

Teacher Victimization and Teacher Burnout in Schools: Risk Factors and Concerns

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Abstract. This conceptual paper explores the pressing issue of teacher victimization and its correlation with teachers' mental health, highlighting significant implications for both educators and students. The prevalence of mental illness among teachers is examined, emphasizing its impact on well-being and educational outcomes. The concept of teacher victimization is introduced, detailing how it affects teachers' psychological health and detrimentally influences student learning environments. Guided by the Social-Ecological Model, the paper categorizes risk factors contributing to teacher victimization into individual and contextual dimensions. Individual factors include gender, race, years of teaching experience, and specific teaching roles, which shape teachers' vulnerability to victimization. Contextual factors encompass school grade level, classroom and school climate, peer and collegial support, as well as broader community and cultural influences that are all supported by concrete evidence. The paper concludes by summarizing key findings and identifying limitations for future research, particularly regarding interventions to mitigate the effects of teacher victimization after it has occurred.

Keywords: Teacher; Victimization; Mental; School.

1. Significance

1.1 Imminence of teacher's mental illness and related outcomes

Frequent psychological stress and turnover of teachers call attention to the severity and urgency of teacher mental health problems, especially during and after COVID-19. During the COVID-19 period, data from the U.S. showed a significantly higher prevalence of negative mental health outcomes during the pandemic when compared to healthcare and office workers (*Kush M. et al., 2022*). Similarly, research from Poland has reviewed that for the first stage of Covid, 45.52% of the teachers from the Silesian voivodeship experienced at least mild levels of stress, 46.90%—at least mild levels of anxiety, and 44.14%—at least mild levels of depressive symptomatology. During the second wave of the pandemic, 47.14% of the respondents experienced at least mild levels of stress, 50.71%—at least mild levels of anxiety, and 55.00%—at least mild levels of depressive symptomatology (*Jakubowski et al., 2021*). After the pandemic, anxiety and stress became more prevalent among teachers. Worldwide, when only clinically meaningful (moderate to severe) psychological conditions among teachers were considered, the prevalence of burnout ranged from 25.12% to 74%, stress ranged from 8.3% to 87.1%, anxiety ranged from 38% to 41.2%, and depression ranged from 4% to 77% (*Agyapong B et al., 2022*). Researchers also found that teachers' rates of anxiety and stress remained high and relatively stable across roles (39%–70%), changing by only 1%–6% for each role (*McMahon, 2024*). The mental health crisis of teachers contributes to the issue of teacher shortage faced by many countries across the globe. Reports from the U.S. news announced that nearly 60% of schools have trouble finding substitute teachers (*Pew Research: What It's Like To Be a Teacher in America Today*). Around 70% of educators say their school is understaffed, leading to a heavier workload (*School Pulse Panel: Absenteeism March 2024*). In Sweden, the most recent prognosis for teacher shortage is for 2018-2033, reporting a lack of 45,000 preschool teachers and teachers in the year 2033 (*Lindqvist et al., 2022*).

Ample research has emphasized the importance of teacher mental health by indicating its effect on teachers' psychological burnout. A recent study based on scholarly works investigating the intricate relationship between stress, social intelligence, and life satisfaction among schoolteachers suggested

that the negative correlation observed between perceived stress and social intelligence highlights how heightened stress levels can impede teachers' abilities to effectively navigate social interactions, potentially affecting their professional relationships and classroom dynamics (*Datta, 2024*).

Research has also consistently shown that teacher stress has negative impacts on students and also greatly affects the school climate. For example, data from the Stockholm School Survey and the Stockholm Teacher Survey revealed negative associations between school-level teacher stress, fatigue, and depressed mood and students' satisfaction and perceived teacher caring, even when controlling for sociodemographic characteristics (*Ramberg, J. et al., 2020*). Another study by Ghanizadeh and Jahedizadeh from Iran also mentions that both individual and contextual burnouts in teachers "have definite bearings on students' involvement and motivation, and ultimately on the entire school community and educational system." (*Ghanizadeh et al., 2015*) The above empirical evidence highlights the need for better understanding and interventions to address teacher's mental illness.

1.2 Teacher Victimization and Its Impact

Many factors may contribute to the decline of teachers' mental health. Recently, many studies have been conducted on student victimization by parents, teachers, or peers. Most are about teacher's life satisfaction, parenting style, and the association between teacher's stress and student response aligned with research on teacher-student relationships. Teacher victimization, on the other hand, is a newly emerging issue in many schools around the world and gradually becomes the focus of discussion. According to the data collected by APA, one-third of surveyed teachers reported they experienced at least one incident of verbal and/or threatening violence from students, and over 40% of school administrators reported verbal or threatening violence from parents during COVID-19. These rates of violence make teacher victimization an increasingly serious issue in schools.



Fig.1 reports of verbal or threatening victimization

In this literature review, I will first review the definition and significance of teacher victimization. I will then focus on reviewing the theoretical framework and empirical studies of one of the important and understudied phenomena: teacher victimization, which has been found to influence teacher mental health. Driven by the Social-Ecological Model of human thought and perception, this paper will examine the determining social-ecological factors or predictors of teacher-targeted aggression from students. It will also explore practical strategies or solutions to prevent this kind of victimization from happening and, at the same time, draw the attention of school administrators and the general public.

1.2.1 Teacher Victimization and Teacher Outcomes

The term teacher victimization refers to threats and violence experienced by teachers that are perpetrated by students, which includes physical, relational, verbal, and cyber victimization, as well as sexual harassment and personal property offenses (*Espelage et al., 2013*). Teacher victimization associations with teacher outcomes have been supported by empirical studies. For example, victimized teachers are more likely to suffer from psychological distress, impaired personal relationships, and heightened fear, all of which harm job performance and relationships with students (*Prakapas et al., 2024*). In addition to bringing negative impacts on teachers in a psychological aspect, teacher-targeted violence could even greatly affect teachers' job satisfaction and cause teacher turnover. For instance, Moon and his team (*2020*) conducted a longitudinal study with a sample of 1,300 teachers in Texas on how the seven different types of victimization are related to teacher turnover. The study's result indicates that teachers who experienced physical assault, verbal abuse, non-contact aggression, and in-person bullying are significantly more likely to move to another school, whereas those who experienced theft/vandalism, verbal abuse, and non-contact aggression are significantly more likely to leave the teaching profession, and that 13% of leavers reported the experience of victimization by students as a very/extremely important factor in their decision to leave the teaching profession (*Moon et al., 2020*).

1.2.2 Teacher Victimization and Student Outcomes

While many studies examine the effect of teacher victimization on teachers, few try to investigate how it can affect students who impelled the victimization themselves. Although there is a lack of empirical studies examining teacher victimization's impact on student outcomes, research has shown that male students were more likely to contribute to teacher victimization. As an example, a longitudinal study conducted in Italy shows that overall, 24.4% of boys and 21.6% of girls had victimized teachers online in the previous six months and that the gender difference was large but not significant (*Sorrentino et al., 2019*). Given this result that male students are more likely to victimize teachers, further research regarding teacher victimization and student outcomes needs to be done to see whether male students have equal difficulty controlling their emotions before, during, and after victimization compared to female students.

1.3 Social-Ecological System

Ecological Frameworks, which have been utilized in previous analyses of school violence (*e.g., McMahon et al., 2017*), are grounded in developmental and community psychology, where there is strong agreement that children's development can be explained by the shared influences and interactions of families, schools, and communities (*McMahon et al., 2020*). Bronfenbrenner organized the framework into five subsystems in the order of how much of an impact they have on a child (*Guy-Evans 2024*). The systems are The Microsystem, including the child's most immediate relationships and environments; The Mesosystem, involving interactions between different microsystems in the child's life; The Exosystem, incorporating other formal and informal social structures, such as local governments, friends of the family, and mass media; The Macrosystem, consisting of cultural ideologies, attitudes, and social conditions that children are immersed in; and The Chronosystem, relating to shifts and transitions over the child's lifetime. The Social-Ecological Framework provides people with a systematic view of the factors that might influence children in their entire stages of development and is considered the founder of the Social-ecological theory that we need to apply in the present research.

Social-ecological theory suggests that human behavior is influenced by a wide range of factors, including individual influences (*e.g., attributions, schemas*), proximal factors (*e.g., colleagues, family, school setting*), and distal factors within the broader social environment (*e.g., community setting, social policies; Martinez. et al., 2016*). It provides a comprehensive framework for researchers to easily identify various kinds and different levels of influence on teacher-targeted violence by students.

Eventually, researchers would be able to move beyond demographic predictors and strive to develop more useful preventive and intervention strategies.

Thus, to assess the factors that influenced teacher-targeted violence, we reviewed and compared data from various research articles on school violence and teacher victimization and came up with two main levels of intersections: individual and contextual.

2. Empirical Supports

Teachers' individual concerns, cognitive views, and contextual relations can greatly affect the probability of teacher victimization's occurrence.

2.1 Individual Factors

2.1.1 Gender & Race

Gender is a significant individual factor of teacher-targeted violence and is what most research articles measure by looking at all the findings regarding gender and teacher victimization. A relatively large percentage claim that male teachers tended to be more victimized. Overall, results indicated that at the individual teacher level, male teachers were much more likely to experience all six forms of teacher victimization (*i.e., physical, social, verbal, cyber, sexual harassment, and personal property offenses*)(*Yang et al., 2018*). Its result is consistent with two more articles (*2015 and 2019*) concerning gender. However, only a small percentage of the research reported that female teachers were more likely to experience victimization than male teachers. (2013). This difference might be caused by the varying proportion of male and female teachers in every school since students are more inclined to cause trouble for teachers from the minority gender group in a particular school. According to the statistics from Zippia, 74.3% of all teachers are women, while 25.7% are men. This data, combined with the conclusion drawn above, indicates that students tending to victimize male teachers might be because male is the minority gender group among school teachers. Apart from having a clear gender to enforce violence upon, some of the articles found no specific preference for gender when victimizing or claimed that it only occurs under specific situations. For instance, Moon's research result indicated that there were no significant differences between male and female teachers in the prevalence of victimization, except for victimization by sexual harassment (*Moon et al., 2018*). He argued that when sexual harassment occurs, most of the time, female educators tend to be the target.

Race is another essential individual factor that is often put on par with gender. Surprisingly, all findings regarding race and ethnicity point to the fact that white teachers are more likely to be victimized than teachers of other races. According to Martinez's research, Latino teachers reported lower levels of student-generated multiple victimization than White teachers. Also, white teachers reported more parent-generated multiple victimization than African-American teachers (*Martinez, A. et al., 2015*). These findings are counterintuitive since, in a world full of racism, we would tend to expect blacks or teachers of color to be the victims of victimization. However, these conclusions are all based on the teacher's self-report or self-perception, so the credibility of their sayings can be further researched by direct observation.

Again, under special conditions like sexual harassment and property damage, the risk faced by whites and other races will change. For example, Moon proclaimed that Hispanic teachers were less likely to report victimization of theft/property damage, while they were more likely to be victims of sexual harassment compared to White teachers (*Moon et al., 2018*).

Gender and race can also be examined interactively. This kind of study can allow researchers to gain knowledge about individual differences based on their different combinations of gender and racial groups. A great example of this can be seen in Gerberich's research. Gerberich and his team found out that female and non-White educators were more likely to experience physical and nonphysical violence as compared to male and White educators, respectively (*Gerberich et al., 2013*). The result shows just the opposite of what we concluded about gender and race separately. The mixed study encourages researchers to do research by combining different factors, inviting more researchers

studying teacher victimization who are interested in both race and gender factors. More mixed research needs to be done to understand whether there are findings that exactly match the individual ones.

2.1.2 Years of Teaching Experience & Teaching Roles

The teaching profession has been fluctuating throughout history and has become a more challenging problem in recent years; this directs research on teacher victimization to consider teaching-related factors. A teacher's teaching experience can greatly affect their chances of being victimized by students. Studies in this field hold very different results, but the majority are consistent with Martinez's finding, in which more years of teaching were associated with less overall and student-generated teacher multiple victimization (*Martinez et al., 2015*). However, one research by Dzuka and his team conducted in 2007 holds the opposite view. His result indicates that teachers with more teaching experience reported more assaults (*Dzuka et al., 2007*). The contrasting result might be because Dzuka's research was conducted at too early period, and its research subjects were several psychologists. More research can be done on finding out other reasons that cause this difference. For example, researchers can investigate contextual factors related to teaching experience to figure out more correlated results.

One more individual factor related to the teaching profession itself is the teaching role of teachers. Few studies look into how different subject teachers are being victimized. Instead, many results indicated that teachers with special occupations or having to spend more time with students are more likely to become the target of victimization. For instance, a study conducted by Yang and her team in China (*2018*) discovered that homeroom teachers perceived more frequent social victimization than non-homeroom teachers. In this example, homeroom teacher is an occupation in school where the teachers have to stay with the student every day, which differs from teachers that teach regular subjects (subject teachers). A common phenomenon for humans is that the longer we spend time together, the more conflicts will arise. Thus, it can well explain why these kinds of teachers with special roles with students are more likely to induce student's violence on themselves.

2.2 Contextual Factors

2.2.1 Peer & Collegial Support

When viewing contextual factors, people tend to start from more detailed factors that are directly related to the students who committed teacher victimization. Peer support is one. There are two ways to view peer support. First, peer support can be a kind of instigation from other students to commit teacher victimization. In this scenario, most research concludes that encouragement from peers increases the likelihood of teacher victimization. For example, Sorrentino and his team came up with the statement that high peer support may encourage teacher victimization by boys (*Sorrentino, A. et al., 2019*) after a longitudinal study on risk factors of victimization with 251 students in Italy. Setting aside gender, this result indicates that encouragement from peers positively correlates with the action of teacher victimization. Another way to explain peer support is that the peers are trying to help these students overcome the thought of teacher victimization, such as by saying comforting words to prevent it from happening. Under this circumstance, peer support will correlate negatively with teacher victimization.

The same goes with collegial support, which means support directed to the victimized teachers from the other teachers in the school. However, collegial support only has one possible explanation: helping teachers to stand up to victimization and help to resolve it peacefully. Many early studies showed either no association between collegial support and teacher victimization, or workplace violence as a whole, or a negative correlation (*Cole, L. et al., 1997; Steffgen, G., & Ewen, N. 2007; Galand, B. et al., 2007*) These evidence rule out collegial support as a risk factor that causes teacher victimization, but rather as a medium to promote warm teacher-student relationship.

2.2.2 School Grade Level

The prevalence rate and effect of teacher victimization differ across school grades, which led researchers to consider whether the different school levels that the teachers are in play a role in intriguing teacher victimization from students. The majority of statistics from previous research shows that teachers from middle school and junior high reported more victimization compared to their counterparts in high school (*Chen & Astor, 2009; Moon & McCluskey, 2016; Astor et al., 2023*). Reasons for the higher prevalence rate of victimization in middle school might be that younger students are less skilled in controlling their actions (*Kendall, P. C., & Wilcox, L. E., 1979*). This can make us quite confident in saying that middle school teachers should constantly be aware of victimization from students. When reaching elementary students, victimization, or the concept of “bullying” in that scenario, would be more prevalent than in middle school since vast research on children's development describes that the younger a child, the lesser self-control they possess. (*Vallesi, A. et al., 2021; Butterworth et al., 2021; Newbeck et al., 2022*)

2.2.3 School & Classroom Climate

Besides grade level, another important contextual factor would be related to the school and classroom climate. The pattern found indicates that teachers within a positive classroom atmosphere are less likely to experience victimization from students. This pattern is obvious and is consistent with our normal conception, in which a good and positive classroom environment, including the perspective and behavior of peers and teachers, fosters a perfect person and vice versa.

At the school level, a more positive school climate was found to be associated with more frequent victimizations experienced by teachers victimizing teachers. As the pattern discovered is identical to the one in that of the classroom climate, Sorrentino's research points out that a poor school climate predicted an increased risk of teacher victimization for girls but not for boys. However, Sorrentino (2019) didn't have enough data to explain why this phenomenon exists. Of course, more research and data collection needs to be done to figure something out. Research has shown that women are much more vulnerable to verbal abuse from teachers and peers, rumors, and hostile learning environments (2022). In the context of teacher victimization, the poor school climate may allow female students to become more vulnerable, thus making them more likely to conduct the action of victimization toward their teachers compared to male students.

2.2.4 Community & Culture

The community that the victimized teachers live in greatly affects the rate of teacher victimization. According to most of the research done on community-related risk factors, many focus on the location of the school. The result of the majority of findings illustrates that teachers working in urban schools are more likely to suffer from victimization than those working in suburban or rural schools. Several explanations have been made regarding this phenomenon. First, Tiesman and his team believe that students' constant stress from the environment they live in can play a crucial role in committing teacher victimization. Students in urban schools are more likely to live in poverty and be exposed to a myriad of environmental stressors (*e.g., crime, poverty*) that can contribute to higher rates of school violence and teacher-directed violence (*Tiesman, H. et al., 2013*). Personally speaking, the part saying that urban students are more likely to live in poverty is quite skeptical, given that the cost of living itself is much more expensive compared to non-city areas. However, data did show that urban areas have higher crime rates, which means that such environmental stressors could be a reason to disturb the thinking of students and, therefore, make them victimize their teachers in school.



Fig.2 Victimization

The second explanation is that students may resort to victimization as a means of self-protection. Students living in high-risk urban neighborhoods may use aggression to adapt to these environments as a form of protection (Latzman, R. D. et al., 2005). This phenomenon is particularly relevant in today's urban society, where pervasive pressure and competition can contribute to heightened anxiety. As students grapple with these stresses, their accumulated anxiety may manifest as distrust toward their teachers, leading them to adopt victimizing behaviors as a misguided strategy for self-preservation. This dynamic underscores the complex interplay between students' environments and their interactions with educators, highlighting the need for supportive interventions that address underlying anxieties and promote healthier relationships in the classroom, thereby reducing the risk of teacher victimization.

Another risk factor that's closely related to community factors would be cultural factors. Cultural risk factors significantly influence teacher victimization, particularly in how conflict resolution strategies are employed. Holt's (2005) research highlights that individuals from collectivistic cultures tend to favor compromising and problem-solving strategies when faced with conflict, prioritizing the preservation of relationships over individual goals. This cultural orientation contrasts sharply with the more goal-oriented, forceful approaches prevalent in individualistic cultures, where assertiveness may take precedence. In educational settings, teachers from collectivistic backgrounds may be less likely to assertively address instances of victimization, opting instead for strategies that seek harmony and collaboration. This reluctance can lead to unresolved issues, ultimately perpetuating a cycle of victimization. Understanding these cultural dynamics is crucial for developing effective interventions that consider diverse conflict resolution preferences, thereby fostering supportive environments that mitigate teacher victimization across varying cultural contexts.

3. Limitations And Future Considerations

While this paper sheds light on the complex interplay of risk factors contributing to teacher victimization and its implications for both educators and students, several limitations warrant discussion. Firstly, the conceptual framework primarily relies on existing literature, which may not capture the full scope of contemporary experiences faced by teachers, particularly in rapidly changing educational environments. Additionally, although useful, categorizing individual and contextual factors may oversimplify the nuanced interactions between these elements. Future research should adopt a more holistic approach that considers the intersectionality of factors, such as how gender and race interact with school climate and community influences, thereby providing a richer understanding of teacher victimization. Moreover, longitudinal studies are needed to track the long-term effects of victimization on mental health and professional efficacy, offering insights into the dynamics over time. The paper also highlights the importance of peer and collegial support, yet there is a scarcity of empirical studies exploring how these relationships can be effectively fostered in various educational settings. Therefore, future investigations need to be done to collect more data on this topic. Finally,

while the paper discusses potential risk factors, it lacks an in-depth exploration of intervention strategies that can be employed to address teacher victimization after it occurs. Future research should focus on developing and evaluating effective support systems and interventions that empower teachers and promote resilience in the face of victimization, ultimately enhancing both teacher well-being and student outcomes.

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