Survey paints disturbing picture for female teachers

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Australia is once again grappling with how we can stop gendered violence in our country. Recent protests show there is enormous community anger over the number of women who are dying and National Cabinet has met to specifically discuss the issue.

There is no single solution here. We need to look at the whole of our society when we consider how to make it safer for women.

One huge part of our society is schools, where Australians spend about 13 years of their lives.

As part of an ongoing, broader study into how online worlds are shaping students and teaching, colleagues and I are surveying South Australian teachers about sexist and other anti-social views among the students.

The survey is ongoing, but our results so far paint a disturbing picture where female teachers are subjected to sexist and abusive language and behaviour by male students.

Our research

Since February, we have advertised an anonymous survey on the *Teachers of Adelaide Facebook* group, which involves teachers from across public and private school sectors and in co-ed and single sex environments.

The survey calls for short answer responses to questions about sexism, racism or homophobia by students at their schools.

To 1 May, the survey has had 132 responses. Almost 80 per cent of the responses are from female teachers, who come from both primary and high schools.

“Make me a sandwich”

One theme to emerge so far is a heightened use of misogynistic language and behaviours by male students, some as young as five.

A high school teacher reported how when she talks about gender in her classes, some boys got defensive about what female students were saying. The boys call the girls liars and repeat untrue statements they have seen online:

“For example, the pay gap doesn’t exist, women lie about rape, men are superior.”

Teachers are also reporting a heightened use of vulgar, sexualised and aggressive language being used primarily by boys/young men during their interactions with women and girls.

Another teacher told us:

“Boys are increasingly using misogynistic language towards female students and teachers, telling them to ‘make me a sandwich’ [a well-known misogynist meme].”

Other respondents noted the use of terms such as “slut” and describing women as “rapeable”. They also reported male students making animal noises (“meowing or barking”) or making offensive gestures (“grabbing their genitals and making other rude gestures”) at girls and women in the school.

One primary school teacher described how several students in her Year 1 class have been making “sex sounds” to herself, a co-teacher and other students.

“It turned out that one student had been watching his brother’s YouTube/Tik Tok channels […] We have met with the boys’ parents at least half a dozen times this year and we are slowly seeing it replaced with more prosocial behaviours but honestly, [the students] do it so often that they do it without intention or thought now.”

The behaviour can be physical

A second theme from the survey is how male students are working in groups to physically intimidate their female teachers and peers. This includes corralling girls/women into corners, out of sight of male staff.

As one high school teacher told us, male students will walk “quickly behind female teachers to rush them downstairs”. Another high school teacher said she had noticed a trend of male students invading her personal space.

“[this includes] entering my classroom at break time/ coming up to my car window and pointing for me to wind it down to just stand there or getting their friends to call out my name when I walk past. They do this when I am alone and there are no witnesses.”

The teacher noted how at face value, they are all “innocuous behaviours” and if challenged, the students would just say they were being friendly.

“But I know these behaviours are intended to be intimidating and to make me uneasy. I nd it disconcerting that by the age of 14 or 15 they know how to use their presence to menace […] if they are behaving like this with me, what are they like with young women their own age or the women in their families?”

Most respondents described insufficient or zero school support. Some female teachers in our survey said they plan to leave the profession because they do not feel safe. As one teacher told us:

“I know I shouldn’t let it affect me but it is draining and I have anxiety and dread going to class.”

Why is this happening?

Our broader research has been prompted by conversations with teachers who note the growing influence of people like online “manfluencer” Andrew Tate (currently facing human trafficking charges in Romania) in their schools.

Such influencers champion a style of populism entangled with racism, xenophobia, trans and homophobia, which believes boys and men are victims of feminist gains. Acts of “male supremacy” are therefore needed to restore a supposedly natural

gender order.

The findings of our survey so far echo other recent studies in Victoria as well as in the United Kingdom and Canada, which have found a link between Tate's views and the behaviour and attitudes of male students.

What now?

This growing body of research strongly suggests we need a national response to anti-social language and behaviours in schools.

All schools now have consent and respectful relationships education. This is welcome, but we need more.

We could start by identifying, reporting and responding to gendered or other forms of anti-social violence, abuse and harassment via a nationwide code of conduct and reporting guide.

This would be just one part of the solution. But if we have an understanding of the scope of the problem and clear guidelines to address it, these would be crucial steps towards making our schools and our society safer for everyone.

The research this article is based on is also being done by Daniel Lee, Edward Palmer and Eszter Szenes and the University of Adelaide and Sarah McDonald at the University of South Australia. Dr Samantha Schulz is a senior sociologist of education at The University of Adelaide with expertise in race critical theorising, First Nations Education, culturally responsive schooling, gender equity and decoloniality. The opinions expressed in this article are that of the author and do not necessarily reflect any official policies or positions of the AEU or SSTUWA. This article was first published on The Conversation website and has been reproduced here with permission.

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