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ABSTRACT

In Ontario, Canada, the agency which has the foremost obligation for the discovery and amelioration of child abuse and neglect is Children's Aid. Elementary schools are the target of much child-abuse detection. This article develops the perceptions of a representative group of 10 workers in Children's Aid on the schools relative to child abuse. The survey was conducted by phone in an hour long three-way interview. It focused on the ways that school people facilitate the case worker's job and/or blocked the investigation and disposition of cases. For the most part respondents saw school people as good humans, observers, monitors and supporters of Children's Aid. But, nonetheless, educators may also project their initial and long-term anxieties onto the situation. They may have unrealistic expectations for rapid and complete resolution of the problem demanding that the child be "rescued from abuse." School people can be defensive out of insecurity and thus require support. Children's Aid workers need to tell school people they value their assistance. Both school people and Children's Aid seem to be addressing and effectively grappling with the problem. Therefore necessary changes need to be incremental and communicative rather than more fundamental and structural. (JBJ)

Children's Aid and the Schools

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Child abuse and/or neglect is one of the leading social problems facing contemporary societies. In fact, abuse of children has gone on throughout history and has been unquestionably one of the most serious social issues ever since histories of human behavior have been recorded. Leaders in many countries have come to recognize this, including in Canada, and have organized governmental (usually public health or social services) structures to deal with the problem. In Ontario, the agency is Children's Aid which has the foremost obligation for the discovery and amelioration of child abuse and neglect.

For the obvious reason that many children are in elementary schools, they are the target of much child-abuse detection. Within the school, teachers and principals and their assistants are the key reporters in child-abuse discovery. They then transmit their suspicions to Children's Aid. This article develops the perceptions of a representative group of ten workers in Children's Aid on the schools relative to child abuse. The group came from all over the province as well as from large cities and small towns and was made up of both male and female respondents.

The survey was conducted by phone in a three-way interview of about an hour each with the two investigators acting as both questioners and notetakers in 1989. It focused on the ways that school people facilitate the case worker's job and/or blocked the investigation and disposition of cases. This study is part of a larger inquiry involving Michigan as well as Ontario in both the schools and among the social services. There were no notable differences between the two places as the perceptions of both sets of social workers were nearly identical in themes and examples.

Children's Aid may be called to the school to investigate, determine and possibly "apprehend" (remove) an abuse victim. Therefore, Children's Aid is in a unique position to assess its role in relation to the schools. The following is a discussion of the school's response to children at risk and the school's role in their remediation as seen by these respondents. In this paper, there is no attempt to identify the respondents except to say that they were came from all ten of the Ontario informants.

School people have a long-standing generally-recognized reputation of devotion to children. It is no surprise, therefore, that these social workers in

Children's Aid have a basic appreciation of the heightened sensitivity of educators to children and their families. One informant observes that, "I've seen principals and vice principals with the little ones on their laps with almost tears coming to their eyes. They're really there for the kids." And school people desire to help the children help themselves as another informant asserts. These people "want to understand and (they) want to empower children." School people know kids and, for the most part, love them. This is exactly the way they are seen by most of the respondents in the present study.

For instance, as one respondent noted in a high profile case, the school reported that a girl "had severe bruises on her face. The school immediately reporting the bruising." This report was very important in the settlement of the case which we knew "had been going on for about five years. The mother had a prior history she had made threats. For example she had said, 'God damn you stop doing that' (outside the school) and then beat the child." The school was very prompt in reporting this incident when they saw what was happening. "They had seen things in isolation before that, but when they noted the bruises in the morning they immediately called us." This care by teachers and administrative people which was translated in this account into diligence and promptness is very important to Children's Aid people.

This same respondent reported that "there have been quite a few school cases of sexual abuse (which are confided to the teachers) because kids trust teachers." This respondent said that in a case involving a twelve year old girl (who finally) revealed to the Vice Principal that for eight years, a man down at the corner store had been (sexually) abusing her. He is part of an ethnic community, is very wealthy, very well known. . . It became a big case. . . (Finally,) the school really helped in preparing the child for court." Apparently, teachers and Vice Principal provided just the right amount of nurturing that enabled the child to stand up in court and face her molester. The school can be rightly proud of their role at least to this Children's Aid social worker.

Similarly, as another informant avers, "If there is Care Service (a group of professionals who provide assistance in abuse cases), the teachers could be invited to be involved. . . if (they are) a prominent person in the life of the child." Of course, one would assume that they are almost always "a prominent person" at least to young children. School people go beyond simply

granting access to children, but also prepare them for the stressful situation of the initial contact. He continues, "They can relax the child and are supportive of the kid during this time." Principals further cooperate by monitoring the child's situation as a third informant states. "Schools keep us in touch with a child's behavior."

It is helpful when principals perceive Children's Aid positively which disposes them to be collaborative. As the first informant asserts, "Children's Aid has been asked to participate in professional development days (where) teachers ask a lot of questions such as 'What do I do when I discover abuse?' 'What questions do I ask?' 'How do I respond?' 'What about the court process?'" School people are also anxious about the legal process. When Children's Aid is forthcoming in support both in answering questions and in making defuse tense situations, it seems to assist all parties, especially the molested child.

Yet, while principals and teachers are clearly caring, this is not always positive as they can be overly protective and even destructive. As one respondent says, "Teachers can. . . over react. A child comes to school crying, afraid to go home and the teachers draw their own 'reasoned' conclusions, projecting on to the child their own fears. They become very strong advocates, and see the solution as removal. They immediately (want to) protect the child." More succinctly, another asserts, "Sometimes they call us even on a small bump, this makes the situation more complicated."

Furthermore, school people sometimes have unrealistic expectations. "They do get stressed about the child and put pressure on us for doing more and more. They often don't understand that getting the kid out of the home does not really solve the problem" as was reported by an insightful respondent. Moreover, educators sometimes do not understand the limits of the official powers of Children's Aid. Additionally, they do not comprehend that a responsibility (an official charge) of Children's Aid is to be as supportive of families as possible and to make every attempt to maintain that family as a unit. "A dysfunctional family is often better than no family at all for the child."

In contrast, some school people perceive Children's Aid as overly intrusive and want to protect the child against their perceived excesses. According to another respondent, "They're concerned that we will go out and jump all over

the family. Until they've worked with us, they think we'll go bombing out - big feet all over the place. The workers are seen as insensitive to the families." School people seem to have an array of attitudes towards Children's Aid and among these is the fear that Children's Aid is a big bureaucracy which is insensitive children's needs as well as to a family's well-being. For these Children's Aid critics (among school people), the failing of the Children's Aid is too much intrusion not too little.

And the fear isn't always for the family or the child. In fact, there are principals who resist Children's Aid fearing that the latter might harm school-family relations. As was succinctly said by one respondent, "Sometimes the school social worker says 'If I report it, I know my relationship will be damaged with the parents.'" These school people are anxious that Children's Aid will destroy their school-community alliance, then leave, and they must stay and "pick up the pieces" of the damaged school-family bond.

Resistance, by school people might appear in other ways. For example, they may dally over filing the report. Such delayed reporting of suspected abuse is one major form of resistance due, perhaps, to anxiety. Another Children's Aid respondent asserts that, "They sit on something all day long and then we're the dumping ground, probably from guilt. . . They say they want to check with Henry or Jane (colleagues to the teachers and/or principals) before calling.'" Ontario respondents seem to be especially reluctant to risk taking (i.e., reporting) without some show of support or agreement from others in similar positions.

Child-abuse reporting may also have a low priority for school people. As was said by one respondent, "A teacher who saw a parent kick a child and told the principal about it the next day. A whole week passed before we got involved." School protocols (a typical Ontario expression) may also account for the delay in reporting. "In one board, a school social worker must be consulted in reporting. (It used to be) if the social worker could not be reached, the principal (would not report it)" as was stated by still another respondent.

Educators sometimes cope with anxiety about child abuse by gossiping and possibly harming the child. "There is lunchroom chatter. (It's) the teachers, (who engage in) the handwringing syndrome," according to the first respondent. They may also gossip because child abuse is negatively attractive

as it piques people's interest. As one respondent characterizes this behavior, "Sometimes, there is a curiosity and a nosiness." School people are not much different from those in any other occupation regardless of their insistence that they are "professionals" who don't do these kinds of things. In fact, there are some who are sometimes attracted to the "soap-opera" or prurient aspects of child abuse and the type of people involved.

Another issue, according to our respondents, is that school people can conflict or dissuade one another. In particular, principals may deter teachers from making reports on child abuse. As one respondent says, "(On occasion), there are principals (who) discourage teachers. We've heard of this from the teachers directly." This discouragement can even lead to "the old guard (who) intimidated the staff, (and) blocked promotions," according to different respondent. This is very inhibiting for, especially junior staff who are reluctant to report without the full backing of their principal or administrative staff. Among other risks is the very real danger that they could be putting their job "on the line."

Nonetheless, the need to control and remediate child abuse is an important problem that appears to be clearly recognized by top leaders in school systems. Occasionally, Children's Aid has had to go all the way to the board to overcome resistance by principals. As a respondent from the North asserts, "Sometimes they are reluctant to allow us to talk to the child. I had my supervisor write the Board. . . I (then) had to go to the Board. . . The principal was very reluctant, (but) now (understands) it better. . . . There is (currently) a protocol that overrides any reluctance." It's unclear, however, whether this principal is finally reporting suspected abuse or just using some other method to avoid the child-abuse reporting mandate.

There is a special complication for all school people when some of their peers are the accused perpetrators. One respondent, from near Toronto, extensively discusses teacher reaction and consequent union action on this issue. "One. . . important difficulty involves teachers being accused. . . The Teacher's Federation is militant, talking around the province about 'wicked children' victimizing innocent teachers. . . The result has been that both the police and Children's Aid tip toe around the school yards. (But, in fact), most cases have merit, and are valid." In other words, these are school people

who are, in fact, guilty of abusing the children in their classes or schools. It is, however, unclear how many of these cases eventually led to the dismissal and/or incarceration of the accused.

Another issue involves situations where false accusations were lodged against teachers and other school people. As this same respondent maintains: "There have been two cases like this. One parent was convinced the teacher was abusing, but the child denied it. We judged (the mother) to be psychotic. In another case, . . . it appeared the parent accused the teacher due more to other complaints (that) she had against the teacher" rather than any proof (or substance) to her charges. The union in these cases has stridently backed the accused teachers and has won the cases. There seems to be no parallel in Michigan or anywhere else in the United States where unions have successfully defended teachers who were falsely accused.

For the most part, these Children's Aid respondents do see school people as good human beings as well as observers, monitors and supporters of Children's Aid and the efforts to discover abuse and stop the abusers. But, nonetheless, educators may also project their initial and long-term anxieties onto the situation. Moreover, they may have unrealistic expectations for rapid and complete resolution of the problem demanding that the child be "rescued from abuse." Although School people are clearly caring, they can also be defensive. One defensive theme appears to be insecurity, and therefore, a need for group support. As one says, a "problem is not acting in a timely manner, but out of anxiety. They're afraid to begin the process and need to get clarity from each other."

Many things are done well by Children's Aid such as workshops for school people which lessen anxiety while reducing gossip and inappropriate referrals. Additionally, social services clearly value the assistance given by the schools. More of them need to tell school people this as they clearly don't do this on enough occasions. However, time and work pressures may be a problem. Within these constraints, some respondents indicate more can be done, such as "if I don't call you, you call me.'" If a teacher or principal has a student involved in these cases they may very well be apprised of the process if they would only ask.

Still another suggestion for possible impasses in child-abuse rehabilitation is the creation of multidisciplinary teams. Along these lines, one respondent mentions a relatively successful team effort in the Toronto area. According to her, "(We have) a Child Abuse Council which has representatives from Children's Aid in addition to professionals including psychiatrists, nurses, public health people and school people. . . Altogether there are 20 people. . ." These are 20 people who have targetted the child abuse case and in some instances have managed rather remarkable successes with children suffering from a wide array of child abuse and/or neglect.

With all the pressures of child-abuse detection and amelioration, both school people and workers in Children's Aid seem to be addressing and rather effectively grappling with the problem. Under the circumstances, they deserve plaudits not condemnation. Therefore, as we suggest above, necessary changes, for the most part, need to be more incremental and communicative rather than more fundamental and structural.