

Addressing concerns about child maltreatment in schools: A brief research report on social work involvement in reporting processes

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: School-based social workers (SWiS) in Aotearoa New Zealand work alongside teachers and principals to improve child wellbeing. The SWiS experience in addressing concerns about possible child abuse and neglect (CAN) is under-researched.

METHOD: In the first phase of the project, the authors undertook semi-structured interviews with 20 SWiS to explore their experiences of how school professionals addressed CAN.

FINDINGS: Some considerable variation in making formal notifications of concerns to the statutory agency was found. In some schools SWiS made all the notifications, in others none, and in some schools the process was variable. Stigma associated with child abuse was reported as a factor in attitudes towards reporting. School-based social workers reported the need for better education and policy to guide schools to address CAN.

IMPLICATIONS: More joint education is needed to ensure a common knowledge base and better interprofessional work. There is potential for SWiS to support this work if better resourced.

KEYWORDS: child abuse and neglect; school-based social work; reporting child welfare concerns

More than three decades have passed since the initial pilot of the “social workers in schools” programme (SWiS) (Belgrave, 2000; Belgrave et al., 2002; Hollis-English & Selby, 2014; Selby, English, & Bell, 2011). At the time of writing there are significant proposed legislative and structural changes to the statutory child welfare system, and child protection in general in Aotearoa New Zealand. Given these changes, it was deemed useful to examine the nature of the work and resultant successes and challenges that SWiS are encountering. New legislation

in 2014 positioned teachers, along with other professionals in the so-called children’s workforce, as significant in a collaborative response to CAN (Vulnerable Children Act 2014).

Little research on schools’ approaches to concerns about CAN has been carried out in Aotearoa New Zealand. Rodriguez (2002) reported that, in the absence of mandatory reporting laws, Aotearoa New Zealand teachers and other professionals make decisions about reporting based on subjective

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judgment and knowledge of situational factors, often reflective of negative attitudes towards mandatory reporting. Discussion of thresholds for reporting is noted in literature as a significant concern (see for example, Levi, Crowell, Walsh, & Dellasega, 2015; Levi & Portwood, 2011). There is a notable grey area between the responsibility to report and the perceived absence of reasonable grounds, giving rise to confusion and ambiguity. Professionals feel that “concerns about the extensive financial and emotional costs of unsubstantiated claims must be weighed against the value of protecting the lives of countless children in danger” (Rodriguez, 2002, p. 321). Beliefs about the relative likelihood of disruptive social service involvement, inferior social work services, or harm to the family as a result of reporting were also found to play a significant role. Rodriguez (2002) recommended that training should focus particularly on neglect, and research should examine the actual impact of child protection notifications on families, given teachers’ preoccupation with the potential for negative impacts. However, change has come without substantial training or new resources and the role of schools remains under-researched.

This brief research account reports on one aspect of a larger study of school professionals’ approaches to child maltreatment, one which includes interviews with school principals (to be reported elsewhere). The article focuses on the experiences of SWiS in relation to schools reporting concerns about CAN.

Given the brevity of this research report format, the extant literature cannot be reported in any depth. Readers are referred to Beddoe, de Haan, and Joy (2018) for further detail.

METHOD

A qualitative study design was selected as an appropriate approach to allow the under-researched aspects of schools’ roles in responding to CAN to be explored in detail.

The selected method of semi-structured interviews enabled the researchers to explore the experiences and perceptions of SWiS about schools’ responses to CAN. The study received ethical approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics committee. Social workers were invited to participate via an invitation sent out by the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers. All those who responded received an information sheet and consent form prior to the interview. Twenty telephone/Skype interviews of between 30 and 90 minutes’ duration were conducted using a semi-structured interview method. The interviews traversed four broad topics: participants’ perceptions of their readiness to work in a school environment; their views about the knowledge and skills needed; the strengths and challenges of practising social work in a school setting (Beddoe, 2017); and the processes followed by the schools when concerns were raised about a child. Saturation was noted at 20 interviews, with clear, consistent narratives having been identified. Interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo11 (QSR International). Analysis was driven by the main questions, with developing themes then explored across the whole data set for linked concepts.

Of the 20 interview participants, 11 identified as NZ European, five as Māori and four as other European. Fifteen were female and five were male. The age range was: 31–40, n= 4; 41–50 n=8; 51+ n= 8. All interview participants held social work qualifications and all were registered, 16 holding full registration while the four new graduates held provisional registration. Efforts were made to recruit younger social workers and those from Pasifika ethnicities but these did not generate more offers. The social workers practised in a mix of rural and urban schools across Aotearoa New Zealand. Pseudonyms are used to identify participants and potentially identifying information removed.

The focus of this article is the social workers’ perceptions of, and involvement in, the reporting of concerns about CAN. Given our

over-arching interest in schools' responses to CAN reporting of children for whom concern was felt about their wellbeing, the main questions asked were:

- In school settings what processes are typically in place for action when a classroom teacher has concerns a child is experiencing abuse or neglect?
- What was/is your role when this happens?

FINDINGS

In response to our question about typical processes when concerns were raised, we found some considerable variation in the role of making formal notifications (reports) of concern to the Ministry for Children Oranga Tamariki (MCOT). In some schools SWiS made all the notifications, in others none. Some schools varied on a case-by-case basis. School-based social workers reported the need for better education and policy to guide schools to address CAN. Significant issues gleaned from the analysis were the variability of reporting processes, misunderstanding of the role of SWiS in reports of concern about CAN, and the presence of some aspects of stigma associated with CAN referrals and the perception of negative outcomes.

Reports of concern

Alison described three distinct responses when school staff held concerns about CAN. She provided an excellent summary of what we found in the responses to our question about reporting process. In summary (and in her words) these are:

1. There are few schools that have very good pastoral care systems that do really kick off with all the services that they have in the school and they allocate [which professional] will address the situation.
2. There are more schools that I know of where it all just sits with the principal or the DP and they make the decision.

Not always do they consult with the social worker, sometimes they think that every case needs to go straight to Child, Youth and Family (the statutory child protection agency, CYF) and they do that immediately.

3. They don't [refer] because they've had such bad experiences. In their view, the experience with CYF hasn't been favourable for the child. (Alison)

Principals in schools were often gatekeepers and this at times created some interesting dynamics. The protocol in most schools meant that teachers had little autonomy and were obliged to "go through the hierarchy," although Debbie felt there was a distinction where "older teachers or the more experienced teachers would talk directly to the SWiS [who would then] fill out the referral form with them and then take it from there."

Barbara found that some teachers would talk openly to her, in preference to going to the principal. Their rationale was that "that way if the principal doesn't allow it to go further they know they've raised their concerns with me." Barbara formalised the process that teachers could talk to her openly, because some teachers had earlier been ringing her with their concerns at home in the evening "and I needed to nip that in the bud." The SWiS participants favoured some level of consultation as it avoided teachers taking on "pastoral responsibilities...without the adequate training that social workers have" (Elsie). Having the option to have an informal conversation with a SWiS "kind of relieves that pressure from the staff...and allows that checking in point that actually addresses concerns about 'am I doing the right thing?' or 'I am a bit worried about this child'" (Elsie).

SWiS often have a relationship with three or more schools and report variability in decision-making across different schools, and in one case, even within a school. Chrissie felt that the relationship with the family was pivotal: "The better the relationship the less likely they are to make a report of concern."

If the child concerned was not currently on her caseload then principals would generally not typically choose to involve her.

Some SWiS had little involvement in notifications by choice, because they did not want to become scapegoats for involving CYF:

I will help the principal do it because we sometimes get used as a scapegoat and I won't tolerate that because that's not fair on me and my families or my role because, for instance, people will see something and then they will say, "oh can you put in a notification?" And I go, "ok I said I don't know whether you realise it but you have a legal obligation because...you are telling me and there are some serious allegations here but I haven't seen any of it [myself] so it is all hearsay", but what I then do is help with the [referral] and follow up to see how the child is. (Cindy)

Jackie also felt some resistance to making all the notifications herself: "you know, I might not have been involved that much and actually the school could offer more information to CYF" (Jackie).

In Jessica's school, teachers had been fearful of making notifications because of the fact that "reporting is going to create additional stress for families: 'I get that as a SWiS...it is hard to make that call to put that family inside the CYF system, you know, but they know it's necessary.... Teachers, I think they are getting better, but I think the hesitation has been around fear'" (Jessica).

Misunderstanding the social work role

Participants commonly reported that not all school professionals have a good understanding of the child protection legislation and how statutory services work. SWiS often find themselves brokering the relationship between the school and CYF, for example, why some notifications are actioned and others not. Cindy felt that an important aspect of the role is

explaining the process of reporting in order to avoid teachers becoming involved in processes they do not understand and find uncomfortable, for example: "[some] don't want anything to do with it because, you know, they are working with these children day in and day out." Raising teacher awareness of the legal process and, indeed, the social work process was vital to the SWiS role and Debbie noted an "undeniable tension between education and social work models," going on to say "I don't know whether that is resolvable. But I certainly tried." One of Debbie's main strategies was to ensure she went to staff meetings:

[I talked] about some of the successes, some of the things that were happening in the social work world, some of the processes that needed to happen. I also talked about the legislation, [our] code of ethics, and they weren't particularly interested, but I needed to...say "look this is what defines how I do what I do. I don't arbitrarily make a choice as to whether I'm going to take this course of action."

When it worked well there was open communication between the principal and the SWiS and both parties were aware of the work being done and my involvement of statutory child protection. Problems arose when this was not the case. June reported a recent incident where the principal had given her the information available about a child and asked her advice: "I thought, so 'yay finally you are getting this.' But [then] I bump into someone from CYF because I used to work there and they will say 'oh we saw your principal the other day because we were visiting [child]' and I didn't have a clue." Marie also reported the same problem: "I haven't always been told when school was approached by CYF...I only found out later which I see as a missed opportunity to work together" (Marie). SWiS concerns about these and similar incidents underlined the potential undermining of their relationship with the families they were working with, when they were unable to prepare families for referral. In addition, not being consulted, or at least informed,

of notifications reduced effective working relationships between CYF and the school.

Need for better knowledge of abuse and violence

In a study of health professionals and teachers in the Netherlands (Schols, de Ruiter, & Ory, 2013), participants recognised that social and cultural norms influence working definitions of normative behaviour and therefore what constituted abusive behaviour. Thus, definitional understandings of what constitutes abuse and neglect can be ambiguous. While professionals were cognisant of the different types of abuse, this did not correspond to knowledge about signs, rates, and impacts of these types of abuse. Risk to children was often underestimated, and individual situations were justified or explained depending on familiarity with the child and family, frequently resulting in inaction. In this present Aotearoa New Zealand study, the SWiS noted both minimisation and ambivalence (see also Beddoe et al., 2018). Chrissie, for example, had encountered several different attitudes towards possible maltreatment:

sometimes it is not recognising it, sometimes it will be "it is not our business," sometimes it will be "well if they are turning up to school being fed and clean clothing and they are clean that's all we need to know about" or "well it's not our job we're here to teach."

Resistance to being aligned to CYF work features also:

a principal said "we would be doing CYF's job if we contacted them, you know." One example was there was quite an awful domestic violence situation and mum kept going back to dad and CYF just said "look please contact us if you get wind of mum going back to dad" and the comment was from the principal was "well we're not doing their job" and "Oh I've met him and he's quite a nice guy." Well maybe

he is when you meet him but he is not a nice person when he's being domestically violent to his partner. (Chrissie)

Jen provided an example of a new teacher who had a child in his class who was coming to school every day without any shoes or appropriate clothing. Instead of talking to the principal or the SWiS, the teacher began buying shoes and books, and had not considered whether there might be other underlying factors in play.

There were challenges for SWiS in knowing that there were children who were facing major problems but there were school staff who were not willing to acknowledge that. Linda noted that, rather than providing wrap-around support, teachers, "just went 'nah, they are just bad, they are just naughty.'" Another example related to a situation where children were punished for sexualised behaviour, seeing it as bad behaviour rather than as a potential sign of abuse. Sal recognised that this was complex:

there is a fine line between them being able to recognise that these behaviours are not just naughty there's obviously something going on...where is the line [between] "ok I can deal with this or do I refer it to the social worker."

Knowledge about appropriate process was also an important component of the SWiS educational role in schools. This might involve discouraging school professionals from interviewing children: "knowing how much you need to know and where the line is and you stop interviewing and stop questioning is really important." Debbie suggested that school professionals need education about how to deal with abuse disclosures because of potential problems with how evidence was gained.

Impact of child abuse stigma

Webster, O'Toole, O'Toole, and Lucal (2005) reported that, when teachers described problematic relationships with statutory

agencies, teachers' attitudes about reporting and their consequent use of professional discretion differed. Where child protection services were poorly regarded teachers often used discretion rather than automatic adherence to mandatory reporting requirements. Stigma associated with the presence of child maltreatment in a school emerged as a potential problem. For example, participants noted that some schools were resistant to having a SWiS because they wanted to be seen as a very successful school and "they didn't want anyone to know that there were children at risk or that they made notifications to CYF" (Kate).

Alison noted that the "biggest shadow that SWiS carry around" is that they are social workers – "don't talk to them, you know," – so it was part of the job to build relationships with the school and the wider community to change this negative perception, when in reality school social workers are not automatically involved in formal notifications, or even the decision to report. Sam felt that SWiS social workers were often disadvantaged because, "historically many schools have had a fairly negative unsatisfactory relationship with CYF." In his view involving managers or liaisons from CYF has helped break down some of the barriers between the school and CYF and as a result they realise that they can also discuss "worries" not just notifications:

...it is really an educational thing that CYF are doing which I think is really important because there is a fair bit of stigma attached which needs to be changed and schools to feel really comfortable and readily contacting CYF. (Sam)

Sometimes the resistance was based on a concern that having a school-based social worker was signalling that the school had undesirable social problems:

...in the first school that I was in there was quite a lot of resistance to having a social worker and I think a lot of teachers felt...that their school was seen as a bad

school or that we would be uplifting kids and intruding on their teaching. (Patrick)

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study are consistent with international literature which has noted challenges posed by differing thresholds for reporting and stigma-based ambivalence about involving statutory child protection. Stigma about child abuse in schools and the involvement of social work and potentially, statutory intervention is potentially problematic if it leaves children at risk. Ambivalence and lack of clear understanding of thresholds for reporting are complicated by the nature of schools' knowledge of families. Familiarity with the family seems to influence whether they monitor before reporting, and for how long. A prevailing theme is the antipathy of some school professionals towards statutory child protection. This reported stigma is likely a consequence of the generally class-riven, surveillant nature of child protection discourse in wider society. The association with poverty, criminality and "dysfunction" (Hyslop, 2017) likely contributes to school ambivalence and is regularly bolstered by government policy which emphasises the surveillance of the vulnerable (Hyslop, 2013). The extent to which this stigma influences school decision-making about reporting concerns is an important area for further study and subsequent recommendations for amelioration.

While this is a small study and the interviews conducted during a time of great uncertainty in the sector, there is clearly work to be done to build relationships between parts of the child welfare system. SWiS practitioners recognised these dynamics as potentially harmful and were in general agreement with Webster et al. (2005) that the focus should be on improving cooperative efforts between schools and child protective services, as this is more viable in the current economic climate than intensive improvement of the child protection system.

While the 2014 legislation requires greater responsibility for vulnerable children across

education, health and welfare, it seems that, at the very least, some joint education for teachers and social workers is needed to ensure a common knowledge and language base (Levi & Portwood, 2011) to enable better interprofessional work. SWiS are in a good position to offer education about child protection processes and to act as consultants for teachers (Beddoe et al., 2018). Poor relationships between parts of the sector are more than unfortunate and recognition of the huge potential for SWiS requires action and resources.

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