

Dealing with and Reporting Child Protection Concerns: A Snapshot of Irish Primary Schools

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Abstract

The research reported in this paper aimed to capture the experiences of primary-school teachers at a pivotal time in 2018, following the introduction of statutory obligations on primary schools in Ireland to comply with mandatory child protection reporting requirements. It is based on responses received from 387 designated liaison persons (DLPs) to an online survey emailed to all primary schools. Data were collected on categories of abuse dealt with by schools, and on DLP perceptions of teachers' concerns regarding their new statutory role as "mandated persons" for child protection. Findings of the survey indicate that, in schools, neglect is the most frequently dealt with category of child abuse, followed by emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. DLPs revealed that teachers were most concerned about the implications of reporting for families and about inadequate training on child protection. The paper highlights the complexity for primary teachers of making judgements about child protection and draws attention to the potential for personal consequences that may arise due to their reporting responsibilities. Recommendations include provision of enhanced supports for teachers as mandated persons and a renewed focus on the development of a framework for inter-agency communication and co-operation.

Keywords: Categories of child abuse, primary-school teachers, mandated persons, child protection training, designated liaison persons

Author Note

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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Considering that, outside of the home environment, children spend the majority of their time in school, the framework used by schools to recognise and report child abuse is paramount to ensuring that children are safe and protected. The role of

service providers, including schools, in protecting children, was placed on a statutory footing through the Children First Act 2015, which was commenced in December 2017. These legislative developments place statutory obligations on registered teachers to comply with mandated child protection reporting requirements. The arrangement that all schools must have a designated liaison person (DLP), to oversee child protection issues and be the first point of contact for staff, remains a core feature of child protection procedures (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). Normally, the school principal undertakes this role and ensures that all disclosures of abuse are reported to Tusla, the state's Child and Family Agency, established in 2014 to improve wellbeing and outcomes for children (Tusla, n.d.). The oversight arrangements of schools' child protection practices also highlight the importance of teachers' efficacy in the area of child protection.

The research described in this paper aimed to capture the experiences of DLPs in their primary-school context, as they embarked on a new child protection journey in 2018. Specifically, the research questions sought to identify the kinds of abuse most frequently dealt with in Irish primary schools, and the main concerns of teachers, as reported by DLPs, in relation to their mandated role. The paper begins with a description of four categories of abuse identified in key policy documents: neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. The next section focusses on the role of a DLP in primary schools. An outline of the methodology used in the present study is then presented, followed by a discussion of the findings of the study. The paper concludes with a consideration of policy implications.

Categories of Child Abuse

Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017) is available as a primary reference to all citizens in Ireland in relation to child abuse concerns and obligations. *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017* was published specifically for schools "to give direction and guidance to school authorities and to school personnel in relation to meeting their new statutory obligations...and in the continued implementation of the best practice (non-statutory) guidance set out in *Children First National Guidance 2017*" (Department of Education and Skills, 2017, p. 1). The signs and symptoms of child abuse listed in bullet-point format in both documents are the official guide for schools in determining if a child may be suffering from abuse. Mirroring international practice, and based on research findings (Carr, 2006), the Irish child protection guidelines and procedures outline four main categories of child abuse: neglect, physical, emotional, and sexual. The findings suggest that the long-term health effects of child maltreatment are often due to the cumulative influence of multiple forms of child maltreatment and adverse household characteristics such as alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, and criminal activity (Hunt et al., 2017).

Neglect

A review of literature indicates that neglect has historically been the most frequent category of child abuse recorded by child protection agencies in Ireland, where it is recognised as profoundly harmful (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017), and in other countries (Dubowitz, 2007; Stoltenborgh et al., 2013; Watson, 2005). Neglect has been identified as accounting for more than 40% of maltreatment in the USA, UK, Canada, and Australia (Moran, 2009). In Ireland, similar proportions of reported child abuse were categorised as neglect in 2000 (40%) and in 2008 (38%) (Peyton, 2012).

As child neglect can take many forms and occur in a wide range of contexts, it has proven difficult to define in a way that generalises across all cases (McSherry, 2007). Neglect can be considered as a phenomenon that exists along a continuum of care, ranging from where needs are fully met (excellent care) to where needs are completely unmet (grossly inadequate care). Along the continuum, it is difficult to pinpoint where the inadequacy of care becomes problematic (Dubowitz, 2007). Additionally, some children who are not “at risk” may nonetheless be “in need” (Ferguson & O’Reilly, 2001).

Of the four categories of abuse, child neglect is the most understudied and, as a result, the least understood type of maltreatment. This is commonly referred to as “the neglect of neglect” (Wolock & Horowitz, 1984), with neglect being labelled the “Cinderella” of child welfare topics (Tanner & Turney, 2006). Neglect entails passive ignoring of a child’s needs, which include physical needs for feeding, clothing and shelter; safety needs for protection; emotional needs for nurturance and a secure base; intellectual needs for stimulation, social interaction and conversation; a need for age-appropriate limit setting and discipline; and age-appropriate opportunities for autonomy and independence (Carr, 2006).

Neglect impacts on children’s physical development as well as on their intellectual development, as children who have experienced neglect are often reared in environments where there is little cognitive stimulation or support. One of the biggest challenges in addressing neglect is that other categories of abuse, perhaps perceived as more “serious”, tend to be prioritised. This may happen for a variety of reasons. Service providers may be slower to report neglect than other forms of abuse due to concerns about the current child protection system being able to cope with the volume of neglect cases (Dubowitz, 2007). Neglect may also be under-reported because of its frequent association with poverty so that social workers may be reluctant to pathologise families who are already disadvantaged. Watson (2005) outlines a number of factors that may lead to the under-reporting of child neglect including:

- isolated recurring incidents being considered “trivial”;
- cultural relativism justifying certain behaviour;

- a presumption of “natural love” between parents and their children;
- cultural preference for overwhelming evidence of abuse before action is taken;
- rights of parents, including recognition of parental effort, being prioritised over children’s rights; and
- “case drift”, whereby, in becoming familiar with a family, a social worker adapts to their circumstances so that certain behaviours become “normal” for a family in the social worker’s eyes.

Emotional Abuse

Rees (2010) contends that “emotional abuse lacks the public and political profile of physical and sexual abuse, despite being at their core and frequently their most damaging dimension” (p. 59). In contrast to neglect, emotional abuse involves *intentionally* carrying out some of the following actions with respect to a child:

- regular punishment for minor misdemeanours;
- regular punishment for positive behaviours like smiling, playing, or problem solving;
- regular criticism, ridicule, humiliation, and threats;
- regular rejection, discouragement of attachment, and exclusion from family life;
- frequent blocking of the development of appropriate peer relationships;
- involving a child in drug use, prostitution, or theft; and
- regular attitudinal corruption through encouraging prejudicial hatred of specific groups of people or family members (Carr, 2006).

Adjustment problems and delays in sensory motor, cognitive and language development are common among emotionally abused children. Typically, these children have low self-esteem and find it difficult to control negative mood states such as anger, anxiety, and depression. Longer-term difficulties include making and maintaining intimate peer relationships, and forming stable romantic attachments. Parents who emotionally abuse their children may themselves have had poor early attachment experiences and are more likely than parents on average to suffer from depression, engage in drug abuse, or have an intellectual disability (Carr, 2006).

Exposure of a child to domestic violence is also considered a form of emotional abuse. The effects on children of observing domestic violence are mediated by, for example, the level and severity of violence, the age of the child, and the extent to which protective

factors are present. However, evidence highlights the potentially deleterious impact of domestic violence on children, placing this issue firmly on the child protection agenda (Burns & Lynch, 2008), even where the violence itself is not directed at children.

The definition of emotional abuse in the national guidelines highlights that such abuse may be evident in the “overall relationship between a caregiver and a child” (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017, p. 8). Considering that most signs and symptoms of emotional abuse are not easily observed, coupled with the fact that school personnel may rarely meet parents and caregivers, this is a challenging category of abuse for teachers and other parties to recognise. Effects of the abuse may be displayed in the school environment through a child’s behaviour and/or emotions, but it is difficult to ascertain that the behaviour and/or emotions result from the child being emotionally abused.

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse happens “when someone deliberately hurts a child physically or puts them at risk of being physically hurt. It may occur as a single incident or as a pattern of incidents” (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017, p. 9). Physical abuse may be intra-familial or institutional and may occur alone or in conjunction with sexual abuse, neglect, and/or emotional abuse (Carr, 2006). Globally, the prevalence of reported child physical abuse varies; in high-income countries, the annual prevalence of physical abuse has ranged from 4% to 16% of all reported abuse cases (Norman et al., 2012).

Physical abuse may have both short- and long-term physical and psychological consequences. Physical consequences include scarring, disfigurement, neurological damage, visual and auditory impairment, and failure to grow. A substantial number of physical abuse victims are physically hurt to the point that they still feel pain the next day, are bruised or cut, or have a broken bone (Simon et al., 2018). More long-term consequences may include personality pathology, psychotic symptoms, externalising behaviour such as substance abuse, and the perpetration of violence and internalising behaviour such as depression and anxiety (Swogger et al., 2011). Low self-esteem and low self-efficacy are among the problems highlighted and relationship difficulties may occur with peers. In many cases, children who run away from home have been abused physically. One of the most serious consequences of physical abuse is an increase in risk for suicidal behaviour (Pompili et al., 2009).

Signs of physical abuse may be easier for staff in a school setting to detect than other abuse categories. Reluctance to attend swimming or games classes may raise concerns for teachers (albeit such reluctance may be for benign reasons also). A further cause of concern may arise if a child provides teachers with different accounts about obvious signs of physical injury.

Sexual Abuse

Definitions of sexual abuse vary across countries and may include reference to sexual assault and sexual exploitation. Sexual assault includes, but is not limited to, oral copulation, sexual penetration, masturbation in the presence of a child, and fondling of genitals or intimate parts. Sexual exploitation includes, but is not limited to, preparing, selling or distributing obscene matter, and employing a minor to perform lewd acts (Negriff et al., 2014). A distinction can be made between intra-familial sexual abuse, the most common form being abuse of girls by their fathers, and extra-familial abuse, where the abuser resides outside the family home (Carr, 2006). There is a general consensus that sexual abuse is a complex phenomenon occurring for multiple reasons, in various ways, and in different relationships within families, peer groups, institutions, and communities (Mathews & Collin-Vézina, 2017).

While neglect has been the most frequently reported category of abuse, it is widely recognised that child sexual abuse dominates the other three categories of abuse in arenas such as media commentary and policy-making, and is considered to be the most “serious” form of abuse. This recognition of the seriousness of sexual abuse has been formalised in Ireland through the Children First Act 2015. A threshold of harm exists in Section 2 of the Act for assault, ill-treatment, or neglect of a child, in that the harm must seriously affect or be likely to seriously affect the child’s health, development or welfare. No such threshold exists for sexual abuse, however, reflecting the fact that sexual abuse of a child is deemed harmful in the law regardless of its perceived effects. Research highlights that more girls than boys are sexually abused and that more abusers are male (Carr, 2006). Furthermore, in comparison to the general population, rates of sexual abuse are two to three times higher for children with physical and intellectual disabilities, while children in residential care are also more at risk of abuse. Girls are more commonly abused intra-familially and boys are more commonly abused extra-familially (Carr, 2006).

A history of child sexual abuse has been linked to fear, anxiety, depression, insomnia, obesity, self-destructive behaviour, headaches, aggression, anger, hostility, poor self-esteem, substance abuse, suicide attempts, and sexual maladjustment (Wilson, 2010). Evidence of low self-esteem, poor coping skills, disrupted self-identity, poor interpersonal skills, lack of social support, and increased stress levels has been found in higher prevalence among adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. The quality of relationships with partners tends to be negatively influenced by a history of childhood sexual abuse (Wilson, 2010). Aspects of abuse such as frequency, invasiveness, the amount of physical violence and denigration involved, and the degree to which a child’s trust in an adult was violated can all impact on the level of abuse-related stress experienced (Carr, 2006). Once a problem of sexual abuse becomes entrenched, it may continue as children may fear for their own safety and for the integrity of their family if they disclose abuse. Children may also feel intense guilt and believe they are

responsible for the abuse. Factors such as low self-esteem and low self-efficacy render children vulnerable to repeated acts of abuse (Carr, 2006).

Signs and symptoms of sexual abuse may not be easily observed by school personnel. Furthermore, findings of a systematic literature review on barriers to disclosing sexual abuse in childhood and adolescence highlight that factors such as limited support, perceived negative consequences, and feelings of self-blame, shame, and guilt prevent young people from coming forward and telling (Lemaigre et al., 2017). It is estimated that as many as 60 to 70% of children who have been sexually abused delay disclosure into adulthood (London et al., 2008). Halvorsen et al. (2020) indicate that it takes on average 17 years before victims disclose their abuse. "Providing young people with information about sexual abuse that is developmentally appropriate is pivotal to facilitating disclosures" (Lemaigre et al., 2017, p. 49).

In Ireland, the Stay Safe programme is a mandatory personal safety skills intervention that is taught as part of the Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum (Child Abuse Prevention Programme, 2016). The programme aims to reduce children's vulnerability to abuse, including sexual abuse, and to increase wellbeing and resilience by giving children knowledge, skills, and strategies in an age-appropriate manner. While no data exist on the impact of the programme on facilitating disclosure, the programme content consistently emphasises to children at all stages of primary education to: *say no, get away and tell* (Child Abuse Prevention Programme, 2016).

Recent Trends in Child Protection and Welfare Referrals

Tusla's *Annual Report 2020* (Tusla, 2020) indicates 69,712 child protection and welfare referrals in that year (including all referrals, not just those from schools). Whilst this is an increase of 13,151 from 2019, when there were 56,561 referrals, such an increase may be due largely to a change in Tusla's reporting methodology. In previous years (including 2019), only referrals requiring a social work response were captured in these data, whereas, from 2020 on, all referrals are recorded. Typically, there are over 1,200 new referrals added to Tusla's case management system every week. This system supports the management of over 25,000 active child protection or welfare cases. Data for 2021 extracted from the Tusla Data Hub (Government of Ireland, 2022) indicate that emotional abuse is the category under which most child abuse referrals were made in the last three years, followed by physical abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse. Interestingly, the ranking of these categories remained stable across the three years, suggesting a consistency of concerns for those making referrals. While these data indicate that neglect is no longer the primary referral category, data in the coming years will confirm the stability of this trend.

The Role of a Designated Liaison Person in Primary Schools

The Children First national guidelines were issued in 1999 and revised in 2011, following a number of high-profile child abuse cases (Department of Health and Children, 1999; Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011). These included the Kilkenny incest case (South Eastern Health Board, 1993), the McColgan case (North Western Health Board, 1998), and the Kelly Fitzgerald case (Houses of the Oireachtas & Government of Ireland, 1996), along with several inquiries related to sexual abuse in swimming (Murphy, 1998) and in the Catholic Church (see Murphy et al., 2005; Ryan, 2009). The guidelines were to be applied by health boards, government departments, and organisations providing services to children, including schools. Whilst the position of a DLP has existed in schools in Ireland since 2001, when child protection guidelines for primary schools were first issued (Department of Education and Science, 2001), the introduction of the Children First Act 2015 placed this role on a statutory footing. It is now a mandatory requirement to appoint a DLP as the “relevant person”, pursuant to Section 11 of the Act, for the purposes of undertaking a risk assessment and preparing a child safeguarding statement (Department of Education and Skills, 2017, p. 23). Pursuant to Section 12, failure to furnish a child safeguarding statement to Tusla when requested can result in a non-compliance notice being served, which can be appealed to the District Court. These developments represent the codifying of some DLP responsibilities in legislation. Additionally, teachers as “mandated persons” now have two statutory obligations arising from the Children First Act 2015. First, pursuant to Section 14, teachers must report any knowledge, belief, or suspicion of actual child abuse, or any perceived risk of child abuse, to Tusla. Second, pursuant to Section 16, teachers must assist Tusla with assessments when requested, including through the provision of verbal or written information or reports, attendance at meetings arranged by Tusla, and the production of any document or item requested by Tusla.

The increased emphasis on statutory obligations for teachers should be considered in light of the European Court of Human Rights’ finding in *O’Keeffe v. Ireland [2014]*.¹ Specifically, the Court found that the Irish state’s failure to protect a 9-year-old girl from sexual abuse perpetrated by a lay teacher in 1973 was a breach of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (prohibition on inhuman and degrading treatment). Additionally, the Court found that it was an inherent obligation of a government to protect children from ill-treatment, especially in a primary-school context. It held that in continuing to entrust the management of primary education to private bodies, without putting in place any mechanism of effective state control to mitigate the risks of such abuse occurring, the Irish state had failed in this obligation. It held that the mechanisms in place, namely reporting child abuse away from state authorities and instead to school managers (generally a local priest), was ineffective.

1 <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre?i=002-9263>

It is now the responsibility of all school boards of management to appoint a “senior full-time member of the registered teaching staff” as the DLP (Department of Education and Skills, 2017, p. 22). The DLP is “the person nominated by the board of management, as the designated liaison person for the school when dealing with Tusla - the Child and Family Agency, An Garda Síochána and other parties in connection with allegations of and/or concerns about child abuse” (Department of Education and Skills, 2017, Glossary of Terms). Whilst it is not a requirement that the school principal must become the DLP, the procedures specify that the “DLP will normally be the principal” (p. 22). Further, should someone other than the principal be appointed as DLP, the school authority “should put in place arrangements to ensure that the DLP will keep the principal appropriately informed of child protection matters” (p. 22). Essentially, the DLP is the key resource person for all staff members who have child protection concerns. In the official guidelines, *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017), a comprehensive outline is provided of the reporting procedures pertaining to child protection that must be followed by each school, but responsibility for ensuring that the requirements are followed “correctly” and “promptly” rests with the DLP. Furthermore, the updated legislation on child protection in Ireland now recognises all teachers registered with the Teaching Council as mandated persons for reporting child protection concerns. Accordingly, the DLP must see to it that joint reporting (by the DLP and mandated teacher) is conducted, to meet both the legislative requirements and the DLP’s responsibilities outlined in the official guidelines (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). Research previously conducted highlights the isolation and sole responsibility of the role of DLP, when the realities of “supporting a hurt child and liaising with staff, families and outside agencies are taken on board” (Nohilly, 2018, p. 22).

Given the challenges faced by primary teachers in their role as mandated persons, and the growth in the number of referrals to Tusla, there is a need for further investigation of what is happening in schools on foot of the new legislative requirements. The study described in the remainder of the paper explored some of the issues involved using an online survey completed by DLPs to examine teachers’ experiences of child protection in primary schools in Ireland.

Methodology

Following ethical approval obtained for the study from the researchers’ third-level institution, DLPs in every primary school in Ireland were invited by e-mail in March 2019 to participate in an online survey, administered through Google Forms. An information note explaining the purpose of the research was included. The survey was designed to collect information about the experiences of DLPs, following updates to procedures and legislation in the area of child protection, introduced in late 2017. The supports available to DLPs and the challenges of the role were a particular focus

of the study and are reported elsewhere (see Nohilly & Treacy, 2022). Additionally, participants were asked which category of child abuse they had dealt with most often in the school environment. Feedback from a pilot study conducted with two experienced DLPs informed modifications to both the structure and detail of questions. In total, the survey contained 28 items, with eight open-ended questions included. Table 1 provides an overview of the focus of the items.

TABLE 1

Topics Addressed in Survey Items

Item	Topic Addressed
1-4	Demographic information about the school and pupils
5-9	Participants' characteristics and experience
10-11	Familiarity with and implementation of child protection procedures in school
12-14	Role of the DLP in school
15-18	Mandatory reporting for teachers
19-23	Child protection training
24-28	Supports and challenges in dealing with child protection in school

The e-mail addresses of primary schools were obtained from the Department of Education's 2017/2018 school database, sourced from the National Schools Annual Census of the 30th September 2017, which lists all schools in receipt of Department of Education funding. The survey was e-mailed to 3,248 primary schools including 3,111 mainstream schools and 137 special schools, with a request to share the survey with the DLP. Of the 3,248 e-mails, 3,221 were delivered (the remaining 27 were not delivered due to incomplete or obsolete addresses). In all, 387 DLPs responded to the survey, yielding a response rate of 12.0% of the number of e-mails delivered (or 11.9% of the number of e-mails sent).

The survey involved a fixed mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The primary data collection approach is quantitative, using closed questions and rating scales. Open-ended questions, providing opportunity for elaboration, constitute a secondary, qualitative approach, embedded within the quantitative framework. This design enabled the integration of findings and drawing of inferences using both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). Analysis of the quantitative data is based on descriptive statistics using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26). Qualitative data were analysed according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for thematic analysis, where the data were coded, codes were developed into potential themes, themes were reviewed using data extracts, and a set of themes was finalised.

Results and Discussion

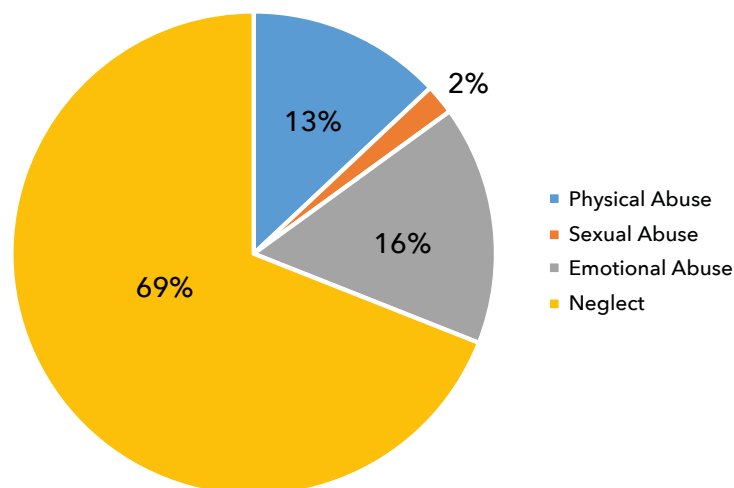
Findings are presented under two main headings - the categories of child abuse with which schools deal most frequently, and teachers' concerns (as perceived by DLPs) about their role as mandated persons.

Categories of Abuse Presenting in Schools

Respondents/DLPs were invited to indicate which of four categories of abuse they had dealt with most frequently in their school. As can be seen in Figure 1, a large majority, almost 70.0%, of DLPs, indicated that neglect was the most frequently dealt with category of abuse. Much smaller proportions of DLPs, respectively 15.8% and 12.9%, indicated that emotional abuse and physical abuse were the most frequently dealt with categories of abuse in their schools. Very few, only 1.8%, reported that sexual abuse was the category of abuse dealt with most frequently. This finding is consistent with the literature indicating that children who are sexually abused generally delay reporting into adulthood with a number of delaying barriers identified (Lemaigre et al., 2017; London et al., 2008).

FIGURE 1

Percentage of Schools That Deal Most Frequently With Each Category of Abuse



These findings align with international trends in relation to the prevalence of neglect in child abuse cases (Jud et al., 2016), but differ from Tusla's recent figures, which, as previously discussed, indicate emotional abuse as the category under which most child abuse referrals were made in each of the previous three years, followed by physical abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse.

There may be several reasons for the discrepancy between Tusla's figures and the findings reported here and elsewhere. First, it may be possible that schools make more referrals for neglect than any other category of abuse, and differ in this respect from other entities or individuals who also make child abuse referrals. Second, referrals to Tusla that are categorised as neglect may be captured as welfare concerns, as opposed to child protection concerns. Third, the survey question asked DLPs to indicate the category of abuse with which their school *dealt* most often, not the category under which they make most referrals. It is possible that, in dealing with abuse such as neglect, a school may determine that the concern does not meet the threshold of harm provision in the Children First Act 2015 and so does not require a referral to Tusla. Such nuances require further investigation in order to capture fully the extent of neglect-related concerns in schools.

DLP Reflections on Teachers' Mandated Reporting Role

DLPs were asked to identify any concerns that teachers in their schools had expressed in relation to their mandated responsibilities regarding child protection arising from the Children First Act 2015. They were presented with five potential issues of concern: "recognising abuse", "communicating with parents", "implications of reporting for families", "lack of training", and "other". The "other" option provided qualitative data opportunities, further discussed below. For each option, DLPs could indicate if their responses related to *all teachers*, *some teachers* or *no teachers* in their school. Of the 387 respondents, 380 provided responses to this survey question. In addition to seven respondents not engaging with the question at all, additional "missing" data exist across each of the concerns presented, where one or more parts of the question were not completed. Analysis of the missing data suggests that some respondents may have left a blank assuming that it represented the *no teachers* response option. This should be borne in mind when reviewing the results presented in Table 2, where the percentage of responses is calculated relative to the total number of responses for each concern.

TABLE 2*Teacher Concerns About Their Role as Mandated Persons*

Concern	DLPs who indicated these concerns n=380	All Teachers		Some Teachers		No Teachers ^a		All & Some Teachers Combined	
	n	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Implications of Reporting for Families	376	181	48.1	149	39.6	46	12.2	330	87.8
Lack of Training	372	174	46.7	139	37.3	59	15.9	313	84.1
Communicating with Parents	369	138	37.4	187	50.7	44	11.9	325	88.1
Recognising Abuse	357	70	19.6	190	53.2	97	27.2	260	72.8
Other ^b	119	42	~	15	~	62	~	57	~

Note. At least part of this question was answered by 380/387 respondents.

^a Figures in this column may be under-reported, where respondents left blanks but may have intended to indicate *no teachers*.

^b Indicates that percentage data are not provided, as less than one third of respondents selected "other".

Implications of Reporting for Families

Nearly half (48.1%) of all DLPs indicated that the implications of reporting child abuse for families was a concern for *all teachers* in their school. When the data for *all teachers* and *some teachers* are combined, this percentage rises to 87.8%, similar to that (88.1%) reported by DLPs for *all teachers* and *some teachers* combined in relation to concern about communicating with parents. These findings highlight the importance of home-school relationships and the extent to which teachers take seriously the impact of reporting abuse on children and their families.

The survey findings do not give any indication of whether such concerns influence the decisions of teachers, including DLPs, in any way. The literature highlights a number of barriers associated with preventing or hindering the reporting of abuse. Bourke and Maunsell (2016) detail both explicit and implicit barriers that may impact on teachers' ability to report abuse. Explicit barriers refer to lack of knowledge or awareness of child protection issues, of the signs of abuse that cause reasonable grounds for concern, and of the procedures to follow, including legal responsibilities, when abuse is detected. Implicit barriers refer to individual teachers' belief systems about child protection and abuse and about children and children's rights. Bourke and Maunsell highlight that

implicit barriers are less tangible than explicit barriers, whereby individuals may not even be aware of such barriers. When appointing DLPs and other mandated persons, it is therefore important to consider that individuals may have their own unique implicit theories about child protection and abuse, which, in turn, may impact on decisions relating to the reporting of child abuse cases.

Lack of Training

Lack of training is the next most common concern reported for *all teachers* in a school, with almost 46.7% of DLPs indicating this. Combining the data for *all teachers* and *some teachers*, this percentage rises to 84.1%, making it the third most frequently cited concern of teachers, according to DLPs.

Since the full implementation of all sections of the Children First Act 2015, on December 11, 2017, opportunities for face-to-face teacher training have been limited. The current provision by the Department of Education is a one-day, face-to-face training event, available only to DLPs and deputy DLPs. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected training provision since 2020. There is no whole-staff, externally facilitated training available from the Department of Education, and the continuous professional development opportunities for teachers are unmoderated online courses (Treacy & Nohilly, 2020). It is unsurprising that lack of training is of such concern amongst primary-school teachers, according to the DLPs who completed this survey (Buckley, 2011). The aforementioned training events for DLPs and deputy DLPs “focus solely on the explicit and tangible knowledge of signs, symptoms, policies, and procedures” (Treacy & Nohilly, 2020, p. 4). While Bourke and Maunsell (2016) argue that training should aim to target both implicit and explicit barriers to reporting, Treacy and Nohilly (2020) highlight the need not only for expanded teacher training in Ireland, but for effective, regular, ongoing child protection training for all staff. Access to such training should support teachers in both detecting and reporting child protection concerns.

Communicating With Parents

More than one third (37.4%) of DLPs indicated that communicating with parents regarding child protection is a concern of *all teachers* in their school. This is the third most common concern reported by DLPs for *all teachers*. When the data for *all teachers* and *some teachers* are combined, some 88.1% of DLPs identified communicating with parents as a concern for staff in their school regarding DLP obligations, similar to the proportion (87.8%) that expressed concern relating to the implications of reporting for families.

Recognising Abuse

Almost one in five DLPs (19.6%) indicated that recognising abuse was a concern for *all teachers* in their school. This proportion increases to 72.8% after combining the data for *all teachers* and *some teachers*. Concerns about failure to recognise abuse can also impact on concerns about reporting the abuse. Over-reporting can adversely affect home-school relationships but under-reporting can point to failures by school staff in recognising and responding to genuine cases of abuse (Parker et al., 2021). Whilst recognising abuse is a somewhat less common concern for *all teachers* in a school compared to other concerns identified in this research (relating to the implications of reporting abuse for families and the lack of training for teachers), questions may be asked regarding the relationship between low levels of confidence in recognising abuse and lack of training. Adequate, tailored professional development, provided on an ongoing basis, could help to parse teachers' concerns about the implications of reporting for families and to alleviate their concerns in relation to both recognising abuse and communicating abuse concerns to parents. Furthermore, such provision would provide important opportunities to explore the implicit factors identified by Bourke and Maunsell (2016), such as teachers' belief systems about child abuse and children's rights.

Additional Themes

DLPs had an opportunity to identify additional concerns of teachers about child protection issues in school settings through the "other" option provided in the survey question. In all, 57 qualitative responses were available for analysis. The themes most prevalent in this "other" response category relate to teachers having to make a judgement about a potential child protection issue (32), lack of training opportunities for teachers (26), and personal implications for teachers (21).

Some overlap exists between teachers' concerns about making a judgement call (including a potentially incorrect one) and their role in relation to recognising abuse. The judgement concern centred on the amount of evidence teachers felt they should have before pursuing a query, particularly in borderline cases, as reflected in the following response examples:

Some teachers feel that the nature of 'abuse' is hard to understand when it is very borderline, for example, parents having a bad day and overheard to shout at their children, or distinguishing between a child's perspective on parents who upset them, and the parents' point of view

Trying to identify whether certain situations warrant reporting

The black and white cases are easy to manage but it is the issues that arise that are in the grey areas that cause the most stress. Teachers don't feel qualified to make these type of judgement calls

Mirroring the quantitative data, a lack of training opportunities was highlighted by DLPs as being of particular concern to teachers, with references to the inadequacy of “teach yourself” days and pre-recorded webinars:

Lack of training - very quick to impose and introduce new guidelines but not enough hands on, face-to-face in-service - webinars and 'teach yourself' days don't cut the mustard

All teachers are concerned with following the correct procedures in relation to paperwork. The training that teachers received is completely inadequate. This training should be provided to whole staffs at least annually given how much time we spend with children

Arguably aligned with concerns about communicating with parents, the potential personal implications for teachers, as they navigate child protection in a local context, also featured in the feedback from DLPs:

Teachers are concerned that they have little protection when they have to make a report

The repercussions in a small community last for years. Teachers are also terrified of making an error in the process

Implications for self and property, as a result of reporting

Analysis of these qualitative data suggests that the decision-making process in the school environment in relation to abuse cases is complex. Direct disclosures of abuse by children, considered as more “straightforward”, may be somewhat less challenging for schools compared to situations that rely more on “judgement” calls from teachers, particularly those involving categories of neglect and emotional abuse, the latter being difficult to identify in a school environment. It is clear from the reports of DLPs that there is considerable discomfort on the part of teachers relating not only to concerns about whether a decision is correct but also to a fear of possible repercussions for themselves.

Conclusion and Implications

Detecting and reporting child abuse is complex work. The complexity is intensified in a school environment for two key reasons. First, whilst the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017) clearly indicate the steps teachers should take in responding to, and reporting, concerns about child abuse, this research study highlights teachers' concerns regarding their ability to first recognise such abuse. Considering that neglect is the category of child abuse most frequently dealt with by schools (as indicated by almost seven in ten DLPs), and that it is difficult to pinpoint when inadequacy of care becomes problematic (Dubowitz, 2007), it is unsurprising that teachers may find making judgement calls in "borderline" and "grey area" cases challenging and stressful. This finding underscores the need for teachers to be supported in their role of monitoring signs and symptoms of neglect in the school context. Second, teaching is a relational activity whereby relationships in a school environment matter deeply. Reflecting this reality, the present research indicates that teachers are concerned about the implications of reporting for families, their role in communicating with parents about child abuse, and potential personal consequences should they make a referral.

A key implication of this research is the requirement for ongoing, face-to-face education for all school personnel in the area of child protection. An important concern of teachers, as indicated by DLPs, is a lack of training and, allied to that, the inadequacy of online training. This finding is consistent with other results from the same survey, in which DLPs indicated low satisfaction rates with child protection training, an over-reliance on online training, and called for expanded training to include all school staff on a regular and ongoing basis (Treacy & Nohilly, 2020). The content of any such training needs to consider both "implicit" and "explicit" obstacles that may impact on reporting. In addition to addressing procedural requirements, such as the role of school personnel, reporting procedures, and the role of DLP, all school-related child protection training should include making judgement calls in "borderline" cases; the implications of reporting for families; communicating with parents; and potential personal consequences for teachers.

As the title of this paper suggests, the research described in this study provides a snapshot, rather than a complete picture, of the concerns of teachers following the introduction of mandatory reporting of child protection issues in Irish primary schools. While the online survey methodology yielded an important opportunity for such concerns to be identified and highlighted, the survey response was limited by the self-selected nature of the sample, which may have resulted in an over-representation of schools with more negative child protection experiences. This, together with the fact that DLPs in just over one in ten primary schools took part in

the survey, suggests that there is considerable scope for further investigation of the issues involved, possibly in the context of the tailored professional training called for in the paper.

Finally, the issue of strengthening inter-agency work and collaboration between schools and Tusla warrants consideration. Notwithstanding the challenges that social workers, as well as teachers, including DLPs, face in terms of demands on work time, caseloads, and limited opportunities for meetings, developing a framework in relation to this collaborative work would ultimately support vulnerable children. It could also lead to greater mutual understanding - for Tusla staff, of how schools operate, and, for school staff, of the culture within which Tusla carries out its work - to support the breakdown of any barriers and misconceptions between these organisations. While the Children's Acts Advisory Board (CAAB) was established in Ireland in 2007, under the Child Care (Amendment) Act with a role in promoting enhanced inter-agency co-operation, it was dissolved in 2011. Returning to a point on which this paper began - that, outside of the home, children spend the majority of their time in school - a renewed focus on inter-agency collaboration between schools and Tusla will serve to ensure that the spirit of the national guidelines is endorsed, by putting children first.

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