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“Recognition and identification of children in preschool and school who are exposed to domestic violence”

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ABSTRACT

Although domestic violence takes place in the private domain, preschool and school professionals are confronted with its consequences in the intermediate domain between home and school when they encounter children who have been exposed to violence. This article investigates whether and how Swedish professionals in pre/school identify children who are exposed to domestic violence. The results show that pre/school professionals argue that they do not have enough knowledge about the phenomenon or about how to identify the symptoms or signals that emerge from family violence. However, most of these professionals talk about their experience in identifying different factors, both known and unknown, that are important in the process of recognizing children who have been exposed to domestic violence. Even though they find it important to identify and support these children, some professionals have difficulty connecting the issue of witnessing violence with child abuse. In addition, the question of whether and how children who have been exposed to domestic violence are perceived as included in the school's educational duties seems to be an important issue affecting the staff's readiness to respond to signals and symptoms.

KEYWORDS

children exposed to domestic violence; identification; preschool; school; private and intermediate domains

Introduction

Preschool and school (herein jointly referred to as pre/school) institutions have many obligations and responsibilities in children's upbringing and education. Educational goals and responsibilities are intertwined with goals that focus on children's wellbeing, and educational institutions are expected to identify and support children in various difficulties, including domestic violence. The issue of children affected by exposure to domestic violence (EDV) – that is, children who are witnessing domestic violence – is a serious one in many countries (e.g. Feerick and Silverman 2006). Being exposed to or witnessing domestic violence is now considered to be child abuse and is grouped with other forms of abuse (Kaufman Kantor and Little 2003; Mac Millan 2014; Münger 2015; SOU 2015: 55). In Sweden, the special needs of children subjected to such violence form an urgent policy question and are a matter for the welfare system and for children's

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institutions (Eriksson et al. 2005; Överlien 2010). No statistics are available on how many reports are submitted to the Child Protection Service (CPS) in Sweden, but it is thought that at least one Swedish child in 20 is affected by EDV every year (Annerbäck et al. 2010). The difficulties inherent in defining the problem of witnessing violence are especially troubling (cf. Bair-Merritt et al. 2015; Melton 2005; Stanley et al. 2011). Överlien (2010, 82) argues that it is important to focus on the child's perspective on the violence and to use the term "experience" when the child encounters violence in different ways, such as through watching, hearing, having direct or indirect involvement and/or experiencing the aftermath of violence in the family.

It has been discussed in the media, often in association with actual individual cases, that children fail to receive protection because of professionals' underreporting of child abuse. Preschool and school are very important arenas to study in relation to child abuse because these are the institutions that encounter all children; in Sweden, most children attend preschool on a daily basis, from an early age. In the Swedish context, legislation emphasizes that all professionals working with children in preschools, schools or other official institutions are required to try to identify victims of abuse, and to report to the CPS if it is suspected or known that a child is being exposed to any form of abuse or neglect (Skollagen 2010; Socialtjänstlagen). Furthermore, the national curricula (Skolverket 2010, 2011) state that the school (i.e., the principal) has responsibility for children's wellbeing and must support them in different ways in school. Unfortunately, research shows that professionals in preschool and school lack knowledge or awareness in general about child abuse and especially about EDV (Eriksson, Bruno and Näsman 2013a; Bruno 2011).

The aim of this article is to investigate pre/school professionals' perceptions of, knowledge of and experience with identifying children who are exposed to domestic violence and abuse. The specific research questions are:

- How do pre/school professionals understand EDV?
- What signals result in recognition, reaction and the identification of children affected by EDV? How can these signals be understood?

Previous research

In previous decades, children affected by EDV became a new research area in the context of intimate partner violence (Jaffe, Lemon and Poisson 2003; Överlien 2012). Previous research shows that a large number of children are exposed to and witness domestic violence (Annerbäck et al. 2010; Ralo et al. 2015; Vameghi et al. 2010). However, EDV is still an underestimated problem. This issue is problematic because there is a strong relation between children's EDV and negative psychological, social and cognitive consequences (Evans, Davies and DiLillo 2008; Graham-Berman et al. 2012; Holden et al. 1998; Holt et al. 2008; Olofsson et al. 2011; Mac Millan & Wathen 2014; Överlien 2010).

Even though studies on the effects of EDV on children and youth are extensive, there are relatively few studies considering the effects on children's educational outcomes (Eriksson, Bruno and Näsman 2013a, 2013b; King and Scott 2014). Bruno (2011, 2012) points out that a conflict often emerges regarding whether the school staff considers its

assignment to be pedagogical or social. However, research to date shows lower reading levels among adolescents Assad, Friedemann-Sanchez, & Levison 2016), lower reading and math scores in elementary and middle school (Kiesel et al. 2016) and higher levels of school dropouts (Durand et al. 2011). Studies also show a connection between EDV and aggressive behaviour in school environments (Holmes et al. 2015). In other words, children's education and their psychosocial health are intertwined.

It is important to identify and support children affected by EDV in educational contexts because, in most countries, children's lives are largely lived in preschool and school (Eriksson, Bruno and Näsman 2013b). Thus, it is of great importance to obtain more knowledge about whether and how professionals in these institutions identify and respond to this problem (O'Toole et al. 1999). Some research has indicated that, overall, suspected cases of all forms of child maltreatment and abuse are more underreported by educators than by other professionals (e.g. school social workers), especially when it comes to family risk factors (King and Scott 2014). Moreover, Odenbring et al. (2015) have shown that school officials explain child abuse in terms of parents' social, psychological or psychiatric problems, but also in relation to the parents' socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. Bruno (2011) shows that pre/school professionals tend to distance themselves from such family problems.

In a Finnish study (Usakli 2012), it was shown that teachers are able to identify children in some kind of trouble, but that they have difficulty understanding and interpreting signals connected to domestic violence, especially regarding children witnessing domestic violence (Hydén and Johansson 2014). Eriksson, Bruno and Näsman (2013b) and Odenbring et al. (2015) also discuss the difficulties school officials encounter in identifying EDV, and the importance of cooperation between different institutions, such as school and social services. School officials often find it difficult to cooperate with the CPS. A lack of cooperation between professionals, both outside and inside school institutions, often results in failure to protect abused children. That is, institutional and organizational conditions may limit opportunities to make the risks these children encounter visible (Bruno 2011, 2012; Eriksson, Bruno and Näsman 2013a,b; Sundell 1997). Furthermore, in studies with children (Buckley, Holt and Whelan 2007; Eriksson, Bruno and Näsman 2013b), children themselves point out that teachers and other adults in the school do not recognize the kind of abuse associated with EDV.

The intermediate domain between home and pre/school

It should be realized that opinions concerning relations between home and school vary in time and place. History shows significant divisions between home and school (private and public domain) and over who is responsible for children's upbringing and education (Erikson 2004; Gutmann 1999). Today, the dominant discourse in Nordic countries, both in research and in steering documents for pre/school, emphasizes the importance of partnership, parental involvement and parental support in children's schooling (Erikson 2004; Kryger, Palludan, Ravn and Winther 2008). Explicit and implicit expectations and demands for such cooperation are formulated in the curricula. For example, the curriculum for Swedish compulsory school (Skolverket 2011) states that a constructive partnership – that is, an

intermediate domain (Mayall 2002, p.11) between home and institution “where state/public interests and family/private interests intersect” – is expected to be constructed and negotiated, with the goal of reaching consensus on different matters. The concept of partnership is used positively, often in an unproblematic and seemingly neutral way. However, some research (Castelli and Pieri 2007; Crozier 2000; Markström 2013) indicates that children, parents or teachers encounter various kinds of difficulty in such cooperation. Differing interests such as educators’ versus parents’ preferences, children’s versus parent’s rights and attitudes, or different perspectives on what is in the best interest of the child can develop into *dilemmas* (Karlsen Baek 2010; Markström 2013; Münger 2015; Symeou 2007). For example, children and parents can have different interests when dealing with an issue of domestic violence, as can parents and teachers, at least during some part of the process. According to “Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989”, children have personal rights as well as rights to provision and protection. This is also stated in various national laws and documents in Sweden, such as within social and family legislation and in the Education Act (Skollagen 2010). Furthermore, although the law forbids violence against children, such legislation is not always defined in detail. Changes in the laws about family violence and violence against children have strengthened children’s own rights in regards to experiencing family violence and being a witness to domestic violence (Mac Millan 2014; Stanley et al. 2011; Överlien 2010, 2012). The facts about children’s rights to be supported in their own right should be well known in welfare institutions such as preschool and school. In cases of domestic violence, these facts are often regarded as crucial (Eriksson, Bruno and Näsman 2013a, 2013b) and can result in dilemmas for the professionals at the pre/school. Within such cases, the borders that are constructed around and define the *private domain* (i.e., the discourse on family privacy), the *institutional domain* (i.e., the discourse on the pre/school’s responsibilities) and the *intermediate domain* (i.e., the discourse on overlapping responsibilities) is under both negotiation and pressure. In this study, the concept of these three domains is used in the analyses.

Methodology

This article draws on a larger qualitative study about children and domestic violence. In this article the focus is directed towards professionals in preschools and compulsory schools in Sweden and their perceptions of, knowledge of and experience with identifying children exposed to domestic violence and abuse. Two different qualitative methods were used to collect data in this study: focus groups and individual interviews. We carried out 11 focus groups and 7 individual interviews with professionals in 10 preschools and 24 schools. The focus groups involved preschool teachers (7), teachers (10), school social workers (9), school nurses (5) and special-needs educators (4). The individual interviews involved preschool teachers (5) and teachers (3). For this article, we were interested in collecting data to show the variation in perceptions and experiences of the EDV phenomenon in general. That is, our interest is not directed towards differences in different categories of professionals.

The data used in this article was collected via 11 focus groups with 7 individual interviews with preschool teachers (n = 12), teachers (n = 13), special-needs educators

($n = 4$), school social workers ($n = 9$) and school nurses ($n = 5$) from 10 preschools and 24 schools in the south of Sweden.

Research on child abuse is always sensitive, so ethical considerations were seriously considered throughout the research process. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards (Vetenskapsrådet 2011); that is, we informed the participants about the study before the interviews, obtained voluntary consent, and promised confidentiality and that the interviews would only be used for our research. The study was also approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board. In addition to informed consent and confidentiality procedures, we considered how the study and the questions it raised could be ethically problematic. For example, we needed to be sensitive to the fact that preschools and schools have been criticized for their way of handling and responding to child abuse. In the focus groups and interviews, therefore, we tried to be mindful of this issue and to show that we understood that dealing with child abuse is a difficult task for professionals to handle in practice.

The focus groups and interviews were used to study how the participants expressed but also constructed different opinions about EDV during the discussions (Holstein and Gubrium, 2007; Wibeck, Abrandt Dahlgren, and Öberg 2007). Three vignettes were constructed by the researcher and used to initiate the topic of EDV in each interview (both in the focus groups and in the individual interviews) in order to start the discussions about participants' knowledge and experience of EDV. In the individual interviews, we also used a semi-structured interview form (Holstein and Gubrium, 2007; Silverman 2006). The form contained questions about the interviewees' perceptions and experiences of children affected by EDV, and about whether and how the interviewees recognize and identify such children in pre/school.

This analysis is based on a social constructivist perspective. The interviews are seen as co-constructions of meaning between the interviewer and the participants. We are interested in various kinds of responses and perceptions, rather than in asking for consensus among the interviewees. Furthermore, in this article, we are not interested in making comparisons between different professions.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the analyses followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) analysis phases: making transcriptions, and then re-reading the transcriptions; coding to discover what was relevant for the aim of the study; and sorting into themes. Two main themes were constructed: (1) knowledge and understanding of EDV as a phenomenon; and (2) the process of identifying EDV. The first theme comprises the sub-themes of *direct violence* and *indirect violence*. The second theme comprises the sub-themes of *identifying unknown pieces of the puzzle* and *known pieces of the puzzle*. In this study the validity, i.e. "appropriateness", is related to the clarity of goals of the study, the methodology and the empirical data. The transparency of the analytic claims in this study is ensured by several empirical examples.

In the following, we first present how the interviewees talk about the phenomenon of EDV. In the second part, we present findings on the interviewees' experiences and on how they identify children affected by EDV in preschool and school.

Understanding of the phenomenon of EDV

The interviewees point out that the interviewees, at first glance, are not particularly familiar with the question of children affected by EDV. This kind of abuse, in which a

child is a witness to or exposed to the physical or mental abuse of a parent or a sibling, is usually not viewed or discussed in terms of the child being a victim.

The concept of EDV

It is characteristic of the interviews as a whole that the interviewees, with some exceptions, are very unsure of the concept of EDV; more specifically, they are unused to thinking or talking about EDV as child abuse. They know that they are responsible for paying attention and acting on violence against children. However, they mostly talk about physical abuse and sexual abuse, with some discussion of psychological abuse. The professionals interviewed do not seem to be particularly familiar with the phenomenon of children being exposed to domestic violence. Yet, when given a specific example, the interviewees express their opinions and describe their experiences with children they have met who suffered from this kind of violence.

In the following example from an individual interview with a preschool teacher, the interviewer starts the sequence with a question about how the interviewee understands the concept of EDV:

Interviewer: If I say, “witness violence at home”, how do you understand that concept?

Preschool teacher: To witness violence, at home. (Pause.) Yes, for me it means that one sees, hears or observes something that shouldn’t happen. It can be many different things, it can be something the child says, it can be something you can observe with the child, that it is afraid in some situations, it can be physical, they can have bruises.

In this example, the teacher talks about the concept and how she understands it: that something is wrong and that EDV is violence that the child sees, hears or observes. Possible signs of EDV are initially focused on as coming from the child’s behaviour or what the child says. However, the teacher soon changes perspective and talks about direct physical violence against the child that can be seen, such as bruises.

Direct and indirect violence

In the next example, the teacher very quickly shifts to talking about physical or sexual abuse; that is, she either avoids or unintentionally shifts away from the issue at stake, which is EDV.

Teacher: Several times, it can be about parents that can’t agree with each other and where it can be beatings. Sexual abuse isn’t unusual. Well, now I am confused. I mix it up. It isn’t about themselves, it’s about witnessing violence.

In this example, the teacher first talks about violence between the parents, and then shifts to an interpretation of EDV as synonymous with direct violence against the child, such as sexual abuse. However, in this quote, she immediately corrects herself, noting that she has shifted focus in her own example and has moved away from the problem of children witnessing violence.

Moreover, the same problem – that is, whether to include EDV along with other forms of child abuse or not – is discussed in several of the interviews. Some of the interviewees consider that domestic abuse is not as severe if the violence is directed towards the adults in the family as if the violence is directed towards the child. One preschool teacher comments: “I have never felt that I have to report if the man hits the woman or the woman the man”. In other words, this teacher draws on discourses about family privacy and distinguishes between the home and pre/school domains. In the following example from a focus group with school nurses, the nurses express similar opinions to the teacher when discussing a case of EDV.

- Nurse 1: It is not the girl. It is the parents that have problems between them, so it is another situation.
- Interviewer: You don't think she is exposed to child abuse?
- Nurse 1: No, I don't think so.
- Nurse 2: The girl?
- Nurse 3: Not physically, she isn't beaten.
- All: (All talk)
- Nurse 2: But it is a kind of abuse, to see and experience maltreatment, it is.
- Nurse 4: I think psychological.
- Nurse 2: She is maltreated, she is, absolutely.
- Interviewer: Do you think that is as severe as if she was physically abused herself?
- All: (Pause for 3 sec.)
- Nurse 4: Eh, I think it is severe that she has been witnessing violence.
- All: Mm.
- Nurse 2: Yes, I think so too. Between the parents.

In this example, the interviewees show different spontaneous reactions and understandings of EDV and whether it should be interpreted or judged as child abuse. Nurses 2 and 4 go against the two others, Nurses 1 and 3, who state that this case cannot be seen as child abuse. (They perceive the parents' problem as being part of the private domain – that is, Nurses 1 and 3 consider that this is not an issue of the intermediate domain.) However, after a direct question from the interviewer on whether this case could be seen as being as severe as if the child had been physically abused, all of them pause. Nurses 2 and 4 then state that they think it is a severe form of abuse for the girl to be a witness to the parents' violence; that is, they put forward another understanding of the problem. This response can be interpreted as Nurses 2 and 4 being affected by their colleagues' answers and/or reflecting on the issue, and then drawing new conclusions. This kind of change of answer, from a quick and perhaps unreflected-upon answer to a more considered one, is typical of many of the interviews. When the participants are asked to reflect on the problem (by being influenced by others' perceptions or through an interview question), new understanding emerges. At the end of another focus group, a participant says: “I can't answer this question”, because she finds it so difficult to define.

In other words, when the interviewees discuss the phenomenon of EDV, they point out that they think exposure to violence is severe; however, it is also significant that they indicate that it is worse to be directly abused. One teacher uses the term “real violence”, even though she also states that psychological violence is as harmful for the child as being

a witness to domestic violence. The school social workers seem to be more familiar with the concept of EDV, and it appears to be more obvious to them that EDV is considered child abuse. The questions raised here are: whether domestic violence, such as children witnessing adults' or others' violence in the private domain outside of school, is a problem for pre/school to act on (i.e., whether it is an issue for the institutional domain); and also whether EDV is as harmful to a child as "direct violence" against the child.

The process of identifying EDV

What types of signal or symptom produce recognition, identification and responses in preschool and school, regarding children who are experiencing EDV? It is characteristic of the interviewees' discussion of EDV that they find it very difficult to identify this form of abuse. They argue that what happens in a child's *private domain* at home is very difficult to detect or prove. In some cases, the professionals obtain information from a child, from parents or from someone else about a child experiencing EDV. However, in most cases, the situation is unknown, and the interviewees report having to identify the problem by asking themselves questions such as: "Is this child abuse, and is this child abused? How can I be sure? Should I talk with the parents? Should I go further and report my suspicions?" The interviews indicate that it is very rare for professionals such as these to identify only one way or one symptom that indicates a child experiencing EDV. Rather, they argue that there are many different symptoms that signal that something is wrong, even if they don't understand what the problem is.

Although domestic violence is seen in the interviews as problematic to identify (if no one informs the professional of the situation), the interviewees indicate that it is possible to "feel that something is wrong", that is, to experience an emotional understanding. They comment that their awareness of a situation can start with what some of them refer to as "a feeling in their stomach"; that is, they can feel that "something is wrong". One teacher says that "it is many pieces of a puzzle to put together". Others mention that they have to play different roles – "to be a social worker, a police officer and everything else" in order to succeed in putting the puzzle together.

All of the informants have worked for many years at school and point out that long experience working in pre/school is necessary in order to be able to perceive what are sometimes subtle signals. Even when interviewees have a great deal of experience in their profession, they don't find it an easy task to "put the puzzle together"; rather, they talk about such a situation as being very complex. They can often see the puzzle in hindsight, but find it to be more difficult in situ, especially when the problem emerges from the private domain. The interviewees exemplify give examples of how they come to know about such problems in many different ways, indicating that the way in which they find out about and identify children experiencing EDV varies. In the following section, we present the interviewees talk about their experiences of different ways to identify children affected by EDV. These experiences include cases when the interviewees are confronted with somewhat vague symptoms – that is, "unknown pieces of the puzzle" – and cases when the violence is known through information from different sources.

Identifying unknown pieces of the puzzle

The interviewees think that it is a significant challenge to discover this kind of problem (EDV) by observing the child, because what they refer to as the symptoms are often very unclear. They talk about subtle signals, such as small changes in the children's behaviour or attitudes. As one special-needs preschool educator says, "the behaviour, I can't catch what it stands for".

Their perception is that the most usual way for a child to signal that something is wrong, is by showing changed or problematic behaviour in pre/school, such as aggressiveness, depression, relational problems with peers, learning difficulties and so forth. These signals can be understood as emerging from family problems in the private domain, but are not initially connected with family violence. The professionals argue that it is important to understand and investigate why the child has changed. A preschool teacher gives the example of a child who was very afraid of sudden noises; if someone raised their voice or something else happened, the child's anxiety was not in proportion to the event. They now know that this child was experiencing EDV. Furthermore, the interviewees reveal another significant symptom: children who need what a special-needs teacher refer to as a "never-ending amount of attention, closeness and acknowledgement in every situation". That is, problems that emerge in the private domain become an issue in the institutional and intermediate domains.

However, according to the interviewees, some children show no clear signals of cognitive or behavioural problems, even if they are suffering from EDV. As one teacher says, they "can behave normally, nothing suspicious at all". By this kind of comment, the interviewees mean that it is also important not to ignore vague symptoms. The teachers emphasize that, in order to be able to identify such diffuse signals, they find it necessary not only to be an experienced teacher, but also to use other professionals, and to contact the school health team (SHT) for support – something that the school social workers also point out. One social worker says that she encourages teachers to talk with the pupils about different personal issues, such as their situation at home, as well as to ask straight questions about violence, if the teacher has a good relationship with the child.

The interviewees also mention that children can suffer from EDV and other problems at the same time. According to their experience, domestic violence can be difficult to identify when the child has a neuropsychiatric diagnosis.

Teacher: Overall, someone has an ADHD diagnosis or some kind of neuropsychiatric diagnosis, or has the same symptoms. But even if we actually know that the child has been exposed to a traumatic experience, such as psychological or physical maltreatment, or has seen the mother being abused, it is not focused on.

Interviewer: It is the diagnosis that is at stake?

Teacher: Yes it is, but we can see a new trend, that we recognize traumas, or symptoms of traumas and what that can do, that it is similar.

In the example above, the teacher points out that the diagnosis is acted on, but that the fact that the child also suffers from EDV can be neglected in these cases. This is an issue that can be interpreted as a "hierarchy" of different problems at school – as some of the school social workers also note. That is, problems that are more school-related

contribute to other problems such as EDV being neglected; or, what are understood as neuropsychiatric symptoms may in fact be something else, such as EDV.

In the cases above, the professionals' understandings of signals have their origin in the child and in his or her behaviour. Another source of signals that are talked about in the interviews originates from the child's family. A significant risk factor that is referred to by many interviewees is that of families in which the parents have various psychosocial problems. One teacher says that "parents that have psychological problems often can use violence, psychological or physical, it's pretty common I think." Drug problems are also mentioned as something that interviewees relate to violence in families, and which can become an issue to consider in the institutional domain.

Regarding the factor of class, one problem raised by a school social worker is that it can be difficult for middle class school staff to understand the circumstances some pupils live under:

I don't think one deliberately turns a blind eye to it, but you haven't been in such contexts, don't have any experience of such a milieu. So it is difficult to imagine how it is. You have lived in a well-organized milieu without such problems, but of course it happens in all kind of families too.

In this example, the interviewee indicates that if one is unaware of risk factors and families with severe social problems, it can be difficult to detect a problem or understand what the problem is. Furthermore, regarding the issue of class, some of the interviewees comment that it is sometimes difficult to obtain knowledge about problems such as EDV, especially for families in which the parents have a high socioeconomic status. In a focus group with school nurses, the participants discuss how it can be more difficult to identify the problem of EDV in high-status families:

- C: If someone is very proper and neat, and is quiet and smart, then I get more worried, then I can get the stomach feeling.
- A: Yes, it can be more difficult to discover, to get behind the facade, especially if the parent has a high position and knows how to behave.

In line with this example, a recurrent issue in the interviews is the professionals' need of knowledge in order to understand vague and sometimes opposing signals and/or symptoms of domestic violence, as well as their need for tools to help them know how to act in these cases.

"Known pieces of the puzzle" – information from different sources

Even though the interviewees find it difficult to identify EDV by themselves in pre/school, they are sometimes given information about a child experiencing EDV from different sources: the child itself, parents, peers or others in the child's social network.

The child itself

As shown in the section above, the most common situation is when the child shows different symptoms that something is wrong, but does not talk about what is bothering him or her. However, according to the interviewees, children's narratives or pieces of narratives about EDV can also be presented suddenly. The interviewees indicate that a good relationship between the child and the adult in pre/school can be a point of departure, allowing the child to entrust his or her problem to the adult, as in the following example:

Teacher: It is easy to hide the problem, but when you have a relationship, then it can come any time. They can sit by the computer, be on an excursion or something like that, and, oops, “Dad was home this weekend”, and I asked, “Oh, and what did you do then, did you do something fun?” and “No, he took a flowerpot and threw it”.

Like many of the interviewees, this teacher furthermore argues that, when a child has confidence in her, bits and pieces of stories can come up in different situations in school. When this happens, she tries to appear calm “because I have learned that it can bring more narratives from the child” and tries not to ask too much. In a focus group, a school nurse presents a similar example about a boy: at a time when the pupils were asked to tell about their weekend, the boy presented the violence he had experienced as a joke, saying that “This weekend, the police came to us because mum and dad fought with each other”. The nurses argue that this kind of utterance can not only be interpreted as a signal for EDV, but may also indicate that the problem is part of the child’s everyday life in the private domain; that is, that the violence has become normalized for the child.

In addition, the interviewees talk about how it is often difficult to validate the information that they get from the children’s narratives; that is, it is hard to know how to interpret such information. One preschool teacher indicates that, if physical violence is not mentioned, she finds it difficult to decide whether the child’s utterance is something that she should act on or not. In other words, she draws on an interpretation or discourse of EDV as including physical violence. Many of the interviewees say that a common problem they deal with is the borderline between family violence and what they call “normal family conflicts”. Still, the interviewees consider it very important to listen to what children try to tell them, especially if a child comes back and talks to them again and again. That is, it becomes an issue for the institution in the intermediate domain between home and pre/school.

According to a school social worker, younger children seldom talk about EDV, in contrast to teenagers, who can take initiative and talk to somebody at school.

Many teenagers can no longer live with it, and then they tell a teacher; and then the teacher comes to me, and then we talk about it together with the pupil, and the social services can also be involved.

However, it is viewed as crucial to understand when and how a narrative develops. It often takes time for a child to formulate and express what they want to say. In one case, when a teacher was worried and wanted the social worker to talk with a boy, the child told the social worker that the problem was that he was dissatisfied with not having a room of his own at home. She was unsatisfied with that explanation, and it was later revealed that the reason for the boy’s problem was EDV. The social worker says that “you can’t give up”, and that you must go on and ask again, and again.

The interviewees also point out the importance of listening to what children have to say. In addition, they say that it is valuable to ask explicit questions about violence, including whether the child is being exposed to violence in some form. One school nurse argues that “they don’t tell you anything if you don’t ask them directly”. Furthermore, she is critical of poor competence among the professionals at pre/school in asking children direct questions about violence. The nurse refers to a case in which a

girl said that no one had asked her before, after finally telling the nurse that she lived under very difficult circumstances at home.

To sum up, some of the interviewees have experience of children talking about being exposed to violence at home. However, children's talk about EDV can sometimes require crucial interpretation, and may take time. The interviewees argue that dealing with this issue properly requires the professionals at school to be competent at talking to children about EDV; by this, they mean that they find their own competence lacking.

Information from parents

Another important source of information, which can be more or less explicit, is information from the private domain and the parents. The interviewees have experiences of parents talking about family problems; they have also experienced having a parent show signs of abuse. In the following example, a preschool teacher talks about a mother who she understands was beaten:

This mother sometimes came limping, was black and blue, and we tried to talk to her because we thought we had a good relationship with her, but she always denied that something was wrong.

In the example, the mother denied that she was beaten. However, some of the interviewees have experienced parents who entrusted someone at school, whether the principal or a teacher, with information about the domestic violence that is going on or that has been going on in the family; these parents wanted to inform the pre/school about the situation and cooperate in the intermediate domain between home and preschool.

When it comes to cases in which the children and mother have so-called protected identities, because of threats from the father, the school has to organize the work around the child in specific ways that the interviewees find difficult. They talk about that they try to support the child, but that they do not always have enough knowledge about how to act, even if, in contrast to other cases, they have some information about the problem.

In addition, cases occur in which the professionals do not know how to handle information from the parents, or do not know whether it is their responsibility to be a partner in the parents' conflicts. The pre/school can be involved when parents are in a divorce process, or when the custody of the children are at stake. Regarding these situations, the interviewees give examples in which one or both parents want the preschool or school to help them. The professionals note, for example, that they can find it difficult to know what to believe when a parent starts to talk about domestic violence. One school nurse says "I have to be careful. Who gave the information, and whose truth is it?"

The examples above show that the preschool and school are involved in the children's families via the children, but also via the parents; that is, that such involvement occurs in the intermediate domain between home and school. Professionals sometimes find this to be an opportunity, an emotional dilemma or an obstacle. It is an opportunity when they can get information from and cooperate with the parents; however, it can be problematic when parents use the professionals for their own purposes. In this way, the interviewees draw a line between what is an issue for the home and what is an issue for the pre/school, when it comes to children's wellbeing.

Information from others

It can also happen that peers or others report to the pre/school that they are worried about a child and his or her home situation. Some of the teachers talk about that, in

cases like these, they can seek and use information from peers, and ask further questions of them.

Furthermore, in a small school or in a small town, domestic violence can be well known by neighbours or others and may be difficult to hide, thus coming to the pre/school's attention. According to some interviewees, information about children and EDV can be spread fairly quickly.

The pre/school is informed by different sources, and may also be informed by the CPS, which sometimes informs the school about on-going interventions in a family. According to the interviewees, it is important for the professionals to understand the situation. They argue that when domestic violence is identified and well known (and when CPS is involved), it is important to identify the children's needs at school. In the following example, a school social worker says:

We have many pupils that live under hidden identities, and they come from families where the mother has been a victim of violence. I should say that it is most important to remind the teachers about that when they come to the school health team with worries about symptoms, concentration problems or depression: that we must ask ourselves what it is about. Often, we start to investigate what the problem is with the child; you “make the child to the problem”, and we as school social workers and school nurses have a very important role to inform; these can be symptoms of exposure to domestic violence. And even if they are free from violence today, they are protected, it obviously affects them.

In this example, the school social worker emphasizes the importance of not blaming the child if he or she shows learning or other difficulties in school, and of understanding and being aware of the consequences of EDV for children's accomplishments in school – that is, the importance of understanding how to handle the situation when EDV is already known. Some of the teachers also problematize how “the silence and the secrecy around the child and its family” result in them, as teachers, being unable to talk with colleagues, or not getting enough knowledge from CPS to support the child. A situation like this can result in the child's problem remaining invisible to the professionals at school, possibly hindering those professionals from supporting the child. That is, the cooperation between different institutional domains and within institutions can be supportive, but can also be an obstacle in some cases.

Discussion

There are several reasons why it is essential to study EDV in the Swedish preschool and school context. Children affected by EDV are victims, and suffer from its consequences; in addition, EDV affects children's educational outcome (Assad et al. 2016). Preschools and schools are very important institutions where children affected by EDV can be identified and supported. However, there is a lack of research about pre/school teachers' and other professionals' experience and knowledge about children and EDV (cf. Eriksson, Bruno and Näsman 2013a).

The results of this study show that, while pre/school professionals consider child abuse in all forms to be very harmful for children, they find it particularly difficult to identify EDV (cf. Usakli 2012). Even if a child shows different symptoms that signal problems, EDV is not the first possible cause the professionals will consider. As a result, the problem of EDV is not prioritized in the hierarchy of different problems to be

solved at pre/school. Even if they know what EDV is, professionals may not – in opposition to the official discourse – define and recognize it as child abuse (cf. Kaufman Kantor and Little 2003). One interpretation can be the lack of knowledge about EDV among pre/school staff.

However, this study also indicates that teachers and other professionals at pre/school are well aware that they are responsible for the children's wellbeing, and that they try to be observant of signs that show that a child is a victim of child abuse, even including EDV (cf. Eriksson, Bruno and Näsman 2013 a,b). The professionals talk about having to be open to different signals, and about how their task is often that of putting together a puzzle out of unknown and known pieces of information in order to identify EDV. It is important to understand that signs or information about EDV can be shown in different ways; that is, the professionals must learn to use and interpret information and signs from different types of sources. *What* information is mediated, *how* it is mediated (i.e., as a narrative, a joke or a child telling the staff about a fight or visit from the police) and by *whom* it is presented (i.e., by the child, parents or peers) are all important. Furthermore, *when* and *where* the preschool and school obtain knowledge about a violent situation can vary in time and place. The professionals argue that their long experience of working in pre/school is an important factor in their ability to interpret signals and put them together to understand a child experiencing EDV.

The professionals also argue that in order to be able to identify EDV, they must search for explanations of the child's problem, and cross the border into the private domain – the family. It is important to consider that changes in children's behaviour, or other symptoms, may derive from the home rather than from school or from learning difficulties. As King and Scott (2014) has shown, some of the participants in this study seem to have difficulty seeing the connection between family risk factors or EDV, and children's problems in school. Previous research has shown that, if family violence does not seem to be acknowledged as a pre/school problem in its own right, as it is interpreted by some of the participants interviewed in this study, the needs that result from this type of problem are downplayed (Odenbring et al. 2016). Instead, the child's problems are placed in other problem categories connected to the individual child, such as learning problems or relations with peers. In other words, the approach one brings to the school's role in regards to domestic violence can affect one's "gaze" on a problem. In addition, some of the school social workers in this study point out that if particularly school-related problems are also present, these may result in other problems such as EDV being neglected (cf. Karlsen Baek; Markström 2013; Symeou 2007).

Aside from a lack of knowledge, another way to interpret professionals' difficulty in identifying and emotionally understanding children experiencing EDV relates to their concern that the school is questioning and intruding upon the families' *private domain* (Mayall 2002). In the interviewees' discussion, they drew on discourses about family privacy, and about what we interpret as a tension between parents' and children's rights (Munger 2015). When professionals act on the behalf of children they suspect are being exposed to domestic violence, they draw on the discourse of the pre/school's responsibility for the children's wellbeing; that is, they act within the *institutional domain*. By doing so, they must challenge the relations between home and school in the *inter-mediate domain*. In other words, the discourse about a constructive partnership in the

intermediate domain between home and school for the good of the child is challenged when the professionals suspect EDV and act upon it. From this point of view, the professionals' way of understanding EDV seems to be important in how they recognize and identify this form of child abuse.

Implications

This study reveals the importance of knowledge – both for the professionals and for the organizations – about the complex problem of children affected by EDV. In addition, our results indicate that training in different forms of child abuse should not only be included in teacher education, but also included in further training for practicing teachers and other professionals at school.

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