

Child protection in primary schools: a contradiction in terms or a potential opportunity?

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This paper deals with the topic of child protection in Irish primary schools, and reports on a recently completed survey of newly qualified teachers' knowledge of and familiarity with their school's child protection policies and procedures. The study was undertaken by means of a questionnaire survey, and conducted with 103 teachers from different schools. The child protection roles and responsibilities of schools are clearly spelt out in national guidelines. However, the findings from this research indicate that compliance with the requirement to inform new staff about the guidelines and ensure that they have read them is weak. This is evidenced by the data concerning the teachers' reported knowledge of, and familiarity with, their school's child protection policies. Half of the respondents did not know if their school had a child protection policy or not. Of those who were aware of their school's child protection policy, only just over half had read it. Well under half of the respondents knew if there was a Designated Liaison Person (DLP) with responsibility for child protection in their school. Furthermore, nearly two-thirds of respondents reported uncertainty or lack of confidence in being able to identify suspected child abuse. The paper draws on international research on child protection in education to provide the context for a discussion on the factors that influence schools' motivation and willingness to collaborate as key protectors of children's safety and welfare, and makes recommendations for policy makers, school managers and frontline staff.

Keywords: child protection; Ireland; school child protection policy; reporting suspected child abuse; Designated Liaison Person

Introduction

The role of the school in the protection and welfare of children is regarded as significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, the teacher has close daily contact with the children and, particularly in primary schools, has the opportunity to observe a child's emotional, psychological and physical condition. Because of the young ages of the children, primary school teachers have frequent opportunities to observe the nature of relationships between children and their caregivers, and are often the recipients of information that gives a clear picture of what home life is like for a child. Additionally, a teacher may find him or herself the object of a child's trust and the potential recipient of information from a child that may lead them to learn of or suspect serious harm or ill-treatment. While there are no Irish data available to indicate the rate of child abuse reporting by schools, statistics from Canada (Public Health Agency of Canada 2003) and Australia (Australian Institute of Health and

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Welfare 2009) both identify teachers as the second highest group of professional reporters to the child protection system, next to police.

This paper will deal with the topic of child protection in Irish primary schools, and will report on a recently completed survey of newly qualified teachers' knowledge of, and familiarity with, their school's child protection policies and procedures. It will discuss the findings from the survey in relation to previous Irish and international research that used qualitative methodology to explore the factors that influence schools' participation in child protection and their links with related organisations. In doing so, it will illustrate the challenges facing schools in responding to the Irish government's proposed initiatives to ensure the adherence of statutory bodies and government-funded organisations to the national child protection guidelines (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs [OMCYA] 2009).

Child protection in Irish primary schools

The policy expectation that primary schools should play a role in child protection emerged in line with broader public policy developments, calling for 'joined-up' government or cross-cutting management, during the 1990s. This ideal reflected a generally accepted view that important public policy goals could not be achieved by any single governmental sector but required the breaking down of 'silos' and the creation of more streamlined collaboration across sectors. The requirement for partnership in child protection has been further affirmed by the publication of inquiries into cases where communication between services was judged to be deficient as well as a review of *Children First* that demonstrated the non-compliance of some organisations with the national guidelines (OMCYA 2008).

The term 'child protection' in this paper is used to mean actions taken in response to suspicions or disclosures of the physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect of children. This definition implies a clear focus on actual or impending harm to children that requires intervention in order to prevent its further exacerbation. Harm to children is normally classified into the four categories of physical abuse, neglect, child sexual abuse and emotional abuse, although it is generally understood that children may experience more than one of these adversities at any one time (Department of Health and Children [hereafter DoHC] 1999). The term 'child protection' is less ambiguous than, for instance, 'child welfare', which is often used in respect of children who are vulnerable because of unmet need and/or problems in their social context (Health Service Executive [hereafter HSE]¹ 2009). The Department of Education and Skills (formerly the Department of Education and Science; hereafter DES) has taken a number of measures to address the 'welfare' problems of vulnerable children whose education and attendance at school may be affected by environmental problems, such as the designation of some schools as disadvantaged, the deployment of home school liaison teachers, and the development of programmes to provide alternative educational settings and prevent early school leaving. Child protection responsibilities, however, are borne by all schools, mainstream or otherwise.

While the HSE has a statutory obligation to investigate and intervene in cases of child abuse, the child protection responsibilities of other government departments, including the DES, are currently determined by policy rather than legislation.

The question of whether or not the requirement to report should be made 'mandatory'² has been debated by the Irish government off and on since the early 1990s. While it is generally agreed that the implementation of mandatory reporting signifies a strong commitment on the part of central government to prioritise the protection of children, there are concerns that the potential resulting increase in referrals could destabilise the system and render it less effective (Department of Health 1996; Buckley 2009).

The issue of mandatory reporting arose again following the publication in May 2009 of the *Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse*, commonly known as the Ryan Report (Government of Ireland 2009), which elicited a strong public and political reaction. While the report dealt mainly with abuse that had taken place in residential settings under the auspices of the Department of Education in previous decades, concerns were raised about a number of current issues, including the need to ensure adherence to national guidelines on child protection by all organisations providing services to children and families, including schools. While the Minister for Children declined to opt for mandatory reporting, he announced in July 2009 that he was drafting legislation to put the national child protection guidelines, *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (hereafter *Children First*) (DoHC 1999), on a statutory footing, in order to ensure the compliance of all publicly funded bodies with the requirement to report suspected or actual child abuse to the authorities (OMCYA 2009). No details were given about the proposed legislative measure, but it has been assumed that clauses will be written into the employment contracts of state sector professionals working with children, obliging them to contact authorities about concerns, and that failure to comply will result in disciplinary action (O'Brien 2009).

The roles and tasks currently expected of teachers have been clearly outlined in *Children First* (DoHC 1999) which stipulates that management arrangements in schools should provide for the planning, development and implementation of child protection programmes, continuous monitoring of the effectiveness of such provision, implementation of agreed reporting procedures, and the planning and implementation of appropriate staff training and development programmes (Section 6.8, 50). Following the publication of *Children First*, the DES issued explicit guidance for primary schools in the form of *Department of Education and Science Child Protection Procedures and Guidelines* (DES 2001), replacing an earlier set of procedures that had been published in 1991. A central element of the 2001 procedures is the appointment in each school of a Designated Liaison Person (DLP) who would be responsible for receiving reports from school staff and passing them to the HSE for further investigation. This replaced the protocol outlined in earlier guidelines whereby responsibility for those actions was carried by the Chairperson of the Board of Management. The 2001 guidelines were developed in line with *Children First* and Section 1.1.4 stipulates that 'it is incumbent on school authorities and teachers to adhere to these guidelines in dealing with allegations and suspicions of child abuse'. The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (hereafter INTO) responded to the publication of the DES guidelines by signalling a commitment to providing direct advice to DLPs and individual teachers and responding to queries about child abuse. It advised schools to appoint DLPs immediately and to facilitate their attendance at training seminars which had been planned and designed by a collaborative team from the DES, the DoHC and the

INTO (INTO 2002). The requirement for schools to implement child protection guidelines was again emphasised in 2005, when following the publication of the Ferns Report (Murphy, Buckley, and Joyce 2005), the DES Primary Schools Section published a circular (Primary Circular 0061/2006) which included the following statement:

It is vitally important that each school has clear and effective child protection procedures in place which are in accordance with the Department Guidelines and Procedures and that these procedures are brought to the attention of management, staff and parents in the school. School management should provide all new staff, whether teaching or otherwise, with a copy of the school's child protection guidelines and ensure that they are familiar with the procedures to be followed. (DES 2006, 9)

Compliance with child protection guidelines

It might be assumed from the attention paid to this issue by the DES that compliance with the requirements laid down would be assured, and that no further efforts would be required to ensure the vigilance of teachers in respect of the welfare and protection of their pupils. However, to make such an assumption would be to ignore the complexity of this subject, and possibly to misunderstand the degree to which priorities must compete in an increasingly crowded school curriculum.

One of the first indications of disparity between the Departmental directives and the reality on the ground was the outcome from a research study carried out by the INTO in late 2007, in which 330 DLPs were surveyed about their own experiences of training and their views on the child protection training needs of teachers generally (INTO 2008). A number of those surveyed also took part in two focus groups in which they discussed their experiences of identifying and reporting suspected child abuse. The study, which reported in 2008, found that fewer than half of the DLPs in the state who are charged with reporting child abuse had had any training at that point, and 70% who had undergone training found it to be inadequate. There was also a general view that training should be extended to all teaching staff and provided on an ongoing basis. This report raised a number of other issues that impacted on schools' capacity to fulfil their child protection responsibilities, including communication difficulties with the statutory child protection system and the potential for disrupted relationships between DLPs and families as a consequence of reporting. It was pointed out that no recognition is given to the latter, nor any support offered to DLPs to deal with it.

Previous research evidence on teachers and child protection

The study reported here was mainly concerned with teachers' knowledge of procedures and guidelines, and not with their reporting behaviours or their participation in the child protection system generally. However, it could be inferred that schools' interest in child protection and motivation to disseminate information about it are symptomatic of their general commitment to their role as protectors of children's safety and welfare. Previous research has shown that the 'climate' of a school, and the role and attitude of the school principal, can influence detecting and reporting, and that current attitudes to child protection procedures are often shaped by previous experiences of reporting similar cases as well as personal values, and

beliefs (Walsh et al. 2006). Lack of adherence to child protection procedures on the part of teachers has previously been identified in Australian research, where it is estimated that up to half of teachers' suspicions about child abuse go unreported (Goebbels et al. 2008; Laskey 2004), and in the USA where the under-reporting rate is considered to be even higher (O'Toole et al. 1999; Abrahams, Casey, and Daro 1992). This is despite the fact that both of the aforementioned jurisdictions have mandatory reporting legislation which deems failure to report as liable to legal sanctions (Matthews and Kenny 2008).

Barriers to reporting

Taking a broader view, there is quite an amount of evidence from Ireland and other jurisdictions that willingness to become involved in responding to child protection concerns can be influenced by issues internal to the school, such as fears about the negative outcomes of reporting including physical threats from parents or other repercussions for teachers, suppression of reports by administrators or fear of legal consequences for schools (Zellman and Bell 1990). Other factors highlighted were inadequate background information about a child's home and a general lack of knowledge amongst teachers of issues such as domestic violence (Crenshaw, Crenshaw, and Lichtenberg 1995; Kelly 1997; O'Toole et al. 1999; Buckley, Skehill, and O'Sullivan 1997; Berry 2003; Laskey 2004; Walsh et al. 2006; Buckley, Whelan, and Holt 2006). The lack of a firm 'action plan' in respect of detecting and reporting child abuse has also been cited as a barrier to involvement (Goebbels et al. 2008), inferring that the absence of school policies or lack of knowledge about them will deter teachers from reporting.

Training

The training of teachers in child protection has also been the subject of research, although precise links have not been made between the timing and nature of training and teachers' ability to make timely and accurate reports (Walsh et al. 2006). Studies that have explored reporting and non-reporting behaviours of teachers have tended to focus on the adequacy of their knowledge about child abuse and neglect as an influential factor and, in general, have concluded that increased levels of training lead to more knowledge and hence to greater reporting (Arnold and Maio-Taddeo 2008; Laskey 2004; Baginsky 2000, 2003). It is difficult to isolate training as an independent variable, however, and it is agreed that training which focuses mainly on guidelines and reporting regulations and does not deal with the other less tangible factors will be of only limited assistance to teachers' confidence and decision-making capabilities (Kenny 2004; Goebbels et al. 2008).

Inter-agency co-operation

The wider context of the child protection and welfare system is also influential on schools' involvement with the issue. Difficulties in achieving collaboration between schools and other organisations, particularly the statutory child protection system, have also been cited as impediments. Irish research has highlighted some of the challenges in this regard, including poor communication between schools and the

HSE, and lack of feedback from HSE staff which discourages teachers from referring (Kelly 1997; Buckley, Skehill, and O'Sullivan 1997; Berry 2003; INTO 2008). The INTO survey highlighted the perception of DLPs that the role and capacity of schools in child protection was misunderstood by other children's services; this is undoubtedly a key factor in any intra-organisational tensions. A sense that teachers' concerns are not treated seriously is also cited as an obstacle to participation by teachers (Crenshaw, Crenshaw, and Lichtenberg 1995; Baginsky 2007).

Policy initiatives implemented in the UK to promote child protection in schools

Other jurisdictions have gone some way to capitalising on the resources offered by schools to protect children from abuse. In the UK, for example, the education sector is identified as an important element of the Integrated Children's Services (ICS) initiative that followed the publication of the Victoria Climbié report. The ICS aims to safeguard children by providing earlier, 'joined-up' intervention using a secure database which may be accessed by other professionals working with a child and family. Schools in England and Wales have also adopted the Common Assessment Framework to facilitate communication with other staff in children's services departments (www.dfes.gov.uk/everychildmatters). While these new developments have not been without their problems, early noted improvements include better communication between schools and children's services departments, stronger and more satisfactory representation of schools at child protection conferences, and an increase in the availability of consultation on child protection matters for teachers who require it (Baginsky 2007).

Sociological considerations

Reluctance to become involved in the minefield that is child protection is often related to deeper sociological considerations about personal rights and privacies in liberal democracies (Dingwall, Eekelaar, and Murray 1983; Fox Harding 1996). Child protection has long been regarded as 'dirty work' (Hughes 1958, cited in Blyth and Milner 1990), and as Butler (1996, 312) has argued, 'child protection work in Ireland has the potential to become even "dirtier" than it is in Britain', linked as it is to the ambivalence which exists about state intrusion into the family, and the greater possibility of 'opprobrium' attaching to practitioners whose duties involve 'policing' elements. Social workers participating in an action research project on assessment concurred with this view with the observation that 'teachers don't want to put their name to anything' (Buckley, Horwath, and Whelan 2003). Reluctance to damage professional relationships with a child or family was cited by Crenshaw, Crenshaw, and Lichtenberg (1995) as a disincentive to report child abuse, and O'Toole et al. (1999) noted that under-reporting by teachers is associated with positive evaluations by teachers of parents, which tend to mask concerns about child abuse. They also commented that larger class sizes and longer years of teaching experience tend to desensitise teachers to the possibility that a child is being harmed.

Overall, then, it can be observed from the literature that a linear relationship between the existence of protocols and procedures and the identification and reporting of suspected child abuse should not be assumed, a point which is borne out by the findings from the current study.

Current study

The study reported here was conducted in early 2009 and sought to ascertain the degree to which newly qualified primary teachers, in their first six months of full-time teaching, understood their formal child protection responsibilities. The impetus to undertake the research came from the authors' experience of lecturing newly qualified teachers in their first year of teaching, where it became apparent that their knowledge of the national child protection procedures was weaker and less consistent than might be expected. The study was undertaken by means of a questionnaire survey, and conducted with participants in the Bachelor of Education course in Trinity College Dublin.

The specific objectives were to establish, from individual teachers:

- whether or not they were aware of the DES child protection guidelines;
- whether they had seen and read the DES child protection guidelines;
- how they had heard about the DES child protection guidelines;
- whether their school had a child protection policy and the degree to which it had been disseminated;
- their knowledge about their school's DLP;
- the number of hours of child protection training undertaken by the teacher in their teacher education courses;
- whether or not they had been inducted into their school's child protection policy on taking up their teaching position there; and
- their current level of confidence in their ability to identify and report child abuse.

Methodology

The School of Education TCD runs a one-year in-service Bachelor of Education programme for trained primary teachers who wish to upgrade their qualification to honours degree level. Permission was gained from the School to administer a survey questionnaire to a class in January 2009 attended by approximately 120 BE students. Ethical approval for the study was given by the Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, TCD. The questionnaire, which was developed in line with the objectives of the study, consisted of 26 closed questions about their knowledge of their school's procedures policies and two Likert scales for measuring the teachers' level of confidence in identifying and reporting child abuse. No questions were asked about specific cases, or teachers' actual experience of reporting. Some 110 completed questionnaires were returned. In order to ensure that there was no duplication of school representation, participants in the class had been asked to note on their questionnaires if their school was represented in the survey by more than one person. This resulted in the elimination of seven responses, leaving a total of 103 questionnaires from 103 schools. The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.

While the focus of this study was on newly-qualified teachers' experiences of child protection in terms of input during teacher education and induction in current schools, prior experiences of child protection training which would undoubtedly influence present perceptions were not included (Walsh et al. 2006). The limited focus

of this study does not account for other formal opportunities for training around child protection, for example, through other qualifications, early childhood education, ‘subbing’³ in other schools, in-service training or informal opportunities for gaining knowledge on child protection such as personal and professional networking, media consumption, and personal academic learning.

Findings of the current study

Demographic information on participants

The majority of the respondents (84%) had qualified as primary teachers in 2008 and had been working in their schools for just under six months. Eighty-nine percent of the schools represented were in Dublin, with the remainder in nearby counties. The majority (80%) were in full-time teaching positions, while the remainder were ‘subbing’.

Awareness of the DES child protection procedures

A primary aim of the survey was to ascertain whether or not the newly employed teachers were aware of the Department of Education and Science (DES) child protection guidelines. Given the clarity of the Department of Education Circular 0061/2006, which stipulates that all new staff should be provided with a copy of the guidelines, the results were at odds with what might have been anticipated. Just over a quarter (28%) of the teachers surveyed claimed that they had never heard of the guidelines (see Figure 1).

When asked if they had seen the guidelines, 66% who were aware of the guidelines replied in the affirmative and, when asked if they had read the guidelines, only 22% of these respondents indicated that they had done so (see Table 1).

When those who were familiar with the DES guidelines were asked how they found out about them only 14% of the total number of respondents found out about them in their schools; 5% had heard of them elsewhere, and 53% answered that they had heard of them during their teacher education (see Figure 2).

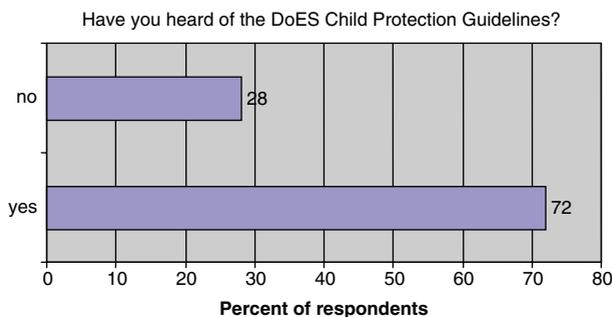


Figure 1. Awareness of the DES child protection guidelines.

Table 1. Have you seen a copy of the child protection guidelines?

	Yes	No	Total*
(A) Seen a copy of the child protection guidelines?	24 (33.3%)	48 (66.7%)	72 (100.0%)
(B) Read the child protection guidelines?	16 (21.9%)	57 (78.1%)	73 (100.0%)

Notes: * (A) n/a n = 29, missing n = 2; (B) n/a n = 29, missing n = 1.

Awareness of the school’s child protection policies

A child protection policy normally consists of a statement about an organisation’s commitment to child protection and the actions to be taken by the organisation to promote safe practices, for example in respect of recruitment of staff and codes of conduct around children. It also provides information about indicators of child abuse, whom to contact with concerns, and the actions that will be taken if concerns are reported. Although both *Children First* and the DES guidelines require schools to have child protection policies in place, awareness and familiarity with policies was lacking amongst the teachers taking part in this survey. When asked if their school had a child protection policy, half of the respondents (50%) were unaware whether or not this was the case and of those who were aware that their school did have a policy, 49% had not read it.

Designated Liaison Person

One of the most significant elements of the DES guidelines is the requirement for schools to appoint a DLP. The main responsibility of the designated person is to ensure that policies are in place, to act as a resource person to any staff member that has child protection concerns, to receive reports, and to decide whether to pass them on to the statutory authorities. Knowledge about the existence and identity of the DLP as a potential source of support could be considered crucial for inexperienced teachers at the outset of their teaching career. It was concerning therefore to find that only 44% of the respondents in this study knew if there was a DLP in their school. A small proportion (14%) of the 44 respondents who reported the presence of a DLP in their school was unable to identify which staff member held the post.

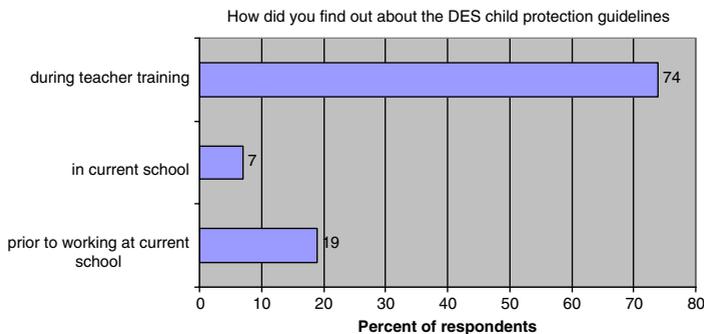


Figure 2. How teachers found out about the DES child protection guidelines.

Child protection training

The survey also aimed to establish whether the newly qualified primary teachers had received specific training on child protection in their Bachelor of Education Degree courses. Just less than half (48%) responded positively to this question with 21% reporting that they did not have a child protection input in their training and 31% claiming that they could not remember.

Of those that had received a child protection input in their training, 6.5% reported it as exceeding 10 hours in total, 20% reported it as between five and nine hours, and 74% reported it as between one and four hours in total. When asked to rate the training, 61% of those who had received it rated it as inadequate while 39% considered it to be adequate.

Respondents were also asked if there was a child protection component in their induction to their current school, to which 17% responded affirmatively and 83% responded negatively.

Confidence in ability to identify abuse or suspected abuse

Finally, the survey respondents were asked to indicate on a Likert scale their confidence in their own ability to identify or reasonably suspect that a child is being harmed or at risk of being harmed. The majority (57%) indicated uncertainty or lack of confidence, while 36% indicated that they would feel confident and 7% claimed that they would feel ‘very confident’.

Confidence ratings were not directly linked to having had child protection training; 51% of the respondents who could not remember having had training considered themselves ‘confident’, although the majority of those who claimed they had no training (66%) were either uncertain or unconfident. However, of those who claimed to have had training, the majority (59%) were also in the uncertain or unconfident categories, possibly signalling the inadequacy of their training (see Figure 3).

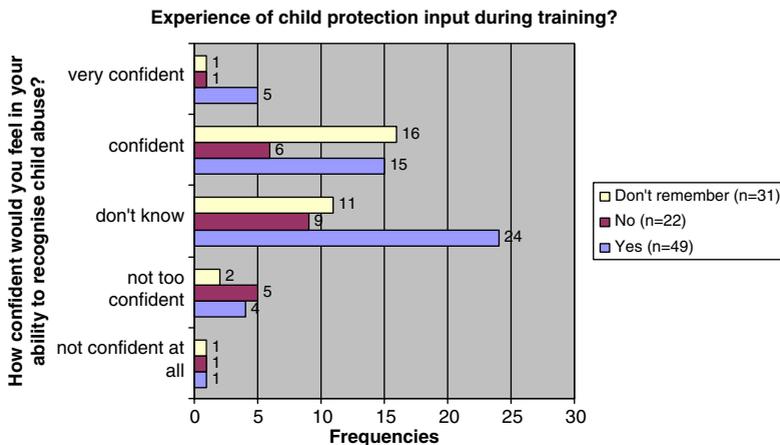


Figure 3. Confidence levels in identifying child abuse by experience of child protection input during teacher training (frequencies).

Discussion

The results of this survey of teachers from 103 primary schools demonstrate widespread breaches of the official requirement for schools to ensure that employees are familiar with their child protection policies and guidelines. While it is likely that more schools had procedures and policies in place than were reported, the fact that so many new teachers were unaware of the correct steps to take or who to approach if they suspected child abuse indicates that schools do not perceive themselves to be key agents in the protection and welfare of children. The data on training inputs also signify the low priority given to this topic which is further demonstrated by the fact that 31% of participants could not recall whether or not they had covered it. It is not surprising, given these results, that the majority of the participants expressed uncertainty or low confidence in their ability to identify or suspect child abuse.

Overall, the findings reported here demonstrate that teachers' capacity to fulfil official expectations of their child protection roles may be over-estimated. Despite fairly clear guidelines and a Departmental directive, adherence to the very basic requirement to induct staff on child protection policies appears to be inconsistent. While this study restricted its focus to teachers' knowledge and awareness of guidelines and not their actual or potential compliance with them, it casts some doubt as to whether their ultimate compliance can be assured, given international evidence that under-reporting is still an issue in jurisdictions even where failure to report is a criminal offence. As previous research has demonstrated, the wider context in which schools and child protection services exist must be considered in order to understand why the type of collaboration envisioned in national policy failed to develop in Ireland. Child protection in schools has to compete with other priorities, and as the results of this study indicate, it clearly does not feature very strongly on the primary school agenda.

Yet, there are clearly opportunities for teachers to play a more significant role in advancing the safety of children. At a preventive level, the promotion and affirmation of resilience can protect children in schools who are otherwise vulnerable (Gilligan 2009). A study in the west of Ireland revealed that children who are exposed to domestic violence often consider school to be a safe haven, and believe that greater support and understanding would benefit them emotionally, reduce the negative impact of living in a violent environment and assist them to make better use of educational opportunities (Buckley, Whelan, and Holt 2006). Recognition of their potential by both the schools themselves and the other stakeholders in child protection could work to incentivise more positive engagement. A study conducted in the US during the 1990s by Crenshaw, Crenshaw, and Lichtenberg (1995, 1107) found that teachers were more likely to respond to suspected child abuse when they believed that schools provide a 'first line of defence against child abuse'; in other words, when they were motivated by both commitment to child protection and a sense that their contributions were valued. However, as Laskey (2004) and others have argued, this belief is likely to be undermined if their concerns are not taken seriously by the statutory child protection services.

Addressing training issues

The survey reported in this paper was subject to a significant limitation in that the majority of participants had qualified the previous year and had been employed for

less than six months in their schools. It could be inferred that more experience would gain them additional knowledge and a greater level of confidence in dealing with child protection matters. It could also be argued that more comprehensive training at Bachelor teacher training level would increase the readiness of newly qualified teachers to engage more fully with the issue.

Although training is only one of a number of components required to support child protection interventions in schools, more elaborate and longer term programmes are likely to raise awareness and improve the discernment of teachers in judging when a child's situation warrants intervention. Of course, it cannot be assumed that undertaking training is a guarantee of learning, particularly as many teachers will not encounter suspected child abuse on a regular basis, but it will lay a foundation which may be supported by other initiatives. Baginsky (2007), who has conducted evaluations of child protection for teachers in the UK, has recommended that training should be delivered along a continuum, at pre- and post-qualifying levels to provide the opportunity for integration of theory and practice.

Overcoming difficulties in collaboration

Inter-agency training is often cited as a means of overcoming some of the obstacles to collaboration but this can actually present unique challenges to Irish schools because of the lack of regional cohesion. A study carried out in the mid-west region of Ireland and published in 2003 evaluated a regional inter-agency training child protection programme in which schools participated, but found that the ability of school representatives in the programme to stand only for their own individual boards of management and the absence of an overall mandate to commit resources to the programme meant that they could play only a minor part in the development of training and therefore missed out on some of the potential benefits (Buckley 2003).

Addressing the obstacles to collaboration is complex; recommendations for community networks and inter-agency meetings are frequently proposed but these are not always feasible, particularly for primary school teachers who are in the classroom all day. There are two practical examples of how this problem was addressed in other countries, firstly, in New South Wales, Australia, where the Helpline (i.e. the centralised intake system which receives reports about child protection) has a separate telephone line for teachers and a specially designated team of intake social workers to receive calls from schools. It also permits schools to make e-reports via a secure website about less urgent cases (Department of Community Services NSW 2008). These initiatives have allowed relationships to build up between the child protection services and schools over time, and facilitated the development of specialised knowledge and insight on the part of the intake workers. The second example is in New Zealand, where a programme called 'Social Workers in Schools' was established in 1999 in a small number of pilot areas but has been subsequently expanded. In this programme, NGOs are commissioned by the statutory child protection service to provide a social work service to schools. The social workers are based in schools; they receive referrals from teachers and from families and will act as a conduit between the school and the statutory service if referrals require to be passed on. Early evaluations of this project have shown positive results (http://www.cyf.govt.nz/documents/swis_fact_sheet.doc). Whatever method is adopted,

however, it must be acknowledged that inter-agency relationships will not emerge automatically and a pro-active stance will need to be adopted by the responsible person within a school to identify and act on any opportunities to foster and maintain relationships with others in the child protection network.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted a number of key points. Principally, it has presented empirical evidence which shows that a significant proportion of newly qualified teachers are unaware of the national child protection guidelines for teachers and the policies of their own schools. A significant number are also unaware of whom to contact if they encountered suspected child abuse. The study has also shown that the training received during teacher education has made very limited impact. Unsurprisingly, it demonstrated that most teachers are uncertain or lack confidence in their ability to identify and report suspected child abuse. Overall, given the reported lack of awareness of their school's child protection policy by half of respondents, and with only 44% aware of a DLP in their school, the study has demonstrated major variation in the experiences of newly qualified teachers in respect of their school's child protection procedures, which raises serious questions regarding school actions on child protection responsibilities. It could be argued that inaction in this regard is symptomatic of a reluctance to take on child protection duties, despite a decade of child abuse 'scandals' and fairly strong Departmental directives. The very slight profile of child protection as a subject in teacher education courses further illustrates the lowly position occupied by this topic. While research has shown that formal knowledge is only one of a number of influences on teachers' willingness to report child abuse, clearer induction and dissemination of policies will act to signify the seriousness with which the school takes its responsibilities and increase the likelihood that actual or potential harm to children may be identified.

As the international research cited in this paper testifies, this situation is not unique to Ireland, and even in jurisdictions where the framework around child protection is far more regulatory, engagement with it by schools may still be erratic for a variety of reasons. This illustrates the complex nature of child abuse and the need for a holistic approach to the training and support of school staff. The number of challenges identified in Irish and international studies shows that success will require strong commitment at policy, management and frontline levels.

At a policy level, a commitment in budgetary terms to the development and maintenance of child protection training and the regular audit or inspection of child protection policies would give schools a stronger identification with the promotion of safety and welfare.

At a management level, school principals and DLPs need to ensure not only that basic knowledge and information are disseminated to all staff, but that child protection remains a live issue within staff consciousness even if no concerns are currently apparent. They need to generate the message that teachers' responsibilities do not end with reporting. Importantly, they need to recognise and acknowledge the obstacles that inevitably impede inter-agency relationships and avail of every possible opportunity to strengthen the school's position in the child protection network.

At the frontline, teachers need to be open to the possibility that children are being harmed at home, in their communities or in the school. They need to learn how to express their concerns in an evidence-based and convincing manner to enhance the likelihood of a response from hard pressed child protection services. Importantly, they too must acknowledge that child protection responsibilities do not end with reporting; children who become involved in the child protection system frequently remain in their original schools and will continue to need a range of supports. They may have extra educational needs and there may be a need for increased vigilance to ensure that abuse does not recur. At the very least, they need to trust in the school's capacity to hear their concerns and this message must be transmitted by teachers.

The Minister's signal that adherence to the national child protection guidelines will be enforced by statute will undoubtedly provide an impetus to schools to streamline their policies. However, the main message from the analysis provided by this paper is that while compliance at a formal level provides an important foundation, it will have limited impact unless some of the other less tangible but nonetheless significant impediments to participation by schools in the child protection system are addressed.

Notes

1. The HSE has statutory responsibility under the Child Care Act to promote the welfare of children not receiving adequate care and protection.
2. The term 'mandatory' is generally understood as legally binding, i.e. failure to report is regarded as a breach of civil law or a criminal offence that carries various penalties such as fines or imprisonment. Mandatory reporting operates in North America and most of Australia as well as parts of Northern Europe.
3. 'Subbing' refers to individuals employed as substitute/replacement/supply teachers in a school for an indefinite period (ranging from one day to longer term) to cover sick leave, maternity leave or any other absences by full-time teaching staff.

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