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Kindergarten teachers' experience of reporting child abuse in Taiwan: Dancing on the edge ☆

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore the experiences of Taiwan's kindergarten teachers when suspecting child abuse.
Method: Grounded theory method was used to analyze data from a purposive sample of 20 Taiwanese kindergarten teachers recruited from three kindergartens in Taiwan. Four focus groups lasting between 60–90 min were conducted. Data were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis.
Results: The model of "dancing on the edge" was the substantive theory developed from this study. Four major categorical themes emerged from the kindergarten teachers' work with abused children and their families: preserving relationships, avoiding harm, obligation, and maintaining balance. The dance between advocacy and risk is not easily choreographed and balanced. While attempted to avoid harm, teachers feel the pull of obligation and preserving relationships.
Conclusions: Reporting child abuse is more than a legal requirement; it is a social process involving a dance between advocacy and personal safety. A critical analysis on the dynamics and interaction between the child, mandated reporters, institutional system, community and society is imperative.

1. Introduction

Identification and reporting of suspected child abuse cases are critical steps in helping abused children. Mandatory reporting laws are in effect in Taiwan, the United States (US) and other countries in an attempt to exercise authority to protect children (The International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse & Neglect, 2007; US Department of Health & Human Service, 2007). The initial medicalization of child abuse was extended to mandate that non-health care professionals also report child abuse. The goal is to detect maltreatment before severe injuries occur (Webster, O'Toole, O'Toole, & Lucal, 2005). Reporting child abuse is a complicated issue. Mandated reporters have failed to report or made inconsistent reports for a variety of reasons including negative consequences for children, families, and themselves and fear the interruption of ongoing therapy (Alvarez, Kenny, Donohue, & Carpin, 2004; Kenny, 2002). As a result of the failure to report, a golden moment to intervene is missed; many children's lives have been lost (King et al., 2006).

Global estimates of fatal child abuse indicate that very young children are in the greatest danger. The rate of child homicide for the 0–4 age group is more than double that of the 5–14 age group (World Health Organization, 2002). Studies of non-fatal child abuse in Hong Kong showed that children 2–8 years of age were the most vulnerable to minor and severe physical abuse (Tang, 1998, 2006). Most kindergarten teachers and nurses in Taiwan have never reported a child abuse case; some have failed to report a suspected case of child abuse. Both groups of professionals have indicated that they are aware of their mandatory reporting role, but few are familiar with the content and the language of the law (Feng, Huang, & Wang, submitted for publication; Feng & Levine, 2005).

Child protection legislation and protocols are complex and vague. Given the ambiguity of the law, mandated reporters are often not confident in filing a report (Levi, Brown, & Erb, 2006; Levi & Loeben, 2004). Professionals have been known to use their own judgment and define maltreatment different from the legal opinion to determine the need to report (Portwood, 1998; Smith, 2006).

Barksdale (1989) found that less experienced professionals tend to encounter greater conflict in reporting child abuse and are less willing to report. Experienced professionals were more confident that reporting would not harm the therapeutic relationship. Though not common in everyday practice, the experience of child abuse has a powerful and long-lasting impact on clinicians' future practice and

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decision making. Mandated reporters' emotional responses to child abuse may have an impact on how they interact with children and their families. Professionals experience a reporting dilemma and indicate a sense of betrayal when reporting a family with whom they have a close and "entrusting" relationship (Flaherty, Jones, & Sege, 2004; Nayda, 2002). In dealing with their own conflict, some might choose not to ask and not to tell (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2007).

School teachers' perceptions of child abuse are important to examine. Children of kindergarten age are most vulnerable because of their developmental immaturity and associated incapability to comprehend and articulate the abuse (Tang, 1998, 2006; World Health Organization, 2002). Kindergarten teachers are in a unique, front line position to observe children who have been maltreated, especially young children who cannot speak for themselves. Besides physical symptoms, teachers are more likely to observe behavioral changes in children than other professionals with less opportunity. In one study, teachers claimed they would pay close attention to child abuse if non-physical signs of abuse emerged (O'Toole, Webster, O'Toole, & Lucal, 1999). Given the critical role of early identification and reporting of child abuse, an in-depth understanding of kindergarten teachers' experiences and perceptions of reporting child abuse is important. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Taiwanese kindergarten teachers and suspected child abuse.

2. Method

A qualitative design with grounded theory method was used to explore kindergarten teachers' experience and perspectives of working with abused children and their families. Focus groups were used to collect data from kindergarten teachers.

2.1. Sample

Purposive sampling was used to obtain kindergarten teachers with experience in working with abused children and their families. A total of 20 Taiwanese kindergarten teachers were recruited and interviewed using four focus groups from three kindergartens in Taiwan. Ideally, a total of 6 to 8 participants (Krueger & Casey, 2000) are required for a sufficient discussion in a focus group. Due to work schedule limitations, 4 to 7 teachers participated in each group. For this study, teachers' descriptions of their experiences with abused children and their families were the events that were sampled. These events included teachers' interactions with parents and children related to child abuse, children's behavioral problems, conditions that gave rise to the interaction, the range of variation in the interactions, and the dynamics of action.

2.2. Procedure

Approval was obtained from the University Institutional Review Board prior to the study. The researchers (JYF, SJC) served as the focus group facilitators, explained the study purpose, rules and rights; teachers provided informed consent and were interviewed in their preferred locations, including conference rooms and classrooms.

The interview guide consisted of nine open-ended questions formulated to obtain teachers' experiences in dealing with suspected cases of child abuse. The first question was framed broadly: "Tell me what child abuse means." Subsequent questions were increasingly specific, requesting information about such topics as how they perceived child abuse, how they detected the different behavioral signs of abused children, what experiences they had working with abused children and their families, opinions about barriers to helping abused children, concerns with the reporting procedure, and confidentiality issues. The facilitators encouraged discussion among members of the focus group. The facilitators asked questions according to the main and specific topics for each individual group for more in-depth discussion on specific issues. Interview sessions were conducted in Chinese and lasted between 60 and 90 min. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

3. Data analysis

Grounded theory was used to analyze the data. The constant comparative method was used to systematically code and analyze data. The principle investigator (JYF), a doctoral prepared researcher, conducted the data analysis which began with open coding, the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding began after the second focus group interview was completed to identify concepts and their properties and dimensions. Categorical themes emerged when the substantive codes were compared with each other. Axial coding was used to connect the categories and subcategories. Properties and dimensions of categories were identified. A core category was selected using process coding, which emerged from the process of open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This core category links the categories and subcategories to explain the relationship between categories and variation among data. Data was independently analyzed by the co-investigator (SJC) to ensure the credibility of the findings.

4. Results

The 20 study participants were female ranging in age from 20 to 45 years old. The participants had been kindergarten teachers for six months to 32 years. Their educational level included two with Masters degrees, 17 with Bachelor degrees, and one Associate degree. Most of the teachers had minimal pre-service or on the job training about child abuse issues. The model of "dancing on the edge" (Fig. 1) was the substantive theory developed from this study. Four major categorical themes emerged from the kindergarten teachers' work with abused children and their families: preserving relationships, avoiding harm, obligation, and maintaining balance.

Teachers cautiously managed and adjusted their approach and decision according to their evaluation of the context of child abuse in terms of the severity, parental intention, danger to the child and self, institutional support, and the closeness of their relationships with the child and parents. They attempted to achieve balance and find a rhythm for each case. Every encounter was a challenge for teachers to position themselves as an advocate of justice or a realist to avoid self-harm.

4.1. Preserving relationships

Preserving relationships explains the social process of making the decision to report suspected cases of child abuse for kindergarten

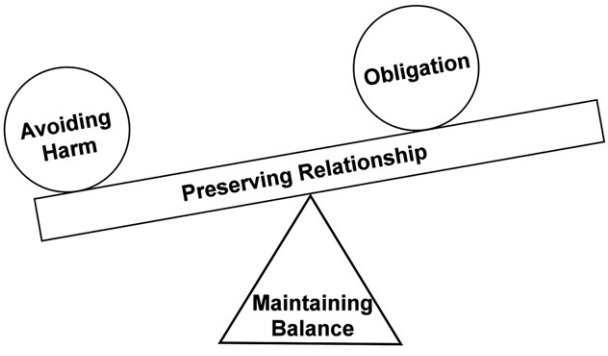

Fig. 1. Dancing on the edge.

teachers in Taiwan. Teachers strived to preserve their relationships with both parents and the child. While teachers struggled to advocate for justice, they carefully avoided any conflict with the parents.

Teachers expressed concerns that their relationships could be severely damaged by a report of child abuse or discussions with parents concerning discipline. These concerns were a major deterrent to reporting. Hoping to preserve a harmonious relationship with parents, teachers were reluctant to question parents with their observations and concerns about any injuries or unusual behaviors of the child. Teacher H said, "We are afraid the parents would be mad at us. If we reported, it would hurt our relationship."

Parents' denials and objections to accusations of any inappropriate discipline or actions intensified teachers' fear and anxiety. Teacher X described a parent's denial: "When we asked dad about the injury, he replied, "He's just very active and naughty, he bumps into all kinds of stuff all the time". Teachers were often unwilling to report the abuse if they sensed their relationship with the parents would become strained or perceived their harmonious relationship would be jeopardized. Teachers reported abuse when they believed the relationship was positive and the report was critical to the child's welfare. Maintaining family harmony and integrity characterizes Chinese culture, which emphasizes "don't wash your dirty linen in public". Child abuse is a family secret, especially for child sexual abuse. Teacher H shared the findings of one investigation, "The mom would just watch her own daughter being sexually assaulted by the dad everyday… she wouldn't admit that it's her husband who's the abuser, it's a huge disgrace for the family. Some women would just put up with their husbands' violence and try to cover it up."

Kindergarten teachers tried to understand the whole picture of the incident in order to prevent damage to the harmonious relationship that a wrong accusation of child abuse would create. Depending on their familiarity with the family's dynamics and the closeness of their relationship with the parents, teachers approached parents in different ways. Approaches included speaking to parents directly, speaking to the child, other teachers, or other caregivers. Often, parents were furious with the teachers' approach, and refused to offer any information. The proximity of the teacher-parent relationship, like partners in a dance, increased the opportunity for teachers to observe the family's dynamics and the abusive acts toward their children, but at the same time put teachers in the perceived awkward position to report child abuse. Teacher J shared: "We didn't really blame him (the father) for abusing his child.., because we knew how he came to this place… growing up with no father's presence and being physically and verbally abused by his mother… and he tried so hard to support the whole family, if you reported him for abusing his child, it's like sentencing him to death…. So I couldn't blame him for what he had done. Instead, we comforted him, tried to soften his heart…, a lot of times the abusers themselves were victims of child abuse, and yearned for love and acceptance from their own parents."

Teachers were concerned that their relationship with the child would be altered when reporting would breach confidentiality. Teacher H noted, "We've promised the child— 'We won't tell anyone', but we didn't keep the promise… I was very nervous and didn't know how or what to say to the child after I reported the case, it feels like you have betrayed the child…"

4.2. Avoiding harm

Teachers bore psychological burdens in the process of working with abused children. They worried about damage to relationships, danger to personal safety, and the potential for injury from the accused parents. The need to avoid harm sometimes outweighed the legitimacy of reporting the case.

Teachers worried that their previous harmonious relationship with the parents could be forever changed as a consequence of a report. They cautiously communicated with parents about their observation of the child by first employing non-offensive questions to gauge the parents' response. A vicious response could prevent or dissuade teachers from additional inquiry. Teacher L stated, "We called and asked mom to modify her discipline of the child. She was previously polite and friendly to us. After the call, she didn't talk or say hi to us, and we felt like we did not even exist!"

Teachers expressed their concerns and fear about their personal safety. Parents' unreasonable anger, aggression, or retaliation was worrisome. "We really worried that the parents would seek revenge or something because of the report… and just as we expected… that parent (of an abused child) stormed into our kindergarten and threatened our principal for my telephone number and address, and he really wanted to go after me." One teacher said, "We don't really know their [parents] background, if they were associated with mafia, some parents are frightening …. One time, kids were just having a small fight in class, but the parents came to school next day with a group of people, gangsters, making trouble… it ended up we had to call the police..."

Unfamiliar with and distrustful of the law, teachers doubted that the authorities would protect their safety or prevent them from being sued if an abuse report was not substantiated. "There's no legal protection for the mandated reporters… we of course would be worried if to report…. You know the law requires us to report the case within 24 h, but the authorities do not give us the power", said Teacher H.

Although the law does not require physical evidence to report a suspected case of child abuse, teachers desired to confirm the abuse before taking any action. They desired to avoid harming parents due to a false allegation. The amount of evidence kindergarten teachers collected functioned as a security blanket and gave them courage and legitimacy to file a report. Teachers made every effort to understand the inside story as well as the authenticity, severity and frequency of the abusive incidents. Teacher O said: "I would like to know the frequency of the abusive behavior. If that was a one-time incident, I probably would wait and see. … I want to make sure every report is a necessity. Was it real?" Teacher X noted, "I would verify if the situation was really like the child described… I talked to parents and tried to get the whole picture of the story… I think I should be able to tell from parents' facial expression and response to see if it was indeed an abusive act or just some misunderstandings."

Teachers felt it was critical to understand the rationale and context for parents' inappropriate behaviors toward their children. "We'd go talk to the mom about their discipline rules at home and the context for the kid to receive such a punishment", said Teacher F. Lack of confidence in the legal system to provide help for the family also appears to be a deterrent to reporting abuse. Teacher L. argued, "You really believe that all the problems will be resolved by the report. What will happen to the kid? Will he get the best care? Will the parents (abusers) get incarcerated? Is there a follow-up for the case? Reporting is the beginning (of helping the child and the family), not the end." "I am really hesitating… how would I know if the report was of benefit to the child and the family? Or maybe what I have done was the opposite… causing harm to the child and the family", said Teacher H.

Many teachers were sensitive and careful when interacting and communicating with the abused children to prevent secondary harm to the child. Teacher Z noted, "No matter how good the kid's development and communication skill, you still have to sensitively guide him to speak out about what he had been through. Be patient, don't push… We have the ability to distinguish if the kid tells the truth or fabricates a fact. I always believe in what the kid tells us because I can't see a reason for them to lie about things like this".

Not all teachers felt comfortable speaking with the child. Teacher Q said, "Some teachers feel nervous talking to the kid who is very vulnerable. You have to be patient with her, be careful of what you say. If the child has been traumatized, there is a big chance that she will

isolate herself and deny reality." Teachers often felt depressed and powerless when they could not find a way to help the child avoid harm. Teacher M described one case, "The boy was not his, the stepfather's, biological child, he hit and punched the kid with no reservation until the child got bruises all over the body… it broke our heart… all the neighbors in the neighborhood knew their situation, everyone wanted to help, but there were just too many obstacles and fear…The dad was a rogue and unemployed. You don't know if he would set the whole street on fire…" Teacher Y said, "When you heard the girl saying, 'Dad comes to my room and lies beside me and does that (sexual abuse)'… it really gave you a nervous breakdown!"

4.3. Obligation

While it is a legal requirement to report child abuse, it is also a teachers' professional responsibility to protect students from harm and to advocate for their welfare. Teachers are endowed with respect of highest morality, justice, and responsibility. "We have to speak up for the abused child. People expect us to do the right things because we are teachers", said Teacher C.

Confucianism forms the fundamental belief and spirit of education in Taiwanese culture and endorses absolute parental rights. However, some teachers defend basic human rights for children noting that children are not the property of their parents and must be treated decently. One teacher stated, "The father argued that since he owns the child, he sees no reason why he can't hit his own possession. We told him that the child is not only yours, he's also owned by our government! So I will report the case." Teachers emphasized that they are child advocates and mandated to report child abuse. They were willing to physically stop the abuse if necessary. "If he (the father) keeps hitting the kid viciously, I would go and try to stop him…", said Teacher A. "We call and ask the parents to adjust their attitude and behaviors (toward their child). And it's our responsibility to report the case if the situation is not improved."

Teachers believed that separating the child from the biological family was the only alternative to child abuse; a goal that can only be achieved by legal enforcement. Teacher M stated, "I imagine the district law court will investigate the case and collect related evidence once I report the case. I think this is the least thing I could do for the kid. In any case, the grown-ups, parents, are sneakier; they'll find a way to escape from the accusation." Teacher Q noted, "The possibility of substantiating the case is probably not great, but we can at least try to prevent the kid from being hurt again by reporting."

4.4. Maintaining balance

Teachers tried to find a balance between the benefit of reporting and the risk of harming themselves and their relationships. An unintentional injury caused by the parents is the most difficult scenario to report. Teachers appear to rationalize parents' acts and intentions to justify their own act not to report. Teacher A said, "Children need discipline; you can't let them monkey around without learning the consequences. But some parents go too far… well, how do we know how to distinguish what's too much for the discipline? …. Sometimes, I do agree that children need discipline and learn a lesson."

Teachers struggled to gain a balance by doing minor things, offering the child food or caring, to compensate for their own guilt and powerlessness for not being able to advocate. Teacher Y said, "That child in our neighborhood was very skinny…every time I saw his dad hitting him so hard, I almost cried out and wanted to tell him, 'Stop! Stop hitting him!' but I was very afraid, and did nothing... I could only give him food, like fruit, candy, etc… only this kind of little things, very passive…"

A positive reward came from doing the right thing and knowing the child was being placed in a better environment. Past positive experiences reinforced teachers' sense of worthiness and advocacy to report the case, and gave teachers balance to risk the potential danger to their personal safety. One teacher shared an experience of reporting sexual abuse in which the child was removed from the family. The teacher felt she had done something really meaningful although she was scared by verbal threats from the parents. "She [the child] has been sending me greeting cards and told me that her foster parents are very kind to her. You can tell that she is much happier and safe. I need not to worry for her now. So I believe that reporting child abuse is very important". Teacher A gave an affirmative and quick response to one teacher's questioning about her willingness to file a future report even if the situation was scary and threatening, "Yes, I will! You know it's a violation of the law if I do not report… and most importantly it's something quite meaningful." Teacher Y shared a similar reporting experience, "I was petrified that the abusive parents threatened to get me… Anyway, I was happy that a social worker had worked on the case to help the child. And it was nice of her to keep checking on me, on my safety, and updating with me on the child's condition even a year after the report. The kid has a nice life now with the foster family. I felt it, mandated reporting, paid off. It's really meaningful so I will do the same thing again if needed."

5. Discussion

Despite the limited experience of reporting child abuse, teachers described valuable personal experiences working with suspected cases of abused children and their families in their careers as kindergarten teachers. While aware of their mandated reporting role, teachers did not report suspected child abuse cases consistently. The four themes that emerged from the kindergarten teachers' experience with child abuse, preserving relationship, avoiding harm, obligation (moral and legal), and maintaining balance, create a model of dancing on the edge. The dance between advocacy and risk is not easily choreographed. The dance steps are continuously changing directions, sometimes forward, sometimes backwards, sometimes left, and sometimes right. Balance is essential for a dance performance. Dancers push themselves and are directed by others to create new movements which have the potential for harm. Like dancers, when faced with suspected child abuse, teachers choreographed their movements with respect to parents and children. They create the dance as it unfolds, often stepping to the edge of the stage. While attempting to avoid harm, they feel the pull of obligation and the pull of preserving relationships; dancing to the left, dancing to the right.

Consistent with other studies (Flaherty et al., 2004; Nayda, 2002), mandated reporters were concerned that reporting child abuse would damage the therapeutic (client-professional) relationship. Being proximal in social and professional relationships helps teachers realize family difficulties and finding ways to intervene, but at the same time increases the risk for self-harm and violent victimization. In the Chinese culture, individuals are seen as bound together in a continuing relationship and exist in harmony within their respective symbolic roles. Mandatory reporting is a mechanism to encouraging professionals to report suspected child abuse, but creates anxiety and fear for the professional. Kindergarten teachers felt on the edge because of the values inherent in the Chinese culture to maintain harmony and the need to act outside of their symbolic nurturing role. These values aggravate the reporting emotional responses and complicate the reporting process. Teachers used an "easing-in" technique to avoid false positive and false negative reports while maintaining the harmonious relationship. By easing-in teachers attempt to understand parents' difficulties in caring for their child and hope to obtain "hard evidence" of child abuse. However, the law does not require mandated reporters to possess physical evidence before reporting (Department of Statistics, Ministry of Interior, Taiwan, 2007), yet the reporters are reluctant to risk a possible false allegation and its consequences. One possible explanation is that

teachers have insufficient knowledge of child development, and are unable to differentiate normal exploration from possible signs of abuse. Lack of knowledge leads to lack of self-confidence in judgment. Denial of child abuse and keeping it secret are more commonly seen with incestuous abuse, even with the non-abusive parent. Without the support from the non-abusive parent, denial and rationalization becomes a quick-and-dirty solution for kindergarten teachers to avoid reporting troubles and to preserve the harmonious relationship. A critical time to intervene in child abuse, however, can be easily missed.

Ideally, based on their legal and ethical obligation, kindergarten teachers should be able to report suspected case of child abuse free from perceived threats to personal safety and threats to their harmonious relationships. However, kindergarten teachers in Taiwan feel that they are risking their lives and others' while they are acting as advocates of justice in reporting child abuse. The majority of kindergarten teachers in Taiwan are female and relatively low-paid professionals in the education sector. Gender inequality and socio-economic status can cause oppressed group behaviors, such as feeling powerless and frustration. The oppressed group seeks approval and validation of their work from people with power and authority. Teachers in this study stated that their reporting anxiety and uncertainty could be eased if the administrator or principal approved and helped with the report. Kindergarten teachers and nurses often doubt their own ability and judgment in recognizing and reporting child abuse cases (Feng, Jezewski, & Hsu, 2005). Lack of confidence is a significant characteristic of an oppressed group and, in turn, becomes a key barrier to reporting child abuse.

The nature of a qualitative methodology limits the ability to generalize the study findings to other populations. While teachers differed in their education and experience with child abuse, it is possible that saturation did not occur in the small sample size of the focus groups. In addition, recall bias, a limitation of all retrospective studies, may have limited the findings.

Future research is needed to investigate the relationships among the four themes identified in this study. The relative strength of each theme in determining child abuse reporting requires study. If key factors can be identified, interventions to facilitate kindergarten teachers' reports of child abuse can be developed.

6. Implications for practice

The findings of this study showed that kindergarten teachers felt like dancing on the edge of personal, legal and moral boundaries, and experienced anxiety and fear of harm to their relationship with parents and to self. Teachers were courageous, decent, kind, and cared for the abused children, yet they feared self-harm as a result of intervening. Administrators need to create a secure system to protect kindergarten teachers from becoming targets of parental rage and retaliation. Legal requirements and procedures require clarity to help teachers resolve their reporting ambiguity. Current training programs have shown success in improving mandated reporters' awareness but have failed to increase their reporting behavior (Khan, Rubin, & Winnik, 2005). A possible explanation is that current training programs only emphasize the cognitive aspects of child abuse recognition and not the affective behaviors required of teachers (Flaherty et al., 2004). Individuals reporting child abuse should be provided with opportunities to share their experience with colleagues and other professionals. Interventions designed to reduce the anxiety and fear about the consequences of reporting and increasing confidence and perception of self-value is crucial.

7. Conclusion

Reporting child abuse is more than legal requirement; it is a social process involving a dance between advocacy and personal safety. While there is a need for a standardized and comprehensive training in child abuse, a critical analysis on the dynamics and interaction between the child, mandated reporters, institutional system, community and society is imperative.

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