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Research article

The effects of e-simulation interview training on teachers' use of open-ended questions



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ABSTRACT

Teachers in many parts of the world are mandated reporters of child abuse and maltreatment but very little is known concerning how they question children in suspicious circumstances. Teachers ($n = 36$), who had previously participated in a mock interview scenario designed to characterize their baseline use of various question-types when attempting to elicit sensitive information from children, were given online training in choosing effective questions. They engaged in simulated interviews with a virtual avatar several times in one week and then participated in a mock interview scenario. The amount and proportion of open-ended questions they used increased dramatically after training. The overall number of questions, and amount and proportions of specific and leading questions decreased. In particular, large decreases were observed in more risky yes-no and other forced-choice questions. Given that most teachers may feel the need to ask a child about an ambiguous situation at some point during their careers it is worthwhile to incorporate practice asking effective questions into their training, and the present research suggests that an e-learning format is effective. Additionally, effective questions encourage the development of narrative competence, and we discuss how teachers might include open-ended questions during regular classroom learning.

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Introduction

Teachers have contact with children in their classrooms on a daily basis, for a large part of the waking hours, and are thus in a unique position to identify possible signs of maltreatment (Cerezo & Pons-Salvador, 2004; Farrell & Walsh, 2010; Schols, de Ruiter, & Öry, 2013). In numerous countries, including Brazil (Bazon & Faleiros, 2013), Taiwan (Feng, Chen, Wilk, Yang, & Fetzer, 2009), Australia, Canada, and the United States, teachers are required by law to report suspected child abuse (see Mathews & Kenny, 2008, for a more complete list of countries that include some type of legislative, policy-based, or voluntary reporting duties). In fact, teachers are among the largest groups of professionals to make these types of reports (Lung & Daro, 1996; Sedlak et al., 2010). Yet, there is evidence that reports from schools are more often unsubstantiated than reports from other professionals (King & Scott, 2014; Sedlak et al., 2010).

In general, research has revealed that teachers do not feel overly prepared in their roles as mandated reporters because they have not received extensive training in detecting and reporting abuse (Goldman, 2010; Mathews, 2011; Schols et al.,

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2013). Where efforts have been made to provide training to teachers, the programs have largely been successful in increasing awareness and understanding about child abuse and bolstering teacher confidence in making reports (e.g., Farrell & Walsh, 2010; Hawkins & McCallum, 2001; Kenny, 2007; Rheingold et al., 2014). None of these programs, however, have focused on how teachers address children's ambiguous or direct disclosures. Recently, student teachers were surveyed about the desired content of their pre-service training, with respect to child and youth maltreatment. One of their wishes was for examples of school professionals' responses to student disclosure (Goldman & Grimbeek, 2014; see also Bryant & Baldwin, 2010).

Mandated reporters are not required to obtain proof of abuse and it could be argued that teachers do not need to ask children any questions about suspected abuse or neglect. Nevertheless, there are numerous examples in the literature that demonstrate that even among trained, well-informed teachers, a large minority still feel the need to obtain additional evidence beyond just suspicion (Goldman, 2007). Indeed, teachers have reported that one way they find out about maltreatment when circumstances are ambiguous is through questioning the child (e.g., Schols et al., 2013; Tite, 1993). One teacher who had recently received training in her role as a mandated reporter opined "I believe it is sometimes better to do some investigation first or checking up before notifying the authorities" (Hawkins & McCallum, 2001, p. 1618). Hawkins and McCallum describe a mismatch – which is not fully eliminated by training – between evidentiary requirements for reporting, and how much information some teachers would prefer to obtain before actually making a report.

It is arguably inevitable that teachers will ask children questions about suspect circumstances (including topics outside the scope of abuse or neglect such as bullying situations). Thus, we contend that training them to ask the *best* questions (but as few as possible) could empower teachers in the face of ambiguous situations and direct disclosures, and increase confidence in their reporting. Concerns about children being subjected to multiple interviews (e.g., speaking to a teacher prior to an investigative interview) are also minimized by ensuring that interviews are of high quality (La Rooy, Katz, Malloy, & Lamb, 2010).

Recently, Brubacher, Powell, Skouteris, and Guadagno (2014) assessed the types of questions teachers thought they would ask children in response to ambiguous disclosures (e.g., A student tells you "I don't like going to Uncle Joe's house"). Teachers' actual questioning habits were also assessed during a mock interview. Overall, teachers used many specific questions known to reduce children's accuracy and inhibit narration (Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 1998; Powell & Snow, 2007), but they also demonstrated some awareness of good interviewing skill. In the present study, this same sample of teachers had the opportunity to use an online tool three times in a one-week period to improve their questioning styles and their performance was then assessed in a mock interview. Prior to presenting our hypotheses, we briefly discuss what is widely accepted as best practice interviewing, and the benefits of online training tools.

What is Best Practice Interviewing?

Experts agree that the best way to elicit information from children is to ask questions that maximize narrative detail. These are non-leading, open-ended questions that tap recall memory, do not suppose any information the child has not mentioned, and do not focus retrieval on specific details (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008; Lyon, 2014; Malloy, Johnson, & Goodman, 2013; Orbach & Pipe, 2011; Powell & Snow, 2007). Children as young as 4-years-old can respond informatively and accurately to such questions, although the ability to do so does improve with age (Lamb et al., 2003). Yes-no and other forced-choice questions (e.g., "in the morning or at night?") are particularly problematic for young children who often answer by guessing (e.g., Rocha, Marche, & Briere, 2013; Waterman, Blades, & Spencer, 2001).

Not only should questions asked of children to maximize narrative detail be open-ended, they should also be few. In other words, it is recommended that interviewers elicit as much narrative information as possible from children while minimizing their own speaking (Burrows & Powell, 2014; Lamb et al., 2008), reducing interviewer bias and giving children adequate time to retrieve their memories (Powell, Fisher, & Wright, 2005; Powell & Snow, 2007). This recommendation is particularly appropriate for teachers and others who do not conduct investigative interviews with children by profession.

Improving Questioning via Online Tools

Research involving recognition of domestic violence situations (Harris, Kutob, Surprenant, Maiuro, & Delate, 2002), child sexual abuse prevention (Rheingold, Zajac, & Patton, 2012), and mandated reporting (Kenny, 2007), among others, has demonstrated that online training is at least as beneficial as face-to-face training. It is also cost-effective, can be done at convenient times, can be accessed from a variety of locations, fits the diverse learning needs of different students, and is typically more interactive than a seminar/workshop learning format (Fedynich, 2014; Jeffries, 2001). It differs from the traditional classroom setup in that it can usually be completed over a period of time with ongoing spaced learning and feedback on an individual level can be regularly provided; these are key elements of an effective training program (see Powell, 2008, for review).

In the investigative interviewing field there has been a desire to move away from over-reliance on traditional face-to-face blocked training for more than a decade, primarily because of cost and the need for spaced learning (Powell, 2002, 2008; Powell, Cavezza, Hughes-Scholes, & Stooove, 2010; Rischke, Roberts, & Price, 2011). Recent research has demonstrated that interactive computer-based learning activities can improve investigative interviewers' performance in questioning children (Powell, Guadagno, & Benson, 2014). Powell et al. (2014) engaged 61 interviewing professionals (e.g., police, social workers)

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