

Teaching teachers to reduce classroom violence

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Mike Beetham and Elaine Neigel are retired teachers sharing their experiences of violence in the classroom at a Calabogie workshop for dozens of teachers. - Derek Dunn/Torstar

A slab of rock lay on the floor before Mike Beetham's chair. He brings it with him to workshops just like the recent one in Calabogie. Soon teachers from across Renfrew county would arrive and chose a seat from chairs that had been arranged in a circle. The now-retired teacher from southern Ontario, who is an expert in classroom violence, would pick up the rock and tell the story he has told many times.

“He was a young boy. He ran from the school across the road so I began chasing him because there is a safety element,” Beetham said. “He went into the bush and when I went in he was waiting for me there. With this rock.

“There was no trigger.”

The incident traumatized him. It seemed to come out of nowhere. And while it is more serious than other cases – elementary level students throwing pencils at teachers, kicking chairs or other forms of aggression – it is an example of a growing trend in province: classroom violence. Not only are three-day workshops such as the one at Calabogie Peaks on July 25 increasing, but various organizations are calling on governments and society as a whole to be made more aware.

It is at the point where talk of bite-resistant clothing for teachers is a thing. Setting aside the right to work in a safe environment, the notion of keeping constant vigilance while juggling various responsibilities – teaching the curriculum, evaluating, and more – is an added challenge.

The Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario surveyed 81,000 members last year. It found that 70 per cent of teachers reported experiencing or witnessing violence during the 2016-17 school year. Verbal threats, physical assault and weapon use topped the list.

Beetham said there are likely multiple factors accounting for the spike. Mental health issues are on the rise; some kids spend more time alone with video games than developing social skills; parents can be negligent; a lack of resources in the education system means less one-on-one attention.

“There is no one cause you can point to,” Beetham said. “It is learned behaviour, and it can be unlearned.”

It isn't as simple as punishing students, either. He and many in the education sector believe in punitive measures; students must be held accountable for their actions, but it should be restorative, not simply retaliatory. Hence the workshops and strategies teachers learn to avoid reaching that stage altogether.

It comes down to excelling within your realm of influence, Beetham said. Teachers can't ensure every child has a good breakfast or is free of clinical depression. They can, however, learn de-escalation strategies.

Elaine Neigel, a retired teacher from Petawawa who organized the workshop, states it more directly.

"Kindness," Neigel said. "Sometimes it's not your job that day to teach the curriculum. Sometimes it's your job to show them some kindness."

A child's needs can be very profound, she said; and society has grown increasingly more complex; but just being a person who wants to understand them (and not exacerbate their problems) can be enough.



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