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EDUCATING TEACHERS
IN CHILD PROTECTION:

LESSONS FROM RESEARCH

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In this paper, I am taking the simple, if idealistic view that educational research is able to enhance “the public good” since it has the potential to inform social policy and practice. In what follows, I provide an exemplification of how this might be achieved in the interests of our community generally and as it pertains specifically to the safety of children.

Schools have an important role to play in supporting children and their families and in protecting students. Because they are in close daily contact with students, teachers are well placed to observe when a child or young person appears to be at risk of harm. Not only are they in a unique position to observe warning signs, a teacher may well be the only trusted adult to whom a child can turn for assistance when needed. However, recent media reports (Bradley 2002; Davies, 2002) have cast doubt on teachers’ capacity and willingness to participate in mandatory reporting duties introduced in Victoria in 1994. Bradley (2002) highlights the factors generating these frustrations: “forced to report abuse but getting little training or feedback, teachers fear child protection is failing”. A similar theme characterises the comments of Australian Education Union’s president Mary Bluett, “Teachers are extremely worried about this issue. Teachers feel unconfident about identifying and reporting anything but the most obvious physical abuse. The stress of making a report is huge for teachers”, (Davies, 2002). Put simply, “many professionals dread making a notification” (Blasket and Taylor, 2003, p 8).

Further, recent statistics show that “for the first time since 1999, child abuse notifications dropped in Victoria to 37,630 with 12,400 cases investigated and 7287 substantiated” (Nader, 2004). This was attributed by Tucci (in Nader, 2004) to be an outcome of people “getting fed up with a system where they’re reporting and there’s no effective response”. In addition, Tucci argues, people are unclear about how the department defines abuse, the threshold set by Department of Human Services (DHS) that triggers an investigation, and for proving cases, being too high (Nader, 2004). The inevitable consequence of such a situation is that, professionals who feel frustrated refrain from further notification, children are left exposed to heightened risk and hence open to being re-victimised (Goddard, Saunders, Stanley and Tucci, 2001).

Now while there are clear deficiencies in the operation of the child protection system, it is also likely that the inadequacy of teachers’ preparation for child protection roles may contribute to their decreasing participation in notifying child abuse. Hence an examination of the research on teachers as mandatory notifiers should enhance our knowledge of appropriate training strategies. Arguably, better training may have the effect of contributing to an improved quality of notifications, thereby avoiding the misdirection of scarce resources and better meeting the government’s objective of protecting children in need.

The conventional approach to such training focuses on the transmission of knowledge about identifying, responding to and notifying suspected child maltreatment. However, research across a number of areas of educational practice, for example, curriculum reform, has demonstrated that teachers do not easily accept instructions to proceed on the basis of externally imposed criteria and procedures. It would not be surprising to find that the same applies when the welfare of their students is under threat. In addition, the extent of the initial training offered in Victoria—two hours—for the majority of teachers at the in-service level, was manifestly inadequate, considering the complexity and emotional impact of child maltreatment. As a result many teachers failed to develop skills, knowledge and confidence in their ability to participate in child protection roles. Hence, the paper explores the research literature on teachers’ involvement in mandatory reporting in the expectation that advice will be provided on a more appropriate form of training. Although there have been more opportunities to undertake training, especially for newly employed teachers, and additional resources developed, (eg Safe from Harm, a training manual), participation has been less than systematic. At the preservice level, there is a tendency for most institutions to deal with the topic on a “one-off basis” in the space of a few hours and sometimes only one (Watts and Laskey, 1997).

An analysis of research investigations on teachers’ response to mandatory reporting legislation (and child protection responsibilities, where reporting is voluntary) in three countries, viz, U.S.A, U.K and Australia is provided. These findings will be examined for the directions they provide to appropriate training design, towards overcoming the problem of discretionary reporting. In particular the paper explores the following questions:
1. What advice is provided by a consideration of the research literature on teachers as mandatory notifiers?

2. What are the implications of these findings for the design of appropriate child protection programs in teacher education?

Introduction


Child Protection involves statutory intervention into the lives of children and families when minimum standards of adult care of children are not met. Intervention may be necessary to protect the child from further abuse or neglect, and to enhance the child’s prospects of recovery from abuse already incurred. The right of Australian children to protection is upheld by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Australian children have the right to protection from “all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child” (Goddard, Saunders, Stanley and Tucci, 2001).

Teachers and Mandatory Reporting Legislation in Victoria

Legislation introduced in Victoria in 1993 (Children and Young Persons Act, 1989, Amendment, Section 64 (1A)) mandated medical practitioners, nurses and police officers to report suspected cases of physical and sexual abuse of children. Teachers became subject to this legislation in July, 1994. The legislation provided anonymity for those notifying in good faith, although a penalty of $1000 was to apply to those failing to report after developing a belief, ‘based on reasonable grounds’ that a child was at risk of significant harm from physical injury or sexual abuse (Safe from Harm, 2001, p 78). The impetus for this legislation was the community outrage expressed at the violent death of toddler, Daniel Valerio at the hands of his stepfather in 1990. While the brutality suffered by this child did not go undetected, it did go without serious intervention by any of some twenty different professionals, (i.e medical, welfare and police), who examined him. A media campaign followed and legislation enacted three years later, (Goddard, 1996). In the years immediately following the introduction of the legislation, there was a large influx of reports. However, the rate of increase has slowed in recent times as the child protection system has become overloaded (Bradley, 2003). In 1999-2000, teachers made 4618 notifications, resulting in 1817 investigations with 1047 cases of child abuse substantiated (Safe from Harm, 2001, p 80).

Reasonable Grounds for Belief

A basic tenet of the legislation is that there is no obligation on mandated professionals to prove that abuse has occurred (Reporting Child Abuse, 1993). While indicators of abuse might be observed, there is no requirement for explicit evidence of abuse or neglect. A ‘belief’ based on reasonable grounds, that a child has suffered or is likely to suffer, as a result of physical or sexual abuse warrants a report. Reasonable grounds include: “a child tells you they have been physically or sexually abused; a child tells you they know someone who has been physically or sexually abused (often a child is referring to him/herself; when someone tells you, such as a relative, friend or acquaintance, sibling of the child, that they know or believe the child has been physically or sexually abused; your observation of the child’s behaviour or development leads you to believe the child has been physically or sexually abused; and, you observe signs of physical and sexual abuse” (Reporting Child Abuse, 1993, p 11). Reporting of emotional abuse and neglect is not mandatory but is encouraged as everyone’s moral responsibility (Reporting Child Abuse, 1993, p 2). Critics have argued that ambiguity surrounding the establishment of ‘belief’ endangers children (Goddard et al, 2001). For instance in 1997, a principal was charged with failing to notify following a disclosure of explicit sexual abuse perpetrated on a five year old. The boy’s father was jailed for nine years having been convicted on multiple charges of sexual penetration of a minor. Charges against the principal were dismissed. Her defence hinged on her statement “that she had not formed a ‘belief’”-her rationale for rejecting the disclosure referred to the five year old child supposedly having “a vivid imagination and a loose mouth” (Bradley, 2003).
Research on Mandatory Reporting of Suspected Child Abuse in the U.S.A.

Early research in the U.S.A tended to focus on teachers’ lack of compliance with mandatory reporting legislation, a requirement in force since the mid 1970s, across all 51 states and territories (Crenshaw, Crenshaw and Lichtenberg, 1995). A variety of hypotheses were generated to explain this finding, some of which concerned lack of knowledge—either of policy and procedures, or of identification skills, and the role of child protection authorities, but many of which concluded by drawing attention to the inadequacies of the type of training offered. Below I review a selection of research studies with more detailed attention paid to two large scale enquiries, in particular, Crenshaw et al (1995) and O'Toole, Webster, O'Toole and Lucal (1999). These have served to advance the debate regarding teachers’ decision making in reporting suspected child abuse and neglect.

Levine (1983) found that a majority of primary and junior secondary teachers judged their knowledge of symptoms of child abuse to be relatively low. Paradoxically, despite the overall low level of reporting, when compared to the known incidence of abuse, teachers felt a high level of personal responsibility to do so. In addition, it was found that a maltreatment notification hierarchy was in evidence, physical abuse being most frequently reported, followed by physical neglect, emotional abuse, emotional neglect and sexual abuse. Levine’s conclusion was that training programs for teachers and administrators were inadequate.

Similarly, McIntyre (1987) found that only 39% of teachers surveyed believed they had ever taught an abused or neglected child and most felt incapable of identifying. But in even less clearcut cases (where parents denied the abuse and the principal wished to avoid reporting), a mere 22% of teachers in the sample indicated they would proceed with notifications.

Trudell and Whatley (1988, p 108) also believe that mandated professionals do not fully comply with statutory obligations. They estimate that only 44% of sexual abuse cases known to professionals are ever reported. They point to underlying assumptions which render preparation for the notification process problematic:

1. Training teachers as though a brief intervention usually of a few hours (i.e limited duration) will suffice, when in fact, complex concepts are involved.
2. Providing teachers with information alone, as though this were sufficient to alleviate their concerns about mandatory reporting.

These authors observe that “the reporting issue is most frequently addressed by informing teachers of possible indicators of sexual abuse, their legal mandate to report, and the procedures for doing so” (Trudell and Whatley, 1988, p 108). They contend that such a rational, “objective” depiction of the reporting process glosses over several dilemmas that arise for teachers as they are faced with identifying and reporting sexual abuse.

First, it obscures both the ongoing controversy surrounding mandated reporting and the ethical decisions inherent in the process. Secondly, it sets forth a truncated view of the overall process and assumes consistently positive outcomes after reporting. Finally, it neglects the context in which the teacher works and minimizes the emotional impact of the process on the reporter” (Trudell and Whatley, 1988, p 109).

Abrahams, Casey and Daro (1992) found that teachers in their sample were hindered in making notifications for a variety of reasons. These included insufficient knowledge in how to detect and report, fear of legal ramifications for false allegations, consequences of reporting, fear of disapproval from parents and parental denial. Although many teachers indicated that they had recognised maltreatment, they had failed to make the notification to Child Protective Services: they had instead preferred to leave the matter in the hands of other professionals, eg school counsellors or administrators.

Reiniger, Robison and McHugh (1994) also directed their investigation to an exploration of training, their focus having arisen from a concern for underreporting of suspected maltreatment by groups such as physicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses, teachers, and other health professionals. The failure to report highlights the limits to legislation as a mechanism, given that all U.S teachers are required to notify
their suspicions of child abuse. Their findings following a compulsory two-hour training course for mandated notifiers bring the situation into sharp relief.

A large number of endangered children (69% of cases suspected by community professionals) were not reported to protective services. Of those that were reported, the majority originated from three sectors: the police, the hospitals and mental health agencies. According to Reiniger et al (1995, p 67), “public schools which are the single greatest source of reports nationwide, … still have more cases unreported (548,100) than those that are reported to child protective services by all other services combined (420,000).” Moreover, a study by Schwartz (1991), cited in Reiniger et al, found that although 57% of over 2.1 million reports of child abuse and neglect in 1986 involved school-aged children, only 16.3% originated from school staff.

Speculating on the reasons for this, Reiniger et al argue that, while professionals had increased their awareness of child abuse indicators during the course, the greatest gap remained in their knowledge of legal obligations and procedures for notification (1995 p 67). Of further interest, is their observation that course trainers documenting the nature of questions raised by participants had noticed that the vast majority related to participants’ concerns over liability, their potential involvement in court procedures and their contact with child protective services, once a report was made. This latter observation is consistent with the Trudell and Whatley analysis above, that it is not just a lack of knowledge about identification of maltreatment (or procedures, for that matter), which constrains teachers in proceeding with notifications.

Examining the decision making process for teachers in finer detail, Crenshaw, Crenshaw and Lichtenberg (1995), sought to build upon the simpler percentage-based survey results of previous studies, such as those reported above. Crenshaw et al utilised abuse scenarios with teachers and other school personnel to investigate recognition and reporting rates. They found that knowledge alone (i.e. of child abuse indicators and mandatory reporting laws) did not differentiate between those who proceeded with notifications and those who declined to do so. The results of their more sophisticated design and multivariate statistical analysis highlighted salient factors in the teachers’ decision to report. Their findings include the following:

- Reporters are more willing to base their decision on suspicions rather than solid evidence. Conversely, non-reporters are unwilling to make reports without greater evidence. Non-reporters generally rated difficulty of defining symptoms of child abuse and neglect as having a greater impact on their decision than reporters. Teachers’ ability to recognize the symptoms directly impacts on their reporting decision; non-reporters generally rated their inability to define indicators (particularly when the symptoms are emotional, sexual or neglect) as having a greater impact on their decision than reporters. They appear to depend heavily on the disclosure of the child—in its absence they are unwilling to notify.

- Reporting tendency varied by type of abuse to form a three-tiered hierarchy, (consistent with Levine, above) but possibly due to the increase in attention given to sexual abuse in the intervening decade, sexual abuse was given a higher priority than emotional abuse. Hence teachers were more inclined to report alleged cases of physical abuse/neglect, than sexual and emotional abuse.

- No direct relationship between gender of victim or respondent was found.

- Reporters were distinguishable from non-reporters by issues involving quality of suspicion (that is, presenting evidence, definitions of abuse and disclosure) and the respondent’s belief that schools should be a first line of defence against abuse and neglect. Somewhat surprisingly, non-reporters were indistinguishable from reporters on their knowledge of mandatory reporting laws, although there was some differentiation according to the level of ambiguity surrounding the evidence.

In terms of recognition and reporting rates, Crenshaw et al found that there was consistency with the previously discussed hierarchy of types of maltreatment, with physical reported more often than sexual abuse, neglect and emotional abuse. At the same time, the data indicated that many respondents had neither recognised nor reported abuse of any kind in the previous two years. According to these authors, this is an alarming confirmation of the tendency to underreporting:
While attempting to estimate the true number of cases of abuse in a given classroom defies any formula of probability, one may conservatively speculate on what does exist. Depending on their level … one can assume classroom teachers have seen at least 60 and possibly 400 different students over 2 calendar years, spanning 3 academic years. Even if just 1 in 10 students is being abused—a conservative estimate—most teachers would teach between 6 and 30 abused children over a two year period. It seems improbable that any teacher could avoid entertaining at least one abuse hypothesis during that time (Crenshaw et al, 1995, p 1110).

In other data, Crenshaw and colleagues found that despite almost 90% of their sample having a uniform knowledge of the mandatory notification statute, only 9.6% “felt very well prepared” to recognize and report child abuse, teachers most often seeing themselves as “barely adequate, poorly or not at all prepared” (1995, p 1099). In addition, the majority of respondents indicated a very strong interest in further training. This was also the case with Abrahams et al as noted above. However, as participants demonstrated a uniform commitment to mandatory reporting, at the same time as they showed inconsistency in their reporting tendencies, suggestions that training directed to understanding and supporting teachers’ statutory obligations, alone, is unlikely to bear fruit. Of further interest is their finding that teachers were either aware of school policy on notifications, or did not allow their ignorance to interfere with their reporting decision. Hence training efforts directed to “simply familiarizing staff with policies are necessary but not sufficient to improve reporting rates” (Crenshaw et al, 1995, p 1104).

A number of related issues came to the fore in Crenshaw et al’s preliminary focus groups. Although results on these items did not clearly support their hypothesis, the investigators noted the strength of teachers’ concerns about:

- Suppression of reports by administrators
- Parental retaliation
- Damaging professional relationships with student and family

As outlined above, the reporting decision seemed to be directly related to teachers’ ability to identify the symptoms of child abuse: the “educators’ ability to recognize the symptoms of child abuse directly impacts their reporting decision—especially when the symptoms are emotional, sexual or the result of physical neglect” (p1106). The presence of physical evidence, for example, bruises, appears to galvanise both reporters and non-reporters into action, as they become more certain of the abuse. However, on other items, non-reporters held to their inclination to define symptoms as ambiguous, “suggesting a tendency to find uncertainty even where there is none” (Crenshaw et al 1995, p 1106). Reporters, by contrast, are more willing to “interpret behavioural and emotional symptoms as representative of child abuse and – even without disclosure or in the presence of open denial—will make a report based on that judgement” (p 1106). This means that in order for all teachers to fulfil their obligations under the law, they would need to increase their competence in identification of child maltreatment, rather than being content to rely on a child’s disclosure, which may come only at an advanced stage of abuse, if at all.

What are the implications of these findings? Since Crenshaw et al found the strongest association to be between reporting tendency and a view that schools provide a first line of defence against child abuse and neglect, it is clear that any attempt to increase professional support for mandatory reporting needs to be anchored in such an approach. A rider to this must be added, however. Given the level of anecdotal evidence provided by respondents suggesting that they did not feel that their reports were taken seriously by Child Protective Services (CPS), Crenshaw et al caution that improvements in CPS relationships with teachers, such as by the provision of appropriate follow up and feedback, must be made.

In terms of within school differences in reporting rates, the study’s qualitative data highlighted a potential diffusion of responsibility whereby educators expect someone else (a school counsellor, or administrator, for instance) to make the report. Crenshaw et al note that “such practices may become institutionalised through the use of Response Teams or Designated Receivers intended to review teacher suspicions and make decisions on reporting”. However, this practice is not without risks. According to these authors, “while this might seem to improve the quality of reports by drawing from several professions and gathering multivariate data on the child, it may actually lead educators to talk
themselves out of reporting” (Crenshaw et al, 1995, p 1110). In addition, the legislative provisions require that the mandated reporter remains liable for their suspicions even if they have reported to a nominated person, suggesting that reliance upon such models would be inappropriate (Crenshaw et al 1995, p 1110).

Other training directions to emerge from the study related to perceptions about parental involvement, severity of symptomatology and quality of suspicion. Beliefs about the level of parental co-operation in overcoming certain types of abusive situations seemed to have the capacity to influence non-reporters in making the decision to notify. Hence, “training should be designed to minimize halo effects and improve objectivity in gathering data and suspecting abuse” (Crenshaw et al, 1995, p 1109). A relatively unsurprising finding was that the ranking of severity of symptoms, had the capacity to strongly differentiate those willing to proceed with notification from those who did not. While both groups responded uniformly to severe physical abuse, this was not the case for other forms of abuse, consistent with the finding on abuse hierarchy noted above. Crenshaw et al conclude that educators must be trained to recognize the inherent severity of serious emotional abuse and neglect as well as any form of sexual abuse (1995, p 1108).

As discussed previously, quality of evidence present in a given case exercised a strong effect on the decision to report, despite the fact that teachers have been instructed to report any and all suspicion. In this respect, teachers appear less than enthusiastic about taking a non-differentiated approach to notification and one might speculate about their concern for the ill effects on families where allegations of mistreatment prove unfounded. In line with this observation, Crenshaw et al advocate that teachers be taught how to suspect child abuse and neglect using ‘standard rules of reasonable suspicion’, because, “educators who know how to suspect neglect and abuse will feel more comfortable in making reports and thus will tend to comply more readily with the mandate” (1995, p 1107). This will, in turn, have a bearing on the quality, because “reports from such educators will be stronger, since they are based on the rules of suspicion rather than gut instincts or mere suspicion. This type of training involves not only knowing the symptoms of child abuse, but how to put these symptoms together to achieve a level of suspicion in order to support a report” (Crenshaw et al, 1995, p 1107). Naturally, such an approach is at complete odds with the notion that any suspicion is grounds for a report.

In summary, this particular study succeeded in illuminating not only a number of issues involved in teacher decision making to satisfy mandatory reporting obligations, but the consequences for worthwhile preparation. Although teachers appeared to be well aware of their responsibilities in notifying suspected child abuse and neglect, their tendency to report was less than uniform. This was, in fact, borne out by actual reporting rates. Hence training must be modified to “go well beyond ordering educators to report and giving them a hotline number. It must teach them to look at themselves as a first line of defence against child abuse, how to achieve reasonable suspicion, and ways to avoid extraneous issues which should not impact on their decision” (Crenshaw et al, 1995, p 1111). Finally, these authors point out that change must be brought at both school and child protection systems level, before teachers can be trained for effective participation (1995, p 1111).

The influence of case characteristics, those of the teacher and organizational setting on recognition and reporting suspected child abuse were explored further by O’Toole, Webster, O’Toole and Lucal (1999). Employing a factorial survey design, these authors obtained the responses of 480 teachers to vignettes in which case characteristics were systematically manipulated (p 1085). O’Toole et al point out that characteristics of the act, (the type of behaviour involved—sexual, physical or emotional, together with it’s perceived seriousness), and variables that describe the victim and perpetrator, for example, social, psychological and behavioural, are central to explanations of abuse and protocols for its recognition (1999, p 1094).

Hence, at the core of this study is a question regarding the potential for reporter bias deriving from beliefs, attitudes, and socialization regarding child abuse. In addition, variables such as type and size of school and the exercise of professional discretion were investigated.

O’Toole et al found that more than half the variance in both recognition and reporting was explained by several specific characteristics of the case, predominantly type and seriousness of the act, and to a lesser extent, the psychology of the perpetrator and behaviour of the victim. Extraneous social factors such as
race and socio-economic status of the perpetrator exerted no influence on teacher responses, a finding which these authors attribute to repetition of the message that abuse is not a function of class or race (1994, p 1094). Teachers recognised abuse in children up to the age of 16 years, contrary to earlier work by Reyome and Gaeddert (1998) who found that adolescent maltreatment tended to be overshadowed by concerns for younger children.

The tendency toward under-reporting of recognised abuse was confirmed for physical and emotional abuse, as well as highlighting the masking of possible abuse through positive evaluations of either perpetrator psychology or victim behaviour. Gender was shown to influence reporting but not recognition, male and female victims being equally identified as having been abused. Male victims, however, were not reported as often. Conversely, more fathers were recognized as perpetrators, although this bias did not translate into disproportionate reporting.

O'Toole et al express a degree of surprise at their failure to confirm the impact of variables related to teachers and school settings. These authors state that “in contrast to the importance of case characteristics, the relatively large number of characteristics of teachers and the schools where they taught … appeared to have had only minor effects on the responses to child abuse” (1999, p 1094). In other words, the addition of descriptive variables for teachers (eg personal and professional experience, previous and current social interactions) actually contributed very little to the percentage of unexplained variance for recognition and reporting. Thus teacher responses in this study tended to be fairly homogeneous (O’Toole et al, 1999, p 1094).

Nonetheless, the issues investigated in this part of the study are worthy of further scrutiny. In terms of the impact of the respondents’ family situation, it was hypothesised that the greater the number of children they raised, the lower the likelihood of teachers recognizing and reporting abuse. This supposition was supported by the data. Similarly, the effect of years of teaching experience and greater numbers of students seen per day was hypothesised as leading to a loss of sensitivity to the problem of child abuse. It was also thought that teachers in administrative roles might have a greater investment in protecting school-community relationships by invoking narrower definitions of reportable abuse. O’Toole et al found that while years of experience was negatively associated with recognition, it was not the case with reporting. They suggest that the former may be due to increased tolerance for child abuse developed over years of teaching or, alternately, that training in responding to maltreatment occurred subsequent to their initial preparation. Teachers who were involved with larger numbers of students, tended to report less, although their ability to recognize abuse was not affected. Administrators, on the other hand, demonstrated that neither recognition nor reporting was affected by their position.

A personal history as a victim of child abuse as a factor in teacher response was also examined. O’Toole et al found that 21.9% of their sample had had personal experience as victims of abuse (physical, 3.8%, sexual, 20% and or emotional abuse 81.4% (sic)). However, contrary to expectation, this experience had no effect on their recognition or reporting behaviour (1999, p 1095). Other surprising findings encompassed administrators and male teachers being more consistent than other groups in levels of recognition and reporting. In addition, although teachers had repeatedly called for improved relationships and better communication with CPS, they did not allow their frustrations to interfere with reporting.

The number of previous reports made by teachers was associated with their intentions to continue their positive response. However, for those indicating that they had exercised discretion in the past, (as signalled by higher recognition rates), their reporting of possible child abuse cases was not affected (O’Toole et al, 1999, p 1096).

School related factors included an examination of reporting structures, type and size. The existence of internal policy structures and procedures, such as direct reporting to an administrator, designated teacher, or review panel, for decision on proceeding with notifications to CPS, could, O’Toole et al argued, have an impact on teacher reporting behaviour (1999, p 1096). This could conceivably occur as a response to administrators (or others) filtering cases such that only those presenting a positive image of the school went forward. Internal criteria for recognition and reporting might then influence teachers’ judgements. Alternatively, the establishment of such structures might indicate that the school was attempting to foreground child abuse, a measure designed to enhance reporting and support. Similarly, it might be argued that freeing teachers from the responsibility of individual reporting could increase the number of
official notifications. The data however, failed to support either position as teachers’ recognition and reporting remained unaffected. There was, on the other hand, some support for the contention that those in leadership roles would take a more conservative attitude toward responding to child abuse.

O’Toole et al compared the recognition and reporting rates of teachers in a variety of schools. While teachers at Catholic schools were found to have the highest scores, those at public schools had the lowest. However, the latter were not significantly lower than teachers in non-Catholic religious and private non-religious schools. The authors call for “more research to determine the nature of specific differences in the schools to account for the differences in teachers’ response to abuse” (O’Toole et al, 1999, p 1097).

School size as a variable was investigated alongside numbers of students and numbers of teachers. Although numbers of teachers and numbers of students were unrelated to recognition, they were inversely related to reporting. As one might expect, smaller schools where there were fewer students and lower student loads per teacher, showed the highest rates of reporting, except for rural schools. By contrast, the higher the number of teachers, the higher reporting score—a finding which possibly reflects the greater number of other teachers available as resources and support in a larger school. There were no differences in reporting rates across school levels, that is, between primary and secondary. The low reporting rates in rural schools might well be explained by dilemmas not experienced in urban settings: a concern for loss of anonymity of the notifier, as well as a reluctance to disrupt relationships in small communities.

Overall, O’Toole et al saw their findings as providing “encouragement for all those concerned with the education of teachers regarding child abuse”, given that both objective knowledge of child abuse and their subjective appraisal of case content were related to recognition and reporting, despite the fact that the extent of post-graduate education appears unrelated (1999, p 1096). Although teachers appear to be undeterred by the attendant fears and problems of reporting, the study revealed that they do use discretion about reporting recognizable maltreatment, especially physical and emotional abuse. O’Toole et al postulate this is to be a rational response to the limited resources devoted to investigation and intervention by CPS. CPS on the other hand, have been compelled to raise the threshold for acceptance of cases with the result that there has been a “widening gap between the thresholds used by teachers and CPS, so that CPS do not adequately respond to reports of less serious cases by school staff”. According to O’Toole et al, “this frustrates teachers and adversely affects their recognition and reporting as a result of their poor evaluation of CPS and its responsiveness” (1999, p 1098). Clearly, a solution needs to be found, since for teachers, overlooking recognised abuse runs the risk of leaving endangered students without protection, as well as exposing teachers to sanctions under the law.

O’Toole et al put forward a number of recommendations to deal with this situation. Research on recognition and reporting of child abuse points to the need for greater clarification of official definitions of child maltreatment, as a preliminary step. Next, teachers need to be trained in responding to child abuse which incorporates working alongside community agencies in general (for example, health, welfare and juvenile justice) and CPS in particular. At the same time, as noted by Crenshaw et al, inter-greater feedback to notifiers being recognised as essential. Professional discretion may need to be recognized and implemented. This could be appropriately supported by simultaneously narrowing the grounds for CPS intervention, while widening the net for social welfare services. Such measures would allow teachers to utilise their knowledge of children to support them and their families without the case having to be substantiated as abusive.

As O’Toole at al point out “concentrating societal effort on reporting, while at the same time neglecting intervention makes little sense and is cruel to the children and families affected”. Furthermore, “it is frustrating to professionals and lay persons who want to help children by reporting and the CPS staff who must cope with increasing reports” (O’Toole et al, 1999, p 1098).

Similar patterns manifesting teacher reluctance to notify child maltreatment, were identified by Kenny (2001). This study sought to determine the number of reports made by a sample of 197 teachers, the extent of their knowledge about legislation and reporting of child abuse and, in particular to highlight perceived deterrents to reporting. Other dimensions tapped included demographic variables and pre- and post-service training in reporting abuse. The results were obtained via questionnaire and response to vignettes. Kenny found that 73% of the sample indicated that they had never made a notification regarding child abuse, while
those who had done so had made an average of only one report. For the 11% of teachers who admitted recognizing but failing to report suspected abuse, the following reasons were provided:

- fear of making an inaccurate report;
- feeling that CPS does not generally offer help to maltreated children;
- lack of visible evidence of physical injury accompanying disclosure;
- not wanting to appear foolish;
- belief that reporting brings negative consequences for the child;
- feeling as though it is not my job;
- fear of misinterpreting cultural discipline styles;
- wanting to avoid being involved in legal proceedings (2001, p 87).

Teacher responses to vignettes featuring reportable incidents of sexual abuse, in one case perpetrated by a girl’s father and in the other, by a teacher at her school, yielded low reporting rates: 26% and 11% respectively. This alarming finding (the more so, given the context of the second case), appeared to refute statements by teachers to the effect that they “had never failed to report” (Kenny, 2001, p 88). Most teachers, on the other hand, felt that reporting to administrators would discharge their obligation, a puzzling rationale, given that 40% of the sample expressed a lack of confidence regarding the administration’s inclination to support reporting. Kenny’s observation here is that “it seems that fear of making a false report outweighs the desire to follow legal standards in protecting children” (2001, p 89). Special education teachers reported significantly more often than their colleagues in mainstream settings, possibly due to a higher incidence of suspected maltreatment in their pupils. Teachers’ comments on their pre-service training in mandatory reporting were scathing, ranging from “minimal to inadequate coverage.” At the in-service level, matters had barely improved, with the majority rating the provision as ‘minimal’. Of the latter, teachers commented that “child abuse was not covered in courses; the skills were never practised in class and they were not sure of legal requirements” (Kenny, 2001, p 84). Perhaps the clearest indication of teachers’ reluctance to notify emerges in the finding that most teachers felt they should not be mandated to report child abuse: some 46% were in strong agreement with this statement. In the face of this, it is not surprising that only 3% were aware of their school’s procedures for reporting. Kenny’s conclusions provide a number of recommendations about the nature of preparation for mandatory reporting of child maltreatment. She calls for “enhanced training in child abuse reporting laws and procedures” such that teachers “understand their duty and legal obligation to report” as well as “proper reporting protocol” (2001, p 90). Moreover, such training needs to allow for “experiential exercises and hypothetical situations to help teachers develop the skills necessary to report such abuse and attend to their concerns regarding their fears of making a false report” (2001, p 90). Kenny concludes with an exhortation to administrators to provide thorough in-service training for staff as well as providing support and encouragement throughout the reporting process (2001, p 90).

Drawing these threads together, a picture emerges of a divided profession in which some teachers are highly committed and sufficiently confident to commit themselves to child protection responsibilities, while many feel ill prepared and distrustful of the child protection system, such that their response to indicators of child abuse puts children at risk of further victimisation. The research studies reviewed above (eg Crenshaw et al 1995; Kenny, 1999) confirm the widespread practice of under-reporting, although this is mitigated to a degree, by a tendency to shift responsibility to administrators for decision-making on notifications via CPS. However, it is also clear that if U.S. teachers have been poorly served in the provision of training to equip them to perform the statutory notifier role, they experience few incentives toward greater participation in child protection, given the poor communication, relationships and lack of resources affecting CPS practice. Such issues constitute a worthy, but complex challenge in the design and provision of effective training. Finally, while a number of commentators have made recommendations on the training implications of their findings, their reliance on survey methods and participant response to vignettes leaves some questions unanswered. For example, “What was it in the teacher’s actual experience of reporting which deterred them from doing so in the future?”?, or “What was the nature of their original training for mandatory reporting?”, and What kinds of teaching and learning experiences were involved?” It appears that there is space for qualitative studies to complement the chiefly, quantitative work discussed here, such that more detail and understanding of these processes becomes available.
Research on Mandatory Reporting of Suspected Child Abuse in the United Kingdom.

In contrast to the situation in the U.S.A and Australia, compulsory notification legislation had been successfully resisted in the U.K. until relatively recently. However, an amendment to legislation passed in July 2002, places a legal duty on schools and local education authorities to make arrangements, which will safeguard and promote the welfare of children (Gilligan, 2002). The amendment followed the failure of teachers to notify a case in which a six year old attended school “covered in bruises and weighing just two stone” before being killed by her stepmother. However “no action could be taken against them because, while teachers had a duty to report suspected abuse, the school child protection guidelines were not legally enforceable” (Gilligan, 2002 p 6).

Hence the research literature has concentrated on issues other than mandatory reporting per se, with some authors, for example, Maher, (1987) and David (1993), not only presenting helpful advice to teachers in their reactive roles, that is, child abuse identification and reporting, but extending beyond this to proactive (prevention oriented) contributions including collaboration with other child protection professionals. However, as Webb and Vulliamy suggest, it seems fair to conclude that “in the literature both on child protection and on teachers’ work, the role of teachers in child protection appears understated and unacknowledged” (2001, p 60).

The model in force in U.K schools is based upon the role of a child protection co-ordinator. In England and Wales, all schools are required to have a ‘designated’ teacher, usually the head teacher in primary schools, who communicates with the local social services department (i.e. CPS)(Winchester, 2002, p 28). Head teachers in schools or principals of colleges are responsible for child protection and they make the decision whether to report child abuse. Designated teachers are expected to ensure that all employees are aware of the procedures and signs of abuse.

One aspect of child protection work which many teachers find particularly difficult is dealing with sexual abuse (David, 1993). Skinner (2001) investigated how teachers coped with notifying sexual abuse. She was particularly interested to document how it affected them in the aftermath of the notification (p 329). Of her 14 interview participants she observes: “their stories illuminate the complexities of dealing with sexually abused children and sometimes demonstrate the discrepancies between whatever training or preparation teachers are given and the reality of the experiences they face” (Skinner, 1999, p 329).

She notes that, although training in child protection is now supposed to be ‘a regular occurrence, the thrust of training on such issues tends to be procedural rather than personal’, an observation, which resonates strongly with U.S experience, discussed above (Skinner, 1999, p 330). Furthermore, “there are limits to interagency cooperation, for, and a paucity of resources in, dealing with impacts beyond the procedural: …alternative sources of support for those dealing with an abused child are limited” (1999, p 330). Skinner found that her respondents, some of whom reported still having a need to process their experience, even after several years had passed, were very eager to participate (1999, p 332). They outlined the varying levels of training and support which had been available. This ranged from having been non-existent to adequate (in the case of just one participant).”

The timing of such courses was also an issue. Three of the sample “ had undertaken training courses as a result of having dealt with abuse survivors, one had no specific training and others mentioned training which had either taken place over ten years earlier or whilst undertaking teacher training” (1999, p332). Although most teachers had notified more than one case of sexual abuse, their reactions varied, with some feeling ‘no better able to cope’ despite the passage of time. It was rare for the respondents, even those acting as ‘nominated’ child protection representatives to have had collegial or organizational support in the aftermath of notifications: in only one case had the potential effects on them of dealing with abuse been discussed.

Factors internal to schools appeared to encourage subjective elements in decision-making about notifications. Skinner, notes for example:

**Identification of abuse was a thorny issue and seemed to be linked to factors such as size of the school involved and degree of support for a teacher’s suspicions. There was some indication that certain children were more likely to be believed than others, and that certain cases provoked more surprise than others. Indeed in some schools expectations of incidence**
could colour the picture and assumptions about the likelihood of abuse within the school population could operate for and against its identification (1999 p 332).

A teacher’s own perception of organizational roles could affect their expectations about having to deal with this issue. For example, teachers who perceived themselves as subject specialists expressed surprise at survivors of sexual abuse consulting them. In another case, a young teacher was challenged and made to feel uncomfortable because a child had chosen to confide in her. Colleagues of ‘nominated’ teachers in some schools complained about having to attend ‘training in child protection’ because ‘it was not applicable in a school like theirs’—in spite of there having been eight cases in two years. According to Skinner, many respondents were uncertain about how or when to act on information or suspicion: the ease or difficulty of so doing was a function of the culture of the school. Teachers refrained from taking action, for instance, when other colleagues failed to validate their suspicions, when organizational obstacles presented, or when damaging precipitate action on the part of the administration (or CPS) was feared. Likewise, the degree of support or consultation afforded the person concerned may affect future activities in dealing with disclosures of sexual abuse. “A child who has disclosed to a teacher and not been believed, or a teacher who has tried to express a child’s concerns to an unsympathetic colleague may be unwilling to take the same risk on a subsequent occasion” (Skinner, 1999, p 337). This is clearly an unsatisfactory situation, not least because the chances of a child gaining needed assistance are thus rendered problematic.

In spite of obvious commitment to their roles, teachers found that notification and support of child sexual abuse survivors was not without its costs. Respondents emphasised experiencing increased stress as a component to this work in combination with a range of disturbing effects, such as: nightmares, insomnia, effects on family and intimate relationships, unpleasant memories, anxiety, anguish over decision-making, feelings of powerlessness, professional conflict, sense of helplessness, isolation, uncertainty about where to seek assistance, dissatisfaction and role conflict (Skinner, 1999 p 333). Given the resemblance of these symptoms to post-traumatic stress disorder, it is not difficult to see why Skinner’s sample considered support for those teachers dealing with survivors of sexual abuse, to be essential. Skinner contends that, “whilst it is impossible to prepare teachers for every issue they are likely to face in a teaching career, the provision of a combination of training opportunities and effective support networks both within and beyond the school context can provide a greater level of confidence in one’s ability to cope” (1999 p 337).

A further problem, lack of interagency openness (as discussed in U.S.A), was perceived as devaluing the current or potential efforts of teachers, thus constituting a major disincentive to participation. In this light, training has much to contribute in not only assisting child protection co-ordinators, but all teachers, to understand and support colleagues in dealing with survivors of sexual abuse. However, Skinner’s research has demonstrated in particular that knowledge of notification procedures represents a mere fragment of that required to participate confidently; the level of organizational support (including school leadership), supportive structures and availability of, and participation in child protection training for all school staff being essential.

Webb and Vulliamy (2001) explored whether the primary teacher’s role in child protection should be extended in the light of the ‘culture of caring’ (Nias, 1999) which characterises primary school life. Their project examined the responsibilities of child protection co-ordinators, their contact with other agencies and the impact of involvement in child protection for themselves and home-school relationships.

Central funding for training in child protection was available to schools in the U.K in 1995-1996, with most of the child protection co-ordinators in this sample having received either half a day or a day’s training at the local level. The content consisted of basic information on the referral (notification) system, case conferences, the child protection register (statutory case list), identifying signs and symptoms of child abuse and keeping records. In response to a questionnaire circulated to 300 schools, 40% of teachers felt that they needed more training in: recognition of signs of types of abuse children have suffered; what to do and say if a child discloses; the role of Social Services and other agencies and personal safety programs (2001, p 64). Within the sample schools it was noted that dissemination of such information came under pressure as it tended to be part of staff meetings dealing with LEA child protection requirements and the development of school policy. But to begin to suggest that this suffices as training, would be a gross exaggeration, since “a one-hour slot at the end of the school day can do no more
than start to raise awareness and give some basic information” (Blyth and Cooper, 1999, p 117 in Webb and Vulliamy 2001). Consequently gaps in knowledge surfaced and few teachers would have had opportunity to reflect meaningfully on information given. One respondent in the study expressed her concern at handling disclosures thus:

Teachers need training not in how to get information out of people but what to do with the information if a child says something, not to overreact. I remember the first time I dealt with it, the initial horror that somebody could do that and I thought, ‘no you can’t show the child that you are upset and worked up about this, you have got to be calm’, but I just wanted to go out and hit somebody. So it’s more training on how to deal with it and knowing that we have got somewhere to go and let off steam because it is upsetting (Webb and Vulliamy, 2001 p 64).

These comments link with those in Skinner’s discussion above, making the argument for support structures due to the impact of child abuse on teachers. However, they also underscore the necessity for teachers’ personal needs to be recognized in any training design. The writer concurs with the position of Braun and Schonveld, 1994 (in Webb and Vulliamy, 2001) who consider that it is insufficient to simply provide information on recognition of maltreatment and the procedures which must be followed. These authors emphasise the need for “training of sufficient depth to provide staff with the opportunity to explore their own feelings, attitudes and values about abuse” and so enable them to recognize how these could inhibit them from taking action, to develop skills to respond to a child who is attempting to disclose abuse and to relate to parents after a referral and to develop knowledge about community agencies and resources to support children (p 64).

Other issues of concern were the lack of awareness of potential institutional abuse and preventive measures to ensure pupil safety in the school environment (p 67), the problematic nature of interagency co-operation, fed by the lack of feedback on notifications and participation in case conferences where teacher concerns for children were left unaddressed (Webb and Vulliamy, 2001).

Interagency collaboration was also a prominent theme in findings from a study in which provision for child protection training in pre-service teacher education was examined and materials relating to the teacher’s role were trialed. Baginsky (2003) found that although an accreditation standard requiring child protection competence had been imposed, “a few courses offered a maximum of three hours, but sometimes it was as little as one hour” (p 119). Perhaps one would not be surprised to learn that participants who had initially expressed high levels of confidence in their ability to discharge these duties returned from school experience placements in a state of confusion. “Many reported hearing colleagues question the point of making a referral to social services when so often they were not aware that anything was then done” (Baginsky, 2003, p 120). Baginsky concluded that materials should be rewritten to focus on the role of teachers within a multi-agency approach to child protection. In addition, the lack of timetable space in pre-service courses led her to caution against relying on the limited input at this level. On the other hand, relying on the provision of in-service level courses to plug the gap, proved to be unwise, as her follow-up study with new graduates revealed: only 17% of newly qualified teachers had attended a course run by their LEAs and only 20% had been able to access any such training via schools, presumably due to the difficulty of covering their absence and replacement costs (2003, p 126). Consequently, Baginsky argues, training should be provided on a continuum from pre-service to in-service levels and with regular opportunities for updating. Moreover, participation would need to be guaranteed by requiring teachers to have undertaken child protection training as a condition for their continuing in employment (Baginsky, 2003, p 127).

In the research reviewed in this section, it was apparent that although the legislative requirements, policies and structures available for school-based child protection differed from those operating in the U.S.A., a number of commonalities exist. These relate primarily to the nature and scheduling of training, inter-agency cooperation and the need for support structures for those involved in notification work. Finally, it needs to be pointed out that the scale of training alluded to above—a three hour maximum at pre-service and a half day at in-service—could hardly be presumed adequate in the light of the evidence previously discussed.
Research on Mandatory Reporting of Suspected Child Abuse in Australia.

In Australia, some form of mandatory reporting legislation for a range of professionals, (usually embracing teachers, and or other school staff) has been introduced across five states, (the exception being Western Australia). South Australia led the way in 1969, with teachers mandated in 1976 (Briggs and Hawkins, 1997 p 10). The circumstances leading to Victoria’s adoption of this policy are set out in the introduction. Research, while not extensive, has cast doubt on the efficacy of this course of action for reasons not dissimilar to the limitations inherent to U.S. and U.K. experience.

Several research studies have explored the situation in South Australia where teachers are required to have completed a one-day workshop in child protection as a condition of employment. McCallum (2001a) surveyed all schools to establish views about mandatory notification and school reporting practices. Factors inhibiting notification were identified as:

1. Lack of supportive school structures
2. Lack of experience in teaching and child protection matters
3. Personal issues in relation to child abuse and individual cases (eg fear of retaliation from parents)
4. Increased workload.

Consistent with studies reviewed previously (O’Toole et al, 1999), McCallum found that personal isolation within schools posed difficulties for notifiers. Hence, the need for effective policy, procedures, and sources of collegial and personal support is required at the school level. Secondly, for novice educators or those in casual and transient roles, the demands of the transition to classroom life left little time for close observation of individual changes in behaviour. In the same vein, the lack of prior experience in child protection issues or inconsistent experience with CPS procedures affected busy administrators and more experienced teachers’ knowledge and familiarity with current protocols. Thirdly, as was evident in the discussion above (eg Skinner, 1999; Webb and Vulliamy 2001), personal factors influence the reporting decision and its aftermath, eg fear of parental retaliation, emotional responses to the abuse itself, guilt about acting on suspicion (rather than proof), or for not acting more promptly and about disruptions to family and child circumstances. McCallum also pointed to feelings of “doubt and negative self-efficacy” accompanying the process. (2001a, p 4). This situation is not helped by increasingly complex demands evident in the changing nature of teachers’ work, whether in relation to curriculum, administrative or community liaison roles. As a result professional development (eg in child protection) is seen as an added burden: even less time is available for necessary collegial sharing and learning. Under such conditions, McCallum concludes, ‘current models of training are ineffective in preparing educators to report suspicions of child abuse and neglect’. Overcoming the inhibiting factors in non-reporting thus requires a preparation which takes into account the local contexts of schools, teacher needs and concerns, including post-notification consequences for the victim and family, and conditions of educator learning.

An empirical assessment of the success of the current Mandated Notification Training Program, available since 1989 in South Australia, was undertaken in two studies by Hawkins and McCallum (2001a and 2001b). In the first investigation of the one day program, training was found to increase participants’ confidence in their ability to recognize the indicators of abuse, their awareness of reporting responsibilities, their knowledge of what constitutes reasonable grounds for reporting and how to respond appropriately to a child’s disclosure of abuse. However, in spite of these quantitative gains in knowledge and skill, it is interesting to examine those areas where teacher attitudes proved to be resistant to change. For example, although participants are advised that they are not required by law to investigate or prove that abuse has occurred, 20% of recently trained teachers believed they should investigate further if unsure of their suspicion. Similarly, despite being instructed to respond to a child’s disclosure by listening supportively, allowing the child to talk without pushing for investigative details, 20% of the recently trained teachers indicated they would persuade the child to give more details. In the words of one respondent, “I believe it is sometimes better to do some investigation first or checking up before notifying the authorities” (Hawkins and McCallum (2001a p1618). Hawkins and McCallum suggest that for some teachers, “there is clearly a mismatch between the level of evidence required by law for reporting to occur and the level teachers expect to satisfy their own personal need for confidence in initiating the serious step of a child abuse report” (2001, p 1618).
Furthermore, this mismatch remains after training has been undertaken and may contribute to the significant occurrence of non-reporters or discretionary reporters evident in the literature (Hawkins and McCallum, 2001, p 1619). Similarly, disquiet about CPS procedures may have contributed to discretionary reporting by 15% of recently trained teachers, whose justifications included: “the child was happier within the situation than she would have been away from it—contact with her siblings was very important to her and the neglect was not severe enough to put her at serious risk”. Another stated, “I didn’t think anything would be done”. In the same vein, although teachers are instructed to report suspicions directly to CPS, more than half of the recently trained group indicated they would consult other colleagues presumably to decrease their feelings of uncertainty about the event and to engender emotional support for their decision. One teacher explained: “I feel that I would discuss the situation briefly with a trusted colleague, even though this is not recommended” because, “I don’t know if I trust wholly my own intuition” (Hawkins and McCallum, 2001, p 1619). These reservations notwithstanding, the training program was shown to have brought about greater acceptance of the incidence and seriousness of child abuse, together with an enhanced commitment to children’s rights and of their own personal responsibility in child abuse prevention Hawkins and McCallum, (2001, p 1620).

In a second study, Hawkins and McCallum examined the impact of Mandated Notification training (as above), on the tendency of individuals to report hypothetical cases of abuse and neglect, using the Crenshaw et al methodology involving response to maltreatment vignettes. The findings were largely consistent with those of Crenshaw et al. Where abuse was unambiguously present, respondents were willing to proceed with notification—training in this context, had no impact on willingness to report. However, where the evidence of abuse was more ambiguous, willingness to notify was reduced—hence training increased the likelihood of reporting. Supporters of mandatory reporting were, unsurprisingly, more willing to make notifications. Thus appropriate training is likely to influence reporting in those jurisdictions where mandatory reporting is already in force. On the other hand, where notification remains voluntary, only the more blatant examples of abuse are likely to be reported (Hawkins and McCallum, 2001, b, p313). An interesting artefact of the use of the Crenshaw et al vignettes, was, as Crenshaw and colleagues also reported, the failure of known subjective influences, eg fear of parental retaliation or lack of faith in CPS response, to be reflected in reporting decisions. As alluded to previously, the vignette presentation approach fails to adequately capture the real-life dynamics of suspected child abuse and neglect. As Hawkins and McCallum observe, “the methodology fails to tap into the complexities of the reporting decision, and provides a somewhat simplistic portrayal of the decisional processes that may take place in real life (2001, b, p312).

McCallum (2001 b) also conducted a less formal evaluation of the Mandatory Notification Training program, with pre-service teachers who were then in their fourth year, (two years after having undertaken the training in their second year). Their knowledge of the policies and procedures, abuse indicators and potential collaboration with CPS revealed a good deal of confusion and low confidence levels. McCallum concluded that, despite pre-service teachers’ high commitment to child protection issues, the nature, scope and scheduling of such programs ought be reviewed. According to McCallum, these findings constitute “clear evidence that pre-service teachers require additional training” (that is, more than one day’s duration) “and that ‘one-off’ programs are not sufficient to skill beginning teachers to fulfil the legal mandate” (2001 b, p 17).

Watts (1998) conducted an investigation into factors affecting Queensland pre-service teachers’ decision-making about child maltreatment. Despite having participated in training courses, their decisions were found to be, “more likely to be influenced by some personal experience—such as previous relationship with a person in a similar position, a child of a similar age, or identifying with one of the people involved in a case, such as the mother, child or father—than by the definitions, evidence and procedures they are aware of...beliefs [such as] ‘a mother wouldn’t do that,’ despite the fact that abuse is also perpetrated by women.”

Taylor and Lloyd (2001) call for programs which focus on attitudes and belief systems, in the wake of a report concerning the reluctance of adolescents and children in a Victorian rural area to disclose sexual abuse for fear of being disbelieved or attracting stigma. The non-offending parents were also fearful of being disbelieved by professionals and of being retaliated against by the offending parent’s supporters. This prevented them from accessing needed community services (p 3). Because traditional notions of
Community professionals require significant support in their deliberations about abuse, the majority of respondents (75%), finding it difficult or complex to determine when child abuse occurred and when to make a report to DHS. For 88% of respondents their decision about proceeding with a notification was influenced by their view of the anticipated outcomes for the child. More than half of the respondents (56%) believed the outcome would not be positive for the child or for the child’s family (63%). Reporting behaviour was influenced by the source of information about the abusive event with some informants being viewed as less credible. However, the most important influences on the decision to report “were the perpetrator’s access to the child, the functioning of the primary caregiver, the nature of parent/child interaction and the type and severity of abuse and neglect” (Goddard et al, 2001, p 89). The authors note that while community professionals take seriously their responsibility to protect children from maltreatment, they require support to make decisions about abuse. Goddard et al point out that “information about what they should consider to be abuse is imperative” and they suggest, “knowledge about the way the child protection system works will also assist in raising their confidence about identifying and reporting cases of child abuse” (2001, p 89).

Goddard et al’s results indicate that considerable confusion exists amongst professionals as to whether or not they are mandated to report child abuse, 29% of those surveyed being either incorrect or uncertain about their obligations under Victorian law. According to Goddard et al, “this represents a major impediment to the effective protection of children from abuse and neglect” (2001, p 3). In other key findings the authors observed:

In direct contradiction to the objectives of the Victorian mandatory reporting legislation, making a report of child abuse to Department of Human Services [DHS], appears to remain a discretionary decision for many professionals.
There is insufficient feedback from DHS to notifiers about the outcome of investigations, with 64% of reporters receiving no feedback on the outcome of the investigation. Respondents identified 11 children (17%) where they knew that abuse had occurred subsequent to reports being received by DHS.

Some 25% of respondents believe that there are major disparities between the concerns and expectations of professionals and the subsequent actions taken by DHS. (Goddard et al, 2001, p 3).

Goddard et al contend that “the outcomes of this study suggest that the current system of reporting and investigating child abuse remains obstructed by layers of uncertainty and confusion”. Further, they argue, “children’s safety is jeopardised by a ‘revolving door’ policy that requires re-referral of children in order to gain service” (Goddard et al , 2001, p3). Among the recommendations arising from the report is the clarification of the wording of legislation referring to the formulation of a ‘belief’ as opposed to forming a ‘suspicion’ such that any ambiguity is removed. It is also suggested that an investigation to determine reasons for the tendency toward underreporting be held. Goddard et al also call for a major education campaign that ensures that all community professionals understand what constitutes child abuse, are aware of their notification obligations and fully understand the procedures to follow in making a report to DHS (2001, p 4).

More recently, Blaskett and Taylor (2003) conducted a survey and interview based study with health and welfare professionals from various occupational groupings including general practitioners, nurses, teachers, psychiatrists and psychologists, childcare workers and social workers. Their aim was to determine to what extent professionals comply with legislative requirements and the extent to which they influence one another in their notification behaviours. Their findings resonated with a number of those reported above. The study’s conclusions indicate that professionals often influence one another when forming a belief or reporting that a child is subject to abuse. There are variations in reporting behaviours across the professional groups with 10% of the sample admitting to non-reporting. At the same time there were generally positive attitudes towards mandatory reporting per se. However, most had some fear of recriminations resulting from notifications. There were generally low levels of confidence in the child protection system as a whole. An insufficiency of training and lack of awareness of reporting responsibilities was common to the group, although teachers had one of the highest rates of training in the sample. (On the other hand, teacher interviewees reflected an alarming trend to discretionary reporting: the greater the frequency of their contact with CPS, the less inclined were they to utilise this avenue in future.) However, the access to, nature and quality of such training appears problematic, with more than 40% of survey respondents requesting further opportunities. One teacher commented:

I’m a little sorry for those people who have been teaching in the short time since the first lot of training came out to the second-there is a big gap of people that really didn’t know the legislation applied to them other than what their principal might have told them and that would have been the principal’s interpretation of it anyway, so I think the training should be offered much more regularly than every nine years (Blaskett and Taylor, 2003, p 155).

Blaskett and Taylor (2003) provide a detailed analysis of these findings with comments specific to occupational groups. Their observations of the implications of the common data, however provide little cause for optimism. They note, for example, that

Despite a high level of concern to protect children from abuse, for a variety of reasons including lack of confidence in the child protection system, concern to protect confidentiality, fear of reprisal and concern at loss of trusted clients, professionals with the care of children express reservations about reporting abuse. Several of those who are most experienced in dealing with cases of child abuse and with Child Protection Services are those who are most reluctant to invoke assistance from child protection authorities (p 9).

In summary, Australian research on mandatory reporting has produced results which resonate with findings of those conducted in the U.S.A and the U.K. A pattern of discretionary reporting is evident, often with subjective impressions influencing whether notifications are made. While training, usually of short duration, has occasionally been found to be effective, some attitudes are extremely resistant to change.
Teachers still lack confidence in their decision-making and seek reassurance from colleagues, in spite of admonitions to report directly to CPS. Similarly, they seem unable to be dissuaded from collecting ‘evidence’ from children. Concern about family disruption and/or retaliation by parents weighs heavily upon them in deciding whether to proceed with notifications, especially in rural communities. Overall, the implications for training are clear. ‘One-off’ sessions of limited duration are ineffective, as are programs, which focus on procedural aspects rather than personal perspectives on child maltreatment. An extended time frame is preferable; one, which allows for revisitation of difficult topics and time to reflect on personal values, attitudes and beliefs. A multi-agency approach needs to be taken, given the realities of present circumstances and the desire of some teachers to find community based solutions. At the systems level, consistency of response, (including feedback) from CPS is needed to restore confidence in the notification process. This will strengthen the interagency collaboration essential to securing children’s safety.

**Conclusion**

Research from three countries, (U.S.A, U.K., and Australia) on mandatory reporting of child abuse has been reviewed. A number of commonalities in teachers’ responses to child protection obligations have been identified. In particular, there was evidence of discretion or ‘underreporting’ of child maltreatment (Abrahams, Casey and Daro, 1992; Crenshaw, Crenshaw and Lichtenberg, 1995; Kenny, 2001; Webb and Vulliamy, 2001; Goddard, Saunders, Stanley and Tucci, 2001, Blaskett and Taylor, 2003). An exploration of the factors involved in decision-making about suspected child abuse reveals the process to be heavily influenced by subjective appraisals about the situation or people involved. There is concern for the teacher’s own safety, with fear of parental retaliation, an oft stated rationale for failing to report. In addition, many teachers have developed a distrust of the child protection system’s capacity to secure an improved situation for child victims. This is not ameliorated by a failure by CPS to liaise with notifiers in the post notification phase.

**Directions for Training**

The program implications for training teachers to respond constructively to Mandatory Reporting legislation which have emerged from this overview embrace dimensions such as timing, duration, pedagogy and content. An opportunity for increasing the breadth of child protection roles is evident as teachers move from the narrowly reactive positions (that is, as notifiers) to proactive opportunities such as teaching personal safety, organizing parenting programs on the school site or interacting with community agencies to broker family support services. They are as follows:

**Timing:** Teachers require a comprehensive program of education about child maltreatment. Such a program needs to be commenced during their pre-service training and continue throughout their career.

**Duration:** Since ‘one-off’ programs and those consisting of a few hours, or even one full day, have been shown to be ineffective, a program extending over one semester in pre-service teacher education, with an equivalent number of hours at in-service level--in cases where the pre-service component has not been undertaken--is recommended. This needs to be supplemented by opportunities for updating periodically (for example, annually) during employment.

**Pedagogy:** Programs need to be experiential in nature, focussing on existing attitudes and beliefs with a view to guiding participants to a child centred approach, such that subjective judgements are eventually replaced by objective appraisals and action to safeguard the child. Case studies and role-plays of appropriate responses to disclosure and notification should be core components.

**Content:** The school, as the first line of defence in child abuse prevention and response, needs to be emphasised. The dynamics of various forms child abuse including institutional abuse should be highlighted, as well as the customary areas of child maltreatment identification, appropriate response and notification. The effects on children of victimisation, including altered academic performance, and short and long-term disturbances to social/emotional adjustment should be highlighted and support strategies included. Parental responses to allegations and strategies for handling them should be examined. An overview of the child protection system should be provided. Representatives of CPS should be invited to discuss local procedures and to provide possible models for interagency collaboration, including monitoring, case conference participation and liaison. Local community agencies and resources should be
identified and relationships fostered toward joint work, whether in child protection or other areas of school community partnership. Child abuse prevention programs, for example, personal safety (including on-line safety), should be introduced and teachers invited to consider their roles in a proactive approach. School policy on child safety needs to be examined and developed further. The benefits of providing resources to parents, for example via parenting programs and linkages to community agencies will be emphasised.

**School structures:** In addition to providing opportunities for collaboration on policy/procedures development, structures for providing support to those directly involved in notification need to be developed. School leaders, especially principals should be closely involved. An awareness of legislative requirements needs to be fostered at the same time as recognising that if an alternative course of action is preferred and a discretionary response (that is, non notification) is made, the child’s welfare must be preserved and local options for safety and access to services must be provided. Of course, it needs to be acknowledged that effective training for child protection duties is also contingent upon teachers’ capacity to have confidence in the functioning of the child protection system. The difficulties noted by Goddard et al (2001) and Blaskett and Taylor (2003) should not be underestimated. It is hoped that a research informed program of child protection education for teachers will thus contribute to our community’s capacity to better safeguard children.
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