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## Violence prevention in special education schools – an integrated practice?

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### ABSTRACT

Research has shown that employees in special education settings are at high risk for work-related threats and violence. Previous research has not yet been able to identify the essential components of training programs that offer protection from work-related threats and violence. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore how employees in special education schools deal with prevention of work-related threats and violence. Group interviews were conducted with 14 employees working at 5 special education schools. Results show that employees use a wide range of prevention strategies drawing on specific violence prevention techniques as well as professional pedagogical approaches. We propose that the prevention of threats and violence in special education schools can be understood as an integrated pedagogical practice operating on three interrelated levels.

### What this paper adds?

This paper explores how employees in special education schools in Denmark understand and try to prevent work-related violence in their daily practice. We provide qualitative in-depth results on how the employees describe how they manage and reduce aggressive behaviour from students in their everyday work. This paper further provides information on what the employees experience as important for the success of their efforts, as well as what may hinder their ability to reduce aggression effectively. Furthermore, we introduce a preliminary model of different levels of prevention in special education schools, which may be useful for further research and for identification and evaluation of how prevention is practiced in similar settings.

### 1. Introduction

The prevalence of work-related violence is high in many occupations especially among employees working in human and social services (Agervold & Andersen, 2006; Rasmussen, Høgh, & Andersen, 2013; Sharipova, Høgh, & Borg, 2010). Work-related violence is defined as any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work (Wynne, Clarkin, Cox, & Griffiths, 1997). In McMahan et al's (2014) study on schoolteachers from USA, 80% of teachers reported at least one victimization such as verbal threats, theft of or damage to personal property and physical attacks, within the last year. Out of these teachers, 94% reported being victimized by students (McMahan et al., 2014). A large Danish representative study shows special education teachers and child care workers to be among the top 10 professions reporting exposure to work-related threats and violence (Borg, 2012). Another Danish study based on 796 employees in 19 special schools found that 71% had been exposed to physical violence during the last year and 78.6% had been exposed to work-related threats during the last year (Rasmussen et al., 2013).

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Teachers who experience student violence are at risk for a number of adverse health outcomes such as psychological strain, professional disengagement and depressions (Dzuka & Dalbert, 2007; Galand, Lecocq, & Philippot, 2007; Wilson, Douglas, & Lyon, 2011). Furthermore, managing physical aggression of students with special needs has been estimated to be the most demanding teaching task and requires very self-efficacious teachers to accomplish (Lai, Li, Ji, Wong, & Lo, 2016). Supporting teacher's efforts at managing and reducing violence within special education schools may therefore have several positive effects on teachers' wellbeing at work.

### 1.1. Prevention of work-related threats and violence in special education schools

A number of intervention studies have been carried out aiming to reduce violence and threats in the workplace. These interventions include conflict de-escalation training programs for the employees and improvement of communications skills and modification of the working environment (e.g. assault alarms and design of the physical space) (Anderson, FitzGerald, & Luck, 2010; Price, Baker, Bee, & Lovell, 2015). Furthermore, the concept 'violence prevention climate' has been introduced in the attempt to focus on organizational and managerial aspects of violence prevention in all sectors (Spector, Coulter, Stockwell, & Matz, 2007). Violence prevention climate is defined as: 'the employees' shared perception of manager as well as workgroup safety related policies, procedures and practices' (Spector et al., 2007). Within this frame, management is central to the prevention of violence in the workplace. The prioritization of violence prevention by management is thought to send a message to the employees, that violence prevention is taken seriously in the workplace, and consequently affect employees' attitudes towards prevention in a positive way (Kessler, Spector, Chang, & Parr, 2008). Conversely, a longitudinal study by Gadegaard, Andersen, and Høgh (2015) found that high levels of prevention behaviour from supervisors and colleagues (e.g. Your immediate supervisor encourages you to report violence/ Top management invests time and money in courses and training in violence prevention) were not associated with lower self-reported exposure to workplace violence and threats in special education schools (Gadegaard et al., 2015). These contrasting results may be due to Kessler et al. (2008) wide conceptualization of work-related violence which encompasses several different types of violence, while Gadegaard et al. (2015) focus on work-related threats and violence by students towards special education school teachers. Taken together the results warrant further investigation of the role of management behaviour and prioritization in violence prevention. Implementing anti-violence policies and violence prevention training among teachers has also been shown to reduce the risk of violence victimization (McMahon et al., 2014). Unfortunately, there are severely limited data on which strategies to build prevention programs or to make recommendations regarding best practices in the prevention of violence against teachers in particular. There is a need for a clear operational definition of violence and aggressions against teachers, so research outcomes can be compared. Furthermore, there is a need for longitudinal studies on the effects of prevention strategies at all levels, as cross-sectional studies primarily provide indications of associations and cannot determine mechanisms or directions of causality (Levin, 2006). Longitudinal studies that include a baseline of prevalence of threats and violence minimize the possibility that some or all of the outcomes may be caused by factors other than the prevention efforts (Høgh & Viitasara, 2005). Identifying ways of preventing work-related violence depends on defining work-related violence and a means to this lies in in-depth studies of practice. Therefore, exploring how – in their daily practice – teachers and management in special education settings understand work-related violence and try to prevent such violence seems to be highly relevant.

However, in special needs education the topic of work-related violence also becomes a question of rhetoric or wording. Instead of referring to aggressive behaviour as "threats and violence" this behaviour is often referred to as challenging or problem behaviour. The concept of challenging behaviour refers to aggression, noncompliance and self-injury (Machalicek et al., 2008), and hence overlaps with acts typically included in the concept of work-related threats and violence (Menckel & Viitasara, 2002). Labelling these acts as challenging behaviour or problem behaviour – instead of work-related violence – enables the use of a wider range of different kinds of strategies for prevention, specific to special needs education. These strategies go beyond traditional safety policies and procedures. One common type of intervention involves behavioural interventions based on Applied Behaviour Analysis or functional behavioural assessments (Brosnan & Healy, 2011). These intervention strategies focus on identifying student-specific social, affective, cognitive, and/or environmental factors associated with the occurrence of specific behaviours such as challenging behaviour or problem behaviour. Within this frame, reactive procedures, such as suspending students as a punishment, only address the symptoms of the problem, not the problem itself. Therefore, unless the underlying causes are being addressed, the undesired behaviour is likely to occur again, regardless of punishment. The functional behavioural assessments approach is important because it leads the observer/teacher to look beyond the "symptom" (the behaviour) and focus on the student's motivation instead. It can thus provide the necessary information for staff to develop proactive instructional strategies (such as positive behavioural interventions and supports) crafted to address behaviours that interfere with academic instruction. Studies and reviews have found evidence for the effectiveness of these types of interventions in reducing challenging behaviours (Ager & O'may, 2001; Brosnan & Healy, 2011). Similarly, a review of the literature shows a decline in publications on punishment procedures over the last decades (Lydon, Healy, Moran, & Foody, 2015).

When researching violence prevention strategies used in special needs education it is pertinent to see these in the context of the broader professional field. In Denmark, and in other western countries, special needs education as well as ordinary education is increasingly based on an understanding of children as entitled to teaching adapted to their prerequisites, possibilities and needs. Furthermore, children are viewed as resourceful and competent participants. The consequences of this understanding of children can be seen in a trend where learning activities increasingly draw on positive, proactive behavioural approaches and intervention strategies to prevent challenging behaviours among children with intellectual disabilities, emotional disturbances, autism spectrum disorders and other developmental disorders (Conroy, Dunlap, Clarke, & Alter, 2005). In the Danish context special needs education

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