

The School, Teachers and Child Abuse

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Recent proposed changes to family welfare legislation in Queensland (Parliamentary White Paper, 1981) include consideration of the extension of the mandatory reporting of cases of suspected child abuse or neglect, to encompass occupational groups other than medical practitioners. At the present time, only medical practitioners are obliged to report cases of abuse or neglect, under Section 76K of the Health Act (1937-1979) and Amendment Act (1980), Division XI B - maltreatment of children. The proposals (Chapter Five, pp. 12-14) state:

"If it is considered that mandatory reporting is necessary, it should not be confined to medical practitioners alone. There are far more occupational groups than medical practitioners who have direct contact with children and the various facets of child protection."

Included in the list of additional occupational groups are, 'All registered teachers including kindergarten and pre-school teachers', with the suggestion that any group involved in reporting should be given immunity and guaranteed that reports will be confidential.

The proposed changes in the legislation raise a number of issues for members of the 'teaching' profession, not least being questions concerning the efficacy of mandatory, as opposed to voluntary, reporting - indeed, of the notion of reporting at all - aspects of teacher responsibility, notions of confidentiality and problems of inter-professional communication. The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, to examine briefly the relationship between teachers and the social phenomenon of child abuse or neglect. Second, to discuss the implications of the proposed changes in the legislation for teachers in Queensland.

Few people could deny that "teachers and other adults in schools are particularly well placed to detect signs

of ill treatment of children in their care" (Department of Health and Social Security, Committee of Inquiry, 1974). It is within the school context that the most regular daily contact between children and professionals occurs - and in contrast to other caring professions concerned with children, it is legally sanctioned contact. Further, the school may represent for some children the only source of help readily available outside of the home situation (Clegg and Megson, 1968). The teacher-child relationship represents the immediate point of contact between the child and the school. It is often within the context of this relationship that problems initially become manifest - be they behavioural, emotional, social or educational problems - and it is at the kindergarten, pre-school or classroom level that the earliest decisions concerning these problems must be taken. The effectiveness of the decisions will be determined by factors at a number of different levels. First, at the level of the individual teacher the attitudes, knowledge, experiential background, and the degree of acuity or sensitivity of the teacher become important, as does the strength of the relationship between teacher and child.

Second, the individual child may actively attempt to conceal the nature or extent of any abuse. This occurs particularly with older children. Reasons for this situation range from a sense of loyalty, however misplaced, on the part of the child, a lack of recognition by the child that anything is wrong, reluctance based on feelings of guilt, fear or remorse, or reticence to communicate with adult school figures. Again, with this latter point, the strength of the relationship between teacher and child becomes crucial.

Third, at the institutional level, schools vary greatly in their knowledge of and degree of sensitivity to the needs of their students. This, in turn, structures the approaches, or lack of them, adopted to meet these needs. Fitzherbert (1978) illustrates how important the role of the school principal is in determining the nature of the welfare function within a school and in the fostering of support for members of staff in any action that they might instigate.

Finally, at the wider agency level, schools vary greatly in their attitudes to external agency involvement. Robinson (1978) suggests that there is a lack of mutual confidence between schools and external agencies. There still appear to be real or imaginary jurisdictional disputes that make it extremely difficult to delineate authority or define terms of reference. Some schools employ an 'open-door' policy, allowing free access to members of external agencies. However, some schools employ a notion of institutional immunity, shunning any external involvement in what are regarded as school affairs. Some teachers

view involvement of external agencies with a high degree of suspicion, if not overt hostility, to the point of refusing to communicate information even when it becomes available. Some teachers and schools have no desire to become involved in what are regarded as matters strictly external to the school.

Generally, teachers lack a professional stance *per se* on child abuse (Hallett and Stevenson, 1980; Murgatroyd, 1980). One possible reason for this lies in the stereotypical images utilised by the public as well as particular occupational groups when considering social phenomena, such as child abuse. The actual extent of child abuse in the community is unknown. Little reliable information is available, but it is tacitly accepted by researchers that a large hidden figure of abuse of various kinds exists. Whatever the actual amount, the lack of information has given rise to the development of myths surrounding the phenomenon, which in turn help structure community attitudes and perceptions. For example, the term child abuse is typically held to refer to the constant beating, or some form of neglect, of a baby or very young child, often from a disturbed home. Connotations of type, age and class are implicit in such notions. The abused child is typically viewed as being a baby (hence "battered baby syndrome") or young infant. However, abuse can, and does, take a variety of different forms (Cooper, 1978). Increasing evidence is coming to light to indicate that adolescents are being subjected to physical or emotional abuse or are being exploited or rejected (Macmillan and Jefferies, 1982). Any definition of child abuse which is restricted to infants is insufficient.

The emphasis in research and news media coverage on physical injury has served to further mislead. Non-accidental physical injuries are more commonly inflicted upon young children, particularly those in the pre-school years, than upon older children (Creighton and Owrap, 1977). Certainly any such injuries are more easily detectable with younger children. The effects and consequences of emotional abuse, sexual abuse or exploitation, and rejection among adolescents are less immediately obvious.

The term child abuse has given rise also to class connotations. The implicit suggestion is that it is a phenomenon restricted to particular types of families in particular social settings. Again, increasing research evidence indicates that child abuse is a broader, more generalised phenomenon than was previously thought.

Teachers tend to relate to children and children's problems on the basis of stereotypical images and generalisations. The situation is little different with regard to child abuse. Teachers generally share common misconceptions. The common-sense notion that child abuse



is restricted to the abuse of very young children, largely precludes consideration of the phenomenon, for example, at the upper primary or high school levels. Few high school teachers are willing or prepared to accept that child abuse is a phenomenon which should concern them, either directly or indirectly, in the course of their work. Similarly, the extent to which teachers consider the phenomenon may well be determined by the socio-economic composition of the school, or of the school's immediate community. Teachers in predominantly middle-class schools may simply discount the possibility of child abuse occurring on the basis that "such things like that would never happen here".

By extension, if aspects of child abuse do not fall within the parameters of the experiential set of particular teacher, then that teacher may find it difficult or impossible to accept the very existence of the phenomenon. For example, the sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of adolescents by adults may be regarded with such abhorrence, or even incredulity, by the teacher that the existence of such behaviour is denied. The teacher finds himself, or herself, unable to accept that acts of that nature could be perpetrated. This is in line with the findings by Roberts and Carver (1978) from a brief questionnaire administered to a group of 66 volunteers, including a group of student teachers. 41% of the respondents "had difficulty in believing that such things could be done knowingly by human beings". Significantly, over 80% did not view themselves as potential abusers of children. Roberts and Carver (1978:14) suggest that there are dangers inherent in these statements:

"One is that unless we can cease to view abusing adults as different from ourselves, as almost an alien sub-species, we shall have great difficulty in taking in the information which suggests the opposite, and consequently equal difficulty in understanding how people come to abuse their children."

Clearly, perceptions of self as a potential child abuser are important. Equally as important are perceptions of the work context. Cooper (1978:42) states:

"It is not the injuries themselves, unless they are severe, that cause the most damage to abused children. It is the total environment in which they are reared."

Cooper continues to suggest that any such environment usually contains any one, or more, of a number of features, including indifference (to the child's basic needs and to the child's affectional needs); constant demands for advanced performance and critical, hostile reactions to failure (including unrealistic expectations); cruel punishments (not all of which involve physical pain); unpredictable and chaotic environment; sexual abuse; or

physical ill-treatment. It is evident that the school, the pre-school, the kindergarten, must be included in any consideration of the "total environment" of the child. In this context, it must be stated that school situations provide opportunities in which children are open to various forms of abuse, both by adult figures and by peers. Indifference, humiliation or embarrassment, corporal punishment and certainly, constant demands for advanced performance and hostile, critical reactions to failure do occur within school contexts.

A second possible reason for the lack of a professional stance, *per se*, by teachers towards child abuse lies in the emphasis of teaching which focuses upon the educational tasks of the school. Teachers regard other 'caring' professionals as being more centrally involved with cases of child abuse. The role of the teacher is often regarded as purely peripheral, at most, if there exists a role at all. Of paramount importance in this context, are the definitions or perceptions of educational tasks utilised by school administrators and individual teachers alike, for these will determine attitudes, outlooks and priorities (Robinson, 1978).

This indicates a third possible reason for the lack of a professional stance, *per se*, the lack of official, departmental directive concerning the relationship between teachers and cases of child abuse creates difficulties for the individual teacher. For the teacher there exists a problem in the sense that there is a seeming lack of consensus concerning the definition of educational tasks. There is also a basic dilemma. Although there is no legally prescribed duty to refer cases of suspected abuse or neglect to specific agencies, there is an implicit professional duty to assist students at all times in whatever ways possible. Clegg and Megson (1968: 40) state the case more strongly by indicating that "the school . . . is breaking the law if it does not endeavour to help the child on five days each week for some forty weeks of the year". All teachers are held in law to be *in loco parentis* while a child is in their care. Teachers assume the mantle of parental responsibility not only to refrain from abuse but to protect the child and to promote his general welfare. Thus, in a sense, a legal prescription for mandatory reporting already exists. What is required in this situation is a clarification of the extent of teacher responsibility - morally, legally, and professionally - with regard to child abuse. New legislation to introduce mandatory reporting by teachers, if nothing else will serve to promote debate on these issues.

However, the implications of any such legislation must be considered further. The school - be it kindergarten, pre-school, primary school or high school - can be regarded as the focal point around which concerted assistance

can be offered to children defined as being 'at risk'. The school is ideally positioned to initiate action, to contribute to programmes, or to liaise with other agencies. At the centre of the effectiveness of this unique position lies the importance of communication. For coordinated activity to take place, it is necessary to ensure that information is given at the right time to everyone who needs it; that it is understood; and that it is remembered when it is required for action (Stevenson, 1978). Schools possess large amounts of information about children and their families and about who should receive specialised services, but this information is rarely used for evaluation or feedback purposes. Frequently, this is because the means for systematically collecting, analysing and utilising the information do not exist, or there exists an over-riding fear that such information, disseminated to teachers will not be used in a professional manner by the teachers concerned. There is anxiety, not only on the part of the teachers, but also other professionals that the information available will be abused, either by being passed directly to the client, or to outsiders.

It is evident nevertheless, that the non-disclosure or with-holding of information can be detrimental to the well-being of the individual child. In particular the opportunity for effective intervention may be missed, if not lost altogether. Within the Queensland situation, one reason for the absence of a free-flow of information is Section 144 of the Children's Services Act - the so-called 'secrecy provisions' which form the basis of the notion of confidentiality for Children's Services workers. The proposed changes in the legislation, if made law, would move towards bringing some uniformity into situations in which confidentiality must be respected, but where differences between occupational groupings create stumbling blocks for flexible inter-communication. Good and Brophy (1978) state categorically that it is not the information itself but the way it is used that is of crucial importance. Too often, too little information is reaching those who could best use that information. At times, the lack of information exacerbates rather than solves problems. It is not uncommon for the teacher to remain unaware of programmes of intervention instigated elsewhere albeit unwittingly, continue to contribute to the causes of the problems. At the same time, the teacher may possess vital information of value to other agencies.

The introduction of mandatory reporting has a number of foreseeable advantages. First, it incorporates teachers more fully into the situation of intervention in cases of child abuse or neglect. This involvement, plus the free-flow of information between all parties concerned, may serve to reduce feelings

of frustration created by lack of feedback. If the teacher is involved, he, or she, is more likely to report cases in the future.

Second, the contact between professionals in different fields, however formal or informal, offers opportunities for each to learn about the roles, functions and responsibilities of the others. Mutual ignorance among caring professionals needlessly creates barriers to effective intervention. Any broadening or development in the area of the relationship between teachers and children 'at risk', calls into question present pre-service training provision. Pre-service programmes offer the opportunity to sensitive student-teachers, for example, to the problems or difficulties confronting those presently involved in cases of abuse. Important in this context is the opportunity for the wider caring community to understand that the term 'child abuse' will mean different things to different teachers, possibly determined by the ages of the children being taught. Inter-professional involvement also creates the opportunity for caring professionals to learn about and to attempt to come to terms with the differing perspectives utilised in child care and protection.

Finally, involvement on the part of teachers brings them closer to other professionals in the caring community. The links between the school and the wider community are often tenuous. Contact between the occupational groups will hopefully facilitate concerted action, at the same time promoting stronger community ties.

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