

‘Teachers matter’: The impact of mandatory reporting on teacher education in Ireland

Child Abuse Review

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**Abstract:** The role of teachers in safeguarding the welfare of children is long acknowledged. However, recent research in Ireland found that the training provided to teachers on child protection issues was lacking (Buckley and McGarry, 2011). The frequent interactions teachers have with children and their expertise in terms of typical child development place them in an ideal position for identifying possible signs of abuse. Yet despite this advantage, research indicates that schools fail to report a substantial proportion of suspected child abuse cases (Kenny, 2004). The oft cited reasons for this may be conceptualised as; explicit reasons such as, a lack of knowledge about child abuse issues; and implicit reasons such as, the individual teachers’ belief system about abuse. The current paper discusses implicit as well as explicit obstacles to teachers’ ‘engagement’ with, and consequent barriers to their responding to, child protection issues. The current changes in initial teacher education and the introduction of mandatory reporting for professionals in Ireland, is an opportune time to raise this issue and the need for holistic education in child protection for teachers.

**KEY PRACTITIONER MESSAGES:**

- Teachers need comprehensive education on child protection issues in order to fulfil their role as mandated reporters.
- Both implicit and explicit barriers impede teacher's reporting of abuse and neglect.
- Education must go beyond policies and procedures and be holistic in addressing implicit belief system in relation to child protection.
- Education must also aim to reduce interagency conflict, oft cited as a deterrent to reporting, perhaps through increased contact between child protection and education professionals.

**KEY WORDS:** Child Abuse; Child Protection; Teacher Education; Mandatory Reporting; Implicit Beliefs

Teachers play a very significant role in safeguarding the welfare of children in their care. However, two recent articles on child protection in primary schools in Ireland found both the education provided to teachers in teacher education colleges and induction at the school level on child protection issues was lacking (Buckley and McGarry, 2011; McGarry and Buckley, 2013). The research found that less than half of the newly qualified teachers reported receiving specific education on child protection in their Bachelor of Education courses, while a large majority of the respondents reported that there was no child protection component included in their induction to their current school (Buckley and McGarry, 2011). Even in jurisdictions where professionals are mandated to report, similar findings have been found (Abrahams *et al.*, 1992; Kenny, 2001). As a result of these findings, McGarry and Buckley (2013) made a call for a more comprehensive education at teacher education level which would improve the readiness of newly qualified teachers to engage with child protection issues. At the same time, Ireland is at an important juncture for child protection with the introduction of mandatory reporting into Irish legislation. The aim

of the current article is to open up the discourse on the factors impacting on teachers' engagement with child protection issues, and how input at the teacher education level might address some of these issues.

### **Recent developments in Ireland**

Since the data collection in 2009 for the Buckley and McGarry (2011) and McGarry and Buckley (2013) studies there have been a suite of positive changes at governmental level aimed at improving the lives of children in Ireland, including the establishment of The Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the passing of the Children's Rights Referendum in 2011 and 2012 respectively. Most relevant, the Criminal Justice (Withholding of Information on Offences Against Children and Vulnerable People) Bill 2012 was published which states that it is an offence to withhold information on certain offences against children and vulnerable adults from the police, including, murder, assault, false imprisonment, rape, sexual assault and incest. These offences are punishable by fine and/or up to fourteen years imprisonment. On April, 14<sup>th</sup> 2014 the Children First Bill (2014) was also introduced. As part of this bill, where a professional or post-holder working with children believes or has reasonable grounds to suspect that a child is being harmed, has been harmed, or is at risk of being harmed, they are legally required to report that belief or suspicion. Teachers are included in the list of mandated professionals. However, although the bill mandates individuals working with children to report concerns, the legislation does not provide sanctions for mandated reporters who fail to comply with the bill. Thus, we are at a time in Ireland where teachers are legally mandated to report their suspicions of abuse, yet recent studies in the Irish context suggests that teachers do not feel that they are adequately trained to do so (Buckley and McGarry, 2011; McGarry and Buckley, 2013).

Within the educational context, the delivery of Bachelor of Education (BEd) courses has been redesigned into a four year spiralling programme, which allows space for the student teacher to reflect on themselves as professionals. This may be seen as an opportunity to improve both the quantity and quality of education that teachers receive on child protection.

### **Mandatory reporting**

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that the government is the main body responsible for upholding the rights of children to protection, participation, and provision, and ensuring that children are recipients of the safeguard mechanisms supporting these rights (Pineiro, 2006). In the case of education, schools and teachers may be seen as the “arms” and “eyes” of the government both in terms of ensuring children’s rights are upheld and identifying the situations where these rights have been violated. Mandatory reporting may be seen as an important strategy in the implementation of these responsibilities as it allows for the interruption and intervention in cases of abuse.

The rationale underlying mandatory reporting is that the benefits of recognising and responding to child abuse, through appropriate services, outweigh the harms of increased engagement with the child protection services (Gilbert *et al.*, 2009). Poor recognition and reporting of child abuse and neglect may leave children vulnerable to continued victimisation, which can have devastating physical, psychological, and behavioural consequences for the child (Widom *et al.*, 2008) and in some cases the perpetrator being left free to continue the abuse and abuse other children. However, despite the many benefits to mandatory reporting, the limitations should also be highlighted, including the overloading of an already stretched child

protection service and the engagement of resources in investigations, with little left for intervention services (Gilbert *et al.*, 2009). This is of particular importance in Ireland where austerity measures are putting a strain on all public service areas, including child protection. Buckley (2012) argued that the introduction of mandatory reporting may lead to a disproportionate level of funding required to manage the intake of reports, with a consequent reduction in the resources available to provide for vulnerable children. Gilbert and colleagues have noted that mandatory reporting may be seen as reactive rather than proactive (Gilbert *et al.*, 2009).

### **Role of teachers in child protection**

The role of teachers in promoting and safeguarding the welfare of children has been long acknowledged (Crenshaw *et al.*, 1995; Hinkelman and Bruno, 2008; Baginsky and Macpherson, 2005; Walsh *et al.*, 2010). Teachers themselves have been found to be highly aware of their role in child protection (Webb and Vulliamy, 2001). The frequent interactions that teachers have with children and their knowledge of typical child development and age-appropriate norms place them in a unique position for identifying the possible signs of abuse and neglect. Teachers are likely to notice the physical and behavioural changes that may indicate abuse; the social and emotional problems associated with abuse, including low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and aggression; unusual and age-inappropriate sexual behaviours; and academic underachievement (Jones *et al.*, 2004; Kendall-Tackett *et al.*, 1993; Lansford *et al.*, 2002; Swanston *et al.*, 2003). Teachers are also in a position to observe the interactions between the child and their caregiver. In some cases, schools may be the only professionals involved with poor and rural families (Zellman, 1990). Teachers also often have a valuable relationship with children, and are in the position of a trusted adult to whom children may feel comfortable in disclosing abuse.

The valuable position of teachers in the lives of children is especially important in cases of neglect. This is of particular relevance as neglect does not appear to be decreasing at the same rate as other categories of child abuse (Finkelhor, 2013). Some of the signs of neglect that would be relevant and directly observable in an educational setting would include inadequate clothing, poor food and nutrition, tiredness, frequent absence from school, anxiety, disruptive and attention seeking behaviour, poor homework routines, insufficient parental support, language and communication delays, poor social skills, delays in cognitive development, or a general failure to thrive. However, the chronicity of neglect poses challenges for the teacher in making the decision that there is a concern and to refer this concern. Irish research has found that not reporting cases of neglect was associated with the professional's level of training and awareness of neglect, their primary focus on current parental behaviour while ignoring the frequency and chronicity of neglect, and concerns about betrayal of the family (Horwath, 2007).

### **Explicit obstacles to reporting**

Reflecting the important role that teachers have in children's lives, research has found that schools had the highest reporting rates of all professionals (Crenshaw *et al.*, 1995). However, even in cases where teachers are mandated to report abuse, schools also fail to report a high proportion of suspected child abuse cases (Crenshaw *et al.*, 1995; Hinkelman and Bruno, 2008; Kenny, 2004). A number of barriers have been found to prevent or hinder the reporting of abuse. One of the most frequently cited obstacles is a lack of knowledge or awareness around child abuse issues (Abrahams *et al.*, 1992; Horwath, 2007; Kenny, 2001). It has been argued that teachers may lack the necessary awareness of the signs of child abuse or what would constitute reasonable grounds for concern (Abrahams *et al.*, 1992; Kenny, 2001), or they may lack the

knowledge of the appropriate procedures to follow and their legal requirements when they suspect abuse (Kenny, 2001; Goebbels *et al.*, 2008).

However, the identification of the signs is only one stage in the referral process. Along with noticing these signs, the teacher must also make a judgement about what is acceptable behaviour, whether the behaviour is on-going, and the risk of harm to the child (Gilbert *et al.*, 2009a). As Laming showed in his report following the Victoria Climbié inquiry, procedural guidelines alone are not enough to support professionals who encounter abuse (CM1530; as cited in Horwath, 2007).

### **Child Protection Training provided to teachers**

The lack of knowledge on policies and procedures is highlighted in the findings across a number of jurisdictions that the training provided to teachers in this area is absent or insufficient (Abrahams *et al.*, 1992; Buckley and McGarry, 2011; Kenny, 2001) and teachers are dissatisfied with the quality and amount of training they have received (Abrahams *et al.*, 1992). For example, Kenny (2004) found using a US sample that 66 per cent of the teachers reported having received no training on child abuse during their college education and only 13 per cent of teachers were aware of their school's procedures for reporting child abuse. Baginsky (2000) notes that, in the UK, the majority of teacher education courses spend only between one and three hours on child protection. Buckley and McGarry (2011) highlighted the lack of training currently being received by student teachers in Ireland and made a call for more comprehensive training at the teacher education level. They suggest that the minimal profile of child protection as a subject on teacher education courses indicates the lowly position of this topic.

### **Implicit obstacles to reporting**

It cannot be assumed that there is a linear relationship between the knowledge of policies and procedures and the identification and reporting of suspected child abuse. We argue that the lack of knowledge of signs, policies and procedures constitute only one type of barrier which may be termed explicit barriers to reporting. On the other hand, more implicit barriers such as the individual teachers' belief system about child protection and abuse may pose more of a challenge. We argue that these implicit obstacles result from underlying implicit social cognitive structures, known as implicit theories, which affect the way in which we process social information. This perspective will be elucidated further in the following section. An example of such an implicit barrier to reporting might be teachers' judgements about the harm of reporting outweighing the benefits, which is likely to affect their reporting rates. Gilbert *et al.* (2009a) argue that unlike most other health problems where there are effective treatments available, for child abuse we do not know whether the interventions given to child abuse victims improves the lives of children overall, which can hinder reporting. Kenny (2001) found a significant barrier to reporting abuse was the perception that the child protection services do not offer appropriate help to abused children. The perceptions of the child protection system is likely influenced by deeper societal views on privacy and personal rights and general attitudes toward the benefit and rights of state intervention in family life (Fox-Harding, 1997).

A further cited reason for teachers' under-reporting may be their fears about the damage reporting may have on the teacher-parent and teacher-child relationship (Kenny, 2004; Hawkins and McCallum, 2001; Abrahams *et al.*, 1992). Australian research found that teachers were better at reporting some types of abuse over others, such that physical abuse is more likely to be reported than emotional abuse or neglect

(Walsh *et al.*, 2006). These factors highlight the role played by an individual's personal implicit belief system about abuse in the decision to make a referral.

### **Implicit theories**

Therefore, while the explicit obstacles refer to the tangible logical factors, such as the lack of explicit knowledge on the signs, symptoms, policies, and procedures, implicit barriers encompass less tangible factors, including the individual's belief system about children, children's rights, child protection, and child abuse. Despite the plethora of evidence on such obstacles, there has been little theoretical explication of them. Given their implicit nature, we attempt to apply a social information processing theory to aid our understanding of these obstacles. In particular, we suggest that barriers such as these could result from an individual's implicit theories about child abuse and child protection which they may not explicitly state, or be consciously aware of, but nonetheless affect how they think about child protection. Implicit theories are schematic knowledge structures that incorporate beliefs about the stability of an attribute and organise the way people think about the world (Ross, 1989). The 'implicit theory' theory was informed by the social information processing perspective within developmental psychology research, which suggests that much of cognitive development in children is driven by the development of implicit theories, similar to scientific theories, in a given domain (Wellman, 1990). The 'theory theory' of cognitive development proposes that children come to understand the world around them by acting like a scientist, forming hypotheses, testing them, revising them, and rejecting those that fail to predict behaviour (Gopnik and Wellman, 1994). From an early age knowledge is organised into different theories that facilitate our understanding of the world. The development of these theories then continues into adulthood. Such theories allow individuals to explain and understand aspects of their environment or their own

and others' behaviour, and therefore to make predictions about future events. This theory has been used to explain attributions and behaviour across a range of areas, including attributions of intelligence (e.g., Hong *et al.*, 1999), self-regulation (Job *et al.*, 2010), stereotyping (Rydell *et al.*, 2007), and teaching and learning (Trowler and Cooper, 2002). We have used this theory to explain the implicit obstacles of reporting among teachers across three domains; the personal, the professional, and the cultural domain.

Within the personal domain, each individual will have their own unique implicit theory about child protection and abuse which will influence how they interpret and process information in relation to this, such that they will be more likely to minimise or dismiss information that does not fit with their unique implicit theory. These theories can also interact with some explicit barriers to reporting and influence what is done with information concerning policies and procedures. The implicit theories will impact not only on how the information of signs, policies and procedures is learned, but also how it is implemented, such that a belief about the costs and benefits of the child protection intervention will impact on what is done with the explicit knowledge about policies and procedures. Horwath (2007) argues that professionals, including teachers, may struggle with the decision-making regarding the types of concern that warrant attention and referral to child protection agencies. She argues that different people will interpret information relating to abuse, particularly neglect, in different ways, and the decision to make a referral will go beyond the evidence available to the individual's interpretation of child neglect, their understanding of professional responsibilities to refer concern, their view of the child protection services, their feelings and anxieties about referring, and their overall working context and culture.

Implicit theories may also be found within the professional domain, such that the implicit theories a professional holds about child protection services, and their own professional role in relation to child protection and welfare, can impact on inter-agency collaboration. Perceptions of child protection personnel will influence the quality of communication between the agencies and how the overall relationship is interpreted. Poor inter-agency cooperation between child protection services and educational services has been frequently noted as a barrier to communicating concerns (e.g., Webb and Vulliamy, 2001). Negative perceptions about the effectiveness of social services and poor communication with child protection services have been cited as deterrents to referrals in Ireland (Horwath, 2007; INTO, 2008; Nohilly, 2011). In particular, Designated Liaison Persons (DLPs) reported the lack of understanding by other children's services regarding the role and capacity of schools in child protection, which has been suggested as a key factor in any intra-organisational tensions (INTO, 2008). A number of inquiries into high profile cases of child abuse in Ireland have highlighted situations where information was not shared across professionals and working relationships had broken down (e.g., Gibbons, 2010). Buckley (2012) argues that the principle weakness in the Irish system is not the failure to report but rather the lack of commitment across health, justice and education services to support vulnerable children after they have been reported to child protection services. Buckley *et al.* (1997) note that interagency conflict may result from the difficulty and complexity with regard to the identification of child abuse, particularly for professionals whose primary vocation is education rather than child protection. They also note that conflict may arise from differences in the background of child protection staff and education staff, role confusion, different ethical norms and vocational orientations, and occupational stereotypes (Buckley *et al.*, 1997).

Finally, the application of the implicit theories perspective on the obstacles to reporting may also be seen within the cultural domain, such that an individual's implicit theories are also likely to be influenced by the wider cultural view of children, their rights, and general attitudes toward the child protection system. For example, general societal attitudes towards state intervention in family life can affect an individual's implicit theories in this regard and thus their likelihood of intervening in a case of suspected child abuse. This presents a deeper challenge than merely imparting specific knowledge about signs of child abuse and the policies and procedures involved.

The three domains at which implicit theories may present themselves as obstacles to the reporting of abuse highlights the complexity of these obstacles which the current paper attempts to address through the application of a theoretical framework and we suggest that a reflective piece is required at initial teacher education level to investigate this particular perspective on child protection and abuse.

### **Proposals for teacher education**

Education should aim to target both explicit and implicit obstacles to reporting. In particular, explicit obstacles such as a lack of knowledge about the referral process could be addressed through training as this involves the application of knowledge and building skills around child protection procedures. However, implicit barriers may be more challenging to address as they relate to the individual's belief system and wider cultural views of children, their rights and child protection, and would therefore require a deeper level of consideration. Teacher education which emphasises procedures and guidelines rather than the other less tangible factors will only go so far in increasing teachers' confidence and decision-making capabilities (Kenny, 2004; Goebbels *et al.*, 2008).

Though the academic literature is limited, there are some good examples of teacher education training programmes which include professional learning about child abuse and neglect and child protection which are reported upon from other jurisdictions. Within a Northern Ireland educational context, McKee and Dillenburger (2009) identified the ‘development of pre-service child protection training’ as a means of addressing poor levels of student teacher knowledge in relation to child abuse and neglect. They report on the effectiveness of pre-service child protection preparation based on an evaluation of a 3 year pre-service child protection and safeguarding education programme ‘Pastoral Pathways Programme’ for students on undergraduate and post graduate programmes in Teacher Education and Early Childhood Studies (McKee and Dillenburger, 2012). These authors note that ‘The Pastoral Pathways is the first assessed compulsory pre-service child protection training programme of this duration and for this group of students in the UK.’ (2012, p. 352).

Walsh *et al.* (2011) comment on the child protection content from three University-based Australian teacher education programmes which ‘locate’ child protection in University-based pre-service teacher education programmes across three jurisdictions of Australia; South Australia, Victoria and Queensland. Emerging from these case studies, the authors identified five areas that warrant further research: (a) social policy influences; (b) programme structure; (c) theoretical positions; (d) praxis; and (e) teacher educators.

The lengthened and restructured BEd programme in Ireland may provide opportunities to address some of the barriers to reporting; however, as the programme is currently being rolled out, there is no evidence as yet to indicate that the curriculum will have an enhanced child protection component or to suggest there will be consistency across colleges in how this is addressed. Nonetheless, the reconfigured

programme provides not only extra time to be allotted to child protection but also provides opportunities for road mapping of child protection across the spiralling curriculum. This roadmap should address both implicit and explicit factors and provide space where teachers can be encouraged to reflect on their own beliefs about children, children's rights and child abuse and how wider societal attitudes might affect how they think about child protection. Although it has been argued that the demands of teacher education mean that too much subject-matter competes for too little time (Baginsky and Macpherson, 2005), it may be possible to use the resources and the modules currently provided, such as Child Development and Social, Personal, and Health Education modules, to address this topic. While we suggest that pre-service education courses address child protection across the curriculum, for this to be effective it needs to be done in an integrative way, such that topics of child protection are not dealt with in isolation to the wider view of children's rights or child development. This education should also focus on the holistic view of the child and typical and atypical development of the child. This was highlighted in a recent report on child deaths in Ireland which suggests that the traditional clinical view of categorising abuse into distinct cases means that individual cases of vulnerable at-risk children become invisible and do not receive appropriate interventions they have a right to (Shannon and Gibbons, 2012).

Inter-agency conflict has been frequently cited as a barrier to reporting (Webb and Vulliamy, 2001), and stereotypical views of education and child protection professionals have been noted to play a role in this conflict (Buckley *et al.*, 1997). Research on prejudice suggests that under appropriate conditions contact can reduce stereotypical thinking (Allport, 1954). Thus, facilitating contact between child protection services and teachers at the pre-service education level may help reduce

interagency conflict. This contact should aim to give both professions a better understanding of the working place culture and priorities of the other. Specifically, qualified social workers could be invited into the teacher education colleges to provide training not only on the procedures to be followed in cases of suspected abuse, but also to educate the students on the benefits of reporting and the interventions they provide to children when abuse and neglect has been recognised.

### **Conclusion**

The current state of affairs in Ireland suggests that teachers are not adequately educated in child protection, and, while the introduction of mandatory reporting is a positive step, evidence from other jurisdictions suggest that this alone will not overcome all the barriers to reporting child abuse faced by teachers. In order to report abuse, teachers must be aware of the signs of abuse, but training must go beyond the identification of this evidence to address the implicit attitudes teachers have in respect of child protection and abuse. Thus more comprehensive, extensive and holistic teacher education is called for. The aim of such education should be to foster the child-centred values of teachers and reinforce their role in promoting the overall welfare of children. There is a widely held belief that primary school teaching is a 'culture of care' (Nias, 1999). This caring culture and the child-centred values of teachers' place the school and its teachers in an ideal position for ensuring child protection and promoting child welfare.

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