

Educational Professionals' Awareness, Identification, and Support of Young Carers: Implications for Policy

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Abstract

Although millions of young people help to take care of family members worldwide, there is limited awareness, identification, and support of young carers (YCs) in Canada. Given YCs spend most of their days at school, it is an ideal context to identify and support YCs. Therefore, the aim of this study was to understand whether educators were aware of YCs and their perceived role in identifying and supporting YCs within schools. Through an applied research design, eight teachers and three principals from Southern Ontario were interviewed. Results revealed multiple barriers in an educators' awareness, and in their ability to identify and support YCs in their schools. Barriers included YC secrecy and inadequate school policies. Recommendations addressing educator mandates, proposing policy changes, and incorporating YCs' cooperation were made.

Keywords: young carer, awareness, identification, support, barriers, policy, implications

1. Introduction

Within many families, children have chores at home to learn responsibility, build character, and ensure successful family functioning (White & Brinkerhoff, 1981). In some cases, however, children have responsibilities that are beyond what is considered typical within the North American context. Some children and youth, under the age of 25, are referred to as young carers (YCs), as they have caregiving responsibilities to support a family member with a disability, illness, addiction, or language barrier (Aldridge & Becker, 1993; Charles et al., 2010; Stamatopoulos, 2015). Their responsibilities might include domestic tasks (e.g., cooking dinner, doing laundry), household management (e.g., paying bills), personal/emotional care (e.g., giving medicine, helping family members use the washroom, providing emotional support), sibling care (e.g., helping with homework), financial care (e.g., having a part-time job), and/or language interpreting (Aldridge & Becker, 1993; Charles et al., 2012; Stamatopoulos, 2015). Caregiving often occurs along a continuum, within which the role varies in extremity (Becker, 2007), as it corresponds with the care recipient's needs (Aldridge & Becker, 1993). Therefore, YCs' provision of care varies based on family context.

Canada has only recently begun to recognize and identify YCs. Although previous research estimated that there were 1.18 million YCs in Canada between the ages of 15 and 24, few have been formally recognized within existing programs (Stamatopoulos, 2015, 2016). Further, agency staff working directly with ill or disabled persons, for which YCs might provide care, admitted that YCs were not their primary focus (Waugh et al., 2015). Therefore, without a YC focus, awareness, identification, and support continues to be a challenge. Since the majority of a YC's day is spent at school, and students are an educator's primary focus, school could be an ideal

context for identification and support to occur. Unfortunately, previous research suggests that YCs continue to face academic inequalities (Charles et al., 2012), including lack of recognition and understanding of their role.

Academic inequality is evident through research that showed YCs in Canada struggled in school as they reported lack of sleep, trouble concentrating, and being late for or missing class (Stamatopoulos, 2018). In addition, YCs' role affected their attendance and curriculum engagement (Lakman et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2009) as well as their ability to meet academic expectations, which sometimes resulted in outbursts of inconsolable anger or tears (Stamatopoulos, 2018). Previous research also suggested that YCs sometimes felt unsupported and invalidated by their teachers, even when the teacher was aware of the YC's situation (Bjorgvinsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2014; Mansell, 2016); however, other research found many YCs reported school staff were not aware of their caregiving situation (Lakman et al., 2017). Therefore, YCs neither receive satisfactory recognition nor support from educators for the difficulties they face in school.

It is possible that lack of awareness and support in school could relate to an educator's understanding or opinion of the YC role. For instance, even if an educator was aware of YCs, they might not understand that YCs' responsibilities go beyond normal chores to include, for example, medicine administration, emotional support, and physical care (e.g., washing, toileting). Likewise, some might view the YC role as inappropriate, which can reinforce stigma surrounding mental illness, disability, and/or the child's role in caregiving (Smyth et al., 2011). This stigma can contribute to YC secrecy, especially when YCs and their families fear child protective services or judgment when asking for support (Bjorgvinsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2014; Moore, 2005; Moore & McArthur, 2007; Sexton & Chalmers, in press; Smyth et al., 2011). This secrecy makes YC identification and support, without the family's willingness to ask for or accept help, even more difficult.

To our knowledge, Canadian research has yet to consider educators' perspectives related to supporting YCs at school. Understanding educators' perspectives could encourage changes to school policy that could reduce the challenges faced by YCs in the education system. Therefore, the aim of this study was to understand whether educators were aware of YCs and their perception of their role in identifying and supporting them.

2. Methods

This study utilized an applied research design with an exploratory approach (Quinn Patton, 2015). Immediately following ethics approval, participants were recruited through purposeful sampling (i.e., word of mouth, recruitment posters) within Southern Ontario. A total of 11 participants (eight teachers and three principals) were recruited. Specific participant characteristics, demographics, or expertise were not required for eligibility; however, seven females and four males were recruited, and participants' teaching experience ranged from two to 38-years. Participants included three elementary teachers, four secondary teachers, one retired teacher, two elementary principals, and one retired principal; the retired participants had experience working in both elementary and secondary schools. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, semi-structured interviews were utilized to allow for specific areas to be explored while giving the interviewee the power to shape their responses within the open-ended format (Quinn Patton, 2015). Interviews took place in a confidential location agreed upon by both the researcher and the participant and lasted between 75-minutes and two-hours.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were labelled by their sex and profession (e.g., Female Secondary; Male Elementary Principal) and participant quotes were slightly edited for readability (e.g., removed words such as "um"). Data was then analyzed deductively within three main themes (i.e., awareness, identification, support). Within each theme, inductive analysis was conducted to identify patterns within the data and were then categorized into meaningful groups, and organized by subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Three members of the research team reviewed themes and subthemes to ensure inter-rater reliability and research triangulation (Quinn Patton, 2015). Researchers agreed 96% of the time and any disagreements were resolved through discussion.

3. Results and Discussion

Educators' perspectives on awareness, identification, and support of YCs were explored to gain a better understanding of educators' perceived role in supporting YCs.

3.1 Awareness

It could be argued that an educator must first be aware of the existence of a YC role to successfully identify a YC who may need their support. For this reason, it was critical to assess the educators' overall awareness of youth taking on caregiving roles. Unlike previous research that suggested a lack of YC awareness (Lakman et al., 2017), all educators in this study were aware that the YC role existed; however, only two teachers and one principal were aware of the term itself. This finding suggested that awareness of the role, in general, might be more common than awareness of the term or label "young carer", which may, in part, be a result of the recent recognition of YCs in Canada. Educators demonstrated their awareness of YCs by providing accurate examples of YCs, through their understanding of caregiving, and by addressing the importance of YC awareness. For example, when explaining an interaction with a student, one participant noted:

This is when I first really thought, 'Okay, she [is taking on a caregiving role at home] other than her picking [her brother] up after school', [because] a lot [of kids] do that. [...] When she came [to her brother's classroom] and she said, 'Oh my god, oh my god, I'm late! I wanted to make sure I could come and get him and make sure he was dressed [for Halloween] and everything!' She was stressed! Because she didn't get there on time! That's when it clued on to me – like I thought, 'Okay, she, I think, is doing maybe some of the taking care at home'. (Female Elementary)

This quote suggests that not all YCs are hidden. Educators might notice these students; however, they might not fully understand the extent of the challenges faced by YCs.

Despite being aware of the term, barriers that impinged YC awareness became evident. One challenge identified resulted from a narrow definition of caregiving. Examples of educators' definitions revealed an assumption that a student must not be a YC if their situation for caregiving was not extreme, if they were not outwardly struggling, if they had a supportive family, if the student wanted to provide care, or if the educator felt they were too young for such a role. Likewise, some educators' expectations of the YC role may have failed to include YCs who were younger, male, or those caring for an ill or a disabled sibling. This suggested that educators might need formal training to ensure they are aware of all possible caregiving situations.

In addition to having limited awareness due to a narrow definition of caregiving, awareness was also affected by the visibility of the caregiving role. Educators might have failed to become aware of a YC's role if YCs were not showing explicit indicators of caregiving. *"I think if they're not struggling, they may go years and years before you even realize that they're providing that care. You would never know. Some kids, to be honest, have it together"* (Male Elementary Principal). In other cases, caregiving was only noticed because the role was overt (i.e., a student's sibling enters a classroom to provide care). Relying on visible signs of caregiving may result in a lack of recognition for those YCs who only care at home or may struggle internally. It is important to note, however, that being unnoticed might be preferred by YCs. Previous research revealed that some YCs did not want to share their specific roles with their teachers (Bolas et al., 2007; Lakman et al., 2017; Mansell, 2016).

I think I miss a lot, because I think students are really good at hiding things sometimes. So, they might be able to maintain their academic stuff and they're not drawing too much attention to themselves, so they're good at kind of blending in and just meeting expectations. (Female Secondary)

YCs might prefer secrecy, especially in situations where others may have a preconceived negative opinion regarding the developmental appropriateness of YCs' responsibilities, *"[In response to a YC's role], I'd be like, 'No, you need to like just be a kid'. [...] Like why – no kid should have to be burdened by taking care of a family"* (Male Elementary). Due to an educator's negative conception of the caregiving role, a YC might want to keep their role a secret in fear of being judged or misunderstood (Bolas et al., 2007; Moore & McArthur, 2007; Sexton & Chalmers, in press). Although it makes sense that some YCs might prefer secrecy, it does not allow for awareness to be raised, which is an essential step towards identification and support.

3.2 Identification

Although awareness and identification of a YC are similar in nature, they are distinct as identification cannot occur without awareness. As YCs struggle academically and emotionally in schools (Lakman et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2009; Stamatopoulos, 2018), identification is essential in providing appropriate support (e.g., deadline extensions, empathy for lateness).

In considering whose responsibility it is to identify YCs, this study found that while teachers might be in the best position to identify, they desired the support of additional staff. Principals thought that teachers would be first to identify YCs because of the time they spent with students. *“Okay, so myself as a principal, my main resource [to identify a struggling student] was the classroom teacher”* (Male Retired Principal). This was complemented by a teacher, who also noted that their daily involvement with students was related to their ability to identify potential issues.

But then in [the] case [of identifying student issues], I’m the one letting [other staff] know because they don’t – they’re not as good at flagging that as we are, right? [...] That’s definitely our job on the frontlines [to identify student changes]. [...] I think it is always your job. [...] The social worker’s not gunna see them all day every day like we do. (Female Secondary)

However, although teachers maintain the frontline position in identifying YCs, results revealed that identification of YCs would benefit from a team-approach (i.e., teachers, administrators, social workers, child and youth workers, youth counsellors, special education teachers, school nurses, in-school teams).

Yeah, it – it’s always beneficial to identify but I don’t think it needs to be a singular role. It has to be an effort by everybody. So, I might pick up on this, and then I didn’t pick up on that kid but that teacher did and do you know what I mean? So, I think every teacher needs to be in that identification stage regardless. (Female Secondary)

Although educators valued a team-approach to identification, school policies created barriers in the educators’ ability to identify. Principals reported that a potential problem could result from school staff who were inexperienced with YC situations or were not educated about the likelihood of having a student with a caregiving role. Another barrier was the number of students under their supervision, which limited how many YCs they would be able to identify.

It’s sort of like, you need to come and be in a school then because we have hundreds of kids and how will we know [there is an issue]? We can’t be everywhere at once. Even in a classroom we can’t be monitoring every conversation or what happens that we don’t know. If we don’t know, then we can’t address it. (Female Elementary Principal)

Likewise, educators reported insufficient time with students and poor access to student information. For instance, supply teachers and teachers who teach multiple different classes of students might find it difficult to establish relationships with students. *“I think it’s hard as a secondary teacher [to identify student issues] because we don’t see them all day long, all year. So, I only see them for 75-minutes from Monday to Friday for one semester”* (Female Secondary). Therefore, as a secondary school or supply teacher, it might be necessary to gather student information from other resources (e.g., student files, other staff). However, educators reported their access to student information was limited by privacy issues that reduced the ability of staff (e.g., guidance counsellor, child and youth worker) to share information with one another.

If you talk to the students, [and the] student’s not telling you anything, then it’s like, ‘Okay, [I have to] go talk to somebody that can [tell me something]’. But...yeah, there is a privacy [issue] [...] [and] people have their hands tied. (Female Retired Teacher)

This suggested that while a team approach is preferred, it might not always be a realistic plan for identification.

Given these potential barriers, educators encouraged (and relied on) YCs to advocate for their needs in schools by coming forward and sharing their caregiving role with staff, *“If [the student] can self-advocate, [they’ll] save [them]self a lot of hassles. As opposed to just not sharing”* (Female Secondary). However, as previously mentioned, it could be difficult for YCs to self-identify, especially if they do not know if they would be supported or judged. It might also be difficult to self-advocate if parents do not allow them to be identified. *“The problem is, unless parents are willing to talk to us, or unless we can get our social worker working with the family who can then share with us, sort of that piece, sometimes we can’t get the information”* (Female Elementary Principal). Therefore, in addition to secrecy being a barrier in YC awareness, it also affected the educator’s ability to identify a student as having this role.

YCs and their families preferring secrecy also creates a challenge if YCs get identified without a willingness to disclose. Educators recognized that unwanted identification could cause feelings of shame, sadness, embarrassment, betrayal, fear, and/or internalization, some of which were consistent with previous YC research (Bjorgvinsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2014; Bolas et al., 2007).

I think the internalization is the biggest problem around [identification]. Like if they don't want you to know and they know you know, then they could start using avoidant strategies, and that I think is the biggest problem. Them avoiding school because they don't want people to know what happens when they leave school. (Female Secondary)

Therefore, educators recognized that identification could be a negative experience for a YC, especially if they wanted to remain hidden.

Although this secrecy continues to create potential issues, it becomes clear that safe identification would not be possible without classroom inclusivity and safety within the classroom. The need to ensure YC comfortability was further supported by the educators' fear in potentially crossing boundaries in the student-teacher relationship, "*I find it incredibly difficult to also not cross lines, or cross boundaries as a teacher, when you're coming into that situation of a young caregiver*" (Female Elementary).

Younger kids especially, you can – they will lose their trust in you. But for the most part, even at a young age, they realize you're trying to help. So, it's not spoiled forever. It typically comes from feedback from the parents when they get home, that the secrets out, that the parents, ya know, aren't fulfilling their role and they get very defensive about it, that accusation. (Male Elementary Principal).

Although educators appear to recognize the importance of identification, their fear of causing harm (e.g., breaking trust, increasing internalization) can hinder their willingness to identify YCs. An educator may become aware of YCs through experience but be unaware of how to safely identify the YC and might, therefore, avoid confrontation. In the same way, YCs might refrain from self-identifying out of fear of judgement. This could create a paradigm in which YCs continue to lack in-school support. This suggests that educator training is necessary on how to appropriately identify YCs and ensure an inclusive and safe environment is created before YC support can be provided.

3.3 Support

Despite fears and barriers, educators recognized that identification is critical in providing appropriate support.

Well I think it'd be important [to identify the YC] because then when they're, for example, not doing well in a class, it could remind that teacher, 'You know what, this week she had to take mom to chemo[therapy], [...] can we try to maybe do that presentation orally?' (Female Secondary)

Educators reported they had a role in providing their students with academic, curriculum-based, emotional, and financial support and reported multiple ways to provide it. Teachers reported that academic support included teacher leniency and sensitivity, ensuring students understood day-to-day lessons, providing accommodations, offering alternative projects (e.g., oral vs. written), omitting assignments, and dropping low test marks during times of heavy stress.

You wanna make sure you're not adding to the [YC's] burden. That kids got enough going on. [...] I don't wanna add deadlines, [...] like I don't care when you hand in the essay. That's not – I'm not gunna lose sleep over it. I need to keep deadlines for other kids cuz they need to learn responsibility. But for this kid, [that's a YC], is that gunna make or break their life? No, they know responsibility. So, that's not a worry for me. They just need to do it at some point so I give them the credit. (Female Secondary)

Despite their recognition for necessary YC support, educators recognized that they still had a job to perform and struggled to offer support while maintaining their role as educators.

I can support as much as I want, I can be as nice as I want, but at the end of the day, my job is to get you that credit. And if I can't get you that credit, I failed in my – like that's my main role. (Female Secondary)

Likewise, even when there was a possibility for support, educators reported that providing support was sometimes out of their range of responsibilities. “*My role would be to best support the [YC] emotionally and academically within the school. Outside of school, unfortunately, I don’t have any control*” (Female Elementary). Similarly, “*the sad thing is, [...] [support is] short lived to a certain extent, right? Because it’s within that building*” (Female Secondary).

Additionally, educators reported policy issues (e.g., large classroom sizes and lack of support staff) made it difficult for educators to attend to every student and get assistance when they noticed an issue. “*Even a CYW [child and youth worker] we don’t have every day of the week. So, I think she wasn’t there on Thursdays, and we were like, what if a kid has a problem on a Thursday?*” (Female Secondary). Educators recognized that students might require multiple venues of support and that some staff were more trained to handle specific issues than others. However, without sufficient support staff, this might be difficult to offer. “*I’ll go get the people that have the expertise, better expertise, to put in contact. [...] [I have] some very special people working for me [...] that I would lean on*” (Male Retired Principal).

I guess, really, my main role [in supporting YCs] would be trying to hook them up with programs or supports depending on why they’re a [young] carer and what type of caregiving they’re doing, [and] how we can help that. (Female Elementary Principal).

Finally, just as discussed within awareness and identification, the stigma surrounding the YC role could also act as a barrier in providing support. One educator reported that prior to giving the YC any support within the school, they would have to assess their home life.

Well, first – the primary thing [is] you’d have to make sure [the home] was a safe environment [for the young carer]. [...] If it is an addiction, and you feel the student [is unsafe] – we’re obligated by law to call FACS [Family and Children’s Services]. (Male Elementary Principal)

A province-based law requires all professionals working with children and youth to include Children’s Aid Societies (CAS) if they have concern of abuse or neglect (Ontario College of Teachers, 2018). This mandate to report and a lack of understanding of the YC role contributes to the YCs fear of involvement of CAS should their role be identified within the school (Bjorgvinsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2014; Moore, 2005; Moore & McArthur, 2007). This creates an additional challenge in supporting YCs. Even if educators promote identification and support within schools, YCs must feel safe to overcome their fears; for this reason, YCs’ fears need to be recognized and respected before implementing any school policy to ensure identification and support.

Overall, results showed that becoming aware of and identifying a YC to provide support comes with multiple challenges. In summary, although faced with certain barriers, all interviewed educators had some awareness of the existence of YCs. Moreover, identification seems to warrant the interconnection between two parties: the YC and the educator. Not only does the educator have to be aware of YCs in general and be prepared to identify a YC within the classroom, the YC must be comfortable and willing to self-identify to help facilitate support. This study also drew attention to the lack of YC support, policies, and expectations of educators. Board policies regarding classroom size and laws regarding privacy issues for accessing student files may contribute to YCs remaining unnoticed. It is important to note that some of these barriers influence one another in a way that can make the implementation of YC support very difficult. While multiple students in a classroom may need support, identifying the reason for the support can lead to a more student-centred approach. For instance, without identification of the YC role, an educator might not recognize that flexibility in curriculum delivery and expectations may be critical for YCs’ success at school. Therefore, in order to ensure YCs are supported within the school system, the following recommendations must be considered and implemented, where appropriate.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Within School Approaches

As educators expressed, YCs and their families disclosing the caregiving role was an essential component of identification and support. For this reason, it is recommended that a school climate is developed where YCs and their families can feel safe and comfortable sharing their caregiving situation. Additionally, this would reduce stigma associated with the role (Moore & McArthur, 2007). Inclusivity can be achieved through raising YC awareness. Utilizing assemblies would not only educate school staff on the YC role but would also educate

students and possibly lead to easier identification by educators. Further, educators may utilize in-class discussions or activities to create a safe space for students to actively discuss their unique caregiving roles, which would also expand fellow classmates' awareness and understanding of YCs.

4.2 School-Wide Policy

In recognizing that school policy is regulated differently provisionally, nationally, and internationally, these recommendations can be tailored to best suit each regulatory body's needs. First, a clear mandate for teachers to recognize and support YCs within their schools should be established. This would allow educators to provide accommodations and ensure flexibility in curriculum delivery (Moore, 2005; Moore et al., 2009). For example, a flexible deadline on an assignment could be critical for a YC if they were struggling with their caregiving role and completion of the schoolwork. Without specific mandate, support could be inconsistently applied and limited to those teachers who choose to take on a role that surpasses curriculum support. In addition, educators could include YCs in all discussions of at-risk students and YC information should be shared within student files. This would assist in reducing the barrier associated with privacy issues among staff; student issues should be addressed within a team-based approach.

Second, school boards can offer training sessions to educate school staff on the YC role, as well as on how to identify and support them. Due to the barriers presented, it is recommended that a training session include multiple examples of YC situations (including prevalence and developmental influence), strategies to identify despite YC secrecy, and ideas for support for those situations when involving CAS is not necessary.

Third, policy makers should consider class sizes and insufficient support for school staff. YCs might be more easily identified and supported in smaller classes and if educators had the support of child and youth workers, social workers, and/or counsellors.

5. Limitations

Despite the importance of the study, there were a few limitations. Typical of qualitative design, the study had a small sample size of 11 participants from one area of Southern Ontario. Future research could examine this topic to determine if these findings were unique to this geographical area and to those educators interviewed. While the findings are not meant to be generalized, the recommendations could be translated internationally. Lastly, demographic differences (i.e., age, experience, grade/subject) were not considered in the analysis. Future research could consider how demographic or experience differences might shape educators' perspectives regarding the ways they see themselves becoming aware of, identifying, and supporting YCs in the school context.

6. Conclusion

In sum, this study considered educators' awareness of YCs and their perceived role in identifying and supporting YCs. Contrary to previous research suggesting a lack of YC recognition and support (Lakman et al., 2017), all participants in this study were aware of the YC role. However, multiple barriers in educators' awareness, identification, and support of YCs were presented. An educator's narrow definition or opinion of the role, as well as the visibility of the YC role affected the educators' awareness of YCs. The barriers in YC identification resulted from insufficient school policies, uneducated staff, YC secrecy, and student-teacher relationships. Finally, support was hampered by an educator's pressures to teach the curriculum, the boundaries in their ability to support within the school, school policy, and involvement of CAS. These results yielded various recommendations related to educator mandate and school policy. This study could yield further research and implementation of systemic strategies for awareness, identification, and support, thereby lessening YCs' vulnerability within the education system.

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