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Child Abuse & Neglect



Case, teacher and school characteristics influencing teachers' detection and reporting of child physical abuse and neglect: Results from an Australian survey^{☆,☆☆}

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To identify the influence of multiple case, teacher and school characteristics on Australian primary school teachers' propensity to detect and report child physical abuse and neglect using vignettes as short hypothetical cases.

Methods: A sample of 254 teachers completed a self-report questionnaire. They responded to a series of 32 hypothetical physical abuse and neglect scenarios by rating each of the vignettes on a 5-point scale for *likelihood of abuse/neglect* (detection) and *likelihood to report* (reporting). Teacher and school characteristics were also captured.

Results: Multivariable multilevel analysis was used because of the hierarchical structure of the data with teachers nested within schools. A modest proportion of the variance in teachers' detecting and reporting scores was attributable to school membership. In the full model, case characteristics were found to exert the strongest influence on detecting and reporting tendency, in particular the type, frequency and severity of child physical abuse or neglect were the most important predictors of detection and reporting. At the teacher level, attention to legal reporting obligations was found to be the strongest and most significant predictor of reporting. The effect of teachers' training on both detecting and reporting emerged as a counter-intuitive finding. At the school level, characteristic effects were not as strong.

Conclusions: Teachers detecting and reporting CAN is a complex decision-making process. The most important determinants of teacher decision making are case characteristics. These characteristics impact upon both detection and reporting. Future research should be directed towards identifying and testing the influence of other teacher and, to a lesser extent, school characteristics that were not included in the current study. Further research is also required to identify the components, nature and duration of appropriate training for teachers and the links between these features and reporting outcomes.

Practice implications: Findings highlight the need for ongoing evaluation and enhancement of teacher education in CAN. The study underlines the importance of educating teachers about: (a) the warning signs and indicators of different types of CAN; (b) the differential effects of CAN; (c) responding to child victims including responses to direct disclosures; and (d) accurate and timely reporting.

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Introduction

Australian data on the sources of notifications for finalised child protection investigations show that the most common sources of these notifications in the year spanning mid-2004 to mid-2005 were school personnel (including teachers), police, and parents or guardians (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2006). Rates of teacher reports vary but generally, those States or Territories with mandatory reporting laws for teachers have higher rates of teacher reports (AIHW, 2006). Most Australian States and Territories have legislation compelling teachers to report knowledge or suspicion of child abuse and neglect (CAN). However, these mandatory reporting laws have differences such that teachers in different States and Territories have different legislative duties to report (Mathews & Walsh, 2004a,b; Mathews, Walsh, Butler, & Farrell, 2006). There were no legislative reporting obligations for teachers in the state of Queensland before 2004, at which time a narrow duty was introduced in the form of the *Education and Other Legislation (Student Protection) Amendment Act 2003*, requiring Queensland teachers to report known or suspected child sexual abuse perpetrated by school staff. Reporting obligations for Queensland teachers are, therefore, extremely limited compared to the obligations for teachers in other Australian jurisdictions. Most of the CAN likely to come to the attention of Queensland teachers, such as physical abuse and neglect, they are not required by law to report (Bromfield & Higgins, 2005; Mathews et al., 2006).

Although Queensland teachers do not have mandatory reporting obligations to report all forms of CAN, they have strong, but less binding, institutional policies regarding reporting of all forms of suspected CAN. In Queensland, the policy for government (or State) school teachers requires their reporting of harm to school students via the school principal (Education Queensland, 2004). Non-government schools must have policies and procedures in place for teacher reporting of all forms of CAN.

A further context for this study is the nature and extent of teacher training in CAN. Noting the critical role which teachers can play in detecting and reporting CAN, Queensland teachers have been compulsorily trained to recognise and respond to CAN since 1999. Training comprises a short 3-h school-based interactive workshop using a standard package comprising audiovisual segments, activities, question and answer clarification, and small-group discussions on case scenarios (Education Queensland, 1998, 2003, 2004). Training is delivered by school leaders, generally principals and guidance officers (or school counsellors) rather than child protection specialists. The most recent version of the training package, the one in place at the time of the study, supports institutional policy and instructs school staff to respond to 4 categories of harm: (i) harm caused by an education employee; (ii) harm caused by other students; (iii) harm caused by forces outside the state educational institution environment; and (iv) student self harm.

The present study comprises analysis of a vignette-based component of a larger study designed to provide a cross-sectional snapshot of Queensland primary (or elementary) teachers' CAN detecting and reporting practices. In the vignette component of the study, we focused on teachers detecting and reporting two forms of CAN, child physical abuse and child neglect. We did this for two methodological reasons. First, to minimise chances of measurement bias because the topic of child sexual abuse by school staff was extremely sensitive in Queensland in 2004 after the *Report of the Board of Inquiry into Past Handling of Complaints of Sexual Abuse in the Anglican Church Diocese of Brisbane* (O'Callaghan & Briggs, 2003) and teachers were, understandably, preoccupied with child sexual abuse. Second, restricting the vignettes to child physical abuse and neglect enabled us to present brief and practical scenarios which teachers would be most likely to encounter in their normal work.

Literature

Notifying child protection authorities of known or suspected CAN, whether mandatory or not, has long been a contested issue for teachers (Mathews & Walsh, 2004a,b; Walsh, Farrell, Bridgstock, & Schweitzer, 2006) and there is little from the field of educational research to inform understandings of teachers' decision making in cases of CAN. To address this gap in the research, at a conceptual level we adapted Dagleish's (1988, 2003) *General Judgement and Decision Making* (GJDM) model to investigate teachers' detecting and reporting CAN. Within this model, teachers' decisions to notify were conceptualised as a two-part process in which teachers must first *detect* CAN, and then *report* it (Egu & Weiss, 2003). At the judgement stage, it was proposed that teachers ask themselves "Is this abuse?"—this is a detection question. At the action stage, teachers ask themselves "Will I report it?"—this is a reporting question. Moreover, using the GJDM model teachers' complex professional judgements and actions were viewed as being influenced by different factors and considerations at each stage of the two-part process. At the judgement (detection) stage, it is proposed that teachers attend primarily to characteristics of the case, that is, the distinguishing signs and symptoms of CAN: its seriousness, frequency and impact on the child. At the action (reporting) stage, it is anticipated that teachers respond (or not respond) to suspicions of CAN based on their own personal and school characteristics: their knowledge of laws, policies and procedures for reporting CAN, their personal values and attitudes, their beliefs about whether reporting is likely to lead to a positive outcome for the child, and the features of their school environment that facilitate or impede reporting. Using the GJDM model, therefore, aided our understanding of how teachers arrived at the point of notification. Studying factors influencing teachers' detecting and reporting practices, holds the potential to advance understanding of teacher decision making in cases of CAN and inform enhancements to policy and training.

Decision-making researchers in the field of reporting of CAN have highlighted the influence of multiple variables on teachers' detecting and reporting practices. Specifically, three groups of characteristics: case, teacher and school characteristics, have been identified in empirical research as influencing teachers' propensity to detect and report CAN (see for example

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