'We weren't trained for this'

Teachers, foster care and permanent care

Cas O'Neill

Schools and teachers are increasingly seen to be an integral part of the welfare system and are expected to cope with very challenging children, many of whom are in residential or alternative family care. The longitudinal action-oriented research which is described in this article, highlighted the joys and difficulties which teachers face in supporting these children and their foster, permanent care and adoptive parents. Themes of role, power, control and support in the teachers' accounts are explored and three implications for practice are suggested.

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> A lot of the children that we have just come to us almost completely unsocialised. They don't know how to make a friend or what sort of behaviour is going to keep a friend ...so it really is starting from scratch and teaching, and over teaching, all of the things that most kids just absorb along the way (principal of special school).
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> He does like to be chosen for things, he does like to be right all the time, that is important to him (teacher).
>
> To be a successful teacher, you have to remember (what it was like to be a child) – you have to let them make mistakes – you're just there to support them afterwards (teacher).

Schools and teachers are increasingly seen to be an integral part of the welfare system, especially in light of the financial cutbacks of education, welfare and health services over the past decade. As school support services have dwindled or closed, teachers have been expected to take on more of a welfare role in addition to their teaching duties.

Recent longitudinal research, a part of which is described in this article, highlighted the joys and difficulties which teachers face in educating and supporting children who have been removed from their biological families by the child protection system and placed in foster and permanent care placements.[1]

During the years 1995 to 1998, I had 26 discussions with seventeen teachers who were employed in a range of schools – a kindergarten; three state primary schools; one primary and one secondary school in the Catholic education system; and one specialist school for children with behavioural difficulties.

Most of these people were very experienced teachers and they were therefore well qualified to reflect on the changes in education and schools, which had impacted on their profession over the past ten to twenty years.

However, while this group of teachers had inevitably taught many children with behavioural difficulties over the years, only a few (in the special school) had previously met school age children who had moved to a new family. The resulting lack of knowledge about permanent care, access with biological families and the time it takes for an older child to settle into a new family, made it difficult for these teachers to fully understand the complexities of the child's and new parents' needs.

This paper reports on themes of role, power, control and support which were evident in the teachers' accounts of how they viewed the children in their care.

THE LITERATURE ON FOSTER CARE, ADOPTION AND SCHOOLS

There are two strands in the literature which connects education with foster care and adoption. The first of these concerns issues between the education and child welfare systems, while the second addresses specific issues within the education system itself.

In a discussion of the different kinds of support available to families who adopt children with special needs, Kramer and Houston note that

> ... service providers usually operate independently of one another, coming

[1] Permanent Care is a Victorian care option which offers permanency to children through both foster care and adoption and permanent care agencies, through the Children and Young Persons Act 1989.

> together only occasionally for an administrative case review' and that 'there is a danger that professionals may not possess the same information about the child and his/her family and so may operate at cross-purposes (Kramer & Houston, 1998, p. 431).

Calder and Barratt (1997) similarly argue that the potential contribution of teachers to the child protection system (and therefore to the alternative care system) is not clearly identified and thus tends not to be utilised as well as it could be.

Writers such as Mech (1994) have also stressed the need for education and child welfare professionals to jointly prepare adolescents in foster care for transition to independent living.

Issues within the education system itself are addressed by a related body of literature.

It is well documented that children who have been institutionalised, or placed in permanent families after infancy, have more trouble than their peers with interpersonal relationships at school, as well as at home (Howe, 1998).

However, much of the literature which looks at foster care and adoption in conjunction with teachers and schools is not particularly helpful as a guide to teachers and parents seeking to jointly support children with very challenging behaviours. There are various studies which look at:

- Learning difficulties of children in alternative care (Aldgate, 1990; Andresen, 1992; Cavanagh, 1995; Dubowitz & Sawyer, 1994; Heath, Colton & Aldgate, 1989 and 1994; Sawyer & Dubowitz, 1994);
- The role of schools in preventing school drop-out of a range of children, including those in foster care (Lee, Bryant, Noonan & Plionis, 1987; Lee, Luppino & Plionis, 1990); and
- Teacher ratings of foster children's behaviours (McAuley, 1996).

There are also information booklets, compiled by adoptive and foster parents, which have been designed to educate teachers on the particular needs of these children in schools (eg, Foster Care Association of WA Inc, 1991).

The most pertinent contributions in this area, however, are the parent-written accounts of the complexities inherent in the foster/adoptive family-school relationship, highlighting positive and negative experiences and emphasising the need for partnership, rather than blame (Ainslie, 1996; Dumbleton, 1996, Gibb, 1996; Kavanagh, 1989). These issues have also been highlighted by a family therapist consultant within a foster care system (Morrissette, 1996).

As school support services have dwindled or closed, teachers have been expected to take on more of a welfare role in addition to their teaching duties.

HOW TEACHERS SEE THEMSELVES

The way in which the teachers in this research described their role was an interesting contrast to how permanent care and foster care workers (who also participated in the research) saw their own role. Teachers talked about themselves as independent professionals who were in charge of their own classes and who did not have formal supervisory links with more senior staff in the same way that child welfare professionals do. Consultation with peers, who included principals and vice-principals in small schools, was an integral part of this system.

In conjunction with this independence was the belief held by some teachers that it was best not to have too much information about a child before getting to know him or her.[2] Only when they felt that they had the child's measure did these teachers seek to read reports on file about the children.

> I usually would look at something like that (report from previous teacher) maybe at the end of a term – or when you start to really worry about something, you might go back to it. But my gut feeling on that is I like to meet them as they are before I go and read any of their past records (teacher).

This culture of relatively independent expertise also made the issue of tutoring somewhat problematic. Of the six children in the research who were formally at school, two had private tutors and one had extra help from his own teachers during school holidays.

Private tutors were not favoured by many of these teachers, partly because tutoring of primary school age children was seen as unnecessary, but also possibly because a tutor was seen as encroaching on the teacher's autonomy.

> She does need help, so I haven't said 'don't have her tutored', but I wonder personally whether there's a lot of value in that ...I don't think it's my place to work in with this tutor – I think the tutor should be able to pick up any of the work and see what we're doing and see where this child is at (teacher).

This group of teachers prided themselves on the culture of open communication which they promoted between themselves, the children and parents.

> Allowing as much time possible with the parents, so we can talk about what she's doing and what I'm doing, and I guess the best thing for me in a short term situation is the fact that I think P. (permanent mother) feels she can relate to me, and we both think alike about what she's doing and what I'm doing (teacher).

However, this was not always an easy task with this particular group of children, as open communication meant that the balance between being realistic and, alternatively, being overly positive needed to be continually negotiated, in the light of parental expectations.

> And we're not allowed to be negative, but I always tend to say they're able to do this, that and the other thing, but they have difficulty with such and such and next term we'll be aiming to whatever. Because I think we've got to look at the

[2] If teachers had known more about the complexities of permanent care, they may have sought to read reports about these children at an earlier stage.

positives, we do need to say what they can do (teacher).

The teachers' role was complicated by lack of knowledge about permanent care and its practical and legal implications. While two teachers, at a special school for children with behavioural difficulties,[3] had significant previous experience with similar children, others struggled to understand the child's situation with varying degrees of information from parents and other teachers.

> Y's (teacher) biggest problem has been 'not knowing – it's the first time in nearly twenty years of teaching that I've dealt with a child of this nature' (summary of discussion with teacher).

> I don't know how long B. (child) has been with these people – is it a foster situation or is it adoption? (teacher).

However, even with little knowledge about permanent care, what was most striking about this group of teachers was their commitment to the children. Teachers were committed to finding each child likable, even when the child's behaviour was challenging. They saw their role very much as not only helping the child with gaps in learning, but also assisting him or her with socialisation strategies.

> There is always something you like when you work with any child, I mean there's that innocence about them. And there's usually twice as much that you like than you dislike (teacher).

A key part of this commitment was a sense of 'watching out' for the child in the playground, as well as informing other teachers of the child's particular needs.

> There were other teachers having problems with J. (child), so then I put them back into perspective and said 'this is the sort of background he's come from, you can't expect him to be behaving. Perhaps we need to look at how you're talking to him and reacting with him'. Unfortunately, I think you do have to have a different code of how you react with those children (teacher).

Considerable thought was also given towards the end of each school year as to which teacher the child would best be placed with the following year – and which teachers the child should not be placed with (although this process was not talked about openly).

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PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL LIVES

Teachers were less concerned than other professionals in this research about maintaining tight boundaries between their professional and personal lives.

There were many instances of teachers sharing parts of their private lives with students and parents. While sometimes this simply involved a teacher talking about her own children as an example to permanent parents, at other times teachers invited the children and permanent parents to their homes or gave children extra lessons during school holidays. In one situation, a teacher even became a respite carer for the child.

> And possibly with people that perhaps haven't had their own children as well. Having a ten year old son myself, I use him often as an example, I'll throw that into a conversation. If I feel as though the pressure is on T. (child) too much, then I'll say something along the lines of 'I wouldn't be expecting that of (my son)' (teacher).

> R. (permanent mother) came in with V. (child) to the house during the holidays before the beginning of term to meet me, because obviously V. would be apprehensive – new school, new house, new Mum. Big issues. And they asked if they could come around and meet me at home and I said yes. So they came around for the afternoon with a friend, another family that I know (teacher).

POWER AND CONTROL

The theme of power and control was evident in several areas discussed by this group of teachers – the children's behaviours, the relationship between teacher and parents, the relationship with the placement agency/DHS and diminishing finances and resources.

The children's behaviour was a source of stress not only to individual teachers, but generally within the school. Behaviours included verbal and physical violence, inappropriate attention seeking and the child's constant need to win, or at least, not to lose. Children often seemed to be setting themselves, or others, up for trouble. While teachers often said that challenging children were seen as 'a whole school responsibility', class teachers and fellow students nevertheless tended to bear the brunt of the behaviours.

> We had a difficult time about five weeks ago, he (child) was starting to get very – standing up and argumentative. In fact there was one episode in the art room in particular, I wasn't there, but I heard about it, it was a conflictual situation between the art teacher and himself and he didn't back down and she didn't back down ...he was (also) quite open to conflict in the yard. He can set himself up for conflict with other children – and he went through a particular time where he was forever having battles or troubles ...I had to have a word to him ...often it's not what he says, it's his mannerisms (teacher).

> He's very loud, so that he takes over because he's so loud ...he just hasn't any control. And he'll criticise anything I like to say (teacher).

While less overt, issues of power and control were nevertheless present in some of the relationships between teachers and parents, especially those in the adoption and permanent care system.[4] A typical pattern of

[3] Children whose behaviour is at the most difficult end of the spectrum, are referred to this school from mainstream schools.

[4] These parents typically had no other children at the time of placement and there was no prior relationship between themselves and the child.

misunderstanding involved parents questioning what was being taught and the school's (seemingly lax) discipline methods; while teachers in turn questioned parents' expectations and (seemingly strict) discipline methods. This inevitably led to less communication between teachers and parents, with teachers deciding to avoid telling parents too much about their children's behaviour – and parents suspecting that they were not being told what was happening.

> I have a feeling that they have amazingly high standards, almost to the point of being unrealistic for an 11 year old child ...there are times they need to back off ...I believe they really have very high expectations, not authoritarian, but I think they're very demanding of him at times. And if he doesn't come up to their expectations, I don't think they like it. It's not necessarily that they feel disappointed, they feel he's just not doing enough, he needs to work harder and do more (teacher).

> Oh yes, he (child) knows it at times because I've even said to him 'we'll leave it here' and 'we'll leave it at school' and 'I won't write it in the (communication) book, but if this continues or if there is another thing then I'll have to make that decision and let them know'. He's quite aware of what gets written in the book (teacher).

This pattern seemed to be exacerbated by teachers' lack of knowledge and training about the troubled earlier lives and challenging behaviours of children entering foster care and permanent care placements. It was therefore less likely to occur in situations where the teachers did have this knowledge, eg, in the specialist school for children with behavioural difficulties.

The relationship between teachers and the placement agency or DHS was reported as being almost non-existent and teachers were only occasionally invited to case planning meetings. Even when this occurred, they were not asked to write reports and did not feel that their knowledge of the child or expertise as teachers had been utilised or honoured in any significant way.

> As a teacher, L. doesn't feel listened to or taken notice of, has never been visited by a DHS worker and has never been asked to write a report. She thinks that there is often too much indecision with these children, that the emotional aftermath of access and social worker visits isn't taken into account, that case plans aren't individualised and wonders if DHS and its workers have the best interests of the children at heart (summary of discussion with teacher).

> W. (teacher) has had no contact with (agency) ...she feels that 'there needs to be more communication' between the agency and the school – and that it is inappropriate for the permanent parents to always be the go-betweens. W. thinks that the agency worker should have contacted the school directly, especially about the Year 6/7 transition and she wonders if the agency staff even know where C. (child) will be going next year (summary of discussion with teacher).

The support which teachers offered to children and parents was both practical and emotional and, at its best, created a very real partnership between family and school.

Diminishing finances and resources were a continuing source of concern to teachers in both the state and private school systems and teachers despaired of this situation changing in the foreseeable future. The main consequence of this for the children, parents and teachers in this research was the very limited, or non-existent, support services to refer to.

> A few years ago I can remember writing a letter to the manager of the (local) School Support Centre saying at that stage I was very appreciative of the support that we were given with difficult children, and the time given by guidance officers, etc. But that's become more difficult over the last few years, and it's reached a stage where I guess within schools you're drawing on your own collegiate support and my own expertise (principal).

Even schools which were relatively well resourced were affected in this way – for example, the principal at the school which specialised in children who could not cope with mainstream schools said:

> Our staffing ratio is 1:11 which is really poor for children with severe social and emotional behaviour difficulties ...we've got very specialised staff here, and even so it's quite difficult sometimes to really do justice to M's (child) needs.

This led to feelings of powerlessness on the one hand, but also to a sense that schools and teachers needed to take control by creating their own sources of support through networks.

> We're very much going down the sink hole because of that (lack of resources). But because we had reached a point where we needed to lobby government, we needed to look at issues as professional people and bring them out into the wider community. We formed a group here and we meet two or three times a term (kindergarten teacher).

SUPPORT

The support which teachers offered to children and parents was both practical and emotional and, at its best, created a very real partnership between family and school. Teachers advocated for the children; normalised their behaviours to other staff and students; offered advice, and gave information, to parents; worked with the children's learning and emotional difficulties; and constantly looked at positive ways of modifying the children's negative behaviours.

> If children feel that they're welcome in the classroom and the teacher appreciates them, likes them, that they feel that they are an important and valued member of the class, they will respond in a positive way. I've learned that (teacher).

> The other day when he threw a whammy, and he was really upset about something ...I said 'come up here J. (child) and sit next to me'. And I put my hand round his shoulder, I'm sure his Mum wouldn't mind, and he didn't want that, so I grabbed his hand and I held it till he relaxed (teacher).

> I think we give him an environment which is very safe and very nurturing, so that he's not lost in a big system. He's with adults who understand why a lot of his behaviours are happening, so while we don't accept a lot of the negative behaviours, there's a real understanding as to why (principal of special school).

Teachers also expressed a great deal of satisfaction with the progress made by children in their schools.

> I really am glad I have her in my grade – it's just lovely to see her blossoming – she's gorgeous (teacher).

> This is where you can really do the good preventive work. So I wonder about my sanity sometimes, when it's a windy rainy day out on playground duty. But it really is rewarding, just to see children arrive here and they're tense and they're mistrusting of school, and they don't want to be here – and the changes that you see so quickly – just doing the things that every school ought to be doing (principal of special school).

The most important source of support for all of these teachers was peer support and a related sense of the school working as a team.

> It's a very close school, everyone helps each other. So if you do have a problem, there's someone there to talk to about it (teacher).

However, a broader theme of working as a team was also evident with teachers talking about their appreciation of the supportive input of parents, both at personal and organisational levels.

> H. (permanent mother) is fantastic. Definitely. So it's (support) a reciprocal thing (teacher).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

There are three main implications for practice which were evident in the accounts of teachers in this research.

Firstly, it is important for child welfare professionals to understand that teachers see themselves as relatively independent professionals, who take pride in their ability to assess the needs of the children in their care. This may mean that they are less likely to read reports from previous teachers or other organisations.

Secondly, the support which teachers in this research offered to children and their permanent parents facilitated partnership with some families, particularly those in the foster care system. However, the fact that many teachers had not previously taught children in permanent care placements, and therefore tended not to understand the impact of the children's behaviours, especially on new parents, had implications for the way in which they related to the permanent parents in the adoption and permanent care system.

It is therefore important for foster care and adoption/permanent care workers to facilitate teachers' understanding of the patterns of behaviour which children may display in new families and new schools. A brochure, *Foster Care, Permanent Care and Adoption: Teachers and Parents in Partnership*, has been written in conjunction with teachers and parents who participated in the research and is available through the Victorian Department of Human Services. (A copy of this brochure can be obtained at www.dhs.vic.gov.au/yafs - follow the links to children and families, foster care, adoption and permanent care.)

Thirdly, teachers reported being inadequately, or not at all, consulted about the needs and progress of the children, either in crises or in the routine case planning process. While the pace and stress of protective, foster care and permanent care work is wholeheartedly acknowledged, the importance of teachers to the daily world of the child needs to be emphasised. Adequate consultation with teachers is therefore crucial in terms of gaining the best possible understanding of how the child interacts outside the family. □

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