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Barriers to Reporting Teachers' Abuse of Students

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Abstract

Teachers in Ontario's schools are responsible for implementing and monitoring anti-bullying programs; in fact, Ontario's teachers are legally bound to report all bullying incidences (Ontario Safe Schools Act, 2010). However, counter to current initiatives designed to combat school- based violence, recent research has demonstrated that some teachers are the aggressors of their students, yet these behaviours are not always reported. The lack of research into teacher abuse of students may be due to a lack of reporting.

Keywords: Barriers, Ontario, Student Abuse, Teachers

1. Barriers to Reporting Student Abuse

The school environment, culture, teacher collegiality, and a teacher's own characteristics are factors found to contribute to teacher abuse of students (Sharpe, 2011); these same issues may impact whether an abusive teacher's colleague(s) choose to formally report the abuse, ignore the behaviour, or to deal with having knowledge of abuse in another manner. Most reports of children and adolescent abuse involve a guardian, primarily a male and/or female parent (Trocme et al., 2001); therefore, it is not surprising that there is minimal research investigating teacher abuse of students. Two reasons for the lack of reporting teachers' who abuse students include: i) it rarely occurs, or ii) witnesses do not report, iii) child/adolescent victims do not report, and iv) reports made internally to the school are not formally reported to child welfare or police. The few studies investigating incidences of teacher abuse of students (TAS) reveals it is a significant issue that requires attention (Twemlow, 2004; Sharpe, 2011 etc.) the lack of reporting requires attention; until the reasons are evident, a discussion of potential barriers to reporting is warranted and may spark the necessary discussions that will encourage teachers, students, and administrators to formally report known or suspected incidences of TAS. The goal of this literature review and discussion is to highlight potential barriers to reporting TAS and to encourage a systemic change to this form of child abuse.

Circumstances and teacher characteristics may be important factors in attempting to discern why many teachers remain silent or at least do not formally report their colleagues abuse of students. The following discussion highlights issues regarding fear, school culture, morals/values, gender, and administrative support.

1.1 Fear

Fear and internal conflict may ensure that teachers do not intervene when witnessing abuse. To remain reluctantly silent, teachers must rationalize that their silence is beneficial. The unspoken collusion in teacher abuse will no doubt heighten the impact of having witnessed a colleague abuse a student.

1.2 Culture

In addition, the culture within the school environment may discourage those who want to report the abuse. The environment and school administration effect whether student abuse is reported.

1.3 How do I report?

Lacking knowledge regarding reporting student abuse requirements, therefore, knowledge and requirements for reporting must be reinforced and teachers must be reminded of their responsibilities in this regard. Strategies must be implemented to ensure that teachers report their abusive colleagues. Reducing the barriers to reporting will benefit these efforts. By identifying and addressing reporting abuse barriers, teachers will likely feel empowered to report incidents of abuse. Little research exists specific to elementary school-based barriers to reporting; however, knowledge in this area of concern can be gained from research regarding barriers to reporting workplace aggression. Cunningham, Richardson, and Wheeless (2008)

indicated four key predictors as to whether a colleague will disclose wrongdoings of any kind by their peers. Reasons considered when deciding to report a colleague included: the reporter's confidence and competence level; the prevailing attitudes in the work environment regarding mandated policies; the perceived receptivity from personnel regarding potentially problematic disclosures; and the overall participatory culture found within the workplace itself. Interestingly, just as a building's culture may contribute to abuse, as noted previously, the culture itself may also contribute to maintaining silence regarding abuse.

2. Recommendation

2.1 School Culture

Staff members are more likely to remain silent if there is not a history of shared ideas, collegiality, and openness to address issues worthy of meaningful discussion and critical reflection (Cunningham, Richardson, & Wheeless, 2008). It may be reasonable for Faculties of Education to require that a practicum student not complete their placement in a location that they have had a previous connection to. Doing so may assist in encouraging students to come forward and report teacher abuse.

2.2 Self-Preservation/Relationships

The decision to remain silent is grounded in self-preservation in the workplace. Not surprisingly, researchers have found that acting against a colleague's errors may be inviting strained, and possibly permanently damaged, work relationships (McLain & Keenan, 1999). Attitudinal beliefs regarding school policy also influence whether a fellow teacher is willing to report a colleague's behaviours (McLain & Keenan, 1999). If a teacher is not willing to accept the merit of a policy in place (strained relationships? ostracism?), they are less likely to believe that any violation has occurred at all (McLain & Keenan, 1999) and lacking knowledge of policy, which has been found, would surely impact a decision to report. For example, in a sample of teachers, 76% were unaware of whether there was written policy in place which addressed a colleague's actions (Twemlow et al., 2006). Guidelines regarding behaviours that are deemed child abuse must be stressed for both pre- and in- service teachers. However, even with any knowledge of the policies in place, there still must be a willingness or acceptance on a teacher's part to report professional misconduct. As certain teacher's behaviours qualify as child abuse, it is important to realize that many teachers believe that they should not be mandated to report child abuse (Kenny, 2001a, b); however, others have found that teachers believe that reporting is their responsibility and that all professionals should be required to notify authorities of such behaviours (Hawkins & McCallum, 2001; Rodriguez, 2002). The personal views and knowledge of teachers obviously impacts their decisions, even when a student needs protection.

2.3 Recommendation

Training and education regarding child abuse and reporting requirements must be reinforced for pre- and in- service teachers as well as all adults (i.e., support and custodial staff) working in Ontario's schools.

3. Is it abuse?

Another barrier to reporting abuse is that a teacher's behaviour can be seen as ambiguous and open for interpretation (McLain & Keenan, 1999). Discussions between professionals after the fact can be explained away and minimized, thus discouraging a teacher from disclosing another teacher's behaviour. If a teacher's behaviour did not seem too severe and if the target did not appear adversely affected, then eyewitness accounts could be disregarded or second-guessed. Individuals lacking confidence in their responsibility to report abuse and in what they believe they witnessed they will be less likely to report the behaviours. As teachers may be faced with having to report suspected abuse, either while on practicum placement or once they move to a contracted position, it is notable that little evidence of the pre- or in-service teachers' confidence in reporting suspected abuse exists. On the other hand, the issue of identifying and reporting suspected child sexual abuse has garnered considerable attention. In a study of 81 pre-service teachers in Australia, participants reportedly recognized the prevalence and problem of child sexual abuse and most reported that primary school teachers are important when confronting the issue. However, the majority (i.e., 78%) did not feel confident that they could accurately identify characteristics of child sexual abuse (Goldman, 2007). In addition, the researchers found that many respondents (i.e., 75%) felt unprepared to assume the role of mandatory reporter of child sexual abuse and less than half felt confident in their ability to report evidence of their suspicions of abuse to the principal (Goldman, 2007). It is unknown whether, over time, pre-and in- service teachers' confidence with their duties and obligations to report, aside from the academic requirements, change and if so, in which direction? Clearly, one aspect that may impact whether a teacher reports abuse is their own knowledge and confidence in taking the required action.

There are a variety of reasons why teachers do not report the abusive behaviours of their colleagues. Little research exists regarding the decision-making process for teachers when reporting their peers; however, it appears the environment, knowledge, and one's confidence are key factors to address when hoping to increase reporting abuse, or even acknowledging, abuse by teachers. Addressing these barriers will take time and further education; however, a starting point may be better informing teachers of their duty to report, and any repercussions should they decide not to do so.

Ontario's teachers are governed by legislation (i.e., CFSA, 1990; Education Act, 1990, O.C.T. A., 1996) that clearly stipulate those professionals, such as teachers, are required to report any suspected child abuse that may cause a child harm. By definition, a child in Ontario is anyone under age 16 (CFSA, 1990) and this is above the age of Ontario's elementary school students. The degree of certainty required for professionals to report abuse is that they must have reasonable grounds, reason to believe, reasonable suspicion, or reasonable and probable cause that a child is being harmed (CFSA, 1990). With mandated reporting laws in place, it is concerning that there are so many barriers which discourage a professional to report student abuse. Teachers can observe common indicators (i.e., behavioural, and emotional extremes) of child abuse and, as has been shown, they may witness various harsh and unwarranted behaviours against students by their colleagues. The issue of whether a teacher's behaviours constitute child abuse to the extent that it must be reported upon will be

considered.

3.1 Recommendations

Providing pre- and in-service teachers with this knowledge, along with information stressing the fact that a professional's failure to report is a finable offence, may prompt teachers to overcome some of the barriers discussed.

It is apparent that some teachers' behaviours are not appropriate, although it is not known whether a respondent considers these behaviours abusive. Pre-service teachers, through their training, are conscious of their rights in the classroom as a teacher and the rights of students, which include being instructed in a safe, nurturing classroom environment built on a foundation of mutual respect between adult and child (Ministry of Education, 2001).

Recommendation: Teachers and school administration must provide and maintain a safe working environment and teachers are responsible for the well-being of the students under their care (Parkey, Stanford, Vaillancourt, & Stephens, 2009). As well, clear guidelines are in place pertaining to the course of action that a teacher must take if he/she has a colleague whose conduct is unprofessional (see OCTA, 1996). However, there are no measures in place to ensure that a colleague's abusive behaviour is reported. Although the teacher's duty to report is known, it is generally discussed with respect to parental child abuse; therefore, many teachers may not consider that a colleague's behaviours may fall into the category for which there is a duty to report.

As noted, teachers are mandated to report any suspected child abuse to a Society and not reporting suspected abuse can result in a fine being levied against a teacher (CFSA, 1990). The duty to report includes any suspected abuse by a caregiver. Teachers are caregivers and if warranted, their behaviours must be reported to a Society. However, aside from sexual behaviours, teachers may not be clear on when, and to whom, they should report a colleague's abuse of a student. Although some adult to child interactions may not be in the child's best interests (and be, by definition, abusive), most will not be at a level that requires reporting to a Society; the same is true of teacher – student interactions. Most of the abusive behaviours engaged in by some teachers will not meet CFSA reporting criteria. In other words, teacher abuse of students will qualify as needing intervention, but this intervention does not necessarily require the involvement of a Society. Abuse by teachers is impactful regardless of whether it warrants reporting under the CFSA. Even though the mistreatment of students by teachers may not be reportable, this does not suggest that it should be minimized or ignored. There are several guidelines that stipulate when and to which body (i.e., Ontario College of Teachers, principal) abuse of a child must be reported. Aside from contacting a Society, options for a teacher to report on a colleague's negative behaviours include reporting to the OCT, the principal, or speaking directly with the teacher of concern (OCTA, 1990).

If a teacher determines his/her colleague's behaviour is not serious enough to report to a Society (i.e., the child is not in imminent need of protection and is not likely to be severely impacted), then he/she must determine if the behaviours qualify as professional misconduct,

as outlined by the OCT (O. Reg 437/97). Conditions outlined by which teachers and principals are to judge another teacher's conduct include arbitrary terms such as unfair, suitable, and lack of. Thus, judgment of another's teaching will be done so subjectively and based on one's own morals, values, and standards with respect to practice and what is perceived to be appropriate student-teacher interactions. The core beliefs regarding teacher and student parameters may differ between new teachers, who are still in the process of adapting to a school's environment, and seasoned teachers, who may have firmly established ideals and practices in the school. A new teacher will no doubt judge his/her own practice based on what is modeled by other teachers; new teachers may ultimately wonder if they are not firm enough, not strict enough, or not skilled enough and thereby not feel qualified to judge another teacher's practice fittingly.

Recommendations: Teachers may benefit from documentation that outlines the types of behaviours that would warrant speaking with a teacher of concern, behaviours that must be reported to the principal, behaviours that should be reported to the OCT, and behaviours reportable to a Society. Such a document could outline specific behaviours on a continuum with examples and the appropriate course of action for a teacher to undertake.

Recommendations: As part of training and re-training initiatives, reviews of cases that have been reported to the OCT may assist teachers to determine which behaviours must be reported and to whom. Teachers could be provided both documented and fictional scenarios for which they must decide the appropriate course of action. For example, the following documented scenario could be provided: If you see a teacher grab a student's coat hood and then proceed to yell very aggressively in a student's face, how should you address the situation? Variations on the scenario could also be provided to assist teachers in recognizing their own biases regarding what is, and what is not, appropriate behavior. For example, in the above, teachers could be asked whether their decision to report and to whom would differ based on the student's gender, grade, or functioning (i.e., behavioural or learning difficulties). Some teachers may recognize that they would speak with the teacher if the student was a male with behavioural difficulties but would report to the principal if the student was female and in grade 1. Similarly, teachers may base decisions on the gender of their colleagues or on their personal opinions of the teacher (i.e., is the teacher well liked, is the teacher a good teacher?). Such inconsistencies in what is considered acceptable, and personal biases that would influence how a teacher responds, must be acknowledged, and addressed to ensure that all students are treated equitably. As previously discussed, specific student characteristics and environmental issues may increase the likelihood that abuse occurs, and these factors must be recognized if teachers are expected to intervene to protect students. Speaking with a colleague, principal, or reporting to the OCT would no doubt be intimidating for teachers new to the profession. Moreover, if the complainant's first prescribed course of action is to approach the teacher they have concerns with, it is likely that new, as well as seasoned teachers, will avoid this possible confrontation to reduce the potential for being ostracized, as well as fearing the risk of reprisals, from both the teacher in question and their peers. If a teacher has concerns about a colleague, the OCT advises that Dispute Resolution (DR) can be initiated at the school level (OCT 2024). According to the Annual Report (OCT 2023), 298

complaints were received by the OCT and of those, 26% were submitted by college members, 31% were submitted by members of the public, and the remaining complaints were submitted by the Registrar, which are generally the result of a School Board notification (OCT 2024). Should a complaint be made to the OCT, the Investigation Committee (IC) of the College Council reviews the complaint to determine whether the review process should continue (OCTA, 1996, s. 26(1)). The Investigation Committee decides whether the complaint is with or without merit, outside the jurisdiction of the College of Teachers, or whether further investigation is necessary (OCTA, 1996, s. 26(2)). Decisions of the IC may include: 1) dismissing the complaint against the teacher, 2) suggesting other means by which to resolve the dispute (DR), 3) to cautioning or admonishing the teacher in question both in writing and in person, 4) referring the matter to the Discipline Committee for a formal hearing if the information alleges professional misconduct or teacher incompetence, or 5) refer the matter to the Fitness to Practice Committee for a hearing if the information provided suggests that there may be health-related issues affecting the member's ability to teach (OCTA, 1996, s. 26(5)).

Recent statistics indicate that a small percentage of the cases received by the OCT are referred to the OCT Disciplinary Committee (i.e., between 18% – 20% between 1998 and 2023; OCT, 2023a) or the Fitness to Practice Committee (i.e., 1% to 1.8% between 1998 and 2023; OCT, 2023a). Therefore, most complaints made against a college member do not result in the teacher's removal from the school. As such, teachers who report to the OCT about their colleague's professional misconduct will continue to work with that member and may be subjected to professional distancing or being ostracized. The possible consequences of reporting will surely impact a teacher's decision regarding whether they are willing to document inappropriate behaviour by their colleagues.

Witnessing teacher abuse affects the witness, and although the witness may want to report the abuse to protect the child and to alleviate his/her culpability, there are many barriers and issues that reduce the chance that such a report will be initiated. Once a report is made, either to the principal or to the OCT, those willing to report may be subjected to environmental politics. Therefore, if the complaint is lodged by a colleague, there may be ramifications once the disciplinary decision is finalized.

3.2 Personal Impacts

Adults who witness teacher abuse are impacted. Although witnessing abuse may be important when understanding why some are affected, the fact that an adult did not intervene cannot be discounted in understanding impact issues. Ultimately, if a teacher's abusive behaviours are not addressed, the behaviour will likely continue, ultimately affecting both the adults and the students in a school. The impact on students who are exposed to teacher abuse is discussed next.

To date, little research has been conducted to investigate the impact of being abused by a male compared to a female. Although some research has been undertaken to understand the impact of abuse by a male or female adult, usually a parent/guardian; in fact, as most DHHS, 2005, Trocmé et al., 2001, Canadian children are physically abused by at least one relative

(95% of the time, see Trocmé et al., 2001), usually their mother and/or father (DHHS, 2005, Trocmé et al., 2001); therefore, it is not surprising that little research exists regarding the impact of abuse by nonfamily members, including teachers.

3.3 Teacher Gender

Therefore, impact may certainly differ based on the victim's and abuser's gender. However, the gender-based impact for students and teachers may be better understood through the role of the teacher in the student's life.

As noted, opinions regarding whether a teacher is considered abusive may indeed hinge on how the teacher is viewed (i.e., are they considered a good teacher?). Impact of teacher abuse could also be linked to a student's beliefs and personal opinions of that teacher. As such, beliefs attributed to male and female teachers could help to explain gender-based impact of teacher abuse. Most elementary teachers are female and most male teachers are in the intermediate grades, it may be several years before a child is exposed to male teachers.

Male students may look forward to having a male teacher as they may envision similarities with this role model. If the anticipation of having a male teacher is confounded with their own or their peers' mistreatment, impact may be two-fold. Male student impact may result from the treatment specifically, but also from feeling disillusioned by a potential role model. Since boys report similar impact when abused by either a male or female parent (Howells & Rosenbaum, 2008) but differential impact based on gender of the teacher who is abusive, it may be the role that a male teacher has in a young boy's life that explains why there is greater impact from male versus female teachers.

The impact for males who are exposed to a male abusive teacher may be explained by Mancus (1992) who investigated student opinions of teachers. Compared to female teachers, male students view male teachers as more academically competent; in addition, boys are more likely to express nurturing behaviours when they see male teachers demonstrating these attributes in the classroom (Mancus, 1992). Therefore, the behaviours of the male teacher may influence opinions and behaviours of male students. Treatment of male students by male teachers may also influence how the young boy's peers view him. Recent research on class popularity and peer acceptance has revealed that male victims of bullying have a lower level of acceptance amongst their male peers (Dijkstra et al., 2010). Although the peer impact of being abused by a male teacher has not been investigated, it may well be that being the target of a male teacher effects peer relationships for male students. The treatment of the male teacher and subsequent treatment of male peers may compound the impact of a boy being the target of a male teacher who abuses. Therefore, male teachers may have a qualitatively important impact on shaping a male student's behaviours, opinions, and friendships.

It is also possible that male teachers who abuse do so in a more aggressive or threatening manner, particularly to male students. Researchers have revealed that abuse by males is more severe than abuse by females (Hegar, Zuravin, & Orme, 1994; Rosenthal, 1988). Additionally, males are more likely to injure male children (Rosenthal, 1988). Therefore, it may not be the gender of the student and teacher that explains the impact, but rather, the level

of aggression that a male teacher uses against a male student. Further investigation in impact, based on student and teacher gender is important to fully understand teacher abuse. It is not clear whether gender is also important when understanding externalizing behaviours of students who are the target of a teacher's abuse.

Research has shown that many teachers are aware of their colleagues' abuse of students; the fact that others do not support the student while multiple teachers abuse them may leave the target feeling isolated. Similar results have been found in studies of child abuse by parents; those who reported that both parents abused them, or who witnessed their sibling being abused by both parents, reported more aggression and depression than those who did not have these experiences (Howells & Rosenbaum, 2008). Challenges to a male child's beliefs on masculinity may also help to explain impact. Masculinity is represented and produced through culturally nurtured behaviours such as dominance, control, authority, strength, toughness, and the willingness and ability to fight (Phillips, 2007). Male students targeted by multiple teachers, both male and female, may be more impacted if they believe they should be able to protect themselves and the fact that they cannot alleviate the situation may increase their impact.

Males subjected to teacher abuse appear to differ than females in impact. Impact does not differ for females, who seem to be equally affected regardless of who or how many teachers are abusive. Males, on the other hand, seem to be more affected if the teacher is male or if both male and female teachers are involved. These results could have implications on how student impact is addressed; therefore, further investigations of gender-based impact are warranted. Although the extent of impact seems related to student and teacher gender, many males and females reported similarities in how they were impacted.

To report abuse by teachers, the victim must recognize that abuse is occurring. Elementary school students may lack knowledge regarding what defines or constitutes emotionally abusive behaviour. A lack of understanding may prevent students from disclosing such behaviour and, as such, it is not surprising that emotional abuse by a primary caregiver is a less often reported form of abuse (Ungar et al., 2009). Along with not recognizing abuse, other obstacles that may deter a student from reporting abuse may include family and cultural values, fear, a lack of confidentiality, perceived negative responses to their disclosure, and just how to appropriately report such incidents (Ungar et al., 2009). These barriers to a student reporting abuse are like those noted for teachers regarding why they do not report their colleagues' abuse. The age of the child, the nature of the abusive behaviour, the context in which the abuse is taking place (Ungar et al., 2009) as well as an ability to identify verbal and emotional abuse may all deter a student from disclosing.

4. Summary

Regardless of whether abuse by teachers is reported, the impact is tremendous and far-reaching. Teacher abuse harms the victim as well as witnesses to such acts. There are many reasons that may elucidate why abuse by teachers is not reported; however, these reasons must be addressed to ensure that both colleagues and students feel free and able to notify authorities of any abuse. Teacher abuse has a detrimental impact. Regardless of who is

abusing and who the target is, the impact of these behaviours is damaging. This paper focused on the barriers to reporting teacher abuse of students, the impact of those who were the target of the abusive teacher as well as those in the teaching profession who had seen a student being abused. It is likely that students who are not the target, but who witness a peer being abused by a teacher, are also impacted by what they see and by their inability to help the victim. Future research is required to understand the many effects teacher abuse has on all school stakeholders. Teacher abuse violates the rights of all those in the elementary school system, including students, as well as pre- and in-service teachers. It is important to reiterate that teacher candidates have the right to be mentored in a professional environment where students and teachers are free from harassment and undue stress (Nipissing University, 2023). Similarly, children have the right to attend a school that is free from prejudice or harassment (Ministry of Education, 2001). Some teachers violate the principles of the Education Act and the Code of Conduct, and this must be addressed system wide. Teachers need to understand what constitutes student abuse and they must have the knowledge and confidence to report student abuse and to whom. Addressing the barriers to reporting student abuse must be acknowledged, understood, reinforced, and addressed in way that ensures student safety and wellbeing.

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