

Decision-making Processes Used by Teachers in Cases of Suspected Child Abuse

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Introduction

Child abuse and neglect are major social problems. A common response has been the passage of legislation in most North American, Australian, and European jurisdictions, which requires a wide range of professionals to report suspected cases of abuse to welfare authorities (Gilbert, 1997). However, despite legally binding sanctions, under-reporting still exists (Elliot, 1996).

For example, Johnson (1995) found that 45% of the teachers he surveyed in South Australia did not notify welfare authorities when they suspected abuse. Their main reasons for not reporting were fear for the immediate well-being of the child following a report and lack of faith in the capacity of authorities to respond appropriately following notification. Yet, little more is known about the private and group decision making of professionals—in particular, teachers—as they consider cases of suspected child abuse or neglect.

In this paper, we discuss a qualitative study that investigated the complex and very personal decision making of teachers about whether to report suspected abuse. The study exposes a mismatch between the training approaches used to educate teachers about reporting and the complex demands of decision-making processes confronting teachers. The implications of this mismatch are discussed.

Under-reporting: Review of Literature

Lumsden (1992) and Finkelhor and Zellman (1991) suggest there is general agreement that the under-reporting of suspected child abuse and neglect is a problem among all mandated professionals, including teachers. Searching for the reasons for under-reporting by professionals in South Australia has preoccupied researchers from many fields. A review of literature suggests that under-reporting is influenced by the following factors:

- lack of confidence in the ability of welfare organizations to deal appropriately with reports (Johnson, 1995; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Morris, Johnson, & Clasen 1985; Saulsbury & Campbell 1985)
- lack of evidence to support a suspicion of abuse (Kalichman, Craig, & Follingstad, 1988)
- professional ethics to maintain client confidentiality (Kalichman & Craig, 1991; Thompson-Cooper, Fugere, & Cormier, 1993)
- lack of knowledge of the indicators of abuse (Reiniger, Robison, & McHugh, 1995; Hay, 1988; Bavolek, 1983)

- ignorance of legal obligations (Reiniger, Robison, & McHugh, 1995; Hay, 1988)
- inadequate training in reporting procedures (Abrahams, Casey, & Daro, 1992; Reiniger, Robison, & McHugh, 1995)
- reluctance to become involved in legal proceedings (Hay, 1988)
- lack of professional experience (Barksdale, 1988; Nightingale & Walker, 1986)
- the age of a victim, with under-reporting increasing with the age of the victim (Kalichman & Craig, 1991; Zellman, 1992)
- type of abuse, with emotional abuse and sexual abuse being most under-reported (Levin, 1983; McIntyre, 1990)
- fear for the future welfare of the victim (Johnson, 1995; Winefield & Castelle-McGregor, 1986; Newberge, 1983)
- fear for personal safety, particularly in small communities (Pollack & Levy, 1989)

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In order to investigate these and other factors that may influence reporting behavior, a qualitative, interpretive study was conducted in South Australia to provide insights into teachers' deliberations, thoughts, feelings, and past experiences related to suspected child abuse. The aim of the study was not simply to support or refute pre-stated hypotheses, but to contribute a deeper understanding of teachers' thinking and decision making about reporting abuse (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Methodology

Purposive sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to select teachers for the study. This was a theoretical and practical consideration rather than one based on randomness in order to facilitate the selection of informants with knowledge relevant to the aims of the study (Morse, 1989). For example, the teachers needed to have had relevant experiences with children they suspected were being abused. Fifteen participants were thus selected to be interviewed using a semi-structured protocol. Interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed.

To help cope with the demands of text management and analysis, each transcribed interview was introduced to the innovative text analysis computer program, NUD•IST (Richards & Richards, 1993). The analysis involved reading and categorizing segments of text and instructing NUD•IST to code these segments within a logical and hierarchical conceptual schema. Using this schema, coded sections of each interview were then retrieved and analysed to discern patterns, trends, common themes, inconsistencies, and idiosyncrasies in teachers' perspectives on reporting suspected child abuse and neglect.

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Findings

The study revealed that teachers had many professional and personal concerns when making decisions about whether to report suspected child abuse. These relate to the following:

- concerns over a lack of evidence of abuse
- concerns over a lack of knowledge of the signs of abuse due to inadequacies in training
- a lack of confidence in welfare authorities' willingness and ability to act on reports
- restrictive school level consultation processes
- personal fears of the consequences of reporting
- teachers' strong moral grounds for reporting suspected abuse.

Although these concerns inevitably led to the under-reporting of abuse by some teachers, the study also revealed teachers' strong moral grounds for reporting suspected abuse despite their concerns. Next, we explore these issues, showing their implications for teacher training and development. After challenging the dominant view of the reporting process as a legalistic and mechanistic set of actions, we present a more holistic and grounded view of the decision-making processes used by teachers.

Concerns Over Lack of Evidence of Abuse

Developing a "suspicion" of abuse is a highly subjective process involving judgements about what counts as sufficient evidence. As one teacher said in her interview,

I guess it depends [on] what you mean by "suspected." If there is enough evidence, like the child's behavior has changed dramatically, or there are changes in the child's emotional response, then I have reported. But there have been times when I haven't been sure and I guess that is the difference between "suspecting" and having that "oh I don't know" niggling feeling. (Experienced female elementary school teacher)

Teachers also revealed that they often needed to collect evidence over time before forming a positive suspicion that led to a report. Similarly, if teachers felt that a situation was a one-off, like in the examples below, then they wouldn't report.

There was a case with a 5-year-old boy who came to school with a carpet burn across his face and I asked, "What happened to you?" and he said, "We were playing and Dad pushed me down" so I left it at that. (Experienced female elementary school teacher)

I knew this kid reasonably well and there were never any signs, then one day there was a bruise. When I looked into it, yes, the child had got a whack from a parent. The child was casual about it, and I hadn't seen any prior signs. It was a one-off as far as I was concerned and I treated it that way, so I didn't report. (Experienced female elementary school teacher)

Thorson (1996), in Gough and Healy (2000), suggests that it is extremely difficult to be precise about the evidence that is needed to form a suspicion that a child is being abused. A vivid example of this problem was shown in a recent legal case in Victoria, Australia, in which a charge against a school principal was dismissed on the grounds that she had not formed a "belief" that a child was being abused. Although a belief infers a higher degree of conviction than a suspicion, nevertheless, the same evidential difficulties exist.

Dilemmas over the adequacy of evidence are not confined to this study. For example, Bavolek (1983) found that over half of the school personnel he surveyed indicated they needed "concrete evidence" before reporting, even though the law clearly stated they were to report once they had formed a suspicion that abuse was occurring.

These insights suggest that further research is needed into the nature and status of evidence used by teachers when they make a report. Such research might provide teachers with case studies that show

... how others work through not having enough information, and how they get that "gut feeling" that leads to a real suspicion that something is going on. (Experienced male elementary school teacher)

Concerns Over Lack of Knowledge of Signs of Abuse

Closely linked to concerns over a lack of evidence of abuse were teachers' concerns over their own ability to *see* the evidence of abuse. Some teachers lamented earlier situations in which they had failed to notice the signs of abuse:

There have been a few times in my teaching career when I had no idea that something was going on. I didn't pick up any of the symptoms and there were quite clear signs... looking back on it. (Experienced female elementary school teacher)

There was a case in which it turned out that both girls had been sexually abused for quite a long time and there had been signs which had I known about, things in her drawings and being incontinent—there were those signs there and the smell and I had no idea. (Experienced female elementary school teacher)

Watts (1997) suggests that identifying abuse is made easier by a thorough knowledge of its definitions, by clear indicators of abuse, and by an individual's alertness. Nevertheless, teachers cited several reasons for missing these signs including work intensification (e.g., "Generally, it's a time factor thing. To actually get to the phone confidentially and make the report...") and a lack of physiological knowledge to accurately identify abuse.

Lack of Confidence in Welfare Authorities

Perhaps the most worrisome revelation from the study is teachers' lack of trust in the capacity of welfare authorities to respond adequately to reports of abuse, primarily because of previous negative experiences. For example, several teachers reported feeling that "nothing will be done" to investigate the report.

I just know if I were to ring up and say, "Look, my suspicion is that there's some awful things going on in this child's life ...", I just know that if I rang FACS [Family and Community Services] about that one then it wouldn't make the light of day, so I don't. I know that's going against the theory. I just know it won't get acted upon. (Experienced female elementary school counsellor)

It's the level of expertise at the other end [of the phone]. There's been a couple of times when I've been appalled at the [lack of] professionalism. I thought [what] if I'd been a parent or community person all nervous ringing in, questioning and commenting at the other end. I'm not fearful of doing it. There's certainly a lot of teachers who get nervous and uptight...; it's just that the system is so poor at times. That's when I feel angry, I suppose, nearly as much as I feel uncomfortable. (Experienced female elementary school teacher)

Even though other teachers were equally critical of the welfare authority's inability to respond to their reports, many were more understanding of the reasons for delays or lack of follow through. They frequently cited inadequate staffing levels, inexperienced and/or incompetent staff, and flaws in the agency's system of ranking reports in order of perceived severity as reasons for losing confidence in the welfare authority. Whatever the sources of frustration with the system, teachers were clearly discouraged from reporting. As a consequence, welfare authority performance can be implicated in explanations of widespread under-reporting of child abuse.

Restrictive School-Level Consultation Processes

Another decision-making theme related to power imbalances in school structures. Teachers mentioned instances in which specific workplace directives about reporting procedures had been given by senior staff even though state legislation specifically vests responsibility for reporting with individual teachers. In schools with set procedures, the Principal was usually consulted before a final decision was made to report. In other situations, principals told their staff that they would deal directly with the situation themselves and that teachers would have no further dealings with the matter. In one case, the decision was taken out of the hands of the teacher altogether:

The procedure to follow through with notifications in our school is "not to follow through." (Experienced male elementary school teacher)

In other situations, a more consultative approach was adopted when school personnel believed they could deal effectively with the situation at the school level. For example,

A discussion occurred with the principal and it was decided in the best needs of the child and family to approach the parents first, and after that the principal said if we felt they weren't going to do anything about it then we were to report. That was his directive to me. (Inexperienced male elementary school teacher)

I consulted the principal; the reaction was to talk to the child first, not to report it. After I had talked to the child, I went back to the principal; it was decided not to report it but to let the parents know and then to see if they were prepared to get support for both children. (Experienced female elementary school teacher)

Keeping discussions in-house was an option used in preference to reporting by quite a few teachers despite mandatory reporting guidelines to the contrary. Clearly, the power dynamics operating in some schools limited the capacity of teachers to fulfill their legal responsibilities.

Personal Fear of Consequences of Reporting

Teachers expressed feelings of fear, which influenced their decision making not to report. For instance, the fear of being identified and possibly threatened by aggrieved parents affected their decisions. As one teacher said,

I'm not scared of reporting but I know some teachers are because they think it will come back at them somehow.... (Inexperienced female elementary school teacher)

This teacher's views were based on a previous experience in a small country town where there had been repercussions following a report. Some teachers also feared that they would worsen the situation if they made a report, or that they would be accused of interfering in "family matters." As one student counselor said,

I can only talk from the education sector. I suspect lots and lots of abuse reportable instances go unreported in the education sector because teachers have this fear that they are (a) going to make it worse, [or] (b) [experience] retribution, and they are so accessible. A parent is less likely to go and abuse a policeman than a teacher. A teacher is in a very vulnerable situation, being alone in a classroom with 30 children. (Experienced female elementary school counselor)

These insights into teachers' perceived vulnerability confirm Johnson's (1995) finding that contextual issues related to teachers' membership in local communities often made them fearful of the consequences of reporting suspected abuse.

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Teachers' Strong Moral Grounds for Reporting Suspected Abuse

It is also interesting to note that teachers in this study made decisions to report suspected child abuse based on moral, not legal, grounds. As several teachers commented, it was their moral sense of duty that impelled them to report:

It is my role legally, but morally, I am a person—so morally I should go and try and do something about it to prevent this from happening again. (Experienced female elementary school teacher)

Other thoughts went through my mind on this one. We [the school] knew that this family was at risk, but we had nothing previously that we had been able to report on. So, the thoughts that went through my mind were, "Am I doing the right thing for the child?" I decided it just wasn't OK, it wasn't acceptable, so I reported it. (Experienced female elementary school teacher)

These insights into teachers' motivation to report are consistent with Fullan and Hargreaves' (1992, p. 5) depiction of teaching as "a moral craft" and of teachers as "morally purposeful" professionals who act in accordance with deeply held beliefs. They also provide an interesting juxtaposition with the views of teachers who decided not to report suspected abuse. Together, both sets of views help to construct teachers as morally driven actors, but who, for the range of reasons outlined in this paper, seem to encounter dilemmas and difficulties that dilute their moral imperative to report suspected child abuse.

Implications

It seems to us, then, that focussing on the *legal* options that mandate teachers to report suspected abuse fails to acknowledge the

operation of more powerful personal and contextual factors influencing teacher decision making. As a consequence, we believe that an effective and grounded approach to the problem of under-reporting should emphasize the dilemmas and difficulties teachers face in their schools and communities. We think this can be done through better training and development as well as school support that teachers receive in relation to identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect. Such improvements could focus on the following:

- developing more fully the moral and ethical arguments for reporting child abuse and neglect
- deemphasizing the legal arguments for reporting child abuse and neglect
- acknowledging the complexity and difficulty of identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect
- providing opportunities for teachers to discuss their fears, problems, and dilemmas associated with reporting child abuse and neglect
- developing in-school procedures that encourage collegial decision making
- discouraging individual and isolated decision making
- exposing teachers to real life dilemmas and problems through authentic case studies of others' decision making about reporting
- involving teachers in simulations or guided rehearsals of decision-making processes
- promoting teachers' understanding of the procedures used by welfare agencies in response to reports.

Through these means, we believe that teachers will be better able to respond to issues of child safety in ways that minimize their vulnerability and maximize the community's efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect.

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