

Child Protection in Irish Primary Schools: Supports and Challenges in the Role of Designated Liaison Person for Child Protection

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Abstract

This article reviews child protection in the Irish primary school context from the perspective of the Designated Liaison Person (DLP). Research undertaken with DLPs is presented which illuminates the supports and challenges that are part of this responsible role. A review of the role of the DLP is presented in the article alongside an overview of the changes in legislation in the Irish child protection system. Particular attention is paid to the challenges of the role of DLP and the potential impact on children's lives and their safety.

Keywords: child protection, children's safety, designated liaison person

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Introduction

More often than not, when children and young people are not at home, they are in school. Whilst many children live in comfortable and safe home environments where their needs are met, for other children their childhood is destroyed by abusive behaviour; be it sexual, physical, emotional or neglect. Abuse can be both intra-familial or it can occur outside of the home environment, but generally the perpetrator is known to the child. In 2020 in Ireland, there were 69,712 referrals to the Child

Protection and Welfare services. A total of 22,356 children received a family support service in 2020 (Tusla, 2021). Whilst the breakdown of statistics in relation to the number of referrals that were made by schools is not provided, given the amount of time that children are in the school environment, and the positive relationships that are built with teachers and school personnel, it is understandable that concerns and disclosures in relation to child protection will be uncovered in the school environment. As we slowly begin to re-emerge from the Covid pandemic, the impact of the pandemic for child protection is very real; for many children, the safety nets that school and other recreational activities provide were not present for months on end leaving them even more vulnerable to abuse. Child welfare inequalities have profound implications for the lives of children and their families. Furthermore, it is likely to feed the prison and homeless population, teenage pregnancy and parenthood, high rates of poor physical and mental health amongst young people and premature death (Bywaters, 2020). Given the introduction of the Children First Act in Ireland, all teachers now have mandatory responsibilities for reporting child abuse to the Child and Family Agency (CFA) (Government of Ireland, 2015). The Designated Liaison Person (DLP) appointed by the Board of Management of each school has the overall responsibility within the school for child protection. This article reviews the supports and challenges reported by DLPs in their role. Findings of a survey completed with primary school DLPs are presented illustrating that whilst there are supports available to them in their role, the challenges are numerous. An online survey was e-mailed to the DLP of all primary schools in Ireland. Of the 3,248 schools that were contacted, 387 DLPs responded, reflecting a response rate of 12.01 per cent. Particular attention is paid to the challenges of the role of DLP and the potential impact on children's lives and children's safety.

The role of DLP

In the Irish school system, the area of child protection is determined by legislation—the Children First Act 2015, statutory guidelines—the 'Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children' (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017) and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) 'Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary schools' (DES, 2017). The 2015 Act sets out the specific child protection statutory obligations imposed on certain categories of persons, including teachers, who now have mandated responsibility to report child protection concerns over a certain 'threshold' to the CFA. Whilst the legislative changes, which have become operational since December 2017 are embedding themselves in the school system, teachers and other school personnel traditionally operated a

system, whereby they reported concerns to the DLP for child protection in the school and the DLP then did all liaising with the CFA. The role of DLP has been retained with the changes in legislation. Indeed, the 'Children First' guidelines outline that it is commonplace for organisations providing services to children to appoint a DLP as both a resource person to staff members and also to ensure procedures are followed correctly and promptly (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017). Initially, it is the responsibility of the Board of Management to 'designate a senior full-time member of the registered teaching staff of the school (DES, 2017, p.22)' as the DLP for the school. In the Irish school system, the Board of Management manages the school on behalf of a Patron body and are accountable to both the Patron and the Minister for Education (DES, 2015). It is usually the case that the Principal undertakes the role of DLP; however, it is not stipulated that he/she must undertake the role, rather it is 'expected' that the role of DLP will 'normally' be undertaken by the Principal (DES, 2017). The role of the DLP essentially is to 'act as the resource person to any member of school personnel who has a child protection concern (DES, 2017, p. 22)'. In addition, the DLP must ensure that the reporting requirements determined by legislation and outlined in the DES Child Protection procedures are followed 'correctly' and 'promptly' (DES, 2017, p. 22) in line with guidance in relation to the role. Under the revised legislation, all schools and indeed other organisations who work with the children are required to prepare a Child Safeguarding Statement. The Safeguarding Statement is a written document that specifies the principles and practices that will be observed in order to ensure that, as far as is practicable, the child is safe from harm (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017). Under the DES Child Protection procedures, the DLP is required to be appointed as the 'relevant person' under section 11 of the Children First Act 2015, as the first point of contact in respect of the school's Child Safeguarding Statement (DES, 2017). Furthermore, the DLP is responsible for liaising with all parties relating to child protection concerns; staff, and relevant outside agencies including the Guards and the CFA, not to mention the families of children involved in child protection cases. Essentially, the role of the DLP in a school setting aims to give overall responsibility for the area of child protection to one person in the school and in doing so to ensure greater safety and protection for vulnerable children.

Reviewing the role of DLP

Internationally, the literature on teachers and child protection highlights that reporting child protection concerns and disclosures has long been a contested area for teachers (McGarry and Buckley, 2013). In the Irish context, the small amount of research evidence that does exist highlights

that teachers' commitments to fulfilling their child protection obligations is weak (Buckley and McGarry, 2010). Indeed, this is the case in the international context also with non-reporting rates varying from 14 per cent to 67 per cent for US teachers and 8 per cent to 46 per cent for Australian teachers (Bunting et al., 2009). Teachers may very well lack the confidence and knowledge to report their concerns (de Haan et al, 2019). Buckley (2015) considers that detection of abuse is a complex process and requires a 'trained eye', 'confidence' and regular engagement with the family in order to become more assured in decision making. Issues in relation to 'race anxiety' may also exist. Race anxiety is where professionals report discomfort about dealing with issues of race and culture, for fear of being labelled racist or culturally insensitive (Chantler et al., 2017). The lack of training for Irish primary school teachers is also a major factor. Whilst training is available for DLPs, no face to face training is made available for teachers. Interpersonal difficulties, including poor communication between schools and the CFA, and lack of feedback from staff have been cited in Irish schools as reasons which discourage schools from reporting (Buckley and McGarry, 2010).

That said, teachers are in an ideal position for identifying possible signs of abuse. 'They are the main caregivers to children outside the family context and have regular contact with children in the school setting (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011, p.23)'. They are likely to notice physical and behavioural changes associated with abuse and also the social and emotional problems and they often observe interactions between a child and their caregiver (Bourke and Maunsell, 2015). The nature and work of the primary school teacher is caring and emotional and it demands and fosters an ethical orientation towards care for pupils (Nohilly, 2019b). Given the importance the teachers place on this caring role and their concern to educate the whole child through meeting their social, emotional and psychological needs, as well as developing them academically, the value base in a teacher's work is certainly very supportive to child protection work (Nohilly, 2019a). Indeed, Baginsky and MacPherson (2005) assert that the effectiveness of a DLP depends to a large extent on the ability of the teaching staff to report their concerns and respond appropriately to children who may be at risk. Undertaking the role of DLP not only involves compliance with legislation and procedures as outlined above, but meeting the concerns and challenges staff face on a daily basis in relation to child protection work, whilst wanting to ensure children are cared for and supported through the school environment.

Findings from research indicate that the role of DLP is one that is extremely emotional and challenging: 'the isolation and sole responsibility of the role become more apparent when the reality of supporting a hurt child and liaising with staff, families and outside agencies are taken on board (Nohilly, 2018, p.22)'. In 2008, the Irish National Teachers'

Organisation (INTO) carried out an investigation and review of the role of DLP. Their research highlighted the time consuming, isolating and solitary nature of the role and the recommendations of the report included putting supports in place for the DLP (INTO, 2008). DLPs highlighted that whilst they provided support to class teachers and others involved in child protection as part of their role, there was no support structure in place for the DLP. Particular challenges in the role identified by the respondents included; a lack of understanding from other agencies about how school's work, dealing with newcomer children and cultural difficulties in relation to child protection, the potential for damage to the relationship between schools and parents which is built up over years following a disclosure and the lack of feedback to the DLP following a referral to the CFA (ibid).

A further study on the role of the DLP was undertaken in the Irish context. As part of a doctoral thesis, interviews were conducted with sixteen DLPs with various years of experience in the role. Whilst supports in the role were identified including the CFA, school policy, training in the role and support from staff, the challenges identified highlighted the responsibility and the isolation of the role; 'the isolation and sole responsibility of the role become more apparent when the reality of supporting a hurt child and liaising with staff, families and outside agencies are taken on board' (Nohilly, 2018, p. 22). Similar to the study conducted by the INTO, challenges reported included dealing with newcomer families and dealing with families when child protection concerns have been reported. Further challenges highlighted by the study were the responsibility of judgement calls one is required to make in the role of DLP, and reaching a decision as to whether signs and symptoms of abuse observed at school, particularly neglect, warranted referral to the CFA. In particular, the reality of decision making, which may have far-reaching consequences for children's lives and the challenges involved for one person in undertaking this role was highlighted by the particular study (ibid). Certainly, the role of DLP in a school is a hugely responsible one, and whilst literature abounds on the role of leadership within the schoolhouse, it certainly is limited in considering the all-important role of DLP.

The current study

The current study sought to ascertain the experiences of DLPs in Irish primary schools, following the changes in legislation and in particular, the introduction of mandatory reporting of child protection for teachers. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the institution where both researchers work. The sensitive nature of the topic of child protection warranted a comprehensive ethical approval process. All of the questions

presented to the DLPs were reviewed as part of the ethical process. The confidential nature of the topic was also highlighted to the participants ahead of completion of the study. Informed consent was granted by all participants involved in the study. Initially, an online survey was generated through Google forms (see [Supplementary material](#)). The survey was piloted by two DLPs who have years of experience in the role and the questions were modified following the feedback received. The e-mail addresses of all primary schools in Ireland were sourced from the publicly available school database on the DES website. The e-mail database for 2017–2018 was accessed. Approximately 3,248 schools were e-mailed the survey in March 2019. The survey was accompanied by an information note requesting that the survey reach the DLP of the school and the purpose of the research was outlined. Of the 3,248 e-mails, twenty-seven were not delivered as the email addresses were incorrect, or obsolete resulting in 3,221 being delivered. 387 DLPs responded to the survey reflecting a response rate of 12.01 per cent. Not all of the questions were addressed by all respondents however. The response rate of 12.01 per cent is indicative of the very busy workload of principals, in particular teaching principals. Approximately two-thirds of all principals in Ireland are teaching principals with responsibility for teaching as well as all of the responsibilities that come with running a school.

A fixed mixed methods design ([Creswell and Plano Clarke, 2011](#)) using a concurrent embedded approach ([Creswell, 2010](#)) was employed for this research in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem. The quantitative approach was the primary method (e.g. closed, fixed questions, rating scales, etc.) and the qualitative approach (e.g. open-ended questions inviting elaboration and explanation of meaning/experience) was the secondary method which was embedded within the quantitative approach. A number of qualitative questions were presented across the survey and this allowed DLPs to develop their responses in relation to supports and challenges in the role of DLP, as well as the supports and challenges in dealing with personnel from the CFA. Furthermore, the qualitative questions presented gave the participants an opportunity to identify one key resource that would support them in their role as DLP and any concerns teachers had expressed about their role as a ‘mandated person’. Given that there was a qualitative focus to the work, a mixed methods approach was selected in order to understand the phenomenon under investigation—the experiences of DLPs—in more detail, that is, ‘for the purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration’ ([Burke Johnson et al., 2007](#), p. 123) so that findings could be integrated and inferences drawn using both quantitative and qualitative approaches ([Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007](#)). Hence, both closed and open questions formed part of the survey. Whilst not all participants responded to all open-ended questions, there was a broad range of qualitative data provided in the findings, which

added to the richness of the study findings and allowed the respondents to elaborate on particular issues, such as supports and challenges in their role. There were a number of limitations to the study, with the main limitation being the low response rate to the survey questionnaire. A further limitation of the study was that interviews were not conducted with a sample of the DLPs who had participated in the study. Whilst rich data were provided through the open-ended question responses, the interview format would have allowed for further probing of very pertinent issues. It is the intention of the researchers to conduct interviews with teachers as the next phase of research in this area. This article focuses on the questions related to supports and challenges for DLPs namely: 'Identify anything that supports you in carrying out your duties as DLP' and 'Identify any challenges you encounter in carrying out your duties as DLP'. Both questions allowed for open-ended responses where DLPs could elaborate on the particular supports and challenges encountered. Analysis of the qualitative data typically echoed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis where data were initially coded with sample data extracts, codes were sorted into potential themes, themes were reviewed using data extracts and a thematic map was generated. The findings section initially considers the supports identified in the role, and thereafter the challenges as noted by the respondents.

Findings and discussion

From the 384 responses received in relation to school category, the DLPs served in a variety of types of school with varying years of experience. About 74.2 per cent of respondents worked in a co-educational school, 4.7 per cent of the respondents worked in a 'Gaelscoil', which operates through the medium of Irish and 2.3 per cent of respondents worked in a 'Scoil sa Gaeltacht' where the school is located in an area that Irish is the primary language spoken. The remaining respondents worked in an All-Boys or All-Girls school or an Infant school or Senior school. The responses are presented in Figure 1.

About 67.6 per cent of the respondents were female and 32.4 per cent were male. The respondents worked in a variety of size of school. About 2.3 per cent of respondents indicated they worked in schools where there were less than seventeen students in attendance, whilst 21.1 per cent of respondents worked in schools where pupil enrolment figures were greater than 300. In the Irish school system, the enrolment thresholds for administrative principal are 176 pupils, unless the school is operating a specialist autism unit, in which case a principal has administrative status at 113 pupils (DES, 2019). Principals retain their teaching responsibilities below these enrolment figures. About 52.9 per cent of the respondents had enrolment figures of over 176 pupils and in

Q1a: School Category (Tick all that apply)

384 responses

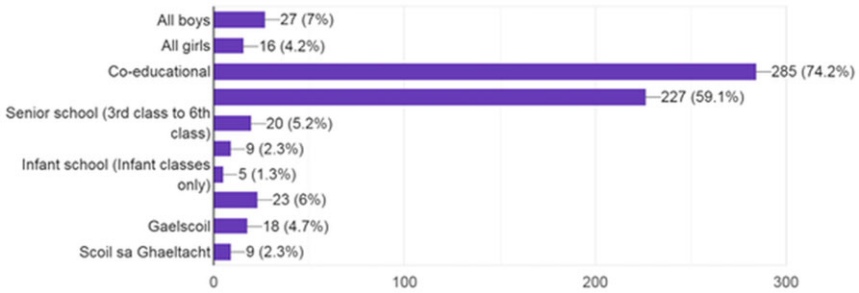


Figure 1: School category.

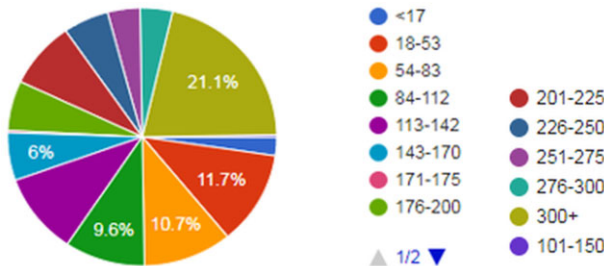


Figure 2: School size.

total, 59.8 per cent of respondents indicated that the principal of the school was administrative. A summary of the size of school the respondents worked in are presented in Figure 2.

The respondents highlighted the variety of years of experience DLPs had served in the role. Of the 367 responses to this question, all of the respondents indicated they have over five years teaching experience but 31.3 per cent had five years or less experience in the role as DLP. About 7.08 per cent of the respondents had over twenty years' experience as DLP. The biggest percentage of respondents had between five and ten years' experience DLP; 28.3 per cent, whilst 21.2 per cent had between ten and fifteen years' experience in the role and 11.9 per cent had between fifteen and twenty years' experience. The results are presented in Figure 3.

Whilst initially a response rate of 12.1 per cent might seem quite low, given that the survey was e-mailed to over 3,200 schools, the response rate is considered average for a cohort of this size. It is evident also that the respondents worked in a variety of school types and they had varying years of experience in the role as DLP, from those who were in the

Q3a: How much experience have you as a primary school teacher and as a DLP? (Please include experience/years in another school if appropriate)

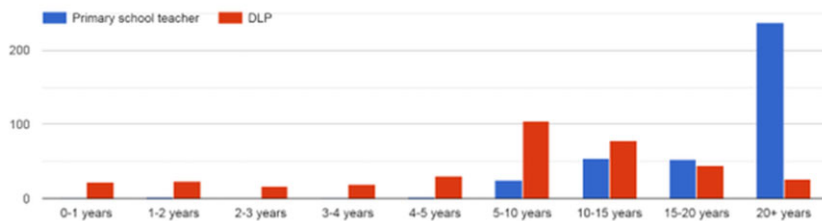


Figure 3: Years of experience in the role as DLP.

first year of the role to those who had over twenty years' experience in the role. Undoubtedly, the role of Principal, and most especially teaching Principal is hugely demanding with many administrative and other duties, and as previously highlighted, this most likely accounts for reasons as to why some of the participants did not complete the survey. It is clear from those who did respond however, that they have varying experiences when it comes to dealing with child protection issues, and as a result, perceptions of supports and challenges are based on personal experiences.

Supports in carrying out DLP duties

A total of 329 respondents addressed the question of supports in the role of DLP. Whilst the participants had the opportunity to elaborate on their response, the majority of the respondents listed one or two supports available to them, rather than provide a detailed response. Analysis of the responses highlighted that the main supports available included: the 'Children First' national guidelines and DES 'Child Protection Procedures', support from staff members and the Deputy DLP was specifically referenced in a number of responses, training courses attended by the DLPs, support from other Principals and also from Networks including the Irish Primary Principal's Network (this is a professional body for leaders of Irish primary schools) and the Catholic Primary School's Management Association (the organisation provides advice and support for Chairpersons and Principals of Boards of Management in over 2,800 Irish primary schools). The CFA and social workers were also identified as supports to DLPs in their role and responses also indicated that experience in the role, coupled with knowledge of families were supportive factors. [Table 1](#) provides a breakdown of the responses received from those who addressed the question and representative of the total number of survey participants ([Nohilly and Treacy, 2020](#)).

Table 1 Supports available to DLPs in carrying out their duties

Supports in the role	Percent of 309	Percent of the total respondents
Deputy DLP	14.6	11.7
Tusla	27.8	22.4
Staff	21	16.9
Training	15.2	12.2
Guidelines	12.9	10.4
IPPN	8.4	6.8
BOM	10	8.1
Child protection guidelines and procedures	11	8.9
Knowledge/experience	3.5	2.8
CPSMA	6.1	4.9
Other	20	16.1

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A sample of the qualitative responses received in relation to the supports is provided below: These are grouped under the themes of Internal supports and External supports.

Internal supports

‘My staff’

‘My DDLP’

‘Knowledge of families in school’

‘Referring to the guidelines myself, if I can work them out’

‘My experience in being a teacher for 36 years’

‘Google’

The staff of the school, including the Deputy DLP was a significant source of support to the DLP in undertaking the role. Naturally, teachers in the school and in particular the child’s class teacher is the person whom children are in day-to-day contact with, and build a relationship of trust with. The 2011 Children First Guidelines consider that ‘teachers are particularly well placed to observe and monitor children for signs of abuse and neglect. They are the main caregivers to children in the family context and have regular contact with children in the school setting’ (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011, p. 23). Particularly, for vulnerable children, teachers are often the eyes and ears to reach out and help a child, so understandably a staff are hugely supportive to a DLP in monitoring child protection concerns and in supporting children. The Deputy DLP in the school, who is generally the Deputy Principal was also noted as a support for almost 15 per cent of those

who responded to the question. Whilst the Department of Education's Child Protection Procedures (2017) set the expectation that the Deputy DLP will 'normally' be a 'deputy principal' of a school, there is no guidelines offered on how and in what ways/if any, a deputy DLP might support a DLP in his/her role. The only guideline noted in the DES Procedures is that the DLP can assume responsibility in the absence of the DLP and furthermore, can access the child protection records 'when required'. This does suggest that the role of the Deputy DLP is to undertake responsibility when a DLP is absent, rather than to provide support and assistance in any way to the DLP. In the survey responses, there was not information provided on how the Deputy DLP supported the DLP in the role. The findings would suggest, however, that the DLP does access the support of the Deputy DLP in considering queries and cases of abuse that they are dealing with.

External supports

'Specific training, relevant circulars and guidelines'

'Supports from other Principals in implementing the guidelines'

'Phone links with social workers for advice'

'Tough question to answer. I would have to say calling Tusla is my best support'

'Management bodies'

Other sources of support noted by the respondents included the organisations that support Principals and Boards of Management in their role including the Irish Primary Principal's Network and the Catholic School's Management Association. Given that confidentiality is so paramount in the area of child protection, and the huge burden of responsibility that is inherent in the role, DLPs do need a support mechanism that provides guidance and a listening ear to them. Notwithstanding the legislative role of the CFA, and the role they provide in seeking advice in relation to child protection concerns, a dedicated service for DLPs that enable them to interpret the child protection procedures and provide guidance on child protection in general would be a welcome support to DLPs and enable them to feel they themselves have an avenue where they can be heard.

It is interesting that 'knowledge of families' in the school is reported by the DLP as a source of support in his/her role. Undoubtedly, being aware of a particular family's circumstances helps to contextualise events that may unfold. There may also be upheaval in family life for several reasons for a short period of time, which may impact on the normal pattern of events. However, Stevenson (1996, cited in Buckley, 2003, p. 124) in highlighting the links between neglect and poverty argues that

social workers and indeed teachers have become used to certain families ‘bumping along the bottom’. Furthermore, [Watson \(2005\)](#) outlines that neglect as a category of abuse is minimised by comparison to other categories of abuse for reasons including; isolated events which occur and are considered too ‘trivial’ to report, ‘cultural relativism’ where some behaviours are justified by labelling it as a cultural practice, the culture operates whereby overwhelming evidence of abuse should be evident before action is taken, the rights of parents take priority over the rights of the child and efforts of parents can be empathised with. Indeed, one of the qualitative responses on challenges referred to familiarity with a family ‘clouding judgement’. These are interesting considerations for DLPs and indeed all teachers to unpick and reflect upon when looking at the circumstances of particular families, particularly in cases of neglect. Does ‘knowledge of families’ really support DLPs in making judgement calls in relation to child abuse or is it ultimately leaving children more exposed and at risk to ongoing abuse, particularly neglect?

There were also a number of responses received on the question in relation to supports that indicated that there were little to no supports available to the DLP in his/her role. Furthermore, 15.1 per cent of the respondents did not provide any information in response to the question. A further 4.1 per cent of respondents stated explicitly in their responses that they felt there was no supports available to them. A sample of the responses indicate the lack of real supports felt by Principals in the role. These are categorised under the theme: Lack of Supports

Lack of supports

‘Very little to be honest, other principal who is a neighbour and that I can speak to in confidence’.

‘No support at all. The principal always ends up carrying the can when things go wrong’.

‘Nothing, it’s a very challenging position’

‘I don’t feel there is a support so I rely on my professionalism’

‘There is no support. Tusla are beyond incompetent’

‘Absolutely nothing’

Following the question on supports, the respondents were then asked to consider any challenges they meet in carrying out their duties as DLP.

Challenges in carrying out DLP duties

A total of 333 (86.7 per cent) participants responded to the question on challenges in undertaking the duties as DLP. Whilst some of the

Table 2 Challenges the DLP face in carrying out their duties

		Percent of 333	Percent of total respondents
Paperwork/administration	101	30.3	26.3
Tusla	76	22.8	19.8
Time	62	18.6	16.1
Training	47	14.1	12.2
Parents/Families	45	13.5	11.7
Procedures	41	12.3	10.7
Teaching principal/workload	26	7.8	6.7
Judgement calls	22	6.6	5.7
Emotional toll	19	5.7	4.9
Oversight report	16	4.8	4.1
DES inspections	12	3.6	3.1
Board of Management	10	0.03	2.6
Isolation	10	0.03	2.6
Knowledge of family/parents doing their best	7	2.1	1.8
Signs and symptoms	4	1.2	1
Other	63	18.9	16.4

A sample of responses in relation to these themes are presented in [Table 3](#). These are categorised under the themes of administration, time constraints, training and supporting staff, dealing with outside agencies and managing relationships.

responses were similar to the supports in that one or two challenges were listed, more detailed responses were provided to this question by comparison to the question on supports. The main challenges listed included: time, paperwork and administration, lack of available training, Tusla support, reporting parents, knowing what to report, the isolation and responsibility of the role and also the challenge of staff fully understanding their role. The challenges are categorised in [Table 2](#).

In some cases, what was reported as a support by a certain cohort of DLPs, was perceived as a challenge by other respondents. This related to ‘training’, the Child Protection Guidelines and Procedures and also the CFA which operate under the logo of Tusla. In relation to training, 15.2 per cent of those who responded to the question on supports listed training as a support, whilst 14.1 per cent of those who responded to the question on challenges noted it as a challenge. The national training that is available to all DLPs in Ireland is a one day seminar, which is facilitated by the Professional Development Service for Teachers, a support service that offers professional learning opportunities to teachers and school leaders that is funded by the DES. The aim of the seminar is to familiarise participants with the content and requirements of the DES Child Protection Procedures. The recent legislative changes have resulted in many new requirements and ‘oversight’ reporting by the Board of Management and the DLP, and much of the content of the seminar day focuses on the changes to the guidelines and procedures since the full implementation of the 2015 Children First Act. The

Table 3 Qualitative responses to challenges faced by DLPs in their role

Administration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'The very demanding administrative burden'. • 'Paperwork. When you are dreading a Child Protection case more because of the paperwork that will ensue as opposed to the actual harm being done to the child, it says a lot. I know that comes across badly but the paperwork is stupid and takes time away from dealing with the issue'. • 'Unending paperwork, lack of response from Tusla, a constant change in procedures which makes no difference to the cases reported but do add to the administrative duties beyond a reasonable level'. • 'The amount of box ticking in the new procedures and the amount of paperwork to be completed. Most of it is an unnecessary stress, it is making us more and more accountable should something go wrong. The emphasis is more on the paperwork now rather than the welfare of the child'. • 'Complexity of reporting, constantly changing requirements, pressure brought on by thought of Inspectorate checks'.
Time constraints
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Not enough time in the day'. • 'Time constraints and work overload. Stress. Anxiety'.
Training and supporting staff
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Inadequate training'. • 'The current procedures are extremely cumbersome in design, and the training was totally inadequate, especially for teachers and ancillary staff working in the school'. • 'Ensuring all other support personal have skill set necessary to carry out their duties if needed—no formal support from DES received in this regard for staff to negotiate, contextualise and to engage in a sense-making process (all training for staff was ad hoc on a system level basis—only as good as any individual school put in place)'. • 'I'm not sure if they would all stick to the procedures if a disclosure was made. I do worry about this and confidentiality'. • 'There are many presentations of emotional abuse and neglect'. • 'Emotional weight of managing a difficult situation; making a judgement on whether something is a CP issue (e.g. child walking home to an empty house?)'. • 'The fact that you're not supposed to discuss casework with colleagues. Sometimes that support is needed'. • 'Loneliness of the role; not having a team of others to confer with (even confidentially); the gravity and seriousness of child protection e.g. getting it wrong—the consequences for the child and/or the consequences for a family or the person reporting'.
Dealing with outside agencies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Inadequate training, inconsistent support from Tusla. No back up'. • 'Speed of Tusla responses' • 'Tusla are impossible to contact'. • 'We do everything we are supposed to when it comes to protecting children in our care. Tusla and social workers however are completely inadequate and do not do the job they are supposed to do. They pass everything back to the school. If parents won't engage with them, they dismiss them from services and it becomes the schools issue to deal with again. Children, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds are being failed not by their school but by Tusla'.
Managing relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Knowing parents involved'. • 'Knowledge of a family can cloud judgement i.e. over familiar with circumstances'. • 'Small rural school/familiarity with all families/reporter easily identifiable/DLP lives locally'. • 'The need to report everything that causes concern. Breaking relationships with parents. One parent took their child out of all school supports because of a report. Ridiculous amount of paperwork. Undue stress caused to parents needlessly'. • 'Having the strength to tackle the difficult issues at a local level. Knowing when to intervene'.

training may in some respects assume that DLPs have baseline knowledge on the signs and symptoms of abuse and other key areas of child protection. A one day event is a very limited amount of time to cover the Child Protection Procedures alone, without consideration of other components of training. Bourke and Maunsell (2016) consider that where teachers are concerned, there are explicit and implicit barriers to reporting. Whilst explicit barriers related to lack of knowledge on signs and symptoms of abuse and policies and procedures, implicit barriers encompass less tangible factors such as an individual's belief system about children, children's rights, child protection and child abuse. They argue that education should aim to target the implicit as well as the explicit barriers to reporting. The qualitative data reported by participants in the survey did indicate that training was 'inadequate' and there is an urgent need to address training for whole-school staff. Currently, no provision is made for face-to-face training for all of the staff of the school, and undoubtedly this has the potential to impact on children's lives and their safety as those personnel at school, with whom they spend the majority of time with outside of the home environment must be adequately trained in child protection so as to ensure timely, accurate and consistent monitoring and reporting of child abuse.

This research also indicates that the national child protection guidelines and DES Child Protection Procedures are perceived as both a support and a challenge. The qualitative data in relation to supports indicate that the guidelines and procedures support DLPs and are obviously a consultation point and indeed they are what should be the reference point for all DLPs in undertaking their duties. About 12.3 per cent of those who responded to the question on challenges noted the DES Procedures as a challenge. Analysis of the qualitative responses provided to this question indicate that the 2017 DES procedures are 'cumbersome' in design and result in much additional paperwork for DLPs. In order to take account of the legislative changes imposed by the 2015 Children First Act, there is a lot of oversight and compliance that must be adhered to and DLPs are finding this work challenging and feel ill-prepared and inadequately trained to undertake it. Whilst the DES have made some recording templates available to support DLPs with recording concerns and disclosures of abuse and also preparing an oversight report on child protection concerns and referrals that must be brought to each Board of Management meeting, it is clear that the content and depth of the procedures are complex to navigate.

DLPs' experiences of dealing with the CFA seem to vary significantly. About 27.8 per cent of those who responded to the question on supports listed the agency as a source of support, and qualitative responses such as 'Phone links with social workers for advice' elucidated the support that is provided. About 22.8 per cent of those who responded to the on challenges then noted the agency as such. The qualitative data indicate

that these challenges involve difficulties with contacting Tusla, the speed of responses and a feeling that the responsibility for many of the children's issues is passed back to the school to deal with by the agency. Despite the fact that interdisciplinary and interagency work is generally regarded as central to child protection practice, it is generally regarded in the literature as fraught with difficulties. Most high profile cases of child abuse in Ireland, dating back to the Kilkenny Investigation case in the 1990s and more recently the Roscommon case of child abuse have repeatedly highlighted instances where information was not shared and working relationships broke down (McGuinness, 1993; Western Health Board, 1996; North Western Health Board, 1998; Gibbons, 2010). Inter-professional relationships between social workers and teachers are identified as being particularly challenging. Buckley (2003) provides a framework in which obstacles can be located. The framework identifies three types of behaviour or obstacle (1) professional, (2) psychological and (3) structural or organisational. The theoretical underpinnings of inter-agency work certainly require considerable development in Ireland. The successes and enabling factors that are identified in the literature should form a focus for the development of a framework for interagency working between social workers and teachers. These include personal well-being, professional development, personal identity and improved services for service users. These benefits would certainly support DLPs in their challenging role and ultimately ensure a more comprehensive response and better outcomes for the vulnerable children involved.

The paperwork and administration involved in the role of DLP is certainly proving to be extremely challenging for those involved. About 30.3 per cent of those who responded to the question noted this challenge and a sample of the qualitative data provided to this question indicates the enormity of the administrative task involved. 'When you are dreading a Child Protection case more because of the paperwork that will ensue as opposed to the actual harm being done to the child, it says a lot' paints a stark picture of the amount of paperwork involved and the time involved in preparing same, from the initial stages right through to the oversight report for reporting to the Board of Management. Whilst the 2011 version of the Children First national guidelines cautions that 'unless accurate records are maintained, the ability to adequately protect vulnerable children may be severely curtailed' (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011, p. 41), it is apparent from the survey results that DLPs need support with record keeping. Furthermore, now that the 2017 Procedures have been in operation for a two-year period, the Department of Education should consider a review of same with a view to making the administrative side of the work more manageable, whilst ensuring records are accurately kept and legislative requirements are met.

The judgement calls, the emotional toll of the role, familiarity with families involved, and the isolation of the role indicate the day-to-day labour of this role for DLPs. 'Having the strength to tackle the difficult issues at a local level' is one of many qualitative responses that indicate the reality of child protection for DLPs on the ground is not as black and white as the procedures might suggest. Certainly, at a personal level, reporting families who are struggling and are under pressure is in no way pleasant, but the rights and best interest of the child have to be paramount. Responses such as 'there are many presentations of emotional abuse and neglect', 'familiarity with all families/reporter easily identifiable', 'the need to report everything that causes concern', 'loneliness of the role' speak of the urgent need for more supports for DLPs including training, a need to focus on implicit and explicit barriers to reporting and more practical supports for DLPs related to the day-to-day challenges they encounter in undertaking the role. This ultimately will ensure further safety and better protection for children.

Conclusion

Child Protection work is demanding, emotional and complex. Its importance cannot be underestimated. The Child Welfare Inequalities Project, which was undertaken to establish child welfare inequalities as a core concept in policy making, practice and research in the UK and internationally highlight this (Bywaters, 2020). What underpins international human rights is the belief that everyone is both equal. The report highlights, however, that there are large-scale inequalities in child welfare. Children in the most deprived 10 per cent of small neighbourhoods in the UK are over ten times more likely to be in foster or residential care or on protection plans than children in the least deprived 10 per cent. For a DLP who is normally the principal of a school, it is one of a multitude of roles in leading a school. It is a critically important role, however, to ensure that children who are vulnerable and need of care and protection can be supported. Findings from this research highlight that whilst there are supports in the DLP role, the challenges are numerous. Given the numerous demands and stresses on school leaders, it is essential that supports in the area of child protection are addressed. DLPs need more comprehensive and additional training in the area, as do their staff. A dedicated support framework for DLPs in the area of child protection needs to be put in place and a framework for interagency working needs to be established. As an initial step, relationships between CFA social workers and schools need to be established so that when DLPs do need to access support for pupils they are not simply cold calling to someone they have never met about very serious issues that may

have far reaching implications for families. The administrative burden should be re-visited. Some of the administrative tasks are very cumbersome. Currently, there is a child protection Inspection model in Ireland. A review of school's practices in the area could be a very constructive way to address the administrative tasks and make the system workable for DLPs. It is imperative that those who are in the frontline with children every day feel comfortable and competent in their role. Ultimately, this role is about children and for children, to ensure the highest standard of care and safety for them.

Supplementary material

[Supplementary material](#) is available at *British Journal of Social Work Journal* online.

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