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Becoming and being DLP: Designated Liaison Persons' experience of the role in the Irish primary school[†]

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This paper reviews the role of the Designated Liaison Person (DLP) for Child Protection in the Irish primary school context. This is a role assigned by the Board of Management to a person in the school who oversees all matters pertaining to child protection including reporting abuse, liaising with staff and outside agencies in relation to child protection and meeting parents as required. Given the responsibilities associated with the role, it is normally the Principal teacher in the school who undertakes the role. A study undertaken with a number of DLPs in a variety of schools of different size and type highlights the multifaceted nature of the role, the supports available to DLPs and the challenges in undertaking this responsibility. The responsibility of ensuring the DLP is taking the correct course of action in making a referral of abuse in relation to a child is highlighted in the findings. Recent updates in child protection legislation which will impact on child protection procedures and policy in the school environment are also considered in this paper.

Keywords: Designated Liaison Person; child protection; legislative changes

Childhood confers a special status on children, including recognition of their vulnerability and need for protection. (Wulczyn et al. 2010, 5)

Ensuring children's safety and protection is everybody's business and most especially the business of the primary school where its heartbeat is its children. The current Department of Education and Skills Child Protection Procedures for primary and post-primary schools (2011) require that each board of management must 'designate a senior fulltime member of staff as the Designated Liaison Person (DLP) for the school' (Department of Education and Skills 2011a, 18). It is 'expected' that the role of the DLP will 'normally' be undertaken by the principal teacher in the school. The Child Protection guidelines issued by the Department of Education in 2001 did require the Board of Management to appoint a DLP but there was no expectation that it should be the principal teacher. The Board of Management must also appoint a person as the Deputy DLP who will assume the responsibility in the absence of the

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[†]Please note that this article was written before the Children First Act was fully implemented and revised Children First Guidelines and Department of Education Child Protection Procedures were published.

DLP. While there is no guidance issued as to who should undertake this role, it is often assumed by the Deputy Principal of the school. Any staff member who receives a disclosure of abuse from a child or indeed who has suspicions or concerns pertaining to child protection is required to report the matter ‘without delay’ to the DLP of the school. In essence, the DLP becomes the resource person for all of the staff in the school in dealing with child protection matters and also for outside agencies that the school deal with in relation to child protection: Tusla (also referred to as the Child and Family Agency), An Garda Síochána and other relevant parties. Undoubtedly, this is a hugely onerous and unenviable position that many principals of schools feel obliged to undertake. This paper reviews the role of the DLP, drawing on interviews completed with 16 DLPs with varying years of experience in the role, illustrating the complexities and challenges of the role. The first section of the paper will examine the way in which recent changes in child protection legislation are impacting on school policy.

Recent changes in child protection legislation

The two core documents which schools refer to in relation to child protection are the ‘Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children’, published by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2011, and the ‘Child Protection Procedures for primary and post-primary schools’, published by the Department of Education and Skills in 2011 following the publication of Children First. The 2011 Children First national guidelines replace the 1999 guidelines and take account of updates in legislation and recommendations from child protection reports in the intervening time. The Department of Education Procedures replace the 2001 guidelines with one set of procedures covering both the primary and post-primary context instead of separate guidelines for both sectors. Indeed, in his foreword to the procedures, the then Minister for Education, Ruairi Quinn, highlighted that the department procedures are based on the Children First Guidelines and their purpose is ‘to give clear direction and guidance to school management authorities and school personnel in implementing Children First within the school setting’ (Department of Education and Skills 2011a, 1). When the revised procedures were published, they were accompanied by Department of Education circular 0065/2011 which provided a summary of the ‘main new elements’ of the revised procedures (Department of Education and Skills 2011b).

Since 2011 a ‘suite’ of child protection legislation has been published including the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act, 2012, the Criminal Justice (Withholding of Information on Offences against Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012 and most recently the Children First Act, 2015 which puts elements of the ‘Children First’ policy on a statutory footing. The website of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs highlights that the legislation was a key commitment in the Programme for Government (www.dcy.gov.ie). To date, only certain sections of the Children First Act have been commenced but when fully implemented the act will provide for a number of key child protection measures including:

- a requirement on organisations providing services to children to produce a child safeguarding statement;
- a requirement on defined categories of persons (mandated persons) to report child protection concerns over a defined threshold to the Child and Family Agency (the Agency) and

- a requirement on mandated persons to assist the Agency in the assessment of a child protection risk, if so requested to do so by the Agency (www.dcy.gov.ie).

The remaining provisions of the Children First Act 2015 were commenced on the 11th of December 2017. While the obligations on mandated persons took effect immediately on the date of commencement, organisations will have three months from the date of 11th December to comply with their obligations in relation to publishing a Child Safeguarding Statement (www.dcy.gov.ie). Revised Children First national guidelines were published on 2nd October 2017 which replace the 2011 guidelines. It is expected that the Department of Education will issue revised procedures to schools in due course and these will guide schools in relation to the implementation of Children First 2017 and the preparation and publication of a Child Safeguarding Statement.

Teachers registered with the Teaching Council are specified as ‘mandated persons’ under schedule 2 of the Children First Act 2015 (Government of Ireland 2015). Schools will also be required to write and regularly review a child safeguarding statement, which is a departure from the child protection policy which all schools are required to have in place under the Department’s (2011) Child Protection Procedures. Essentially, in order to prepare a safeguarding statement, schools and other organisations providing services to children will be required to undertake an assessment of any risks to the child while the child is availing of its service and use this as the basis for forming the statement. There is also provision within the legislation for a register of non-compliance for providers who fail, on request, to provide a copy of the child safeguarding statement to Tusla. The real consideration, however, needs to be given to teachers as ‘mandated persons’ reporting concerns or disclosures to Tusla. As outlined, in the current procedures, the DLP liaises with all outside agencies in relation to child protection and this includes reporting any disclosures or suspicions of child abuse brought to the attention of the DLP by staff members. When the Children First Act 2015 is fully commenced and all teachers are identified as mandated persons, specific consideration will need to be given to the role of the DLP and the requirements of mandated persons as outlined by legislation. The 2017 Children First Guidelines highlight that the obligation to report abuse rests with the ‘mandated person’ and not the DLP (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2017). However, the Children First Act does not prevent the mandated person making a report jointly with the DLP or providing a copy of the report submitted to the DLP for information. Given that schools have a structured system in place whereby staff members rely on the DLP to report to the relevant agencies, it seems logical that revised procedures for schools will take consideration of the role of the DLP and make provisions for information sharing between mandated persons and the DLP.

Under the Criminal Justice (Withholding of Information on Offences against Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012, it is a criminal offence for any person to fail to disclose to An Garda Síochána information in relation to certain specified offences against children and vulnerable persons. Details of the specified offences to which the Act applies are set out in schedule one and schedule two of the Act and include amongst others; rape, sexual assault and sexual exploitation (Criminal Justice Act, 2012). In a situation where a teacher or staff member receives a disclosure of abuse or has information in relation to offences specified under this Act, it is their personal responsibility to ensure that they comply with the provisions of the Act. The Department of Education and Skills website outlines clearly that the fact a member of

school personnel has dealt with a child protection concern under the department's procedures (i.e. reporting to the DLP) does not absolve that person of their legal obligation to disclose information to the Gardai under the Act. Likewise, if they have dealt with the matter by reporting information to the Gardai as the Act requires, if the information relates to a matter that would fall under the department's procedures they must also comply with the requirements of the procedures (www.education.ie). The requirements of both the Department of Education Procedures and the Criminal Justice Act, depending on the particular situation, may require that a teacher or school staff member report to both their DLP and to An Garda Síochána. The 2017 Children First guidelines outline that the provisions of the Withholding legislation are in addition to the reporting requirements under the Children First Act 2015. Given that both Acts have different reporting procedures to different organisations, there is potential for confusion and lack of clarity for teachers and DLPs. On some occasions, they will be required to report child protection concerns to Tusla and on other occasions to report the same concern to both the Guards and the Child and Family Agency, depending on the nature of the abuse. As it stands, the role of the DLP in the school context is a challenging and isolated position, normally assumed by the principal.

The role of the DLP

The DLP will act as a liaison with outside agencies and as a resource person to any staff member or volunteer who has child protection concerns This person will be the designated liaison person for the school in dealing with the HSE, An Garda Síochána and other parties, in connection with allegations of and/or concerns about child abuse and neglect. Those other parties shall be advised that they shall conduct all matters pertaining to the processing or assessment/investigation of alleged child abuse through the DLP. (Department of Education and Skills 2011a, 18–19)

When considering the role of the DLP, as it is outlined in the Department of Education and Skills procedures, one might almost assume it as somewhat straightforward, involving a list of actions that are undertaken when a child protection concern must be responded to. In addition to liaising with outside agencies and being the resource person for staff, the procedures outline a number of actions that are taken by the DLP, including informing the board of management, taking confidentiality into account, informing parents/carers of any reports submitted taking the safety of the child into account and liaising with Tusla when the child transfers from or leaves the school and there has been a child protection report relating to the child in the past (Department of Education and Skills 2011). But the reality of child protection work is that is extremely emotional and challenging and involves a DLP meeting parents to inform them that the school have reported them to the Tusla as a child protection concern. While the procedures allow for the appointment of a Deputy DLP 'to assume the responsibilities of the DLP, where the DLP is unavailable for whatever reason' (Department of Education and Skills 2011, 18), the sharing of information or the professional relationship between a DLP and Deputy DLP is not interpreted in the procedures. The isolation and sole responsibility of the role become more apparent when the reality of supporting a hurt child and liaising with staff, families and outside agencies are taken on board.

In 2008, the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) carried out an investigation and review of the role of INTO members acting as the DLP in their school. The

review was intended to examine the structures of interagency communication along with the supports and legal advice available (INTO 2008). The INTO sent a survey to a random 15% of their principal teacher population in the country. Following the results of the survey, a number of respondents were requested to attend a focus group and discuss the findings of the survey. The specific aims of the survey and focus groups were to: identify training needs and other supports and to identify the experiences of DLPs dealing with other agencies in the area of child protection. The INTO report highlighted that 91% of the 335 DLP respondents were also the principal of the school. Members found their role as DLP ‘time consuming and very isolating and solitary’ (INTO 2008, 3). While the DLP has to support the class teacher and others involved in child protection issues, the report indicated that there was no support structure for the DLP or the school. The recommendations of the report included putting supports in place for the DLP as the key school link person with the family and all other agencies, including child protection matters in leadership training for newly appointed principals and establishing support groups for DLPs (INTO 2008). The current study sought to explore the ‘lived experience’ of the DLP with an in-depth focus on supports and challenges in the role.

The ‘lived experience’ of the DLP

The current study was undertaken as part of a doctoral thesis with a number of DLPs in primary schools, with a variety of levels of experience and serving in different categories of school. The purpose of the study was to investigate the role in detail and the issues of what meanings the DLPs assign to their ‘lived experience’ of the role would underpin the investigation. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as the most suitable qualitative approach for this study. IPA contends that ‘human beings are not passive perceivers of an objective reality, but rather that they come to interpret and understand the world by formulating their own biographical stories into a form that makes sense to them’ (Brocki and Wearden 2006, 88). This ‘lived experience’ is coupled with a subjective and reflective process of interpretation, in which the analyst explicitly enters the research process (Reid, Flowers, and Larkin 2005). Consequently, the researcher’s personal background and personal perspectives related to this phenomenon were made explicit as a process of self-reflection.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 DLPs, 15 of whom were the principal of their school, while 1 participant was a teacher in the school. Each interview took approximately one hour to complete. The study participants outlined below were drawn from a range of both urban and rural primary schools, including schools with teaching and administrative principals, inclusive of *gaelscoileanna*, special schools, schools designated as disadvantaged and schools under various school management bodies. The participants had varying years of experience in the role; from less than a year to over 20 years. [Table 1](#) outlines the demographic profile of the participants chosen for the interview, highlighting the type of school they worked in and the number of years of experience they have in the role. Purposive sampling was adopted as a strategy in order to recruit participants for the research. Participants were invited to participate based on their school type, years of experience as a DLP and gender. Participants were selected from a wide geographical area to ensure all criteria were met. Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the university where the researcher was undertaking the doctoral thesis.

Table 1. Detail of the participants who took part in the study.

Name	Gender	Principal type	School category	Years of experience as a DLP
Participant 1 (P1)	Female	Administrative Principal	Co-educational	0–1 Year
Participant 2 (P2)	Female	Administrative Principal	Special	0–1 Year
Participant 3 (P3)	Female	Administrative Principal	Co-educational	3–4 Years
Participant 4 (P4)	Female	Teacher in school	Co-educational	3–4 Years
Participant 5 (P5)	Male	Administrative Principal	Co-educational	4–5 Years
Participant 6 (P6)	Female	Administrative Principal	All girls	4–5 Years
Participant 7 (P7)	Male	Administrative Principal	Co-educational	5–10 Years
Participant 8 (P8)	Male	Administrative Principal	Co-educational	5–10 Years
Participant 9 (P9)	Male	Administrative Principal	Co-educational	5–10 Years
Participant 10 (P10)	Male	Teaching Principal	Co-educational	5–10 Years
Participant 11 (P11)	Female	Teaching Principal	Co-educational	5–10 Years
Participant 12 (P12)	Female	Administrative Principal	Co-educational	10–15 Years
Participant 13 (P13)	Female	Administrative Principal	Co-educational	10–15 Years
Participant 14 (P14)	Female	Administrative Principal	Co-educational	10–15 Years
Participant 15 (P15)	Female	Administrative Principal	All boys	15–20 Years
Participant 16 (P16)	Female	Administrative Principal	All boys	20+ Years

The DLP role

While the Child Protection procedures outline the responsibility of ‘all boards of management to designate a senior full-time member of staff as the DLP for the school’ (Department of Education 2011, 18), the DLPs in this study outlined that their experience of being appointed to the role came about in different ways; ‘Nobody told us, just assumed it. It more or less came with the job. It was sort of looked on that the person who had responsibility for the school would now have that as well’ (P1). Many participants took on this responsibility in taking on the role of principal, while the participants who had been in the role for many years felt that awareness in relation to the role had increased significantly in recent years. Even though it is ‘expected’ that the DLP will ‘normally’ be the principal teacher, there were mixed opinions as to whether this important role should be that of the principal; ‘I think the principal in the school, particularly the teaching principal has a huge degree of responsibility in the day to day running of the school ... and I think within the umbrella of the principal’s role, it can get lost’ (P5). By comparison, some participants felt that given the importance of the role, the principal was best positioned to assume responsibility; ‘It is such an important role, it is something the principal should do themselves’ (P12).

The role of the DLP was described by all participants as a very responsible and isolating one; ‘it is a huge, you know it’s a massive responsibility’; ‘I found it’s been very thought provoking. A lot of times you really have to search your own conscience about what you feel about a thing’ (P2). The value of experience in the role was articulated by those DLPs that have served a considerable length of time in the role and/or have had a number of child protection concerns to deal with. Interestingly, it was DLPs who served in schools designated as disadvantaged who all spoke at length about the value of experience in the role. While the Children First Guidelines (2011)

recognise that neglect is more closely correlated with poor socio-economic circumstances, it is worthwhile considering whether more experience in the role enables a DLP to be more alert and aware to overall child protection concerns in the school. One DLP who had worked in a non-DEIS school before being appointed principal of a DEIS school highlighted that while issues of neglect may be more prevalent in DEIS schools, sexual abuse 'is the secret one and that is the one that needs to be broken and I don't know how you break that' (P3)?

Supports and challenges in the role

In describing their experience of the role of DLP, participants elaborated on the supports and challenges in the role. Supports identified included Tusla and the Guards, guidelines and the school policy, training and support from staff and the board of management. While some participants identified Tusla as a support, this view was not supported by other participants. This was also the case with the role of the Deputy DLP, with some participants elaborating on the necessity to speak to the Deputy DLP in relation to confidential matters and others feeling the role of DLP was only to assume responsibility of the DLP in their absence. Two DLPs interviewed elaborated on the establishment of a care team within the school as a significant support in dealing with the overall care needs of pupils within the school, some of which pertain to child protection. Personnel on the care team varied from case to case and met with the aim of establishing the cause for referral to the team, the interventions that could be put in place for a child and whether the case needed to be referred further. Confidential issues in relation to child protection would never be discussed at these meetings. The greatest support of this structure as DLP was in helping him or her to make informed judgement calls; 'the judgement call, if you have one person and it's left up to you to make the judgement call, it's difficult' (P8). Many of the DLPs expressed the need for further supports for them in the role, given its isolation and the responsibility of making judgement calls warranted by the role.

The challenges faced by the DLPs in this research were numerous. These included: dealing with newcomer (migrant) families, dealing with parents and the responsibility of the judgement calls one is required to make as DLP. Reaching a decision as to whether signs and symptoms of abuse, in particular neglect, that are apparent at school level warranted referral to Tusla is the crux of what judgement calls entails for DLPs:

Do you know, there are two categories, there is ones that you know you definitely have to report and there is no real problem with those, but it is those kind of in between ones and you are wondering is there a problem and you are wondering if you should report or are you wasting your time reporting it? (P13)

The experience of informing family members that a referral has been lodged to Tusla is not a pleasant one for DLPs. The participants in the research had various responses from parents when they had to meet them in relation to referring a case to Tusla, from feeling that the reality of the situation had not registered with parents to dealing with parents' anger. One participant spoke of the situation where months later parents came in to him to thank him for making the referral because it had really helped her family. However, the participants voiced their concerns about the

possibility of someone seeking revenge on them, the responsibility of ensuring that you do not put someone through a false claim and the personal consequences of living and working in a local community where a family also resides: ‘you are dealing with your own neighbours and it’s people that you have grown up with and your children have grown up with’ (P13).

Taking action

DLPs in the study elaborated on their experience of seeking advice from Tusla in a situation that is ongoing in a child’s life and no direct disclosure of abuse was made. In many of these situations, participants spoke about supporting the situation at school level where possible. The course of action described by one participant is reflective of many voices in the study:

I go down various avenues. I would start off by looking at the child myself, talk to the teacher about it ... then we have a home school liaison teacher here ... he would go out to the family ... and then if we were still worried about any aspect of the child we would contact Tusla ... we would do as much as we can within the resources we have and then we pass it on after that. (P7)

The study reflected that knowledge of the families involved, taking consideration of the circumstances the family are living in, parenting ability and parental incapacity due to a learning disability, for example, is often an influencing factor in decision making. Participants also spoke about children who were causing them concern, but where there was no specific evidence from a child protection perspective to bring the matter to the attention of Tusla; ‘I can’t prove it. It’s only an observation. I can’t make an assumption’ (P13). One DLP spoke in detail about a child in the school who came to school with no lunch. While the school would contact the parent to bring in lunch for the child and otherwise ensure that the child did not go hungry, the DLP highlighted that had she referred the matter to Tusla: ‘that same person (the parent) would have spoken throughout the village and blackened my name that I was doing this ‘cause the child had no lunch for one day’ (P11).

One DLP in the study had taught abroad during his teaching career outlined that his experience of working in a country where mandatory reporting was in place in relation to child protection was a huge support to him in terms of taking action in relation to child protection decisions;

As a young teacher, my frame of mind was very much about the importance of child protection and while I was there (abroad), the question as to whether this might be an issue or not was really only secondary you know, if there was a possibility then I had to go and say it. (P9)

Experience of dealing with outside agencies in relation to child protection

The participants in the study also spoke of their experiences of dealing with outside agencies in relation to child protection; mainly, the experience of dealing with Tusla and in some situations liaising with the Guards. In this study, five of the participants had dealt with a situation where a child had directly disclosed an abuse situation. The participants elaborated on their experience of dealing with Tusla with very mixed reports ranging from extremely positive to very negative: ‘I found them (Tusla)

excellent, and they called me back ... I must say giving a name, saying when they were available, coming back all the time, liaising with us very well. I did find them very good' (P1). Another participant highlighted; 'I found somebody at the other end of the phone very open and understanding in relation to the kinds of questions I was asking and very good advice was given' (P9). In contrast to this, some participants were left feeling extremely frustrated and disillusioned as a result of their experiences with Tusla:

Referring your child is like washing your hands of them. It becomes someone else's problem and because there is nothing coming back it is not your problem anymore. I would definitely think twice before I would contact Social Services again, as a matter of fact, I would have to be very sure. (P5)

Another participant commented that she felt Tusla were 'questioning us in so far as to why the school had made the report' (P14).

For some of the participants who described their experience with Tulsa as positive overall, they expressed discontent at various issues within Tulsa, including slow response rates to reports and levels of feedback offered to schools, as is illuminated by one participant:

At the end of the day very slow to respond. Ok, I had to make quite a few phone calls before I got what I wanted. I felt, considering the nature of what I was asking they would be quicker to respond, and I felt even when I did send in the report it was slow to be dealt with. (P2)

The level of feedback offered to the school from Tulsa following a referral was also a matter that caused dissatisfaction in general for DLPs; 'You are left wondering, you know was that a correct thing to do, or did that family get the support that they needed or is that child ok now' (P9)? Participants also raised concerns in relation to the adequacy of supports put in place for children and the level of follow-through by Tulsa:

They are put in place (supports) and it's sort of hunky dory. We have taught her how to do this now and she is going to do it, but it's not followed up on in an ongoing basis, so the problem repeats itself. (P2)

Reference was also made to the high turnover of staff in Tulsa and different staff dealing with one case which impacts on consistency issues and follow through. One DLP summed up her overall concern in relation to taking action as: 'You go through all this process and at the end of the day, does it really make a difference in the lives of the children' (P15)?

Effective interagency communication and cooperation between all professionals involved in child protection work are recognised as essential in the Children First national guidelines. This study highlighted that levels of interagency communication and cooperation were highest with the schools who had the largest number of referrals to Tulsa. One of the participants in the study who had numerous dealings with Tulsa cited the importance of interagency working for successful outcomes for children: 'Ourselves, Tulsa and Gardai worked together, so that's what helped, that's what made it work in the end' (P1). Relationship building is core to effective interagency

communication and one participant noted how interagency communication was hampered due to lack of trust between schools and Tusla: ‘There is an awful lot of distrust between teachers and social workers’ (P14). The study reported situations of very good working relationships between Tusla and a school which was enabled through schools liaising with Tusla, learning how the system operated through consistent attendance at child protection conferences and professional record keeping. The participants were unanimous in declaring their wish that they would have a specific member of Tusla personnel who would deal with a school’s child protection issues and that this would enable relationship building:

Now do you know the way we have this, the NEWB and somebody walking in and you have a face with the name, and that is serious enough, children losing days from school but it is not as serious as someone being sexually abused ... I think it would be no harm if there was somebody that was connected with x amount of schools. It would be much easier to get advice as well. (P12)

Guidelines and training

In supporting DLPs in their role, the Children First national guidelines from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education Child Protection Procedures are the principal documents that guide participants in their role as does training that has been offered to DLPs. Participants in the study expressed general satisfaction in relation to the guidelines with comprehensive information to support them in their role, with one participant cautioning ‘I always think getting from a document to practice is where people can trip up or where things don’t happen as well’ (P9). The main areas where participants felt they required further guidance was in relation to dealing with newcomer (migrant) children and also more specific information in the guidelines in relation to the different categories of abuse. All but one DLP in the study had attended training in the area of child protection. Participants expressed satisfaction in relation to the training received in terms of providing a comprehensive overview of the guidelines and procedures. Further training requirements requested from the DLPs included an input from the different agencies involved in dealing with child protection, including Tusla, further legal training and further information on filing a report and dealing with families where a report has been made. One of the participants who had experience of attending training spoke about the importance of what you prioritise as principal and DLP of a school: ‘You see I think an awful lot of it is to do with the ethos of the school and how you prioritise things yourself, even more than training, even going around in your ordinary causal conversations with people’ (P6). Most especially, the importance of training for staff was highlighted in this study as it is ‘so essential in many ways because you are dependent completely on your staff’ (P2).

Discussion

The investigation and review conducted by the INTO into the role of DLP highlighted the lack of support structures available to the DLP for such a responsible and demanding role. The current research study elucidates our understandings of the experiences of DLPs for child protection in primary schools in Ireland. The experiences as told by the participants in this research portrayed the role as time-consuming, isolating and

fraught with decisions that are in reality not as simple as outlined in the guidelines. Buckley (2015) contends that detection of abuse is a complex process and requires ‘a trained eye’, ‘confidence’ and regular engagement with the family in order to become more assured in decision making. The ‘lived experience’ of the research participants highlighted the reality of making decisions that potentially may have far-reaching decisions for children’s lives and the challenge involved for one person in undertaking this role. Findings of research conducted with personnel from a number of services who work with children across Ireland echo the complexity of abuse detection. The findings of the study highlight that child protection concerns exist along a ‘continuum of severity’ marking a distinction between suspected abuse and reportable abuse; “reportable cases” (which) are severe and unquestionable child protection concerns and “suspected” or “theoretical” cases, (that) are less likely to be reported because they are ambiguous or lack the severity needed to instigate a report’ (Buckley 2015, 36). Bolstering support for DLPs by establishing protocols for information sharing between a DLP and Deputy DLP and allocating a social worker to each school would support a DLP in their child protection work. Potentially, this would be very effective in helping to minimise the often overwhelming sense of isolation and responsibility for DLPs, keeping in mind the confidential nature of the subject matter. Allocating a social worker to each school would enable both services to establish a working relationship and take away some of the fear for schools about contacting a service that is relatively unknown to many DLPs. Schools are in regular contact with a wide range of support services that provide a suite of supports to children and over time a relationship is established with these services which leads to the best outcomes for the children involved. Establishing this relationship with social workers would serve to ensure that the most vulnerable children are adequately protected. The study highlighted the fact that the schools who had the most contact with Tusla had built this relationship over time and it made the demanding nature of this work less fraught and isolating. While the Department’s Child Protection Procedures interpret confidentiality and the sharing of information pertaining to child protection on a ‘need to know’ basis in the best interest of the child, further guidance in the procedures on information sharing between a DLP and Deputy DLP would offer support to a DLP within the school community.

The themes presented from the findings of the current study highlight the need for established monitoring systems in schools in relation to child protection records. While the Child Protection Guidelines note that the responsibilities of boards of management of schools include ‘monitoring the progress of children considered to be at risk’ (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2011, 22) there is, in reality, a lack of established monitoring systems in schools. A system in a school that enables classroom and support teachers to account for child protection concerns such as falling standards of hygiene, attendance, behaviour and takes account of patterns of lateness, appearance and hygiene, and particular behaviour patterns as examples would certainly support DLPs in making judgement calls and in seeking advice or making a referral to Tusla. The aforementioned study by Buckley (2015) highlights that cases of neglect and emotional abuse are the most problematic in terms of identification, given the high levels of ambiguity associated with them. ‘As the presentation of abuse of neglect becomes more ambiguous and the signs less pronounced, the corresponding level of confidence in making a report declines’ (Buckley 2015, 36). Monitoring systems are a practical measure that, when consistently filled in, may help to

build a picture of less easily identifiable cases of abuse. In addition, monitoring systems would help to support DLPs in dealing with migrant families, and balancing recognition and respect for cultural differences with ensuring that the guidelines are consistently applied and adhered to.

Considering the amount of time children spend in schools and the unique perspective teachers have on all children in their care suggests the possibility that schools have much to offer by way of supporting children in need of care and protection. A more effective method of communication needs to be established between Tusla and schools, incorporating structures of feedback and adequate response rates to referrals being processed. Some of the findings of the present research study highlight the levels of distrust and frustration that exist between school personnel and Tusla as a result of non-intervention and unsuccessful intervention for children. Burns and MacCarthy (2012) argue that the recommendations of successive child abuse inquiries in Ireland have given rise to expectations and demands which are not possible to meet, given the large numbers of children for whom social workers are responsible. The size of the caseload carried by teams inhibits their ability to meet practice expectations which have resulted from the recommendations of child abuse inquiry reports. Supporting and organising child protection and welfare teams in a manner where caseloads are reasonable and manageable, with good quality and reasonable supervision would facilitate the process. In order for interagency communication and cooperation, which is the thrust of the Children First national guidelines, to achieve real success these issues need to be addressed. Presently, schools feel they have little to no information in relation to how the child protection and welfare system in Tusla operates and information sharing and awareness raising is needed for schools and DLPs to understand the constraints and realities of the child protection system in this country. Allocating a designated social worker to a school or groups of schools seems the most practical way of enabling communication and ensuring greater levels of trust between Tusla and school personnel. The participants in this research elaborated on care practices in place in their schools, and particularly in schools designated as disadvantaged, day to day care practices in schools, including provision for breakfast and lunch, contribute in a very significant way to a child's overall care and protection. It is essential that this information is shared with personnel who are responsible for implementing support for children in need. Given the trusting relationships that schools build with children and their families, combined with the reported success in this research of programme intervention, it seems logical that Tusla and schools would form establish closer working relationships in the area of child protection and this would be particularly beneficial in safeguarding the most vulnerable children.

The current study highlighted various levels of staff awareness into child protection and the importance of staff vigilance in this area as ultimately teachers and school staff in classrooms are interacting with children on a day-to-day basis. As with many priorities in school life, teachers can vary in their attitude towards child protection with most realising its absolute importance to few expressing a reluctance to get involved for fear of the consequences. It is necessary that teachers and all school staff are made aware of the consequences of abuse and the importance of early detection and intervention. While the Department of Education and Skills have facilitated school closure days for all curriculum areas since the revision of the curriculum in 1999 and are currently offering this support model to enable schools to receive training in

the revised language curriculum, this time has never been facilitated for child protection. Support is available for school through the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and the Child Abuse Prevention Programme (CAPP) but the time to allow for this training must be made available by the school. Given the unfortunate history in our country in child protection and the priority of teachers' roles in this area, time should be afforded to school to train and upskill in this area. Affording this opportunity to schools following the further implementation of the Children First Act provides a very appropriate time to enable staff to receive this training as revised Children First Guidelines are published and Child Protection Procedures from the Department of Education and Skills will follow. In addition, the revised Stay Safe programme, a personal safety skills programme for children, has been made available to all schools from November 2016. Stay Safe is a primary school based approach to the prevention of child abuse and is, in fact, a mandatory programme for all primary schools. Department of Education circular 0065/2011 states that the 'stay safe programme must be fully implemented in all primary schools' (Department of Education 2011, 1). This recent programme update and forthcoming updates provide the ideal time to give schools an opportunity to upskills in necessary updates in relation to child protection. Training is available to DLPs in the area of child protection but there are no specific guidelines in terms of how often training should be updated and it might be very worthwhile considering a practice similar to First Aid where there is a requirement for DLPs to keep training up to date.

Conclusion

The recently published Action Plan for Education 2016–2019 weaves wellbeing in the school community as an objective to support success in schools and in life throughout the plan (Department of Education and Skills 2016). Children's safety and protection are fundamental to their wellbeing and it is paramount that in a changing tide of legislation and policy practice in child protection, DLPs and the wider staff of schools are supported to manage and embed change and most especially respond to signs and symptoms of abuse a child may display. Existing research highlights how child protection work for teachers is very challenging. Buckley and McGarry (2010) note the impact of training, competing pressures on teachers' time, interagency collaboration and teachers' reluctance to report abuse as the issues most commonly emerging from Irish studies on the challenges for teachers in child protection work. Bourke and Maunsell (2015) categorise the barriers to teacher reporting as both explicit and implicit. Explicit obstacles include lack of knowledge or awareness in relation to child abuse issues, including lack of necessary awareness of the signs of child abuse and furthermore, lack of knowledge of the appropriate procedures to follow. Implicit obstacles to reporting among teachers may be located across three domains; the personal, the professional and the cultural domain. Bourke and Maunsell argue that education and training should aim at targeting both explicit and implicit obstacles to reporting. This paper focuses on the realities of the person in the primary school at the front line of child protection: the DLP. The shared stories of the DLP highlight the need for a renewed emphasis on this central role in a school and a number of recommendations that may support the DLP in practical terms are presented, including guidelines for information sharing between the DLP and Deputy DLP and advice on the establishment of monitoring systems in schools.

The reality remains that a staff member may be the eyes and ears for a vulnerable child; therefore the importance of whole school staff training on a regular basis cannot be overlooked. Interagency collaboration, particularly between schools and front line social workers working at the chalk face of child protection, needs to be strengthened to ensure children's needs are appropriately addressed. There is scope through revised Department of Education procedures to address some of the issues highlighted from the study undertaken. As the guidelines themselves say, this is about Children First!

Notes on contributor

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