Cracks in the Concrete: The Demise of the Teacher's Role in Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect.

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Introduction

The role of the teacher in the late 19th or early 20th century was quite different to the present day teacher. Standing tall, they were perceived by society as knowledgeable as they had some education or training and had acquired the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. Their role was predominantly one of pouring facts into the minds of their pupils. They were also moral, religious church goers who the community would look to for advice. They were socially reliable and responsible who held a certain status in society. Robinson (1993)
describes scholars embarking on a teaching career as an opportunity "...to gain upward social mobility, respect and status in a professional career" (p 251). These qualities provide a picture of someone who is powerful, secure, strong - like concrete - that wavered little on matters of importance.

Teachers and the teaching profession have undergone significant change since that time. Burdened by a crowded curriculum, standardised testing, and political and economic forces, teachers are pressured to produce results that show that children are achieving and meeting set standards. The profession is aging (Senate Employment, Education and Training Reference Committee, 1998, p 9), low in morale, and the day-to-day nature of teachers work has changed. Teachers find that matters for which they have not been trained sometimes consume their work. No longer do teachers teach facts but are instead, involved in catering for the social and emotional needs of children, as well as their physical and cognitive ones. These factors, amongst others, indicate that the concrete-like figure of a teacher is cracking as teachers aim to address the needs of the whole child. This paper aims to focus on one of these cracks: an aspect of teachers' work that has been affected by the pressure of change. I refer to their role as a mandated notifier, the legislative requirement put down by the Children's Protection Act (1993) which identified teachers as mandated reporters who must report their suspicions of child abuse and neglect, based on reasonable grounds, to the appropriate reporting authority (see appendix a).

Background

Statistics that report child abuse and neglect incidence abound, but it is difficult to obtain accurate figures as "official" statistics reflect only the reported cases referred to child protection services. However, the most recent statistics released in Australia report that in 1997-1998, 5.6 per 1000 children under the age of 16 were the subject of substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 1999). Also, recent epidemiological data provided by the National Research Council in the United States (cited in Heller, Larrieu, D'Imperio & Boris, 1999, p. 322) suggest that there are over 2 million reports of child maltreatment (including neglect) in the United States annually. Approximately half of these reports are validated as meeting local criteria for maltreatment by state-run child protective service agencies. However, Wang (1999) asserts that in 1997 the number of child abuse reports in the U.S. rose 1.7% exceeding 3.1 million. 41% of these reports involved children who had current or prior contact with local child protective service agencies, and 78% were under the age of five years.

In developing countries, research has been undertaken by government authorities on the problem of child abuse and neglect. Gaining accurate statistics is difficult because of the controversies that may exist within the confines of a family or clan. For example, "cultural tolerance" to physical abuse is not uncommon in the Pacific Islands. The attitude towards child rearing is restricted to the family, an issue similar to that in many Asian cultures. Likewise, discussions about sexual abuse and incest is taboo and, when it does occur, traditional clan affiliations, family honour, and preference for silence may combine to protect the abuser. There also exists a cultural belief that child abuse is found only in Westernised communities, despite studies that show evidence to the contrary (Marcus, 1991; Lyman, 1997 in Collier, McClure, Collier, Otto and Polloi, 1999). For example, a nation-wide survey of 15% of the population of Palau (in the Pacific), in 1991, indicated that 28% claimed to know a family where child abuse was occurring; 24.5% stated that they knew a person who sexually abused a young child; and 14% of the sample admitted to having sexually abused their own children (Collier et al, 1999 p. 231).
And, WuDunn (1999) recently reported on the incidence of cases of child abuse and neglect in Japan, a country that was thought to have strong family ties and cultural beliefs. No child abuse statistics have been kept because it was thought that, historically, there was no problem of child abuse in Japan. However, in 1997, 5352 cases of child abuse were reported, a rise of 30% from the previous year, which prompts a fear that these statistics do not indicate the extent of the problem. The newly formed Centre for Child Abuse Prevention in Japan have stated that 'the single biggest problem was society realising that there is child abuse' (WuDunn, New York Times, 1999, p. 1). Reasons given for the rise in child abuse point to strained family ties created by economic pressures arising from a long recession and record unemployment, and to the rise of divorce rates and remarriages. Such factors are thought to undermine stability in the home.

The cases reported above indicate that there are problems with the collection of data on child abuse and neglect as definitions vary, as do sampling methods, and statistics are reported differently within different cultures and contexts. However, the statistics cited here and the presumed incidence of unreported cases of suspected abuse, suggest that child abuse is a significant social problem in Australia, as it is worldwide.


A tertiary prevention strategy, mandatory reporting, has been introduced in many countries, including Australia. Despite differences between States there are legislative requirements that various professionals, including educators, are required by law to report suspicions of child abuse and neglect (Appendix A). To promote mandatory reporting effectiveness there are penalties for not reporting and freedom from liability for reporting. In some States, educators attend compulsory training to assist them in their reporting role. In Australia, this is referred to as "mandatory notification training". It is an employment prerequisite and compulsory component for exit from university teacher education courses. The training addresses myths that exist about child abuse and neglect, identification of child abuse and neglect, responding to victims, and procedures for reporting. Some schools provide follow-up training, in the form of in-service, but there are factors that affect the effectiveness of such training. These include variations in the dissemination of information, educators' workload, and the professional development model used.

Despite the legal mandate that educators report their suspicions and the preparation completed by all novice and experienced educators, professionals fail to report their suspicions, and under-reporting behaviors occur. The literature cites many reasons (fear of identification of self or victim, fear for personal safety: Winefield & Castelle-McGregor, 1987; Winefield, Harvey & Bradley, 1993; confusion with the law: Kalichman & Craig, 1991; lack of confidence to identify and/or report: Kalichman & Brosig, 1992; Kalichman, Craig & Follingstad, 1988; reluctance to become involved: Pollack & Levy 1989; lack of professional experience or knowledge: Bavolek, 1983; Crenshaw, Crenshaw, & Lichtenberg 1995; Hay, 1988; Barksdale, 1988; Nightingale, 1986; inadequate training: Reiniger, Robison, & McHugh 1995; and fear for the future welfare of the child: Winefield & Castelle-McGregor, 1986; Newberger, 1983) for such behaviors. O'Toole, Webster, O'Toole and Lucal (1999),
also suggests that under-reporting occurs as a result of educators developing a loss of sensitivity to the problem. This develops over years of teaching experience and because of an increase in the number of children seen each day. They found that years of teaching were negatively associated with recognition of abuse, but not with reporting. This was because educators had become more tolerant about behavioural signs exhibited by children, had received no formal training in child abuse detection when they were trained to become educators, or because an increase in student numbers affected their time and type of relationship with individuals and smaller groups.

This paper focuses on educators as one of the professionals mandated to report abuse, and discusses factors that inhibit the reporting of suspicions of child abuse and neglect.

Research Context

The findings are based on research conducted in one State in Australia; South Australia. All schools were surveyed to explore educators' experiences with, and views about mandatory notification training and school reporting practices. The purpose was to ascertain what led educators to report or not report suspicions of child abuse and neglect. The design of the survey tool was based on the findings of a previous pilot study using qualitative methods of research, purposive sampling and interview methodology. The survey was distributed to principals of schools who were asked to randomly select two educators at their site to complete and return the survey directly to the researcher. Identity was anonymous, and the information provided was treated confidentially. Ethics approval was granted by The University of South Australia and appropriate employing bodies. The quantitative results were analysed using SPSS and the qualitative comments using NUD.IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data. Indexing Searching and Theorising, Richards & Richards, 1997).

Inhibiting Factors Associated with Educator Reporting

Of relevance to this study is the research conducted by Abrahams, Casey and Daro (1992) who identified inadequate training as a reason for under-reporting. Research conducted on training programs with law enforcers (Portwood, Grady & Dutton, 2000) concurs with the present findings and identifies obstacles to implementing effective training programs. According to the researchers, these are: general scepticism about research and its practical implications; resistance to working with outside researchers who fail to work in partnership with them; distrust of evaluation research which has been used to justify cutbacks and other negative consequences; doubts over the generalizability of research findings from one jurisdiction to another; a professional climate that discourages questioning superiors; and the belief that the focus should be on immediate action, rather than thinking. While there are workplace variations between educators and law enforcers, there are also similarities in the findings presented by the research. Law enforcers are high reporters of abuse (as are educators), and receive similar training to educators. In conclusion, Portwood et al (2000) suggest that the obstacles identified can be used as guidelines for developing collaborative relationships and more relevant training models and programs to apply within different jurisdictions.

Training was introduced to assist mandated notifiers, in this instance educators, to report their suspicions of child abuse and neglect. However, it appears that training influences reporting and under-reporting behaviours and these will be explored here. Firstly, the educators alluded to inhibiting factors that influenced their decisions not to report. These include: a lack of school structures; lack of experience with teaching and with child protection matters; personal issues for educators in relation to child abuse and individual cases; and the perceived associated increase in educators' workload. These factors (figure 1) suggest that current training arrangements are inadequate in preparing educators to
report suspicions of child abuse and neglect, and in addressing the reporting needs of educators.

lack of school support structures

lack of experience personal factors educators' work

Figure 1:

Inhibiting Factors Affecting Mandatory Notification Training and Educators' Reporting Practices

Lack of school support structures

Educators reported that the absence of school support structures created a barrier to reporting. They reported feeling isolated when making a decision about a suspicion, and also when following through that decision to the child protection agency. Many educators suggested that, in some instances, certain support structures (eg established school policy, agreed reporting procedures, formalised support networks) would be of benefit. Because these structures were not available, individuals established personal networks that became invaluable in assisting during and after the recognition and reporting processes. It was acknowledged that, for some educators, access to support networks other than those provided by family and friends were necessary.

This suggests a need for internal school structures to assist reporting behaviours, although this view was not homogeneous. There was a general feeling that structures such as set policies and procedures, identified personnel, and support mechanisms, would assist. Despite this view, O'Toole et al (1999) found that only a small percent of educators' responses to possible abuse were affected by the school as an organisational setting. However, they stress that, from the viewpoint of social policy, there is a major concern that students in certain types of schools do not receive the protection from abuse that the law promotes. For this reason alone, certain internal school support structures would be of value.
Lack of experience

Two variables were identified concerning experience and its effect on reporting behaviours: lack of teaching experience and familiarity with the work of educators, and lack of experience in identifying and reporting suspicions of child abuse and neglect. Stern (1989) confirms that the reporting rate of educators is dependent on both of these factors. Also, educators should have an understanding of family dynamics, which, he asserts, depends upon training but also on experience of both a personal and professional nature.

In this study, novice educators and those who worked in transient or casual roles were grappling with their transition to the world of teaching, and often missed, or were too busy to observe, children's behaviour at an individual level. Likewise, experienced educators, both in classrooms and in administrative positions, were not always familiar with the knowledge and procedures associated with the identification of child abuse and neglect. This was often thought to be due to inconsistent experiences with reporting or dealing with child protection services, despite the completion of mandatory reporting training.

O'Toole et al (1999) report that, the more involved educators are with recognition and reporting, the higher their recognition and reporting scores. Strategies to increase regular contact with children and their families, familiarity with the workings of classrooms, and knowledge of reporting laws and procedures are paramount to educators' professional development requirements.

Personal factors

Individuals faced with the decision to report child abuse are confronted with many personal issues that influence reporting. Educators experience fear when faced with anger and threats from parents who suspect them as the reporter. Educators can feel strong emotions as a result of identifying or reporting suspected abuse. They may also feel guilt for making a report based on suspicions alone, for not acting more promptly or for not acting at all, and for any subsequent disruptions created for the children and/or their families. Their thinking can be confused by feelings of doubt and negative self-efficacy.

For reporters and non-reporters, the decision to report represents a high level of personal investment. Many feelings are experienced when they are faced with distressed, traumatised children and, despite their lack of expertise to handle the situation, they have no option but to respond. The investment they place on this aspect of their role can cause added pressure for educators and place additional demands on them. The personal aspect of educators' work is seldom valued and taken into account in the management of school sites and educator professional development.

Educators' work

It has been suggested that the nature of educators' work has changed. Educators, researchers and writers have alluded to possible causes for this, although some are self-evident, such as the onset of technology, an aging profession, increased class sizes, and a perceived increase in the number of duties expected of educators. A succinct summary is provided by the Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee in Australia (1998), which identifies the range of non-core teaching tasks now added to educators' workloads. Many of these responsibilities were previously handled by community, church and family organisations, but are now the responsibility of the school.

Schools have become the first port of call for many families in crisis and in some schools [the] teachers’ welfare role threatens to engulf their primary
function, that is, to teach. (Senate Employment, Education & Training References Committee, 1998, p. 132)

Educators did not seek out this welfare role, and many felt that they had not been trained or prepared for it and receive little support to fulfill it. A quote from the Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, supports this view,

As well as preparing students academically, teachers in ... schools are expected to act in the roles of social worker, counsellor, surrogate parent, psychologist, law enforcer, disabilities educator and, as employment agents. These additional expectations placed upon teachers move teachers far beyond their traditional roles without adequate training or new ways of coping with and organising work. (p. 132)

The workload for those associated with school systems appears to have increased, and classroom educators are also required to teach subjects or handle situations with which they are unfamiliar. A consequence of this practice, without adequate preparation or follow-up, is damaging to the profession, because:

It has been claimed in Australia that teachers are being deskilled while their work becomes intensified; and that teacher education is getting fewer resources, but classroom teaching is becoming increasingly demanding. (Lawnham, 2000, p. 12)

In addition, for some educators, the requirement to attend regular professional development is seen as a burden. In South Australia, this is currently a compulsory component of educators' work, with industrial ramifications. Decisions regarding style and value of professional development are of paramount importance to educators, who feel that programs must relate closely to their day-to-day work.

A further view that impacts on the perception of educators' work is often promoted by the media, and refers to educators' work being of significance only when they are working with students. This view hampers professional development, as it promotes the traditional view that educators' work is governed by the singular value of time spent with students, and that educators are primarily deliverers of content. The implication is that curricular planning and decision making rest with higher levels of authority, so promoting the view that professional development is unrelated to improving instruction (Darling-Hammond, 1991). This is limited, and does not allow educators to be involved in professional sharing, learning other ways to reach children, discussing comprehensive advances, or continuing their own learning. Creative ways need to be explored that locate effective use of time for teacher professional development. Community support is also essential in understanding educators' needs in this area.

Summary

The behaviour of educators who under-report suspicions of child abuse and neglect in the current study align with similar behaviours reported in research conducted with other mandated professionals. O'Toole et al (1999) stress that, because professionals overlook signs of abuse or fail to report abuse to authorities, abused children fail to receive protection and treatment. This behaviour, alerts O'Toole et al, raises questions regarding solutions to the problem of under-reporting. These are concerned with influences that are brought to bear on recognition of child abuse and neglect and on professional decision-making.
Consideration of these two influences is relevant; however, success can be measured by paying attention to certain workplace factors.

Figure 1 has identified factors which support the hypothesis that current models of training are ineffective in the preparation of educators to report suspicions of child abuse and neglect. The identified inhibiting factors of non-reporting show that the local contexts of schools, educators' needs and concerns, conditions of educator learning, and familial considerations have not been taken into account in the preparation of educators for mandatory reporting. Mandatory reporting training can be classed as a 'traditional model' of professional development, and, as Little (1994) argues, it does not meet the needs of educators and schools. This is because it does not recognise the importance of and variability of local contexts.
Appendix A

In South Australia, where this study was undertaken, the following law applies:

Under Section 11 (1) and (2) of the Children’s Protection Act 1993, the following persons are obliged by law to notify the Department for Family and Community Services (renamed Department of Family and Youth Services in 1998) if they suspect on reasonable grounds that a child/young person has been abused or neglected and the suspicion is formed in the course of the person’s work (whether paid or voluntary) or in carrying out official duties:

- a medical practitioner
- a registered or enrolled nurse
- a dentist
- a psychologist
- a member of the police force
- a probation officer
- a social worker
- a teacher in any educational institution (including a kindergarten)
- an approved family day care provider

Any other person who is an employee of, or volunteer in, a government department, agency or instrumentality, or a local government or non government agency, that provides health, welfare, education, childcare or residential services wholly or partly for children, being a person who

- is engaged in the actual delivery of those services to children; or holds a management position in the relevant organisation the duties of which include direct responsibility for, or direct supervision of, the provision of those services to children. (Family and Community Services, 1997, p. 25).

Any other person who is an employee of, or volunteer in, a government department, agency or instrumentality, or a local government or non government agency, that provides health, welfare, education, childcare or residential services wholly or partly for children, being a person who

Reasonable grounds is defined in the legislation as being when:

- a child/young person discloses that s/he has been abused
- your observations of a child/young person’s behaviour and/or injuries leads you to suspect that abuse is or has occurred
- someone else tells you
- a child/young person tells you of someone they know who is or has been abused and they are actually referring to themselves.

The law does not require the mandated reporter to prove that abuse has occurred, it requires that they report their suspicions (Family and Community Services, 1997, p. 189).
References


RICHARDS, L., & RICHARDS, T (1997). QSR NUD.IST - Software for Qualitative Data Analysis. Victoria, Australia, Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty Ltd.


