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# **Teacher Targeted Bullying and Harassment by Students and Parents: Report from an Australian Exploratory Survey**

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to thank all the teachers who took time out of their busy schedules to answer the survey and participate in interviews. Your contribution means we are now one step closer to understanding the impact of Teacher Targeted Bullying and Harassment by students and parents in Australian schools.

## **PROJECT SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS**

This study was undertaken in 2018 with funding from the DVC(R) Research Engagement Income Growth Fund and HuSS IRGS Supplementary Support Fund. It received the support of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (Ahisa) and the Australian Education Union (Victoria branch). This project aimed to shed light on teachers' experiences of feeling bullied and victimised while working in Australia's Independent and Public Schools and presents findings of the incidence and impact of student and parental Teacher Targeted Bullying and Harassment (TTBH). To our knowledge, this is the first research of its kind in Australia.

It was found that while there is mounting evidence that teachers suffer ongoing incidences of Teacher Targeted Bullying and Harassment, there is a paucity of research which explores teachers' reports of being bullied by students and parents. It also found that many teachers feel they struggle to feel respected professionally and believe their reports of teacher targeted bullying and harassment are often ignored or downplayed by management and peak bodies. Finally, it was found that teacher targeted bullying and harassment by students and parents has detrimental effects on a teacher's sense of self-efficacy and wellbeing and may contribute to an unsafe workplace.

## BACKGROUND

Many people have trouble believing that teachers can be bullied or harassed by students and their parents. This is because in the context of the school, teachers are thought to be in a position of power. However, this may not be so. Evidence suggests that teachers often feel powerless in the classroom and that Teacher Targeted Bullying and Harassment (TTBH) from students and their parents is a common occurrence in the day to day interaction of a teacher's workplace.

While teachers' accounts of bullying and harassment by students and parents have featured in online forums, webpages (see for example *Teachers blowing their whistle*) and some media reports, the negative impacts on teacher workplace safety from student and parental TTBH has been largely unacknowledged across Australia. There is a dearth of academic research conducted on the topic. Government reports, while insisting on the right of students to emotional and physical wellbeing (see for example Gonski 2011 and 2018), largely ignore the adverse effects of negative classroom interaction on teachers. The only mention of teacher safety made in policy documents is related to pre-service teachers "many [of whom] struggle with the transition from the safety and security of being a pre-service teacher to becoming a fully-fledged classroom teacher" (Gonski 2018: p. 74).

The problems which arise from the lack of acknowledgement of TTBH, have led to teachers feeling increasingly unsatisfied. The lack of discussion surrounding TTBH in part originates from the dominant traditional pedagogical narrative which celebrates the school and its classrooms as the locus wherein the incontestable right of students to a safe learning environment is enabled. Australian cultural attitudes and public discourse resist identifying certain student behaviour as having an adverse impact on teachers and problematic behaviours are contextualised in terms of teachers' ability (or lack thereof) to manage increasingly complicated classrooms. What is more, teachers more than ever are under pressure to perform. Not only is there a focus on student engagement and achievement, but teachers are increasingly tasked with teaching more diverse, often techno savvy cohorts in technologically-hybridised environments with relatively little targeted training. Not surprisingly, teachers in 21st Century Australia have reported being overwhelmed (Fogelgarn, 2013). Stress, burnout, disturbing rates of attrition, intense emotional drain,

challenging student behaviour, planning and reporting demands and work-life balance, deplete teachers' energy and impact attitude towards their work (Dawson, 2008). These stressors are particularly acute for early career teachers, with the prevalence of contract work further intensifying the precariousness of establishing themselves in a gruelling and highly competitive professional context (Johnson et al., 2010; Mohamed et al., 2017).

What is more, the impact of TTBH is further obscured by simplistic media representations of teachers, which imply that teaching is uncomplicated (Alhamdan et al., 2014). Research suggests that globally, newspapers blame teachers for poor student performance and poor educational outcomes, (Swetnam 2010; Alhamdan et al., 2014; Kirby 2016) and that subliminal messages promoted by film and television result in a range of misconceptions negatively influencing the public's perception and expectations of individuals in the profession. Swetnam (2010) in particular suggests that the following media perpetuated misconceptions may be harmful;

- That anybody can teach
- Communication between teachers and students is often a give-and-take exchange, when in fact, these types of behaviours would be taken for back talk in most real classrooms
- That teaching is an easy life as class sizes are portrayed as minuscule while the realities of grading, planning, meetings, and the extra duties that take up a large portion of the average week are rarely represented.

## **INCIDENCE OF TTBH AROUND THE WORLD**

Numerous international researchers have produced disturbing evidence of the incidence of student and parent enacted TTBH and its detrimental impact on teacher wellbeing across varied cultural contexts. In New Zealand, Benefield's (2004) study of 587 teachers revealed that 28% of participants reported experiencing minor bullying from students on a weekly basis. Similarly, a 2007 study of teachers in Luxembourg reported that teachers were often the target of aggressive behaviour from students with 23.9% reporting being victims of strong verbal attacks; 19.4% of perceived defamation and 7% of sexual harassment



(Steffgen & Ewen, 2007, p. 86). In Canada, a study of 571 teachers found that an alarming number had experienced and suffered from intentionally victimising or fear-inducing abuse; 60% suffered personal insults or name-calling; almost 50% had experienced rude or obscene gestures intended to offend or insult or intimidate; 41% were subjected to remarks or statements made to harm their reputation or relationships; 40% reported experiencing behaviour or conduct intended to make them feel fearful or intimidated; 34% had experienced personal property damage and almost 20% reported being threatened with physical violence without a weapon. Similarly, Dinkes et al., (2007) found that in the US around 7% of teachers reported being threatened with injury and 4% were physically assaulted by students during the previous year. A separate study found that almost all teachers had been subjected to rude or disrespectful behaviour.

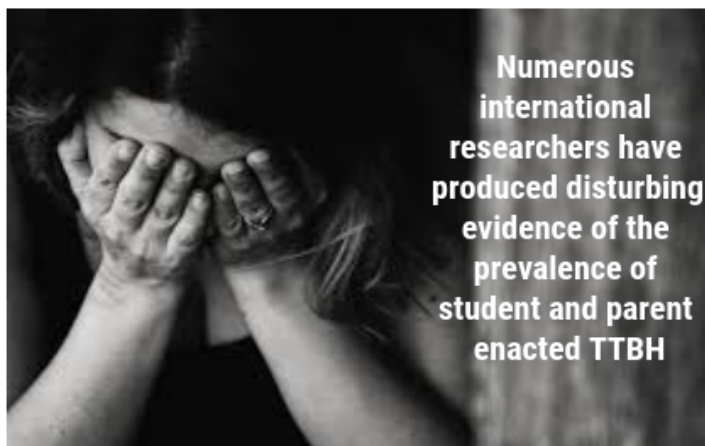
In Slovakian secondary schools, Dzuka & Dalbert (2007) discovered that almost half of the teachers in their study reported having experienced at least one recent violent student act. In an internet study with 219 teacher-respondents, Kauppi & Pörhölä (2012) found that 70 teachers indicated that they had been bullied by their students. Kõiv's (2014) study of 560 Estonian teachers found that the incidence of student and parent led teacher-targeted bullying had risen a staggering 300%. In South Africa Woudstra et al. (2018), found that out of the 153 public secondary school teachers surveyed about learner-to-teacher bullying, "62.1% of the teachers reported exposure to verbal bullying, 34.6% to physical bullying, 27% to indirect bullying, and 6.6% to cyber bullying" (p.1).

What is more, student to teacher bullying and harassment was also recorded in countries where the cultural context traditionally has taught students to revere teachers. Chen & Astor (2008) found that in Taiwan, up to 30% of students responded affirmatively to having engaged in at least one aggressive act against teachers in the year before the survey.

At a glance

**Key findings - Australia and around the world**

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**TTBH** constitutes an unsafe working environment

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The problem of  
TTBH has been  
largely ignored  
in Australia

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# Teacher bullying is difficult to define

Language such as teacher bullying, or staff bullying is ambiguous and is easily misconstrued

## THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

There appears to be a dearth of Australian studies focusing on student and parent enacted teacher targeted bullying and harassment. Studies which focus on bullying as a subject choose to emphasise the incidence and effects of teacher to student bullying or on peer to peer bullying (Hemphill, et al., 2014). Few studies were found to acknowledge the existence of student enacted TTBH. In his discussion of violence in schools more widely, Tronc details 'Australian incidence of school violence' (p. 35) listing more than half a dozen government and teacher association reports that chronicle the incidence of school bullying and violence throughout the 1990s. Tronc indicates that the problem 'has been steadily increasing over the last couple of decades' (p. 36) and suggests that 'serious assaults upon educational personnel, both teachers and students, are likely to proliferate' (p.36). Problematically, Tronc suggests that Australia appears to have a 'blasé community attitude [toward school violence] ... that attacks on teachers and students are foreign phenomena' (p.36). In a study of Western Australian students, Angus et al. (2010) found around 20% of students were consistently unproductive and over half students who were found to be disengaged displayed behaviours from being inattentive and lacking motivation through to disruptive, aggressive behaviour. Similarly, in his longitudinal report on the experiences of Principals in Australian schools, Riley et al., (2018) found that one in three Principals had been bullied or harassed with principals reporting both physical and verbal threats and abuse.

As a result, to our knowledge, the exploratory study discussed within this report presents the first attempt to discover the incidence and effects of student and parent enacted teacher targeted bullying in the Australian context.

## DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Bullying is a difficult concept to define. Language such as teacher bullying, or staff bullying is ambiguous and is easily misconstrued based on mediatised public discourse and policy which tend to view teachers as the powerful party and thus implicitly as the perpetrators of bullying rather than the victims. What is more while teachers are vulnerable to frequent episodes of bullying and harassment from students, they also feel compromised by reporting such incidents. Many teachers feel their professional capacity may be questioned if they disclose occurrences of TTBH.

Further complicating this is the lack of awareness as to what constitutes an episode of bullying or harassment or when one becomes the other. To better elucidate this, in the initial phase of conceptualisation we adopted the following generalised definition of harassment as:

“unwelcome conduct, action, communication, or behaviour... which mocks, demeans, puts down, disparages, or ridicules...” (Heathfield 2018).

Bullying we defined as an extreme form of harassment characterised by repeated “unwanted, aggressive behaviour that involves a real or perceived power imbalance” (U.S Department of Health and Human Services 2018), arising from the deliberate intent to cause physical or psychological distress to others. It is generalised, rather than specific discrimination against someone and not based on characteristics such as age, gender, race, disability among others (Davenport, Schwartz, Elliott, 1999). It may be perpetrated by one or more people, be of short or long duration, it may be premeditated or opportunistic, and may target one or more victims.

Further refining of these concepts for application into a teaching context led us to adopt the following final definition of student or parent enacted teacher targeted bullying and harassment:

A communication process that involves a real or perceived power imbalance where “a teacher is subjected, by one or more students [or their parents], to interaction that he or she perceives as insulting, upsetting or intimidating” (Kauppi and Pörhölä 2012) this may be verbal, nonverbal or physical in nature, it may be premeditated or opportunistic, be a single instance or recurring and or of short or long duration.

## ABOUT THE STUDY

This mixed method exploratory study aimed to gather evidence of the experiences of Australian teachers who have been subjected to bullying or harassment by students and/or their parents over a period of twelve months (2017-2018). It received approval from the researchers' institution Human Ethics Committee (research number HEC17-060). It was undertaken over a one-month period beginning in May and ending in June 2018. It aimed to answer the following research questions

- Is there evidence of teachers experiencing student and parent enacted bullying and harassment in Australian schools?
- What type of bullying and harassment do teachers experience in their day to day classroom interactions?
- What effects, if any, is teacher targeted bullying and harassment having on teachers' sense of self efficacy and wellbeing?

The survey was open nationally to all teachers who either held current Australian teaching registration or had held registration within the last two years, aged between 21 and 70.

Three separate social media campaigns were run over a four-week period using one social media platform. An invitation to participate was also sent out by supporting organisations via their email newsletter.

The campaign targeted individuals who identified in their profiles as teaching professionals. The list of key words used to recruit include identification as; Secondary School Principal, Principal, Secondary School Assistant Principal, Assistant Principal, Vice-Principal, Deputy Head Teacher, Teacher, Secondary School Teacher, Primary School Teacher, Primary Teacher, Physics Teacher, Social Studies Teacher, Math Teacher, Mathematics Teacher, English Teacher, Chemistry Teacher, History Teacher, Science Teacher among other variations.

Identified individuals were invited to participate by clicking on the dedicated website link and participating in the survey. Teachers from Victoria were also able to take part in an additional one-hour semi structured interview to further explore experiences of TTBH in more depth.

Qualitative information for this study was coded and analysed using Nvivo statistical software. Anonymous quantitative data was analysed using SPSS.

## **PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS**

560 individuals participated in the survey<sup>1</sup>. 51.6% of our respondents came from the secondary sector, 40% from primary and 7.7% worked across the primary and secondary sectors (a further 0.7% did not respond to this question). In total 82.3% of respondents identified as *Teachers*, 11.6% as *Head Teachers*, 3 % as *Deputy Principals* and 3.1% as *Principals*. The average participant recorded their age bracket as 36 - 40 years of age. 53.8% of participants had been registered for ten years or longer and 46.2% had been registered for four years or less with only 2.1% of these having been registered for less than one year.

85.9% of our respondents were female, while 14.1% were male. Female teachers were relatively evenly distributed across primary (42.3%) and secondary (48.6%) level. Male participants were predominantly engaged in the secondary teaching sector (65%); only 28% of male participants recorded teaching in the primary sector<sup>2</sup>. These findings are in line with current gender distributions found more generally in Australian schools across the teaching sector (for example see McKenzie et al., 2014).

While responses were received from almost every Australian State and Territory, response rates differed greatly. The east coast of Australia contributed the largest number of responses, with 74.6% of participants. Of these, 32.2% of respondent came from Victoria, 26.8% from Queensland and 16.6% from New South Wales; the ACT recorded a much smaller response rate of just 1.7%. The lowest numbers of responses were recorded among Tasmanian teachers, with only 1.1% of responses. The Northern Territory only recorded responses for individuals working across two or more states.

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<sup>1</sup> Not all participants responded to all questions. We have reported on the valid count for each question.

<sup>2</sup> The remaining 9.1% of women and 7% of men either worked across both sectors (multi sector) or did not respond to this question.

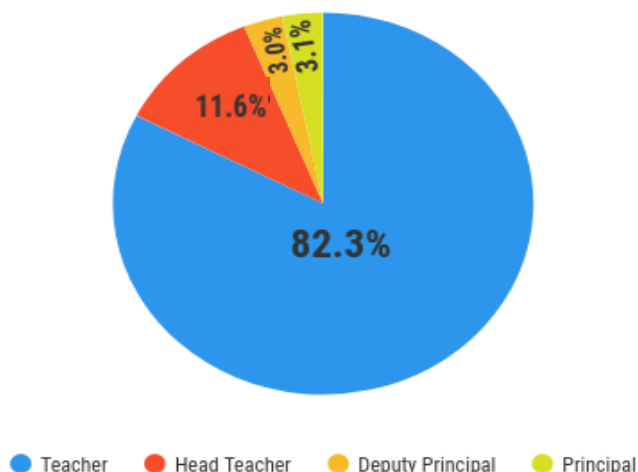
## At a glance

### Participant demographics

#### Participants - N=560



#### Role currently employed in



### Gender distribution

#### Study distribution

85.9% Females

14.1 % Males



#### Distribution per sector

##### ☐ Females

- Were only slightly more likely to work in the secondary sector (48.6%) than primary sector (42.3%)

##### ☐ Males

- Males were far more likely to work in the secondary (65%) than primary (28%) sector.

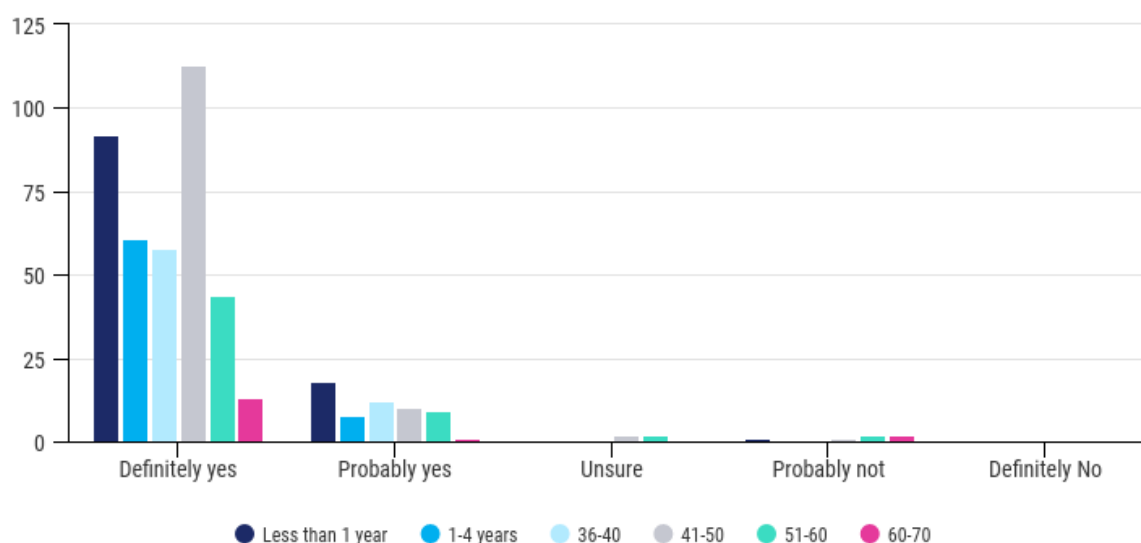
## INCIDENCE OF TTBH IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

*'It makes you wonder why you entered the profession when you know that every day you are going to be bullied, harassed and abused by students...'  
(Female teacher, 25+ years in the profession)*

The survey was designed to record the incidence of bullying and harassment by students and parents over a 12-month period. It was broken up into smaller time periods which included last fortnight, last month, two to five months, six to eight months and nine to 12-month periods. Participants were asked to nominate if the behaviour had been perpetrated by a repeat offender, a one-off incident or both for each time period. This publication reports on the data recorded for the nine to 12-month period.

Teachers' experiences of TTBH is a frequent occurrence with 80% of respondents recording having experienced some form of student or parent enacted TTBH over the last nine to 12-month period. 85.2% of teachers who participated in this survey felt that TTBH by students and parents was a problem in Australian schools. A further 13% felt that this may be a problem. As indicated in table 1 below, this view was shared among teachers of all ages with less than 2% believing that student and parental TTBH may not be a problem for teachers in Australian schools.

**Table 1 - Perception of TTBH by age bracket**





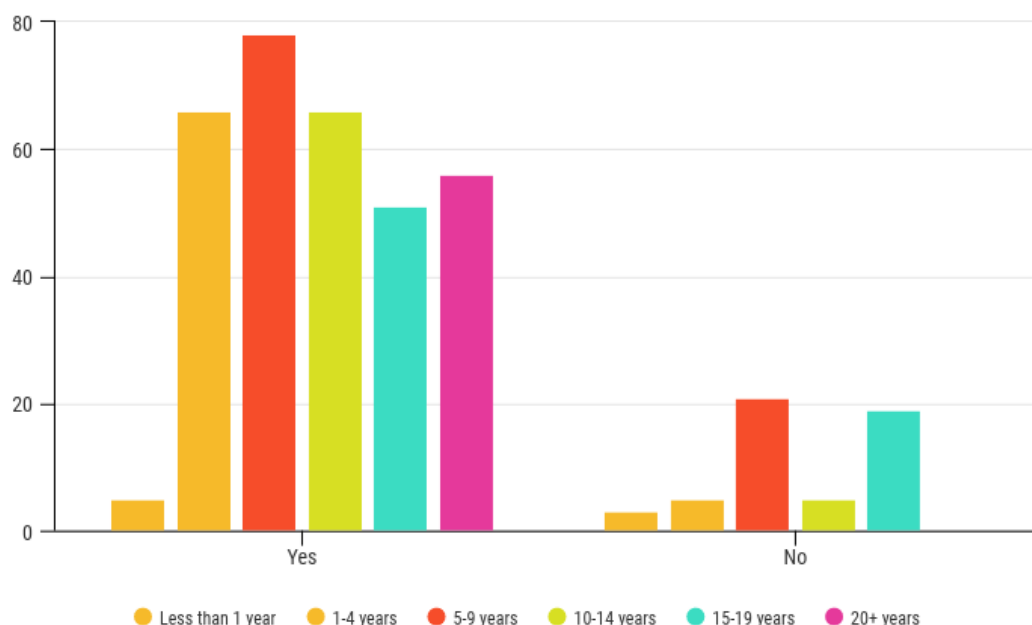
When asked about their experiences of TTBH in the previous 9 to 12 months, 55.6% of teachers reported TTBH from both students and parents, 13.4% had experienced student enacted TTB exclusively and 12.4% reported solely parental enacted TTBH. As may be expected, parent/guardian TTBH was most common for teachers working in the primary sector, with 62.9% of primary school teachers having experienced bullying or harassment from a parent in the nine to 12-month period preceding the survey. Conversely, secondary teachers suffered TTBH most often at the hands of their students with 77.6% of respondents reporting being bullied or harassed by a student in the last nine to 12 months.

Over 1540 incidents of TTBH were recorded by participants<sup>3</sup> for the nine to 12-month period immediately preceding the study. Of these, over half (56.2%) of all respondents reported having experienced TTBH by a repeat aggressor and 26.7% reported single one-off incidents. In a further 17.1% of cases, participants had experienced both repeat aggressor and single instances of TTBH in the last nine to 12 months. This finding supports those made in overseas studies which suggest that student and parental TTBH is usually part of a continuum, whereby the teacher may experience ongoing TTBH, which may not be enacted by the same individual, but may present itself as several separate (at times minor) occurrences.

As can be seen by table 2, TTBH seemed to be high among all teachers, no matter how long they had held registration. This finding suggests that experiences of TTBH may not be easily correlated to a teacher's ability to manage a classroom and that even the most experienced educator may or may not be a target of student or parental TTBH. Interestingly, teachers who had held registration for less than one year reported the lowest incidence of TTBH (62.5%) and while this figure needs to be approached with caution due to the small sample of respondents, it may be indicative of the high level of support very early career teachers receive.

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<sup>3</sup> Teachers were able to record more than one type of incident for this section.

**Table 2- TTBH by teacher length of registration**

Age however did seem to influence the experience of TTBH to some extent. Teachers aged over 60 were found to be much less likely to report incidents of TTBH in the last nine to 12 months (54.5%) while teachers aged 21-30 reported the highest incidence of TTBH of any cohort (89.1%).

In terms of gender, women more often reported experiencing student and parental TTBH (82.7% and 72% respectively). This was also more pronounced for women aged 21-30 (32.9%) who recorded incidents of TTBH more often than any other cohort; in fact, men in this same cohort recorded just 11.1% of all bullying, the third lowest level after women and men aged 60 years or older.

Finally, secondary school teachers were found to be more likely (67.6%) to experience TTBH than those in the primary sector (60.9%). A difference was also found for the types of TTBH experienced between those working in primary and secondary schools. Secondary school teachers more often reported student TTBH (77.6%) while primary school teachers recorded parents as the main aggressors (62.9%).

## **TYPES OF TTBH ENCOUNTERED BY TEACHERS**

### ***STUDENT ENACTED TTBH***

The survey collected evidence of 12 different forms of teacher targeted bullying and harassment. These included yelling, swearing, hitting or punching, damaging personal property, disparaging remarks (verbal), disparaging remarks (social media), standing over/involving personal space, organising others against a teacher, lying to get a teacher into trouble, harassing thought text and phone calls, discriminatory behaviour and students engaging parents to argue on their behalf.

71.4% of participants reported having been bullied or harassed by a student in the proceeding 12-month period. Verbal aggression was the most commonly encountered form of student enacted TTBH. 28.6% of respondents recorded a student having sworn at them in the last nine to 12 months, while yelling (28%) and disparaging verbal comments closely followed (25.5%). In terms of physical violence, while reports were lower than for other types of behaviour, 10% of teachers had been hit or punched by a student in the last year, 12.5% had a student damage their personal property and 16.6% had a student stand over them or invade their personal space.

Table 3 explores the types of student enacted TTBH experienced by teachers according to their length of registration. Teachers in their first year of teaching reported experiencing the lowest levels of TTBH by students with mid-career teachers disclosing the worst. Verbal abuse in the form of yelling, swearing and disparaging remarks were the most often recorded experiences of student enacted TTBH for all but those registered for 15-19 years. Early career teachers (registered for 4 years or less) recorded the lowest levels of having a student engage a parent to argue on their behalf. Hitting or punching was recorded most often by mid-career teachers (5 -14 years registered). Late career teachers (15 - 20+) reported students engaging parents to argue on their behalf or using standing over tactics or invading personal space more often than any other cohort.

**Table 3 - Type of student TTBH experienced by teachers by length of registration**

	Less than 1 year		1 - 4 years		5 - 9 years		10 -14 years		15 -19 years		20+ years	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Yelling</b>	1	8.3%	26	26.2%	39	27.2%	38	32%	23	29.1%	28	28.2%
<b>Swearing</b>	1	8.3%	23	23.2%	39	27.2%	39	33%	6	7.6%	30	30.3%
<b>Hitting or punching</b>	1	8.3%	9	9.0%	15	10.4%	14	12%	7	8.9%	8	8.0%
<b>Damaging personal property</b>	0	0.0%	13	13.1%	22	15.3%	13	11%	8	10.1%	14	14.1%
<b>Disparaging remarks (verbal)</b>	0	0.0%	24	24.2%	37	26%	35	29.4%	2	2.5%	27	27.3%
<b>Disparaging remarks (social media)</b>	0	0.0%	3	3.0%	9	6.3%	6	5.0%	8	10.1%	8	8.0%
<b>Standing over/ invading personal space</b>	1	8.3%	13	13.1%	19	13.3%	26	5.0%	14	17.7%	19	19.2%
<b>Organising others against a teacher</b>	0	0.0%	13	13.1%	15	10.4%	10	22.0%	12	15.2%	12	12.1%
<b>Lying about a teacher to get them into trouble</b>	0	0.0%	10	10.1%	17	12%	10	8.4%	12	15.2%	16	16.1%
<b>Harassing through phone calls or text messages</b>	0	0.0%	6	6.0%	6	4.2%	2	1.7%	4	5.0%	3	3.0%
<b>Discriminatory behaviour</b>	0	0.0%	8	8.0%	9	6.3%	2	1.7%	9	11.4%	1	1.0%
<b>Student engaging a parent to argue on their behalf</b>	1	8.3%	13	13.1%	26	18.2%	21	18%	15	19.0%	19	19.2%

Female teachers experienced student TTBH slightly more often than males (71% to 68.4%). While both genders reported yelling and swearing as the most often encountered form of student bullying and harassment, women experienced this behaviour more often than men (16.4% and 15.2% respectively). Female teachers were also more likely than male teachers to experience students standing over or invading their personal space (9.9% to 6.9%) as well as students harassing them through phone calls or text messages (2.3% to 1.4%). Male teachers on the other hand were more likely than female teachers to have students organise others against them (8.3% and 6% respectively), lie about them to get them in trouble (7.6% to 6.4%), be discriminated against by students (5.5% to 2.5%) and have parents engaged to argue on a student's behalf (11% to 9.4%).

At a glance

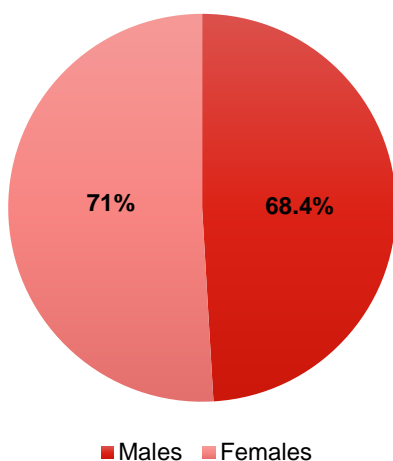
## Student enacted TTBH

# 71.4%

of participants

reported having been bullied or harassed by a student in the proceeding 12-month period

### Student TTBH



**Being sworn or yelled at is the most common form of student TTBH experienced by teachers**

# 10%



of teachers had been **hit or punched** by a student in the last year.

## **PARENT ENACTED TTBH**

57.8% of teachers reported experiencing at least one incident of parent led teacher targeted bullying and harassment in the last 12 months. Upon analysis, it was revealed that the only cohort not to record any parent TTBH were very early career teachers (less than one year registered) with incidents recorded for all other groups. Of the incidents recorded, the most common forms of parent TTBH were parents verbally disparaging a teacher (15.2%) yelling (14.4%), and parents engaging to argue on their child's behalf (13.4%). Physical attacks by parents on teachers were rare, with 8.8% reporting a parent standing over or invading their personal space and just 1.1% experienced being hit or punched by a parent.

Table 4 presents the types of parent TTBH experienced by teachers by length of registration. As can be seen, teachers often find themselves to be the target of several different forms of parental bullying and harassment. While early career teachers (registered for 1-4 years) recorded the lowest number of TTBH incidents (14%), they most often found themselves the target of parents lying about them to get them into trouble. Those enrolled for less than 9 years recorded being the targets of parents organising others against them more often than other cohorts (12.4%). Mid-career teachers (10-14 years registered) were most often victims of parents using stand over tactics or invading a teacher's personal space. Teachers in the mid to late stages of their career (10 years or more) also reported higher incidences of parents swearing at them, being the victims of disparaging social media remarks and being hit or punched than younger cohorts. Mid to late career teachers (those registered between 15 to 19 years) reported the highest incidence of bullying and harassment through phone calls and text messages (7.3%) while those who had been teaching for over 20 years recorded the second lowest incidence of TTBH after early career teachers engaged in the profession for less than 5 years.

**Table 4- Type of parent TTBH experienced by teachers by length of registration**

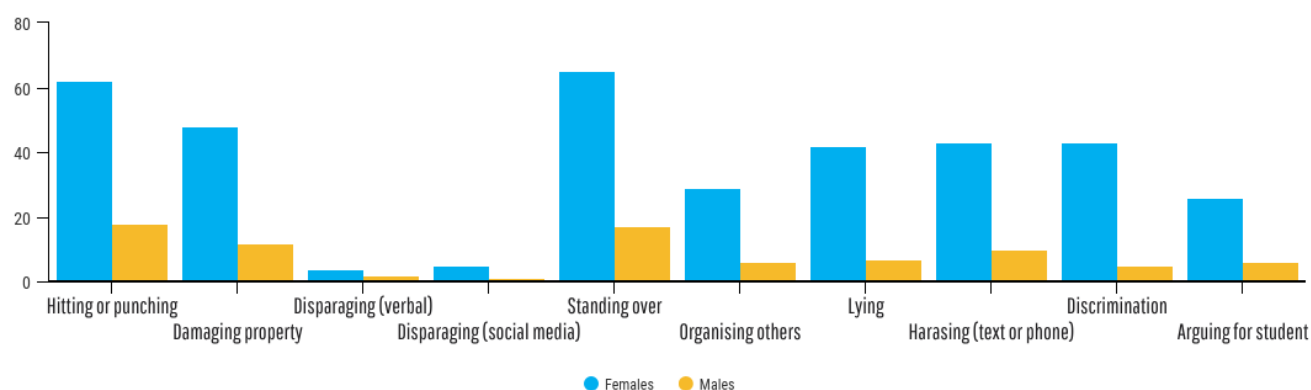
	Less than 1 year		1 - 4 years		5 - 9 years		10 -14 years		15 -19 years		20+ years	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Yelling</b>	0	0.0%	10	13.0%	19	14.7%	21	15.3%	18	14.5%	12	13.8%
<b>Swearing</b>	0	0.0%	6	7.8%	13	10%	17	12.4%	14	11.3%	10	11.5%
<b>Hitting or punching</b>	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	1.6%	1	0.7%	2	1.6%	1	1.1%
<b>Damaging personal property</b>	0	0.0%	1	1.3%	2	1.6%	0	0%	2	1.6%	1	1.1%
<b>Disparaging remarks (verbal)</b>	0	0.0%	13	16.9%	20	15.5%	18	13.1%	20	16.1%	13	15%
<b>Disparaging remarks (social media)</b>	0	0.0%	4	5.2%	4	3.1%	11	8.0%	9	7.3%	7	8.0%
<b>Standing over/ invading personal space</b>	0	0.0%	7	9.1%	8	6.2%	18	13.1%	8	6.5%	8	9.2%
<b>Organising others against a teacher</b>	0	0.0%	9	11.7%	16	12.4%	11	8.0%	8	6.5%	9	10.4%
<b>Lying about a teacher to get them into trouble</b>	0	0.0%	8	10.4%	13	10%	9	6.6%	10	8.0%	8	9.2%
<b>Harassing through phone calls or text messages</b>	0	0.0%	5	6.5%	8	6.2%	6	4.4%	9	7.3%	4	4.6%
<b>Discriminatory behaviour</b>	0	0.0%	5	6.5%	6	4.7%	6	4.4%	8	6.5%	2	2.3%
<b>Student engaging a parent to argue on their behalf</b>	0	0.0%	9	11.7%	18	14%	19	14%	16	12.9%	12	13.8%



In terms of parental TTBH per gender, 58.8% of females and 41.2% of males recorded having been the victim of parental TTBH in the previous 12 months. As indicated in table 5 below, women more often than men documented incidents where parents had used standing over tactics or invading their personal space (9.3%). Younger females (21-30) recorded being harassed via phone or texts more often than other females (29.5%). Women aged 41-50 recorded the highest incidence of most types of TTBH including parents lying about them (39.5%), parents engaging in arguing on their child's behalf (34.4%), parent's disparaging them verbally (26%) and in social media (34.5%), swearing (30.6%) and yelling at them (33.3%). Females aged 51 and over recorded the lowest levels of TTBH after very early career teachers.

Men on the other hand found themselves the targets of verbal abuse more often than females, with yelling (17.8%), verbal disparaging (16.8%) and swearing (11.9%) being the most often experienced behaviours. Males aged 36-50 most often reported being sworn at by students (66.7%). Males 36-50 most often reported parents using standing over tactics or invading their personal space (57.1%). Finally, males aged 51 and over, like their female counterparts, had experienced the lowest levels of TTBH over the last nine to 12-month period.

**Table 5 - Type of parental TTBH experienced by teachers**  
(by teacher's gender)

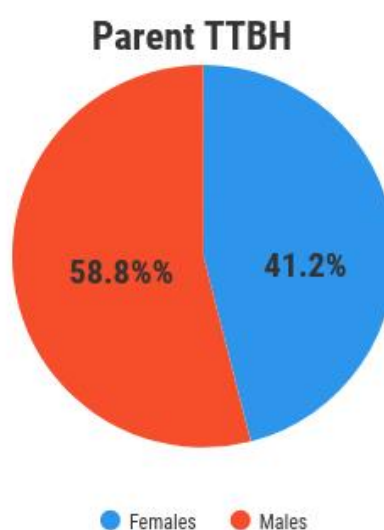


At a glance

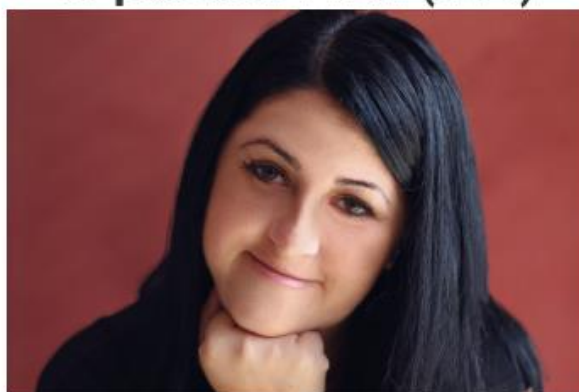
## Parent enacted TTBH



**57.8% of teachers reported experiencing at least one incident of parent led TTBH**



**Early career teachers recorded the lowest levels of parental TTBH (14%)**

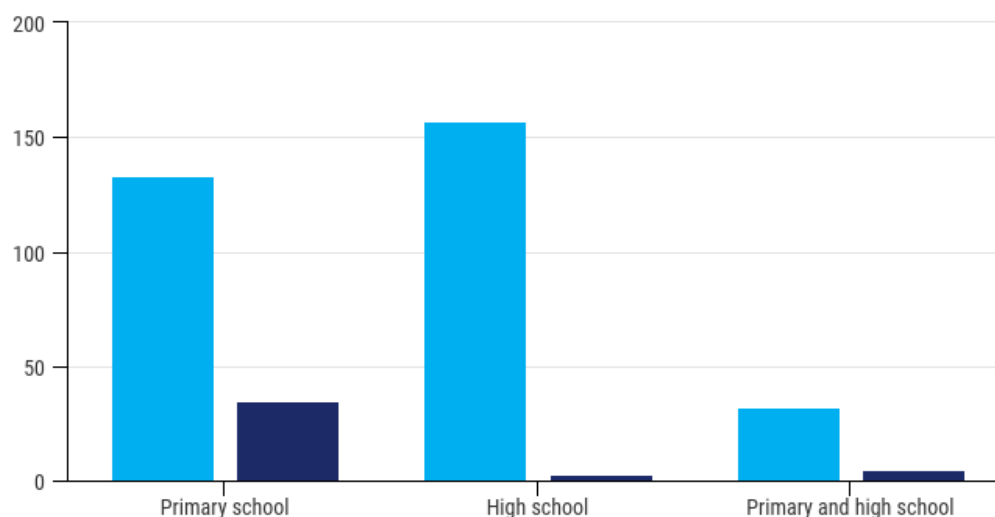


## THE IMPACT OF TTBH ON TEACHERS

*The short of it is that bullying from students (led by one [individual] in particular) contributed to me wanting to commit suicide. I felt worthless and unable to do the valuable and important job of teaching. It has taken years of support, encouragement and medical & spiritual intervention to enable me to teach full time again. (Male teacher, 10-14 years in the profession)*

This section of the report explores both quantitative and qualitative data we received to questions pertaining to the impact of TTBH on teachers. The data gathered showed that for most teachers, TTBH is experienced as a continuum of mostly separate and apparently ‘harmless’, experiences, which eventually wear down and erode teaching staff self-confidence, sense of efficacy, and enjoyment in the workplace. Many teachers lamented having lost their desire to teach due to ongoing issues with TTBH and several found themselves unable to re-motivate their once passionate teaching practice. Not surprisingly, a high number of teachers who were looking to retrain or were considering a different career path indicated that teacher targeted bullying and harassment by students and parents was directly related to their desire to leave the teaching profession. In fact, 83.1% had considered leaving the profession due to TTBH. When teachers’ responses were analysed by length of registration, up to 69% of early career teachers (those registered for less than 4 years) had considered a different career path. Mid and later career teachers fared little better with 61.7% of mid-career and 63% of late career teachers asserting that they had at some stage considered leaving. Finally, women (64%) more often than men (55.9%) stated that they had contemplated a career change.

Table 6 in the following page captures the relative disclosure of a teacher’s desire to leave the profession due to TTBH by the educational level they are working in. Teachers who work across both sectors were most likely to want to leave due to TTHB (86.5%), this was closely followed by those teaching in high schools across the country (82.6%) and finally primary school teachers (79.2%).

**Table 6 - Desire to leave teaching due to TTBH and educational level teaching into**

The information gathered suggests that teachers perceived a difference in level of TTBH impact relative to whether the source of bullying and harassment is a student or parent.

Parental TTBH was regarded as an unwarranted challenge by parents concerning a teacher's abilities and professionalism. Several teachers suggested that the ongoing, and at times relentless advocacy, performed by parents eroded a teacher's ability to censure and ultimately control poor student behaviour. This was not only humiliating for most teachers, but also disempowering.

Student TTBH on the other hand impacted teachers at two different levels. On a personal level, it served to increase a teacher's levels of anxiety by exploiting personal insecurities (for example comments about appearance) while also undermining a teacher's sense of self-efficacy, by compromising their ability to effectively run lessons.

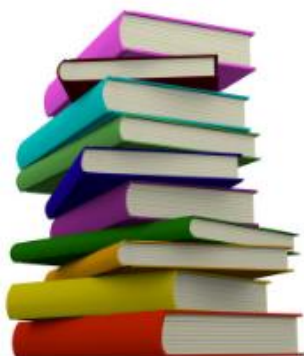
Student TTBH is often neglected due to its apparent or misconstrued presentation as poor classroom management. However, student enacted TTBH was found to occur across a large proportion of respondents from both primary and secondary sectors, across all genders, all age groups and lengths of teaching registration. This would suggest that the issues being faced by teachers in the classroom are beyond an individual teacher's responsibility to manage and are instead part of a much larger and complex set of issues

which includes student disengagement and disinterest, behavioural issues and inadequate repercussions for poor behaviour.

Finally, TTBH had severe consequences for teachers' mental health and wellbeing. Numerous teachers reported suffering symptoms of anxiety, depression and PTSD, including panic attacks and uncontrollable shaking. A large portion of respondents recounted needing psychological support to navigate cases of TTBH. Many had taken stress leave and some had resorted to taking sick leave (of one or more days), unpaid or holiday leave to avoid ongoing bullying and harassment. What is more, TTBH was said to affect all aspects of a teacher's life, and personal relationships were often affected. One respondent recounted a particularly serious episode of student TTBH affecting her children, with the bullies victimising the teacher and their family. Several individuals stated being fearful for their safety within school grounds, with a smaller number also reporting feeling unsafe in their local areas. Individuals who undertook teaching in rural and regional schools also revealed that the visibility of individuals in close-knit communities was also a factor in the distress caused by TTBH.

## At a glance

### Impact of TTBH



**Up to 69% of early career teachers had considered a different career path**

## Perceived impact of

### ☐ Parental TTBH:

- Regarded as an unwarranted challenge on a teacher's abilities and professionalism.
- Ongoing, and at times relentless advocacy, performed by parents eroded a teacher's ability to censure and ultimately control poor student behaviour.
- This was not only humiliating for most teachers, but also disempowering.

### ☐ Student TTBH:

- Increases a teacher's levels of anxiety by exploiting personal insecurities
- Undermines a teacher's sense of self-efficacy, by compromising their ability to effectively run lessons.

"Parent and student TTBH has severe consequences for teachers' mental health"

**83.1%**

— of teachers —

**Considered leaving the profession**

## TEACHERS PERCEPTION OF RESPONSE EFFECTIVENESS TO TTBH

*'Schools need to look after staff above anyone else, they cannot expect there to be respect for zero tolerance on bullying amongst students if the school allows staff to be mistreated by students without serious consequence.'* (Female teacher, 15-19 years in the profession)

Teachers felt that responses to student and parental TTBH were only successful at times, with much of the perceived effectiveness of responses resting on the level of support teachers received from their principals and other managers. In most cases teachers believed that action was taken by management to address instances of TTBH (60.5%), however the majority also believed that more could be done to help support teachers. In fact, most teachers believed that interventions to end TTBH were only sometimes (56%) or almost never effective (31.8%) with only a tiny percentage believing that action taken was successful (2.9%). The feeling that interventions were only partly effective was similar among individuals teaching at primary (46.6%), secondary (47.5%) and those teaching across both (50%).

**Table 7 - Response effectiveness by education sector**

	Primary	%	Secondary	%	Teaching across both primary and secondary	%
<b>Always</b>	28	15.8%	26	11.7%	4	10.5%
<b>Sometimes</b>	83	46.6%	106	47.5%	19	50.0%
<b>Almost never</b>	57	32.0%	72	32.3%	13	34.2%
<b>Never</b>	10	5.6%	19	8.5%	2	5.3%
<b>Total</b>	178	100%	223	100%	38	100%



From qualitative data, it was ascertained that most teachers saw principals and other management figures as important allies in helping to deal with incidents of student and parental bullying and harassment. Teachers who had positive and supportive responses from management and peak institutions in dealing with TTBH reported much better outcomes in terms of their mental health and their ability to overcome the damaging effects of bullying and harassment. Unfortunately, most participants reported feeling low levels of support from management. In most of these cases, teachers perceived that management, rather than supporting teaching staff, had allied themselves with students and parents. As a result, action taken by management and other key bodies to address TTBH was felt as largely tokenistic and often viewed as victim blaming. This was perceived as a form of disloyalty toward the teaching staff and resulted in high levels of teacher dissatisfaction.

Teachers also expressed dismay at their inability to create real and lasting change to student behaviour. For most, there was a lack of clarity around procedures to address student and parental bullying and harassment. They also believed that the inability to pursue stronger measures against aggressors (such as expulsion from school) did little to curb TTBH or protect teacher wellbeing and safety.

## **ADDRESSING TTBH – TEACHERS’ SUGGESTIONS**

As discussed in the preceding section, qualitative data gathered on suggestions to address student and parental TTBH were centred on procedural clarity and follow through. A large proportion of respondents wanted more support shown by management and peak organisations upon reporting of even minor incidents of TTBH. They also suggested a code of conduct to be instituted in schools with a zero-tolerance policy and clear guidelines which spelt out the types of behaviours that were considered teacher targeted bullying and harassment as well as the penalties which students and parents could face for breaching the code of conduct. They also wanted stronger measures to be taken to prevent aggressors from stepping back into classrooms or school grounds.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The evidence found in this exploratory study suggests that student and parent teacher targeted bullying and harassment is a problem in Australian schools. While understanding the magnitude of its impact is still in its infancy, steps need to be taken to ensure that teachers are provided with a safe working environment. To this end, it is highly recommended that an examination of current federal and state policy and responses to student and parental TTBH is undertaken to ascertain what further protections need to be instituted for teachers in Australian schools. It is also recommended that a clear code of conduct addressing the types of expected behaviours by students and parents is developed and that this code of conduct is made available to teachers, students and parents.

In terms of research, it is believed that further investigation is needed to gain a complete understanding of the depth and breadth of student and parent TTBH in Australian schools as well as the effectiveness of responses.

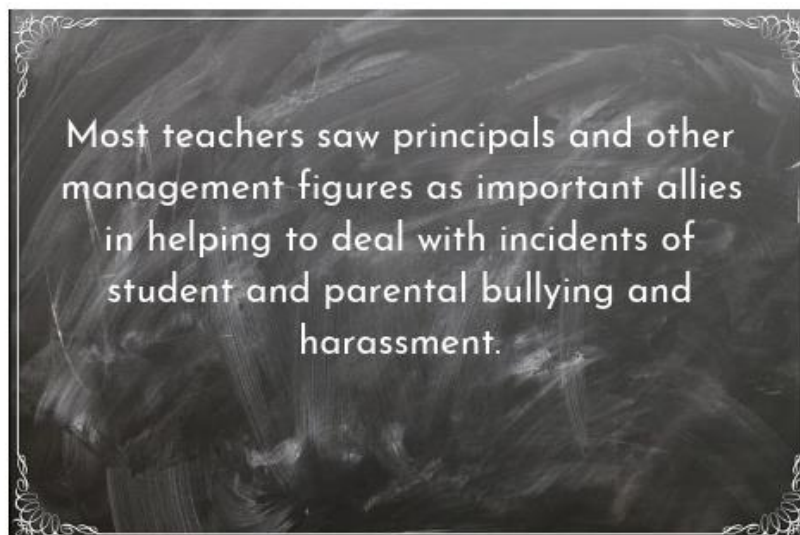
The research should consider:

- Examining the role TTBH may play in teacher attrition in the first five years
- What implication TTBH has for teaching practice and its impact on student learning
- The impact of student and parent TTBH on those teaching in rural and regional schools in Australia.
- What difference, if any, exists in the experience of student and parental TTBH between teachers working in the public, independent and Catholic sectors

At a glance

## Teacher's perception of response effectiveness to TTBH

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### Teachers' suggestions to address student and parental TTBH

- **A need for clarity and follow through**
- **More support shown by management and peak organisations upon reporting of even minor incidents of TTBH**
- **A code of conduct with a zero-tolerance policy and clear guidelines which spells out the types of behaviours that are to be considered teacher targeted bullying and harassment as well as the penalties which students and parents could face for breaching the code of conduct.**
- **Stronger measures to be taken to prevent aggressors from stepping back into classrooms or school grounds.**

### Recommendations

**" A clear code of conduct addressing the types of expected behaviours by students and parents is developed and instituted across Australian Schools and that this code of conduct is made available to teachers, students and parents."**

**" It is highly recommended that an examination of current federal and state policy and responses to student and parental TTBH is undertaken to ascertain what further protections need to be instituted for teachers in Australian schools."**

**" Further investigation is needed to gain a complete understanding of the depth and breadth of student and parent TTBH in Australian schools as well as the effectiveness of responses."**

## APPENDIX - SURVEY QUESTIONS

### Investigation into Teachers' Experiences of Bullying and Harassment in Australian Schools

Q1 What is your gender?

Male

Female

Other

Q2 What is your age bracket?

21-30

31-35

36-40

41-50

51-60

60-70

70+

Q3 How long have you held registration as a teacher?

Less than 1 year

1-4 years

5-9 years

10-14 years

15-19 years

25 + years

Q4 Which educational level are you employed in? Tick all that apply

Primary school

Secondary School

Q5 Which area do you teach into? Tick all applicable

Technology

Sport and Health

Humanities/Social Sciences

Math

English

Science

Art

Languages

Information Technology

Generalist

Specialist

Other

Q6 In what role are you currently employed

Teacher

Head Teacher

Deputy principal

Principal

Q7 In which state/territory(s) have you taught? please select more than one if applicable

Queensland

New South Wales

Australian Capital Territory

Victoria

South Australia Western Australia

Norther Territory

Tasmania

Q8 Over the last twelve months, have you experienced bullying or harassing behaviour(s) from a student?

Yes

No

Q9 Which of the following behaviour(s) **from a student have you experienced** and in what frequency? (Tick all relevant)

	In the last fortnight		In the last month		In the previous 2 to 5 months		In the previous 6 to 8 months		In the previous 9 to 12 months	
Yelling	Repeat aggressor	Once off instance	Repeat aggressor	Once off instance	Repeat aggressor	Once off instance	Repeat aggressor	Once off instance	Repeat aggressor	Once off instance
Swearing										
Hitting or punching										
Damaging personal property										
Disparaging remarks (verbal)										
Disparaging remarks (social media)										
Standing over/ invading personal space										

Organising others against a teacher/principal										
Lying about a teacher/principal to get them into trouble (9)										
Harassing through phone calls or text messages										
Discriminatory behaviour										
Student engaging a parent to argue on their behalf										

10 Did you receive support from any of the following sources? (Tick all relevant)

Department of education or other governing institution

Teachers Union

Head teacher

Other staff members

Parents

Partner or family

Other (please specify)

Q11 Over the last twelve months, **have you** experienced bullying or harassing behaviour(s) **from a parent/guardian(s)**?

Yes

No

Q12 Which of the following behaviour(s) from a **parent/guardian(s)** **have you experienced** and in what frequency? (Tick all relevant)

	In the last fortnight		In the last month		In the previous 2 to 5 months		In the previous 6 to 8 months		In the previous 9 to 12 months	
Yelling	Repeat aggressor	Once off instance	Repeat aggressor	Once off instance	Repeat aggressor	Once off instance	Repeat aggressor	Once off instance	Repeat aggressor	Once off instance
Swearing										
Hitting or punching										
Damaging personal property										
Disparaging remarks (verbal)										

Disparaging remarks (social media)										
Standing over/ invading personal space										
Organising others against a teacher/princip al										
Lying about a teacher/princip al to get them into trouble (9)										
Harassing through phone calls or text messages										
Discriminatory behaviour										
Student engaging a parent to argue on their behalf										



Q13 Have **your own** experiences of bullying and harassment by **parents/guardians** ever made you want to leave the teaching profession?

Yes

At times

No

Q14 Please tell us a little about the impact your own experiences of bullying and harassment by parents/guardians has had on you and your desire to teach

Q15 Did you receive support from any of the following sources?

Department of education or other governing institution

Teachers Union

Head teacher

Other staff members

Parents

Partner or family

Other (please specify)

Q16 Do you feel that bullying and harassment of teachers by students and their parents is an issue for schools in Australia?

Definitely yes

Probably yes

Unsure

Probably not

Definitely not

Q17 When a teacher, feels bullied or harassed at your school, is any action generally taken?

Always

Sometimes

Almost Never

Never

Q18 In what way is action taken and by whom?

Q19 Do you feel when action is taken, that the response is effective?

Always

Sometimes

Almost never

Never

Q20 What type of action do you feel your school could take to more effectively address bullying and harassing behaviour from students and/or their parent/guardians toward teachers?

Q21 What is the **Index of Community Socio- Educational Advantage** (ICSEA) score for your school? **This will not in any way identify you or your school.**

To view your school's score, click [here](#) (a new window will appear) and enter your school's details and press view profile.

your school's ICSEA value will be displayed on the centre of the page next to "School ICSEA value" (If your school value is not available please add NA)

Q22 Would you like to participate in a one-hour interview to discuss teachers experiences of bullying and harassment in Australian school with one of our researchers?

Yes

No

Q23 Are you currently teaching in a state, independent or Catholic school in Victoria?

Yes

No

Q24 Please add your first name, email and best contact day/time in the box below.

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