

*Idaho Teacher's Attitudes about Child Abuse and/or Neglect: Trends and
Implications of Reporting*

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study investigated problems impeding teachers and, in particular, Idaho elementary teachers in fulfilling their responsibility to report child abuse and neglect (CAN) as mandated by law. Teachers were asked about their desires to know more about child protective services (CPS) and its court process. Quantitative data was gathered from a sample of 25 teachers using an adapted version of Teachers and Child Abuse Questionnaire (ECAQ). Qualitative data was obtained from teacher interviews. Both sets of data were analyzed separately and compared providing triangulation.

Teachers reported uncertainty about education adequacy pertaining to CAN. Teachers wanted to know more about CPS and the CPS court process to help fulfill their mandated duties. The researcher's recommendations include building relationships between CASA personnel and educators to assist teachers' self-confidence in reporting cases of CAN. Federal intervention should give consistent educational guidelines within CAN laws to improve CAN education regarding teacher's mandated duties.

Overview of Study

In the United States in 2012, there was a nationally estimated rate of 686,000 victims of child abuse and neglect resulting in approximately 1,640 child fatalities (National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect [NDACAN], 2012). During 2013-2014, I conducted a mixed-methods study to discover why Idaho teachers were struggling to fulfill their duties as mandated reporters of child abuse and neglect (CAN). The following four research questions guided my study:

1. How adequate is teacher pre-service and post-service training for helping make teachers aware of mandated reporting of CAN?
2. What complications impact teacher preparedness and willingness to report suspected cases of CAN?
3. What professional supports do teachers feel are needed regarding CAN?
4. What further information do teachers want about Child Protection Services (CPS) and the court system's procedures that children and families must go through?

During the quantitative part of the study, I used an adapted version of the *Teachers and Child abuse Questionnaire* (ECAQ), which had been previously used in other child abuse studies (Kenny, 2001; Kenny 2004) to survey twenty-five elementary school teachers from three elementary schools in southwest Idaho. I organized survey responses according to my four research questions. During the qualitative part of my research, I conducted, recorded, and transcribed three interviews. The three teachers I interviewed were a purposeful sample; one teacher was interviewed from each of the three elementary schools, additionally, the interviewees were chosen according to the responses from the ECAQ survey. I performed cross-case coding between the interviews to find the common interview themes. Common interview themes and

survey themes were analyzed and compared. I called the themes established between both sets of data *recurring themes*. These *recurring themes* generated the findings for this study.

Study's Findings

The purpose of this article is to better make sense of my research study. Specifically, I wish to explore what the five findings of this study (based upon the *recurring themes*) suggest for future practice. The five findings from my research are listed below:

1. Professional obligations: Participants cared about protecting their students from CAN and believed it was their professional obligation to report such cases.
2. Education Adequacy: Participants felt unsure about their pre-service and post-service training adequacy about how to deal with CAN a teacher. Participants desired further education and support about CAN and how to deal with it as a teacher.
3. Reporting Policies: Participants believed they were correctly fulfilling their mandated duties to report CAN by following their school's reporting policies. However, the reporting policies for the three schools studied did not allow the participants to self-report cases of suspected CAN.
4. Contact with CPS system: Participants contact with social workers was rare.
5. CPS Knowledge: Participants wanted to know more about the CPS system and its court process.

Explanation of Findings

What do the five findings of this study mean, and what questions and concerns do they raise? How do they coincide with the past research concerning teachers reporting CAN?

Finding #1. Professional Obligations: Teachers in this study were accurate in believing they are professionally obligated to report suspected cases of CAN. Starting in 1974, The Child Abuse and Treatment Act, Law 93-247 (CAPTA) was the law that helped paved the way for educators to become mandatory reporters of CAN in all fifty states (Kenny, 2001; Bruno & Hinkelman, 2008; Crosson-Tower, 2003). Furthermore, educational personnel have played a pivotal role in recognizing and preventing future episodes of abuse. Teachers may spend as much or perhaps even more time with a child than the actual parent or guardian, allowing them to build strong teacher-student relationships, which gives students support and guidance, while also being valuable advocates for elementary children who are especially vulnerable to abuse (Riggs & Evans, 1979; Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008; Abrahams, Casey & Daro, 1992). Knowing the critical role teachers play for abused and/or neglected elementary aged children, it is important that teachers know what to do if they suspect CAN; and, to suspect CAN, teachers must be educated about their role as mandated reporters of CAN.

Finding #2. Education Adequacy: The participants in this study did not feel adequately prepared to deal with cases of CAN and wanted to learn about how to handle CAN as a teacher. This finding is not uncommon. A common research theme is that, although school professionals commonly report child maltreatment, they lack enough knowledge about CAN to help identify and report potential cases (Levin, 1983; Haase & Kempe, 1990; Abrahams, Casey & Daro, 1992; Kenny 2001; Zellman & Fair, 2002; Kenny, 2004; Webster, O'Toole, O'Toole & Lucal, 2005; Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008; McKee & Dillenburger, 2012; Krase, 2013). Numerous studies have found that most teachers are unaware of the indications of specific types of abuse especially because some symptoms and indications can be subtle (Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008; Crosson-

Tower, 2003). Other studies indicate that teachers may ignore symptoms or simply not understand that the symptom “i.e., the very quiet child” is masking deeper abuse (2008).

The lack of education that teachers are receiving about their duties to report CAN is worrisome and the consequences can be catastrophic for an abused and/or neglected child. For example, *The Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect* (NIS-4) (Sedlak et al., 2010) (a congressionally mandated periodic research report) found that, although school personnel are known to make the most reports of CAN, reports made by schools receive the fewest CPS investigations. The NIS-4 (2010) stated that these low investigation rates might be explained from some school policies barring teachers from making direct reports to CPS. Conversely, it is also known that when teachers are allowed to make direct reports to CPS agencies, they account for the fewest reports made to CPS agencies compared to staff of other agencies (e.g. health agencies and law enforcement) (2010). It is clear that teachers are struggling with aspects of reporting cases of CAN: as a result of teachers not reporting suspected cases of CAN in a sufficient manner, abused and/or neglected children may never receive the help they desperately need.

Finding #3. Reporting Policies: Most teachers in this study did not self-report suspected cases of CAN as Idaho CAN law mandates ("Idaho Statutes 16-1605") and seemed unsure what reporting suspected CAN entailed. Why might these teachers not have known or understood what Idaho law mandates? Haase and Kempe (1990) explained, there is a lot of “legal confusion” (p. 261), especially when it comes to knowing when and how to report CAN. They also noted a lack of “Clear, written procedures or guidelines within the schools system for reporting” (p. 261). These ambiguities in CAN state’s laws can cause confusions about teacher’s legal obligations (Haase & Kempe, 1990; Foreman & Bernet, 2000, p. 190). My study suggests that

teachers might unknowingly be acting in opposition to the law when reporting suspected cases of CAN.

Teachers who fail to self-report cases of CAN have been a concern discussed by other researchers in the past (Kenny, 2001; Kenny, 2004; Alvarez et al., 2005, Abrahams et al., 1992; Sedlak et al., 2010). Barring teachers from self-reporting CAN has dire consequences. Kenny (2001) and Abrahams (et al., 1992) explained that, if teachers make their reports to other school personnel, such as counselors, nurses, or principals and fail to directly report to CPS agencies and/or law enforcement, many cases go unreported and/or not able to be investigated. Such a policy may continue to place a child at risk for further CAN. My findings suggest the importance of noting that procedures that bar teachers from making direct reports to CPS might be in opposition to states' CAN mandated reporting laws and hinder the ability of CPS and law enforcement agencies to initiate investigations of reports of suspected CAN.

Finding #4 & Finding #5. Contact with the CPS and Knowledge about the CPS system: Although participants had little to no contact with social workers, the majority felt it was important to learn more about the CPS process and its court system. Little to no attention has been given to teachers and the idea that they should obtain knowledge about the CPS court system. Many education programs are designed to help teachers increase reporting cases of CAN and focus on obtaining knowledge about the symptoms abused children show (Yanowitz, Monte & Tribble, 2003).

Should teachers know about the CPS court process? Crosson-Tower (2003) wrote the manual titled *The Role of Educators in Preventing and Responding to Child Abuse and Neglect*. This document is alone in detailing information for educators about what happens once a report is made to CPS. It also explains that some “educators may be asked to appear in court as

witnesses” (p. 36). The manual then gives information known as “tips” for the educator to adhere to when going to court and explains that notes can be subpoenaed for a CPS court system. These “tips” and information may help a teacher navigate the critical features of the CPS court system that they may find themselves part of.

However, recommendations from recent research state that teachers and CPS workers should build working relationships to help teachers understand their mandated duties to report CAN and create the needed rapport between both professionals (Sedlak et al., 2010; Haase & Kempe, 1990; Alvarez, Kenny, Donohue, & Carpin, 2004; Sinanan, 2011). Additionally, working relationships between teachers and CPS workers are critical to develop because teachers have been known to believe that CPS does not help abused and/or neglected children (Krase, 2013). Distrust between these two professionals have been known to arise from the “mysterious elements” teachers have been said to have felt surrounding the disappearance and lack of knowledge about the cases they reported (Haase & Kempe, 1990; Crosson-Tower, 2003; Alvarez et al., 2004). Having little to no contact with CPS workers may impede ways for teachers to build trust with CPS workers.

Implications of Findings

The following section presents four recommendations derived from the five study findings already discussed.

1. Consistent Educational Guidelines: Findings from my study suggest that most teachers want to fulfill their role as mandated reporters of CAN, but lack the education to properly do so. A lack of awareness exists regarding the issue that teachers are receiving little to no education about their mandated duties as reporters of CAN. The federal government must become more aware that most states have CAN laws that lack a specific law mandating teachers to be given the

proper resources to be able to follow the law; no federal law makes education about CAN laws mandatory.

My research compels me to believe the federal government should give education requirements for all fifty states to follow. These education requirements should give teachers the information needed to properly fulfill their mandated duties to report CAN. Education requirements within every state's CAN laws would create fewer ambiguities and more knowledge about teacher duties as reporters of CAN.

2. School Districts Evaluating School Policies: Past research concluded that educational personnel seemed unknowledgeable about reporting procedures (Abrahams et al., 1992; Kenny, 2001; Kenny, 2004; Levin, 1983, Dillenburger & Mckee, 2012) and school policies surrounding them might not be in compliance with state and federal reporting laws (i.e. not letting a teacher self-report a case of CAN) (Kenny, 2001; Alvarez et al., 2005; Sinanan, 2011). Because teachers are mandated reporters of CAN at the state and federal level in the United States, lacking knowledge of the legal faultiness reporting procedures within in their schools may practice puts teachers at a disadvantage. The federal government should require school districts to evaluate individual school policies regarding reporting CAN in their districts and make sure they accord to their state's CAN laws.

3. Teacher Education with CASA and CPS Workers: Teachers in my study felt unsure and undecided about the adequacy level of their CAN training; specifically, they did not know whether it prepared them to report CAN as educators. Such uncertainty with their preparedness to report cases of CAN is worrisome in light of past research that found a positive relationship between teachers having higher self-confidence levels and having better abilities to report

potential cases of CAN (Walsh, Farrell, Schweitzer & Bridgestock, 2005; Kenny 2004; Yanowitz et al., 2003).

Teachers may want to report cases of CAN, but obstacles such as the lack of education about CAN laws and reporting CAN and school policies barring staff from making direct reports of CAN leave teachers underperforming at the advocacy levels they wish to and as mandated by federal and state laws. I have come to believe that all undergraduate colleges should educate soon-to-be teachers about the warning signs of CAN. Undergraduate programs must focus on teaching educators about the state and federal laws concerning CAN they must adhere and how to handle suspected cases of CAN. I also believe undergraduate programs should create working relationships with local CPS workers (Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008; Sedlak et al., 2010) and build stronger relationships between teachers and CPS workers during undergraduate years.

Furthermore, the growing distrust between the CPS system and teachers might be prevented if educators built relationships with the CASA program. Both professionals have one unique duty that sets them apart from other professionals: to advocate for what is in the best interest of the child (About Us. - CASA for Children, n.d.). Therefore, teachers and CASA workers may relate to and perhaps trust each other more than an educator and CPS worker may. Support from a CASA to an educator can bring teachers a sense of comfort about the CPS system, which may help them gain the confidence needed to report more cases of CAN.

The school district also plays an important role between building working relationships with local CPS workers and teachers (Sedlak et al., 2010; Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008). Most study participants wanted more education and support about CAN. School districts must become aware of the increasing need for relationships between CPS workers and other such professionals to develop trust and education that their district's need to report more cases of CAN. A

professional development day could include CASA and CPS representatives and create a safe environment where teachers ask important questions that have been revealed only through practice. It is crucial that school districts provide resources to teachers by giving them annual updates about the ever-changing CPS system and their mandated duties as reporters of CAN.

4. Teacher Training Programs Incorporating the CPS System and its Court Process:

Teachers in my study wanted to know more about the CPS system and its court process.

Teachers have a professional duty to know how they can support their student during a court process and be given information about the role they may play during a CPS court process (Crosson-Tower, 2003).

Additionally, because of the inadequacy of knowledge teachers acquire about the signs of CAN (McIntyre, 1990; Abrahams et al., 1992; Tite, 1994; Kenny, 2001; Kenny, 2004), confidence issues existing about reporting cases of CAN (Yaniowitz et al., 2003; Goldman, 2007; McKee & Dillenburger, 2012), the legal ambiguities teachers are facing when reporting suspected cases of CAN (Levin, 1983; Haase & Kempe, 1990; Abrahams et al., 1992; Foreman & Bernet, 2000; Kenny, 2001; Kenny, 2004; Goldman, 2007; Sinanan, 2011), and confidentiality laws and policies that usually surround follow-up of reported cases of CAN (Haase & Kempe, 1990; Crosson-Tower, 2003; Alvarez et al., 2004), it becomes easier to see why many teachers are experiencing distrust for the CPS system. However, such distrust for the CPS system may dwindle if the CPS system were not a mysterious entity for most educators as it currently is (Haase & Kempe, 1990; Crosson-Tower, 2003; Alvarez et al., 2004).

Teachers maintaining distrust for the CPS system is a serious dilemma. Teachers will forever be on the front lines of reporting suspected CAN because of the strong teacher-student relationships that form within their classrooms. Consequently, teachers often acquire firsthand

knowledge and observations of the suspected CAN of their students (Riggs & Evans, 1979; Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008; Abrahams, et al., 1992), conceivably making them one of the most influential advocates for their students enduring suspected CAN. Such powerful advocates for abused and/or neglected children must be better heard and incorporated within a CPS court process instead of feeling mystified by it.

Once training programs for teachers include information about their sometimes essential and professional involvement with the CPS system/court process, teachers may become more empowered and motivated to learn how to use their direct knowledge and observations about suspected CAN and develop into more involved and valuable members of a child's advocacy team during a CPS court process. Training programs for teachers learning about their mandated duties to report CAN would benefit teachers, CPS workers, the CPS system/court process, and students by including information about the CPS system and its court process that their students and teachers themselves might become a part of.

Summary

If teachers were equipped with knowledge to fulfill their roles as mandated reporters of CAN, they could better protect and advocate for students who might be suffering from CAN. Particular attention should be paid to this study's recommendations detailing fostering relationships between personnel at CASA programs and teachers and establishing training programs for teachers that incorporates information about the CPS system/court system process that teachers may find themselves and their students involved in. Findings from my study strongly suggest that the federal government create consistent and firm educational guidelines every state must follow and incorporate into the CAN laws. Only then would teachers find the help and support they deserve to have to fulfill their mandated duties as reporters of CAN.

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