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College of Psychology and Community Services

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Nina C. Kornegay

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Underreporting of Educator Sexual Misconduct in K–12 Schools

by

Nina C. Kornegay

MA, The Chicago School of Professional Psychology, 2011

BS, North Carolina Central University, 2002

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

December 2022

Abstract

Educator sexual misconduct continues to present a problem in U.S. K–12 schools. As mandatory reporters, K–12 educators must report any suspicion of educator sexual misconduct, but despite state and federal laws regarding reporting, educator sexual misconduct often goes unreported. The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study was to learn more about how U.S. K–12 educators perceive underreporting of educator sexual misconduct. The integrated change model served as this study's conceptual framework. Semistructured interviews were conducted to collect data from eight educators in K–12 schools in two school districts in North Carolina. Coding analysis was used to identify themes. Five themes related to reporting barriers to educator sexual misconduct emerged: problematic training, inconsistent training across schools, lack of rapport with supervisors, fear of repercussions for reporting, and lack of accountability and consequences for not reporting. Three themes related to overcoming those barriers to reporting emerged: Title 9 training, professional conduct, and accountability for not reporting. These findings could be used for positive social change to decrease barriers to reporting, improve mandatory reporting and sexual harassment training, and keep students safe from harm.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my circle. You all have supported me, checked on me, listened to me vent, and, most importantly, prayed for me. Without any of you, I don’t know if I would have made it this far. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I love you all!!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Federal and state laws protect students from any sexual misconduct by school employees (Grant et al., 2019). However, educator sexual misconduct continues to be an issue in U.S. K–12 schools. An estimated one in 10 K–12 students may experience sexual misconduct at the hands of an educator (Grant & Heinecke, 2019). According to Grant et al. (2019), school systems must provide educators with policies and training regarding awareness and prevention of educator sexual misconduct.

Grant and Heinecke (2019) asserted that despite federal and state laws, cases of educator sexual misconduct go unreported. Mandatory reporting laws require law enforcement and child protective services to be notified when an incident of educator sexual misconduct is suspected. The authors continued that the mandatory reporting law imposes consequences for those who fail to report any suspected incidents of educator sexual misconduct. Despite these consequences, educator sexual offenders go without punishment and transfer to a different school or school district where they might reoffend.

Background

Educator sexual misconduct remains an understudied yet continuous problem in U.S. K–12 schools (Grant et al., 2019). In a literature review search on the topic, Shakeshaft (2004, as cited in Grant et al., 2019; Wurtele et al., 2019) found approximately 9.6% of U.S. K–12 students (i.e., 5 million students) are victims of sexual misconduct. Out of those 5 million students, an estimated one in 10 can experience sexual maltreatment by a school employee (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2004). A

school employee can be anyone who works in or cares for a child in a K–12 setting or activity (Henschel & Grant, 2018). The current study focused on K–12 educators in the United States.

Under the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), each state must provide provisions for keeping children safe from harm. As a result, 47 out of 50 states developed mandatory reporting laws. Designated individuals, including educators in K–12 schools, must report any suspicion of child maltreatment (Child Welfare Information Gateway Children's Bureau, 2015). However, the law lacks accountability measures that would ensure implementation (Grant & Heinecke, 2019).

Educator sexual misconduct can affect students, educators, and the school system. Victims of educator sexual misconduct may struggle in school, become depressed, or turn to substance abuse (Grant et al., 2019; Wurtele et al., 2019). Grant and Heinecke (2019) explained educators and school systems may experience backlash, a tainted reputation, and financial consequences if found responsible for incidents of educator sexual misconduct. Consequently, despite mandatory reporting laws, incidents of educator sexual misconduct go unreported.

Previous studies have shown educators, school administrators, and county officials perceive barriers exist to reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct. However, these studies have not primarily focused on barriers to reporting perceived by K–12 educators. A lack of research also existed regarding how to overcome barriers to reporting. The current study focused on the perspective of K–12 educators regarding

barriers to reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct and overcoming those barriers.

Problem Statement

Educator sexual misconduct in K–12 schools is vastly underreported (Grant & Heinecke, 2019). According to a study by the Chicago Tribune, school officials frequently failed to report incidents of educator sexual misconduct toward students (Jackson et al., 2018). Over the last 10 years in Chicago, students reported over 500 cases of educator sexual misconduct to the police. However, school officials generally failed to report these cases. The issue of underreporting is not unique to Chicago Schools (Keierleber, 2019). Abboud et al. (2018) asserted underreporting also occurs in other states where the authors found a lack of documentation of incidents of educator sexual misconduct. Abboud et al. also noted that because no unified way of measuring the prevalence of incidents has been established, the magnitude of the impact remains unknown.

Underreporting of educator sexual misconduct perpetuates the incidence of educator sexual misconduct in U.S. K–12 schools (Grant & Heinecke, 2019). Unreported cases of educator sexual misconduct allow offending educators to transfer to different school districts without consequences (Grant et al., 2019). Moving without consequences allows perpetrators to reoffend. The Government Accountability Office (2010, as cited in Grant et al., 2019) reported that a teacher-offender could assault approximately 73 victims across three school districts due to their misconduct not being reported.

Although underreporting remains an undeniable issue, researchers know little about why underreporting occurs from the perspective of K–12 educators. Even though researchers have noted the problem of underreporting (Fromuth et al., 2016; Grant & Heinecke, 2019), they have not centered this topic in their research agendas. For example, Grant et al. (2019) noted that underreporting represents one barrier to Title 9 implementation in K–12 schools. However, the researchers focused on how to better implement Title 9 practices without exploring why school officials fail to report. K–12 educators could provide valuable information to help fill this gap in the literature. Therefore, the researcher identified a need for a study addressing K–12 educators' perspectives on underreporting of educator sexual misconduct.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological exploratory study was to investigate U.S. K–12 educators' perspectives related to the underreporting of educator sexual misconduct. Specifically, the researcher explored two main facets of the underreporting phenomenon: K–12 educators' perspectives of barriers to reporting and potential ways to overcome those barriers. The researcher had determined a need existed to address the gap in understanding underreporting by seeking K–12 educators' thoughts regarding barriers to underreporting and how to overcome them.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study.

RQ1: What are the experiences of U.S. K–12 educators regarding barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct?

RQ2: What are the experiences of U.S. K–12 educators regarding potential ways to overcome barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct?

Conceptual Framework

The integrated change (I-change) model served as the conceptual framework for this study. The I-change model integrates concepts from the theory of planned behavior, social cognitive theory, the transtheoretical model, the health belief model, and goal-setting theories (Goebbels et al., 2008). Schols et al. (2013) contended that, according to the I-change model, an individual's behavior is influenced by attitude, ability, and social influences. Theorists who subscribe to the I-change model assume that motivation is determined by predisposing factors, information factors, awareness factors, motivational factors, intention state, ability factors, behavioral state, and barriers (Goebbels et al., 2008).

The researcher in the present study used the I-change model to categorize the reporting behaviors of K–12 educators. The motivational factors of the I-change model corresponded with previous studies regarding teachers' reporting behaviors (Goebbels et al., 2008). Because teachers must report any suspicion of child abuse, educational leaders must understand the barriers to reporting coworkers and ways to overcome those barriers.

Nature of the Study

The researcher chose a qualitative exploratory phenomenological design for its suitability for identifying the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants (see Creswell, 2013). The researcher collected data for the study from semistructured interviews with eight educators working in K–12 schools in North

Carolina. Semistructured interviews enabled the researcher to ask K–12 educators open-ended questions and allowed respondents to answer in their own words (see Longhurst, 2010). The exploratory phenomenological approach enabled the researcher to delve deeper into perceptions of barriers to underreporting educator sexual misconduct and how to overcome those barriers.

Definitions

The researcher used the following terms and definitions during the course of this study.

Child maltreatment refers to physical, verbal, emotional, or sexual abuse or neglect (a).

*Educato*r refers to a teacher responsible for fostering intellectual development and ensuring the safety of students in school and during school activities (Wurtele et al., 2019).

Educator sexual misconduct was defined by Shakeshaft (2004, as cited in Abboud et al., 2018) as any "behavior by an educator aimed at a student and intended to sexually arouse or titillate the educator or the child" (p. 1).

Physical behaviors include fondling, kissing, penetration, or touching of genitalia (Burgess et al., 2010).

Student refers to any person enrolled in an educational institution through Grade 12 (Abboud et al., 2018).

Verbal behaviors involve sexual talk (Burgess et al., 2010).

Visual behaviors involve showing pornography (Burgess et al., 2010).

Assumptions

In this study, the researcher assumed participants would find the topic of barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct valuable and would have a genuine interest in participating in the study. The researcher also assumed that all educators who participated would respond truthfully about their perceptions. Third, the researcher assumed K–12 educators would not fear negative perceptions or experience any repercussions for participating in the study. Last, the researcher assumed participants understood their identity would be protected.

Scope and Delimitations

The researcher designed the study with a goal of understanding K–12 educators' perspectives regarding barriers to reporting suspected incidents of educator misconduct and ways to overcome those barriers. The scope of the study included educators from K–12 schools in North Carolina. The study did not include school administrators or other school employees. The researcher collected data using semistructured interviews and observations of K–12 educators in North Carolina.

Limitations

One potential limitation of this study was the difficulty of recruiting K–12 educators. Due to the possibility of exposing a school's Title 9 violations, school district leaders may have been hesitant to allow educators to participate in the study. Participants may have also hesitated to participate due to prior incidents regarding educator sexual misconduct or a family member's involvement. Another limitation of this study involved

the limited availability of literature regarding underreporting of educator sexual misconduct.

The potential for researcher bias also existed because the researcher had personal and professional knowledge on the topic of educator sexual misconduct and had read about the topic in the literature. The researcher avoided actions or statements that could influence participants' thought processes or responses during the interviews. The researcher kept a reflective journal to record thoughts throughout the research process. This activity helped the researcher recognize whether conscious or unconscious biases were emerging during data collection.

Significance

This research may contribute to the literature because it addressed underreporting from the perspectives of K–12 educators, a population charged with keeping students safe. This research may also contribute to the literature by providing descriptions of the experiences of K–12 educators related to why educator sexual misconduct goes unreported. The results of this study may help inform school administrators of the barriers to reporting and strategies needed to overcome them. If these barriers are overcome, more incidents of educator sexual misconduct may be reported. By reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct, educators may be able to prevent teacher-offenders from transferring to another school and reoffending (Grant et al., 2019). The positive social change implications of this study involved its potential to help educators prevent additional or ongoing student abuse.

Summary

Incidents of educator sexual misconduct continue to be an issue in U.S. K–12 schools, and many of these cases remain unreported. This chapter provided background on why incidents of educator sexual misconduct go unreported. The researcher presented the need for the study, the research questions, and definitions of key terms and phrases. Chapter 2 presents a detailed literature review that includes information on the I-change model, sexual misconduct legislation, the harmful effects of sexual abuse, and reporting and underreporting in various sectors.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this phenomenological exploratory study was to investigate U.S. K–12 educators' perspectives related to the underreporting of educator sexual misconduct. The researcher used semistructured interviews with educators at K–12 schools in North Carolina with the goal of understanding their perspectives on the responsibility to report fellow coworkers for misconduct. The first step in understanding this phenomenon involved conducting a thorough review of existing scholarly literature on the subject. To review existing scholarly literature, the researcher consulted major academic databases such as Google Scholar, PsycINFO, JSTOR, and EBSCOhost. Terms searched included *educator sexual misconduct*, *teacher–student sexual misconduct*, *reporting educator sexual misconduct*, and *mandatory reporting*. The researcher also checked the reviewed article's reference list to find any additional articles of interest. Chapter 2 includes a description of the conceptual framework followed by a review of the literature surrounding educator sexual misconduct, mandatory reporting laws, and underreporting of educator sexual misconduct. The chapter ends with a summary and conclusion.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, the researcher employed the I-change model, which integrates ideas from the theory of planned behavior, social cognitive theory, the transtheoretical model, the health belief model, and implementation and goal-setting theories (Goebbels et al., 2008). Researchers often use this model to examine and explain different health

behaviors (Kasten et al., 2019). Goebbels et al. (2008) explained how the components of the I-change model could be used to explain educators' reporting behaviors.

According to the I-change model, an individual's behavior derives from motivation, intention, and ability (de Vries et al., 2005). Attitudes, social influences, and self-efficacy expectations represent the three factors that determine an individual's motivation (de Vries et al., 2005). An individual's action plan and performance skills determine their abilities (Goebbels et al., 2008), and an individual's ability to recognize the advantages and disadvantages of their behavior determines their attitude (Goebbels et al., 2019). The I-change model is determined by motivational factors such as awareness, psychological, biological, social and cultural, and informational (de Vries et al., 2005).

Educators Reporting Methods Using the I-Change Model

Researchers have already applied the I-change model in the health field (Gobbels et al., 2008); however, the researcher applied it in this study to help describe the phenomenon of educator sexual misconduct reporting. According to Goebbels et al. (2008), attitudes, self-efficacy, intention, and social influences may motivate educators to report inappropriate teacher–student relationships. The authors added these factors can also cause barriers to reporting inappropriate teacher–student relationships. Goebbels et al. identified a need for additional research on how the variables of the I-change model could be used to understand educators' reporting methods.

The researcher determined the I-change model represented an appropriate choice as a foundation of this study because the study focused on perceptions of K–12 educators regarding barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct and how to overcome them.

The model helped the researcher understand the behavioral change process as it related to the K–12 educators' reporting efforts. The following sections present a review of the literature concerned with understanding educator sexual misconduct, mandatory reporting, and understanding reporting by colleagues.

Educator Sexual Misconduct

Childhood sexual abuse is a preventable public health issue (Mathers et al., as cited in Assini-Meytin et al., 2020), yet educator sexual misconduct continues to be a threat to students in K–12 schools (Grant et al., 2019). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020), approximately one in four girls and one in 13 boys experience childhood sexual abuse. In 91% of those cases, the child or their family members knew the offender (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). In some cases, children experience sexual abuse at the hands of an educator. One in 10 students reported being a victim of educator sexual misconduct (Shakeshaft et al., 2019).

Childhood sexual misconduct by an educator is referred to as *educator sexual misconduct*. Shakeshaft (2013) coined this phrase to describe the inappropriate behavior of educators toward students. Wurtele et al. (2019) stated that even though most inappropriate behavior that occurs in a school is committed by an educator, other school employees such as administrators, janitors, school bus drivers, or counselors can sexually offend. After incidents of educator sexual misconduct, schools can face a backlash, civil suits, or a teacher who is left questioning their decision to report. Educator sexual abuse of children has far-reaching effects, causing long-term trauma such as psychological or behavioral problems (Grant et al., 2019).

Effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse

The effects of child sexual abuse and harassment can negatively impact an adolescent's life, and the effects can manifest into adulthood. Children can experience sexual abuse from a family member or a stranger (Hall & Hall, 2011). According to Hall and Hall (2011), not all sexual abuse involves touching, but it can involve coercion into taking sexually explicit photographs, internet harassment, or exposure to pornographic material. Hailes et al. (2019) reported a correlation between childhood sexual abuse and psychosocial and health-related problems.

Hall and Hall (2011) reported depression as the most reported long-term effect of childhood sexual abuse. As a result of depression, survivors can engage in suicide ideations, substance abuse, or self-harm (Hailes et al., 2019). Other symptoms resulting from childhood sexual abuse include eating disorders and avoidance (Briere & Elliott, 1994; Chen et al., 2010; Nanni et al., 2012, all cited in Li et al., 2016). Brenner and Ben-Amitay (2015) reported victims of childhood sexual abuse could be revictimized in adulthood, and Bigras et al. (2015) claimed they can experience a disturbance in self-capacity, causing a decrease in self-worth. Bigras et al. added that some survivors experience reduced sexual satisfaction and sexual distress.

Childhood sexual abuse can also impact interpersonal relationships (Dugal et al., 2016). According to Dugal et al. (2016), victims may lack social support and socially isolate themselves from others. Dugal et al. suggested that romantic relationships present challenges and often lead to dysfunctional relationships. The authors added victims may

experience abandonment anxieties and avoidance of intimacy, and some victims of childhood sexual abuse experience intimate partner violence.

Effects of Educator Sexual Misconduct

Victims of educator sexual misconduct suffer emotionally and psychologically, but they can also suffer academically (Wurtele et al., 2019). Victims begin missing days from school and perform poorly academically. According to Shakeshaft (date, as cited by Shakeshaft et al., 2019), some victims commit suicide, and Shakeshaft et al. (2019) asserted victims can feel guilty and ashamed. Students do not suffer alone; their parents and family members can also experience long-term emotional and financial consequences (Wurtele et al., 2019).

According to Shakeshaft et al. (2019), the community as a whole can suffer from an educator-predator's actions; this negative effect applies especially to teachers, administrators, and school districts. Shakeshaft et al. explained that educator sexual misconduct can ruin a school district's reputation. Wurtele et al. (2019) asserted that the educator perpetrator can have their license revoked and be criminally charged, and victims may seek damages, holding school systems financially responsible. Shakeshaft et al. reported some school districts have paid anywhere from 3 to $26 million to settle civil suits.

History of Mandatory Reporting

To address the problem of child sexual abuse, the U.S. government has enacted several laws. Child protection agencies promoting awareness of child maltreatment date back to the 1920s. The National Abuse and Neglect Training and Publications Project

(2014) explained the federal government was not initially involved in child protection and other social service agencies. The organization claimed that after the Great Depression, a lack of funding led to the dismantling of many agencies. According to the author, the federal government became involved in the welfare of people with the 1935 signing of the Social Security Act.

According to the National Abuse and Neglect Training and Publications Project 2014), years after legislators signed the Social Security Act, various agencies received questionnaires designed to gather information about the need for child protective services. The National Abuse and Neglect Training and Publications Project reported that 1960s media coverage of child abuse and neglect increased. The Child Bureau met with lawyers, judges, social workers, and hospital employees to draft a document proposing hospital staff and doctors be mandatory reporters. The National Abuse and Neglect Training and Publications Project continued that by 1967, all states and the District of Columbia had passed laws regarding mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse and neglect. However, the author added that the conversation about child abuse and neglect did not stop there; it eventually reached the U.S. House of Representatives, which adopted the CAPTA of 1974 to prevent child abuse and neglect.

CAPTA

In addition to mandatory reporting laws in 1974, the federal government adopted CAPTA to handle incidents of child abuse (Golomb et al., 2017). CAPTA required each state to develop guidelines for investigating and reporting suspected incidents of child abuse (Nelson et al.1984, as cited in Golomb et al., 2017). Hogelin (2013) asserted

another responsibility of CAPTA was to provide funding for child abuse prevention. The author explained funding relies on the state's compliance with mandated guidelines to create reporting and prevention programs. According to Hogelin, CAPTA also provided immunity to individuals who reported incidents of child maltreatment. Eventually, the Children's Justice Act emerged from CAPTA (Golden, 2000). Golden (2000) stated the Children's Justice Act provides states with tools for investigating and prosecuting child sexual abuse cases. The author explained CAPTA next led to the development of research and demonstration projects related to the cause, prevention, and treatment of child maltreatment.

CAPTA has been amended and reauthorized throughout the years. The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2019) pointed out CAPTA's last reauthorization occurred on December 20, 2010, with the most recent amendment occurring on January 7, 2019. The amendment added procedures and provisions covering victims of sex trafficking and safety plans for children born affected by substance abuse (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). CAPTA is not the only law written to protect children from abuse. Grant et al. (2019) stated the primary law for protecting children from maltreatment, especially educator sexual misconduct, is Title 9 of the Educational Amendments of 1972.

Title 9

Two years before passing CAPTA, legislators passed Title 9 of the Educational Amendments of 1972 with the aim of protecting students and educators from discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual violence (Broadway & Marcotte, 2014). According to Grant et al. (2019), the DOE, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR), the Office

of Safe and Healthy Students, and the National Center for Education, all enforce Title 9. Legislators originally established Title 9 in response to the unfair treatment women faced in the educational arena during the 1970s (U.S. Department of Justice, 2012). Title 9 mandated: "no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" (as cited in Lieberwitz et al., 2016, p. 4).

Lieberwitz et al. (2016) reported that over the years, the OCR adjusted Title 9, extending it in the 1980s to address inappropriate sexual misconduct. The authors stated that as part of Title 9's evolution, The National Advisory Council in Women's Educational Programs suggested the OCR define sexual harassment. According to Lieberwitz et al., other changes came after lawsuits regarding sexual harassment surfaced. The authors reported that in 1992, the Supreme Court ruled that under Title 9, victims of sexual harassment could receive monetary compensation.

In 2011, the OCR and DOE released the Revised Sexual Harassment Guidance. Two important documents released as supplements included the "Dear Colleague Letter: Sexual Violence" (U.S. DOE & OCR, 2011) and "Questions and Answers on Title 9 and Sexual Violence" (U.S. DOE & OCR, 2014). These documents provided guidelines on addressing the rise of sexual violence and sexual harassment, reinforcing the school's obligation to implement Title 9 by appointing a responsible person or mandatory reporter and by publishing Title 9 policies, steps which would provide the public with their legal rights under Title 9 (DOE & OCR, 2014). In 2017, the newly appointed U.S. Secretary of

Education, Betsy DeVos, rescinded the “Dear Colleague Letter” and the “Questions and Answers on Title 9 and Sexual Violence,” giving greater protections to accused students and reducing responsibilities of investigating complaints (Brown & Mangan, 2018).

Phenicie (2019) asserted the proposed changes to Title 9 set forth by DeVos did not fit the needs of K–12 schools. The author continued that one of the main proposed changes to Title 9 was to investigate cases of harassment only if they interfered with the student’s ability to learn. Phenicie explained that any suspicions of educator sexual misconduct must be reported. Changes to Title 9 regarding who reporters should inform of investigations conflicted with existing mandatory reporting laws. Proposed changes suggested individuals report their suspicions to the school’s Title 9 coordinator; however, the guidelines related to the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (2018) stated the first step is to provide an oral or written report to the Department of Social Services in the child’s county of residence. Phenicie reported most of the changes to Title 9 related to decreasing incidents of sexual misconduct at higher education and college campuses than at K–12 schools. Even though the main focus has been higher education, the OCR and DOE must write guidelines including the specific needs of K–12 schools.

Barriers to Mandatory Reporting

Understanding the known barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct may help educators overcome them. Although researchers in the literature did not address barriers to reporting or overcoming those barriers, they did identify some barriers. These barriers include a lack of government policy implementation (Grant & Heinecke, 2019),

lack of training and awareness (Falkiner et al., 2017; Grant et al., 2019; Kenny, 2001), and fear of consequences (Falkiner et al., 2017).

Lack of Implementation

Grant and Heinecke (2019) attributed unreported educator sexual misconduct to a failure to implement governmental policy. Additionally, the authors explained that legislators often leave policy language vague and open to interpretation. Schools cannot properly implement policies that are not clearly worded, and subsequently, teachers cannot report if they feel confused about the policies. Hence, poor implementation of policies contributes to underreporting. Grant and Heinecke and Grant et al. (2019) conducted two studies highlighting reasons for poor policy implementation. Using a multiple case study (*n* = 42), Grant and Heinecke examined the intergovernmental system and the implementation of educator sexual misconduct policies in three school districts in the state of Virginia. Participants for this study included school district, county, state, and federal government employees. The researchers conducted semistructured interviews and analyzed the data using Erikson's analytic induction. In the second study, Grant et al. conducted a multiple case study (*n* = 92) examining the implementation of the key elements of Title 9 in K–12 schools before and after an incident of educator sexual misconduct. The authors conducted the study between January 2016 and September 2017. They collected data using document analysis, semistructured interviews, and focus groups with secondary actors. Participants included school employees, school administrators, and county officials. The authors analyzed data using analytic induction.

Grant and Heinecke (2019) described an intergovernmental system as an educational system with several layers: federal, state, and local school districts. The authors added that state departments of education, school districts, schools, child welfare agencies, district attorneys, and local law enforcement all manage educator sexual misconduct policies. These agencies all share policy changes and implementation (O'Toole et al., 2012,as cited in Grant & Heinecke, 2019). Grant and Heinecke stated that having multiple agencies involved in policy implementation "creates an unstable system for policy implementation with many severe, unintended consequences" (p. 9).

Grant and Heinecke (2019) found that intergovernmental policy implementation failed for a variety of reasons, including vaguely written policies. According to the authors, vague policies intentionally allow those charged with implementing them to do so at their own discretion. The authors claimed the second reason for policy implementation failure involved lack of communication between agencies. The third reason for intergovernmental policy implementation was because there was a gap in preventing sexual predators from being in the classroom. Grant and Heinecke listed lack of background checks, improper record keeping, allowing an educator accused of sexual misconduct to transfer to another school district without consequences, and unsearchable criminal records as examples of failing to keep predators out of the classroom.

Grant et al. (2019) showed participants' challenges included "being unaware of model policies from either state- or district-level sources, difficulties addressing the use of evolving technologies to interact with students, and the ambiguity of boundaries around physical contact" (p. 11). The authors explained participants specifically wanted a

policy regarding technology and the use of social media and texting with students, and they wanted clear, written policies surrounding physical boundaries and shows of affection toward students.

Both Grant and Heinecke (2019) and Grant et al. (2019) contributed knowledge about why teachers underreport. However, they fell short on three key fronts: sample size, population, and purpose. Both studies featured small sample sizes. The second limitation involved the population of the studies. Both sets of researchers interviewed several individuals, including attorneys, principals, counselors, educators, and other governmental officials. Even though educators were interviewed, however, the researchers did not focus on them in the studies. Grant and Heinecke focused on the intergovernmental implementation of policies, and Grant et al. focused on Title 9 implementation as a whole. Reporting represented a small facet of those areas of interest. Therefore, the authors did not address educator reporting in their findings in an in-depth way. Some of the findings served as jumping-off points for this current study of barriers to reporting and overcoming those barriers.

Lack of Training and Awareness

Under the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO's) (2014) guidance, Title 9 implementation requires the provision of sexual abuse training to school employees. However, studies have indicated educators are not receiving proper training on sexual abuse and harassment nor on how to properly report it (Grant & Heinecke, 2019; Grant et al., 2019; Kenny, 2001). For example, Kenny (2001) conducted a study on the number of reported incidents of child maltreatment by professionals and how often

the professionals failed to report it. Kenny administered the Child Abuse Questionnaire—which consisted of items relating to personal demographics, reporting history, and knowledge of training in child abuse—to first-year physicians (*n* = 28) and first-year teachers (*n* = 28). The author found physicians, who reportedly received more training on child maltreatment, reported more incidents of child maltreatment than teachers. Physicians and teachers responded to not being aware of signs of child neglect or sexual or physical abuse.

Wurtele et al. (2019) conducted research on the prevalence of educator sexual misconduct and how to reduce its risk. The authors created seven standards to serve as an operational framework to help prevent educator sexual misconduct. These standards included a screening and hiring process, a code of conduct, ensuring safe environments, a staff–student communication policy, training, monitoring, supervision, and reporting concerns. Standard 5: Staff/Parent/Student Training and Standard 7: Reporting Concerns both related to training and reporting.

According to Wurtele et al. (2019), not all school employees receive training on educator sexual misconduct-related topics. The GAO (2014) stated that only 18 states require school districts to provide educator sexual misconduct training. Wurtele et al. found the states that required training focused on mandatory reporting rather than on being able to recognize inappropriate conduct by an educator. School employees who can recognize and properly report suspected educator sexual misconduct help to reduce the risk of future offenses.

Even though Wurtele et al. (2019) contributed to the literature on the prevention of educator sexual misconduct, they focused on the literature review and not on the educators' perspectives. However, the researcher in this present study considered the results of Wurtele et al. as guidance when asking participants to share their perspectives on lack of training as a barrier to reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct and how to overcome that barrier.

Lack of Confidence

Another reason educators fail to report incidents of educator sexual misconduct is that they lack confidence. Falkiner et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study to determine what barriers, if any, keep an educator from reporting incidents of maltreatment to the appropriate agencies. The participants for this study included 30 randomly sampled primary teachers of students in Grades 1–3. Eighty percent of the participants were female, and 30% were male. The authors used a professional agency to recruit participants; chose a qualitative design; collected data using two-part, semistructured face-to-face interviews; and used deductive-thematic analysis to analyze the data.

Falkiner et al. (2017) explored barriers such as complex reporting laws and policies, unclear reporting methods, and lack of training as possible reasons educators failed to report child maltreatment. The authors identified two broad themes in their analysis, attributing teachers' failure to report incidents of maltreatment to inconsistent and inadequate mandatory reporting training and a lack of confidence in reporting. The authors believed that the lack of confidence resulted from the lack of adequate and

consistent mandatory training. Participants believed they lacked the thorough training needed to recognize when a student was a victim of maltreatment. Some participants stated obvious signs of harm would make it easier for teachers to report maltreatment. Falkiner et al. reported the following participant statement:

> I guess I would expect there to be more physical signs for physical abuse. And I think with neglect that perhaps there would be more signs than maybe sexual abuse. I'd know what to look out for. Whereas perhaps for sexual abuse there are also indicators but I'm less aware of what I'd be looking for. (p. 43)

Falkiner et al. (2017) continued that participants were afraid to report child maltreatment based on suspicion alone, worrying it would cause more problems. One participant stated:

> I guess being unsure and I guess not knowing the implications of that either on the child or on the family. I guess knowing if I'm not correct how does that affect the child, are they going to get into trouble or am I causing harm to the family? (p. 43)

Because of their uncertainty about reporting child maltreatment, teachers in the Falkiner et al. (2017) study feared repercussions for the students and themselves, especially if they lacked confidence in their reporting. According to Grant et al. (2019), participants feared being fired or ruining their reputations if the accusations turned out to be false. They also feared the parents or guardians would be investigated, or the children would be removed from their homes (Falkiner et al., 2017).

Other Barriers to Reporting

Researchers have shown additional reasons for underreporting of educator sexual misconduct include lack of implementation, lack of knowledge, and fear of reporting consequences. Morejohn (2006) conducted a study to evaluate educators' knowledge of reporting child maltreatment, their experience with reporting, and barriers to reporting. The author used a questionnaire to gather data from educators (n = 47) at three elementary schools in Modesto City School District. Morejohn found most of the educators received some form of training but noted it was either outdated or it pertained to college students rather than a K–12 setting. According to Morejohn, most participants suspected child abuse and reported it. However, the participants acknowledged barriers existed to reporting child maltreatment. In addition to some of the most common barriers to reporting, participants stated frustrations with Child Protective Services, difficulty proving there was actual abuse, and the fear of nothing being done to protect the students.

In another study, Bazon and Faleiros (2013) asked educational professionals their thoughts on reporting child maltreatment, how they handled cases of child maltreatment, and if they did not and why they did not report the cases. The participants included principles, assistant principals, and educators (n = 139) recruited from 14 daycare centers, preschools, and elementary schools in two towns in Sao Paulo, Brazil. The authors collected data using a questionnaire with open- and closed-ended questions surrounding the participants' sociodemographic characteristics, knowledge of reporting child maltreatment, and attitude toward reporting. The second data collection method involved an open-ended question about reasons educators failed to report suspected incidents of

child maltreatment. Bazon and Faleiros explained they administered the second data collection method 50 hr after implementing the first questionnaire. The authors analyzed data using a qualitative–interpretive approach and found that 73% of the participants reported having contact with students who experienced child maltreatment. Bazon and Faleiros found it odd for the remainder of the participants to report that they had never been in contact with students who experienced child maltreatment considering the years they had taught. The participants reported a desire to resolve the issue of child maltreatment within the school instead of reporting it to outside agencies. Attitudes serve as a component of the I-change model, so the researcher in this current study used this to determine the motivations behind the barriers that prevent educators from reporting educator sexual misconduct.

Bazon and Faleiros (2013) stated that a lack of commitment to the problem presented an additional barrier to reporting child maltreatment. Instead of teachers reporting suspected incidents of child maltreatment, they voiced their concerns to others who might handle the situation. Some educators felt reporting took time-consuming and presented a danger, with some seeing the abuse as the student’s problem. According to Bazon and Faleiros, individuals choose whether or not to report according to their personal values but may not understand that not reporting could cause greater harm to the students.

Lumen Learning (2020) explained a qualitative–interpretative approach can be expensive and time-consuming, especially with a large amount of data. Bazon and Faleiros (2013) mentioned methodological limitations and the limits of having a large

sample size. Despite their large sample size, the authors only recruited educators and principals from daycare, preschool, and elementary schools. To show diversity, therefore, the researcher in this study included middle and high school educators while also conducting an inexpensive study that was completed on time.

Summary

The primary goal of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of U.S. K–12 educators regarding barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct and ways to overcome those barriers. First, this literature review revealed that educators serve as mandatory reporters, so they must report any suspicion of child abuse and neglect. Secondly, the review showed failing to report suspicions of educator sexual misconduct can affect a child's life. Last, existing research indicated that despite mandatory reporting laws, some educators fail to report suspicion of child maltreatment.

Some literature existed on barriers to reporting, but the researchers in those studies did not focus primarily on K–12 educators. Rather, they included a mixture of participants who ranged from educators to government officials and school administrators. In this current study, the research solely focused on K–12 educators who served as mandatory reporters and who spent a great deal of time with students. A second topic overlooked in the literature search involved barriers to reporting suspected incidents of educator sexual misconduct. In the literature, researchers studying child maltreatment did not specify if the child maltreatment was perpetrated by a parent or guardian, classmate, educator, or another school employee. In this current study, the researcher focused on child sexual maltreatment by an educator. Researchers in the existing

literature also failed to ask educators about their perceptions of how to overcome barriers to reporting. Grant et al. (2019) conducted the only study where researchers asked educators about recommendations for how to overcome barriers to reporting. The researcher in this current study included the same practice when asking educators about overcoming barriers to reporting other educators. The current study can potentially increase awareness of reporting practices, barriers to reporting, and ways to overcome barriers to educator sexual misconduct among K–12 educators. The next chapter presents the research methodology for the study. It includes the research design, the researcher's rationale, and the step-by-step method undertaken to conduct the study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this phenomenological exploratory study was to investigate U.S. K–12 educators' perspectives related to the underreporting of educator sexual misconduct. The researcher explored two main facets of the underreporting phenomenon: K–12 educators' perspectives of barriers to reporting and potential ways to overcome those barriers. This approach provided a deeper understanding of K–12 educators' experiences in reporting colleagues suspected of sexual misconduct. This chapter includes a discussion of the applicability of the I-change model approach. It also presents the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, participant selection, procedures, data analysis, ethical procedures, and a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

The following two research questions addressed guided this study:

RQ1: What are the experiences of U.S. K–12 educators regarding barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct?

RQ2: What are the experiences of U.S. K–12 educators regarding potential ways to overcome barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct?

Grant et al. (2019) explained that Title 9 laws require schools to protect students from misconduct by a teacher. Grant and Heinecke (2019) added that for further protection, most states have mandatory reporting laws requiring educators to report any suspicions of child abuse or neglect. Grant and Heinecke explained that despite mandatory reporting laws, some educators failed to report incidents of misconduct. According to Grant and Heinecke, educators failed to report for a variety of reasons.

Consequently, underreporting of educator sexual misconduct presents an opportunity for offending teachers to leave their school without penalties and transfer to another school district and reoffend.

The phenomenological approach enables researchers to explore a phenomenon from the perspective of those experiencing it (Neubauer et al., 2019). Neubauer et al. (2019) asserted that the intended goal of a phenomenological study is to describe “what was experienced and how it was experienced” (p. 91). The researcher in this current study identified an exploratory phenomenological design as one of the best options for this qualitative study because it would illuminate the perspectives of K–12 educators regarding underreporting of educator sexual misconduct. This approach also provided a deeper understanding of the perspectives of K–12 educators regarding barriers to reporting and how they can overcome those barriers.

The researcher used the exploratory qualitative approach to collect data by asking open-ended questions in semistructured interviews. The researcher also followed up with additional questions to gain more understanding of the educators’ perspectives regarding barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct and how to overcome those barriers.

Role of the Researcher

I am a full-time educator at a high school in the eastern United States who had taught a forensic science course for 2 years. In addition to teaching at the high school, I taught a psychology course part-time to college students. I did not have supervisory roles over K–12 educators, including those participating in this study. I managed any biases by excluding any current coworkers from participating in the study.

Ravitch and Carl (2016) described the role of the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection. As the researcher, I was involved in every step of the research process. I followed all necessary guidelines to protect the participants and myself. I collected all data by conducting semistructured interviews. I also analyzed and reported the results.

Additionally, as the researcher, I needed to be clear and concise in communicating the purpose of the study to the participants. Because of the study's sensitive nature, I ensured confidentiality for all participants. I provided the participants with my contact information, my dissertation chair's name, and the institutional review board (IRB) approval number so they had the information they needed if they had questions or concerns during the study.

Methodology

The researcher chose a qualitative exploratory phenomenological approach for this study because interviews can be used to gather information on a participant's beliefs, experiences, or expert knowledge (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). The researcher gathered data using semistructured interviews with K–12 educators in North Carolina.

Participant Selection

Population

The researcher chose to include K–12 educators as the study population because, as mandatory reporters, they must keep students safe. Participants were practicing educators with a minimum of 2 years of teaching experience. Morse (2000) contended

that phenomenological studies require fewer participants than other studies and suggested a range between six and 10 participants.

Sampling

The researcher employed both purposeful and snowball sampling of participants. Purposeful sampling is commonly used in qualitative research (Palinkas et al., 2015). Creswell and Plano-Clark (2011) stated that purposeful sampling is used to gather participants' knowledge about the phenomenon. The researcher purposefully selected K–12 educators based on their role as mandatory reporters and their experience deciding whether to report incidents of educator sexual misconduct. The researcher randomly selected 10 K–12 schools from two school districts in North Carolina. The researcher contacted the educators via email to invite them to participate (see Appendix A) and to ask them to help in the recruitment process. The email included a recruitment flyer (see Appendix B) so participants could pass them out to other potential participants.

Instrumentation

Jamshed (2014) stated that interviews are the most common data collection method. For the current qualitative study, the researcher gathered data from semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviews can include closed, open-ended, and follow-up questions (Adams, 2015). Employing semistructured interviews allowed the participants to give their perspectives on the underreporting of educator sexual misconduct (see Horton et al., 2004). According to Horten et al. (2004), semistructured interviews can also bring out any contradictions, consequences, and policy changes. For

the current study, K–12 educators gave their perspectives on barriers to underreporting of educator sexual misconduct and ways to overcome those barriers.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min. The researcher recorded the interviews using a Wohlman digital voice recorder and took focused notes. Roller (2017) stated that note-taking comprises a critical part of the interview process. Roller explained note-taking heightens the researcher's awareness of any contradictory statements or quotes of important value. Recording the interviews allowed the researcher in this study to engage more fully in the conversation with the participants (see Newcomer et al., 2018). The researcher transcribed the interviews immediately after they concluded, then mailed the transcripts to participants, asking them to check for accuracy and to note changes or concerns where needed.

Procedures

The researcher selected eight K–12 educators who responded to the email invitation by contacting them via email to set up a convenient time and place to meet for the interview. The researcher conducted the interviews at a place that provided quiet and privacy. The local public library offered one potential location for these meetings. The interviews lasted approximately 45 min to 1 hr. The researcher ensured the teachers felt relaxed and comfortable and printed out the questions for the participants so they could read along and write notes if necessary. The researcher provided a pencil or ink pen for the participants' use and recorded each interview using a Wolman digital voice recorder. The researcher transcribed the interviews using Rev transcription services.

Before each interview began, the researcher asked the participants to sign the consent form. The researcher kept the participants' names confidential throughout the study and ensured no identifying information appeared in the written study. The researcher secured all of the collected data in their home, where no one else had access. Participants volunteered to take part in the study and received no compensation for their time.

The researcher notified the educators that they were free to exit the interview at any time. During the interviews, the researcher described the purpose of the research and provided information about the interview process and the obligation to protect their identity and the study data. The researcher instructed the teachers to answer all questions honestly and to the best of their ability. The interviews concluded with a thank you to the participants for taking part in the study.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

For this study, the researcher selected eight K–12 school educators from two school districts in North Carolina. The school districts represented two of the largest school districts in North Carolina. The study criteria required participants to be currently teaching with a minimum of 2 years of experience. After receiving Walden University IRB approval, the researcher began the recruitment process, obtaining information for each participant from a public directory at each educator's respective school of employment. The researcher sent an email and a recruitment flyer to each educator, inviting them to participate in the study and asking for help recruiting other participants.

The email and recruitment flyer included details such as the study purpose, participant eligibility, study benefits, location, and scheduling.

Data Analysis

Semistructured interviews and focused notes helped the researcher collect data for this study. After transcribing and analyzing the interviews, the researcher organized the data by labeling and creating files (see LeCompte, 2000). According to LeCompte (2000), the next step involves data sifting. Data sifting occurred when the researcher thoroughly read over field notes and transcripts, identifying any topics that appeared numerous times or that needed further investigation. The next step involved coding the data.

To further analyze the data, the researcher employed a qualitative data analysis software program. According to Hilal and Alabri (2013), using a data analysis software program can help the user work more methodically and attentively. For this study, the researcher used NVivo to analyze the data. The NVivo qualitative data analysis software allowed the researcher to focus more on emerging themes and to deduce reasoning (see Hilal & Alabri, 2013). The next step in analyzing data involved assembling structure (see LeCompte, 2000), and the final step involved member checking. During member checking, a researcher asks participants to check for the accuracy of the data (Candela, 2019). In this study, the researcher sent participants a copy of the transcripts to ensure their responses were recorded correctly.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Pilot and Beck (2013, as cited in Connelly, 2016) described trustworthiness as how well the presentation and interpretation of data ensure data quality. Credibility represents the first and most important criterion for establishing trustworthiness (Pilot & Beck, 2013 as cited in Connelly, 2016). Patton (1999) explained one way to demonstrate credibility is through the researcher. In a qualitative study, the researcher acts as the instrument of data collection. The author added that researchers can bolster their credibility through their training, experience, and preparation for the study. Member checking provides another way for researchers to establish credibility. Member checking occurs when the researcher returns the interview transcripts to the participants to ensure the results are reported accurately (Birt et al., 2016). Shenton (2004) asserted the last way a researcher can demonstrate credibility is through reflective commentary. In this current study, the researcher provided reflective commentary during the data collection steps and when emerging themes became evident during data analysis.

The second criterion of trustworthiness is transferability. Transferability involves the ability to take the results of one study and apply them to other studies (Cope, 2014). Transferability occurs when the researcher provides a detailed description of the study, including its participants and location (Connelly, 2016). Even though the researcher conducted this study in North Carolina, barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct represent a nationwide issue. Therefore, this study may serve as a blueprint for future research on this topic.

Dependability occurs when a future researcher can repeat the study and produce the same results (Shenton, 2004). The researcher enhanced the current study's dependability by reporting the steps in detail. Another way to enhance dependability is by keeping a reflective journal. My reflective journal showed the research progress, including changes made along the way (see Ortlipp, 2008).

The final criterion for establishing trustworthiness is confirmability. To demonstrate confirmability, the researcher must show the data represent the participants' views and not the researcher's biases (Cope, 2014). An audit trail of analysis (i.e., a researcher's record keeping) offers one method of showing confirmability. To show a physical audit trail, the researcher in this study took notes of the methodology decisions made during the research (see Carcary, 2009). A strategy to confirm trustworthiness involved allowing the researcher's peers from a doctoral-level course at Walden University to conduct an external audit and provide feedback. The researcher asked these peers to sign a confidentiality agreement before allowing them to conduct the audit.

Ethical Procedures

Researchers must follow four ethical guidelines when conducting research: reduce any potential for harm, maintain confidentiality, avoid deceptive practices, and provide an opportunity for participants to withdraw from the study at any time (Laerd Dissertation, 2012). The researcher in this study obtained IRB approval from Walden's IRB before collecting data and sought approval from the school district's IRB in North Carolina. Once approved, the researcher began the interviews. Participants received no

compensation for taking part in the study. The researcher did not select participants based on personal relationships to prevent any suspicion of influencing research data or results.

Each participant received an informed consent form detailing their rights as participants and ensuring confidentiality. Participants signed the consent form before beginning the interviews. The researcher reminded participants that they could end the interview at any time without penalty. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher excluded the names of the participants in the study and assigned each a pseudonym (e.g., P1, P2, P3). The researcher stored all information regarding the study on a password-protected laptop computer, and no one else had access to the computer. Data from the study will be kept for 5 years, after which the researcher will properly dispose of it.

Summary

This chapter outlined the research method used to answer the research questions. The researcher provided details of the researcher's role, the study procedure, participants, instrumentations, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 3 also addressed trustworthiness and ethical procedures. The next chapter presents the findings of this study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this phenomenological exploratory study was to investigate U.S. K–12 educators' perspectives related to the underreporting of educator sexual misconduct. To collect data for this study, the researcher interviewed eight educators employed at a U.S. K–12 school. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the experiences of U.S. K–12 educators regarding barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct?

RQ2: What are the experiences of U.S. K–12 educators regarding potential ways to overcome barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct?

This chapter presents information about the setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and study results.

Setting

According to the participant recruitment process outlined in Chapter 3, the researcher anticipated recruiting participants via emails sent to random educators from public school websites or through posts made on social media. Participants responded to the social media post rather than emails sent to school emails. Eight individuals responded to the recruitment post on Facebook. The eight potential participants identified themselves as K–12 educators in one of the two largest school districts in North Carolina and consented to participate in the study by sending a confirmation reply from their school's email account. The researcher scheduled each participant's interview at a time and date of the participant's choice.

Data collection occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic led students and scholars to find new ways to conduct research (Opoku et al., 2022). The researcher in this study collected data using semistructured interviews with questions informed by a comprehensive literature review. Participants had the option to engage in the interview via the Zoom video conferencing platform or face-to-face. All chose to participate via Zoom, which complied with COVID-19 restrictions. All participants appeared to be genuine in their responses to the interview questions.

Demographics

The participants consisted of eight currently practicing K–12 educators. At the time of the study, all participants worked in two of the largest school districts in North Carolina. To ensure confidentiality and to protect the participants' identities, the researcher did not include personal demographic or specific school information about the educators in the written report. The participants consisted of six women and two men. The educators' teaching experience ranged from 6 to 17 years of service.

Data Collection

The researcher began the data collection process on March 29, 2021, after receiving the Walden University IRB approval. She used a purposive sampling approach to recruit participants to interview for this study. Initial contact with the participants began with emails to K–12 educators listed on public school websites in two of the largest school districts in North Carolina and a flyer posted on Facebook. Eight potential educators contacted the researcher after viewing the Facebook post. The researcher selected the eight educators after confirming that each individual met the criteria to

participate in the study. Before scheduling the interviews, the researcher emailed the consent form to the participants. Once they responded with “I consent,” the researcher scheduled the interviews on a date and time of each participant’s choosing.

Participants had the option to be interviewed face-to-face or via Zoom. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all participants chose to be interviewed via Zoom. Prior to the interview, the researcher assigned each participant an anonymous identifier consisting of the letter “P” and a single-digit number representing the participant’s number in the chronological interview sequence (i.e., P1, P8). The researcher omitted all personally identifying information from the study, including the participants’ places of employment.

Once the interviews began, the researcher reminded the participants that if they felt uncomfortable at any point during the interview, they could stop. The researcher asked 10 open-ended questions during the interview. These questions helped the researcher analyze the participants’ perspectives regarding the underreporting of educator sexual misconduct. The interviews ranged from 15 min to 1 hr.

The researcher stored each interview on a password-protected Zoom cloud recording. The researcher personally transcribed the interviews and then emailed the transcripts to each participant so they could check them for accuracy and make any additions or changes.

Data Analysis

The data collected for analysis included transcripts from semistructured interviews with eight K–12 educators. The researcher also took notes focused on identifying terms and ideas stated multiple times during the interviews. The researcher

analyzed the interviews using a multistep process. The first steps of data analysis involved organizing and becoming familiar with the data (see Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). After organizing and becoming familiar with the data, the researcher transcribed each of the eight interviews. After transcribing each interview, the researcher conducted a member check in which participants received a copy of the transcribed interview to review for accuracy. Participants also had the option to check if they wanted to add or change anything. The participants did not have anything to add or change. After the member check, the researcher began the coding process to identify similar themes and ideas (Jacelon & O'Dell, 2005). The researcher initially coded transcripts by hand, looking for themes and subthemes. Then the transcripts were uploaded into NVivo to identify additional themes and subthemes.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Korstjens and Moser (2018) equated credibility with internal validity. In this study, the researcher established credibility using member checks that involved returning transcribed interviews to participants and asking them to check for accuracy and determine whether they wanted to add, change, or remove anything from the interview. No participants requested any changes. Each participant appeared knowledgeable about their role as a mandatory reporter. These steps enhanced the study's credibility.

Transferability

Transferability refers to whether the researcher has provided descriptions of the participants and the research process adequate enough for other researchers to use in

different contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In this study, the researcher interviewed educators from two of the largest school districts in North Carolina. This method could be useful for additional studies regarding the underreporting of educator sexual misconduct in U.S. K–12 schools.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the study's consistency and reliability. Researchers can ensure dependability by providing an audit trail (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The researcher in this study demonstrated dependability through recorded interviews, transcribed interviews, and member checks. The researcher also conducted the data analysis using the software program called to assist in identifying additional themes and subthemes.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the quality of the results (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Audit trails and reflexivity provide useful ways of establishing confirmability. Korstjens and Moser (2018) described reflexivity as a reflection of the researcher's thoughts, judgments, and practices during the research process and how they may have influenced the research. Reflexivity occurred in this study when the researcher worked to recognize and remove any biases regarding underreporting of educator sexual misconduct in K–12 schools. The researcher also used the participants' experiences to reflect on their role as a mandatory reporter. The researcher approached this study with an objective lens, using an interview guide to remain neutral.

Results

The researcher collected data from eight K–12 educators who worked in the two largest school districts in North Carolina. The researcher conducted and recorded all interviews via Zoom video conferencing. The data analysis highlighted the following terms as frequently used during the interview: obligations, professionalism, aiding and abetting, bystander effect, reputation, trust, protection, and training. Table 1 presents descriptions of the five themes and four subthemes related to RQ1 that emerged during data analysis. Table 2 presents the three themes related to RQ2 that emerged during the analysis.

Table 1

Study Themes and Descriptions Relating to RQ1 Regarding Barriers to Reporting Educator Sexual Misconduct in K–12 Schools

Theme	Description
Theme 1: Problematic training	Participants identified how problematic training presents a barrier to reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct.
Subtheme 1: Ambiguous definitions of inappropriate teacher behavior	Participants cited the ambiguous definition of inappropriate teacher behaviors as one of the reasons for problematic training.
Subtheme 2: Measuring or assessing training effectiveness / Knowledge	All participants acknowledged that no follow-up assessments occurred after the mandatory reporting and sexual harassment training to test educator knowledge.
Subtheme 3: Lack of mandatory reporter / Sexual harassment training	Two participants acknowledged they did not receive any mandatory reporter or sexual harassment training.
Theme 2: Inconsistent training across schools	Inconsistent training across schools presented a barrier to reporting.
Theme 3: Lack of rapport with supervisors	Educators fearing their lack of relationship with their supervisor would prevent them from barrier.
Theme 4: Fear of repercussions for reporting	Educators fearing repercussions from coworkers or administrators presented a barrier to reporting.
Subtheme: Fear of losing the trust of a student as a result of reporting	In addition to Participants 1 and 3 discussing the fear of repercussions educators face after reporting a suspected incident of educator sexual misconduct, they also discussed the fear of losing their students' trust.
Theme 5: Lack of accountability and consequences for educators who do not report	School systems have a responsibility to enforce mandatory reporting laws.

Table 2

Study Themes and Descriptions Relating to RQ2 Regarding Overcoming Barriers to Reporting Educator Sexual Misconduct in K–12 Schools

Theme	Description
Theme 1: Improved Title 9 training	Improved Title 9 trainings could help overcome barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct.
Theme 2: Professional conduct	Educators conducting themselves in a professional manner could help educators overcome fear of repercussions for reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct.
Theme 3: Being held accountable for not reporting	Holding educators who do not report incidents of educator sexual misconduct accountable for their actions could motivate educators to overcome other barriers.

RQ1: Barriers to Reporting Incidents of Educator Sexual Misconduct

The first research question addressed the lived experiences of educators regarding barriers to reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct. The themes that emerged related to RQ1 included the following: problematic training, inconsistent training across schools, lack of rapport with supervisor, fear of repercussions for reporting, and lack of accountability and consequences for not reporting. Participants described how these themes presented barriers to reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct.

Theme 1: Problematic Training

Participants in the current study identified how problematic training presented a barrier to reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct. P8 stated: “Once a year, schools are to provide mandatory sexual harassment training to educators in K–12

schools. However, the trainings are not always adequate enough to equip educators with the knowledge to report incidents of educator sexual misconduct." P2 stated: "After this past training, I was left with more questions regarding educator sexual misconduct." Other ways in which participants deemed the training problematic included ambiguous definitions of inappropriate teacher behavior, measuring or assessing training effectiveness and knowledge, and a lack of mandatory reporting.

Subtheme 1: Ambiguous Definitions of Inappropriate Teacher Behavior. Ambiguous definitions of inappropriate teacher behaviors led respondents to describe training as problematic. Two participants discussed how they had additional questions after attending mandatory reporting training regarding what constituted inappropriate teacher behaviors. For instance, P2 shared: "I wanted more. There was an unclear definition of what inappropriate teacher behaviors. Specifically, I wanted to know more about flirting." P2 wanted further details distinguishing flirting from being friendly toward a student. She also shared concerns that the lack of clarity could be problematic for younger teachers who might not be able to adhere to boundaries or have a clear definition of educator sexual misconduct. She stated:

> because what scares me is you have these new young teachers, and they're coming up and the young teachers look like the kids and is super scary that they can get actually wrapped up in or caught up in and not realize, okay, what you're doing here. Can lead to something worse if you don't realize that what you're doing is flirting, is what I'm saying. But you have but the generation is coming

> through now, this young generation. And they look like the kids, and they want to be like the kids. So, the kids relate to them. And then you have that fine line.

P4 expressed a similar concern from the perspective of both an educator and a coach. He stated: “I am not only a coach as well. I like to hug and high-five my students. And I’m afraid it could be interpreted as inappropriate behavior according to the definition.” Both participants expressed concern that the lack of clarity could be problematic for teachers who might not understand the boundaries between what constitutes friendliness and what crosses a line.

Five out of the eight participants did not expand on why these issues were problematic. However, P5 focused on how her training experiences differed among the schools where she had worked, adding that she had a different training experience at every school where she had worked. Although P5 did not expand on these differences, she noted: “and so at the beginning of the year, I have had different experiences, though, with each school handling those mandated reporting training a little bit differently.” However, P4 discussed how even across different departments in his school, he encountered confusing laws regarding to whom, when, and how to report.

Subtheme 2: Measuring or Assessing Training Effectiveness and Knowledge. Another way the participants deemed the training problematic involved the lack of a way to measure training effectiveness. All participants acknowledged that after the mandatory reporting and sexual harassment training, no follow-up assessments occurred to test the educators’ knowledge. P8 shared that her county delivered the mandatory reporting and sexual harassment training in an online format. She also stated: “the problem is in not

knowing how educators perceive the training or if the educators skip through the training because they are in an online format." P8 worried educators may misinterpret the context of the training, not pay attention, or skip through the slides.

Subtheme 3: Lack of Mandatory Sexual Harassment Training. All participants understood the Title 9 guideline that they must receive mandatory reporting and sexual harassment training each year. However, out of the eight participants, two shared they did not receive any mandatory reporting and sexual harassment training. Both expressed concern about not being up-to-date on the latest changes to Title 9 reporting practices. P1 stated: "we had training before, through the county, but it has not been provided at my current school." P7 added:

> That's not something that's really talked about, not even at staff meetings at the beginning of the school year. It's kind of like you just supposed to know better. It's not even in our handbook. There was no training on that.

Theme 2: Inconsistent Training Among Schools

P5 focused on the lack of training continuity among schools, noting all of the schools where she had worked provided different training experiences. Although P5 did not expand upon these differences, she noted: "And so at the beginning of the year, I have had different experiences, though, with each school handling those mandated reporting training a little bit differently." However, P4 discussed how even across different departments in his school, he encountered confusing laws regarding to whom he should report his suspicions, when to report, and how to report. North Carolina state law requires

mandatory reporters to report incidents of educator sexual misconduct to the local police, but P4 appeared unaware of this.

Theme 3: Lack of Rapport With Supervisor

Three of the participants expressed how the lack of rapport with their supervisor presented a barrier to reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct. P2 stated: "I am not sure if I would be comfortable reporting an incident to a male principal. I would feel more comfortable if it was a female." P1 also explained she and other educators would feel more comfortable reporting to a female than a male principal. P2 agreed that the supervisor's gender contributed to their comfort level with reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct but added the educator's rapport with the supervisor also played a role. P4 stated: "I know I should report to my supervisor or dean, but what if I don't know them or built a relationship with him or her?"

Theme 4: Fear of Repercussions for Reporting

All of the participants explained that fear of repercussions for reporting presented a barrier to reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct. Participants feared the possibility of being held civilly or legally responsible, especially if the accusations were found to be untrue. Participants also stated educators feared retaliation from their coworkers or administrators. They worried others would call them names or they would lose the trust of their colleagues or students. Ps 3 and 5 both expressed concern about educators being labeled as "snitches'' for reporting. P1 replied: "Educators do not want to be viewed as the tattle tale.'' P7 stated:

> fear of retaliation. Seems to be a very common thing, and I believe that I have fear of retaliation; for example, telling on a colleague who's been there for a while and well-liked, other colleagues might cause retaliation as a result of protecting their friend or taking their friend's side.

The single subtheme of fear of losing the trust of a student as a result of reporting emerged under Theme 4. In addition to fearing repercussions for reporting, Ps 1 and 3 also worried about losing the trust of their students. P1 stated:

> They're afraid of losing the trust of their student. The educator feels that if they tell, the student might not come to them again and share something as important with them, like that student somehow feels like they are going to get in trouble.

Theme 5: Lack of Accountability and Consequences for Educators Who Do Not Report

School systems have a responsibility to enforce mandatory reporting laws. However, some of the participants stated the lack of accountability and consequences for educators who do not report presented a barrier to reporting educator sexual misconduct. All eight participants acknowledged their legal obligation to report any suspected incidents of educator sexual misconduct. These educators had a sense of what should happen legally to educators who do not report; however, six of them explained that a gap existed between what the law required and what actually occurred. P8 stated: "Not being held responsible or not having any consequences for not reporting allows the cycle to continue, and it implies it is okay for other educators to not report."

P5 explained there were "no specific consequences for not reporting. Besides, how would an administrator know if a teacher has not reported an incident of educator

sexual misconduct." P1 replied: "No one really knows what happens to those who do not report, but we know it is the law to report."

RQ2: Overcoming Barriers to Reporting

The second research question related to various ways to overcome barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct: The themes related to RQ2 included the following: improved Title 9 training, self-awareness of one's role as a mandatory reporter, and accountability. Participants discussed what they needed from mandatory reporting training, their role as mandatory reporters, and how they should remain professional at all times and be held accountable for their actions.

Theme 1: Improved Title 9 Training

In addressing ways to overcome the barrier of problematic training, participants consistently stated that improved Title 9 training would help. Participants claimed training could be improved in a variety of ways. They called for providing trainees with clear definitions of educator sexual misconduct. Additionally, they wanted to see real-world examples that would boost their confidence in their ability to identify educator sexual misconduct and increase their comfort with reporting. They also expressed a desire for real-world scenarios that would help them distinguish between educator sexual misconduct and sexual harassment in general. P1 stated:

> I appreciated when a training I attended provided examples of potential red flags of abuse or educator misconduct to look for in students. It was a simple journal entry, and we had to evaluate this journal entry. And she asked us, do we see any red flags come to mind? We don't know who this woman is, why she's presenting

> to us this. Do we see any red flags within it? And, we looked for things like some verbiage that would catch our attention.

In addition, participants mentioned that more thorough training would represent an improvement. Thorough trainings would include very specific and clear definitions of educator sexual misconduct. P2 stated: "The trainings I attended focused on bullying and student-on-student sexual harassment or student–family-related sexual harassment. I want more training in regards to teacher–student sexual harassment." P5 replied: "I want sexual harassment training more catered to educators in K–12 school."

Theme 2: Professional Conduct

Participants stated that conducting themselves in a professional manner in their role as an educator could help them overcome their fear of repercussions for reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct. All eight participants discussed how their role as a mandatory reporter required them to ensure student safety and conduct themselves in a professional manner. Ps 1 and 6 described professionalism as the responsibility to build rapport with students, parents, and other educators. They also described professionalism as dressing and behaving in an ethical manner. P6 stated: "To overcome the barriers overall in general. Well, keep on being professional, keeping your relationships like your friendships, off campus." P4 stated:

> You have to put it to the side. I mean, at the end of the day, you have to think about what's right, and you just have to report. I mean, right is right. Wrong is wrong. So at the end of the day, you have to be able to put that aside.

Theme 3: Being Held Accountable for Not Reporting

The third theme to emerge when discussing how to overcome barriers to reporting involved holding educators who do not report incidents of educator sexual misconduct accountable for their lack of action. All eight participants acknowledged that educators should be held responsible for not keeping students safe. Ps 4 and 7 stated: "Educators who do not report should be charged with aiding and abetting." Ps 5 and 6 asserted that the educator should lose their job. Pt 8 stated: "If other educators see other educators being held accountable for not reporting, they will be more willing to report."

Summary

Eight themes emerged from this study. For RQ1, the primary themes included problematic training, inconsistent training among schools, lack of rapport with supervisor, fear of repercussions for reporting, and lack of accountability and consequences for educators who do not report. The themes relating to RQ2 included improved Title 9 training, professional conduct, and being held accountable for not reporting. Chapter 5 presents the study's findings, conclusions, recommendations, and areas of future research are discussed.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this phenomenological exploratory study was to investigate U.S. K–12 educators' perspectives related to the underreporting of educator sexual misconduct. Even though previous researchers mentioned underreporting as a problem that needs to be addressed (Fromuth et al., 2016; Grant & Heinecke, 2019), researchers had not made it the main focus of their agendas. The researcher in the current study collected data using semistructured interviews conducted over Zoom to comply with COVID-19 restrictions. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the experiences of U.S. K–12 educators regarding barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct?

RQ2: What are the experiences of U.S. K–12 educators regarding potential ways to overcome barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct?

The findings revealed the need for improved and ongoing mandatory reporting and sexual harassment training.

Interpretation of the Findings

Barriers to Reporting Educator Sexual Misconduct

The first research question in this study focused on the lived experiences of K–12 educators regarding barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct. The organization of the findings corresponds to the themes that emerged from the interviews. These themes included problematic training, inconsistent training across schools, lack of rapport with supervisor, fear of repercussions for reporting, and lack of accountability and consequences for educators who do not report. Emergent subthemes included the

following: ambiguous definitions of inappropriate teacher behaviors, measuring or assessing training effectiveness and knowledge, lack of mandatory reporter and sexual harassment training, and fear of losing the trust of a student.

Theme 1: Problematic Training

Participants expressed a desire for more language clarifying what constitutes inappropriate behaviors. Some participants understood the definition of appropriate behavior involved no touch at all. One of the participants discussed how some educators might not recognize that hugging a student to congratulate them could be considered inappropriate. This finding aligns with the findings of Grant et al. (2017). The participants in the Grant et al. study described the sexual harassment policies as being “vague” or “too general.” This resembles concerns asserted by Ps 3 and 4, who worried the training they received that did not clearly define or provide specific examples of inappropriate teacher behavior.

In addition to ambiguous definitions of inappropriate teacher behaviors, participants stated the lack of mandatory reporting and sexual harassment training presented a barrier to reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct. Wurtele et al. (2019) explained some school districts are not required to offer sexual misconduct awareness and prevention training. Prevention and awareness training helps educators recognize and report suspected incidents of educator sexual misconduct (Lipson et al., 2019). This may help explain why P5 did not know how or to whom to report incidents of educator sexual misconduct.

Previous researchers have cited a lack of research regarding training efficacy. P8 detailed how the educators in her school district received online training for mandatory reporting and sexual harassment; however, she explained that no one followed up after the training to assess its efficacy. Follow-up would help to determine whether the educators understood the material or whether they had any questions regarding the training. Lipson et al. (2018) found a barrier in ways to measure the effectiveness of the training provided in their study. Lipson et al. also recommended including a voluntary posttraining questionnaire after each training.

Theme 2: Inconsistent Training Across Schools

Previous researchers have cited inconsistent training across schools as a barrier to reporting educator sexual misconduct. Title 9 requires mandatory reporting and sexual harassment training in federally funded institutions; however, the implementation of these guidelines has been inconsistent (Grant et al., 2019). According to Abboud et al. (2020), some states have not implemented sexual misconduct training, and school systems have depended on a general understanding of sexual misconduct statutes. These findings support the perceptions of inconsistent training stated by the participants in the present study. P5 shared that they received different training in all of the schools where she worked.

In addition to the presence of different training across school systems, policy implementation also differed. Title 9 not only requires mandatory reporting and sexual harassment training, but it also holds schools responsible for making sure educators and school employees know who serves as the Title 9 coordinator at their institution and

understands all policy changes. Some of the participants in the Grant et al. (2017) study reported not knowing either of these things. Participants in the current study expressed a similar dilemma. They did not know who served as their Title 9 coordinator and were unaware of relevant policy changes. In addition, some did not know to whom they should report incidents of educator sexual misconduct. Inconsistencies in training and policy implementation create barriers to recognizing and reporting educator sexual misconduct.

Theme 3: Lack of Rapport With Supervisor

Participants in the current study described lack of comfort with their supervisor as a barrier to reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct. Participants defined comfort as having rapport and trusting their supervisor to investigate the reported incident. P2 shared that she did not trust her supervisor to follow through with investigating or reporting to the proper agencies. Participants in the Grant et al. (2017) study stated school administrators should create an atmosphere in which educators feel safe to report any suspicions.

Limited research existed on the lack of comfort with a supervisor as a barrier to reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct. Grant et al. (2017) reported that relationships between educators and administrators depend on the size of the school district. The literature also showed a lack of comfort exists between school administrators and child welfare and law enforcement agencies. Despite participants in the current study not expressing concerns about school size or the relationship between school administrators and outside agencies, participants in both the Grant et al. study and the

present study thought it was important for school administrators to encourage and support educators who suspect misconduct between another teacher and student.

Theme 4: Fear of Repercussions for Reporting

Reports of educator sexual misconduct can have long-lasting repercussions. Students can become depressed, turn to drugs and alcohol, drop out of school, or have suicidal ideations. Participants in the current study stated the repercussions of reporting suspected incidents of educator sexual misconduct could include losing their colleague's trust, losing their job, or being seen in a negative light. This perspective reflects the literature findings. Wurtele et al. (2018) reported that students and their families could face emotional distress or financial burdens. Participants in the current study and the Grant et al. (2017) study both reported fearing they or their school district would be subject to stigma and tarnished reputations if they reported incidents of educator sexual misconduct.

Participants in the present study not only feared the repercussions of reporting from the public and their colleagues, but they also feared losing the trust of their students. P1 stated: "I am afraid that if I report something a student has told me in confidence, I will no longer have the trust of the student." Lipson et al. (2018) explained educators serve as in loco parentis, meaning they act in parental roles, provide emotional support, and also educate students. This perspective aligns with that of the present study that proximity to students helps build trust; once that trust is broken, it affects not only the students and their families but the educators, administrators, and community. These are some of the reasons educators feared reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct.

Theme 5: Lack of Accountability and Consequences for Educators Who Do Not Report

Limited research existed on the lack of accountability and consequences for educators who do not report. Studies conducted by Grant et al. (2017), Wurtele et al. (2018), and Lipson et al. (2018) mentioned legal consequences but did not elaborate on the subject. This finding aligns with the present study in which participants acknowledged legal ramifications but were unaware of anyone being punished for not reporting any incidents of educator sexual misconduct. Participants in the current study and in the Grant et al. (2017) study stated the lack of accountability and consequences for educators who do not report presents a barrier for educators to report. Ps 5 and 6 expressed concern that educators who saw colleagues face no consequences for not reporting would also not report incidents of educator sexual misconduct.

Overcoming Barriers to Reporting Educator Sexual Misconduct

The second research question in this study focused on K–12 educators' perspectives on overcoming barriers to reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct. Participants discussed improving Title 9 training, conducting themselves professionally, and being held accountable for not reporting.

Theme 1: Improved Title 9 Training

The participants in this study believed improved Title 9 training would provide one way to overcome barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct. A part of Title 9 training includes school districts implementing mandatory reporting and sexual harassment training (Wurtele et al., 2018). Participants in the current study stated improved trainings would include real-world scenarios and provide clear definitions of

educator sexual misconduct. Similarly, participants from the Grant et al. (2017) study expressed that training should not only consist of real-world scenarios but should also be offered annually.

In addition to the provision of clear definitions and specific scenarios, two participants in the present study expressed concern for younger teachers who, by virtue of their inexperience, might need additional training to clarify boundaries, especially when they are close in age to their students. Similarly, Grant et al. (2017) reported how inexperienced educators may have a difficult time creating boundaries with their students. P8 also shared a similar concern, especially for younger educators who are closer in age to their students.

Participants offered mixed responses regarding whether face-to-face or online training offered ways to overcome barriers to reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct. P8 revealed that mandatory reporting and sexual harassment training was offered online. She stated teachers could complete the training at their convenience. This finding resembled those in the Grant et al. (2017) study, where participants stated that although convenient, online training did not capture their interest, and it enabled them to easily pass through the modules and pass the quizzes (Grant et al., 2017). Ps 1 and 6 from the current study stated face-to-face training needed improvement but was still more effective than online training. Current findings align with existing research calling for training that includes real-world scenarios (Ayling et al., 2020; Grant et al., 2017) and clear definitions of sexual misconduct (Wurtele et al., 2019).

Theme 2: Professional Conduct

Participants also pointed to professional conduct as another means of overcoming barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct. Participants stated educators may be reluctant to report their colleagues because they do not want to lose their trust or friendship or report something that is not true. P5 stated friendships should remain outside of school, and educators should show professionalism at all times. This statement resembles those provided by the participants in the Grant et al. (2017) study, who stated educators should be held to the highest professional standard. Additionally, participants from previous studies suggested educators could benefit from professional or ethics policies (Grant et al., 2017).

Theme 3: Being Held Accountable for Not Reporting

Despite mandatory reporting laws, some incidents of educator sexual misconduct go unreported. Holding educators who do not report incidents of educator sexual misconduct accountable could help educators overcome barriers to reporting. One way of holding educators accountable is by reporting any suspected incidents. Both participants from the current study and from previous studies reported that if educators see something, they should report it.

A second way to hold educators accountable for not reporting involves punishing the educator. Participants from the current study and from the Grant et al. (2017) study suggested educators could be punished for not reporting, but they recalled no accounts of individuals who received punishment for not reporting. This finding was supported by the

lack of research available on educators being held accountable for not reporting and a lack of documented punishment for those who did not report.

Limitations of the Study

This study provided in-depth insights into U.S. K–12 educators' perceptions of barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct and ways to overcome those barriers. Because the study focused on K–12 educators' perceptions, the researcher took their responses at face value even though the truthfulness of their statements could not be confirmed. The researcher approached each interview with the assumption that all participants would answer the interview questions honestly and truthfully.

Second, the choice to take a qualitative approach resulted in a small sample size of eight participants, which represented the number needed to reach data saturation. Saturation refers to the condition where no new themes or codes emerge during data collection and analysis (Saunders et al., 2018). The small sample size used in the current study limits the transferability of findings to other populations.

Third, the researcher recruited participants from two of the largest school districts in North Carolina. The study may have attracted a more diverse sample of educators if the participants had been recruited from all school districts in North Carolina. Lastly, the researcher only recruited K–12 educators for this study. Recruiting school administrators, school resource officers, guidance counselors, and other school employees would have provided a different perspective regarding barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct and how to overcome those barriers.

Recommendations

This study was conducted to explore the perceptions of U.S. K–12 educators on the topic of underreporting educator sexual misconduct. Previous studies provided some insight on the subject; however, these researchers had not focused primarily on K–12 educators' perceptions. First, the researcher in this current study recommends expanding the participant pool. This study included K–12 educators from two of the largest school districts in North Carolina. Future researchers should expand the participant pool to include all of the school districts in North Carolina. It would be beneficial to explore how educators from other school districts perceive barriers to reporting and how to overcome those barriers to reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct.

Secondly, future researchers should expand the participant pool to guidance counselors, resource officers, and other school employees (e.g., custodians, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, or coaches). Like educators, these individuals spend a large amount of time around individuals, so they can provide insight on educator sexual misconduct, if they received mandatory reporting and sexual harassment training, and their understanding of reporting practices. Guidance counselors can provide insight into mandatory reporting training, and resource officers can help to build a partnership between the school and law enforcement agencies.

Thirdly, the resulting data exposes a need for additional information on training practices. In one of the themes of the present study, participants deemed mandatory reporting and sexual harassment training as problematic. Some participants stated their training lacked real-world examples of inappropriate behaviors, and some identified a

need for clear definitions of educator sexual misconduct. Some participants stated they received no training at all. Future researchers could explore how and if school districts administer mandatory reporting and sexual harassment training. Future researchers could also compare the efficacy of face-to-face and online training and explore how to measure effectiveness.

Lastly, educators understand they have a legal responsibility to report any suspected incidents of educator sexual misconduct. However, the consequences or punishment for not reporting remains unclear. A beneficial research direction could involve exploring how and if educators and administrators are punished for not reporting. Future studies would also include measures to determine if someone should be punished for not reporting and what the appropriate punishment should be for those individuals.

Implications

Even though the number of reported incidents of educator sexual misconduct has increased, researchers have suggested present numbers do not include the total number of cases (Henschel & Grant, 2018). Hernandez et al. (2020) claimed that some incidents of educator sexual misconduct go unreported. Finding ways to decrease the barriers to reporting represents a vital action for social change. Understanding barriers to reporting from the perspective of K–12 educators would provide crucial insight because these individuals are legally responsible for keeping students safe from harm (Wurtele et al., 2019).

During this research study, participants offered their perceptions of barriers to reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct and methods in which to overcome

those barriers. These insights shed light on needed policy changes, specifically on improved mandatory reporting and sexual harassment training implementation. Training should provide educators with the skills and knowledge needed to recognize and report any incidents of educator sexual misconduct (Ayling et al., 2020).

Educators and school employees should receive yearly training that includes follow-up questions designed to ensure the educators and school employees understand the material. Improved and consistent training practices have the potential to decrease the number of unreported incidents of educator sexual misconduct and, ultimately, the number of incidents of educator sexual misconduct. The overall goal is to keep students safe from all harm.

Conclusion

This study was an exploratory phenomenological study of the perceptions of K–12 educators regarding barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct and how to overcome those barriers. Eight K–12 educators with a minimum of 2 years of teaching experience participated in this study. The educators worked in two of the largest school districts in North Carolina.

Even though the educators all had different experiences and opinions, they offered similar perceptions regarding barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct in K–12 schools. The main themes that emerged from this study included problematic training, inconsistent training across schools, lack of rapport with supervisor, fear of repercussions for reporting, and lack of accountability and consequences for educators who do not report. The educators also suggested ways to overcome those barriers. The themes that

emerged for overcoming barriers to reporting included improved Title 9 training, professional conduct, and being held accountable for not reporting.

These findings may generate additional research that includes a larger demographic of educators and school employees who can provide their experiences with the phenomenon of reporting educator sexual misconduct. Results from this research study can be used to improve mandatory reporting and sexual harassment training in K–12 schools. The social change that could result from this study relates to protecting students from the harm imposed by educator sexual misconduct.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Gender:
Employment Status:
Years of Service:

Opening Question: What grade do you teach?

1. What are your responsibilities as a mandatory reporter?
2. What is your knowledge about reporting obligations?
3. Define the term educator sexual misconduct.
4. What are the consequences of not reporting incidents of educator sexual misconduct, if any?
5. Do you know who to report incidents of educator sexual misconduct to?
6. Do you know how and when to report incidents of educator sexual misconduct?
7. What are some of the barriers to reporting educator sexual misconduct?
8. Describe how to overcome those barriers to report.
9. Would you be able to recognize inappropriate teacher-student behavior?
10. Is there anything else you like to say or add?

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

K–12 Educators Needed

K–12 Educators as Research Participants

Seeking individuals to participate in a 45 minute to a 1 Hour individual interview
Where you will be asked about:

- Your current role as a mandatory reporter and reporting educator sexual misconduct.
- Your perception regarding barriers to report and overcoming those barriers.

Purpose of the study: To explore K–12 school educators' perspectives related to the underreporting of educator sexual misconduct. Specifically, this research will explore two main facets of the underreporting phenomenon: K–12 educators' perspectives of barriers to reporting and potential ways to overcome those barriers.
Eligibility: Participants must meet the following criteria to be eligible to participate:

- Currently teaching in one of the K–12 schools in North Carolina
- Minimum of two years of teaching experience

Location and Scheduling:

- A face to face interview can be scheduled at any location of your choice.
    - Scheduling will be at your free time (mornings, evening, or weekends)
- Due to COVID-19, a videoconference can be scheduled as an alternate option.

Compensation: There will be no financial compensation for participation in this study.

**All interviews will be confidential, and your participation is voluntary. You may opt to withdraw from the study at any time. **