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Exploring Parental Aggression toward Teachers in a Public School Setting

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Abstract

Almost all of the extant research examining aggressive activity uses data from student populations. In this study, we extend that literature by examining teacher perceptions of parental aggression in public schools in Kentucky. Using data from a sample of 5,971 public school teachers, we determine that parental aggression directed at public school teachers is a rare event,

and when it occurs, it is far more likely to be verbal than physical in nature. The multivariate results presented here further indicate that younger teachers, teachers with advanced degrees, and teachers from more heavily populated areas as more likely to have experienced parental aggression than their counterparts. Implication for policy and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: Parental aggression; teacher victimization; school violence; parent-teacher communication

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While researchers have identified a number of characteristics and causal influences related to aggression against students in school settings, similar research focusing on aggression against teachers is limited and typically concerned only with instances that involve students as perpetrators. Given the literature describing an inherent conflict in parent-teacher relationships, the emerging recognition of the "pushy parent" (Beard, 1991; Estes, 2002; Frean, 2002), and increased recognition of the existence of incidents of parental aggression against school personnel, a more thorough examination of the issue of parental aggression is warranted. The research reported here is an attempt to fill that void by (1) examining public school teachers' perceptions of (and experiences with) parental behaviors they perceive as aggressive or otherwise problematic, and (2) investigating the extent to which perceptions and experiences vary according to selected teacher, school, and community characteristics.

We begin with a review of the literature on teacher experiences with (and perceptions of) instances of parental aggression and violence, followed by a description of the methods through which these data were collected. Using self-reports from a cross-section of elementary, middle, and high school teachers from the state of Kentucky, we then provide a descriptive analysis of teacher perceptions of, and experiences with) problematic behaviors on the part of parents. We follow that with results from analyses investigating variations in perceptions and experiences according to individual teacher characteristics, school characteristics, and community characteristics. Finally, we conclude with policy recommendations and suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

In recent years, recognition of the seriousness of school safety issues has brought about a concerted effort to document the existence, types, and frequency of crimes and aggressive

behaviors that occur within schools (Bauer, Guerino, Nolle, & Tang, 2008; Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009; Eaton et al., 2007; Harris & Udry, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). However, the majority of information specific to the issue of acts of aggression in school settings has focused primarily on student-on-student behaviors (Bauer et al., 2008; Dinkes et al., 2009) and includes only a small amount of information regarding aggression towards teachers (Callahan & Rivara, 1992; Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1993).

Moreover, a growing literature has also sought to identify the causal influences of aggressive behaviors among students. Of particular relevance to the current project, out of this effort has emerged a wealth of information regarding the influential nature of parents as predictors of student aggression within schools (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Farrington, 1989; Hotaling, Strauss & Lincoln, 1989; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986; Olweus, 1980; Paperny & Deisher, 1983; Patterson, Dishion, & Bank, 1984; Trickett & Kuczynski, 1986). A related literature has examined the adversarial nature of the parent-teacher relationship as well (Anderson-Levitt, 1989; Attanucci, 2004; Fine, 1993; Katz, 1996; Lasky, 2000; Lightfoot, 2003; Lodish, 1994; Trumbull, Rothstein-Risch, & Greenfield, 2000). In response to this body of knowledge regarding the importance of parents' role in the school environment and culture, researchers have also attempted to develop appropriate methodologies for dealing with the inherent conflict between parents and teachers (Ames, 1995; Epstein, 2001; Fenwick, 1993; Krumm, 1989; Rucci, 1991; St. John-Brooks, 2001).

Much of the aforementioned literature focuses on how to resolve the inherent teacher-parent conflict or improve the nature of parental involvement in the school, yet little attention has been paid to the specific issue of parental aggression in education. This lack of attention is surprising given that studies have identified parental attitudes as a significant source of stress for

teachers (Brown, 1984; Heads fear, 2000; Moses, Slough, & Croll, 1987; Phillips, 2005). In fact, the strain of dealing with parents has been cited as one of the primary factors in new teachers leaving the profession (Phillips, 2005). Further, documented incidents of parental aggression towards school administrators are numerous. Philadelphia public schools reported 57 instances of parental assaults against teachers in one six-month period. In a 2001 study of school administrators in one Florida county, Trump and Moore (2001) found that 70% of respondents had been threatened by a parent. They identified three primary types of threats that occurred: verbal threats accompanied by intimidation, non-contact threats accompanied by intimidation, and intimidation with physical contact. While the study results confirmed the anecdotal belief that parental aggression towards teachers existed in their district, the authors cautioned against generalizing beyond their district and suggested replicating their study in other places (Trump & Moore, 2001). From an international perspective, 140 members of the National Association of Head Teachers reported being assaulted in the United Kingdom in the year 2001 (Figures confirm, 2001; Rights culture, 2001). In Edinburgh alone, over 70 parental assaults of teachers occurred during 2004 (Meglynn, 2005).

Recent incidents of parental aggression in a variety of other contexts further recommend this line of inquiry for additional investigation. Parental involvement in extracurricular activities has been linked to a wide range of behaviors, including relatively harmless acts of overextending their child's involvement in youth sports to more serious acts of physical aggression and even murder (Freivogal, 1991; Kanter, 2002; Sports Illustrated, 2000). Indeed, increasingly close parental involvement in extracurricular activities and debates between parents and teachers regarding academic grades has resulted in the emergence of a "pushy parents" typology (Beard, 1991; Estes, 2002; Frean, 2002).

Although society has recognized the existence of "pushy parents" and educators have sought to develop strategies to address conflict in parent teacher relationships, limited empirical research examines parental aggression towards teachers. Specifically, while some research is available, it is limited in scope and geography.

The present study fills a void in this literature by conducting a descriptive and exploratory analysis focusing on parental aggression toward teachers. This study will enable researchers to learn more about 1) the prevalence and incidence of behaviors perceived as aggressive or problematic, and 2) the teacher, school, and community characteristics associated with the presence and prevalence of such behaviors.

Methodology

Survey Construction

The limited literature on parental aggression towards teachers necessitated developing original constructs to include in the survey instrument. To facilitate that development, the researchers convened a focus group following a structured group format (Morgan, 1997) with a representative group of administrators and teachers (n = 10). The purpose of the focus group was to solicit information regarding the following issues: (1) conceptual definition of parental aggression, (2) forms of parental aggression, (3) frequency and extent of parental aggression, (4) issues around which parental aggression arises, (5) current responses to parental aggression, and (6) possible recommendations for dealing with aggressive parents.

Several themes emerged from analysis of the focus group data. The question concerning the conceptualization of parental aggression resulted in the identification of two primary sources of conflict, communication and issues of control, as well as a suggestion for a more appropriate conceptualization of the problem. Specifically, participants stressed the need to frame the survey

instrument to conceptualize the issue from the standpoint of a problem versus a conflict (i.e., to extend the inquiry beyond just overtly aggressive behaviors to consider other problematic interactions). The question concerning the types of parental aggression also yielded several themes, with verbal, property, and physical aggression identified as the most common. The question concerning the frequency and extent of parental aggression produced results suggesting that while few parents were problematic, dealing with those problematic parents consumed an inordinate amount of the teacher's time. A total of seven themes emerged for the question concerning the issues around which parental aggression arises: grades, discipline, special education, curriculum, absences, extracurricular activities, and negative media portrayal. The aforementioned themes served as the basis for developing the survey instrument.

Data Collection

Data were collected via electronic questionnaire. While electronic questionnaires may not yield representative results for surveys of the general public, valid, reliable electronic surveys involving members of organizations that have both access to the Internet and valid email addresses can be conducted with minimal issues of coverage (Devoe et al., 2000).

A letter was mailed to all Kentucky superintendents (n = 176) describing the purpose and methodology of the study and asking for the email addresses of all school principals in the district and permission to send an email to each principal asking for their help in administering the questionnaire. The initial letter was followed up with three mailings and a phone call. In the end, 161 (91.5%) superintendents agreed to allow their principals to participate.

Using an email distribution list of principals created from addresses provided by the superintendents, an informational letter was emailed to the principals. Approximately one month later, principals were sent an email containing the link to the web-based survey and were asked

to forward the email to all the teachers in their school. The website was deactivated after approximately six weeks. After cleaning the data, the sample consisted of responses from 5,971 public school teachers.

Estimating an accurate response rate for this project is problematic. If each of the principals forwarded the email to all teachers in their school, then 33,106 teachers, the number of teachers in the 161 districts who agreed to participate in the research, had the opportunity to complete the questionnaire. Because the sample under study here consists of 5,971 respondents, our response rate using that calculation strategy is 18.0 percent. This estimate is conservative, at best, as it assumes that (1) all principals in all districts whose superintendent cooperated were able and willing to forward the email containing the link to the web-based survey to all the teachers in their school and (2) all teachers in those schools received and read that email. Nevertheless, the low response rate is indicative of the literature suggesting that lower response rates generally result from online versus pen and paper survey administrations (Handwerk, Carson, & Blackwell, 2000; Matz, 1999; Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003; Tomsic, Hendel & Matross, 2000; Underwood, Kim & Matier, 2000).

Demographic characteristics of teachers in the sample are remarkably similar, however, to the overall population of Kentucky teachers in terms of race and gender, suggesting that non-response bias is not a serious issue (Dillman, 1991; Krosnick, 1999). As such, while the findings presented here need to be taken in the context of this sample and are not immediately generalizable to the state as a whole, it is reasonable to expect that future research efforts with more representative samples would produce similar results. Moreover, if we construe the 5,971 respondents as a sample for the population of 33,106 teachers, sample size calculations using a

confidence level of 95% result in a confidence interval of 1.15 when based on the most stringent range of responses (two-item, or 50%).

Data analysis

The following research questions guided the quantitative investigation in this study:

1. To what extent have public school teachers in Kentucky experienced aggressive or otherwise problematic parental behaviors?
2. What do public school teachers in Kentucky perceive to be the primary causes of problematic interactions with parents?
3. How do teachers' experiences and perceptions with regard to problematic interactions with parents vary according to key characteristics of the teacher (e.g., gender, age, years of education experience, education level)?
4. How do teachers' experiences and perceptions with regard to problematic interactions with parents vary according to key characteristics of the school and community (e.g., grade level, school enrollment, community population size)?

The research questions were addressed using descriptive statistics, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), and multiple linear regression analysis. Specifically, descriptive statistics were used to present a general overview of characteristics of the teachers, schools and communities represented in the sample, and were also used to describe experiences with aggressive or problematic interactions for the sample as a whole. A one-way ANOVA test was then used to investigate the extent that incidences of problematic behaviors vary according to the level of the school (i.e., elementary, middle, or high). Finally, multiple linear regression analysis was used to investigate the impact of salient teacher and school characteristics on the number of instances of aggressive or problematic interactions with parents reported by respondents.

Additional description and specification of the ANOVA and regression models follows in the next section, accompanying the results reported from these investigations. This study is responsive to key gaps in the literature regarding parental aggression toward teachers. In general, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners have little information about: (1) the prevalence or incidence of parental aggression toward teachers; and (2) situational and contextual factors associated with parental aggression toward teachers. Thus, despite the caveats indicated by the sampling limitations, this project lays an important foundation for future work in this area.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Tables 1 to 4 provide descriptive and frequency statistics for demographic and professional characteristics of respondents in the sample. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for respondents' age and years of teaching experience. Tables 2-4 offer frequency statistics describing gender, race, and education level distributions among the sample.

Table 1

Summary of Descriptive Statistics for Respondents' Age and Tenure in Education

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Teacher's Age	5,743	21	75	41.636	10.493
Years Experience	5,933	0	43	12.670	8.976

Table 2

Summary of Frequency Statistics for Teacher Gender

Variable	Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative

				Percent	Percent
Valid	Female	4,856	81.3	81.6	81.6
	Male	1,097	18.4	18.4	100.0
	Total	5,953	99.7	100.0	
Missing		18	.3		
Total		5,971	100.0		

Table 3-*Summary of Frequency Statistics for Teacher Race*

	Variable	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Black	109	1.8	1.8	1.8
	White	5,757	96.4	96.9	98.7
	American Indian	24	.4	.4	99.1
	Hispanic	17	.3	.3	99.4
	Asian	11	.2	.2	99.6
	Other	17	.3	.3	99.9
	Multiracial	7	.1	.1	100.0
	Missing	29	.5		
Total		5,971	100.0		

Table 4

Summary of Frequency Statistics for Teacher Education Level

	Variable	Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative

				Percent	Percent
Valid	Some College	9	.2	.2	.2
	Bachelor's	1,428	23.9	24.0	24.2
	Master's	2,957	49.5	49.7	73.9
	Masters +30 hours	1,502	25.2	25.3	99.2
	Ed.D./Ph.D.	48	.8	.8	100.0
	Total	5,945	99.6	100.0	
Missing		26	.4		
Total		5,971	100.0		

Tables 5 to 7 provide frequency statistics for school and community characteristics. Table 5 reports the distribution of respondents by school level, table 6 reports the distribution of respondents by school size, in discrete categories, and table 7 reports the distribution of respondents by community size, in discrete categories.

Table 5

Summary of Frequency Statistics for School Level

	Variable	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Elementary	2,598	43.5	43.6	43.6
	Middle	1,501	25.1	25.2	68.7
	High	1,865	31.2	31.3	100.0
	Total	5,964	99.9	100.0	
Missing		7	.1		
Total		5,971	100.0		

Table 6

Summary of Frequency Statistics for School Size (Enrollment) Categories

	Variable	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Less than 250	471	7.9	8.0	8.0
	251 to 500	1,922	32.2	32.5	40.5
	501 to 750	1,874	31.4	31.7	72.2
	751 to 1,000	754	12.6	12.8	84.9
	1,001 to 1,250	335	5.6	5.7	90.6
	1,251 to 1,500	272	4.6	4.6	95.2
	1,501 to 1,750	151	2.5	2.6	97.8
	1,751 to 2,000	73	1.2	1.2	99.0
	2,001 to 2,500	59	1.0	1.0	100.0
	Total	5,911	99.0	100.0	
Missing		60	1.0		
Total		5,971	100.0		

Table 7

Summary of Frequency Statistics for Community Size (Population) Categories

	Variable	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Less than 2,500	974	16.3	16.6	16.6
	2,501 to 5,000	1,047	17.5	17.8	34.4
	5,001 to 10,000	861	14.4	14.7	49.0
	10,001 to 25,000	1,169	19.6	19.9	68.9
	25,001 to 50,000	784	13.1	13.3	82.3
	50,001 to 150,000	388	6.5	6.6	88.9
	Over 150,000	653	10.9	11.1	100.0
	Total	5,876	98.4	100.0	
Missing		95	1.6		
Total		5,971	100.0		

Tables 8 and 9 provide frequency and descriptive statistics related to respondents' experiences with aggressive or problematic interactions with parents. Table 8 reports the number and percentage of respondents who experienced one or more incidents in a given category, as reported by respondents based on their overall career (i.e., since they started teaching). Table 9 reports descriptive statistics for the total number of aggressive or problematic interactions; in other words, the sum of all aggressive or problematic interactions, per the seven types of interactions reported in Table 8.

Table 8

Incidence of Respondents Reporting Various Problematic Interactions with Parents

Interaction	Frequency	Valid Percent
A parent has shouted at me in anger	1,930	36.0
A parent has used profanity directed toward me	1,506	27.9
A parent has verbally threatened me	820	15.2
A parent has sent numerous emails to harass me	443	8.3
A parent has detained or attempted to detain me against my will	300	5.6
A parent has damaged my property at home or school	122	2.3
A parent has hit, pushed, or attempted to hit or push me	91	1.7

Table 9

Summary of Descriptive Statistics for the Number of Total Incidents Reported

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Incidents Reported	5,426	0	255	3.2254	10.567

The results presented in Table 8 reflect responses to questions regarding the prevalence of problematic behaviors that respondents had experienced *in their careers*. The most prevalent form of aggressive/problematic behavior was verbal aggression. More than one in three respondents reported that a parent of a child at the school had shouted at them in anger, more than one in four reported that a parent had used profanity directed toward the respondent, and

more than one in seven reported having been threatened verbally. Considerably less common, about one in eight respondents reported having been harassed as a result of receiving numerous emails. Far fewer respondents had experienced any of several more serious situations: a parent detaining or attempting to detain the teacher in a location in which they did not want to be (5.6%); a parent damaging their property at school or at their home (2.3%); or a parent pushing, hitting, or attempting to push or hit them (1.7%).

The results presented in Table 9 represent descriptive statistics for the variable measuring the total number of incidents reported in the above-described seven categories of aggressive or problematic interactions with parents. Of note, the mean of 3.2 is potentially misleading as an illustration of what is a typical among respondents. The median statistic for this variable is in fact 0, and a total of 3,243 respondents (approximately 60%) reported no interactions in one of these categories. Thus, the majority of respondents in the sample have never experienced aggressive or otherwise problematic behavior from a parent. A sizable minority did report having some but not many incidents; an additional 30% reported between one and eight total instances of aggressive parent behavior or problematic interactions with parents. Less than 3% of respondents reported 20 or more incidents of such interactions over the course of their career.

Table 10 reports frequency statistics for the variable measuring respondents' perceptions of the most important causes of problems between teachers and parents.

Table 10

Summary of Frequency Statistics for Respondents' Perception of Most Important Causes of Problems with Parents

	Variable	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Discipline	3,016	50.5	51.4	51.4
	Grades	1,637	27.4	27.9	79.3
	Special Education	417	7.0	7.1	86.4
	Other Issues	285	4.8	4.9	91.3
	Attendance	228	3.8	3.9	95.2
	Curriculum	117	2.0	2.0	97.2
	Sports	120	2.0	2.0	99.2
	Other Extracurricular	44	.7	.8	100
	Total	5,864	98.2	100.0	
Missing		107	1.8		
Total		5,971	100.0		

More than half of the respondents reported that discipline was the most important cause of problems with parents, while another 28% cited grades as the leading cause. Other notable causes included special education, cited as most important by 1 in 14 respondents, and attendance issues, cited as most important by 1 in 25 respondents.

Investigative Analyses

The results reported in the previous section represent measures of central tendency and variance among the nearly 6,000 respondents in the sample, thus depicting their collective experiences with regard to aggressive or otherwise problematic parent behavior directed toward teachers. As a follow-up to that general depiction, here we investigate the extent to which reported experiences vary according to characteristics of the respondent, the school, and the community. The results from a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) that was performed to investigate whether experiences with aggressive or otherwise problematic parent interactions vary according to the level of the school are reported in Tables 11 and 12. The dependent variable for this analysis operationalizes respondents' experiences as the total number of incidents reported from among the categories in Table 8. The factor variable is the grade level of the school (i.e., elementary, middle, or high school)

Table 11

Summary of ANOVA for Number of Incidents Reported by School Level

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
Between Groups	1467.307	2	733.654	6.581**
Within Groups	603802.379	5416	111.485	
Total	605269.686	5418		

**p = 0.001

Table 12

Post-hoc Bonferroni Comparison for Number Incidents Reported by School Level

Comparisons	Mean Difference (in reported incidents)	Std. Error	95% CI	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Elementary vs. Middle	-1.130*	0.358	-1.989	-0.271
Elementary vs. High	-0.972*	0.336	-1.777	-0.166
Middle vs. High	0.158	0.384	-0.762	1.079

* $p < 0.05$

ANOVA results indicate that there is a significant difference in the number of aggressive parent behaviors or problematic parent interactions experienced by teachers at the three grade levels ($F = 6.581$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$). This suggests that the grade level of the teacher's school affects the number of aggressive/problematic parent incidents experienced by the teacher. Results of post hoc comparisons indicate that experiences for teachers at the elementary level differ significantly from that of each of the other two groups; elementary teachers experienced significantly fewer incidents than either middle or high school teachers. Elementary teachers, on average, experienced 1.1 fewer incidents than middle school teachers, and .9 fewer incidents than high school teachers. The difference in the number of incidents experienced by middle school teachers when compared to high school teachers was not statistically significant.

We next performed a multiple linear regression analysis to investigate whether salient teacher and school characteristics constitute viable predictors for the same dependent variable used in the ANOVA (i.e., the variable measuring the total number of instances of aggressive or problematic interactions with parents reported by the respondent). Independent variables included respondent's sex, age, total years of experience in education, and educational attainment, along with school enrollment size and community population size. Prior to performing the analysis, relevant statistical tests and transformations were performed to ensure that variables met assumptions for regression analysis.

Table 12

Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Number of Incidents Reported by Teacher (n = 5, 691)

Variable	B	SE B	β
Sex of Respondent	.129	.062	.048
Age of Respondent	-.010	.004	-.100**
Years Experience in Education	.004	.005	.031
Level of Educational Attainment	.080	.038	.054*
School Enrollment	.020	.018	.030
Community Size	.057	.012	.108***

Notes: Adjusted $r^2 = .162$; *p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01;***p ≤ .001

The R^2 statistic in table 12 indicates that 16.2 percent of the variation in experiences with problematic parent behaviors is explained by the variables included in the regression equation. The results suggest that respondent's age, respondent's level of educational attainment, and

community size where the respondent was located all had statistically significant associations with problematic parental behavior. Specifically, the regression results suggest (1) that, on average, the higher the age of the teacher, the less likely it is that the teacher will experience aggressive and/or problematic interactions with parents; (2) that, on average, the higher the education level of the teacher, the more likely it is that the teacher will experience aggressive and/or problematic interactions with parents; and (3) that, on average, the larger the community, the more likely it is that a teacher will experience aggressive and/or problematic interactions with parents.

Discussion

Interpretation of Results

As noted earlier, data limitations in this study prevent us from making generalizations to the larger population with statistical certainty. In other words, we cannot draw *statistical conclusions*. Given the close similarities between teachers, schools, and communities in the sample and in the larger population, we can, however, draw *logical conclusions* based upon the results reported here.

First, the experiences and perspectives of nearly 6,000 Kentucky teachers were assessed regarding the incidence and prevalence of problematic behavior among parents. The results presented here suggest that although a substantial minority of teachers had experienced verbal abuse and threats from parents, only a small percentage of teachers had actually experienced any physical aggression from parents. In other words, while the problem of parental aggression was present for many of the teachers in the study, the issue was more verbal than physical.

This finding, coupled with the fact that much of the literature on parental aggression against teachers is found in popular or trade magazines (e.g., Time, Good Housekeeping, Times

Educational Supplement), further suggests the need for scholarly research in this area. Based on the results of this study, most teachers are likely to experience somewhat regular, if primarily verbal, conflict with parents. Contradicting anecdotal evidence and media accounts of numerous threats and assaults on parents, the results presented here suggest that teachers in this sample experienced only a small amount of physical confrontations with parents. The explanation for this perception that teachers are at great risk of physical assault by parents may be attributed to the rarity of these types of events, rather than their frequency. Whenever a teacher is assaulted by a parent, it becomes a newsworthy event, not just at the local level, but often at the state, regional, and sometimes national levels as well. Thus, these rare events often dominate the news, saturating those areas with news accounts about these events. This saturation increases public perceptions that these events are regular occurrences in the school setting when, in actuality, verbal threats from parents far outnumber any sort of physical threat against teachers in the school setting.

Secondly, respondents indicated that the primary cause of conflict between parents and teachers is discipline. This finding suggests that teachers who regularly discipline students may increase the likelihood of parental conflict by doing so. Consequently, it is important that school administrators be aware of this relationship and take steps to reduce potential for conflict between parents and teachers over disciplinary actions in their schools. One method through which administrators can do so is by supporting teachers when they discipline students and, if needed, by serving as the disciplinarian for teachers for particularly problematic children so teachers can focus on the academic tasks at hand, and not worry about increasing their risk for victimization by firmly and fairly enforcing classroom rules.

ANOVA results also suggested that the experiences of elementary teachers with regard to parental aggression or problematic interactions differ from that of either middle school or high school teachers. Specifically, both middle and high school teachers are, on average, likely to experience about one more incident of problematic parental behavior than an elementary teacher is. To characterize the practical significance of this one incident difference, it is worth recalling that approximately 60% of respondents reported no such incidents, and that 90% of respondents reported eight or fewer incidents. The one incident difference represents a 33% increase over the mean of 3.2, and a 100% increase over the median of 0. Thus, differences in the experiences of elementary school teachers, when compared to those of middle school and high school teachers, are not only statistically significant, but substantively significant as well. The grade-level differences suggest that efforts in this area should be targeted at the middle and high school levels.

Teachers were more likely to experience incidents of parental aggression or other problematic interactions than their older counterparts, as were teachers working in larger communities. The relationship between age and exposure to increased incidents of parental aggression is intuitive, as younger teachers often do not have the life experience and maturity of their older counterparts, who have often developed strategies through the "school of hard knocks" that are effective in avoiding parental conflict. Additionally, given that teachers working in smaller communities are generally more likely to have long-standing roots in that community (and often have attended the same school in which they are currently working) and are also more likely to interact with the parents of their children in settings outside of the school, this finding makes sense as well. It is also possible that differences in the number and/or severity of disciplinary incidents is a contributing factor—rural and small town schools, on average,

experience fewer incidents and fewer serious incidents (NCES, 2006). This difference is thus impacted by differences in community dynamics in urban, suburban, and rural settings.

The regression results also suggest that teachers with more advanced degrees were more likely to experience incidents of parental aggression or other problematic interactions than their counterparts without those advanced degrees. Although this relationship was somewhat unexpected, it is not completely surprising. It may be that teachers who return for additional graduate courses are more willing to experiment with innovative educational practices and theories than their counterparts who do not. These practices may make parents that are unfamiliar with these strategies uncomfortable and thus more likely to confront these teachers than they would be to confront their less innovative counterparts. It could also be that teachers with higher levels of education are less willing to tolerate questions or suggestions about their educational strategies and methods from parents. This resistance may make conflict with parents more likely. Further analysis is needed to unravel these relationships.

Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this descriptive and exploratory project warrant further inquiry into this line of research. Specifically, the following recommendations for future research are offered: (1) replication of this project using a more representative data sample and additional salient variables, and (2) investigation of parental perceptions at different grade levels about school discipline, attendance, and other issues identified by respondents as causes of parent aggression and other problematic interactions.

Data for use in a replication or modified replication of this study could be obtained using different sampling and collection methods to achieve a more appropriate set of respondents. Additional variables that could be added to enhance the work include (1) discipline data about

the teacher and school, additions that would allow for examining the influence of teachers' disciplinary action and also provide some additional context for exploring school level influences; (2) locale codes from NCES, an addition that would allow for more precise consideration of the influence of community characteristics by using an established 12 item typology describing school locations on a rural-suburban-urban continuum; and (3) types and perceptions of coursework completed by respondents as part of their graduate programs, additions that would allow for exploring the influence—and potential for influence—of graduate instruction on practices related to student discipline and parent engagement issues. The use of national datasets such as the Schools and Staffing Survey and the National Household Education Survey, both products of the National Center for Education Statistics, should also be explored.

A related line of inquiry with the potential to inform findings in this line involves the investigation of parent perceptions of salient issues identified in this project (e.g., discipline). Results of such inquiry could confirm teacher perceptions that certain types of issues and interactions lead to aggression and problematic interactions. Moreover, and more exploratory in nature, investigations in this line of inquiry would allow researchers to explore the hypothesis that differences in parent behaviors at different school grade levels are in part the result of changes in the perceptions of those parents as their children move through the different schooling levels, with a particular focus on the middle school transition years.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The results presented here reveal that incidents involving problematic interactions with parents are far more likely to be verbal than physical, that middle school and high school teachers are more likely to experience such incidents, and that discipline is a primary cause of such incidents. With that in mind, the following recommendations for policy and practice are

offered: (1) that pre-service training and in-service professional development incorporate strategies for dealing effectively with verbal conflict; and (2) that schools involve parents in developing, implementing, and monitoring discipline policies and procedures.

Because teachers are most likely to experience verbal conflict with parents, providing training for teachers on how to avoid, prevent, and resolve verbal confrontations with parents (e.g., de-escalation strategies for preventing verbal confrontations from turning into physical conflict) is recommended for both pre-service and in-service teachers. Additionally, training and support for teachers in developing non-confrontational approaches to student discipline are recommended. While providing training and support in these areas for all teachers is clearly warranted by results reported here, findings also suggest, if more tentatively, that inexperienced teachers likely need the most support and assistance if they are to build capacity in these areas. Because discipline incidents are a primary cause of teacher-parent conflict, based on teacher perceptions, disciplinary policy and practice should be procedurally clean, should involve parents, and should provide for transparency in its development, implementation, and monitoring. Schools can be proactive in preventing problems here by: (1) developing clear discipline codes, including consequences for specific infractions; (2) enforcing rules consistently and without favoritism; (3) communicating the rules to parents, students, and the community at large; and (4) creating and maintaining a process through which parents can address their concerns regarding discipline issues with the principal and, if needed, the superintendent and school board. Involving parents in the process of developing discipline codes can be a very effective approach (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). A clear disciplinary code and a process for addressing appeals and other issues should also be thoroughly explained in the student handbook. Recent research (NCES, 2006) suggests that only 60% of schools have a formal process to obtain

parent input on policies related to school crime and discipline, and only 19% of schools have a program that involves parents at school in helping to maintain school discipline.

Moreover, data on disciplinary incidents should be assembled and published in a manner that is accessible to parents and other interested parties in the community. Schools should also be proactive in disseminating this information to parents at every opportunity and through a variety of media (e.g., print, electronic). Clearly and proactively communicating this information may reduce the number of potentially problematic situations that arise. While these strategies will certainly not completely do away with parent-teacher conflicts, any strategy that reduces this conflict is a worthwhile strategy to explore.

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