



## Victim blaming at work

This post was sent to us by email, with the author wishing to remain anonymous.

I began teaching at the tender age of 22. I was active in sports, and enjoyed volunteer work with the local government implementing programs for those younger than me. I had worked hard to achieve my undergrad and postgrad diplomas, graduating with high grades and hopes of teaching life skills to the next generation. I worked at two different schools in my short career as an Australian teacher, but it was the second school that not only ended my career, but changed my life.

I taught at a rough metropolitan school, which wasn't uncommon. I often found myself subjected to abuse from my students due to my age and gender, but I chalked it off as being normal and ignored it. Then in my first year I was assaulted by one of my students and ended up in the ER.

I had a severe concussion to the point my brain was swelling so severely you could see a lump on the back of my neck where it was pushing out from under my skull. I ended up with short term amnesia, and to this day I do not remember anything from just before the assault through to the end of the following week. Two years later there was a scare that I might have developed scar tissue on my brain, but that proved to be false (thankfully).

Immediately after the incident it was reported to the school, and I claimed Work Cover for days off work. Work Cover was awarded, but later all the paperwork disappeared and the school denies the incident ever took place even though Work Cover and I still have our copies.

What triggered the assault? According to my boss – me. The assault was the beginning of a horrible two years of micromanagement and threats of being dismissed. I was kept on probation for three years (which is against the law), and I told to change how I taught, how I spoke, and how I prepared every lesson. I was told the students were only reacting to me.

A year after the assault it became clear that more damage had been done than first realised. I had an existing spinal condition that had been treated in my teens and was stable, but the assault had shifted things. Slowly over the time after the assault I lost the full use of one of my legs, and had to begin using a walking stick.

The school made very few accommodations. Rather, they put me in rooms with stairs, and wouldn't allow me more time to move between classes. In fact, the school viewed my walking stick as a weapon and often doubted I needed it. I was told on more than one occasion to keep it by my desk when moving around the room, which was impossible. It deeply affected my teaching style and I had to learn to adjust, but nothing I did made the admin team happy as they continued to force me into meetings and told me to change everything I did.

The threats from students didn't end. I was subjected to misogynistic abuse and treatment, and the added walking aid began the anti-disabled comments. I even had the unfortunate incident of



witnessing an extremely violent fight and stabbing. I was the one to initially report the fight as it began so that the police could be called, and the whole thing left me traumatised especially since some of my own students were involved. My boss' reaction? Apparently I shouldn't have been there in the first place! (For the record, I spotted the fight as I was about to go home for the day).

After all this I began to fear for my safety. I requested having surveillance cameras installed in my classrooms, but this was dismissed as overreacting.

Then the second assault happened, under no doubt similar circumstances to the first. I remember every detail of this one, and this time even some of the students backed my story. Thankfully no ER this time, but I was left in a good deal of pain. Again I reported it, and again I was blamed for the incident. The students were temporarily suspended but then put straight back into my class.

Again I was called into meetings and my role questioned. Once again I was asked to change my teaching method and behaviour (I'd lost count how many times I'd changed by this point) and told if I didn't win the respect of my students I'd be let go. Then another incident happened which had a member of the admin team scold me in front of my students for breaking a policy that wasn't even known to the staff or implemented, and the students began mocking me in earnest afterward.

It was the straw that broke the camel's back. I had a nervous breakdown, and was soon after diagnosed with severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder comparable to those who have served in the military. I was also diagnosed with psychogenic seizures (epileptic fits caused by stress – hence why they thought I had brain scaring).

I've been left not only unable to work in education, but virtually unable to work. I was suspended from the school without pay, leaving me without an income since I was 25. I am still in treatment and probably will be for a long time to come, and my physical disability is showing signs of worsening rather than stabilising.

And the school still maintains to this day that it was all the fault of my own. When they don't say I'm just making the whole thing up, that is.

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