

## **MELO4087**

### ***Child Panic and the Media: representations of schools, teaching practice and child protection legislation in the Australian press.***

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper explores the manner in which the Australian press media has a role in shaping public consciousness regarding the issue of harm to children in schools. Our analysis of national press reportage during 2003 reveals two consistent narratives which antagonistically intersect and perpetuate social anxiety around issues of child protection and teaching practice in schools. We locate this alongside legislative changes and data drawn from a three-year research project investigating the shifting relationships between teachers' identity and child protection policies. Finally we consider the positive role that the Australian press media can play in recuperating schools as safe and dynamic learning environments.*

#### **Introduction**

Each era of history had its own fears, which set it apart from other epochs; or rather, each gave the fears known to all epochs names of its own creation. These names are concealed interpretations; they informed of where the roots of the feared threats lay, what once could do to keep the threats away, or why one could do nothing to ward them off. (Bauman 1995: 105)

Children have always been in varying need of protection, but child protection as both practice and social discourse has emerged as a significant concern of our epoch. It has become a staple of Australian talkback radio, press media and education policies. In New South Wales,<sup>1</sup> the findings of the Wood Royal Commission into Police Corruption (1997) provided instances where the state had neglected its duty of care regarding children in various settings. Claims of pedophilia, the abuse of children while in the care of the church or the state and allegations of teachers physically, emotionally or sexually abusing students were brought to public attention. This inquiry generated much social anxiety and fear about how well society protects children. Indeed, the attention that the inquiry generated in the media led to what could be described as a 'moral panic' (Cohen 1972) regarding the safety of children, particularly in schools.

Child protection, and the role of social institutions in general to ensure that children are in no way at 'risk of harm', has become a major site of social anxiety and surveillance (Wallace 1995). In particular relation to NSW, the findings of the Wood Royal Commission into Police Corruption (1997) acted as triggers for government in NSW to revise child protection policy and legislation. In response, State and non-government schools have responded with greater emphasis on child protection and teachers and

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<sup>1</sup> In 1998, the Queensland Government established a Commission of Inquiry into the Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions. The aim was to examine whether children had been abused, mistreated or neglected in any Queensland institution. For further information about the implementation or outcomes of what became known as the Forde Inquiry, refer to the web-site of the Queensland Government <http://www.families.qld.gov.au/departments/forde> accessed 13th May, 2004.

school administrators have instituted 'risk management' practices as part of the reality of school life.

Our task in this paper is to explore the manner in which the Australian press media shapes public consciousness of 'child panic' in schools. Our analysis of national press reportage during 2003 reveals two consistent narratives which, antagonistically intersect and perpetuate social anxiety around issues of child protection and teaching practice in schools. In response, we consider the role the media can play in representing schools as places in which both children and teachers are supported. And in so doing, we ask "what positive role the media can play in representing schools as safe and dynamic learning environments.

### **Naming the problem**

The nature of 'moral panic' that we have raised is usefully described in Cohen's (1972:9) classic definition:

A condition, episode, person or groups of persons emerges to become identified as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other 'right thinking people' socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved (or more often) resorted to.

Likewise, for McRobbie, (1994: 199) 'moral panic' boils down to 'instilling fear in people and, in so doing, encouraging them to turn away from complexity and the visible problems of everyday life and either to retreat into a "fortress mentality" – a feeling of helplessness, political powerlessness and paralysis – or to adopt a gung-ho "something must be done about it" attitude. We will see in the media analysis, that reports of pedophilia in schools have a role in 'instilling fear in people' at the same time as they identify pedophilia and child abuse as a threat to children — particularly within schools — but a threat that is symptomatic of a breakdown of moral values.

We will also see that press media-as-medium is a site in which child protection legislation is visibly contested. On the one hand, following McRobbie, it represented as an essential component of a 'solution' to child abuse, but teachers and teachers representatives are represented as feeling that the legislation is too "gung-ho" and, in fact, erodes security in schools. With schools being named as unsafe places for children, teachers are represented as having retreated into "a fortress mentality"... and feelings of 'helplessness, political powerlessness and paralysis'.

Since 1997, Australian press media reporting has named child abuse as a 'fear of our epoch' (Bauman 1995) and in so doing has inadvertently named schools and teachers as complicit in that threat. Drawing from Giddens (1990:29), McWilliam and Perry (2004) note that risk gives rise to "a new moral climate... marked by a push and pull between accusations of scaremongering on the one hand, and of cover-ups on the other". They further add that:

This push and pull of risk is enacted...as claims and counter-claims that, when taken together, constitute certain matters as more or less 'risky' or certain people as more or less 'at risk'. (McWilliam & Perry 2004:2)

Again, we will see that, when taken together, media reporting of pedophilia on the one hand, and child protection legislation on the other, constitute a push and pull which ultimately present schools as 'risky' places to be for both children and teachers.

As we have noted elsewhere (Sachs & Mellor, 2003), the development of risk consciousness across public and private spheres alike can be seen the light of an erosion of trust. Risk, danger and blame characterize institutional responses to uncertainty and ambiguity. Within this dynamic, risk and the erosion of trust is intrinsically linked to notions of power. Much of Foucault's work reminds us of the connections between power and knowledge (see for example Foucault 1977; 1978). On the one hand, it is easy to see how the revised child protection legislation constitutes a response to the uncertainty and ambiguity of risk of harm to children and young people and that, on the other, it's governed implementation and monitoring constitutes a form of surveillance. State power is enacted here both through the discursive formations of legislation and the implementation of reporting procedures that enable governing bodies to both proscribe and know what is going on. Concurrently, the press media enacts a type of power through its capacity to investigate and report — to know — and to share that knowledge with their readers. Although the media does not legislate behaviour, media representations influence public consciousness through the representation of preferred narratives.

In her work on education news in the British tabloid press, Katie MacMillan (2002) speaks of the manner in which the press media frame media reports in terms of 'social narratives' (MacMillan 2002: 28). She argues that these narratives are "treated as given, the taken-for-granted frame within which the news item is placed" and she further adds that:

By examining the details of news discourse we show how the use of specific descriptive categories and lexical items firmly sets the news item within an overall narrative of social disruption. (MacMillan 2002: 28)

When we turn to our analysis, we will see that media reports of the abuse of children within our school systems is presented within an overall narrative representing a breakdown of social and moral values, within which, teachers, principals and even church leaders cannot be trusted. Whilst child protection legislation is a positive and institutionally authoritative response to this 'social disruption' (MacMillan 2002), media reports of teachers and child protection legislation is received by a press media readership who may well have lost trust and faith in our social authorities. At one level, media producers have a vested interest that this is the case. It seems that no news is not good news and that good news is no news at all.

Within this vision of social disruption and 'power failure', the press media is able to assert itself as a power for social good and the reinstatement of social order (Couldry 2003: 4). Couldry describes this function of "media power" and argues that:

...the social world is 'mediated' through a media system that has very particular power-effects, and ...the actions and beliefs of all of us are caught up in this process. (Couldry 2003: 1)

He uses the term 'media ritual' to refer to the manner in which the media represents itself as "stand[ing] in... for something wider, something linked to the fundamental organisational level on which we are, or imagine ourselves to be connected as members

of a society” (Couldrey 2003:4). Thus, media representations frame the social. Press media reports offer us a representation of certain prescribed categories and boundaries (and, transgression of boundaries) and in so doing, the media itself becomes the voice of the ‘social’ (Couldry 2003:5). As readers, we are invited to ‘imagine ourselves’ as connected to a society in which the media-represented categories and boundaries have social meaning. As readers, we are invited to ‘imagine ourselves’ as participant in the power/knowledge dynamic of the press: the press has the power to represent our social order and through our ‘active’ readership (Couldry 2003: 49), we can know ourselves.

In order to understand how recent Australian press media reporting has envisioned issues of child protection as a social narrative, it is necessary to premise our media analysis with an overview of some of the legislative and policy changes that have occurred since 1997. Doing so will also make apparent the climate of concern regarding the risk of harm to children and gesture towards the potential for competing discourses and mediated social narratives between government, schools, unions, teachers, students and parents.

### **Legislative and Policy Change**

In NSW, the findings of the Wood Royal Commission into Police Corruption (1997) acted as triggers for government to revise child protection policy and legislation. As a result of the findings, which were released in August 1997, four pieces of legislation were passed. These were:

- The Ombudsman Amendment (Child Protection and Community Services) Act 1998,
- The Children and Young Person (Care and Protection Act 1974),
- The Child Protection (Prohibited Employment) Act 1998, and
- The Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998

These legislative changes had far reaching social effects in terms of the ways in which relationships between adults and children were perceived, not only in school and institutional settings, but also within family and other community environments. For the purposes of this paper, the legislative changes, which went through parliament in 2000, significantly impacted upon teachers’ roles as carers of children and young people in school settings. The legislation also brought into intense focus the reality and possibility of children being at ‘risk of harm’ within institutionalized settings, such as schools.

One immediate outcome was that teachers were required to undergo a pre-employment check and declare that they are not a ‘prohibited person’ whether they were applying for a job in a government or a non-government school. Another was that teachers are mandated to report to the Department of Community Services if they have reason to suspect that a child in their care is at ‘risk of harm’. This role extends beyond the classroom and the schoolyard. The legislation also recognizes the negative effects on children and young people of living in situations with domestic violence. Teachers and school staff are now mandated to report their concerns for the children and young people that they interact with, even if the ‘risk of harm’ occurs outside of school hours. In NSW, the Ombudsman Amendment (Child Protection and Community Services) Act 1998 deems that an allegation of child abuse can be made against a ‘current employee’ of any school, be it state or independent. In such instances, the allegations must be

reported to the NSW Ombudsman and that office has a responsibility for overseeing the investigation procedures. This specific legal point has enabled retrospective allegations to be made against teachers and staff still in employment within schools and brought to the attention of the Ombudsman for investigation. In the case of Catholic and independent schools the passing of this act was the first time that complaints against staff were not able to be handled internally, but rather, were subject to government scrutiny and authority. Logistically, even adults who made an allegation that they were abused by a teacher or staff member when they were at school, even up to 35 years ago, now had the legal right to make a complaint to the NSW Ombudsman. Within the Catholic and Anglican church school system, allegations that had been made but that hadn't been resolved to the satisfaction of the claimant, could justifiably be made again and handled externally to the church system.

At once, State, Catholic and independent schools began to struggle over how to understand or implement newly defined terms such as 'risk of harm' and 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate conduct' towards students. Each of these sectors have had to design and implement professional development for their teachers and staff in order to raise the knowledge of child protection issues and enable their staff to make informed judgments as to how to behave towards students. Teachers and school staff have needed to develop the skills to identify children and young people at risk of harm and respond rapidly and appropriately to their needs, and in accordance to the legislation.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, teachers' representative unions have struggled to prescribe behavioral tactics aimed at protecting teachers and school staff from placing themselves in situations where an allegation of sexual, physical or emotional abuse could be made against them. For example, one such response from the NSW Teachers' Federation has been to develop a 'no touch' policy as a way of alleviating the possibility of allegations of sexual and physical assault being made against a teacher. On their website, under the headline of "Protecting teachers as well as students: advice you need" they state such things as:

Try not to touch students.

It is unfortunate that a hug or a pat aimed at encouraging or comforting a student may be misinterpreted by the student, or a staff or community member as "unwarranted or inappropriate touching. Apart from inevitable situations, such as first aid, a teacher should avoid touching children".<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to the unions' 'no-touch' policy interpretation, the government legislation does not state anywhere not to touch students, but rather, to be circumspect about what is warranted and appropriate for the teaching situation. Understandably, the unions have the task of representing and counseling teachers when an allegation has been made against them, but this prescription of risk adverse behaviour has had a role in cultivating a culture of fear amongst teachers and school staff: fears that their appropriate behaviour could be misinterpreted and a vexatious allegation made against them.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The NSW Ombudsman's office has had a productive role working with each of the educational sectors to assist in the development of educational policy regarding child protection. Regular interaction between the Ombudsman's Office and representatives from the educational sectors is ongoing, supportive and productive.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.nswft.org.au/journal\\_extras/cprotect](http://www.nswft.org.au/journal_extras/cprotect) 1 October, 2003

<sup>4</sup> The teachers we interviewed had all undergone professional development around issues of child protection, and had received government and school policy information as it emerged. However, many had also been present during presentations from representatives

Alongside this, as active community members in our mediated society, teachers are also consumers and readers of press media in which their professional status as carers of students has been (and continues to be) fuelled by multifarious representations of schools as dangerous places.

### **Australian press media reportage of schools and teaching practice**

An analysis of Australian press reporting of the last two years reveals two distinct narratives regarding schools, the intersection of which perpetuates social anxiety concerning issues of child protection, schools and teaching practice. According to the first of these media-narratives, schools are places frequented by male pedophiles. This media-narrative is made evident in both the reporting of retrospective accounts of sexual and physical abuse of children in schools and the representation of pedophiles possibly lurking within schools at present, either as school employees or having gained access to the school by other means. In these media stories, the school, as site, remains a dangerous place for children to be. According to the second media-narrative, schools have become sites of partial anarchy, where vexatious children, armed with knowledge of child protection legislation have usurped the disciplinary power of teacher to such an extent that teachers are now fearful to act with authority in their own classrooms. This media-narrative is made evident in the reports of teachers who have “lost their teaching confidence” having been investigated for allegations of child abuse made against them. It is also evident in reports of teachers being too frightened to restrain, touch or chastise a student for fear of an allegation being made against them. According to these reports, the effect of this has created another form of risk to children; teachers are unsure what to do and, therefore, don’t respond quickly enough to crises in the classrooms or playground. Consequently, schools remain dangerous places for children, but have also become dangerous for teachers and school employees.

We should make clear at the outset that we are not suggesting that the reporting of pedophilia and child abuse is a media ‘beat up’. In contrast, reading through the media reporting of actual cases, one can easily get the sense that there is a far bigger story out there, as yet untold. However, our task in this paper is to consider the effect that media connections made between pedophilia, teachers and schools has on the reported and actual reception of child protection legislation.

In order to explore this connection, we did a straightforward Australian press media search of the last two years<sup>5</sup>. At the time of writing, searching for articles that contained both the terms “pedophile” (or pedophilia)<sup>6</sup> and “school” (or schools)<sup>7</sup> in the last two years brought up 758 references. In contrast, searching for articles containing both terms “child protection” and “teachers” (or teaching)<sup>8</sup> brought up 97 articles. These articles were distributed fairly evenly across the major newspapers and more regional tabloids. Clearly, it is evident that media articles discussing child protection legislation are

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of the various unions and had been told of ‘horror stories’ of what the experience of having an allegation made against them was like for teachers.

<sup>5</sup> Using the search engine *Lexis Nexis*.

<sup>6</sup> We used the truncated form ‘pedophil\*’ to bring up either pedophilia and pedophile. The search also contained both spellings of ‘pedophile’ and ‘pedophile’.

<sup>7</sup> Again, the truncated school\* will search for both possibilities.

<sup>8</sup> The truncated teach\* will search for both possibilities.

received by a readership comparatively swamped by reports of pedophilia and child abuse.

Representations of the two media narratives we have outlined come from different sources. For the most, the representations of pedophilia come from 'court reporters', 'police reports' and feature writers. These reports are responses to information regarding actual cases and allegations. Further, the reports often represent that complaints or allegations had already been made in the past and that many powerful adults had been party to the offence being covered up or remaining unresolved to the satisfaction of the claimant. For the most, the representations of child protection legislation come from education writers and more generalist journalists. However, the connections that are made between pedophilia, teachers, principals and schools (as both places of employment and sites where children "gather") means that the reception of reports of child protection legislation and teaching practice is already mediated by negative and highly emotive representations of the risk of harm to children in our school systems.

### **Abuse of children in the care of the school system**

Far from being safe places of learning and development, schools are portrayed by the national press media as dangerous places of potential and actual abuse. The following headlines give a few examples:

Sex abuse legal action against school, church (The Advertiser, September 11, 2003)  
School knew but 'failed in its care of students' (Courier Mail, May 2, 2003)  
Anglican schoolteacher jailed for attacks on boys - The Hollingworth Resignation (The Australian, May 27 2003)

In each of these headlines, the representation of schools as risky places for children is clear. Each of the media stories represents an offence against a child within our school systems. Whether the offence was carried out or alleged to have been carried out in a state, catholic or independent school, the general sense conveyed is the same, that our children have been betrayed and abused by adults who were supposed to care for them. Articles such as these all portray that school employees have failed in their duty of care towards students. The first, for example, is the story of a man who "claims he was sexually abused by two of South Australia's most notorious pedophiles". The man has now lodged a complaint against both the school and the Lutheran church, which has meant that information regarding his claim is now available to the public through the official court information. The information reported is quite explicit as the following excerpt shows:

Now aged 21, the man was 10 when he alleges serious pedophiles Robert Kingsley Hawkes and Kenneth William Glencross abused him. At the time of the alleged abuse, he says he was a student at Good Shepherd Lutheran Primary School at Para Vista and Hawkes was employed as school football coach. Glencross - who died of cancer in June 2001 - was a close associate of Hawkes. The pair were involved in a network of pedophiles including Brian Bertram Perkins, who last month pleaded guilty to a string of child abuse offences, and Jeffrey Paul Barton, who committed suicide in 1994 after being charged with similar offences. All preyed on young boys in the early 1990's...

The article moves on to describe the alleged offence, including such details as:

"[he] sexually assaulted him by forcing him to undress in front of him and Glencross, by touching him and putting a G-string on him and by taking photographs of him while he was naked.

Hawkes, now 59, was charged with prurient interest and indecent assault after a police investigation in 1993 that included this incident and similar allegations" (The Advertiser, September 11, 2003).

We are granted an enormous amount of detail as to an event that happened to a schoolboy some time ago. This is worth recalling when we turn to representations of child protection legislation where there is a contrasting absence of information regarding allegations made due to the confidentiality of mandatory reporting procedures and investigative processes.

Whilst the presentation of information such as names, dates, schools, and even the 'indecent assault' itself, are quite straightforward and matter of fact in this article, the articles still makes use of emotive language when it can. For instance, the mother is quoted as saying, "I feel so hurt. I personally go through hell because it's like I did not protect my son". Here, the mother/carer in us all is appealed to, but so is the sense that somehow justice has not been done towards either the child or the mother. The school should have protected the child, but, as the mother says, "they failed to care for my son" and it is the mother who somehow feels that she has failed in her duty of care. The manner in which this one example uses detailed information and links it with emotional appeals is common to much of this reporting. Couldrey argues that it is the use of emotion (and emotive language) that makes the "mediated reality appear as really real" (Couldrey 2003: 125). The personal quotes from the family and the claimant remind us that these are 'normal' people we are talking about and that these atrocities could happen to any child that we know in our communities.

This article also makes evident another point of interest. The mother is quoted as saying "her family took legal action after publicity into sex-abuse claims in the Anglican Church". Here we are told that media representations of child abuse have had an effect. Reporting of investigations into allegations of abuse within the church system informed and encouraged the family to partake of their legal rights and make a claim themselves. The media here claim a productive role in the return of power to the public. Whilst the church and school system have let us down, through media's engagement with child protection issues, the public have been made aware (or at least reminded) of their legal rights as citizens. In this manner, the media can perpetuate its own myth of standing in for the public through public representations; of being the people's representative.

There are many press articles that represent pedophiles returning to places "where children gather" (Sunday Mail, September 21, 2003) and all of those that were collected by my search names schools as either the site of a previous offence or a site where the released pedophile has been recently sighted. One example is of Kevin George Jacobs who gained employment with a security firm "that guards 300 public schools" (Sydney Morning Herald, August 4th, 2003) after completing his sentence for having "sexual intercourse" with two 14 year-old boys". His story, headlined "Double Move To Block Pedophile" told that the "State Government" was intervening to clarify regulations that allowed him to work as a security guard. In this article, part of the detail of his case that we are told is that he served only 12 months of a two-year sentence. Another story "Anger at bail for pedophile - set free again despite new child-sex charges" (Sunday Mail, July 13, 2003) represents a man "who has been convicted but not yet sentenced for

attacking a six-year old boy in a school toilet" has been "allowed to walk free again". Yet another story headlined "State schools ban for pedophile MP" represents that "convicted pedophile and former Labor MP Keith Wright was banned yesterday from operating his literacy business in Queensland schools" (The Australian, February 27, 2003). Convicted pedophile Dennis Ferguson received multiple media representations after he visited a Sydney primary school to sell cleaning products. One, headlined "pedophile back in custody" tells that he "was back in custody in NSW last night after he allegedly failed to inform police he was working in a job that could bring him into contact with children" (Courier Mail, September 18, 2003). The story was also picked up nationally in The Weekend Australian (September 27, 2003) and again in The Australian (November 25, 2003) when he was "sent back to jail yesterday for 15 months without parole for failing to tell police he had a new job that brought him into contact with primary school children". As readers, we are being offered a strong media-message that schools remain dangerous sites where pedophiles still infiltrate security measures intended to protect children.

So many more media reports remind us that people with various degrees of power within our school systems often carry out child abuse. The following quote in a weekend edition of the Hobart Mercury makes this clear:

Headline: Unsettling profile of a selfish crime

Body: Rock spiders, kiddy fiddlers, child molesters -- all nicknames for that dirty old man in the trenchcoat hanging around the school yard.

Unfortunately, it's a stereotype and mostly wrong. Pedophiles are often upstanding citizens, married, with a good job and children of their own... "The pillars of the community are the ones who have the best disguises... (January 25, 2003)

At the most general level, we could say that these media reports have two aims, one to inform and the other to engage readers so that they keep buying the newspaper. Both of these are achieved through the presentation of specific legal information regarding a conviction or an alleged offence. As we have noted, whilst the presentation of the details of the offences and convictions is quite matter of fact, each of the articles uses emotive language and, often, quotes from victims or their family members, to illicit an emotive solidarity from readers. These media reports are generated from information made public through the legal system and privilege of court reporting. In this regard, the court or police reporter stands in for the reading public as witness; through them we are able to see and know the truth of 'our society'. Yet, even if 'truth' is conveyed, it is only a partial truth, but one part nonetheless. Children are portrayed to be at risk of harm from pedophiles at large, but particularly within schools and despite the caring gaze of school staff. Further, according to these mediated stories, the caring gaze of school staff cannot be taken for granted. For example, the article quoted above represents an absolute breakdown of morality in society and expresses (on the readers' behalf) an erosion of trust in powerful and caring adults to protect children. According to the national press media, schools — church and state — are not only places 'where children gather', they have been places in which networks of pedophiles have gathered and have abused their power; both by committing offences against children but also by covering up their crimes or the crimes of others.

What is excluded from these representations are accounts of the productive strategies teachers and school staff engage in every day to ensure, to the best of their ability, that children in their care are protected from abuse of all kinds. All schools now have

strategies and procedures for people entering and leaving school property. All visitors needing to report to the administration and sign in, or wear a visitors badge is one. Formalised "exit procedures" for students leaving the ground each day, is another. The positive outcome of strategies such as these does not make eventful news, rather, an absence of drama.

The reports we have exemplified are all regarding sexual and physical abuse to children and thus the term 'child abuse' is often associated with sexual and physical abuse — and by implication, pedophilia.

It is no wonder that the field of child protection must be carefully negotiated. Child protection legislation is received by a media-public that is highly concerned about the protection of children. Child protection legislation is absolutely necessary, but the media representation of schools as unsafe and risky places for children does not help us envisage teachers as valued professionals, nor schools as important places of social learning and education.

### **Teachers at risk**

The second narrative that is apparent in these media reports is that schools have become anarchic places in which teachers are fearful to interact with students for fear of a vexatious allegation being made against them. Teachers are seen to be potential criminals rather than carers. Even positive child protection strategies, such as the implementation of the 'Working with Children Check' are transformed into a media narrative that represents teachers as potential criminals. For example, The Courier Mail (September 2, 2003) begins with a headline "Teachers welcome sex threat check law" but quickly names teachers as potential criminals in the early body of the report:

Every Queensland teacher is to have their criminal history checked to ensure they do not pose a sexual or physical threat to students. Under new child protection measures, any teacher found to have committed a serious offence such as sexual abuse or assault faces suspension and possible deregistration from the profession. The checks, to be conducted by the Board of Teacher Registration, will begin immediately on 62000 teachers who were registered before 1998 when criminal history checks began.

The implication of this report is that not only are teachers potentially criminals, but that schools may be filled with abusive teachers who "registered before... criminal history checks began". Rather than present a positive light on the new check scheme, the overall sense of the article is that to date, the criminal checks on teachers has not been adequate to flush criminal teachers out of the system. But these reports represent another threat, teachers are afraid of students and that this is having a damaging effect on teaching practice. The following excerpts are from articles in which teachers are represented as being the victims of child protection legislation. Consequently, they represent another risk, teachers professional standing and competence is brought into question:

Seeking a balance in NSW classrooms; Jennifer Leete says present child-protection legislation allows minor complaints to be treated as child abuse, sapping teachers' morale... Teachers who live in fear of their conduct being misinterpreted or deliberately misrepresented will have their effectiveness as teachers undermined. Student learning and the need of students to be cared for will suffer... (Canberra Times, July 7, 2003)

And,

Teachers Deserve a Fair Go... It seems remarkable that in the rush to improve child protection in NSW no-one considered the impacts the changes may have on teachers and their ability to maintain discipline in the classroom without fear of being sued or accused of abuse (Illawarra Mercury, July 3, 2003)

And,

Teachers are dobbing in themselves... Schoolteachers are dobbing themselves in to child protection investigators in a bid to head-off damaging allegations that could wreck their career. (Daily Telegraph, May 20, 2003)

In this particular article, we are not only told that teachers are “voluntarily notifying child protection staff” before complaints become “exaggerated or misconstrued”, but that when they do, teachers are afraid that their case will be “kept in a filing cabinet next to the name of a pedophile”. The language of this article, and others like it is emotive and has transposed the fear of abuse of children to the fears of teachers. One principal is quoted as saying that child protection guidelines were “scaring the living daylight out of teachers”. Here, schools remain places to be afraid, teachers as well as children. According to these reports, it seems that teachers are most afraid of “frivolous complaints” (Daily Telegraph, July 2, 2003) and “litigious people” who are able to “hurt” (The Advertiser, July 3, 2003) them by “inventing an allegation that ordinary classroom behaviour can be interpreted as child abuse”. In these articles, the emphasis has shifted from child-at-risk to teacher-at-risk, but this conveys a more systemic problem. Schools have now become places in which both children and teachers are at risk. Teachers and other school staff are represented as being too afraid to act decisively when necessary - “even if the kids are in danger” (The Sunday Telegraph, April 6, 2003).

This is echoed in another article that claims that parents are now more concerned about their children because “the code undermines classroom discipline and potentially places children at risk of harm because of teachers’ uncertainty (The Daily Telegraph, July 2, 2003). Schools are represented as places where children are at risk of harm, teachers are at risk of harm and, according to one report “unfair child protection laws” have placed “the teaching profession at risk”. According to these media-narratives, nobody is safe at school. Clearly, this is a mis-representation of the intent of child protection legislation.

Other comments can be made in relation to these media-narratives. For one, as we have suggested earlier in this paper, there is a relative absence of factual information of actual allegations made. This is for two reasons. Firstly, many of these reports are generated by a media press release, which precipitates a legislative change and is more of an announcement than a report of a particular case. Secondly, the confidential manner in which allegations are handled means that information regarding the specificity of allegations of teachers doesn’t usually become media information. Interestingly, this confidentiality has been breached by the self-disclosure of teachers in response to the press media’s invitation to “send comments” (Illawarra Mercury, June 10, 2003) or “tell us your story” (Daily Telegraph, July 2, 2003). It is only in these instances where articles give any detail as to an alleged offence. For one example, one head teacher has written in to the newspaper about the damaging effect of a “malicious” allegation being made against them by a student. The article is headlined “Who Does the Law Protect?” and begins:

Child protection legislation can be a blunt instrument, says one angry NSW high school teacher.

I am a teacher who has recently been through one of the most traumatic experiences of my almost 30-year career.

I believe that serious flaws in the child protection legislation are partly responsible for this...  
(Illawarra Mercury, June 10, 2003)

The article is too lengthy to quote in its entirety; however, as the information has been self-disclosed in the form of a letter, it is represented in the same manner. So, we are given matter-of-fact detail about what happened, such as:

As a head teacher, I was recently the overall supervisor on playground duty when there was a surge of student into our canteen, apparently in anticipation of a fight... In a clearly threatening situation where there were probably 200 students, I conferred with the deputy and agreed the canteen area should be cleared. In an ushering motion with arms outstretched, I approached many students and asked them to leave. I approached a group of four or five boys and asked the same. One student reacted aggressively and publicly accused me of "grabbing him on the arse"... (Illawarra Mercury, June 10, 2003)

The article reads like a witness giving evidence and again we are left with the sense of the media bearing witness on our behalf, standing in for the social (Couldrey 2003). This particular article represents child protection legislation as futile and damaging and makes such comments as:

I would like to know why the child protection legislation allows mischievous, malicious allegations to be made without the complainant being forced to retract them when they are found to be incorrect. My name has been sullied, my confidence has been affected... When you empower the undeserving these things return to bite you. The child protection legislation has stripped me of my rights and empowered somebody who is apparently guided by no sense of morality... (Illawarra Mercury, June 10, 2003)

In reports like this, teachers are represented as having become the victims of child protection legislation. Clearly, this is a mis-representation of the intent of child protection legislation. Placing this alongside the ongoing media-narrative of pedophilia reporting, schools remain dangerous sites where neither children, nor teachers are safe.

## **Conclusion**

For the last two years, we have been conducting focus groups with teachers and principals in various schools in Sydney, N.S.W.. During this time, we have only heard negative comments about the damaging affect of media representations of schools as dangerous places. Low morale affects teaching practice. There are many positive stories of safe schools and good teaching to be reported. Perhaps they are not as sensational as reports of pedophilia or teachers' being fearful of allegations of child abuse being made against them, but increased reporting of some success-stories of child protection legislation would at least provide a more balanced and 'truthful' representation of our school systems.

Child protection legislation is absolutely necessary to ensure that students are protected from risk of harm in schools. As we have stated elsewhere:

Risk consciousness emerges out of a crisis as "a way of representing events so they might be made governable in particular ways, with particular techniques, and for particular goals" (Dean 1999:131). The primary goal of child protection policy is to codify in a legalist framework a set of procedures to oversee

practices in schools and other public institutions. Secondly, they present themselves as 'restoring trust' (accountability, transparency and democratic control) in the activities of service providers, public services and professionals' (Dean 1999: 149). (Sachs and Mellor 2004)

Yet it is also evident, that child protection has become a politicized risk. That is not to say that the risk is not real, rather, that the risk is not just to children in schools but poses a threat to public education as a valued social institution (Douglas 1994: 29) and to the status of school staff as valued professionals. In response to a long campaign from teachers and NSW teachers unions, The Carr Government mooted a revision of the child protection guidelines in NSW schools through parliament. As one article reported the changes:

Hundreds of teachers will have their names removed from the child protection databases under new guidelines that redefine abusive behaviour. The new code enables school teachers to touch children when protecting them from danger, to comfort distressed or hurt students and to engage in reasonable contact during classes. (The Daily Telegraph, July 16, 2003).

Clearly, the media-reports that we have represented here, have effects. Media-narratives that perpetuate a culture of mistrust in our schools can only be damaging for children, schools and education. They foster an individual response of fear and distrust that becomes enacted at an instrumental level. According to McWilliam and Sachs (2003):

The new ethos of risk management in schools is having two important if unintended effects – the production of a new timidity in pedagogical practice and a growing sense among teachers that no-one is above suspicion of negligence or abuse – as caregivers they are all more or less suspects.

Further, the culture of fear that suspects men of sexual abuse by virtue of being male has had a damaging effect on the gender balance in schools. Men are leaving teaching because they feel they cannot protect themselves from accusations of inappropriate behaviour towards students. Both teachers and students are losing out as good male teachers seek other educational roles, or leaving education altogether. The entry rate of men into teaching courses, particularly primary and early childhood, has become so low that the present government has called for the Sex Discrimination Act to be amended to allow scholarships to be offered to male teachers by Australian schools. Within this political and media debate, the shortage of male teachers has been called "a crisis of masculinity" (The World Today, March 10, 2004)

We have not argued that the media producers are completely to blame, as we have stated, all mediated data comes from somewhere. However, we would like to call for more responsible media reportage with more awareness of the consequence of media-narratives of child abuse on the reception of equally important media-narratives of changes to child protection legislation. At the same time, we assert that in the interest of good social relations it is the responsibility of all of us to restore trust in schools and envisage them as social institutions in which our young people learn and grow.

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## **Web-sites**

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