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Teachers coping with sexual abuse issues

Julie Skinner, University College Scarborough, The University of York,
Filey Road, Scarborough YO11 3AZ

Summary

This paper is based on my study of how survivors, mothers of survivors and teachers of survivors cope in the aftermath of child sexual abuse. It explores aspects of the experiences of the 14 teacher respondents from that study. The paper examines how teachers dealt with sexual abuse issues and the effects of this on the teachers concerned. It concludes that often insufficient attention is paid to teachers' personal needs, and that in some instances, policies are not sufficiently responsive to the needs of all children. It argues that more training and greater openness are important concerns in dealing with this issue.

Keywords: child abuse, sexual abuse impacts

Introduction

This paper is based on my study of how survivors, mothers of survivors and teachers of survivors cope in the aftermath of child sexual abuse. Its aim is to explore findings from the experiences of the 14 teacher respondents in that study. Their stories illuminate the complexities of dealing with sexually abused children, and sometimes demonstrate the discrepancies between whatever training or preparation teachers are given and the reality of the experiences they face.

Background

The study sought to discover the factors which might be involved in understanding and coping with sexual abuse through looking at the experiences of some of those who had been involved in dealing with it.

A wide range of literature has been devoted to the subject of sexual abuse, and this review merely includes some examples of the range. Primarily, the literature dealt with the needs of victims (e.g. Kempe and Kempe, 1978) later conceptualized as survivors (e.g. Kelly, 1988). The focus then moved to the families in which these victims lived (e.g. Furniss, 1984) and often dwelt upon the perceived deficiencies of such families (e.g. CIBA, 1984) with no acknowledgement that some within the family may be innocent of what was being perpetrated. A further focus developed around the role of mothers, firstly as a source of blame (e.g. Furniss, 1984) and more recently as an important source of support (e.g. Wyatt and Mickey, 1987) and/or a secondary victim (e.g. Dempster, 1993).

In terms of the role of others in dealing with sexual abuse victims, there is literature dealing with the treatment of abuse (e.g. Bentovim *et al.*, 1988), the procedures which should be employed by social workers (e.g. Glaser and Frosh, 1988) or child protection teams (e.g. Besharov, 1990), discussions of therapeutic (e.g. Herman, 1992) or counselling interventions (e.g. Hall and Lloyd, 1993) and the procedures employed in child protection (e.g. Gibbons *et al.*, 1995).

There is some literature which notes how social workers (e.g. Erooga and Masson, 1989), nurses (e.g. Esparza, 1993) and teachers (e.g. Hancock, 1988) may deal with abuse, but comparatively little which deals with how dealing with those who have been abused may affect them (e.g. Maher, 1988; Braun, 1988; Morrison, 1992).

My study sought to examine how those who were, it could be argued, likely to be in most regular proximity to a child (or young adult) coped with both the needs or demands of that person and the personal impacts on themselves.

The literature has noted the difficulty of ascribing definitions to particular phenomena (e.g. Kelly, 1988) and the role of definitions in prescribing meaning since different groups may ascribe different meanings to events. Sexual abuse is no exception. If a definition is linked to criminal law (e.g. Viinikka, 1989), it will impact upon a smaller group than one which involves a broader view. The definition employed by the study was one which embraced the broader view and included non-contact acts within its ambit (SCOSAC, 1984). Part of the study dealt with how the target groups made sense of abuse within the context in which they had had to deal with it, and in the light of aspects of their own understanding of it.

Since social phenomena are subject to both historical and situational interpretations (e.g. Gordon, 1989), the literature provided some evidence that there were likely to be differing understandings of the causes of abuse and differing interpretations of the role of the family within this context.

Chamberlain (1993) has suggested that teachers' perceptions of who is at risk of abuse might be restricted by the texts they read. Glaser and Frosh (1988) note that often in relatively recent years sexual abuse has been conceptualized as a problem which may have a higher incidence in the lower classes. Whilst more recent research, and indeed media publicity, would indicate that this is not the case (e.g. New, 1993), several writers continue to note the prevalence of such myths in popular knowledge of abuse (e.g. Kelly, Regan and Burton, 1991; Driver and Droisen, 1989). Similarly, some researchers have expressed a concern that abuse of males may be under-reported (Finkelhor, 1993; Waterhouse, 1993; Mendel, 1995).

Whilst increasing attention has been paid to the school's role in child protection since Cleveland (e.g. Campbell, 1988) and the rights of children have been strengthened by legislation such as the Children Act 1989 (e.g. GB. Department of Health, 1991; Herbert, 1993), and despite the recent requirement for child protection training to be a regular occurrence (Hancock, 1988), the thrust of training on such issues tends to be procedural rather than personal (e.g. Sage, 1993; Oxley and Sanderson, 1993). The literature points to the limitations of interagency cooperation (e.g. Hallett, 1995) for, and the paucity of resources in, dealing with impacts beyond the procedural. Often survivors can wait for months before being offered therapeutic help (e.g. Hooper, 1992) and alternative sources of support for those dealing with an abused child are limited (e.g. Priest, Mockridge and Clear, 1993; McCann, 1995; Sharland *et al.*, 1995).

Literature about teachers' difficulties in dealing with sexually abused children

is scanty, although, where it exists, it does indicate that the impact of dealing with an abused child can be profound (e.g. Maher, 1988; Braun, 1988; New, 1993; David, 1993). There is also some indication that the size of the school in which a teacher works can have an effect on both the perception of issues and the way in which they are subsequently handled (Knut, 1997). Christo (1997) suggests that research needs to look at how the external and internal realities of the abused child interact. The current study was concerned with interacting perspectives.

The part of the study on which this paper focuses sought to explore how teachers had coped with dealing with abused children and their families and made linkages to how survivors, and mothers of survivors, had perceived the role of schools whilst coping with what happened in their own situations.

Methodology

The study involved the in-depth interviewing of all participants, seven survivors of child sexual abuse and seven mothers of those who had been sexually abused – this group were not related to the survivors in the study – and 14 teachers who had knowingly dealt with victims of sexual abuse. The interviews employed a story-telling style backed up by an interview guide. Frequently, respondents covered the issues identified in this guide simply by responding to my opening request that they tell me something of their own stories and why they had wanted to take part in the study. Survivors and mothers were interviewed twice, teachers only once – partly in recognition of their time constraints, but also because I wanted to interview teachers who came from different areas of the educational system. Survivors and mothers of survivors, who were included in the study, had responded to an open letter in local newspapers requesting respondents who were willing to talk about their experiences of being involved in sexual abuse – nobody in this group was less than 18 years of age. Teacher respondents had all worked in educational establishments in the north of England and were found by identifying a range of educational sectors which I hoped to include and then using a combination of contacts and snowball sampling, in order to identify people who had knowingly been involved in dealing with a sexually abused child. These respondents involved people who represented different levels in the educational hierarchy.

A sensitive issue such as this had to be carefully handled at all stages. Prior to meeting respondents, they were given a contract outlining their absolute right to withdraw from the research at any time and refuse to answer any question. Interviews were conducted at a place and time of their choice, and at the time of the interview they were handed a list of helplines and other contact numbers, should they need to discuss issues further after the interview.

All interviews were tape recorded with respondents' consent, and after transcription, the tapes were wiped so that respondents would hence be identified only by a letter.

Interviews were analysed on a case-by-case basis using coding by themes or issues arising from the data. Cross-case analyses and cross-group analyses were undertaken. Guba and Lincoln's (Kyriacou, 1990) tests for trustworthiness were employed as a check on reliability and validity, and when a model suggesting how themes might interact in particular situations had been developed, this was tested out on a number of 'other' representatives of the three groups studied in order to test its applicability.

Findings

Since the data were analysed both in relation to the group of respondents and on a cross-group basis, the original study was written up in a similar manner. Survivor, mother of survivor and teacher issues formed separate chapters and were then compared and contrasted.

Whilst the aim of the study was to discover how the various groups coped in the aftermath of child sexual abuse, it was felt that an important area of interest ought to be why these particular people had chosen to tell their stories for the purposes of the research. In terms of the teacher group, my biggest surprise came from an increasing awareness of how much some of them needed to talk about what had happened to them. Indeed, I was contacted by two people who claimed that they had 'needed to talk to someone for years' about their experiences.

Teachers described varying levels of training and support which had been available to them – in some cases, this was non-existent – but only one of the sample felt that this had been adequate to meet his needs, although he had certain doubts about how the legal system operated in this area. However, it must be noted that the authority for which he taught had also produced a respondent who had continuing doubts about her own preparedness for the task with which she had been faced some years earlier.

Several teachers claimed to want some of their experiences to be available to others, in order to promote discussion of the personal issues involved, but their own need to talk through and understand was apparent as the interviews progressed. This issue has been dealt with elsewhere in my discussion of research as a counselling activity (Skinner, 1998).

Most of the teachers had dealt with more than one case of sexual abuse and, during the interview, I asked them to concentrate on specific cases in order to focus on issues within a particular context. It was interesting to note that whilst sometimes different cases prompted very different reactions in the teachers, on other occasions teachers could comment that even despite a number of years separating incidents, they 'felt no better able to cope'.

Only two of my sample were nominated people for dealing with child protection issues within their establishments and, whilst these people had usually had more training than had others, the potential effects on them of dealing with abuse had been discussed in only one case. Teachers' knowledge was an issue in which I was interested, and though three of the sample had undertaken training courses as a result of dealing with abuse survivors, one had had no specific training and others mentioned courses which had either taken place over ten years earlier or whilst undertaking teacher training. Teachers seemed aware of the likelihood that males might be abused, but there was a strong assumption by several that abuse of those from deprived families was more common than in other classes.

Identification of abuse was a thorny issue and seemed to be linked to factors such as the size of the school involved and the degree of support for a teacher's suspicions. There was some indication that certain children were more likely to be believed than others, and that certain cases provoked more surprise than others. Indeed, in some schools expectations of incidence could colour the picture and assumptions about the likelihood of abuse within the school population could operate both for and against its identification.

Another factor which emerged from the data was the way in which a teacher's own perception of the role they played within the organization could affect their expectations about having to deal with this issue. This operated both at the level

whereby two teachers who perceived their role as subject specialists expressed surprise that survivors had consulted them about their problems; and at the level where a school could challenge a young teacher and make her feel highly uncomfortable that a child had chosen to speak to her. People who had been given the role of nominated person expected to have to deal with such issues, but one of the two in the sample attributed the number of cases seen to the catchment area of the school involved. This assumption was borne out by another respondent who spoke of how a colleague had complained about being required to attend child protection training because it was not applicable to a school like theirs. The respondent had encountered eight cases in the previous two years.

A problem for many of the respondents centred on when and how to act on information given or suspicions encountered. The ease, or otherwise, of this depended on the culture of the particular school. Often teachers mentioned that they sounded out colleagues on whether they knew or suspected anything about a particular child, and where their own suspicions were not confirmed, they may refrain from acting. Such a situation could be exacerbated by organizational factors or by previous experience. There seemed to be a number of stages before an official notification of a child's problem to the appropriate person and these could be jeopardized by an unsupportive experience or the expectation that precipitate action could damage the child or the situation. Even where a teacher had been supported, there was the sense that often events could get out of control and that difficult situations could be exacerbated. One teacher, who had followed procedure, supported the child and the family during the investigation and court case only to find that the perpetrator had been given a non-custodial sentence, doubted that much of what had ensued had been worth the effort.

Such personal impacts formed a large part of the teachers' stories and every member of the sample mentioned increased stress as a result of having to deal with this issue. Other impacts mentioned, as teachers told their stories, were: nightmares (2); inability to sleep (4); an effect on family or sex-life (2); unpleasant memories (3); anxiety (10); difficulties about what action to take (5); feelings of powerlessness (5); conflict with colleague(s) (3); sense of helplessness (7); feeling of isolation (7); uncertainty where to seek help or advice (6); dissatisfaction with outcome (3); and role conflict (4) – two spoke of the differences between their own abilities and the perceptions that other bodies had of them, and two of their desire to support or comfort a child and the constraints of their professional role.

As suggested earlier, organizational constraints can have a noticeable effect on teachers' willingness and ability to support sexually abused children. One further area that was mentioned by primary school teachers was a concern that support which had been given to a child may not be continued at secondary level. Another concern was that funding for support was so difficult to obtain.

One problem identified by Blagg (see Wattam, Hughes and Blagg, 1989) is that some sexually abused children may exhibit destructive or provocative behaviour. Whilst such behaviour may directly correlate with the severity of the abuse, it does not mean that the teacher's role in dealing with that child is any less difficult. Indeed, most of the teachers instanced examples of behaviour which severely tested them or their colleagues. It was here that they felt a particular need for additional sources of support, so that the child concerned did not end up being 'shunted from school to school and eventually written off'. One teacher suggested that exclusion could often be seen as a way of dealing with the problem, but felt that that neglected the fact it was a child who had the problem and the school had not dealt with that aspect of the case.

Sources of support were patchy and often *ad hoc*. Indeed, one young teacher described how she finally undertook six months of personal counselling in order to help her to work through the issues which dealing with an abused child had produced for her. Another spoke of how at her next attendance at a course dealing with child protection issues she had felt it important to comment on the limitations of dealing only with procedural issues, which were insufficient when actually dealing with a child in this situation. Others spoke of how they felt that useful information was being kept from them both by the external child protection agencies and by their own organizations. In the two cases where abuse had been perpetrated within the organization, such problems were hugely exacerbated.

Teachers were asked how, in their opinion, matters could be improved, and whilst there were individual issues which criticized practice within their own organizations or authorities, there were also more general perceptions that more effective training and support networks, as well as the injection of resources, would improve the lot of both the survivors and the teachers who became involved in dealing with them.

Discussion

Whilst it is not the intention of this paper to make detailed reference to the findings in relation to the other two groups in the original study, this section will make appropriate links to the other groups studied and will examine the factors involved in coping, including the importance of training, discussion and support.

In both the survivor and the mother of survivor samples, the majority of those interviewed had not disclosed their abuse in the school context, although most claimed that they would have liked to have been given the opportunity to do so. There was some perception by survivors that they would have been perceived as culpable if they had disclosed their situations, and some indication by two mothers that they had been aware of how similar cases had been handled by local schools and did not want their children to be labelled.

However, there do seem to be a series of factors which affect how those involved in this situation cope and interact. Orr (1995) has claimed that there is 'no right way' of dealing with sexual abuse, and it was very much the conclusion of the current study that issues were often messy and complex, and whilst procedures provided a framework, they often masked deeper issues which could not be so easily quantified.

Dealing with abuse involves a number of factors. Those which this study identified as operating on a personal (i.e. survivor, mother or teacher's own understanding or reaction), as well as an interpersonal level (i.e. when these views or reactions are juxtaposed), were as follows.

1 *Cognitive understanding*

This is concerned with the knowledge the person has about abuse. This may be theoretical knowledge, or information acquired from the stereotypes or myths surrounding the area. It provides the knowledge base against which a person makes sense of the events involved and which allows them to be defined for the individual. Whilst, for some potential players in an interaction, such knowledge may remain relatively unchallenged until a specific incident demands a re-evaluation, for others the knowledge itself is constantly evolving. Such 'knowledge'

may be flawed as in Briere's (1989) abuse continuum, but it forms the base on which the individual is currently operating. Indeed, Himelein and McElrath (1996) argue that healthy functioning can coexist with distorted cognitions of reality and that this is sometimes a factor in resilience.

Chamberlain's (1993) concerns about teachers' perceptions of abuse are likely to be located in this area.

2 Support systems and relationships

This area involves those with whom an individual can discuss, or not discuss, events. It encompasses the nature of the assistance which is, or is not, on offer to an individual and encompasses their ability to relate to others. The nature of this support may vary from personal, or family, relationships to organizational, or professional, support.

The area involves not only the physical resources, or lack of resources, an individual can involve, but is linked to their perceptions of the motives and role of such people. For example, if an individual has a damaged pattern of attachment (e.g. Alexander, 1992), not only may support relationships be lacking but they may also be perceived to be unlikely to be beneficial should they exist.

3 Physical effects

This area involves the physical effects which may have been caused by the abuse, or by having to deal with it. The physical effects upon a survivor may be short-term, long-term or linked to psychological symptoms. Such symptoms may also become linked to judgements about the relative severity of the abuse. Draucker (1992) and Hall and Lloyd (1993) note the importance of allowing survivors physical space and of appreciating how such actions as sudden movements might affect them. The area can likewise be closely linked to behaviour.

Teachers may find it less difficult to believe a child, or to act, if there are obvious physical signs of abuse and may express more surprise if a child, who is not neglected or deprived, discloses abuse.

4 Emotional impact

The emotional impact of the abuse may produce differing reactions at different times and in different people. The emotions involved may vary and range from anxiety to anger. In some instances, there may be no apparent emotion – perhaps, where emotional deadness has been used as a defence mechanism. Emotional reactions, or the lack of them, may be differently constructed by different parties. Herman (1992) notes that trauma can disconnect normal function. The range of survivor reactions can be from highly emotional with little memory of events, to detailed memories with no emotional reaction. Teachers who may be called upon to act on the information they receive may have difficulty in accepting its credibility.

5 Coping strategies and defence mechanisms

This area concerns the ways in which those involved deal with the information or experiences which they have had. A wide range of possibilities is identified in the literature (e.g. Herman, 1992; Draucker, 1992; Hall and Lloyd, 1993).

Again, different strategies may be perceived differently by survivors, or other people involved. For example, promiscuity may be perceived less sympathetically than minimization. A child who is well-behaved or a high achiever may not be perceived as having this sort of problem. Varia, Abidin and Dass (1996) suggest that survivors who use minimization may be less able to protect their self-esteem than those who are more open about what has happened. Ironically, minimization may also lead other people to perceive such survivors as coping more effectively.

6 Personality factors

The individual characteristics of those involved may, again, affect the way in which they deal with events, or respond to others who become involved. This may have links to the type of symptoms exhibited or to the defence mechanisms employed. It may have an impact upon disclosure and upon the degree of support made available. Both the characteristics of resilient survivors (e.g. Wolin and Wolin, 1995) and the conditions which might foster resilience (e.g. Gilgun, 1991; Esparza, 1993) are debated in the literature. As has been mentioned earlier, a child who is perceived as bad, or who perpetrates abuse, is likely to be perceived less sympathetically than one who copes quietly.

7 Age and gender related factors

When a survivor is very young, or very old, there will be different interpretations formed by those involved about the meaning of the event. There is a possibility that some age-groups attract less sympathetic treatment than others (e.g. Hooper, 1992), and that some groups are perceived to be at greater risk than others (e.g. Glaser and Frosh, 1988). The literature suggests that male survivors are less likely to be identified (e.g. Mendel, 1995). Teachers need to explore their own assumptions and beliefs in this connection.

8 Language and communication skills

The ability of a survivor to communicate the nature of the problem may influence outcomes, as may the ability of an individual to demonstrate understanding and comprehension (e.g. Hooper, 1992). A survivor in this study claimed that there may be assumptions about the veracity of a story if emotions are not apparent, whilst a mother spoke of assumptions made about her motives because her ability to communicate was of a high standard.

Teachers working in differing educational settings face differing difficulties in ascertaining the nature of this problem.

9 Behavioural factors

Behaviour may be affected by abuse events (e.g. Hooper, 1992) or by having information about such events (Johnson, 1992). The behaviour may apparently be directed against people other than those responsible (e.g. Hall and Lloyd, 1993), or may be very different in different contexts (e.g. Herman, 1992). In the current study, one teacher was called upon to believe that children who were already emotionally damaged and manipulative had been further abused by a colleague.

10 Disclosure events

The willingness or ability of those concerned to believe and act upon a disclosure may have an impact upon other factors in this model. The degree of support or consultation afforded to the person concerned may affect subsequent interactions in this connection (e.g. Wyatt and Mickey, 1987). A child who has disclosed to a teacher and not been believed, or a teacher who has tried to express a child's concerns to unsympathetic senior colleagues, may not be willing to take the same risk on a subsequent occasion.

Recommendations

The recommendations made by the study as a whole included a variety of links to education since this was an issue which was of importance to all of the groups interviewed. The study was more concerned with noting the effects on the individuals involved and their means of coping with abuse, but often the organizational contexts within which they had to operate had an impact on this effect.

Just as the survivors I interviewed were pupils during the duration of their abuse, so some of the mothers had contacted schools for help in dealing with the problems they, or their child, faced. The teachers in this study had all been faced with dealing with child sexual abuse survivors and often with other members of their families. Whilst one teacher felt that the support mechanisms available to him were good, this was not the case for the rest of the sample.

Support was considered to be essential if those dealing with abuse issues were to be effective. Whilst it is impossible to prepare teachers to deal with every issue they are likely to face in a teaching career, the provision of a combination of training opportunities and effective support networks both within and beyond the school context can provide a greater level of confidence in one's ability to cope.

However, support needs to be available and appropriate to current needs. A training course which dealt solely with procedures was not perceived to be as relevant as the ability to know who could offer support or suggestions with particular situations. A lack of interagency openness was perceived to devalue teachers' potential contributions or current efforts. Hughes (1993) found that teachers and mothers formed the principal groups responsible for reporting child protection concerns, yet Hallett (1995) notes that in terms of interagency cooperation, other professionals, whilst believing teachers to play a valuable role, are unsure of where they fit in.

In a climate where alternatives to exclusion are being sought and where interagency cooperation is being enshrined in such legislation as the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, and where the technology of the Internet is available to schools, issues of networking and support need to be tackled and resourced to ensure better outcomes for all concerned.

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