

Mandatory Reporting and Child Sexual Abuse: Contextualising Beliefs and Attitudes.

Dr. Shannon-Caroline Taylor and Dr. Doug Lloyd.

School of Education, University of Ballarat, Victoria. 2001

I know of no more sacred duty than the care and education of a child.

(Ludwig van Beethoven, 1770-1827)

Despite greater social awareness the topic of child abuse within the family unit continues to be a vexing issue for professionals and the lay community. Mandatory reporting of child abuse was introduced in Victoria in 1993 after community outrage at the killing of a young child through parental abuse. Legislating against child abuse recognizes that children have a right to be protected from abuse, but it does not protect children from prevailing social attitudes and beliefs about child abuse, especially abuse within the family unit. Figures suggest that reports of suspected child abuse (physical and sexual) have increased since the introduction of Mandatory Reporting in Victoria. Teachers play a significant role in reporting suspected abuses since they occupy close and regular contact with children and adolescents. Attitudes and beliefs towards child abuse, especially sexual abuse, have been articulated as a problem among mandated professionals nationally and internationally. This paper discusses the intersection of beliefs and attitudinal factors among teachers and the implications for a range of behaviours regarding reporting and responding to the sexual abuse of children and adolescents. Also discussed are education programs designed to enhance teachers' knowledge of child/adolescent abuse and mandatory reporting. Weaknesses in these programs are identified and suggestions to improve teacher education and delivery of such programs are also discussed.

Introduction:

This paper focuses attention on mandatory reporting and the sexual abuse of children and adolescents. The topic of child sexual abuse is one of tremendous valance and while contemporary society is more aware of sexual violence against children and adolescents, differences in prevailing attitudes and beliefs among professionals and the lay community identify how knowledge on this issue is mediated and constructed. The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of attitudes and beliefs in reporting behaviours among teachers as mandated reporters of child and adolescent sexual abuse.

Firstly, this paper begins with a brief summary of the impetus for introducing mandatory reporting legislation to Victoria in 1993, and concomitantly, evidence suggesting a failure to report among mandated professionals, including teachers. Section two critiques literature on teacher attitudes and beliefs about child sexual abuse, especially intrafamilial sexual abuse, and juxtaposes these attitudes with non-compliance of mandatory reporting. Section three highlights the influence of social context and response to sexual abuse in order to establish a clear link in how beliefs can affect and shape teacher attitudes and reporting behaviours.

Further evidence is presented to supplement how negative attitudes can also lead to general discriminatory behaviour towards individuals identified as having been sexually victimised. Section four looks at current trends in teacher education programs on mandatory reporting and child protection issues with the intention of highlighting gaps in the application and content of such training. This paper concludes by suggesting future directions for research and educational policy to address the legal onus placed on teachers to report suspected and/or disclosed sexual abuse.

Section I The Introduction of Mandatory Reporting in Victoria:

Legislation introduced in Victoria in 1993 (Children and Young Persons Act 1989, amendment Section 64 (1A)) mandated teachers, among other professionals, to report suspected cases of physical or sexual abuse of children. The impetus for this legislation was the community outrage expressed at the violent death of an infant child at the hands of his stepfather, who was later convicted for murder. What seemed to outrage members of the community and many professionals was that the shocking abuse suffered by this child did not go undetected – however it did go without serious intervention by social welfare, medical practitioners and police. In his short, brief and brutal life, no less than twenty professionals examined Daniel Valerio and spoke to his mother, and at times, his stepfather. Despite the involvement of a large number of professionals from a variety of agencies – all of them linked to the welfare of children – none of them was able to intervene in a meaningful way that might have prevented the violent death of this child (see Goddard, 1996, ch.11 for an in-depth discussion about this case).

Daniel's death resulted from the brutal treatment metered out to him by his stepfather. But his death was also due, in part, to societal values, beliefs and attitudes which underpin concepts of parental rights and family privacy; the treatment of children and children's rights; and the causes and extent of family violence in society and notions of victim and perpetrator. The impact of values and attitudes on how individuals, and indeed whole groups, conceptualise and respond to the multiple forms of child abuse and neglect, has been recognised in research literature (Reyome & Gaeddert, 1998; Goddard, 1996; Beck, Ogloff & Corbishley 1994; Rush, 1980; Harper, 1980). Dominant values, beliefs and attitudes are shaped and mediated through the process of socialisation in which dominant social and cultural hegemonies influence and construct social knowledge.

Enacting mandatory reporting legislation demonstrated a cognizance that society as a whole has a moral obligation to protect its most vulnerable citizens, and that this obligation is a legal onus on those professionals who come into contact with children. However, mandating professionals, which includes teachers, to report suspected abuse will not necessarily protect abused children or adolescents, as knowledge, beliefs and attitudes are capable of affecting reporting behaviours in negative ways.

Despite the introduction of mandatory reporting in most states of Australia and overseas, a number of studies indicate that many teachers fail to comply with their legal duty to report suspected or disclosed child abuse, especially sexual abuse (Delaronde, King & Bendel, 2000; Berson, Berson & Ralston, 1998; Goddard, 1996; Rosien & Helms, 1993; Randolph & Gold, 1994). The reasons for failure to comply have been categorized around several points: lack of knowledge about child abuse, especially sexual abuse; negative attitudes and beliefs about child abuse, especially sexual abuse; beliefs in parental autonomy to discipline children; beliefs in the privacy of the family; beliefs that welfare or legal intervention is harmful to the child and family or will not result in the protection of the child; and fear of retaliation for making a report (Skinner, 1999; O'Donohue & O'Hare, 1997; Manning & Cheers, 1995; Beck et. al. 1994; Abrahams, 1992; Besharov, 1990).

The introduction of mandatory reporting and the implementation of training programs to assist teachers develop a better knowledge around child abuse issues and reporting processes is a positive development in the protection of children. Statistics show that since the introduction of mandatory reporting, notifications of suspected child abuse (physical and sexual) have increased across all mandated groups of professionals (Crime Prevention Committee, 1995, ch. 3). However, as stated earlier, a number of studies suggest failure among some teachers to comply with mandatory reporting for a range of reasons, many of which are connected to wider entrenched social beliefs and attitudes about child abuse. Teachers, like other mandated professionals are not immune from attitudes and beliefs that negate the various forms of violence that are a reality in the lives of many children and adolescents. Discriminatory attitudes about child abuse have also been shown to influence the response of police, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists, lawyers and the judiciary (Hicks & Tite, 1998; Taylor, 2000; Taylor, 1997; Trute, Adkins & MacDonald, 1992; Kalichman, Craig & Follingstad, 1990; Saunders, 1988).

It is also worth noting that an increase in reports has not necessarily resulted in increased protection for children, or an increase in successful prosecutions for child abuse. Indeed, some anecdotal evidence suggests that some teachers are making inappropriate reports of suspected abuse out of a fear of *not* being seen as complying with their mandated obligations. Moreover, despite legislative changes introduced into Victorian law in 1991 to improve evidentiary and procedural laws regarding sexual crimes, conviction rates for sexual offences have significantly decreased and serious concern is being expressed about the role of social attitudes in mediating responses among the judiciary and the community who make up juries.

Victoria was the last Australian state to introduce legislation to mandate reporting of child abuse and substantial differences exist between Australian States and Territories relating to mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse and neglect. Even when mandatory reporting is a legal requirement, studies suggest that there tends to be a low rate of compliance (Delaronde & King, 2000; Goddard, 1996). At least in Victoria, the failure to report suspected child abuse has rarely led to legal action against mandated professionals (Swain, 1998).

It has been argued that Victorian legislation introducing mandatory reporting is fraught with difficulties that weaken the intention of the legislation. To some extent these outcomes reflect problems in the way legislation is framed (e.g., how child abuse and neglect are defined, what constitutes the level of suspicion required for action, what constitutes notions of 'significant harm' when and how action should be taken, and whether any protection is afforded to professionals for errors in judgment they might make). However, even if mandatory reporting legislation and associated practices had greater specificity, there may still be limited compliance. Attitudes, beliefs, and domain-specific knowledge have been identified as factors that regulate the willingness of mandated persons to comply with reporting requirements.

One Victorian legal academic has argued that the terms 'significant harm' and the formation of 'reasonable belief', both of which are prerequisites to reporting under Victorian legislation, are extremely problematic due to the wide scope for interpretation of these two concepts (Sandor, 1994). Sandor argues that deciding or interpreting the concept of what constitutes 'significant harm' requires a major degree of assessment on the part of the potential reporter, thus making the concept open to wide interpretation. Secondly, the notion of forming a 'belief on reasonable grounds' suggests that a certain subjective mental state of mind needs to occur in the potential reporter and that such a state of mind determines reporting or a failure to report (Sandor, 1994). Such a concept allows individual beliefs and opinions to inform the mandated professional – and what if those opinions or beliefs entail

notions about sexual abuse that negate the possibility of believing that a child may be sexually victimised?

The prospect of such questions loom heavily when the legislation contains what Sandor believes are critical weaknesses that need to be addressed. Ambiguous terminology not only weakens the intent of the legislation but makes difficult any attempt to promote consensus among mandated professionals regarding a workable concept around suspicion and reasonable belief. The concept of 'reasonable belief' as a prerequisite to mandatory reporting was legally scrutinised in 1997 when a school principal in Victoria was charged with failing to report a case of child-disclosed sexual abuse.

In this particular case a young child gave explicit details of sexual abuse being perpetrated on him by his father. The teacher reported the disclosure to the Principal who decided against reporting suspected abuse because she did not form a 'belief' that suspected abuse had occurred. Several weeks later the child's teacher made a report after the child continued to complain that his father was sexually abusing him.

A subsequent investigation led to the father being convicted of more than forty charges of penetration of his child. The Principal was charged under mandatory reporting provisions of the Children and Young Persons Act for failing to report suspected and/or disclosed child sexual abuse. The Principal contested the charge on the grounds that she was not guilty of failing to report if she did not hold a 'belief' that child abuse occurred (Naidoo, 1997). The Principal was not convicted. However the case does serve to highlight some of the difficulties of the legislation as outlined by Sandor and further highlights the need for more comprehensive teacher education in the area of sexual abuse. Teachers themselves have reported that aside from too little education on mandatory reporting and child abuse, the legislation concerning the formation of 'reasonable belief' was inadequate as a basis for exercising professional judgment and intervention via reporting (Lord, 1997).

It needs to be acknowledged that teachers are not welfare workers or child abuse experts and therefore may have difficulties identifying suspected cases of child abuse, especially sexual abuse. It should also be acknowledged that many teachers respond professionally and compassionately to suspected or disclosed cases of child abuse notwithstanding personal and professional dilemmas. Although training programs address some of these issues, such as being able to better identify suspected abuse, appropriate steps in making a notification and dealing with professional dilemmas to do with the notification, there exists a gap between teacher education around compliance and better detection of suspected abuse, and the beliefs and attitudes that encourage or inhibit a willingness to report suspected abuse. As teachers are one profession that has regular contact with children over a prolonged period of time they are key professionals in the lives of children and are in a position to recognise and respond to suspected or disclosed child abuse. As Fantuzzo & Stevenson (1997) suggest, school personnel are in an excellent position to respond and intervene in child abuse and respond to the needs of children given their regular contact with them.

Section II Attitudes and Values and their mediating role in child/adolescent sexual abuse:

Attitudes and beliefs towards child sexual abuse is one major area of child abuse that has been shown to adversely affect reporting behaviour among professionals, including teachers (Randolph et. al. 1994; Besharov, 1990). Both teacher attitude and lack of knowledge have been identified as significant where child sexual abuse is concerned (Berson et. al.

1998; Beck et. al. 1994; Randolph et. al. 1994). The intersection of personal and/or professional attitudes and how they may impact negatively on professionals who are in regular and close contact with children and are mandated to report suspected abuse, in this case sexual abuse, has been well documented (Hicks et. al. 1998; Portwood, 1998; Ford & Medway, 1994; Beck et. al. 1994; Kean et. al. 1991; Johnson, Owens, Dewey & Eisenberg, 1990; Kalichman et. al. 1990 Ringwalk & Earp, 1988; Broussard & Wagner, 1988). Other more recent research has also identified the significance of attitudes and beliefs among teachers in reporting and responding to child sexual abuse (Skinner, 1999; Hicks et. al. 1998; Berson et. al. 1998; O'Donohue et. al. 1997).

Several studies have focused on how dominant social knowledges about child abuse influence decisions to report suspected abuse by mandated professionals, including teachers. These studies found that stereotypical characteristics attributed to victims of abuse, perpetrators and 'family types' were factors that influenced decisions to report or not report suspected child abuse (Portwood, 1998; Kean & Dukes, 1991). These studies reflect the significance of dominant social knowledges in shaping attitudes and mediating the uptake of knowledge about child abuse, particularly sexual abuse.

Research conducted in Britain on attitudes among teachers and social workers to intrafamilial sexual abuse, more specifically father-daughter rape, found that while both groups demonstrated a willingness to attribute blame to the child victim, teachers were more likely to attribute blame to the victim (Johnson, et. al. 1990). A significant factor highlighted in this research was the role that attitudes and beliefs played in the degree of blame teachers attributed to victims of such abuse. Similar findings regarding teachers' attribution of blame to child victims of sexual abuse have been found in other research (Ford et. al. 1994).

Moreover, some studies also found that a reluctance to report child sex abuse correlated with blame attribution (Ford et. al. 1994; Kalichman, et. al. 1990). More disturbingly, some research has found that adolescent victims of sexual abuse, especially intrafamilial abuse, are more likely to be not believed when they disclose abuse and are more likely to be blamed for the abuse by teachers, clinicians, the judiciary and the general community (Hicks et. al. 1998; Wagner, Aucoin, & Johnson, Reidy & Hochstadt, 1993; Zellman, 1992). Further, there is the lack of teacher awareness in knowledge and beliefs about the victimisation of adolescents, both sexually and physically (Reyome et. al. 1998). The tendency for 'child sexual abuse' to be a dominant term in literature and public discourse on sexual violence means that older victims can be rendered either invisible or theoretically culpable for their own victimisation simply because of the confluence of their age, and professional and public discriminatory attitudes about sexual abuse of older children. Sandor (1994) has argued the current Victorian legislation on mandatory reporting does not adequately address the need to ensure that adolescents are fully protected from sexual and physical abuse because the focus is on 'child abuse', thus rendering older victims almost invisible.

Because negative attitudes and beliefs towards child abuse can influence general behaviour towards victims of abuse as well as reporting behaviours, there is a need to identify the significance of how mandated professionals conceptualise sexual abuse of children and adolescents. In a related vein, implications arising from gaps in knowledge and/or the influence of negative attitudes towards sexual abuse are also capable of affecting the behaviour of teachers in their interactions with children identified as having been sexually victimised (O'Donohue et. al. 1997; Ford et. al. 1994). As some researchers contend, insensitive treatment towards the child/adolescent even on a subtle level, which transmits concepts of blame or indifference to the child/adolescent can be damaging to their emotional well-being (Zellman, 1992).

Furthermore, studies suggest that entrenched social stigma towards victims of sexual abuse affect teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards child victims of sexual abuse. Therefore the need for sensitization of child sexual abuse and attitudinal and behavioural change is important for the well-being of children (Hicks et. al 1998; O'Donohue et. al. 1997; Randolph et. al.1994; Bromfield, Bromfield & Weiss, 1988) . It also needs to be recognised that teachers can suffer emotional distress from their involvement with children/adolescents who have been abused. It is therefore important that education and training programs address this issue (Skinner, 1999).

Section III The Influence of social context and response to sexual violence:

Attitudes and beliefs about sexual abuse vary in intensity both individually and collectively due to social and cultural contexts. A number of studies in Australia and overseas demonstrate the impact of a rural context in reporting behaviours among mandated professionals as well as the lay community. Rural communities differ from urban communities on a range of social factors, including closeness of community links and maintenance of traditional values and attitudes (Select Committee of the Legislative Council, 1991). Raising greater social awareness and response to the problem of child abuse in rural populations has been acknowledged as an ongoing difficulty (Dietrich & Mason, 1998; Ermacora, 1998; La Nauze & Rutherford, 1997; Crago, Sturmeay & Monson, 1996,). For example, research in the US by Rosien and Helms identified a reluctance and/or failure among teachers in rural communities to report suspected abuse, even though they were mandated to do so (Rosien et. al. 1993). Individual beliefs among teachers compounded with community attitudes and relative intimacy (families being known to many in the community etc.) were considered barriers to reporting (ibid; Crime Prevention Committee, 1995, Part A).

Another more recent study from the US reported on differences between teachers in rural schools and teachers in metropolitan schools in America, in terms of how social problems are contextualised (Rintoul, 1998). The study demonstrated differences in constructions of violence and in social attitudes to violence in the community. Rintoul reported that rural teachers tend to have traditional idealized images of their school community that did not reflect the reality of violence within that community setting (ibid.).

A study conducted in Ballarat in 1996 reported that traditional and conservative values and attitudes dominated rural communities, and resulted in some children and adolescents being fearful of disclosing sexual abuse perpetrated upon them for fear of being disbelieved or attracting stigma. The study also found that the non-offending parent or parents whose child/ren were sexually abused were also fearful of reporting the abuse, citing a fear of disbelief from professionals and fear of retaliation from the offender and those in the community supporting him/her. The study also highlighted difficulties faced by victims and their non-offending parent/s in accessing appropriate services and ensuring confidentiality within a rural community (Goodall, reported by Hodson, 1996). The Select Committee of the Legislative Council (1991) has also noted that the reporting of child abuse is often under-reported in rural areas as a result of domain specific problems as outlined above.

A rural context is one domain that should be examined more closely with regard to how sexual abuse against children and adolescents is conceptualized and responded to by professionals and the general community. Sexual and/or physical abuse of children and adolescents which occurs within the family unit is another domain factor that influences professional attitudes, as detailed in section two. As Edgar has argued, dominant and traditional notions of 'family' maintain the family as a private unit and as a 'natural phenomenon', thus removing it from scrutiny and intervention (Edgar cited in Weeks & Wilson, 1995, p.20). The maintenance of this mindset is frequently articulated and acted out

in professional and government agencies and the law, as they hesitate to involve themselves cases of domestic violence and child abuse on the basis that they are perceived as 'family problems' or 'difficulties' (Nicholson, 1998; Taylor, 1997; Goddard, 1996). For these reasons, teacher training programs need to develop greater understanding of child abuse within the family unit, especially as the majority of sexual and physical violence against children and adolescents occurs within the family unit.

Fear of reprisal does not necessarily need to be domain specific, such as a rural context. The act of disclosing information by reporting illegal or unethical conduct or institutional practice or standards is often referred to as 'whistleblowing'. In a contradictory vein, society values the adherence to certain moral and ethical codes of conduct and behaviour yet those who report the violating of these standards or practices are most often victimised by their employer or other significant stakeholders. The inherent double standards in whistleblowing and theories around coercion and compliance and the repercussions of whistleblowing has been well researched and documented in Australia and overseas (De Maria, 1999; Martin, 1999; Hunt, 1998; Dempster, 1997). For some individuals, unspoken codes among their professional colleagues and within their professional organisation require conformity to an unspoken and unwritten code of practice to the extent that non-compliance to certain legislation or practice is considered acceptable. This can also apply to a community or social ethos where some forms of illegal behaviour such as child abuse or neglect or domestic violence may be regarded as 'other people's private business' and reporting of such behaviour may be considered akin to 'dobbing' or unwarranted interfering in the lives of others.

Therefore, those who step outside this code may be seen as violating these codes to the detriment to the reported individual or group. Moreso, if an individual attempted to highlight non-compliance among his colleagues with regard to a particular area of practice, then he or she may be viewed as a whistleblower, and treated accordingly. As a result, fear of reprisals may serve to dissuade mandated professionals from fulfilling their legal obligations. The difficulties posed by the concept of whistleblowing in relation to reporting of child abuse has been noted in recent work (Taylor, A. 1998).

Section IV Current Teacher Education Programs on Mandatory Reporting and Child Abuse and Protection:

Recent academic literature on teacher education programs on mandatory reporting and child abuse reveals the diversity of training programs and the desired and achieved outcomes of some programs; gaps in program delivery; as well as inconsistency in the content and application of training programs.

A recent review of school-based teacher training/education programs in Canada, United States, New Zealand and Australia suggested that longer term education programs were preferable to short-term programs and that teachers reported an increase in knowledge about child abuse after taking part in such programs (MacIntyre & Carr, 2000). Baginsky reviewed teacher education programs in the United Kingdom on mandatory child abuse reporting, and undertook research into the degree of training provided for in-service teachers and pre-service teachers (Baginsky, 2000; Baginsky & Hodgkinson, 1999). In response to a survey of head teachers and designated teachers who were responsible for acting on teacher reports of suspected child abuse, a high majority of the respondents (88%) were concerned that many teachers lacked experience and appropriate training to be able to respond appropriately to suspected child abuse (Baginsky, 2000). Despite these concerns, Baginsky noted that the high majority of respondents were keen to improve their knowledge

and to develop an interdisciplinary and multi-professionally coordinated approach to child protection and consequent reporting. Baginsky also noted the lack of research into the role of teachers' attitudes towards child abuse and mandatory reporting (ibid).

In a survey of initial teacher training/education courses on mandatory reporting and child protection, Baginsky and Hodgkinson (1999) reported that education around child abuse and protection issues were minimal. Despite an overwhelming majority of higher education institutions (91.4%) reporting that they provided some coverage of child protection issues the vast majority of these courses were of only 2-3 hours duration (Baginsky et. al. 1999). Their research also suggested that the design of these child protection/mandatory reporting courses were poorly integrated with the teacher education curriculum and highlighted the need for detailed research into the rationale and design of these courses, especially the timing and delivery of such courses to identify their efficacy with regards to content and effectiveness (ibid.). This point is important given that their survey showed that only 10% of mandatory reporting/child protection education courses assessed the students' work on their knowledge of child protection (ibid). The researchers contended that a more substantial and comprehensive child protection education course is required in pre-service teaching curriculums to allow students to develop a more integrated knowledge of child protection issues. Further, that higher education courses need to develop a pre-service course that is recognised as the first but important stage of what should be a continuum of pre-service and in-service teacher education around child abuse issues (ibid).

In Australia, mandatory reporting laws have not been enacted by all states, and of those states that have mandatory provisions for teachers, there are marked differences in these requirements (Watts & Laskey, 1997). A study by Watts and Laskey (1997) showed that pre-service teacher education around child protection issues was not consistent across Australian universities with some institutions allocating time to child protection issues as a core element of their courses; some allocating time on an optional basis and others providing zero hours to mandatory reporting and child protection issues. Time allocated to child protection education in higher education institutions in Victoria varied enormously with one institution allocating 16 hours but most other institutions that responded to the survey indicating that they provided approximately 2 hours, with half of the respondents reporting zero hours allocated to pre-service teacher education in child protection (ibid).

Watts and Laskey (1997) rightly contend that teachers have a right to adequate education in child protection issues that allows them to fulfill their legal obligation to report suspected and/or disclosed abuse. Further, Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, and this further illuminates the rights of children and adolescents to be fully protected by the law and by those entrusted to care or to work with children (ibid).

Whilst it is positive that some studies report that teachers exposed to such training reported increased knowledge about child abuse, research presented in this paper suggests that knowledge alone is not enough to combat child abuse, given the influence that attitudes and beliefs can have in reporting behaviours and general response to victims of sexual abuse. The evidence presented show that attitude and value systems may hold an overriding influence on manifest behaviours of teachers and other mandated professionals.

Because attitudes and belief systems play an integral role in mediating professional and lay response to the abuse and neglect of children and young people, programs that address this area are important for both in-service and pre-service teachers. The importance of the need for such education is demonstrated by research conducted by Randolph and Gold (1994) who evaluated a specific teaching education program that sought to affect both knowledge and attitudes towards child abuse, especially child sexual abuse. The evaluation study utilized a control group in order to measure the efficacy of the teacher education program

and found that a program that addressed attitudinal and belief factors around child sexual abuse led to positive attitudinal and belief changes among teachers. Follow up surveys conducted three months after the training found that teachers who undertook this particular training program were better able to apply their knowledge to hypothetical cases of sexual abuse; were less likely to blame the child; were more likely to acknowledge the severity of sexual abuse in the community; discuss the seriousness of sexual abuse with colleagues, and were more likely to report suspected abuse (ibid).

Conclusion:

Despite Australia being a signatory to the UN convention of the rights of children and adolescents, as this paper has demonstrated, children and adolescents continue to be victimised not just by the abuses that professionals are mandated to report, but they also continue to be victimised by negative attitudes and beliefs held by many professionals that affect both reporting behaviours and attitudes towards victims. The need to address attitudes and beliefs among professionals is central to improving the lives of children and adolescents. Teacher education programs around child protection issues are valuable developments in detecting and intervening in the abuse of children and adolescents. However, the focus of this education is on the provision of knowledge about child abuse that will better assist teachers to detect possible abuse and to respond appropriately as mandated by law. The integration and application of this knowledge is mediated by attitudes and beliefs, and as this paper has argued, dominant hegemonies about children and sexual abuse do impact on professional and societal understanding and response to such abuse.

A number of studies utilised in this paper suggest that factors such as domain-specific knowledge, inappropriate beliefs and negative attitudes limit the willingness of teachers (and other professionals) to meet their mandated responsibility of reporting suspected abuse. It is reasonable to extrapolate from contemporary studies that specific domains such as "place" (e.g. 'rural' areas) and dominant social hegemonies influence compliance with mandatory reporting as well as attitudes to sexually victimised children and adolescents.

Research has identified gaps or elucidated gap areas in the provision of current teacher education programs on child protection, such as:

- More inclusive knowledge on the issue of abuse of adolescents
- The need for cohesive, comprehensive and consistent education programs
- The need for pre-service teacher education to form a core component in higher education courses
- The need to acknowledge the mediating role of attitudes and beliefs in mandatory reporting of abuse, especially sexual abuse, and towards victimised children and adolescents.

In summary, identifiable gaps in the provision of teacher education programs is the lack of comprehensive and cohesive programs for pre-service teachers in higher education institutions and the failure to address the impact of attitudes and beliefs in in-service and pre-service teachers' reporting behaviours and attitudes towards sexually victimised children. Current in-service and pre-service teacher programs seek to provide education for teachers about child abuse and mandatory reporting obligations. Some programs also seek to sensitise teachers to the issue of sexual abuse and child abuse per se. The effective uptake of knowledge depends a good deal on the attitudes and beliefs of learners.

Negative attitudes and beliefs about the sexual abuse of children and adolescents are similar to racism in that it is negative attitudes and beliefs that create prejudicial and discriminatory mindsets. Training programs also need to take into account community

attitudes and values, and the extent to which these impact on school environments and local agencies involved in protecting children from abuse. It is our contention that teacher training programs will have greater effectiveness if the pre-training knowledge-based, attitudes and beliefs of teachers are more clearly understood.

There is a need for teachers and academic teacher educators to consider the value of developing a core child protection course that could be conducted either as a single unit, or as a course that is interwoven across the span of the course curriculum. Such a unit should be mandatory to all teaching degrees so that pre-service teachers would be better prepared to meet their legal obligations. Such a unit would further benefit students in developing a critical, reflective and integrated knowledge on issues relating to child and adolescent abuse and mandatory reporting. It is also feasible that such a unit can influence positive attitudinal development and hence positive knowledge uptake on issues surrounding the physical and sexual violence of children and adolescents.

Research is also needed to explore the impact of domain specific factors such as 'place', gender and socio-cultural issues and their influence on attitudes and beliefs with regard to reporting behaviours and attitudes to victimised children. As a precursor to effective legislation, it is important to understand the ways in which the attitudes and beliefs of persons who have contact with children in professional roles influence the likelihood that suspected child abuse will be reported. Attention needs to be given not only to factors that facilitate reporting, but also to those that operate to inhibit reporting. This area of research is critical as the development of programs can be directly enhanced through a more detailed understanding of how attitudinal factors and beliefs affect mandated professionals.

Teachers face an increasing level of complexity in their professional lives. Children and adolescents interact and negotiate their social and individual lives in a society that has become more complex with competing influences of socialisation impacting upon them. An increasing recognition of the intersection of family, social, and school life has resulted in a more holistic understanding of, and response to student behaviour, but has also led to teachers facing more complex and at times difficult interactions with their students. There is much evidence to show that predominantly teachers are committed to their teaching and to their students. However, we cannot avoid the necessary task of acknowledging how negative attitudes and beliefs among professionals and the community can impact on the lives of victimised children and adolescents. Acknowledging this factor is a major step towards addressing the issue in a constructive manner conducive to positive change and development.

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