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Child Abuse Reporting by Mandated Reporters in Schools

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MS, University of Phoenix, 2009

BS, University of Houston, 2007

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Child maltreatment has proven to be a mainstream issue in the United States, with millions of children being referred to state welfare systems for investigation or alternative response intervention. Research has identified mandated reporters as being responsible for reporting the majority of these cases. Amongst those identified as mandated reporters, education personnel refer the greatest number of children for suspicion of child abuse or neglect, partly because of their ongoing contact daily; however, many of the cases they report are unsubstantiated. Past research findings have concluded that mandated reporters in schools lacked proper child abuse training. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of training for child abuse reporting with mandated reporters in schools in relation to consistency in reporting of child abuse. Prosocial behavior theory underpinned the research. A semistructured interview was used for data collected from a sample of 10 school professionals. Analysis used a modified van Kaam method, with active processes and member checking for confirming data trustworthiness. Key findings of this study included that school professionals' felt the need for ongoing training throughout the school year, rather than an annual update. Desired training would include more information regarding the process of identifying reportable child abuse, along with safely managing relationships between parent and school during the process. Results of this research may provide information for contributing to the training process and content made available to increase consistent reporting by these mandated school reporters leading to positive social change.

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Dedication

I dedicate my study to God, who guided my path through this journey. The road was not easy, but He saw me through and for that I give Him all the praise. I would also like to dedicate my study to my late grandmother Parrie Lee DeHart.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my mother Kathleen, nephew Kleighton, family, and friends for their continued support. I would also like to give special thanks to Dr. Benita Stiles-Smith and Dr. Jill Barton at Walden University for their ongoing guidance through this challenging process.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In this study, I investigated the child abuse criteria used by mandated reporters to establish consistency in reporting. Based on statistics gathered through the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, in Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2015, an estimated 3.4 million children in the United States were referred to Child Protective Services for either an investigation or alternative response, with approximately 2.3 million children receiving prevention services (United States Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2015). In FFY 2015, roughly 683,000 children were validated as victims of child maltreatment, which is a 3.8% increase from FFY 2011 with an estimated 658,000 children (USDHHS, 2015). Of these reported cases, 75.3% of these children had been neglected, 17.2% physically abused, and the remaining 8.4% sexually abused (National Children's Alliance, 2014).

According to the USDHHS (2015), professionals whose job requires them to be in direct contact with the possibly victimized child reported about three-fifths (63.4%) of these child maltreatment cases. Within this group of professionals, education personnel reported the highest number of cases (18.4%; USDHHS, 2015). Presently, education personnel include teachers, counselors, and administrators.

In this research, I evaluated the reporting criteria used by mandated reporters in schools when reporting child abuse. I explored with participants what training is being used by mandated reporters in schools to gather a better understanding of how this informs their awareness when identifying, reporting, and preventing child abuse. The results of this study may afford new evidence on the relationship between reporting

criteria of child abuse, training offered in schools for mandated reporters, and consistent reporting by mandated school reporters.

The following sections of this chapter include a synopsis on training and education that mandated reporters receive about reporting child abuse, followed by the problem statement. Next, the purpose of the study is described. In the following section, I present the research questions that guided the study. Subsequent sections include a discussion of the prosocial behavior (PB) theory as the theoretical framework, the nature of the study, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study. Finally, I offer a summary to conclude the chapter.

Background of the Study

In this study, I aimed to explore the perceptions of training for child abuse reporting with mandated reporters in schools to better understand consistent reporting practices. Specific training and education on child abuse could assist mandated reporters when referring families to the child welfare system. Flaherty et al. (2004) suggested educating mandated reporters on the definition of reasonable suspicion and that a lack of such definition may lead to inconsistent reporting. In addition, Hogelin (2013) suggested that limited knowledge of state and federal statutes and codes related to child abuse might result in underreporting of apparent abuse by educational personnel. Moreover, Hawkins and McCallum (2001) concluded that mandated reporters are more likely to report situations of obvious abuse as opposed to those that are more ambiguous.

In the United States, educators, along with other professionals (e.g., legal, medical, and social service personnel), are mandated to report cases of maltreatment in

children. Kessner and Robinson (2002) concluded that when compared to other mandated reporters, educators are responsible for a greater number of cases reported to child services but have the lowest number of substantiated cases. They explained the reason for this conclusion is because education personnel have poor training in child maltreatment (Kessner & Robinson, 2002). Krase (2013) concluded that educational personnel need more training in identifying child maltreatment indicators to enhance their ability to effectively report cases where families may benefit from child service intervention. Furthermore, Hogelin (2013) found that educational personnel were more confident in reporting, and cases were substantiated at a higher degree when they received continuous updated training about identifying indicators of abuse and the laws that protect children from abuse. Dombrowski and Gischlar (2006) encouraged school districts to establish a policy related to identifying and reporting child maltreatment to increase confidence levels in professionals when determining whether a family should be referred to the child welfare system. Considering the findings by Kessner and Robinson, Krase, and Hogelin, exploration of mandated school reporters' perspectives seems a reasonable next step in service to understand more of what might be useful to them for greater consistency and efficacy in reporting child abuse.

Providing ongoing training with appropriate updates for educators may bring about greater uniformity and efficacy in reporting (Sinanan, 2011). Sinanan (2011) argued that further research is necessary to understand and establish reporting criteria based on specific indicators of abuse for consistent reporting. The results of this study can contribute to narrowing the gap in literature by identifying and implementing what

support is perceived as needed by mandated reporters for appropriate and effective reporting child abuse. A detailed review of relevant research underpinning the premise is presented in Chapter 2.

Problem Statement

Children spend majority of their day and week at school. During the hours of instruction, school professionals have consistent and ongoing interaction with students. This daily continuum of contact with students often gives educational personnel direct exposure to abuse symptoms; therefore, it is imperative school professionals remain alert to these indicators. Although school professionals have a significant amount of contact with students, they continue to report the largest number of unsubstantiated abuse cases to the appropriate authorities (Kessner & Robinson, 2002). Some researchers have indicated that school mandated reporters' failure to report child abuse is due to the lack of a good training content base (Hawkins & McCallum, 2001). Qualitative data from school mandated reporters might determine their issue of ineffective reporting being due to lack of training in specific reporting criteria, but there is limited research on this issue.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of training for child abuse reporting with mandated reporters in schools in relation to consistency in reporting of child abuse. Crowell and Levi (2011), Hogelin (2013), Krase (2013), and Sinanan (2011) argued that further research is necessary to understand the importance of establishing a criterion for consistent child abuse reporting

by school mandated reporters. In this study, I explored mandated reporters' perceptions of child abuse training in relation to their reporting practices.

Research Questions

The following six research questions were developed to guide this study:

Research Question (RQ)1: What criteria do mandated reporters believe are valid, and which of these do they use when reporting a suspected case of child abuse?

RQ2: What situations of child abuse do mandated reporters see as ambiguous or difficult-to-categorize, and what criteria do they use to decide whether to file a report?

RQ3: How does professional training of mandated reporters influence or inform them about when to report suspected abuse?

RQ4: What do mandated reporters think is lacking in formal training that should be added to assist them in making more accurate decisions to report child abuse?

RQ5: What do mandated reporters think is lacking in school district policy that should be added to assist them in making more accurate decisions to report child abuse?

RQ6: How does prosocial behavior influence mandated reporters' decision to report suspected abuse?

Theoretical Framework

In this study, the PB theory acted as the theoretical framework. In PB theory, the voluntary behavior of an individual is intended to benefit other people or society as a whole (Winterich et al., 2013). This behavior is often driven by feelings of compassion and concern regarding the welfare and civil rights of others. Because mandated reporters are professionally punished for not reporting, they are challenged to choose between two

dilemmas. Reporting suspicions of child abuse could possibly require the reporter to be intertwined in an abuse investigation or in court hearings or even result in retaliation from the family. On the contrary, failing to report could result in legal ramifications for the mandated reporter, with a fine, suspension/termination of professional licensure, and/or incarceration; however, many mandated reporters doubt prosecution would occur against them (Kalichman, 1999). Despite personal discomfort relative to the two dilemmas in reporting, rather than the legal imperative angle, a mandated reporter exercises PB and reports a case of child abuse to benefit the greater good. Researchers have indicated that the act of PB promotes positive outcomes that are both beneficial to children and society (Carleton, 2006). Mandated reporters in schools use of PB benefits children by motivating the reporters to identify signs of abuse and report their concerns when other reasons to do so may not be understood or strong enough to result in action. PB allows a researcher to explore the driving forces within school professionals when determining to report child abuse.

Adequate training can support school professionals in their application of PB to understand how their decision benefits the affected child and the community. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of training for child abuse reporting with mandated reporters in schools. The context of PB, especially for understanding the influence of training and reporting criteria on consistent reporting, made it an appropriate theoretical base for this research. PB theory relates to the motivators that may be most relevant to school professionals' reporting behaviors. In the absence of clear, objective, and influential information, this may result in nonreporting or incomplete reporting,

whereas in the presence of such information, PB may support appropriately completed reporting.

Nature of the Study

The nature of the study was qualitative with a sample of school professionals (e.g., teachers, counselors, school psychologists, social workers, diagnosticians, and principals). The phenomenological qualitative research design allowed me to scrutinize explanations of school professionals' perceptions and what they described as the process and practice of reporting child abuse. Identifying that there is a need to understand a phenomenon is the beginning of a phenomenological approach by means of exploring the lived experience to unveil its true meaning (Eglander, 2012). Understanding this concept of the phenomenological design permitted me to strategically interview participants based on phenomenon relevance. I, therefore, selected this research design to explore the perceptions of training for mandated reporters in schools on consistent child abuse reporting.

The qualitative study consisted of semistructured interviews with open and closed questions that address the research questions (Appendix A; see Creswell, 2006). Participants selected for this study were 10 to 15 school professionals from a major independent school district. The data collected were analyzed by horizontalization where interview statements were organized and changed into clusters of meaning. These clusters were then grouped into themes to produce a description of the texture, structure, and experience of the participants. I concluded the phenomenological report by identifying essential, invariant structures of the experience.

Definitions

Child maltreatment: Child maltreatment includes two wide ranges of abuse and neglect. Abuse consists of physical injury, emotional injury, and sexual inappropriateness. Neglect includes inadequate fulfilling of daily life needs and failing to seek appropriate medical services (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services [TDFPS], 2016).

Child Protective Services (CPS): CPS is a state operated agency governed by county, federal, and state legislation to investigate reports of child abuse and neglect and provides services to families in need (TDFPS, 2016).

Educational personnel/school professional: A specific individual currently employed in an academic environment who is legally mandated to report. These individuals are as distinguished from other mandated reporters in different occupations.

Mandated reporter: An individual who has ongoing contact with a child due to their profession and is required by law to report child abuse and neglect (TDFPS, 2016).

Training: Curriculum provided to professionals as an educational opportunity for a specific task or topic and official certification is given for participation (Masadeh, 2012).

Assumptions

An assumption of this study was that participants would offer true, unprejudiced responses. I also assumed that as mandated reporters in schools, participants would have pertinent information and perceptions to share that would contribute to this phenomenological research.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study is the explanation of school professional's perceptions regarding their training for consistency and efficacy in reporting child abuse. I did not seek the perceptions of mandated reporters in other occupations, nor of school staff members. The various school campuses from which participants were selected delimited the research.

Limitations

The results of this study are limited due to it being a qualitative study; therefore, I was not be able to identify measurable indicators of how child abuse training assists educational personnel in developing a reporting criteria for consistent reporting of child abuse. Instead, I aspired to reveal themes in explanation of the phenomenon from subjective perceptions of school professionals, bringing with it potential limitations to objective perspectives of the phenomenon. Furthermore, results may be limited to generalization within the group of participants from independent schools within the geographic confines of this investigation.

Significance of the Study

Recent research has indicated limited education of state and federal legislation regarding child abuse, which may lead to underreporting by school professionals (Hogelin, 2013). Although school professionals may underreport cases of abuse, they are responsible for the largest number of reported child abuse cases in comparison to other mandated reporter occupations (Kessner & Robinson, 2002). An explanation provided for this conundrum is educational personnel lack ongoing, updated training about child

maltreatment and identifying associated symptoms (Kessner & Robinson, 2002). This research is significant because results from this study may provide more insight into the perceptions of training for child abuse reporting with mandated reporters in schools. Outcomes from this research may potentially contribute information for positive social changes in the home, community, and school to increase consistent reporting of child abuse by school educators through ongoing training to recognize symptoms.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided the study introduction with information regarding important research components. Sinanan (2011) found that providing ongoing training with appropriate updates for educators might bring about greater uniformity and efficacy in reporting. The concern is that educational personnel have neither established criteria for reporting abuse nor adequate training to identify child abuse indicators (Crowell & Levi, 2011; Hogelin, 2013; Krase, 2013; Sinanan, 2011). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore mandated reporters' perceptions of child abuse training and what they perceive as symptoms of child abuse. This study was guided by six qualitative research questions. PB theory was used as the framework to explore how training of school professionals influences child abuse reporting. To explore the perceptions of mandated reporters in schools with regard to reporting child abuse, I selected the qualitative phenomenological research design for this study. In the next chapter, I provide a review of child abuse and how mandated reporters are involved and the barriers that often prevent them from reporting.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

With an increasing number of cases reported by education personnel and only a low number of these cases being substantiated, there has been a lack of research on identifying and implementing a reporting criterion for mandated reporters when reporting child abuse. Crowell and Levi (2011), Hogelin (2013), Krase (2013), and Sinanan (2011) argued that further research is necessary to understand criteria for consistent child abuse reporting by school mandated reporters. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore mandated reporters' perceptions of child abuse training and what they perceive as symptoms of reportable child abuse.

Literature Search Strategy

In this literature review, the concentration was on peer-reviewed journals that addressed the different views of child abuse and mandated reporting. The articles scrutinized for this study were obtained from the Walden University library. The databases used were the Academic Search Complete, ERIC, MEDLINE with full text, SAGE full-text database, Social INDEX with full text, and PsycARTICLES. The terms used for this literature review, single or in association with each other, included the following: *mandated reporters of child abuse, child abuse in schools, Child Protective Services, child abuse training, child abuse training for school staff, barriers to teachers reporting of child abuse,* and *influences for teachers reporting child abuse*.

Theoretical Foundation

In this study, the PB theory acted as the theoretical framework. In PB theory, the voluntary behavior of an individual is intended to benefit other people or society as a whole (Winterich et al., 2013). This behavior is often driven by feelings of compassion and concern regarding the welfare and civil rights of others. Carleton (2006) noted the role of PB in allowing researchers and practitioners, especially those working in the field of psychology, to explore the logical processing of mandated reporters when deciding to report a case of child abuse. For example, in order to understand a mandated reporter's willingness to report abuse, it is necessary to explore how the decision will benefit the affected child and the community as well as recognize perceptions of related professional training (Carleton, 2006). The PB theory allows a researcher to explore the societal, personal, and educational influences on school professional's decision making for reporting.

Carleton (2006) compared the difference between mandated and nonmandated reporters' perceptions of seriousness of emotional abuse vignettes and their willingness to report. It was believed that mandated and nonmandated reporters would differ in their reporting tendencies; however, both groups were equal when considering a vignette as reportable. Secondary factors associated with the decision-making process were where the groups differed, as mandated reporters' willingness to report was motivated by prosocial behavior, and nonmandated reporters' confidence in CPS impacted reporting practices.

In the context of the present study, the role of mandated reporters in reporting child abuse, especially in the context of determining when to report, differed from others who are not mandated to report on the basis of at least two negative outcomes: investigation involvement beyond reporting and legal reprimanding. A school professional still making the determination to report, despite consequences, embodies the decision to exercise PB (Carleton, 2006). Adequate training on child abuse supports mandated reporters in their application of PB when choosing to report (Hogelin, 2013). The preparedness of school professionals in their application of PB through professional training could result in consistent reporting of child abuse. This framework was appropriate to explore the perceptions of training for mandated reporters in schools on consistent child abuse reporting, in the context of PB as a driving force.

History of Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States

Child maltreatment has an extensive history. The issue of child abuse by parents or any adult has always been present in the United States, but the judicial system neglected to establish laws for children's protection until 1874 when authorities used animal cruelty laws to remove a child from an abusive home (Tanner, 2015). Historically, children have been viewed as financial commodities and have been controlled by their caregivers (Yarrow, 2009). It was not until the end of the 19th century that child welfare activists organized private nongovernmental entities (Yarrow, 2009). Their main objective was to liberate children from inhumane and cruel living conditions (Chaffin, 2006).

By the late 1890s, each state had established some form of CPS and began to pave the way for child welfare organizations (Myers, 2008). At the rise of the 20th century, the federal government created the U. S. Children's Bureau; with this there was a development of dedication to protect children by the federal and state governments (Child Welfare Information Gateway [CWIG], 2017). The Social Security Act in 1935 developed during the Roosevelt administration modified the culture in the United States and its child welfare organization. Title V allocates federal dollars to states for further development of CPS agencies (Bryant & Milsom, 2005).

In 1962, Kempe et al. discussed the issue and exposed child abuse in the United States; this stimulated a need to expand the limited professional research and writing of literature about the topic. Roughly 10 years after the production of these literary contributions, every state had established statutes related to mandatory reporting laws. Mandatory reporting laws require any professionally licensed individual (i.e. doctors, teachers) to file any suspected cases of child abuse with law enforcement agencies.

Prior to 1974, the federal government held an instrumental but limited role in fighting the epidemic of child abuse. As a way of establishing a firm standpoint on the issue, Congress enacted the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) in January 31, 1974 (P.L. 93-247). This was the first federal legislation established to increase awareness in the public regarding the need to ensure proper child protection and welfare. Initiatives from this act paved the way for federal funds to be used on a state level to establish prevention, identification, and treatment efforts for physical abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse. Under CAPTA, government agencies and institutions were

permitted the opportunity to explore research techniques for the reduction of child abuse and neglect and expand treatment methods for victims. Funding from this act also established new federal grant programs to be used for training, centers concerned with child abuse and neglect at both the state and community partnership level, and projects intended to impact the problems of child abuse and neglect.

Title II CAPTA amendments in 1996 charged the Children's Bureau with the responsibility of identifying a primary organization in all states to allocate Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention funding. With this funding, prevention of child abuse and neglect increased through development, operation, and increased initiatives, also including the implementation of resources and services aimed to increase family stability and reduce maltreatment chances. Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention grantees of each state assume management roles in planning events and preparing information in efforts to show support for Child Abuse Prevention Month.

On November 29, 2006, Governor Edward G. Rendell signed into legislation the Pennsylvania Act 179 of 2006 (P. L. 1589) to modify CPS law and expand mandated reporters' obligations. Pennsylvania was the first of the states to specifically outline mandated reporter responsibilities and consequences for a lack thereof. Mandated reporters were charged with the responsibility to report any suspicion of child abuse and neglect, without regard to relationship between victim and perpetrator. Mandated reporters with a first offense of failing to report were charged with third degree misdemeanors, and any other violations thereafter were elevated to second-degree misdemeanors (CWIG, 2016). This law explained that a burden of reasonable suspicion

had been satisfied by a mandated reporter when, according to their professional, medical, or alternative training and experience, they believed child abuse or neglect had happened. It was no longer required for the mandated reporter to physically observe the child to be obligated with the responsibility of reporting child abuse or neglect concerns.

Abuse and Neglect Types

With increased stakes for mandated reporters failing to report, government officials provided definitions and types of child maltreatment. Under the Pennsylvania Code (28 Pa. Code § 611.5), child maltreatment was divided into categories of physical neglect, mental injury, physical injury, and sexual abuse. States across the United States adopted this classification model, and today child maltreatment is divided into four primary domains: neglect, physical, emotional, and sexual. Each domain outlines specific behavioral clues that can be used to recognize symptoms of the associated maltreatment in children.

Neglect is defined as the "failure to provide for a child's basic needs necessary to sustain the life or health of the child, excluding failure caused primarily by financial inability unless relief services have been offered and refused" (TDFPS, 2016, para. 2). According to the USDHHS (2015), 72.9% of child maltreatment victims across the United States die from neglect.

Any "physical injury that results in substantial harm to the child, or the genuine threat of substantial harm from physical injury to the child" is defined as physical abuse (TDFPS, 2016, para. 1). Whether intentional or not, an injury of this caliber is still considered abuse. Injuries include a broad range from nonvital bruises to internal injuries

and child fatality. The intensity of physical abuse varies in level and includes inappropriate extreme discipline and/or punishment not equivalent to the child's age or development. Parental mental health, use of alcohol and illicit drugs, stress, and maturity level are all considered risk factors that increase the chances of physical abuse occurring (Solis et al., 2012).

TDFPS (2016) defined emotional abuse as any "mental or emotional injury that results in an observable and material impairment in a child's growth, development or psychological functioning" (para. 4). Emotional abuse can be identified in extreme punishment such as, but not limited to, continuous scapegoating, entrapment in a dark closet, and belittling.

Sexual abuse includes "fondling a child's genitals, penetration, incest, rape, sodomy, indecent exposure, and exploitation through prostitution or producing pornographic materials" (TDFPS, 2016, para. 3).

Abuse and Neglect Effects on the Student

Across the literature, researchers have discussed how the effects of child maltreatment can be responsible for a decline in academic performance (Leiter & Johnsen, 1997; Staudt, 2001). Abused and neglected children have almost a 3 times greater chance of being retained for a grade level than nonmaltreated children (Mallett, 2012; Staudt, 2001). Results from standardized test scores have indicated that maltreated children yield lower scores in reading and math domains, more Cs and Ds, even Fs, with more nonattendance in school than those students who have not been maltreated (Leiter & Johnsen, 1997). Zolotor et al. (1999) conducted research on academic performance in a

longitudinal cohort of children potentially at risk of maltreatment. Infants were selected at birth and followed into elementary education to determine a relationship between child maltreatment and academic performance. They concluded that a substantiated case of abuse and neglect showed correlation with poor school performance.

Reviewing the impact of maltreatment in children and their education has been widely researched. Staudt (2001) completed a review of research on academic performance comparing maltreated children in kindergarten through 12th grade to nonmaltreated children. Students were matched based on gender, school, grade level, and residential neighborhood. Findings revealed, when compared to nonmaltreated children, that maltreated children were almost 3 times more likely to experience grade level retention. Neglected children had significantly lower scores on math and reading standardized tests. Physically abused children received more discipline referrals than any other maltreatment group. Students who experienced both neglect and physical abuse had lower grades in language arts.

As the topic of child maltreatment and education developed, the concept of service intervention evolved. Mallet (2012) conducted a longitudinal study on a county program in Ohio that had been created to improve academic performance and decrease retention rates for maltreated children, with over half placed in foster care, in kindergarten to 12th grade. Students and families involved with the program received in-home tutoring services from certified teachers and pairing of the tutor and student was based on educational needs, personality, and abilities. After a year of receiving programming, a large number of youths were promoted to their appropriate grade level,

and scores in all academic domains improved by at least 50%. Grade point averages increased by one full point over 7 years of services for participants (Mallet, 2012). This research revealed that poor academic performance in maltreated children can improve over time with ongoing, individual educational reinforcements, reinforcing the need for clear and accessible reporting criteria that can lead to timely identification of children and families in need of intervention.

Additional research was conducted to evaluate academic success in maltreated children. Leiter and Johnsen's (1997) retrospective study involving 967 5 to 23-year-olds concluded that children with a history of maltreatment declined in academic performance. These individuals experienced failing grades, low school attendance or dropout, grade repetition, and special education classification. Scores on standardized tests for maltreated children were much lower than for nonmaltreated children.

This phenomenon is seen in more societies than just the United States. Altamimi et al. (2017) conducted research amongst adolescents in Saudi Arabia and concluded that poor school performance was more likely in students who were psychologically, physically, or otherwise abused as opposed to those who were not. Analysis of the data revealed that household dysfunction also contributed to poor performance in school for students. These researchers explained that increasing awareness of the impact of child maltreatment and academic performance amongst schools, families, and community is of absolute importance (Altamimi et al., 2017).

Through the research, it is evident that child maltreatment adversely impacts academic performance with long lasting effects. Maltreated children are more likely to be

retained a grade level, have lower grades in academic domains, and poorly perform on standardized tests, when compared to nonmaltreated children. Recognizing and understanding child maltreatment is complex, but it is imperative for school professionals to understand their role as mandated reporters to mitigate some of these educational disparities. Federal and state legislation provide mandated reporters with definitions and characteristics to assist with identifying victimized children. Although school mandated reporters are provided with this information, some may question when to actually file a report.

Mandated Reporting

Teachers, counselors, principals, nurses, social workers, diagnosticians and psychologists have ongoing contact with children in schools and are therefore considered to be mandated reporters (CWIG, 2016). Mandated reporters are required by federal and state laws to report concerns and suspicions of child abuse or neglect of students to law enforcement or child protective services (CWIG, 2016). This section will focus on the development of mandated reporting and more specifically on school mandated reporters.

Most states require educators (e.g., teachers, principals, administrators, school nurses, school social workers, diagnosticians and guidance counselors) to report suspicion of child maltreatment and may provide a specific definition for those who are considered educators (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). The mandate for these professionals to report child maltreatment varies from state to state. It is the responsibility of educators to verify state reporting statues and determine if they are designated as a mandated reporter.

Educators as Mandated Reporters

Literature implies that because of the continuous interaction educational personnel have with children it is reasonable for them to join forces with child protective agencies as mandated reporters (Baginsky, 2000; Baginsky, 2003; Smith & Lambie, 2005). The academic environment appeals in serving as a front line of defense to combat child abuse because school mandated reporters have day to day contact with children; it would only make "good sense" for them to act in this capacity, as opposed to individuals with limited contact (Crenshaw, Crenshaw, & Lichtenberg, 1995). However, a large number of school mandated reporters admit to not having a sufficient skill set in knowing when and how to report child maltreatment (Crenshaw et al., 1995). This would imply a demand intervention in five specific domains: (a) knowing and understanding child maltreatment; (b) mandated reporter training; (c) influence of maltreatment on students; (d) mandated reporter expectations, (e) obstacles when reporting child maltreatment (Bell & Singh, 2017).

Over the course of two years, Baginsky (2000) conducted a series of surveys throughout different education systems to learn how schools, local education authorities, and training institutes defined their role in the child safety. The research identified the importance of training educators in their role with child protection, as the school is a key agency to assist social service departments in identifying child maltreatment. Educators have a responsibility in recognizing and referring cases of maltreatment but also are involved with developing inter-agency child safety plans. However, two fifths of schools reported their educators had not received any in-service training on child protection and

roughly two thirds of schools reported their educators were uncertain about when to report a case to CPS. Schools reported an interest in wanting to educate all staff who come into contact with students, with ongoing, updated training on identifying symptoms of child maltreatment.

Federal Legislation

Congress passed the National Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act ([CAPTA]; P.L. 93-247) into law in 1974. It was later amended on June 25, 2003 and is now known as the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003 (P.L 108-36; Smith & Lambie, 2005). Creating this child welfare policy granted states federal financial assistance to create their own child maltreatment awareness and prevention initiatives (CWIG, 2016). Child abuse and neglect were defined by federal legislation as follows:

> Physical or mental injury, sexual abuse or exploitation, negligent treatment, or maltreatment of a child under the age of eighteen or the age specified by the child protection law of the state in question, by a person who is responsible for the child's welfare under circumstances which indicate that the child's health or welfare is harmed or threatened thereby. (42 USCS § 5101, 2003)

State Legislation (Texas)

Child abuse is criminally punishable at the state level (Smith & Lambie, 2005). Texas Statues Family Code, Title 5, Subtitle E, Chapter 261, Section 261.101 (b) requires professionals who have cause to believe a child has been or may be a victim of abuse or neglect, to report to Department of Family and Protective Services no later than 48 hours after suspicion of cause. The term "professional" is defined as an individual certified or

licensed by the state or employed at a state licensed facility who has direct contact with children (Texas Constitution and Statutes, 2015). The term includes those in practice as a teacher, nurse, doctor, daycare staff, clinic or health care facility employee, juvenile probation officer, and juvenile detention officer.

Failure to report suspected abuse by a professional, according to Texas Statutes Family Code, Title 5, Subtitle E, Chapter 261, Section 261.109 may result in Class A misdemeanor charges. A professional may be charged with a state jail felony when failing to report abuse or neglect for an intellectually disabled child placed in a state living facility and the actor caused serious bodily injury (Texas Constitution and Statutes, 2015). Professional licensure and civil obligations may also be suspended or revoked for mandated reporters who fail to report (Kalichman, 1999).

Barriers to Reporting

Filing a report of child maltreatment is not an accusation, but instead, is a request for authorities to make a professional decision in determining if abuse or neglect has occurred and, if so, provide the victim with refuge (CWIG, 2016). Professionals sometimes struggle with knowing when to report suspicion of child maltreatment to appropriate authorities. The process of reporting is not always an easy task and challenges may present themselves as barriers to discourage educational personnel from making reports in the future.

Past research has investigated factors contributing to the underreporting of child maltreatment and further research has not emerged since 2001. Mitchell, Turbiville, and Turnbull (1999) identified five barriers of child abuse and neglect reporting by

professionals: (a) inadequate training on identifying and reporting child maltreatment, (b) retaliation against the child by the perpetrator, (c) retaliation against themselves by the family, (d) strained relationship with the family, and (e) decreased assurance in child protective services. They also explained additional complications are presented when identifying and reporting child maltreatment in children with disabilities. First, some children with disabilities may not be able to effectively communicate or express abuse related events. Also, the validity of abuse and neglect claims may be questioned when children with disabilities make a disclosure. Lastly, there may be conflict in distinguishing the differences between injuries caused from abuse or the disability itself.

Beck, Ogloff, and Corbishley (1994) conducted research amongst teachers in British Columbia, an educational system and society similar to that in the United States, and it was concluded that many teachers had a poor skill set in training and knowledge regarding child maltreatment identification and reporting. Of the elementary school teacher participants, 29% had reported a child abuse case in the previous school year. Sixteen percent of the sample were suspicious of child abuse but failed to report it in the previous school year. According to the group who admitted to not reporting, 80% indicated the reason was due to insufficient evidence; additional reasons were punishment for the victim and their family, limited assurance in child protective services, and unclear understanding of child maltreatment definitions.

Kenny (2001a) evaluated a sample of 31 teachers who indicated being suspicious of abuse, but did not report, and discovered the primary reason was based on fear of not making an accurate report. The second reason was not feeling confidant child protective

services would aid the victimized child. Additional factors associated were poor evidence, punishment for the family, denial of responsibility, cultural considerations of the family, and not wanting to be involved in legal proceedings. Forty percent of teachers felt they would receive little to no support from administration when reporting. Research questions for the proposed study intend to clarify how to best aid teachers and other mandated reporters in school with confidence levels of identifying child abuse and consistently reporting by evaluating training received.

Kenny (2001b) compared the decision to report child maltreatment between 28 first-year teachers and 28 first-year medical residents. Doctors were more likely to report suspicions of child abuse, as opposed to teachers; however, explanations for not reporting were fear of not making an accurate report and no valid indication of abuse. Even though physicians claimed to have received both pre-service and professional child abuse training, they reported not feeling confident in identifying and reporting abuse. Both groups felt they would not receive adequate support from administrators when reporting. In fact, they reported there should be no obligation or mandate for them to report; the majority was under the impression the family could take legal action against them if allegations were not substantiated.

Bryant and Milson (2005) surveyed 263 school counselors about their perceptions of barriers to child abuse reporting. On average, each participant had been suspicious of about five cases of abuse in that school year but only reported about four cases. Reasons for following through with reporting the case were compliance with mandatory law, unquestionable proof, and concerns for child welfare. Counselors described their reasons

for not reporting included having insufficiently substantial proof of abuse and having doubts that the Department of Human Services would follow through with investigation of allegations made.

Mitchell et al. (1999) facilitated focus group interviews with 42 education, health care, and child protective service professionals to explore the issue of not reporting child abuse and neglect. The professionals agreed the considerable strengths of child welfare agencies were their mandatory reporting policies, protective measures for children, and addressing child welfare in different professions. However, they expounded upon barriers of reporting, which include unclear abuse and neglect definitions, the difference between discipline and abuse, personal retaliation, and punishment for the victim and their family.

In summary, not reporting child maltreatment can be attributed to several explanations of concerns with definitions and evidence, unsure of support from administration, lack of confidence that child protection services will actually help, and concern of hindering rather than helping the child. Lack of confidence in the identification and what is considered concrete evidence of maltreatment are additional factors that contribute to professional underreporting. As a result of these factors, school professionals are hesitant in their decision to report and internally debate whether they should fulfill their obligation as a mandated reporter or risk consequences for themselves, the victim, and their family. After rationalizing through these obstacles, mandated reporters then question what is in the best interest of the child and if the outcome will benefit the child. Kenny (2001a, 2001b) indicate that mandated reporters in schools have a poor skill set in accurately identifying symptoms of child maltreatment and if they

received updated training it would reduce the likelihood of additional considerations for reporting. Updated and adequate training could foster support for school professionals in their application of PB to overcome the identified barriers of reporting; unfortunately, the presence of these barriers hinders the act of PB and supports underreporting by mandated school professionals.

Research Gap

Researchers in this body of literature provided evidence of inconsistent reporting practices by mandated reporters, with emphasis on those who work in schools (Mitchell et al., 1999; Beck et al., 1994; Bryant et al., 2005). Educator's qualitative perspectives have not been collected and analyzed. Researchers have implied that poor training and lack of child abuse and neglect evidence are factors that may impact a school professional's decision to comply with their mandate of reporting (Mitchell et al., 1999; Beck et al., 1994; Bryant et al., 2005). The absence of continued research about mandated reporters in schools and consistent reporting practices has become more apparent. Thus, obtaining information regarding these reporters and their reporting practices could be beneficial in effectively helping children and servicing their families. Evaluating these mandated reporter's perceptions of child maltreatment training would raise awareness of current perspectives in identifying, reporting, and preventing child abuse and perhaps help to identify ways in which improvement might be sought.

The aim of this research is to explore the perceptions of training for child abuse reporting with mandated reporters in schools to better understand reporting practices. Providing ongoing, updated training for school professionals could embody great

uniformity and efficacy in reporting (Sinanan, 2011). Research has purposed gaps in the literature on understanding and establishing a necessary criterion for consistent reporting of child maltreatment (Sinanan, 2001). Results from this research will contribute to gaps in the literature by gathering mandated reporters' perceptions of what support is needed and could be implemented to aid in effective child abuse reporting.

Summary and Conclusion

In review of literature, the aim was to describe research that has accrued in the field, and to identify gaps in literature related to child abuse reporting practices for mandated reporters in schools. The literature provided evidence of child maltreatment being a historic issue in the United States, and educators playing a vital role in the child welfare system because of their continuous interaction with children and thus becoming initial identifiers in the process of notification and reporting of child abuse.

I reviewed the theoretical framework that will be used for this study, prosocial behavior (PB) theory. This theory involves an individual's voluntary behavior regarding the welfare and civil rights of others, as opposed to theirs, to benefit both the person and society (Winterich et al., 2013). The PB theory allows a researcher to explore the societal, personal, and educational influences on school professional's decision making for reporting. The existence of barriers often discourages school professionals from the act of PB and the issue of underreporting continues. With ongoing, current training on child abuse and its indicators, school professionals can be confident in their decision to report and feel supported to act on PB.

In the next section, I addressed literature that specifically addressed barriers when reporting child abuse. This body of literature was limited. Many studies concerned with child abuse reporting did not focus on reporters' training; among those focusing on barriers to reporting child abuse, reporting criteria were not an area of focus (Crowell & Levi, 2011; Hogelin, 2013; Krase, 2013; Sinanan, 2011). This represents a research gap, which I intend to bridge with the current study exploring reporters' perceptions of child abuse indicators and training for reporting.

The reviewed research supported correlations between the ability to properly identify child maltreatment and consistent reporting of child maltreatment. Other implications of underreporting maltreatment by mandated reporters also include the lack of confidence in follow-through by child services and support from other campus professionals. These researchers summarized barriers that influence inconsistent reporting and support further investigation into exploring reporters' understanding of child abuse indicators and training for reporting. Research indicates mandated reporters in schools are not confident of their understanding of the parameters of reportable child abuse and neglect, nor of their ability to gather and sufficiently present evidence to regulatory agencies. The proposed research intends to explore what school professionals are currently drawing upon for this information and how they go about utilizing their understanding for purposes of reporting.

Based on the literature examined as a part of this literature review, it was established that there has not been a published study exploring mandated reporters in schools' perceptions of child abuse indicators and training for reporting. The need for

examining this is significant, especially considering the agreement amongst researchers regarding the relationship between adequately identifying child abuse and consistent reporting. The goal of this study is to contribute in this body of research by evaluating the reporting criteria used by mandated reporters in schools and child abuse training received to determine if these components aid in consistent reporting of child abuse.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

Previous researchers have found that mandated reporters are responsible for many validated child abuse cases (Kessner & Robinson, 2002). Mandated school reporters appear to play a major role in the reporting of child abuse to local welfare systems (CWIG, 2016). With education personnel reporting the highest number of child abuse cases as well as having the highest number of unsubstantiated reports (USDHHS, 2015) in comparison to other professional groups, there is a need to investigate this process more closely from the perspective of the educators themselves. Researchers have purported that lack of education and training for school mandated reporters on identifying what constitutes reasonable suspicion of child abuse might contribute to inconsistencies present in reporting (Flaherty et al., 2004).

Gaining a better understanding of school professionals' perspectives about training for child abuse reporting might assist in the construction of more effective approaches. Crowell and Levi (2011) argued that further research is needed to (a) establish a reporting criterion of child abuse for mandated school reporters and (b) to assess the consistency of reporting. In this study, I aimed to contribute to narrowing the gap in the literature by exploring reporters' perceptions and understandings of child abuse indicators and training for reporting.

Research Design and Rationale

In this research, I investigated themes shared by mandated school reporters regarding child abuse reporting, including multidimensional variables that influence the

decision of education personnel in determining when to report. Therefore, a focus on variables influencing decision making and school professionals' perceptions of these were explored with the following six research questions presented for this study:

RQ1: What criteria do mandated reporters believe are valid, and which of these do they use when reporting a suspected case of child abuse?

RQ2: What situations of child abuse do mandated reporters see as ambiguous or difficult-to-categorize, and what criteria do they use to decide whether to file a report?

RQ3: How does professional training of mandated reporters influence or inform them about when to report suspected abuse?

RQ4: What do mandated reporters think is lacking in formal training that should be added to assist them in making more accurate decisions to report child abuse?

RQ5: What do mandated reporters think is lacking in school district policy that should be added to assist them in making more accurate decisions to report child abuse?

RQ6: How does prosocial behavior influence mandated reporters' decision to report suspected abuse?

Role of the Researcher

My role as a researcher includes that I am a full-time CPS investigator with the TDFPS. I have been employed in this position for 12 years and have investigated many cases reported by all professional types and the community. I have also served on the Caseworker Advisory Committee within the agency to inform high level management and state officials of chronic challenges that cause burnout in many caseworkers. My role

and responsibilities for this research included the study design, creating interview protocols, completing participant interviews, and performing data analysis.

I have never worked in a school setting and do not have any experience as a school professional. I did not possess a power relationship with any participants of this study because I am not currently employed in that capacity. I managed any bias by excluding from participation in the study any school professional with whom I may have had a personal relationship or have known to report a case where I was the primary investigator.

Research Model

In this study, I examined themes of mandated school reporters' perspectives regarding child abuse reporting. I used the qualitative methodology to articulate and interpret a phenomenon, as opposed to collecting quantitative data based upon a tested theory (see Creswell & Poth, 2017). I chose a phenomenological research design to identify core themes and categorize the data. A biographical design would not have been appropriate because I did not aim to study the life of a single individual. A case study would also not have been appropriate because an in-depth an examination of a specific event or person to explore the causes of underlying principles was not the focus of this study. A grounded theory design would not have been appropriate, as I did not intend to develop a theory. Finally, an ethnographic design would not have been appropriate, as I did not aim to focus upon environment.

Methodology

In this section, I provide a description of procedures for participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. I provide a description of the target population, including the sample, and reasoning for the sample size. Following the modified van Kaam method, I provide an explanation of the data collection and of the data analysis plan (see Moustakas, 1994).

Participant Selection Logic

The target participants for this study were educational personnel required to report child abuse in accordance with their professional licensure. For this study, education personnel included teachers, counselors, school psychologists, social workers, diagnosticians, and principals who are mandated reporters within the jurisdiction where the research occurred. Educational personnel are frequently the first to observe child maltreatment in school age children but are often reluctant to report because of fear and lack of confidence and knowledge due to insufficient formal training (Alvarez et al., 2004). Among this population, I recruited 10 school professionals to participate in this study. Given that in-depth information was collected, a sample size of 10 was adequate to gain data saturation (see Creswell & Poth, 2017). If a mandated reporter presented with a vulnerable condition such as an intellectual disability, emotional disability, crisis, or psychotic condition, but further met all other inclusion criteria appropriate for this study, their participation and data provided were not excluded.

I obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Walden University prior to participant recruitment. I also obtained permission from school

(and/or district) administrators for the study to be conducted on school premises and to include their staff. Participant recruitment happened after these permissions were obtained. I asked campus administrators to forward my invitation of participation in this study to appropriate mandated reporters. The correspondence explained the nature and purpose of the study and provided my contact information. All participation in the study was voluntary, and only educational personnel with professional licensure were asked to participate. Once participants agreed to participate, they were contacted to complete an interview at their convenience.

Instrumentation

Participants were interviewed using an open interview format with researcher-developed questions. An interview protocol introduction has been created to establish consistency during the interview process (see Appendix B). Interview questions for this research were developed according to reviewed literature on qualitative research similar in nature to this topic. The interview protocol introduction provided participants with a formal introduction of the study, how the interview process would be structured, time allotted for interview completion, and the role of the researcher (Appendix B). After participants reviewed the interview protocol introduction, they transitioned into completing my interview questions (see Appendix A).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I used semistructured interviews with validated questions reviewed by my chair and committee member to gather data. Interviews allow a researcher to obtain information about how a person thinks and gain their individual response; however,

semistructured interviews uncover rich descriptive data on the personal experiences of participants (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Before interviewing, I required each participant to submit a signed informed consent. I used a self-created semistructured interview tool to direct data collection. I also gathered demographic information about each participant for reference (Appendix C). Interviews for each participant were digitally recorded and lasted on average about 60 minutes. I requested to evaluate field notes provided by the professional to attain data triangulation and performed member checking to increase the accuracy of data collected. Following data collection, information was recorded in Microsoft Word. I stored all collected data in an encrypted folder that only I have access to. I will store concrete data in a locked file cabinet, and after 5 years, material destruction will occur.

I contacted principals via email at different local schools explaining my research and asked for their permission to carry it out with mandated reporters at their campus. A copy of my recruiting flyer was provided to the principal if permission was granted, and I asked for their assistance in recruiting participants by either emailing the flyer or posting it in designated staff areas. I also emailed identified campus mandated reporters asking for their participation in the research. School personnel were provided my contact information on the recruiting flier to ask questions prior to their agreement for participation.

Data Analysis Plan

I began data analysis after all data had been collected. I uploaded all files to NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer program used to deeply analyze rich text-

based information. The data analysis was guided by the modified van Kaam method explained by Moustakas (1994), which was a 7-step process: (a) horizontalization, (b) reduction and elimination, (c) clustering and thematizing, (d) validation of invariant constituents, (e) individual textural description, (f) individual structural description, and (g) composite description. In horizontalization, statements were given equal value. Irrelevant or repetitive statements were extracted, leaving only the textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon in the second step. In the third step, similar content and data were clustered into themes. These themes were then validated in the fourth step. Keywords in the data were used to summarize themes in the fifth step, and in the sixth step, transcripts were interpreted. Final themes were generated after evaluating data according to the overall experiences of participants in the seventh step. Each step of the method guided the coding process although coding was cyclical as opposed to linear.

Issues of Trustworthiness

I implemented methods to increase trustworthiness throughout the course of the research. Reflexivity was accomplished through reflexive journal writing to document explanations for methodological decisions, research logistics, and reflecting on personal values and interests. I performed member checking to increase the accuracy of data collected by allowing participants to review their responses. I ensured credibility through triangulation by identifying patterns or contradictions in participant responses. I also ensured confirmability by using an audit trail to document each step of the data analysis process. Lastly, I ensured dependability by enlisting an outside person to review the research process for confirmation of results.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical procedures for this study included obtaining IRB permission. In addition, I obtained permission from school (and/or district) administrators to carry out the study. I respected each participant as a human subject with entitlement to confidentiality, as well as the right to decline participation at any phase of the study without prejudice or consequence, if they so desired. I assigned coded identifiers to each participant to conceal individual identity. The informed consent document stated the rights of each participant, and I collected this form prior to interviewing. I will keep all collected data confidential and store all collected data in an encrypted folder that only I can access. I provided the participating school districts with a specifically prepared document including findings and potential recommendations from this study as a form of appreciation for participation.

Summary

Following the purpose of this study, I used a qualitative phenomenological study to examine themes shared by mandated school reporters. I recruited 10 educational personnel to join the study. I used a self-created interview tool to direct data collection. Data analysis commenced after data were collected and recorded. The data analysis plan involved the grounded theory coding. I respected ethical procedures and methods of trustworthiness throughout the study. I present the results of the study in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The study addressed the perceptions of training for child abuse reporting with mandated reporters in schools to better understand reporting practices. This research contributes to the field of psychology in providing an understanding of what factors may impact a school professional's decision to comply with their mandate for reporting suspected abuse or neglect. The primary research questions were as follows:

RQ1: What criteria do mandated reporters believe are valid and which of these do they use when reporting a suspected case of child abuse?

RQ2: What situations of child abuse do mandated reporters see as ambiguous or difficult-to-categorize, and what criteria do they use to decide whether to file a report?

RQ3: How does professional training of mandated reporters influence or inform them about when to report suspected abuse?

RQ4: What do mandated reporters think is lacking in formal training that should be added to assist them in making more accurate decisions to report child abuse?

RQ5: What do mandated reporters think is lacking in school district policy that should be added to assist them in making more accurate decisions to report child abuse?

RQ6: How does prosocial behavior influence mandated reporters' decision to report suspected abuse?

In subsequent sections of this chapter, I report the results of this study. I include data collection, data analysis procedures, and demographics. I review topics associated with trustworthiness, including transferability, credibility, confirmability, and

dependability. I conclude this chapter incorporating a thorough discussion of the findings of this study using in-depth descriptions and tables.

Setting

Participants were only provided one option for the interview setting. Interviews were conducted face to face, in a private, confidential room at a public location in a centralized location. All interviews occurred without interruptions. There was no request from any participant to withdraw during the research, beginning in the recruitment phase to completing interviews, nor in the review process of this study. There was also no indication of any psychological or stress responses to the interviews.

Each participant volunteered to participate in the study. At the time of each scheduled interview, the participant met me alone and was afforded the opportunity to individually review the informed consent and the study introduction prior to the interview. The interview occurred over the following hour. After completing the interview, each participant was debriefed and provided information as outlined in the informed consent and procedures. There was no indication from any of the participants of distress or need for follow-up support.

Demographics

Ten school mandated reporters participated in the study. All participants were educational personnel required to report child abuse in accordance with their professional licensure. Participant occupation varied according to the following categories: teacher, counselor, principal, and diagnostician with a range for highest level of education being bachelors, masters, or doctorate degree. Diagnosticians in schools are subject matter

experts on learning disabilities, teaching methods, and academic testing. A visual representation of this information is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

School Mandated Reporters

Participant number	Level of education	Occupation
01	Master's Degree	Diagnostician
02	Master's Degree	Teacher
03	Bachelor's Degree	Teacher
04	Doctorate Degree	Teacher
05	Master's Degree	Principal
06	Bachelor's Degree	Teacher
07	Master's Degree	Teacher
08	Master's Degree	Teacher
09	Doctorate Degree	Teacher
10	Doctorate Degree	Counselor

Data Collection

I emailed a copy of the recruitment flyer to campus principals and asked that they disseminate it to school mandated reporters. I followed this with an email to identified campus mandated reporters, asking for their participation in the research and providing them a copy of my recruiting flyer. With each volunteer participant, I inquired about a preferred time to complete the interview and schedule it accordingly. During the

telephone conversation, I shared information about the participation eligibility for the study. During the face-to-face meeting, each participant was administered the protocol introduction, semistructured interview, and demographic questionnaire.

I received IRB approval August 4, 2020. The participant recruitment process for this study took place between October 16, 2020 and March 7, 2021. Interviews took place at a centrally located library in a private room. Full interview times varied in completion but averaged 56 min 40 seconds. Data obtained during the interview were both electronically and voice recorded. The interview times included the protocol introduction, semistructured interview, and demographic questionnaire.

All data I collected during the interview are stored in an encrypted electronic folder on my personal computer and are retained as my academic property not to be distributed. Once each interview concluded, the information was typed in a Microsoft Word document. Follow-up interviews did not occur. The data collection plan described in Chapter 3 was carried out.

Data Analysis

For the data analysis phase, the Moustakas (1994) modified van Kaam method was used to evaluate research findings. Data were recorded using NVivo for all participant interviews, underlining common words, phrases, and statements pertaining to research questions and listing them by such categories as (a) school reporting procedures, (b) child maltreatment experiences, (c) training, and so on. I also paid attention to prompts, such as variations in tone, emotions, and mood. I reviewed each participant's interview record multiple times, associating codes, and notating key words, phrases, and

statements in a daybook (see Creswell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Cross referencing for accuracy in the identified statements, I then associated and elicited the themes. These were required for finalizing the first steps of Moustakas' modified van Kaam data analysis phases, evenly classifying all statements. Integrating the second stage, I categorized, scored, and separated evenly counted words, phrases, and statements. Then, I grouped them into sets as they were associated to the research question they were related to, organizing them according to their affiliation. I maintained those that were rationally similar, and I extracted those that were not.

I did not identify any conflicting situations in this study. During the phase of data collection in this study, there were no abnormal events that happened. To ensure there were no conflicting situations and abnormal events, it was important that I acknowledged (a) what a participant might undergo and (b) how they might encounter the experience. The PB theory as explained in Chapter 2 unveiled similarities in the reviewed literature and participant responses for assisting me. I paired research questions with corresponding interview questions. I also programmed each interview question to depict simple themes and usual response groupings by interview questions. Trends and patterns were formulated from the use of this technique as explained below.

Interview Question 1 was as follows: "Does your school or district have standard procedures for reporting child maltreatment?" Of all the participants, Participant 02 was the only one who indicated "no," and answered, "not really," elaborating on not having a clear direction on what to do next when signs of abuse or neglect were suspected. All the other participants indicated "yes" and provided the steps of their reporting procedures.

Interview Question 2 was as follows: “Do you believe your school or district’s procedures for reporting is efficient for accurate reporting?” Again Participant 02 was the only one who answered “no” to this question and explained, “I don’t think everybody knows that they can actually do the report themselves.” All other participants indicated “yes” based on having an actual reporting protocol developed for mandated reporters to follow.

In addition, a response that was formulated out of this interview question was regarding education about what to report. Participant 09 noted that as a school mandated reporter, “the staff is knowledgeable about the training or the things we should report.” Participant 10 explained having “ongoing staff development…and training for teachers as well as counselors.”

Interview Question 3 was, “Do you believe there is anything missing from your school or districts reporting procedures that could assist with accurate reporting?” Most participants did not believe there was anything missing from their school or districts reporting procedures. Many of the participants believed there did not need to be any modifications to the current reporting procedures.

A category formulated from this interview question was security when reporting. Participant 01 noted a need for “no retaliation for reporting” where parents try to confront who they believe may have reported the case. Participant 09 stated, “Staff might be a little reluctant in reporting because…there would be some backlash.” Another category derived from this interview question was the need for better training. Both Participant 02 and Participant 05 suggested actual “training from CPS” on what to look for.

Interview Question 4 was, “What makes you suspicious of a student being a victim of child maltreatment?” A category for this interview question highlighted either a noticeable change or lack of hygiene. Participant 01 disclosed reporting a family of students because “they would come to school smelling of urine and feces every day, every single day. It was intolerable...the other kids couldn’t learn because of their smell.” Another equally noteworthy category from this interview question described the change in a student’s behavior. Participant 07 stated, “When I see a student that’s acting out of character or…being by themselves and not wanting to talk.”

Interview Question 5 was as follows: “When suspicious of child maltreatment for one of your students, how often have you reported or caused a report to be made to CPS?” Many participants expressed never having to report a case because of no suspicion. Participant 01 shared having contacted CPS “about 10 times,” and Participant 08 reported making “over 20-30 reports to CPS.”

Interview Question 6 was, “When you have been suspicious that one of your students has been maltreated, but have not instigated a report to Child Protective Services, why did you not report?” The consensus amongst participants was that they would proceed to report if they were suspicious. Participant 03 reported, “I have to report any incident that I feel like a child is getting abused…I can lose my job for that [not reporting].” Participant 01 presented only one exception and that being “the kids were already on file, had an open case.”

Interview Question 7 was as follows: “What child maltreatment situations with your students do you consider difficult-to-categorize?” A couple categories came forward

from this interview question. The main category was emotional abuse. Participant 05 shared, “Emotional abuse is when it’s the hardest to actually report because it’s a fine line.” The secondary category formed was sexual abuse being difficult-to-categorize. Participant 01 identified sexual abuse because “you don’t get kids to come out with that.” Participant 02 supported sexual abuse as being difficult-to-categorize because it is “hard to know that it is definitely happening.”

Interview Question 8 was, “What factors do you consider when deciding to report difficult-to-categorize maltreatment for your students?” Many of the participants reported being somewhat reluctant to report situations if they are unsure if the abuse occurred. This further led to questioning whether reporting would be helpful or hurtful to the child, with Participant 05 responding with their consideration of “is it going to help the child or put the child in more harm, in danger?”

Interview Question 9 was as follows: “When did you first receive training information about child maltreatment or mandated reporting?” The primary response for this question was that this occurred the first year in education. Participant 01 shared it started in “your orientation when you first start working; during onboarding before you even start working.” Another response generated from this question was that this began in college. Participant 03 reported first receiving training information about child maltreatment or mandated reporting “in college” after taking a “course on it.”

Interview Question 10 was, “What is your understanding of the role of the mandated reporter?” Many school professionals understood this role as not failing to report if there is any indication of suspicion. Participant 01 reported, “It is my obligation

to report suspicion; it's not a choice if you want to or not; it is your responsibility." Participant 09 replied, "That when you see it you report it. If you suspect, you report it." Another response generated from this question was not understanding or knowing what is meant by the term mandated reporter. Participant 10 shared, "We don't really use that term."

Interview Question 11 was, "How often do you receive training updates about child maltreatment or mandated reporting in your professional career?" All participants reported receiving training annually and typically at the beginning of every school year. Participant 01 replied, "The teachers go back two weeks before school starts so it's like that first week before the actual school year starts."

Interview Question 12 was as follows: "Approximately how many cumulative hours have you received during your pre-service education and professional career about child maltreatment and/or mandated reporting?" Cumulative hours of training varied amongst the participants depending upon their years of service in education. Participant 08 reported being "at 100 plus hours of training."

Interview Question 13 was, "When was the most recent training you have received in your professional career about child maltreatment or mandated reporting?" The consensus response was at the beginning of the school year, primarily in August. Participant 10 reported having a more recent training that happened in the fall of the school year.

Interview Question 14 was as follows: "Describe the training you have received in your personal career about child maltreatment and mandated reporting." Most

participants reported the training to be online. Participant 07 said, “The training was online and what it did was go through different modules. The first part of the training talks about child abuse. What child abuse looks like. Secondly, it takes you of what…things to look for.” The second part of the training “teaches you how to report” and what is required to report.

Interview Question 15 was, “Is there anything that you think could be further useful in child maltreatment or mandated reporting training for ensuring accurate reporting?” An emerging theme was the need for additional training during the school year. Participant 09 documented that another training during staff development would be beneficial to discuss again the topic of child maltreatment. Participant 06 said, “A refresher or maybe an additional training course after the start of the second semester would be beneficial.”

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility is the measurement of a study’s accuracy and truthfulness to reality. Member checking was used to ensure credibility was achieved. I transcribed participant responses from the audio recordings of each interview to ensure accuracy. All participants for the study were asked the same questions to elicit open-ended responses for elaborate explanations. All participants were provided a copy of their transcribed interview and asked to review for clarity summaries and sensibility. Participants did not identify any discrepancy for their transcribed interview.

Transferability evaluates how study results can be applicable to alternative circumstances. A thorough description of my research was provided. This guaranteed a

well-defined content of base about the issue being explored and the appropriateness of transference for other mandated reporters, such as medical and mental health professionals. Transferability may be limited in this study because of sample size, and generalizability to other settings may not be likely.

Dependability refers to the degree of documented research procedures for consistent research findings. Member checking was also used to support dependability. Review from my doctoral chair and committee member research supervisor was the basis of measuring validity and reliability, as well as accountability. Written evaluation coupled with the NVivo 12 software was used as a multi-level cross-referencing system to guarantee dependability. Theme representation and efficient coding were double checked. Both analysis measures produced comparable outcomes.

Confirmability regards which results of the research can be confirmed by other researchers. Triangulation was used to understand the process of confirmability. Triangulation compiles information from different databases for comparison to validate consistency during the data collection phase. Data collection occurred through several streams for consistency in triangulation. This involved an audit trail of raw data, notes, and outcomes. Alternative triangulation methods involve using NVivo analysis software and personal handwritten analysis to identify data commonalities and themes.

Results

The next section will discuss interview results for school mandated reporters according to the research questions. Mandated reporters in schools provided responses

about school reporting procedures, experiences, and training on child maltreatment. Each section will report results to include themes and trends in the data for research validity.

Research Questions and Themes

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What criteria do mandated reporters believe are valid and which of these do they use when reporting a suspected case of child abuse?

RQ2: What situations of child abuse do mandated reporters see as ambiguous or difficult-to-categorize, and what criteria do they use to decide whether or not to file a report?

RQ3: How does professional training of mandated reporter's influence or inform them about when to report suspected abuse?

RQ4: What do mandated reporters think is lacking in formal training that should be added to assist them in making more accurate decisions to report child abuse?

RQ5: What do mandated reporters think is lacking in school district policy that should be added to assist them in making more accurate decisions to report child abuse?

RQ6: How does prosocial behavior influence mandated reporters' decision to report suspected abuse?

Education and training on the identification of child maltreatment is critical in accurate reporting. The primary theme of having an identified reporting protocol on how to report a case and then properly identifying indicators of child maltreatment, as identified in training, was attached to consistent and accurate reporting of child maltreatment. Most participants described their duty as a mandated reporter being that the

mere suspicion of maltreatment should be reported to the local welfare agency. Successively, the participating school mandated reporters' views of efficient child maltreatment reporting will be examined through data from participant interviews.

Table 2

Summary of Classifications

Research questions	Developing themes
RQ 1. What criteria do mandated reporters believe are valid and which of these do they use when reporting a suspected case of child abuse?	Apparent child maltreatment injuries Apparent hygiene concerns Change in behavior, appetite, and/or emotions District developed reporting protocol Reporting cases based on first-hand information Reporting cases based on suspicion
RQ 2. What situations of child abuse do mandated reporters see as ambiguous or difficult-to-categorize, and what criteria do they use to decide whether or not to file a report?	Emotional abuse Sexual abuse Physical neglect Verbal articulation from the child Concrete evidence of child maltreatment Possibility of future child maltreatment Documentation of child maltreatment for historical purposes
RQ 3. How does professional training of mandated reporter's influence or inform them about when to report suspected abuse?	Yearly updates about child maltreatment Identification of child maltreatment situations Provide examples of child maltreatment situations Knowledge assessments of child maltreatment
RQ 4. What do mandated reporters think is lacking in formal training that should be added to assist them in making more accurate decisions to report child abuse?	Additional child maltreatment training throughout the school year More child maltreatment scenarios Legislature on child maltreatment Confidence to report child maltreatment
RQ 5. What do mandated reporters think is lacking school district policy that should be added to assist them in making more accurate decisions to report child abuse?	Dealing with retaliation from parents after reporting Additional child maltreatment training Support from district after reporting Confidentiality Nothing missing from the policy
RQ 6. How does prosocial behavior influence mandated reporters' decision to report suspected abuse?	Child safety If reporting will help or hurt the child

Research Question 1

RQ1: What criteria do mandated reporters believe are valid and which of these do they use when reporting a suspected case of child abuse? The theme that developed from valid mandated reporters' criterion and what they use when reporting is identifiable injuries and apparent hygiene concerns related to child maltreatment.

Participant 01 reported a student "would come to school smelling of urine and feces every day". The smell was intolerable and would distract the other classroom students from learning. The first time the child was sent to the nurse and the parent was contacted on consent to provide alternative clothes, if not they could pick up the student. After consistent days of coming to school with hygiene concerns and the school nurse providing clean clothes then the decision was made to report a case.

Participant 03 shared "physical abuse you would see the markings, you see the bruising" as the basis of reporting a case. Also, coming to school in the "same clothes over and over and over again" would be another reason to report a case. Sometimes the student was only changing their undergarments and sometimes not even that so the physical abuse and hygiene would be considered valid indicators for reporting.

Participant 10 disclosed using hygiene concerns as a viable indicator to report suspicion of child abuse. Specifically, they described when seeing a child that normally comes to school well cut, "well dressed or kept and all of a sudden there's a drastic change in hygiene, the cleanliness of clothing, and they're starting to lose weight."

Research Question 2

RQ2: What situations of child abuse do mandated reporters see as ambiguous or difficult-to-categorize, and what criteria do they use to decide whether or not to file a report? Themes that arose from ambiguous or difficult-to-categorize child abuse situations were emotional abuse and sexual abuse. The theme that arose from criteria that mandated reporters use when deciding to report ambiguous or difficult-to-categorize situations was verbal articulation from the child.

Participant 01 revealed that a child being sexually abused would be ambiguous because children do not come out directly and share this information. Children may tend to display the behavior by acting out provocatively or drawing pictures describing the abuse.

Participant 02 shared that sexual abuse would a difficult-to-categorize situation because it is not something that can be identified by sight. It would be challenging to say, "Oh that kid is being sexually abused" and it is hard to know if it is happening.

Participant 05 reported that emotional/verbal abuse would be considered difficult-to-categorize because after one incident it is not easily identifiable. There would have to be ongoing situations that become "detrimental to a child's growth, self-esteem, and who they are." Verbal disclosure from the child that the abuse is occurring would be a sufficient indicator to report the case.

Participant 07 said emotional abuse would be considered ambiguous because again it is not easily identifiable just based on mere observation of the child. To identify this situation is occurring there would need to be direct statement from the child.

Participant 08 reported emotional abuse as a difficult-to-categorize situation and would report the information based on “what the student says”. A report would be made based on assessment with the student and what they disclose.

Research Question 3

RQ3: How does professional training of mandated reporter’s influence or inform them about when to report suspected abuse? The theme that developed from the influence of professional training on a mandated reporter’s decision to report suspected abuse was yearly updates that provided child maltreatment examples. Each participant was able to report they received yearly formal training provided by their school district. It was unanimous that at least, the training occurred prior to the start of a new school year.

Participant 01 described receiving online training that required the completion of different modules and mini assessments about the specific child abuse topic. The modules were interactive and taught staff when to report cases based on the situation. After completion of each module, there was a 10-14 question quiz where a score of 80 or above must have been achieved.

Participant 02 reflected on a training received in a smaller school district that was very detailed. An actual CPS representative facilitated the training in-person and gave insight to mandated reporters on what to report by providing scenarios. The facilitator expressed that mere suspicion was sufficient to report and it was not the mandated reporters job investigate whether abuse is occurring. Receiving training from a CPS representative, someone in the field doing the work, was reported to be profound.

Participant 03 recalled the training she received the past summer was “very helpful because you got to understand the aspect of how some of these kids are feeling while staying at home with their parents.” Hearing stories about children who had been abused shed light on what to look for and what needed to be reported. The training was two days that offered both in-person and virtual learning.

Participant 04 disclosed that the training they had received discussed different types and forms of child abuse. The training educated and provided different scenarios of child maltreatment. With each scenario you can explored, information regarding what to do, based on suspicion, was offered. Following the reporting protocol devised by the school district was described.

Participant 05 explained the training was a PowerPoint video with a voiceover speaking and telling you abuse signs to look for, then what to do if you saw it. As a mandated reporter it was described as your responsibility to initiate the report and not hand it off to someone else.

Participant 06 described completing online training that consisted of videos and supplemental handouts via email regarding child abuse. The training identified different behaviors to look for that could indicate child abuse.

Participant 07 shared the first part of training talked about child abuse, explaining what it was and what it looked like. The second part took you through things to look for associated with child maltreatment and how to report the case. The training also outlined what the district required to be reported.

Participant 10 recalled receiving training from a CPS director that identified new trends in child abuse, with cultural and societal changes bringing new signs of abuse. The director provided fresh information outside of traditional injuries and student behavioral changes as indicators of abuse.

Research Question 4

RQ4: What do mandated reporters think is lacking in formal training that should be added to assist them in making more accurate decisions to report child abuse? Participants were able to report what they believed was lacking in formal training that would assist in deciding when to report. The theme that emerged regarding what is lacking in formal training, was the need for additional training throughout the school year, following the annual training completed prior to the start of every school year.

Participant 02 indicated the need for "more training about what you're actually seeing and how to report would be beneficial." Expounding on this, the need to learn "what the state of Texas classifies as abuse or neglect."

Participant 06 reported that "a refresher or maybe an additional training course after the start of the second semester would be beneficial." This would remind mandated reporters about child maltreatment because with numerous daily tasks some signs may get overlooked.

Participant 07 said, "giving teachers more training throughout the school year." The training to provide updates on "signs and things to actually look for and encouraging them to report it" would be beneficial in formal training. This would assist in reducing reluctancy in reporting due to not being sure of indicators of abuse.

Participant 09 disclosed that another training in the year during staff development would be helpful to "use that as a topic or springboard to discuss it again, especially if we see more than one case of it on the campus."

Research Question 5

RQ5: What do mandated reporters think is lacking in school district policy that should be added to assist them in making more accurate decisions to report child abuse? Participants were able to share their opinion about what they believed to be missing from their school districts policy for reporting. The theme that evolved from this was how to handle retaliation from parents after reporting, and the need for additional child maltreatment training.

Participant 01 disclosed fear of retaliation from parents and how to deal with it once a report has been made. Some mandated reporters felt that if they reported it would come back on them. There was been a specific incident in which a parent came to the school to retaliate and confront the person who they believed reported. Situations were described to have escalated to the point of needing assistance from school district police to deescalate the situation.

Participant 02 shared that mandated reporters needed additional training on child maltreatment and to know they can report the case themselves. Not all staff were aware they could report the case without needing approval from a campus administrator, and thus losing confidentiality.

Participant 05 stated, "actual training from CPS or those who are receiving the reports on what to look for" would be beneficial to support accurate reporting. Knowing

what to the signs are that should be looked for was seen beneficial. The goal was not to report invalid information.

Participant 09 disclosed “staff might be a little reluctant in reporting” because of backlash from a parent so more instruction regarding how to respond in this situation would support mandated reporters if they took the initiative to report a case.

Research Question 6

RQ6: How does prosocial behavior influence mandated reporters’ decision to report suspected abuse? Prosocial behavior is understanding a mandated reporter’s willingness to report abuse based on how it will benefit the affected child (Carleton, 2006). The theme that evolved from this was child safety.

Participant 01 shared that she would report a case based on the likelihood of future abuse as determined if the child was at risk of being harmed again in the near future or by expressing their fear of returning home (i.e. being afraid to go back home). Assessing whether the child would be able to handle the outcome of deciding to report a case was also considered.

Participant 02 explained a concern for child safety and to provide parents with support like classes, services, or resources to address family functioning and dynamics.

Participant 07 indicated they would report a case based on how the student would be affected. There was concern that if the child was exposed to an ongoing dangerous situation then, a case would be reported.

Participant 08 divulged reporting based on assessment of child safety after speaking with the student. What the child disclosed about the abuse would aid in deciding whether to report.

Summary

The purpose of this research study was to explore the perceptions of training for child abuse reporting with mandated reporters in schools in relation to consistency in reporting of child abuse. The study was based on six research questions to identify themes related to criterion used by mandated reporters when reporting child abuse.

RQ1: What criteria do mandated reporters believe are valid and which of these do they use when reporting a suspected case of child abuse? The findings from this study suggest that mandated reporters used apparent injuries and hygiene concerns as explicit indicators of child maltreatment. Mandated reporters used these signs to report suspected abuse.

RQ2: What situations of child abuse do mandated reporters see as ambiguous or difficult-to-categorize, and what criteria do they use to decide whether or not to file a report? The results revealed that emotional abuse and sexual abuse were difficult-to-categorize situations due a lack of clearly observable signs. Mandated reporters used direct disclosure from the student documenting the abuse to report a case.

RQ3: How does professional training of mandated reporter's influence or inform them about when to report suspected abuse? The results suggested mandated reporters completed annual training on child maltreatment that provided them education on indicators and scenarios for reporting.

RQ4: What do mandated reporters think is lacking in formal training that should be added to assist them in making more accurate decisions to report child abuse? The study findings indicated mandated reporters would benefit from ongoing training on child maltreatment throughout the school year. This training would be additional to the yearly training provided before the start of every school year.

RQ5: What do mandated reporters think is lacking in school district policy that should be added to assist them in making more accurate decisions to report child abuse? The study findings showed that mandated reporters did not feel supported by their district when challenged with retaliation from parents about deciding to report a case. Additional training on child maltreatment was also revealed as missing from school district policy.

RQ6: How does prosocial behavior influence mandated reporters' decision to report suspected abuse? The results revealed mandated reporters felt compelled to report child maltreatment based on the child's safety and the likelihood of future abuse.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss the purpose of the research and the theoretical framework. I will also discuss implications for further research findings related to accurate reporting of child maltreatment by school mandated reporters based on a specific criterion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the summary findings for this study. Suggestions for up-to-date child abuse reporting practices and potential research based on the literature and theoretical framework are also discussed. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of training for child abuse training by mandated reporters in schools in relation to consistent reporting. The study was underpinned by the PB theory. Six research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What criteria do mandated reporters believe are valid and which of these do they use when reporting a suspected case of child abuse?

RQ2: What situations of child abuse do mandated reporters see as ambiguous or difficult-to-categorize, and what criteria do they use to decide whether or not to file a report?

RQ3: How does professional training of mandated reporter's influence or inform them about when to report suspected abuse?

RQ4: What do mandated reporters think is lacking in formal training that should be added to assist them in making more accurate decisions to report child abuse?

RQ5: What do mandated reporters think is lacking in school district policy that should be added to assist them in making more accurate decisions to report child abuse?

RQ6: How does prosocial behavior influence mandated reporters' decision to report suspected abuse?

The significant findings in this study were that mandated reporters received annual child abuse training but felt they would benefit from updates throughout the school year. Specifically, mandated reporters expressed needing additional training in the areas of reporting cases and scenarios depicting child abuse that would be identifiable with their students. Each participant in the study was eager and thorough in disclosing their perceptions regarding child abuse and was optimistic that their input would provide insight in supporting change for child safety from maltreatment.

Interpretation of the Findings

Professional training on child abuse played a vital role in reporting of cases by school mandated reporters to CPS in this study. The school professionals had a general idea of how to identify child abuse but would appreciate more training to support their assessment process. Mitchell et al. (1999) presented that inadequate training on identifying and reporting child maltreatment was one of five barriers of child abuse reporting by professionals and implied a lack of research in this area. Data obtained from participants were like research with the schools' professional population identified by Kessner and Robinson (2002) who were underreporting cases and were also responsible for the largest number of reported child maltreatment cases. This phenomenon is explained by educational personnel lacking ongoing, updated child maltreatment treatment, and recognizing related symptoms (Kessner & Robinson, 2002). Though the directly relevant research occurred some years ago, the results of the current research study indicate that at present, continued professional training for school mandated

reporters on the recognition of child maltreatment and the process for reporting cases would still support more consistent reporting to CPS.

The first research question addressed the identification of a reporting criterion that mandated reporters believed was concise and that they used to report a case. A few findings developed from participants' responses, including apparent injuries and hygiene concerns, change in physiology, and reporting cases based on suspicion and firsthand information. The relevant state Department of Family and Protective Services provided a definition for neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse maltreatment that aligned with the criterion used by school mandated reporters for identifying abuse. Also, mandated reporters were required to report cases of maltreatment based on mere suspicion (USDHHS, 2003). The school professionals in this study reported an understanding that as mandated reporters, the idea of suspicion qualified as enough to report a case, and it is the duty of CPS to validate if maltreatment has occurred. This concept supported the PB theory, and the research addressed identification of symptoms and reporting the information. The idea is for mandated reporters to alert CPS about a student displaying symptoms of abuse and for CPS to investigate the allegations.

The second research question addressed difficult-to-categorize child maltreatment situations and what criteria school professionals use when deciding to report. Dinehart and Kenny (2015) contended that when education providers were unclear if a child was being abused, they used child disclosure to provide clarification and understanding. The findings of this study were consistent with this literature. Most participants reported emotional and sexual abuse as ambiguous situations, and they used verbal articulation

from the student to determine if the maltreatment occurred. Participants reported these situations as difficult-to-categorize due to a lack of measurable definite symptoms. When not able to obtain a disclosure from the student, participants reported ongoing monitoring of the situation and then reporting once reaching a level of comfortability.

The third research question addressed the impact of influencing mandated reporters' decision to report suspected abuse. Literature revealed that school personnel are more inclined to report child maltreatment cases after receiving proper training (Townsend & Haviland, 2016). Townsend and Haviland (2016) conducted research on providing educators with training about recognizing child sexual abuse. They stated, "In the year following training, educators increased their reports of child sexual abuse to authorities by 283% as compared with career averaged reports in the year prior to training" (Townsend & Haviland, 2016, Abstract, para. 4). School professionals in this study endorsed the literature. Participants reported receiving annual updates about child maltreatment before the start of a new school year. The training provided examples and scenarios of child abuse to assist with the early detection by school mandated reporters. At the conclusion of all training, professionals are required to complete a knowledge assessment to acknowledge their retention of information. This concept supported the theoretical framework of the PB theory, with mandated reporters expressing willingness to report child abuse when equipped with adequate tools for appropriate detection. More reports to CPS are supported so that more victims can receive intervention services (Townsend & Haviland, 2016).

The fourth research question addressed identifying missing components of formal training that could assist mandated reporters with making accurate decisions to report. Participants reported the need for additional training throughout the school year, in addition to the yearly training already provided. This additional training would refresh mandated reporters about the identification of child abuse and serve as a reminder to be alert for indicators. Participants disclosed not feeling confident when reporting because they only received training one time in the school year and the information learned was not retained due to being tasked with other challenges throughout the school year. Townsend and Haviland (2016) suggested that school professionals would benefit from ongoing training during the school year for accurate and increased numbers for reporting. Ongoing training provides professionals with knowledge regarding new trends in child and abuse that requires reporting to CPS for investigation.

The fifth research question addressed identifying missing components of school district policy that could assist mandated reporters with making accurate decisions to report. Participants expressed not feeling supported by their district after reporting a case and parents seeking retaliation against them. Many participants expressed fear in reporting because parents become hostile towards them and expressed violence, to the point of district police being involved. In turn, this hostility broke down the parent-educator relationship when the parent no longer trusted the professional with familial dynamics. School professionals feel that additional training is needed in this area on how to respond to retaliation and maintain confidentiality when reporting.

The sixth research question addressed how prosocial behavior influenced a mandated reporter's decision to report abuse. PB theory provides for the opportunity to identify societal, personal, and educational influences on school professional's decision making for reporting. Many participants reported an overall concern for child safety as a driving force to report suspected abuse. Their willingness to report reflected an awareness of how the child could be impacted by CPS involvement (Carleton, 2006). A key reflection for the participants was whether reporting a case would help or hurt the child to prevent future abuse. This relates to PB theory and the school professional's voluntary report of suspicion of abuse with the intent of safety as benefit for the child (Winterich et al., 2013).

I examined participants' perceptions and discovered a trend in responses that supported mandated reporters benefiting from ongoing child maltreatment training for consistent reporting. These results are supportive of recommendations from Townsend and Haviland (2016), who indicated child maltreatment reporting by mandated reporters increased after receiving thorough training about abuse, symptoms, and how to report cases. In the current study, participant perceptions were that child maltreatment training throughout the school year would reinforce what they have learned and keep them aware of symptoms for consistent reporting.

The occurrence of increased reporting appeared in self-reports from participants engaged in ongoing training about child maltreatment. Outcomes were consistent with findings from previous studies concerning reporting practices regarding school mandated reporters reporting more cases to CPS after adequate training (Kessner & Robinson,

2002). The results propose that school mandated reporters training, support, and knowledge of child maltreatment are important for increased and accurate reporting to child welfare agencies.

The results of this parallel with the PB theory, supporting the voluntary behavior of school mandated reporters to benefit child safety by reporting cases to CPS. The perception of mandated reporters heavily relied on the use of training to determine if reporting a case would be helpful or harmful to a child's welfare. The PB theory helped school professionals with deciding to report for ambiguous situations.

Limitations of the Study

Geographical location was a limitation of this study, and results cannot be globally generalized to school mandated reporters across the country, as participant recruitment was limited to a specific area. Also, all participants were of the same gender and race, which may not be an accurate depiction for school professionals of the opposite gender and other races. Results from this study were reflective of only a limited sample size of perceptions for mandated reporters. Trustworthiness of results was expanded through triangulation of data from participant interview data.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this study, further research is recommended. Child maltreatment is a serious topic for discussion because of its impact on children throughout the country. Further research on this topic can be launched on a larger scale with a more diverse sample size, such as gender and race. Findings in this study suggested that school mandated reporters would be more confident in reporting with

ongoing training. Findings in this study correlated with previous research that cases are underreported by school mandated reporters. Further research relative to the increased levels of training is thus also recommended.

Implications

Researchers have explained the reporting practices of by mandated reporters, but those specifically in schools have not been thoroughly explored. This leaves cause for questioning the impact of training on mandated reporters' reporting practices (Kessner & Robinson, 2002). The findings of this research are critical for children, families, and school professionals to understand accurately involving a family with the child welfare system.

School professionals in this study provided direct statements about their perceptions of child maltreatment training and how it impacts the decision to report. Professionals reported benefiting from ongoing training about child abuse that addressed concerns of how to report and updated state legislature. Based on data collected in this study, school professionals are only required to complete an annual training at the beginning of school year on child maltreatment. The training content does not seem to be in-depth, and many professionals expressed reluctance in reporting because of gap in knowledge and confidence for identifying and reporting suspected abuse. It is apparent that there is need for more thorough training of child maltreatment symptoms and reporting. The development of further training to address issues identified in this study would support mandated school reporters with accurate reporting of child abuse. School

administrators can support campus mandated reporters by making training tools available for ongoing learning and equitable reporting.

Conclusion

The present research has supported a need for additional thorough, qualitative research with emphasis on training for child abuse reporting with mandated reporters in schools in relation to consistency in reporting of child abuse. In this qualitative research study, I focused on perceptions of training for child abuse reporting with school mandated reporters and relied on semistructured interviews as an approach to offer a phenomenological description of their perceptions. I identified an explicit need for ongoing training of schools' professionals on child maltreatment for consistent reporting. The literature revealed limited research specifically on the perceptions of training for child abuse reporting with school mandated reporters. Increased awareness for school mandated reporters is critical for promoting child safety. This research study was intended to explore school mandated reporters' accounts of their perceptions of supports and processes that encouraged reporting child abuse. Through adequate ongoing education, school professionals may identify specialized training needs on various child maltreatment topics for effective reporting of child abuse.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Part I

School Reporting Procedures

1. Does your school or district have standard procedures for reporting child maltreatment?

   If yes, what is the procedure for reporting suspected child maltreatment?

   If no, what procedure do you use for reporting suspected child maltreatment?

2. Do you believe your school or district's procedure for reporting is efficient for accurate reporting?

   If yes, what makes it efficient?

   If no, what makes it not efficient?

3. Do you believe there is anything missing from your school or districts reporting procedures that could assist with accurate reporting?

Part II

Child Maltreatment Experiences

1. What makes you suspicious of a student being a victim of child maltreatment?

2. When suspicious of child maltreatment for one of your students, how often have you reported or caused a report to be made to child protective services?

3. When you have been suspicious that one of your students has been maltreated, but have not instigated a report to child protective services, why did you not report?

4. What child maltreatment situations with your students do you consider difficult-to-categorize?

5. What factors do you consider when deciding to report difficult-to-categorize maltreatment for your students?

Part III

Training

1. When did you first receive training information about child maltreatment or mandated reporting?

2. What is your understanding of the role of a mandated reporter?

3. How often do you receive training updates about child maltreatment or mandated reporting in your professional career?

4. Approximately, how many cumulative hours have you received during your pre-service education and professional career about child maltreatment and/or mandated reporting?

5. When was the most recent training you have received in your professional career about child maltreatment or mandated reporting?

6. Describe the training you have received in your professional career about child maltreatment and mandated reporting?

7. Is there anything that you think could be further useful in child maltreatment or mandated reporting training for ensuring accurate reporting?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol Introduction

Introductory Protocol:

This interview is structured to not last longer than one hour. Interview questions will cover a variety of topics. In order to be mindful of the time, there may be moments during the interview where the process is sped up to ensure all topics are addressed.

During the interview I will record interview responses by taking hand written notes. The written notes will only be accessible to the researcher and stored away in a confidential and locked file cabinet.

You will be asked to sign an informed consent document that meets the requirements for Walden University Institutional Review Board. This form outlines your voluntary participation in the research and at any given time you are able to withdraw your participation from the study.

Thank you for your agreed participation.

Introduction:

You have been chosen for participation in this research study because of your role as a mandated school reporter of suspected child abuse.

The research focuses on exploring the reporting practices of child abuse for mandated reporters in schools. The research study is to learn more about developed school district reporting procedures, suspicion of child maltreatment, and training on child abuse. The research is not designed to evaluate your professional expertise.

Appendix C: Demographic Information of Participants

These questions are intended to obtain background information. Please read each question carefully and circle the appropriate response.

1. What is your occupation?

a. Teacher

b. Counselor

c. Nurse

d. Principal

e. Social Worker

f. Psychologist

2. What is your gender?

a. Male

b. Female

c. Decline to indicate

3. What is your age range?

a. $\leq$ 25 years old

b. 26-35 years old

c. 36-45 years old

d. $\geq$ 46 years old

4. What is your ethnicity?

a. Caucasian

b. African American

c. Hispanic

d. Asian/Pacific Islander

e. Multiracial

f. Other

5. How many years have you worked in your profession?

_____

6. What is your highest level of education?

a. Professional Skills Education

b. Bachelors Degree

c. Masters Degree

d. Doctorate Degree