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The Child Abuse Matter and the Major Role Played by the Teacher: Issues Raised by a Pilot Focus Group Sample of Primary Teachers

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Abstract

A great deal of attention is now being paid to issues raised by child abuse. Recent reports, enquiries and relevant agencies have all recognized the important role played by teachers in aiding the detection and prevention of child abuse, due to their close everyday contact with children. The result of the ideas presented in the present work was initiated by a Focus group of 12 re-educated teachers at the University of Crete, who met five times in order to review and examine: a) their attitudes concerning possible child abuse incidents within the school settings, and b) the type of teachers' involvement in assessing and intervening with abused children and their families. Finally, the participation of a second group of 6 re-educated elementary teachers in the last meeting provided the opportunity of comparing feelings and attitudes between the 2 groups concerning child protection training programs and made recommendations for ways gaps could be filled in the future. The present work concluded that teachers who do recognize abuse do so intuitively, for there is little or no initial advice during the training of teachers to help them develop such diagnostic skills. Nor is there training to help teachers take things further after the initial diagnosis.

Keywords: child abuse, primary school, teacher's role

1. Introduction

1.1 The Problem

Serious evidence of child abuse and neglect raise major issues for teachers who usually recognize the type of child abuse (physical, sexual, psychological, and neglect) (Leeb, Paulozzi, Melanson, Simon & Arias, 2007) but make little effort to organize interventions and support policies for these children and their families (Webster, Stephen, O' Toole, O' Toole & Lucal, 2005). According to Kenny (2001/2004), a quarter (or 25%) of the reported cases with data on child maltreatment comes from teachers who are more likely to come into contact with abused children in the school settings. According to Kenny (2004) teachers often express anxiety symptoms when they get involved with students who may be abused or were abused by their families meaning that these cases of abused children may be ignored by them in the end. Unfortunately, persons who used to be victims of any kind of physical punishment as a way of discipline are less inclined to report events of child abuse (Cerezo & Pons-Salvador, 2004; Tomlinson, 2004; Panagiotaki, 2010). Given that primary teachers should identify critical signs of child abuse and prevent possible behaviors that might lead to it, the present research emphasizes the need for proper guidance or giving directions to primary teachers in dealing with the particular subject (Kenny, 2001/2004). Furthermore, this article identifies the vital role of schools in promoting intervention programs for preventing child abuse and supporting their families.

1.2 Significance of the Study

Recognizing the importance of teachers involvement with abused and neglected children and their supportive role for these pupils and their families, this article examines teachers values and attitudes towards child abuse issues and the different ways these feelings and behaviours might influence their actions towards abused and abusers in and out of the school boundaries. The significance of this study lies in pointing to the fundamental need of teachers to be prepared much more than gaining skills of referral on child abuse cases as they are expected to develop understanding and insight into the nature of adult/child relations and become efficient in involving parents, the community and other agencies in work on child protection as well. Given that there are

cases which the type of abuse is not clear, this leaves teachers in a considerable dilemma: How and in what degree will they need to maintain a relationship with the child and the family after referring a case? The acknowledgement of such difficult personal and professional decisions were also addressed to the particular group of teachers. Moreover, the need of teacher guidance in order to develop skills and confidence in dealing with child abuse issues was also discussed, and emphasis was given on the way such guidance would be vital and constructive, and should leave teachers feeling competent enough to respond to cases of abuse.

1.3 Theoretical Background

Child abuse, far from being abnormal and pathological, arises from the interaction of culture, social organization and social learning (Cerezo Pons-Salvador, 2004; Tomlinson, 2004; Panagiotaki, 2010; Silovsky, Bard, Chaffin, Hecht, Burris, Owora, Beasley, Doughty & Lutzker, 2011). As the level of cumulative risk facing a family across the transition to parenthood is associated with factors as the quality of paternal and maternal care giving, social support, well-being, and indicators of child cognitive functioning, it seems that child abuse is just one aspect of the increased violence in society as a whole (Minnis, Bryce, Phin & Wilson**,** 2010; MacKenzie, Kotch & Lee, 2011). Furthermore, Fantuzzo, Perlman & Dobbins, (2011) reported that children experiencing neglect and physical abuse were more likely to have health and social problems as well as poor academic performance.

Schools should take a major responsibility for these parents, who are psychologically inadequate in some way and abuse their children. Perhaps, if teachers were supported and properly guided to identify the particular social and psychological characteristics of these child abusers, they could predict and protect children who would be at risk and take measures to ensure their safety (Kenny, 2001/2004). Though, according to MacKenzie, Kotch and Lee (2011) the cumulative nature of risk for child abuse suggests that intervention and support programs focusing on reducing risk in one or a few domains in the particular matter usually fail to result in the prevalence of maltreatment. After all, the introduction of preventive work in schools and communities is considered an extremely complex matter according to the pre referred empirical researches (Cerezo & Pons-Salvador, 2004; Webster et al., 2005; Tomlinson, 2004; Minnis, et al**.,** 2010; Panagiotaki, 2010; Fantuzzo, et al., 2011; MacKenzie, et al., 2011; Silovsky, et al., 2011). Given that all schools and communities are different, schools would need to adapt and revise any materials and ideas to their own situation. As the protection of children is linked to the way adults and children relate in general (Minnis, et al., 2010), teaching awareness to children and families for building self awareness and self esteem is a particularly significant task for schools and their teaching personnel. Usually, victims of abuse feel themselves to be guilty, and at fault in some way. A prevention program needs to look at ways schools can enhance children's self esteem and also to deal with the way adults may undermine children's sense of self worth. These issues initiate from the school's organization and structure and the relationships with parents (Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker & Ice, 2010; Clarke, Sheridan & Woods, 2010). Guiding teachers in child abuse matters needs to enable them to explore their perceptions of these issues, and to support them in introducing changes into schools (Kenny, 2004).

2. General Background of the Research

The present study was conducted within the framework of the Teachers In-Service Training Division program "School and Family Relationships" which is part of a series of re educating seminars in various educational and pedagogical subjects held in the University of Crete, Greece. The particular training program was held in the Department of Primary Education during the vernal semester of 2009-2010 and evidence was drawn from video-taped and recorded discussions between the researcher (who was also the trainer of the particular group) and a group of 12 re-educated primary teachers concerning their experiences and attitudes toward possible child abuse incidents within the school settings. The meetings took place once every 15 days for almost 3 months (a total of 5 sessions). The first 2 were dedicated to the teachers theoretical guidance in various child abuse and neglect situations, concerning legal procedures, signs and symptoms, and of preventive work on four most common child abuse cases: a) physical neglect, which involves children who have been persistently or severely neglected physically (e.g., lack of proper nutrition, hygiene, clothing, supervision, education etc.) (NYU Child Study Center Letter, 2003) to such an extent that their health and development are impaired (NYU Child Study Center Letter, 2003; Panagiotaki, 2010), b) emotional or psychological abuse which involves persistent coldness, hostility, or rejection by the parent or care-giver, to such an extent that the child's behavior and development are impaired (Glaser, 2002; NYU Child Study Center Letter, 2003; Panagiotaki, 2010), c) physical abuse which involves physical harm or injury to the child which can also result from severe discipline (NYU Child Study Center Letter, 2003; Scannapieco & Connell – Carrick, 2005), and finally d) sexual abuse which refers to the child's coerced or forced sexual contact or activity that may be ongoing or occurs over time, often within a trusting relationship (NYU Child Study Center Letter, 2003; Panagiotaki, 2010). The other 3 sessions involved teachers discussions on ranking the causes of abuse, confronting feelings about abused and abusers in

combination with active participation in hypothetic scenarios on handling a situation where a teacher suspects a child is being abused or neglected, managing the family contact, keeping school records and organizing a consultation policy and structure for the teachers, the school and the parents for responding to such cases of abuse/neglect.

Particularly, the main objectives of this research were to investigate:

a) The ways teachers can recognize abuse and if they are able to work afterwards sensitively and effectively with the abused child.

b) The teachers' readiness to come to terms with local child abuse procedures and guidelines.

c) The teachers' ability to manage the family contact and to handle those parents who have difficulty in managing their relationships with their children.

d) The teachers' effort to develop students understanding and insight into the nature of adult/child relationships, in order to develop appropriate prevention and child protection programs, and

e) The role of the teacher training in the area of identification and prevention of child abuse.

3. Method

Focus group study was adopted as a methodology tool to encourage 12 re-educated elementary teachers (6 men and 6 women) to review and examine their role concerning possible child abuse and neglect incidents within the school settings (Gilflores & Alonso, 1995; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, Zoran, 2009). Furthermore, the particular method was useful since interactions that occurred among the participants yielded important data regarding their knowledge and attitudes about child abuse issues (Morgan, 1998). Finally, this way of research offered elementary teachers ample opportunity for active participation and more spontaneous responses (Butler, 1996), and provided the setting where the particular sample could discuss personal dilemmas concerning various child abuse cases, express attitudes and provide possible solutions (Duggleby, 2005).

During the sessions, the moderator of the focus group participants was the researcher of this study who presented teachers with a series of questions concerning their attitudes towards possible child abuse incidents in and out of the classroom, and their role in assessing and intervening with abused children and their families. The particular moderator presented the members with stimulus material (e.g., statements from abused children, newspaper articles and various documentaries concerning abused children and abusers) and asked primary teachers to respond to it. Finally, the researcher/moderator was responsible for facilitating the discussion, prompting members to speak, requesting overly talkative members to let others talk, and encouraging all the members to participate. An assistant moderator was also used for taking important notes that would produce potential emergent questions to ask (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

In this study, the basic data for analysis (both video- and audio-taped), was based on the 5 sessions and provided the setting for discussions among the participants, giving solutions and capturing teachers responses and feelings on the particular subject (Duggleby, 2005). Every session lasted 3 hours and each one was held in the University of Crete during the vernal semester of 2009-2010. The first 2 meetings aimed to provide elementary teachers with detailed information about various child abuse and neglect subjects and definitions and finally, recommended procedures. Subsequently, the moderator/researcher and assistant moderator analyzed these videotaped data and field notes extracted from the debriefing and an abridged transcript was created (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech & Zoran, 2009). Finally, an independent group of 6 re-educated elementary teachers who had never before had the opportunity to develop insight into the critical matters of child abuse and neglect participated in the discussions at the 5th meeting with the rest of the 12 participants. This procedure was considered to be useful for comparing both groups in terms of values, attitudes and skills and for making recommendations for ways gaps could be filled about the complexity of issues surrounding child abuse and neglect.

Finally, 5 basic aspects guided our data collection:

a) Teachers know little about abuse/neglect and lack the skills in its identification-and so need to be given these.

b) Teachers should come to terms with local child abuse/neglect procedures and guidelines and develop listening and responding skills.

c) Teachers need to involve parents, the community and other agencies working for child protection.

d) Schools can introduce child safety and parent education programs, and so aim to eliminate child abuse and neglect in the future, and

e) Teachers need training and support to initiate appropriate prevention work on child abuse and neglect incidents.

3.1 Participants

The present pilot research focused on a sample of 12 re-educated elementary teachers (5 men and 7 women). Nine of them (3 men and 6 women) had almost 15 years of teaching experience while the rest (2 men and 1 woman) had been teachers for almost 20 years. The selected sample of teachers was representative of various geographic areas of Greece, and also of different sized school populations, from big cities to small towns and villages. The final participants in this study was a team/group of 6 re-educated elementary teachers (2 men and 4 women) who met with the first 12 participants in the last session (^{5th}) in order to exchange opinions on child abuse and to discuss hopes and needs from such a course. This additional group of elementary teachers had also a 20-year teaching experience in different sized urban and rural schools from various geographic areas from Greece too. At the time of the study, the teachers' age of both groups ranged from 35 to 45 years old and all 18 teachers were in their 2nd year of training at the University of Crete.

4. Results

Given that the work described above is not a controlled experiment but a set of qualitative analyses of field notes extracted from the debriefing of elementary teachers' discussions and their interactions that occurred amongst them concerning their understanding of their roles and responsibilities towards abused/neglected children, the key notes from this study were as follows:

1) Helped teachers define cases of abuse and neglect and explore their feelings and attitudes about these issues.

2) Provided teachers with the opportunity to review and adapt materials on child abuse and neglect issues for their own need.

3) Highlighted the ways cases may be dealt with in the locality and explored the teachers' perceptions about this.

4) Raised teachers' awareness of the need to consult professionals and liaise with other relevant agencies.

5) Explored the school's relationship with parents and the community and how this is affected by possible child abuse and neglect incidents.

6) Enabled teachers to explore what can be expected of such child abuse/neglect training courses and to see how these can become part of a whole school approach to child protection.

7) Helped teachers to begin thinking of the aims of prevention in their schools and community and encouraged plans for the future.

Regarding the first aspect of observation and key notes by the researcher, all 12 re-educated elementary teachers showed active participation in the program, and showed commitment and involvement. In other words, the knowledge of such critical issues on child abuse and neglect generated as a part of the teachers' experiences with children in their familiar school and local domains. As a result, the first two guiding seminars that focused on discussing with teachers the signs and symptoms of abuse and neglect and developing empathy with the abused child had a positive effect on them for developing empathy for the abused child and for understanding their legal responsibilities for handling such cases. Furthermore, during the first two introductory meetings on the issues of child abuse most of the questions raised concerned the point at which teachers should invoke their local guidelines and procedures.

As the 5 meetings aimed to support the teachers' role in the prevention of the pre-mentioned 4 issues of child abuse which may arise at school, a lot of emphasis was given to the sensitive matter of sexual abuse. This particular aspect of abuse caused teachers the most concern, as most of them agreed that they would need the cooperation and a lot of support from other professionals and local agencies to develop support for these children and respond to the specific needs of their families and the local community. Concerning the other 3 cases of abuse and neglect (physical neglect, emotional or psychological abuse, physical abuse) the debriefing extracted by the field notes showed a gradual teacher encouragement to adopt a questioning stance to the usual checklists and signs of abuse and neglect and a rising ability to recognise the uniqueness of each case. Moreover, during the next three discussion sessions, 9 out of the 12 teachers reported: "*The first 2 preparation meetings on such critical issues on child abuse is a necessary first step before the introduction of preventive work at schools*". The

other 3 teachers agreed that: "*Such seminars usually result in the sense that the teacher is not the right professional to control such a difficult process as preventing a child from being abused or neglected by their family*".

A willingness to experience a similar training process themselves in order to become familiar with the issues of child abuse/neglect, was expressed by the last 6 re-educated teachers that took part in the 5th discussion session. Though, regarding the second group of teachers, 5 teachers out of 1 expressed almost no confidence that teachers, unlike other professionals, could develop skills in identifying children from "*difficult*" families and in supporting them. Finally, 4 of these elementary teachers out of the 6 agreed that: "*It is the States' responsibility to provide schools with the appropriate professionals in order to be involved with child protection and support of their families and teachers have nothing to do with it*".

In addition, at the beginning of the first 2 training sessions in child abuse and neglect approaches, it appeared that the first 12 teachers' prejudices for taking steps for prevention in the elementary school was significantly changed. Though, when teachers were finally asked to report their reactions if they had to put into practice their existing knowledge, 7 out of the 12 teachers underestimated their abilities to support the abused children and organize contacts with their families due to their lack of communicative competence in such "*complicated matters*". For example, most teachers expressed anxiety about what may happen to a child following referral to social services and regarding their personal experiences at school seemed quite aware of the complexity of deciding what would be best done for the particular child and his/her family. Moreover, the following statements of teachers were extracted from the diary kept by the researcher: "*A constant teacher guidance on the issues of child abuse and neglect is needed to be planned into the cross curricular approaches for prevention at schools"* or "*Schools need more empowerment of their personal and social educational policy in order to support the development of preventive programs concerning the disclosure of abused/neglected children and their families* ". The same view was also shared by the 2nd group of 6 teachers who had no previous theoretical and practical experience in the critical matters of child abuse and neglect.

In conclusion, most teachers admitted that they found it very interesting to work out ideas with the aims for a preventive school curriculum and are willing to initiate prevention policies at schools in combination with the appropriate professional advice and encouragement from the States and local community. Furthermore, observational reports showed a tendency of the first 12 trained teachers to share their new learning experiences and skills with the second group of 6 teachers who had no previous experience in child abuse and prevention and to make recommendations for ways gaps could be filled. Finally, both groups concluded that "*It is important to recognize the limits of what schools can do*" or "*It is naive to believe that schools can prevent child abuse occurring in the future, particularly when it occurs in the context of a complex web of social and personal factors*" or "*Schools cannot change society as the amount of time both students and teachers spend together is very limited in the context of their whole lives*" and "*Training and support for teachers to respond to issues of child abuse will not solve such a difficult problem. That requires more far reaching social and political changes*".

5. Discussion

The present article shows the attitude of elementary teachers on the matter of introducing child abuse issues and preventive procedures at schools during 5 sessions of guidance and discussions at the University of Crete, Greece. Particularly, the aspects of developing teachers' skills of assertiveness concerning various situations of child abuse incidents at school if these arise, were concentrated on the following aspects: a) teachers were pointed towards the necessary first steps for developing awareness, insight and basic skills to identify critical signs of abuse and deal with the particular subject and, in turn b) teachers experienced the school's potential to prepare the ground for initiating social change through supporting groups and child safety preventive programs (Kenny, 2001/2004; Silovsky et al., 2011).

Right from the beginning, the first two guiding sessions on the critical issues of child abuse provided teachers with the ability to examine the various explanations of why child abuse occurs and clarified their own values and attitudes in relation to these explanations (Cerezo & Pons-Salvador, 2004; Tomlinson, 2004; Panagiotaki, 2010; Minnis et al., 2010; MacKenzie et al., 2011; Fantuzzo et al., 2011; Silovsky et al, 2011). As such, extensive discussion was devoted to developing a climate among teachers where differences of opinions are valued and respected. This helped the following discussions to be based on what was deemed essential by the teachers and what is practical or feasible in their schools (Kenny, 2004; Silovsky et al., 2011). In particular, most teachers felt a strong sense of responsibility in being the "*protector*" of an abused child, a perspective which resonated strongly with the concern, which was repeatedly noted, of the difficulty of "*making children's voices heard*".

Finally, all participants noted that a key role played in achieving the best outcome for the protection of a child is the development of relationships with other professionals and having support from their schools, the relevant local agencies and the community (Clark, Sheridan & Woods, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2010; Dunst & Trivette, 2010).

Furthermore, participants felt quite empowered by evidencing practice on the prospect of supporting an abused child and their recommendations helped the prospect of a future school's policy structure that can be made on that basis. This was inevitably linked to a sense of preparing themselves for change, imagining that their actions would lead to the best resolution for all students of their schools and their families (Kenny, 2004; Clark, Sheridan & Woods, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2010). For both group members (the first 12 re-educated teachers who had a basic preparation in the issues of child abuse during the 5 sessions and the 6 ones who attended the last discussion), the prospect of a planned school intervention program in supporting abused children and their families provided optimism especially in the matters of sexual abuse (Kenny, 2004). The aspects of similarity in both groups concerned their frustration by barriers to deliver an equitable support to children and were preoccupied by attempting to ensure that the needs of any child are prioritized, clarified and valued, independently of how children are being treated by their family (Cerezo & Pons-Salvador, 2004; Tomlinson, 2004; Webster et al., 2005; Minnis, et al**.**, 2010; Panagiotaki, 2010; Fantuzzo, et al., 2011; MacKenzie, et al., 2011; Silovsky, et al., 2011). These similarities highlighted the researcher's perception that there was a gap in the present attempt to provide a constructive guiding and supporting approach which would be both holistic and would provide teachers with the sense of efficiency and be well organized in their response to serious cases of abuse (MacKenzie, Kotch & Lee, 2011).

Given that many local authority child abuse procedures seem to widen the gap between home and school, emphasis was also given to the need of developing good relationships with parents (a significant objective that obviously is not efficiently promoted across many schools' curriculum) as a way to minimize this gap and hoping to take the first steps to get the proper support to run child and family support groups within the school context (Albright & Weisberg, 2010). On return to the prospect of working on the aims of a prevention school curriculum on child protection, discussions soon turned to details of practical barriers of implementation, with attention ranging from staff cooperation and skills required through to organizational support and permission required from the school administrators, the parents' association and the local community (Okagaki & Bingham, 2010).

Generally, the above dilemmas and worries generated from teachers' personal inconveniences as well as practical ones (e.g., unsophisticated school curriculums, problems of cooperation with the rest of the school staff, the director of the school, the parents and the local community, as well as the lack of proper inter-professional training). Specifically, despite the 12 teachers' systematical 5 session guidance and preparation discussions over the moral and pedagogical treatment of children at home and at school, they still expressed low self esteem to be efficiently and systematically involved with students, families and the local community regarding these aspects (MacKenzie, Kotch & Lee, 2011). A strong negative attitude was held by the final 6 teachers in dealing with the particular subject as they had never received information in child abuse protection practices within the school environment. Due to this, almost all of the teachers identified the vital role of inter-professional training which should be longitudinal, constructive, holistic, supportive and should leave teachers feeling better able to respond to different cases of child abuse and not impotent- that their actions might be wrong (Kenny, 2001/2004; Cerezo & Pons-Salvador, 2004; Tomlinson, 2004; Minnis, et al**.,** 2010; Panagiotaki, 2010; Fantuzzo, et al., 2011; MacKenzie, et al., 2011; Silovsky, et al., 2011).

This study is still subject to several limitations: first, more representative focus samples should be included in a more regular naturalistic and longitudinal study basis. Second, a richer data set could be based on a study framework that goes beyond analyzing only the verbal communication of teachers', students' and parents' involvement in various school activities and programs regarding child protection and prevention of child abuse. Certainly more research is needed to understand how relationships between teachers and parents are developed and perceptions are shared, in order to facilitate cooperative working to protect children.

6. Conclusions

This pilot study was designed to encourage a group of elementary teachers to debate their own concerns about their role in detection and prevention of child abuse within the school environment. Also, a future prospect of working on the aims of an organized school policy for child abuse prevention and support was also discussed and promoted. The questions raised among these elementary teachers address the challenges and issues encountered with probable events of abused children and their families within the school context. Teachers

should be prepared for the fact that sooner or later some students may disclose instances of abuse that they have suffered. Given that the introduction of preventive work in schools and local communities is a considerably complex issue, teachers should be supported and properly trained to initiate appropriate efforts with children, parents and the local community. As all schools and communities are different, schools will need to work on the aims of a preventive curriculum to suit their own situation. The implementation of a prevention program relates to the organization and structure of schools, as well as to the classroom ethos, and to relationships with parents. Inter-professional training needs to enable teachers to explore their perceptions of such issues, and to support them in introducing changes into their schools.

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