back to walk towards the blackboard, my hands shaking, sweat dripping off me. Suddenly he sprang, grabbing me from behind, I was pinned to the floor by two of his friends whilst he began a punching my face and head. The noise brought in the teachers from neighbouring rooms; they pulled the boys off me and helped me up. I couldn’t help it, I broke down and cried, even the teachers seemed embarrassed. I was led out of the room and taken to Kim’s office. I could hear the voices of staff outside, I had started it, and I had hit Barry first.

My wife was phoned and she came to pick me up. I couldn’t talk to her about it, as much as she tried to get me to tell her what happened.

I went back to the school, but only to hand in my resignation. Kim mentioned something about being sorry to see me go, but the relief was evident on his face. Nearly twenty years experience gone, ended by one stupid mistake, I didn’t handle the student right and I lost control of the situation. There was no question of fault on Barry’s behalf, he had been provoked, and I had touched him first.
There was no support from the school. I resigned before I was fired. It was my own fault anyway, not theirs, I had lost my ability to teach. We moved back to the city and my wife went out to work whilst I stayed home and took care of the kids. That’s it, end of story.

When his story was finished I saw Mark differently. My initial impression of him was wrong. He was solid, well built, but his shoulders definitely slumped and the way that he held his head made him appear a lot shorter than he actually was. He was a deflated man. Even now, years on, working in a new job, he was still ashamed, he felt a failure and would continue to feel that way for the rest of his life.

It was so tragic; this poor man did not have any fight left in him. The stress had not only affected him, but had affected his whole family; their entire way of life had to change. The wall that I had felt him put up was not one of arrogance or superiority, it was a barrier to keep others away as he felt so ashamed. I felt guilty for misjudging him as a stern, unapproachable man. I know it may sound sexist, but I really had not expected a male to react the way that Mark did. I have heard of women who are attacked feeling great shame and humiliation, but Mark was a mature gentleman, who seemed to be in control of every situation. I now saw him as human, not an authority figure; he was some-one’s Dad, husband and son.

Mark had been reluctant to tell his story, unlike Rachael who told her story with passion and spirit. Mark just wanted to forget the whole thing, he really did not want to go into a lot of detail. It was a real struggle for him to tell his story. Four years on he was still a nervous wreck. Unlike Rachael, he had not felt able to discuss the assault with his family, he was the man and was trying to save what little pride he had left. I only gained access to him through the influence of a mutual friend.

At the end of the session Mark looked up, still not making eye contact with me,
'The hardest thing to deal with is the total lack of control, no matter how hard you try, you can't pull yourself together...that's been the hardest thing for me. I hope my story will be of some help to you for your study.'

And with that he left. I felt like crying.

CAROLINE'S STORY

Caroline, a colleague of mine, volunteered over lunch one day to be my third story. Caroline is a very gentle, soft spoken, motherly teacher. She is always smiling and ready with a kind word; she is the last person you would think of as being a victim of a student assault.

We arrange the meetings at her house after work to record her story. Caroline, a twenty-nine-year-old mother of two, married to a police officer, was the victim of a student assault three years ago.

It was 1997 and I was employed by the department on contract for terms two, three and four at Garring Primary School [name changed]. This particular incident happened in a year 6 class. I must mention that I was seven months pregnant at the time. It was a pretty rough school with students coming from low-socio economic backgrounds and a lot of them also had poor support at home. They were often coming to school with problems that affected their learning and as a consequence a lot of the students came to class angry and annoyed. They were often easily angered by other students, even for minor little comments that another student had made on something. So you need to know that these kids had a lot of problems, it wasn't their fault.

Caroline gave the distinct impression of trying to apologise for her assailant before she had even told me about the incident.
This particular lesson was an English lesson, I had just finished writing something on the board that I wanted the students to copy and as I turned around this compass came flying through the air - a mathematical compass - and hit me with a great force in the stomach - obviously being seven months pregnant I was quite large at the time. It didn’t impale me but I was grazed by the compass and later had a nasty bruise there.

I saw where the compass came from and questioned the student who I thought had thrown it. She actually admitted throwing it, but denied throwing it at me; instead she had intended to aim it at another student who had taken her pencil. Apart from the fact that she could have taken out this student’s eye I doubted her story as the student she claimed to throw it at was next to her and I was directly in front of her.

I immediately went to my supervisor - each teacher had a senior staff member as their supervisor - and reported the incident to her. She then went off to discuss the incident with the student who had thrown the compass and with the student who was allegedly the potential victim. After much discussion the student admitted that she had thrown the compass at me in anger because the other student had taken her pencil and I had not stopped her. The fact that I was writing on the board and did not see the pencil being taken did not seem to be an issue for this child.

Anyway my supervisor felt that she needed to follow this up with the principal. At the time the principal was in a meeting - I don’t think that she was actually in the school. The deputy principal was not around at the time neither - I think she was out, like on a sick day or something. Anyway because of the severity, where I could have been more seriously injured and potentially other students could have been injured, my supervisor took it upon herself to suspend the student for the rest of the afternoon - after all she was the only other senior staff member actually in the school at the time. So the student got sent home and the parents came to pick her up.

That evening I went home and told my husband what had happened. He was really upset, especially as I was pregnant. I mean, I wasn’t that hurt, just bruised and a little grazed,
but it was the fact that I could have been hurt a lot more. I was also upset about the whole thing, and stress is not an ideal state at seven months of a pregnancy. I made a doctor's appointment just to check that the baby had not been hurt and that all was okay.

It took a lot of convincing on my part to assure my husband that I would be okay going to work the next day. He did not want me going back to work if there was a risk of me getting hurt again.

The next day when the principal had come there was a big you-know what. The parents had rung the school and a complaint had been made against me for not doing my job properly as their child was upset at having their equipment taken by another student. I didn’t even see it happen and here they were basically saying that their child was the victim.

There was also a complaint against my supervisor for unfairly suspending their child for the afternoon. As a result of the complaint my supervisor and I got called into the principal’s office and harshly criticised for our actions...um...basically saying we had poor judgement, we had misread the situation and that I was not carrying out my classroom management effectively. No attention was given to the fact that: a) I was a pregnant woman in the class, the compass had hit me, deliberately; b) if my pregnant stomach had not intercepted the compass it could have hit another student, perhaps in the eye.

Now this was clearly disregarded and the student who had thrown the compass was allowed to come back into my classroom the next day, no punishment. I was also instructed to apologise to the student for not stopping the 'so called' theft of their pencil. I was given some more warnings about going through the proper channels and over-reacting to situations. Basically there wasn’t a lot of support for me at that time. I mean, I was really upset and made to feel as though I was the one in the wrong. The other students were given the message that it's okay to throw something at a teacher, especially
if you want their attention, and that made me become more reluctant in dealing with issues as well.

There was an example of a student getting their head smashed into the window of the canteen - I was left on my own to do duty - this is the last day of school for the 1997 school year. By then I was like full into my thirty-sixth week of being pregnant and there was no help for me to help the victim of the attack, who had their head smashed into the window. The offender ran off and I, being in my condition, felt useless and because of the criticism earlier, how I had misread the situation and over-reacted, I had no confidence in my ability then or at that particular school to deal with any of these misdemeanours. I wasn’t going to get hurt again or get another reprimand for doing the wrong thing, so I just helped the victim up and got a kid to take him to the sick room. That’s one of the sad things, they’re quite major misdemeanours and they are going unnoticed and students are walking away with no punishment as there is little support for the teachers and I suppose that’s as far as it goes.

From what I have witnessed of my colleagues I would say that Caroline is a good teacher, but the state system lost her as soon as her contract was complete. She and her family decided that education in the private sector could offer her a little more security in her place of work. Her son was born healthy and unscarred from the incident. However, whilst she was not permanently injured the event changed her.

Caroline is still teaching, but admits she always thinks twice before involving herself with student disciplinary action. She confesses that she will turn a ‘blind eye’ and ‘put up with’ a lot more since the incident, as she fears putting herself in a potentially dangerous situation or becoming involved in a situation where she may be criticised. Caroline’s assault may seem minor but it was made worse by a lack of support from the principal and a lack of procedure in the school to deal with: (a) the student that assaults a teacher; (b) a staff member who has been assaulted.
Accidental or deliberate there is still a victim who needs to be cared for. If Caroline’s situation had been handled adequately by the school, her teaching ability and confidence would not have been so severely affected.

MY WIFE THE TEACHER: A HUSBAND’S PERSPECTIVE

I have one more story that I would like to add here. It is not the voice of an assault victim, but rather the voice of a family member of an assault victim. When making arrangements for the interviews I found some spouses, and parents of the victims, keen to add their opinions and feelings. These family members experience the trauma as well, they are the front line of support for the victims and are often themselves worried, anxious and extremely concerned about the lack of help given to their loved ones. As evident from Rachael’s father’s letters, the family members feel a lot of anger and a great need for answers. Bryan shared his feelings with me after his wife was assaulted by a student for the second time. Bryan is not the husband of Rachael or Caroline. I interviewed five assaulted teachers prior to determining which stories to tell. Bryan’s wife, Claire, had a very interesting story to tell, however I was not able to interview her extensively, due to demographic difficulties. Bryan was kind enough to write down an initial draft of his story and we have since developed it through written communication and telephone calls.

I've been married to my wife, a teacher, for just under three years. During that brief time I have been compelled on two separate occasions to leave my own work, travel to the school at which she was teaching, seek her out and go through the unpleasant task of comforting her following an attack on her person. Twice in two years! Each assault occurred in a different school. In the first attack a male student threatened her with a Stanley knife. The second attack was perpetrated by a female student, as she (the student) was about to attack another student. My wife tried to calm the situation but received a punch to the side of the face for her troubles. In each case the attack was accompanied by a barrage of verbal abuse involving obscene language that would see an adult arrested if said in public.
I’ve been asked to provide some insight into what I, as a spouse of an assaulted teacher, have gone through as a result of the assaults on my wife. Who would think that in this day and age of occupational health and safety, equal employment opportunity, and harassment free work practices I would firstly be asked to answer that question and secondly, be able to draw on numerous incidents to provide my answer? I guess the easiest way to present my perception of the events is to provide some details of the assaults.

Incident # 1

My wife is a highly competent individual who had spent a year or so doing relief teaching at a variety of public and private schools in the Perth. I work in the military and consequently move around the country frequently, changing cities every few years. Our first year together saw us living in Perth and she obtained a full time job at a nearby public school. She was enthusiastic and genuinely looking forward to the opportunity to stay in one school for a reasonable period of time. She had been at this particular school for a couple of months and things seemed to be going okay.

Then one day I arrived home to find her sitting the kitchen looking very run down. When I asked her if she was okay she said she was a bit upset because a student had attacked her during the afternoon. After getting over my initial shock I asked her again if she was okay. She said she was getting over it and gave me a few details - something about a year 8 student being upset in class (at something another student had done) and decided to take out his frustrations out on my wife, so he threatened her with a Stanley trimming knife, holding it up against her face. Fortunately she was not cut but the subsequent verbal abuse and the fact a knife had just been held to her face was enough to traumatisate my wife.

I remember gritting my teeth and wondering how the hell this could happen, why it happened to my wife, and how much trouble would I get into if I ‘had a word’ with the
student and his parents. The last point gives some indication to the turmoil of emotions that went through my head.

The next few weeks were somewhat surreal for me. My wife was going through guilt trips thinking she was being 'wimpy' by taking time off and not getting back to work whilst at the same time suffering anxiety attacks resulting from the assault. Eventually we (I insisted on going with her) made an appointment to see the principal of the school.

That meeting highlighted everything I knew to be bad management and is the epitome of bureaucracy gone wrong. Upon inquiring what the result had been for the student I was mortified to hear that the student had been suspended for two days. Two days????!! For assaulting a teacher????!! Let's hear it for the public school discipline system – to my military background the action/consequence equation didn't even come close to balancing out.

I suspect my blood pressure rose somewhat at that stage but I managed to remain calm enough to ask about the lack of assistance from the school she had received following the attack. He stated that she had received all assistance that was deemed necessary and it was in accordance with local school instructions. When I asked to look at these instructions (which my wife knew did not exist) he mumbled something about not having a copy handy – we decided not to press the issue.

Since the meeting was less than reassuring for me or my wife we asked what he was doing to ensure that this type of incident was made less likely in the future – particularly given my concern that the punishment acted as no deterrent to potential future aggressors. After another ten minutes of his ramblings, none of which indicated any understanding of the issues I concluded that for him the whole thing would be better off brushed under the carpet. The meeting was concluded with me stating that my wife would not be returning to that school and would be requesting a transfer to a different school.
All in all the incident had her scarred, dampened her enthusiasm for her job and her willingness to go the extra yard to help students. For me, the whole exercise was amazingly frustrating – I couldn’t understand how a system could look on with apparent indifference when a young female teacher is assaulted. If it had happened in the street it would have been in the news but because it happened at a school and the assailant was ‘just a child’ the whole thing was “too hard to deal with so we’ll just sweep it under the carpet shall we.”

Incident #2

Well, at the end of that eventful year I was transferred to Melbourne and luckily for me my wife decided to come and start her career afresh in a new city. She filled a number of short-term contracts in public and private schools around the city before securing full-time employment in a local school. She happily worked there for a year and a half – putting in long hours, getting promoted into a teacher/coordinator/head of department role. She seemed to be enjoying herself and I supported her career as best I could (attending her work functions, helping her with marking etc). Regrettably it wasn’t to remain so ‘tranquil’.

I arrived home one afternoon just in time to answer the phone. It was my wife and the brief message I got was to ‘get a lift to the school so I could pick her and her car up’. When I asked what was up, she said she’d tell me when I got there and pretty much hung up. Good grief – what had happened this time? I figured she didn’t want to drive because she was stressed about something but I had no idea what had caused the stress.

After a worrying ride out to the school (about 25 minutes) I found her office – unfortunately no wife. Instead one of the school counsellors greeted me (my wife had just stepped out to wash her face) and gave me the Reader’s Digest version of what had happened:

a. My wife was OK, just a bit shaken (Hmm, I’ve heard this before).
b. A student had ‘gone crazy’ and burst into my wife’s classroom intent on attacking another student. When my wife stepped in to defuse the situation she copped a punch to the side of her face – little consolation that it wasn’t actually meant for her.

c. Instead of seeing what she had done, the student turned on my wife and yelled obscenities at her, called her names that belong in an R rated horror movie, threatened her with more violence, and then stormed out.

I think it’s worth mentioning that the student was not a minor (she’s completing year 13 or some such) and was larger than my wife. Hence this is a classic assault case and could easily have been taken to civil courts. The student has since been suspended from the school and my guess is she’ll be asked to leave in the not too distant future unless she has a significant attitude change.

Once again I got to perform the comforting role. This time the school was very supportive (particularly the counsellor) and insisted that she take some time off, even arranging for flowers to be delivered to our home. It doesn’t sound like much but it goes a long way towards helping with the recovery process.

My wife has since returned to work at the school, I think she’s becoming hardened to the whole thing. However the toughening process has come at a price. Apart from the obvious stress immediately following the incident, the nightmares and sleepless nights don’t help either of our well beings. My wife freely admits to me that she is now ‘just going through the motions’ during her lessons and she is vigorously seeking alternative employment outside of the education system. I’m supporting her in her pursuit of a new career because I can’t see how the school system (with the current trend towards less discipline and greater ‘know your rights as a child’) will fulfil its obligation to provide her with a safe workplace free from harassment.

Over the last few years I’ve read a lot of literature regarding violence in schools – most of it aimed at protecting the students. Very little attention is placed on addressing the needs
of the teachers. I've also had the opportunity to talk to a lot of teachers but I often find myself asking the same thing.

In today's workplace there are a number of government policies that must be followed, either as good practice or merely to avoid prosecution in court/tribunal. Briefly the policies cover:

a. Occupational Health and Safety in the Workplace:- ie. workers have the right to work in an environment that is 'reasonably' safe and has risks identified and minimised.

b. Equity and Fair Practices:- workers have the right to a 'fair go' in the workplace and are entitled to a workplace that is free from harassment (sexual and otherwise).

Given the preceding, why is it that the education system apparently continues to ignore these issues when it comes to violence/harassment perpetrated against teachers? I believe that teachers themselves contribute significantly to the problem by allowing incidents like the above to be 'hushed up'. I know I wouldn't tolerate being sworn at regularly by people I worked with - why do so many teachers? Does society think that teachers have some special ability that allows them to shrug off the frequent abuse? I can state from experience that teachers don't - they react to the trauma of abuse just like everyone else would. The fact that the abuse is from a child doesn't make it any easier to deal with - in fact it makes it harder.

Sadly Bryan is not alone, with many family members of assault victims experiencing feelings of fear, frustration and anger at the totally unpredictable nature of student assault. Bryan is obviously very supportive and understanding, and yet even he admits that the assaults upon his wife have seriously affected his own sense of well-being and outlook on society. Bryan indicates that teachers must stand up for themselves and not accept violence so easily. His story told me a very simple, yet important message; violence happens because we accept it; if one person rebels against the trend and does not accept it
then change has begun. As well as providing an external perspective of the situation, Bryan’s story acts as a reinforcement to the teachers’ stories in that it again highlights the effects of assault by students on teachers’ lives.

With my series of interviews complete and my stories established I attempted to draw up a list of common themes and subsequently developed a list of things, which may have helped these teachers, in terms of support. Once I had made this preliminary list I conferred with each of the three teachers and together we developed the following list of actions which would have helped in their situations.

**SUPPORT SUGGESTIONS**

Teachers’ health and welfare must be protected in accordance with the Occupational Safety and Health Regulations\(^\text{18}\), which include items such as the right to a safe working environment, free of preventable risk to employees mental and physical health. Figure 3.1 of the regulations states that an employer must:

(a) identify each hazard to which a person is likely to be exposed;
(b) assess the risk of injury or harm to a person resulting from each hazard, if any, identifies under paragraph (a); and
(c) consider the means by which the risk may be reduced.

Penalty for failure to comply: $25 000.

In each of the three case studies presented in this chapter, employees were at risk of harm. In Rachael’s situation the hazard, a student, was previously known to have assaulted teachers. Rachael, and other staff, were not alerted to this hazard, thus precautionary measures to reduce risk from this hazard were not implemented. After Rachael’s assault

\(^{18}\) For Example: Occupational Safety and Health Regulations, Western Australia, 1996. Enacted October 1\(^{st}\) 1996. Details of the regulations are available from Worksafe Western Australia.
no further action was taken to reduce the risk of harm to Rachael or other staff with in the school.

In Mark and Caroline's case the assailant had not previously offended. However, if a risk assessment had been carried out, in both of their schools, the potential risk may have been identified. This would have enabled preventative measures to be implemented, thus reducing the possibility of harm being inflicted upon a teacher by a student. In Mark's situation the principal had been alerted to the potential problem by Mark; however, the severity of the risk was not identified by the principal. In both Caroline's and Mark's situation no measures were taken by the employer after the assault to reduce the risk within the school.

In all three cases the assaulted teachers felt that: (a) their health both mental and physical was put at risk, and; (b) their welfare was at risk by having to return to the same environment without the installation of any precautions.

Australian citizens have rights and should be granted these basic rights regardless of their chosen vocation. There is a strong need for teachers who have been assaulted to feel safe and be reassured that their workplace has carried out high levels of precautionary measures to prevent assaults upon teachers. What emerges from an analysis of Rachael, Caroline and Mark's stories is that the number of assaults could be drastically reduced by carrying out the following preventative measures:

1. A list of high-risk (hazardous) students must be given to all teachers.

2. Emergency back-up procedures must be formulated immediately in every school so that staff are aware of what must be done when a teacher is assaulted.

3. All yard duties must be undertaken by two teachers, preferably one male and one female.
4. Communication systems, alarms, phones, panic buttons must be available to all teachers working individually, especially in rooms such as woodwork rooms and other practical subject areas, or in rooms where there is a degree of isolation such as classrooms on the far side of the school.

5. A police presence at the school should be mandatory in schools with a high-risk profile.

6. Students should be reminded of their responsibilities to society as well as their rights. They need to be taught that violence is wrong and shown that society does not accept acts of violence. Students with known aggressive tendencies should be placed in early intervention programs and/or given lessons in anger management.

7. Disciplinary rules should be reviewed and revised with thought being given to 'time-out' rooms, where students are expected to continue school work, yet placed in an area where the teachers and students are given a break from undesirable behaviours. This may be a more suitable alternative than suspension as some students see suspension as a positive reward, which allows them a short holiday.

8. The Occupational Safety and Health Regulations WA (1996) are designed to prevent hazardous situations. To ignore these regulations or put them in the 'too hard' basket will result in negligence on the part of the supervisor (principal). It is also against Western Australian law. Schools need to acknowledge that some students periodically assault teachers and thus present a hazardous situation. Duty of care works both ways; teachers must provide it for students and administrators must provide it for teachers. If administrators do not provide this they are guilty of negligence.

9. Home economics and technology rooms have a plethora of potential weapons ranging from knives to dangerous chemicals. Students considered to be high risk should not be allowed access to these things.
10. In high-risk schools all open areas, such as ovals, canteen areas, and playgrounds, should have video surveillance. Even with two duty teachers, dangerous situations do occur. Surveillance may reduce the risk and/or assist with follow up procedures after an incident has occurred.

11. When an assault occurs staff, especially administrative staff, need to acknowledge that it has occurred. Victims of assault do not want to hear excuses or justification for the assault; they want to acknowledge that an act of violence did occur and that the staff are concerned about them. Disciplinary action is rarely the immediate concern of a victim; they usually want comfort and recognition.

12. When a teacher has been assaulted they should be comforted by a member of the pastoral care team and the next of kin should be contacted to take them home. No matter how insignificant the injuries may seem the staff member should not be expected to teach or drive home after the attack. As evident in many cases of assault, shock sets in after the incident. Therefore if assaulted staff appear to be fine, it may be that the shock has not yet set in.

13. Staff should be advised of an assault on a teacher. In addition to giving the victim recognition of the incident, it also prevents the development of rumours and gossip. This can also be beneficial in that it advises other staff of the hazard and as a result they can take more care when dealing with the same student.

14. Teacher training courses need to address the issue of assault with trainee teachers. Trainee teachers also need to be taught how to handle assault upon a staff member and be given a basic procedure to follow.

I recognise that there are barriers to implementing any new measures within a school. Logistics, equity issues and resourcing problems may be implicit barriers in implementing these suggestions. The measures themselves are offered as reactive suggestions to the specific cases presented in this chapter.
Support is desperately needed for any victim of an assault. As I had established what the victims feel would be of benefit, my next step was to discuss the issue with a number of other involved parties such as the teachers union, the department, counselling services and legal representatives.

THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

I decided to approach the Education Department with a few well thought out questions. One of my main aims was to try to determine why support policies and procedures had not been established by the department for these specific victims of assault. Tracking down a spokesperson from the department was not easy. I actually spent a total of three hours on the phone to the department just trying to locate a spokesperson and arrange an interview. This may not seem an enormous amount of time, however, I was ringing from my home in South Australia. In one sitting I was transferred to fifteen different people before eventually being cut off. Finally I bit the bullet and drove over to Perth, where upon I simply stood at the reception desk of the Education Department until the receptionist finally located someone to talk to me (again another hour’s wait). I had the distinct feeling that ‘teacher assault’ was a topic most departmental members would rather not discuss.

My interviewee was a senior officer in the department. He asked that I not name him, therefore I will simply refer to him as Peter. Peter led me through the cubbyholes of the department, an amazing sight in itself, totally organised chaos. Faces popped up from behind divisions like the prairie dogs of the Serengeti, tired, grey, overworked faces. Silence screamed at my ears, it was like a huge vacuum had sucked all the life out of this place.
Peter led me to his own little cubby-hole, I was sure he must have some built-in homing device, as it looked like every other cubby-hole in this vast building. His desk was crammed to overflowing with files and bits of paper, his computer screen almost covered with stick-it notes. Tired Christmas decorations hung against the partition walls, indicating that the occupant was too busy or too drained to remove them. Removing another endless pile of paperwork from a spare chair Peter offered me a seat. We exchanged pleasantries, then I commenced explaining the purpose of my visit. After reading my pre-prepared letter for interviewees and signing it I commenced my interview. Peter was extremely helpful and very talkative.

'What action does the Education Department take when a student assaults a teacher?' I asked.

Peter shifted his weight in his chair, scratched his head thoughtfully and replied, 'I can't answer that. It's not up to us really, it's dealt with as a criminal action, and reported to the police as a citizen against the person that's done it. But you're going to feel pretty silly if you've got a primary school age child who may kick or whatever and you wish to make a complaint against them.' He smiled at me waiting for a response. I let him continue, 'The difficulty is children are not adults and you can't prosecute them like adults, or get a restraining order against them. In the end it is the person that has reason to believe his safety is under threat and an application must be lodged with the judge, but again that all has to be done as a private individual. But considering the situation of a child assault it begs the question, is this the way to go?'

I took a deep breath. Peter's last comment indicated to me that he had never been assaulted, in fact I would be surprised if he had ever been a practising teacher. Turning to my clipboard I asked the next question,

'Are there any long term support programs that the Education Department provides for teachers who have been assaulted in schools?' I added quickly, 'after all it is a very traumatic experience.'
'Yeah, for some'

Was he baiting me? Peter gave me the impression that he saw the need for support as a sign of weakness. I nodded for him to continue, trying desperately to maintain my objective researcher hat.

'EASE is available, but I don’t know anything about that. I rely on others to tell me about that. We will provide information on certain regulations, be they school premise regulations or education regulations and you can go from there. So it’s a bit of a production line in terms of dealing with various aspects of this issue.'

I persisted,

'What does the Education Department do to ensure the safety of assaulted teachers?'

Peter smiled. He could answer this question easily, 'It really comes down to the issue of how to deal with the uncontrollable child. The issue is one that will have to be dealt with by consultation with school psychologists and a whole school approach to see how this issue can be best dealt with. Normally we would transfer a student to a more sympathetic school, where the school is better able to deal with their needs. Expulsion is an option, but it still leaves the minister with the responsibility to provide the child with an education. The last resort would be to put the child on the old correspondence system, but there are programs in each district to deal with difficult students.'

His choice of language was slowly revealing his views on teacher assault. I was getting the impression that Peter saw teachers who complained about stress or trauma as 'bludgers' who were simply trying to rip off the system to get an easy ride.

'Vet seems that there is a lot to protect the student here and their rights.' I said, 'But how does the Education Department protect the teacher?''
This question seemed to have hit a nerve. Peter responded with vigour. ‘Well in recent
times there’s been a lot of ‘arrgee-bargee’ about the occupational health and safety thing.
From what I’ve seen they (Education Department) take a very robust view at the
interpretation of what constitutes a threat. It may not be simply a person’s perception of a
threat. It undergoes a pretty stiff test as to whether a person has actually got the right to
leave a workplace because of a perceived threat. At the end of the day we expect our
teachers to bear up, to try to put educational practices in place. We can always just wait
for the next teachers to step up and try to deal with it.’

Again his language revealed to me that Peter did not hold teachers in high esteem.
Perhaps he had seen another side of teachers, however, it was upsetting to see a
department member refer to teachers with so little regard.

‘Do you feel that more should be done at the school level to support the teachers
who have been assaulted?’ I asked.

‘That’s really up to the department to make up its own mind.’ A very diplomatic
response, I thought. I waited for more, hoping that Peter would feel strongly enough to
expand on this answer. He continued, ‘My point would be that as there is a change in
society teachers have got to be real. It’s advantageous for them to understand how the
world is changing and to adjust their teaching techniques accordingly. It’s part of their
profession...I mean if they are going to come into the workplace as professionals, the
professional aspect is not simply the instructional aspect but also the management of
children, and I believe these people need to make sure that they are mentally equipped to
deal with these sorts of issues.’

Mentally equipped? Was Peter implying that those who are assaulted are not stable
enough to be teachers?

‘So if they are no longer ‘mentally equipped’, as you say, after a violent attack are
you suggesting that they look somewhere else for work? Or should the department
do something to help these teachers who were very professional but had a traumatic incident imposed upon them? I'm talking about violent physical assaults here!'

Peter paused, 'Difficult to answer, err, yes teachers need support, but there may come a time when they are beyond it as worthy trustees of the classroom. I think most teachers will tell you, at the end of the day you've got to vote with your feet. If it's not to your liking you make personal decisions as to whether you still want to stand by.'

I was so surprised at his stance. He seemed to see the need to be supported as a personal weakness. I could feel my anger rising, I had to control myself, after all Peter saw me as a researcher, not as a teacher who had herself been assaulted. I referred again to my prepared questions.

'Do you feel that there should be a standardised support policy and procedures for teachers in government schools who are assaulted by students?'

'I think it's reasonable to have something whereby at least people can talk about the incident without feeling...in a sympathetic climate, where they can articulate their fears, concerns and disappointments or whatever else. EASE is designed to deal with those sorts of issues. Whether EASE is enough is difficult...I would hope that if there is a serious incident an experienced administrator (would be) aware of what can be available for their staff and thereby place them in rehabilitative programs. I guess if there is a serious incident they could decide to take a day or two off so that they could take stock of the situation and make decisions on how they are going to return. But once again how do you differentiate between a temper tantrum and a savage assault? I mean all teachers at some stage are going to come across some pushing and shoving and so on, I mean that's just part of it.'

Gob-smacked, I thanked him politely, remembering my manners, even if I totally disagreed with a lot of his opinions. Suddenly the lack of support seemed to make sense. It appeared that the departmental senior official thought that all teachers should expect to deal with a bit of 'pushing and shoving'. Perhaps the department was of the opinion that
there is little difference between a temper tantrum and an assault when you are dealing
with children. If so, is it any wonder that there seems to be little concern for the teacher’s
welfare when, as Peter had said, ‘We can always just wait for the next teacher to step up
and try to deal with it.’

As far as this official felt, the department provides EASE and will advise on regulations,
so what else do teachers want? I feared, with the world rapidly becoming a disposable
society, humans too were falling into the junk pile.

INTERVIEW WITH A UNION REPRESENTATIVE

To complete my stories I had two more groups to visit: the SSTUWA and the Victim
Support Service. Out of all the wonderfully helpful people I came across when
undertaking this study Lynn [name changed], a senior staff member for the SSTUWA,
was the most helpful. It was she who pointed me in the right direction with literary
searches and passed on names of contacts.

The SSTUWA building was a grey, dirty looking monolith, with very little indication on
the outside as to the nature of its inhabitants. It brought back many childhood memories; I
used to walk in the shadows of this building on my way to choir practice. Brown sliding
doors with blackened glass slid slowly open as I approached the entrance. I was instantly
greeted by a silver list of the offices on the floors above. The only other object in this
void of life was the door to the lift and a black button begging for human contact.
Pressing the lift button I stepped inside a bright yellow lift and was slowly transported up
to the second floor where the heart of the union beat.

Lynn greeted me with a smile. Lynn was petite, showing no outward signs of her strength
or knowledge - an advantage in her line of work. It was her eyes that revealed the true fire
that lay beneath. Lynn directed me to a seat in her office. Looking around the room it
was clear to anyone that she knew her ‘stuff’. Shelves lined every available piece of wall
and were filled to overflowing with lever arch files containing material on topics such as
assaults, violence, policies, action groups. Lynn sat in another chair opposite me; the whole set up was casual and friendly.

'Do you mind if I tape this?' I asked, 'It helps me recall the discussion.'

'That's fine,' she replied, admiring my tape recorder in the process. My tape recorder is a very recent model, with lots of flashing lights and chrome. It caught my eye in the shop when I bought it. However, with hindsight, a more discrete, and less intrusive machine would have proved a better option for my study, as this recorder certainly makes its presence known.

It wasn't long before the rapport established in our previous meetings was retrieved. I began the questioning.

'Does the union have an accurate indication of the frequency of teacher assaults by students?'

Lynn smiled, her body language revealing that I had asked a sensitive question. 'No, I don't think we have an accurate indication, we have a snapshot only. We collect data in an annual survey but for whatever reason the response has got less. By that I mean the number of schools responding has got less. The department recently released their figures on the number of kids that were suspended for assault, so I would think that would be reasonably accurate of the number of kids that were suspended, but there will be other cases where the kids weren't suspended. So really there are no accurate figures, what we do is get an idea of the trend etc.'

A real dilemma it seemed, as it is hard to argue a case if you can't get accurate statistics.

'What advice would the union provide members with when a student has assaulted them?' I asked.
'If it’s a physical assault we advise them to go to the police, and we advise them that once they start that process they can’t stop it. We also suggest that they visit a doctor even if they don’t appear to have an obvious physical injury, because later on they may have to take time off for a number of reasons…” Lynn paused and gave me a knowing look ‘…so it’s important that the doctor has recorded it. We suggest that they have to decide whether they should take time off - not necessarily out of school, but maybe not with that class - or not to teach. It may be better to stay in the school environment, but some may need to be right away from the school environment and go home and of course we always suggest some form of counselling. And make sure that it’s all recorded. And we have some new processes whereby the union representative will check and follow through what’s happening with the attacker and offer support to the teacher.’

‘What support does the union provide for the long-term in the area of policy?’

Lynn shifted in her seat. ‘In the long-term we ask schools to look at their discipline policy reviews. We will often go to schools and talk to them (union members) after a problem, about their legal rights and what the act and regulations are about, information that is available to them and what legal sanctions they have. And often as a result of that talk you will find that there’s not a good policy or there is some sort of break down in the behaviour management policy. So we try to encourage them on a sort of policy of rewriting their discipline policy, where the parents and students and teachers all take ownership of that; so if everyone owns that policy parents, teachers and kids are more likely to be familiar with it and apply it. Err… I mean some might, it’s just a random act of violence sometimes isn’t it and in those situations we would just ask that they sort of follow up and support and provide counselling. They’re actually introducing a system in the Cannington district at the moment whereby they’re starting a peer-support group, whereby in each school a person, a volunteer, is trained to be a peer supporter…they’re really there just to help, to debrief and talk through things, if necessary adopt a counselling role or whatever. So those people are being trained by a clinical psychologist…those peer supporters network and they have a peer support person that
they can go to. That's being trialed at the moment and there is some very positive feedback from teachers.'

I frantically scribbled details down. I would try and find out more information on the Cannington trials. I continued with my questions as I was aware that Lynn had another meeting to attend,

'Does the union find schools to be cooperative when a teacher has been assaulted?'

Lynn smiled and looked at the tape recorder. I realised that a diplomatic answer would be forthcoming. 'On a whole... I'm afraid that sometimes they feel as if their hands are tied... So schools only tend to be uncooperative when they feel they're under added pressure... such as a race issue... they can be frightened of the bad press. The other problem is often schools have not documented previous incidents and all steps and measures taken, and then there's no way that the department will get a successful exclusion.'

'Do many teachers need the 'muscle' of the union when they have been assaulted?'

'I think it's all part of that support process, they're often so shocked that they don't know what to do and often they're not getting any sort of sympathetic reaction from the department... There is also the fear of counter-litigation... so we provide an access to legal advice. But really they're looking for someone to give them some sort of recognise that this terrible thing has happened to them. They just want recognition that it happened.'

Recognition, that was what the teachers were asking for; the interviews with the teachers had revealed this and now Lynn was saying the same thing. I continued to ask my questions with a small amount of satisfaction that Lynn was confirming the teachers' beliefs.

'What are the main questions or problems members face when assaulted?'
‘One of the main questions is, do I have to teach this child? Another main question is, what’s going to happen now? And can I take legal action? Yet another one is about repeat offenders, you know, what should the administration do to warn?

As an aside, warning is a real sensitive issue, so many of the teachers that I spoke to felt that they should be notified in advance if they are teaching a child who has a history of assaulting teachers. They felt that the school had a duty of care to protect them from possible danger by advance warning of a hazardous child. As I looked into the Occupational Health and Safety Regulations\textsuperscript{19} I began to question whether the school was in fact breaching these by not notifying teachers of this potential hazard. I spoke to a legal practitioner about this issue. He felt that it could be argued that the schools were breaching the OHS regulations by not informing staff of potentially hazardous students, however, as the students are minors it would be extremely risky for a school to advertise a student’s past offences to staff. But, back to Lynn. As a closing question I asked her,

‘What actions can the union take against a school that is not supporting an assault victim?’

Lynn’s sighed, ‘The union itself, the union administration can’t do anything really. Members come up with action to take...an ownership thing...we can direct teachers... Teachers are speaking out more. Some teachers are often embarrassed that the assault occurred. More rigorous reporting, standardised forms, and leaflets have slowly encouraged openness to speak up. The union is slowly changing the ‘keep quiet’ culture.’

The union is still fighting an upward battle for support. Fortunately the teachers have a ‘champion’ but the war is not yet won. It the process of our meeting Lynn shared a number of horrific stories and some amazingly bureaucratic problems. Whilst I was there she showed me a well-written memo for administrators, advising them of the support that they could provide for their staff. It was a very positive, helpful, and polite one page

\textsuperscript{19} Occupational Safety and Health Regulations, Western Australia, 1996. Enacted October 1\textsuperscript{st} 1996. Details of the regulations are available from Worksafe Western Australia.
document. However, to my shock, Lynn informed me that it was never passed on by the Education Department to school administrators, because they felt that the administrators had ‘enough bits of paper’ come across their desk as it was. How do you reason with that?

VICTIMS' SUPPORT SERVICE

I decided to interview Victims Support Service staff for two reasons. Firstly, as workers in an independent non-profit organisation they are available for any victim of crime, or family member of a victim of crime, and are thus accessible to teachers who have been assaulted by students. The second reason was more personal. When I was assaulted I was contacted by a counsellor from Victims Support Service who had been given my details from a police officer who I had spoken too. I found the Victims Support Service to be very helpful with the provision of information regarding my rights and services available for me. I also felt more comfortable talking to the Victims Support Counsellor than EASE. The counsellors at EASE were terrific in their support, however, they were housed with and directly linked to the Education Department and in my distressed state I saw them as agents of the department. I must highlight that EASE exists there to support the teacher and does not have some hidden agenda for the department. However, I personally was more comfortable with an independent counselling service, particularly one which had been recommended by the police department.

Anna [name changed], a social worker for the Victims Support Service, discussed the ‘John Wayne Syndrome’ with me. She said that many people hold the belief that when something bad happens to you the first thing that you should do is ‘climb back on the horse’, a suggestion given to many assaulted teachers from school administrative staff. Anna explained that this method of confronting your fear works for a few people, but can be very dangerous and destructive for others. The Victim Support Service advises that you should not be tempted into taking unnecessary risks, especially if this makes you feel uncomfortable. I asked Anna a number of other questions to gain a professional counsellor’s opinion of support needs for an assaulted teacher. These questions were
asked after I had interviewed the assaulted teachers, as I felt that the counsellor’s interview would help to confirm or dispute the messages that I received from them.

‘What type of trauma does the assault victim experience?’ I asked.

‘Well, it really depends on the assault I think. Coming through here we have people that have experienced a broad range of assaults - sexual assaults, domestic violence, home invasion kind of assault, assault that we call public stranger assault, which is generally what men experience, so I think the kind of trauma is related to the actual experience of the assault as well. It’s very popular to have categories like post-traumatic stress syndrome and particular type of traumas that you get after sexual assault but in general I don’t think, as a service, we can label trauma in that way. All assaults happen to different people and thus have to be treated individually.’

I nodded in response. I was glad to hear that specific assaults need to be treated individually, especially as I began my research with the belief that teacher assault was a specific type of assault and the victims had specific needs. I was finding that there were some similarities amongst all assaults, with regard to the emotional response of the victim. Therefore, I asked Anna,

‘Are there any similarities between all assault victims?’

‘I think there are, yeah, I think that, and this is just what you’ll probably find in the literature, from psychological literature or social work or psychiatry literature, that people have a sense of ‘out of control’, having a decision made they had no part in and it depends if it’s in the family area, you know – it’s a betrayal of trust issue, there’s no safety in the world. If it occurs in a public place generally people are quite shocked and surprised that that would happen, so yeah, there are some similarities. And we find that here, people are experiencing a whole range of crime and coming up with the same kinds of things – you know, one of our comment sheets is on sleeplessness because it’s a real common reaction.
to a broad range of crimes not just assault I suppose – the whole gamut. It’s one of the most common ones and eating patterns change, and lifestyle patterns change.’

I had attended a conference on workplace violence when I began my literature review as teachers are usually in their place of work when assaulted by a student. The conference presenters felt that there were many issues for the workplace violence victims to address. However, the conference was designed for legal practitioners and as such focused more upon the legal implications rather than details of the victim’s trauma. Therefore I asked Anna,

‘Are there any specific issues for the victim of an assault when the assault occurs in the work place?’

‘Yeah that is what we deal with mainly here. I suppose the kind of workplace crime we deal with is armed hold ups and things like that. Robberies - even if they’re not armed, if there is a threat there, it is considered to be robbery with violence. I think again it’s that sense that you’re in an environment where you assume you’re safe and people can get a lot of self-worth and self esteem can be affected if you can’t go back to work which is probably one of the most widely affected things if you have the crime occurring in your workplace. So I think that that’s probably what we see a lot of – people not being able to get back to work or associating work with something fearful or something unexpected which in the past wouldn’t have been the case.’

With the work environment of a teacher in mind I asked,

‘How would you deal with the fear / people when you’ve got to go back?’

‘One of the main things is for people to get used to gradually going back to the place they fear and I suppose that’s the similarity with other assaults. If the assault occurred at a restaurant or at a particular park often it is useful for people to go back. But just gradually; not to say, I’m going to go back to work full-time, I might go back half a day a week or I might be able to get used to the environment without that continual reminder
that that is where the crime occurred. I suppose that’s just a technique of re-acquainting the person with that environment again, and, as the unknown, it’s a place that’s never frequented again then it builds up into something that becomes bigger than it should or could be. They may have to de-sensitise themselves to that environment again but it’s a huge issue I think. And it depends on whose involved, you know if the employers are involved it might have a different focus than with someone who’s independent.’

Perhaps schools need to consider teachers who are assaulted by students as victims of workplace trauma. It appeared that this crime was recognised, whereas assault upon a teacher by a student did not appear to be recognised as an assault. I then asked Anna,

‘How long does it take someone to heal – is it permanent scars that they are left with or do a majority of people get over it?’

‘There are many people that believe if post-traumatic stress syndrome is not treated straight away it becomes a lifelong legacy. There are many that feel that an experience like rape or sexual assault is a lifelong legacy but there are many survivors who heal from that and continue their lives perhaps in a more fulfilling way that proves that healing is possible.’

‘Is it the talking in counselling that tends to get them over it?’

Anna paused and appeared to really consider her answer before responding. ‘I think it’s about getting a bit of control back, a bit of empowerment, and to make decisions for themselves again. Often in the experience of a crime decisions start getting taken out of your hands; police are taking control – friends and relatives know what’s best – some well meaning advice from a wide range of people and I suppose counselling is not about advice, telling you where to go now – but giving that person space to look at what options there are now, what’s normal and what they’re experiencing because it’s really normal stuff that will go away with time. That can be very reassuring – saying, ‘I’m not crazy and these are really normal things and I will get over it and I just need space and need to
adjust a few things in my life now'. For some people counselling is not the right sort of thing. I wouldn't say that all people need to see a counsellor over any crime really – it depends on the person and the situation.'

The teachers I had spoken to felt that seeking counselling was perceived by peers as a sign of weakness, or a personal failing. Therefore, I was interested in other therapy options that Anna was aware of.

'Are there any other ways people can help themselves?'

'Other options are support groups, rather than having a one-to-one. People find the mutual aid model really useful which is just getting with other people that have experienced a similar thing. I think probably a crime like the one you're talking about – which can be really isolating, I imagine, for victims because I imagine there's not much (and I can tell by looking at the literature) about it so getting together with people who've experienced similar crime can be really useful because people have got strategies to share – 'yeah, this is how I dealt with it'. And you know there are many other options. It depends on what works I think. For some people it might be doing a lot of exercise or simple things like that that can release them of that anxiety. Certainly counselling isn't the only way.'

Finally I asked Anna,

'Are there any permanent scars are left after a person has experienced an assault?'

'I think that's a point about how do people integrate. Whether people can integrate the experience and take meaning from it. I wouldn't use the word 'scar' cause I think scar predetermines what the meaning of that experience will be.'

Anna and I talked candidly after I had turned off the tape recorder. She had only recently started her career as a counsellor and admitted that she had not personally counselled any teachers who had been assaulted. Anna said that when I had initially telephoned her she
had spoken to several other counsellors in the agency to try and find out more about assaults on teachers. I found myself smiling when she said, ‘You know, it’s really hard to find any literature on assaults in schools.’ I too had experienced the difficulties of a literature review on the same topic. Anna found, as did I, that most material pertaining to assaults in schools was about assaults on students. She confessed surprise at the lack of information on assaults upon teachers. Anna had a number of teacher friends and had heard the stories herself, stories about students assaulting teachers. We hypothesised together on the reasons for this lack of literature, and I’m sure we would have continued talking for another hour or two. Unfortunately her intercom buzzed, and a voice informed her that her next appointment had arrived. Feeling like old friends, we said our farewells and Anna gave me her business card and best wishes for my research. I could see why she was a counsellor; she was so easy to talk to.
CHAPTER SIX: MODEL FOR SUPPORTING ASSAULTED TEACHERS

The information gathered for this chapter came from multiple sources, not just interviews with individuals or small groups of people. It departs from the narrative style and contains material presented in a more conventional style.

When I commenced my study I nominated two research questions as the base for my study. The first question was to determine the personal effects of student assault upon a teacher; this question has been explored in chapters four and five. The second aim was to find out what assaulted teachers feel that they need in the way of support; from this aim I developed the sub-question - what can be done to support the victims of the assault?

During the course of this study I received a great deal of policy documentation from eight government secondary schools in WA and four government primary schools in WA. An analysis of these documents revealed some common trends. All schools have a policy on the management of student behaviour. Within these policies a statement is made to acknowledge the need for a safe working environment for the students. For example,

A governing premise is that all students have the right to work in a safe environment, free from disruption, abuse or threat. The school seeks to safeguard this at all times.

(Extract from: MSB policy statement from Swan View Senior High School.)

What very few of these policies acknowledge is the simple fact that staff also have the right to work in a safe environment. Most schools recognise the fact that violence is a part of the school culture and have established critical incident strategies and procedures for responding to acts of violence. Unfortunately these documents rarely identify the possibility of a staff member being the victim of the assault.
The Sources

To answer the second research question I have developed a comprehensive model for support for assaulted teachers. There was no set model for support of assaulted teachers, therefore I used several sources to construct my own.

I have presented in this study a range of information, gathered from primary and secondary sources. The material has discussed what teachers and their families go through, when assaulted by a student, and various expert opinions on the issue of teacher assault. The interviews with the teachers, who had been assaulted by students, revealed a number of common themes. One was the issue of administrators not acting appropriately to meet the assaulted teachers' needs for support. Therefore I felt that it was necessary to gather information from the assaulted teachers and their families which identified what they felt school administrators can actually do to acknowledge and support their staff after an assault has occurred.

A brief interview with the EASE counselling service provided some further information. The Employment Advisory Service in Education (EASE), is a counselling service provided free of charge to all departmental employees. The Education Department has done well by establishing this service, but this is not enough. It is like sending a soldier with a pistol into a war zone - a good start but is it enough to win the battle by itself?

The counsellors and psychologists at EASE have been alarmed at the increasing number of assaulted teachers they are seeing as clients. EASE clinical psychologist, Della Clements, discussed the nature of traumas experienced by education employees with journalist T. Raffa-Mulligan (1996) in an article titled, 'Help to deal with workplace trauma'. Clements reinforced the point that reaction time to a trauma varies between individuals and can take two or more weeks to eventuate. She emphasised the importance of colleagues and administrative staff being aware of this fact, because when a person appears to be getting on with their lives as if nothing happened the support that is so imperative to a sound recovery is often lacking.
I arranged a meeting to discuss a number of related issues with an EASE counsellor. The meeting was brief, as the counsellor was very busy, however that person reiterated a lot of the issues raised by Clements. According to the EASE counselling staff many teachers, who access their service, felt that the administration did not take any notice of what the teachers said. In the article, Clements stressed the importance of teachers feeling that the administration supports them when they have been assaulted by a student. She said that teachers have to feel that there is some consequence for the behaviour. Overall, according to the Raffa-Mulligan article and the EASE counsellor, the EASE staff felt that trauma caused by assault would be reduced through greater support by administration at the school level.

Through the process of preparing for this study I attended a number of workshops on occupational health and safety and workplace violence. I also discussed the issue of workplace audits with a number of occupational health and safety representatives. With the assistance of Robert Unwin-Berrey, a risk prevention manager for an international organisation, I was able to develop a list of steps, which should be carried out before and after an incident of violence has occurred in the workplace.

I felt that it was necessary to discuss assault procedures with teachers who had not been assaulted, as they would be expected to react to an assault of a colleague. I arranged for a group of teachers, from both secondary and primary schools, to meet and discuss the issues that need to be addressed in a school policy and procedure documents for assaulted teachers. This group consisted of nine teachers, four males and five females. The members of this group varied in age from twenty-three years to fifty-four. I played the role of a facilitator in the group and as such did not participate in the discussion, I simply kept them on task. It was very interesting to see the dynamics within the group. The discussion started out very philosophical and academic. As the discussion progressed and opinions, the values of each individual seeped into the discussion. At times I was forced to intervene and break up clashes between individuals with differing opinions. I was extremely surprised to see how quickly emotions became heated when discussing issues of teachers being assaulted by students. One particular teacher appeared fixated on the
premise that violence against teachers was brought upon by poor classroom management. This opinion was not shared by the other members of the group. Using information gathered from the group discussion I produced a list of all the areas that the teachers in the discussion group felt needed to be addressed in a school policy and procedure document for assaulted teachers. I then passed this list on to a number of support staff such as union representatives, occupational health and safety representatives and counsellors to expand upon the list.

With several lists now developed I began analysing the information for common themes that appeared. In my conceptual framework I had identified five possible areas of support: legal, medical, psychological, industrial, and micro-political. The data gathered revealed that four of these five support areas were required. The support area of micro-political did not appear, although a fifth area for management support did arise. Using all of this information I developed the following model of support for assaulted teachers.

THE EVANS MODEL OF SUPPORT

The analysis of data gathered from sources described above revealed five areas of support that needed to be provided when a teacher has been assaulted by a student. These five support areas are medical; psychological; legal; industrial; and management. The information also revealed a strong need for preventative and planning procedures. Having identified these five need areas for support I created a model which represents each support area and the priority of each for the assaulted teacher. I also added an underlying base of planning and preparation as the information highlighted the importance of this structure. (See Figure 1.1).
The Evans model represents each of the types of support that must be provided for a teacher who has been assaulted by a student. Whilst each support type is vital there is a ranking order amongst them, as demonstrated by the inner-circle and the outer-circle in Figure 1.1. Medical and psychological support must be the first types of support provided. For example the victim will need first aid and comfort before they want to know their legal rights. However, this does not mean that the outer ring is less important, it simply occurs after medical and psychological support has been initiated. It is also important to note that one support type does not need to be completed before the next can occur; the model works as a whole unit. The base of the model represents prevention and planning. This category upholds the support system. Without this base the support model will not work.
PREVENTION AND PLANNING

Assaults will, unfortunately, always occur. However, situations can be prevented and steps can be initiated to reduce the risk of assault. Mardie Whitla (1994), an Australian psychologist, developed a model for emergency management planning. In her model she indicates four categories for management of an emergency; these are preparation, mitigation, response, and recovery. In the preparation category Whitla stresses the need for planning, familiarisation and, rehearsal. [See Whitla model in Appendix D].

A great deal of the information that I received from occupational health and safety representatives, union representatives and private industry indicated that it was essential to assess and review each school’s safety procedures in order to prepare a strategy for violence prevention.

Schools need to initially carry out a workplace violence or safety audit. A workplace violence audit is a procedure that assesses violence prevention measures within the workplace. Schools will already have an occupational health and safety representative who plays a significant part in ensuring that safety regulations and procedures are complied with. Therefore a thorough review of safety procedures in all areas of the school is an essential part of teacher assault prevention.

A range of issues needs to be reviewed when carrying out a workplace violence audit. The schools need to address the likelihood of an act of violence in their school. Whilst doing this they must take into consideration the nature of the students, socio-economic area, employees and work environment. The personnel carrying out the workplace violence audit, I will refer to them as the audit team, also need to carry out a policy review to see if there are any policies and procedures to deal with violence in the school. The audit team needs to make sure that the policies and procedures are comprehensive enough to cover acts of violence against any school member and acts of violence from any person. The audit team then needs to try and determine the likely outcome of any violence against staff, considering the specific nature of their work environment. This stage involves some
guesswork, but needs to be comprehensive enough to ensure preparation for any possible scenario within the school. By considering the environmental characteristics of the work and workplace the accuracy of the audit team’s 'guess work' is increased. The audit team will need to review such factors as:

- staff who work in isolation
- the type of students enrolled in the school
- physical access to school members
- staff training and experience
- location of the school
- records of past violent acts within the school. Near miss reports are a good source of information when trying to determine what type of assaults are likely to occur in the future.

The audit team will also need to review the school’s preparation for the scenarios that they identify as leading to possible acts of violence within the school. When reviewing preparation for violence the audit team will need to consider factors such as the following.

- Who attends safety meetings in the school? How often do these meeting occur? Do they need to involve more staff?
- Are the emergency procedures up to date and comprehensive enough to prepare for any emergency?
- Is every member of the school familiar with the emergency procedures?
- Are first aid facilities adequate in meeting the scenarios identified as possible risks by the audit team?
- Is there adequate support staff within the school?

Each school will have to design its own audit checklist depending upon the individual school characteristics, however, guidelines provided in occupational health and safety regulations will assist schools. Appendix E contains a brief checklist I developed which can be carried out before and after an incident of violence has occurred in a school. The
checklist in Appendix E can also be used to evaluate the procedures currently in practice within a school.

A workplace audit will reveal areas that need attention, however, there are many other steps that need be taken to prevent the acts of violence. The teacher focus group and the assaulted teachers provided the following suggestions for prevention and planning.

- Create a supportive work environment in which acts of violence are given zero tolerance.

- Train staff to recognise warning signs of a troubled student.

- Provide accessible counselling in the school for students; give them a chance to talk problems through before they get to the 'explosion' stage.

- Establish procedures for handling grievances; some schools have grievance committees for staff, but it may be necessary for students (especially secondary students) to have problems heard and dealt with to prevent a 'build up' of anger.

- Train all staff in conflict resolution skills. These skills are not acquired through osmosis, and yet they are essential to the modern teacher’s role.

- Implement security programs that protect staff from internal and external risk.

- Provide counselling for suspended students and students with high aggressive tendencies.

- Set up a school emergency plan. This needs to address contingencies such as assault against staff members.
Medical needs was one of the first areas of support identified by the teacher focus group and the assaulted teachers. Other sources of data for this chapter also mentioned first aid as a priority and the legal and union sources addressed the issue of medical compensation.

Immediately after an assault has occurred the victim must receive medical support. If a school nurse is available they should be advised of the assault immediately in order to carry out appropriate first aid. It is a police requirement that a medical opinion must be sought as soon as possible after an assault has occurred.

The assaulted teachers also indicated that it was important for the teacher to be driven to a doctor and not be expected to drive themselves. Most of the teachers indicated that they would prefer a family member to take them to a medical facility if the injuries were not life threatening. Therefore, it is important that a family member is contacted immediately after the assault has occurred. Many of the teachers in the focus group felt that it was important for the assaulted teacher to be taken into a calm environment and given a cup of tea whilst they wait for a family member to arrive. The assaulted teachers also felt that it was important for the victim to be comforted by a nurse, chaplain or friend immediately after an assault has occurred.

If a victim is not physically injured it does not mean that they do not require medical support. Shock is one of the major results of a traumatic experience and can be fatal in certain circumstances. Shock may not occur straight after the assault, in fact Clements (in Raffa-Mulligan, 1996) states that reaction time to trauma varies between individuals. Therefore it is important that all victims of assault receive some medical support even if they do not appear to be injured.

The police, lawyers and union identified the need for the organisation to support the teacher by covering medical costs. The assaulted teacher needs to know that their income is secure whilst on sick or stress leave. The union felt that many teachers would not be
aware of their right to claim workers compensation to secure their income whilst they are on sick or stress leave. The school also needs to inform the victim of the assault that their medical expenses will be covered by the organisation. Two of the three assaulted teachers profiled in this study were not aware of their right to claim medical expenses and had covered the cost of medical bills themselves. The third assaulted teacher was aware of the right to claim medical expenses, however, the school did not provide her with any information regarding this right and she had to chase up the paperwork and details herself. The teacher focus group and the assaulted teachers felt that this information regarding workers compensation for medical expenses should be provided to all staff at a staff meeting.

PSYCHOLOGICAL

The area of psychological support encompasses counselling and morale support. When a teacher is assaulted by a student they experience the trauma of an assault, the trauma of a workplace violence incident and the trauma of being assaulted by a minor. The teacher focus group indicated that they were not aware of the psychological support that would be needed by an assaulted colleague. The assaulted teachers felt that this area of support was one that was greatly lacking in their assault experiences.

Trauma in the workplace, according to EASE staff, can exact a psychological and physical toll on those involved. They believe that workplace traumas are critical incidents as they are frequently outside an individual’s normal experience and there are few guidelines, based on previous learning experience, for the individual to depend upon to assist in dealing with the incident. They state that while all incidents may be unique one thing is common, all individuals are placed under extreme stress and everyone involved has the potential to become severely distressed. How well the individuals cope will depend not only on their own personal experiences but also on how the school supports them.
EASE also believe that being aware of how individuals may react will assist in the process of recovering from the traumatic event. According to EASE there are four psychological stages that an assaulted teacher will experience. As these four stages are common to all assault victims it would assist victim support for all school staff to be made aware of the stages.

**Shock**
As a result of the traumatic incident or event you may feel dazed, immobilised, experience difficulty with your memory, or may feel your sense of time distorted. Physical reactions are not uncommon - nausea, muscle aches, pounding heart.

**Denial**
You may doubt what happened, or the effect it has upon you. You may feel emotionally numb and wish to isolate yourself from the situation, or, conversely, euphoric or “wired up’ and want to talk.

**Impact**
The full impact of the trauma you have experienced will begin to sink in after the initial shock and denial have subsided. Some people have nightmares; most have trouble sleeping for at least a few days. You are also likely to be pre-occupied with thoughts about it during the day, which are quite intrusive. You may feel as if you are going crazy - you are not. These are normal responses to abnormal events and will subside over time. You may question the role of others, or be obsessed by ‘what if’. These self doubts are common. They are often exaggerated and unfounded. It is important that you do not give in to feelings of blame, rage, or depression by isolating yourself or using alcohol in order to cope. This will only make things worse.

**Resolution**
Recovery from psychological traumatisation is a painful but natural process in most people. It is normal for people to need to talk about what happened to family, friends, clergy, counsellors and to co-workers; especially if the trauma occurred at work. The more you talk about it with people who understand, the sooner the difficulties will pass.
If you have experienced a traumatic event your life will not be the same. You cannot go back to where you were. However you have the opportunity to review aspects of your life, learn new skills and forge new directions.

(EASE Brochure Workplace Trauma January 1996–
Education Department of WA)

Assaulted teachers need to be given counselling and opportunities to talk to colleagues without fear of judgment. They experience a number of emotional stages, as highlighted by EASE (1996). A school chaplain or counsellor should contact the assaulted teacher after the assault and offer counselling. The assaulted teachers indicated that this offer may not be accepted as the victim may feel more comfortable with an independent counsellor. In this situation the counsellor should advise the victim of other counselling services that are available to them. Counselling services should also be offered to the assaulted teacher's family members as they may have a lot of anger, anxieties and issues that they need to discuss. A number of counselling services are available throughout Australia for teachers who are victims of assault. It is important that all staff are made aware of these services prior to an incident occurring. Counselling services vary in each state, however all areas will have access to:

- Victim Support Service: many other non-profit organisations such as VSS exist around Australia.
- Private counselling services: such as psychiatrists.
- Clergy: many churches and religious groups offer counselling services.
- Education Departments in every state have a similar agency to EASE.

INDUSTRIAL

A number of industry groups have policies or programs designed to support employees. Teachers should have access to the support of these groups and need to be made aware of
the support that can be provided. These groups can also assist the school with a review of the safety procedures and strategies within the organisation to minimise future hazards to employees.

One of these industry groups is the teachers’ union. The union actively supports teachers, providing them with advice on their rights and legal assistance. In certain circumstances the assaulted teachers may feel that they need the support of an organisation such as the State School Teachers’ Union of WA. The ‘muscle’ of the union can be particularly helpful in cases where the teacher decides to press assault charges against the student. Many of the teachers that participated in my study felt that if they were assaulted they would contact the union immediately for advice. The union can also act as a facilitator. Staff members and the assaulted teacher can experience anger against the administration when a student has assaulted a teacher; this is particularly so when the student is a repeat assaulter. The union can discuss issues with staff members and relate these to the school administrators. It is therefore very important that the school union representative is advised about the assault and contacts the assaulted teacher to offer union support.

The teacher focus group participants believed that assault on a teacher was an occupational hazard and thus the Occupational Safety and Health Regulations (1996) would have some guidelines relating to workplace assault. This belief is correct, the Occupational Safety and Health Regulations (1996) are relevant to teacher assault as they are designed to regulate safe working environments. A copy of the document concerning the assault needs to be filed with the school occupational safety and health (OSH) representatives. If it is deemed that a safe working environment has not been provided the representatives must act. The OSH representative can also assist the school in reviewing and evaluating the situation and procedures carried out after each assault. As Whithall (1994) indicates, in her model for emergency planning, review and revision of an emergency is a vital part of the recovery process as it deals with long term issues. The assaulted teachers, EASE and the union felt that it is important to the victim of the assault that the school is seen to take action to minimise the risk of future incidents of assault.
The workers compensation system is another area of support available to assaulted teachers. Most of the teachers, who participated in this study, were not aware of the assistance that was available to them through the workers compensation system. Many felt that if they were to seek workers compensation after an assault their colleagues and the school administrators would see them as a ‘bludger’. It is therefore important that the school provide information on workers compensation to all staff prior to an assault occurring. The assaulted teacher should also be reminded of the workers compensation system, by the school, after an assault has occurred.

LEGAL

There are many legal implications in an assault case especially when the perpetrator is a minor. The assaulted teacher will need support with the legal aspects of assault and the school can assist in this area. When talking with the teacher focus group there was a great deal of confusion over their legal rights in the event of an assault by a student. Most thought that they could only use the school discipline policy. Only two of the assaulted teachers were fully aware of their legal rights in a workplace assault situation; one was aware because she was married to a police officer, the other was aware of her rights as she had pressed charges against the assailant and thus spoken to police officers and union legal representatives regarding her rights.

A teacher who has been assaulted has the right as a public officiary and Australian citizen to press charges against an assailter. The school should not talk the teacher out of pressing charges and has a responsibility to support the teacher’s decision. If the assailant is a minor the legal consequences will be different from that of an adult, however a child can be legally charged with assault. If the minor is a repeat offender then the consequences will be more severe. The teacher also has the right to take out a restraining order against a minor. The school should inform all staff of their right to press charges and the use of use the criminal code. Teachers need to be informed of their rights as citizens and public officers.
Whilst the school can contact the police on the teacher’s behalf it is the responsibility of the assaulted teacher to lay charges with the police. If teachers do wish to press charges they should not be expected to drive themselves to the police station. The school should contact the police, to attend the scene of the crime. Alternatively a member of the school staff should drive the teacher to the police station so that they can file an assault report.

Under no circumstance should the assaulted teacher return to class after the assault has occurred. Relief must be provided as some degree of shock will occur with all persons involved in a traumatic event, and supervision of students when suffering from shock is potentially hazardous. Teacher relief will also be needed so that the assaulted teacher can immediately document the assault. It is important that the incident is documented immediately so that all facts can be recalled. The assaulted teacher needs to give a documented report to the principal and discuss the assault. A copy should also be given to the union representative at the school.

The school should record names of witnesses to the assault. This should not be the responsibility of the assaulted teacher. If witnesses are minors they should be asked as soon as possible to say exactly what they saw. This should be recorded. The school must also be aware that witnesses to the assault will suffer some form of shock. If the witness is an adult they should be relieved of duties whilst they record their statements. They should also be offered some counselling. If the witnesses are minors their parents should be contacted and the incident should be discussed with them so that they are comforted and made to realise that the incident is not acceptable and the assailant will be punished.

All of the teachers involved in the study believed that they had a right to know if there was a student within the school who had assaulted a teacher/s previously. Many felt that the Occupational Safety and Health Regulations required the school to inform them of this hazard. The lawyers that I spoke to believed this to be a grey area as the hazard was a person and thus by informing staff of the hazard the school would be violating the students’ rights. The lawyers felt that it may be more appropriate for the teachers of the student to be informed that he/she has had violent behavioural problems in the past and
confrontation should therefore be minimised. It may be necessary for the teachers of a student who has assaulted a teacher/s to be provided with an individual behavioural management strategy for that student.

The union representatives, EASE representatives and the police who participated in this study believed that the school has a responsibility to make staff aware of counselling and legal services that are available to them. They felt that the school needs to make information such as 'Victims of Crime' financial compensation, legal agencies, teachers' rights and the criminal code more accessible. The police suggested that the school invite various agencies to staff meetings to present staff with information on their rights and legal procedures. One of the teachers in the focus group suggested that schools provide legal information in staff handbooks.

MANAGEMENT

The area of management support emerged strongly from the study. When referring to 'management' the participants combined school management and education department management into the one group. Many participants felt that management support was an area that was extremely necessary in the support of a teacher when they had been assaulted. EASE, the assaulted teachers and the union also indicated that management support is an area of support that is often lacking. The participants raised many issues relating to management support. These issues were easily arranged into a set of common themes, namely policy support, preventative support, and individual support.

Policy Support
Participants felt that it is vital for management to demonstrate their concern for employees' safety and health by placing a high priority on eliminating safety and security hazards. It was suggested that a policy, which places employee safety on the same level of importance as student safety, should be formulated in every school. The responsible implementation of this policy would require management to integrate issues of employee
safety and security with student services to assure that this protection is part of the daily school activity.

A few of the participants felt record keeping and reporting processes for assault should be a whole school process, as accuracy would be greatly improved if the ‘workers’ and not just managers, were involved in recording and discussing incidents of violence. They also believed that through allowing employee participation the teachers would feel more empowered and in control of their safety.

The participants indicated that management should make a commitment to assign and communicate the responsibility for various aspects of safety and security to administrators, teaching staff, teaching aides and other employees involved so that they know what is expected of them. This would help ensure that appropriate records are kept and used.

Participants indicated that a process should be established that evaluates all reports and records of assaults, incidents of aggression, and employee complaints related to violence. The process would need to be designed so that it included input from all levels of workers and managers. A suitable means of follow-up should be implemented to ensure that all measures taken are implemented properly and their effectiveness evaluated.

Employee participation should also be a priority in whatever process or system is devised to receive information and reports on security problems, analyse reports and make recommendations or amendments.

**Preventative Support**

The second theme that arose for management support was the area of preventative support. Participants suggested that through offering measures to prevent assault, management would be seen to recognise the seriousness of violence against employees and acknowledge that it does occur. The assaulted teachers and counsellors from EASE indicated that it is very important for the assaulted teacher to have the incident recognised...
by management. The assaulted teacher experiences many feelings of doubt and guilt, and if the assault is not acknowledged by management as a traumatic event the recovery process can be difficult (Raffa-Mulligan, 1996).

Participants suggested that management should initiate and facilitate employee participation in case conference meetings to present data on students and identify problems. This would help identify potentially violent students and thus assist in the planning of preventative measures. They also felt that a system should be devised so that employees can express their concerns or suggestions to management without fear of reprisal.

The police and teachers involved in the study recommended that courses in professional assault response training and management of aggressive behaviour be provided to all employees. Programs provided by police departments on ‘personal safety’ or other classes on ‘handling the hostile customer’ could be easily arranged for staff professional development.

**Individual Support**

The third area of support required by management is that of individual support. After an assault has occurred management needs to focus on how they can support the individual who has been assaulted. Support for an individual employee will vary depending upon the type of assault and the individual, however, there are a few basic support provisions that management can initiate.

Firstly the school needs to remove the student from classes immediately after an assault has occurred. Staff should not be expected to teach the assailant immediately after an assault has occurred, as there will be a number of staff, other than the victim, who will have strong feelings about the incident. Management should also ensure that the victim will not ‘run into’ to assailant immediately after the assault has occurred. When the student involved in an assault has been dealt with by the school administrators or the police they should be required to undergo counselling before returning to classes. This
should be carried out by a suitably qualified person, not just administrative or teaching staff.

It is also imperative that the school punishes the assailant in a way that reflects to the whole school community the seriousness of assaulting a teacher and the school’s lack of tolerance for assault. Management needs to provide recognition of the seriousness of the incident that occurred. The assaulted teacher must be reassured that their employer refuses to tolerate violence in the school and that every effort will be made to prevent violent incidents.

The assaulted teachers felt that whilst the assaulted teacher is on sick leave management should send flowers or a card to show their support and concern. One of the assaulted teachers stated that she felt it was the little extra displays of support that count, especially when self-doubt is setting in.

All of the teachers participating in the focus group believed that management should inform staff when an incident of assault occurs against a colleague. They also felt that management should discuss with staff the normal reactions to assault and ways in which they can support their colleague.

Finally it was suggested that the assaulted teacher needs support from management upon their return to the school in the form of a reduced teaching load, or time off from classroom teaching. Participants in the study felt that a reduced load or time off from teaching duties would enable the assaulted teacher to gradually return to teaching with minimum trauma. The teacher focus group participants and assaulted teachers indicated that if the teacher does not wish to return to the school where the assault occurred management should arrange a quick and easy transfers to another school.
CHAPTER SEVEN: CLOSING THOUGHTS ON NARRATIVE

In this closing chapter I reflect upon several aspects of the narrative approach to research in terms of how it worked for me in practice. These reflections complement the description of narrative methodology provided in chapter four.

DATA COLLECTION

I found the data collection methods for my narrative study to be very similar to those used for more conventional qualitative studies. However, undertaking a narrative study required more detailed note taking than a more traditional method. Instead of simply noting the participants' responses to my questions I had to record their facial expressions, body language, pauses, choice of words, and the emotion in their voice when answering my questions. These details were necessary in order to construct their character accurately when writing the stories.

It was also necessary to make notes on the interview setting and story settings. As there was so much detail required, I sometimes had to return to a setting of the interview or visit the scenes detailed in the participants' stories so that I could accurately recreate the detail for my stories. Ideally I would like to have had the option of video-taping the interviews to gather all of the necessary information. However, due to the sensitive topic of my research I decided that the presence of a video-recorder would have inhibited the participants too much and thus reduce the necessary 'non-verbal' information required for my study.
DATA ANALYSIS

In writing the narratives, I found it difficult to separate data description and analysis. Some formal separation of 'story' and 'commentary' occurs in reporting the 'findings' of the narratives. However, it seemed necessary to embed a lot of the commentary or analysis within the stories. Embedded analysis occurs through the selection and arrangement of details, the use of the narrator's voice, and the choice of imagery to convey human experience.

While I found a growing literature on narrative methodology, including examples of stories, very few postgraduate theses seem to be written based on this new approach. The absence of multiple models made it difficult to decide with any certainty what the ground rules for narrative-based thesis writing are. As a result, some chapters represent concessions to more traditional approaches which in turn might seem to depart from a pure paradigm of narrative methodology.

WRITING STYLE

It is always a challenge for a narrative writer to come up with a powerful way of writing. In my case, a writing style was needed that adequately conveyed the trauma of assault. If I used the wrong style the experience could appear clinical and the reader would not feel the power of the emotions experienced by the victims.

Assault on teachers is an act of violence that involves an intense, fearful human experience. A novelist is able to use creative skills and imagination to develop atmosphere, images and experiences. As a researcher using narrative methodology I had to use a form of writing that developed the story whilst remaining faithful to the facts.

We are taught at school the difference between essay writing, report writing and fiction writing, as each requires slightly different writing techniques and formats. I found the rules for narrative to be the same as the rules for fiction. I had to organise the data into a
structure, which had a well developed plot, with a beginning, middle and end. As in fiction, my stories needed to have main characters and minor characters who experienced some form of conflict. When gathering the data the participants did not always provide information in a sequenced order. I had to organize the data in a meaningful sequence and select information that needed to be emphasised in order to develop each story. Also, as in fiction, I needed a point of view for the story. Unlike most fictional writing, however, I found it necessary to change my point of view throughout the study. When the assaulted teachers were telling their stories I used first person, as I felt that this was the most powerful way to tell the story. With other participants, such as the institution stories, I used the voice of a narrator, as the study required the input of a reflective voice.

VALIDITY

One of my main concerns when undertaking a study using narrative was the question of validity. I was aware that to some academics narrative might be viewed as ‘not scientific’. Critics could say that at best I had simply written a readable story but at worst had not conducted not real research. To prepare for the questions of validity I implemented measures for the participants to check the accuracy of my stories. However, the main view I came was this. Narrative is based upon the premise that there is no fixed truth, that people construct their own reality and truth. Due to the intensity and seriousness of what the phenomenon involves, assault upon teachers is an area which cries out for action. The ultimate test of the validity of my study will be if readers believe it to the extent that they are prepared to take action. After all, as Maykut and Morehouse (1994) indicate, the most rigorous test of validity is whether or not the readers do something.

FINAL COMMENTS

When I began this study I had a number of very specific purposes. I wanted to know:

a. What does it mean to be assaulted in your own workplace?

b. What do the people within the system do to support teachers when they have been assaulted?
c. What more can be done at the school level to ease the trauma of the assault and to support the victim?

Throughout the course of this study I feel that I have found my answers to these questions. The personal stories provide an insight into the emotions and trauma that individual’s experience when they are assaulted in their workplace. Interviews with professional counsellors and the union support the information provided by the victims of teacher assaults by students. The stories give varying perspectives of actions taken by different schools when teachers are assaulted. Information from interviews with the education department and teachers union and from various documents appear to deliver a similar message; assault victims are not being supported as well as they could be in schools. Also, various strategies and guidelines are presented for schools to consider and hopefully utilise in the development of more effective support systems for teachers who have been assaulted by students.

This study has allowed victims of assault to tell their side of the story. It offers educators suggestions for improvement rather than delivering a doom and gloom message. I also hope that this study will be of some benefit to society as a whole by contributing to an awareness of a very serious issue that teachers must deal with and their need for a supportive, more understanding community. Finally, I hope this study will be read by new teaching graduates, who will become the instigators of change in the new millennium.

To all who read this study please remember the stories and the needs of these victims of assault. After all, teachers are somebody’s children too.
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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Following is a list of proposed, initial questions for each of the seven categories of interviewees.

**LAWYERS**
From a legal perspective what advice would you give to a teacher who has been assaulted by a student?

Where would a school stand from a duty of care position if they had not informed an assaulted teacher that they were aware that the student had a record of assaulting teachers?

What legal rights do teachers have when the offender is a student?

Who is the education department obligated to support in the case of student assaulting teacher?

Can the teacher sue the school for negligence under OH&S if the student is known by the employer to have a record?

Can the teacher refuse to teach a student who has assaulted them or a colleague?

**POLICE OFFICERS**
From a legal perspective what advice would you give to a teacher who has been assaulted by a student?

When does it become a police matter and not a school matter?

Do you feel that teachers should be warned about known offenders? (Offences specific to assault)
What support is available from the victims of crime association?

Are there any other support groups the police would direct an assault victim to?

What is the difference, legally, between a ‘general’ assault and an assault by a juvenile?

What are the legal consequences under the criminal code for a student assaulting a teacher?

Can a teacher take out a restraining order upon a student? How would this operate in a school environment where both parties are required to be?

TEACHERS UNION
Does the union have an accurate indication of the frequency of teacher assaults by students?

What advice would the union provide members with?

What support do they provide in the first stages?

What support do they provide for follow-ups and long term?

Does the union find schools to be cooperative and supportive?

Do many teachers need the support / muscle of the union, when they have been assaulted?

What are the main questions / problems members face when assaulted? How does the union help?
What action can the union take against a school that is not supporting / hindering an assault victim?

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
What action does the Education Department take when a student assaults a teacher?

Is there any long term support programs that the education dept. provides for teachers who have been assaulted in schools?

What does the department do to ensure the safety of the assaulted teacher?

How does the department ensure that the schools are supporting staff and not encouraging them to ‘keep quiet’ for the sake of the schools reputation?

How do they support the teacher and the student simultaneously? Whose interests get priority and why?

Do they feel more should be done at school level to support these teachers?

What action does the Education Dept. take so that the student can still receive a quality education, yet teachers are not put at risk?

Do they feel that there should be a standardised support policy for teachers in government schools who are assaulted by students?

COUNSELING SERVICES
What type of trauma does an assault victim experience? Is the trauma different when the assault occurs in the workplace?
How long can it take for a victim to ‘heal’?

Are there any permanent scares on the assaulted person?

How would the trauma differ when the assault is caused by a juvenile upon an adult?

Is a teacher as an assault victim by a student any different to an assault from a different assailant?

What can a school do to help in the healing process?

Do you as a counsellor feel that support for teachers from the school is a problem? If yes, what should be done?

ASSAULTED TEACHERS

What happened?

Do you feel that you could have done anything to avoid the situation?

Do you feel that the school supported them at the time of the assault?

Do you feel long term support was available?

How did the Education Department respond to your assault?

Did you seek union assistance?

Where charges pressed against the student? If yes, how was this done?
Did you feel that you knew your rights?

Did you feel that the system supported your rights?

Where you transferred as a result of the assault?

Was the student removed from the school? Permanently or temporarily?

Did they seek workers compensation? Why / Why not?

With hindsight what, if anything would you do differently?

**PRINCIPALS**

What procedures are in place to deal with teachers being assaulted by students?

What support structures / facilities does the schools have?

What is the policy regarding students that assault?

What advice would you give to a staff member who has been assaulted by a student?

If you had prior knowledge of a student with a record for assaulting teachers would you warn your staff?

How do you ensure teachers right to safety and the students right to an education when the student has assaulted teacher /s?
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN THE RESEARCH OTHER THAN THE TEACHERS WHO HAVE BEEN ASSAULTED BY A STUDENT OR STUDENTS IN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS.

Introduction
I would like to introduce myself. My name is Rebecca Evans. I am a post-graduate student at Edith Cowan University currently writing my thesis to complete a Masters of Education degree, majoring in Educational Policy and Administrative Studies.

Topic
My research topic is: Support systems for teachers in government schools who have been assaulted by students.

Research
Data for the research will be collected through 60-minute (approx.) tape-recorded interviews. Participants will not be made to feel uncomfortable or embarrassed during the interviews and will be able to stop the interview at any time. Participants will also be given the opportunity to check transcripts taken from the interviews if requested.

Benefit
Throughout Australia a consistent trend of problematic violence in government schools is evident, particularly a rise in the incidents of teacher assault over recent years. This increases levels of stress teachers and fear for their personal safety within their place of work. It is the aim of this study to provide a support system to be used by schools, which benefits the assaulted teacher and enables them to continue working in their chosen occupation without fear or shame.

Your support for this study and a willingness to talk about your perspectives on the issue and or experiences will be greatly appreciated. Any questions concerning this research
can be forwarded to Dr Rod Chadbourne, Department of Educational Policy and Administrative Studies, Education Faculty, Edith Cowan University on (08) 9273 8423 or myself on (08) 82887167 (home).

I (interviewee) have read the above information and received satisfactory answers to all questions I have asked. I agree to participate, realising that I may withdraw at any time.

I (interviewee) agree that the research data gathered for the study may be published provided I am not identifiable.

Signature
(Interviewee) Date / / 

Signature
(Interviewer) Date / / 

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APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATING TEACHERS WHO HAVE BEEN ASSAULTED BY A STUDENT OR STUDENTS IN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS.

Dear ____________.

I am writing to you as a follow up to our previous discussion on the telephone. If you are still happy to assist me by telling your story I would like to arrange 3 interviews, approximately 50 minutes in duration, where upon we can focus upon the following topics:

| What did it mean to you to be assaulted in your own workplace? |
| What did the people within the system do to support you when you were assaulted? |
| What more could have been done at the school level to ease your trauma and to support you? |

The interviews will be taped and you are entitled to a copy of the tape and a copy of my interpretation of the information gathered at your interviews. You also have the right to stop an interview session at any stage. If at any stage you wish to withdraw your participation from the research you may do so.

There is a possible risk that past emotion or anxieties will resurface as a result of telling me your story. If you become upset during the re-living of what must have been a very distressing situation I can make arrangements with an independent counselling service for you.

I feel strongly that your participation will have a number of significant benefits. Throughout Australia a consistent trend of problematic violence in government schools is evident, particularly a rise in the incidents of teacher assault over recent years. This increases levels of stress teachers and fear for their personal safety within their place of work.
I hope that the studies finding will be used to create awareness amongst those creating crisis action policy within schools and education systems. It may also hold value with those responsible for administering support to teaching staff or at least create an awareness of a need for support. Also by reading the story individual teachers may alter the way they respond to and ultimately support a colleague in need. On a larger scale I hope that the findings will educate the community, on this very serious, yet somewhat taboo topic.

Your support for this study and a willingness to talk about experiences will be greatly appreciated.

Any questions concerning this research can be forwarded to Dr Rod Chadbourne, Department of Educational Policy and Administrative Studies, Education Faculty, Edith Cowan University on (08) 9273 8423 or myself on (08) 8288 7167 (home).

I (interviewee) have read the above information and received satisfactory answers to all questions I have asked. I agree to participate, realising that I may withdraw at any time.

I (interviewee) agree that the research data gathered for the study may be published and that every possible care will be taken to ensure that I am not identifiable.

Signature
(Interviewee) Date / /  

Signature
(Interviewer) Date / /
APPENDIX D: WHITLA’S MODEL FOR SCHOOL EMERGENCY PLANNING.

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<th>Response</th>
<th>Recovery</th>
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<td>reorganisation</td>
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<td>resumption of routine</td>
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Preparation

- planning
- education
- negotiation
- training
- role definition
- action plans
- familiarisation
- rehearsal

(M. Whitla, 1994)
APPENDIX E: CHECKLIST FOR SCHOOLS

1. Prevention
Assess the risk of violence in the organisation?
Simple, confidential reporting procedures in place?
Staff trained to identify signs of impending violence in other employees and clients?
Counselling services available to employees under stress?
Adequate disciplinary provisions in place?

2. Preparation
Crisis Plan in place?
Staff trained in first aid?
Staff trained in how to deal with aggressive people?
Security procedures and devices in place? Staff familiar with these?

3. Post-Incident Intervention
First aid administered to those who need it?
Police, ambulance etc. contacted?
Staff involved in violent incident given option of being relieved of their work?
Have families of victims been notified?
Has senior management been notified?
Debriefing sessions (within 24 hours)?
Counselling sessions (within 24 hours)?
Investigation?
Do some employees need / desire further counselling?