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Critical factors in teachers' detecting and reporting child abuse and neglect: Implications for practice



A project funded by the Abused Child Trust

Final Report January 2005



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About the Abused Child Trust

The mission of the Abused Child Trust is to be the leading provider and advocate of recognised, quality services for the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect in Queensland. The Abused Child Trust aims to create better communities, break the cycle of abuse and neglect and has the visionary goal of achieving zero child abuse and neglect. The trust works through three main programs: (1) a therapy program - working with children and parents; (2) an early childhood program – providing an educational and therapeutic environment addressing the emotional and developmental needs of children experiencing abuse and neglect; and (3) a health program – recognising that abused and neglected children and their families have special health needs.

Further information about the Abused Child Trust can be found at <http://www.abusedchildtrust.com.au/content/home.asp> or by contacting them at:

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About the Centre for Learning Innovation at QUT

The Centre for Learning Innovation (formerly the Centre for Innovation in Education) is established within the Faculty of Education at QUT's Kelvin Grove Campus. The CLI aims to contribute to the overall goal of the Faculty which is to be in the top 10 Australian contributors to internationally recognised educational research, a leader in collaborative research with the education professions, and a nationally recognised innovator in research education.

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Executive Summary

Background and aims

In 2002-03 over 31 000 cases of child abuse and neglect were reported to statutory authorities in Queensland (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2004). Within the context of child protection reform in Queensland, prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect are viewed as a responsibility shared by government and non-government agencies, professionals and non-professionals, communities, families and individuals. Teachers are key professionals who are particularly well-placed to identify and report child abuse and neglect, to respond specifically to the needs of child victims, and to teach prevention strategies to children. They have the potential to intervene with children at risk of or experiencing abuse and neglect. They have regular contact with children's families and can assist with referral and access to support services. Teachers and other school personnel are among the most common sources of child protection notifications.

All Australian States and Territories, except for Western Australia, have legal provisions for teachers to report known or reasonably suspected child abuse and neglect. In Queensland, these provisions are limited to teachers reporting known or suspected child sexual abuse perpetrated by school staff. This requirement was introduced in April 2004 - after we collected data for this study. Reporting any other category of child abuse and neglect (for example, any type of child abuse or neglect perpetrated by family members) is not a legal requirement for teachers in Queensland. Instead, teachers are directed by their employing body to follow institutional reporting policies.

The overall aim of this study was to *investigate the critical factors which influence teachers to detect and report child abuse and neglect to statutory authorities*. Within this broad aim, our five specific aims were to examine teachers':

- awareness of laws governing teacher reporting of child abuse in Queensland and specific policies and/or procedures pertaining to child abuse and neglect within their education sector;
- knowledge of the indicators of different forms of child abuse and neglect;
- knowledge of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in their school community;
- experiences of reporting to statutory authorities; and
- perceptions of the consequences of, motivators for, and deterrents to reporting to statutory authorities for themselves, families and individual children.

Further, we adopted an innovative methodology to develop a further aim to:

- explore the effects of case, teacher, and school characteristics on teachers' thresholds for detecting and reporting child abuse and neglect.

Our research has identified critical factors in teachers' decision-making which may be used to inform initial teacher training and professional development for practicing teachers, school administrators and support staff. Through understanding these critical factors, we may be better able to address the issue of child abuse and neglect in school communities.

Method

This is one of the largest studies of teachers' reporting practices undertaken in Australia to date. A questionnaire survey was administered to a large group of teachers (n=254) from 30 primary schools representing 10 administrative districts in South East Queensland. The survey instrument we developed, the Child Abuse and Neglect Teacher Questionnaire (CANTQ) comprised five sections addressing: teacher background and experience; school characteristics; knowledge of and training for child protection; previous contact with child abuse and neglect; and thresholds for identifying and reporting (32 case vignettes).

In addition to traditional survey questions, the CANTQ incorporated a series of 32 case vignettes which allowed us to directly assess the effects of numerous teacher, school, and case characteristics on how likely teachers are to identify child abuse and neglect, and how likely teachers are to report it, given identification. Using statistical analysis techniques, known as fully factorial least squares regression, we were able to quantify the effects of various attributes on whether or not teachers will detect child abuse and neglect and then report it.

Key findings

1. Most teachers agreed that they had a moral (98.8%) and professional (93.3%) responsibility to report child abuse and neglect. Interestingly, most also concurred they had a legal (86.5%) responsibility. A significant minority were unsure about specific legal and policy requirements. When we collected data for this research, there was *no* legal obligation for Queensland teachers to report any type of child abuse or neglect, that is, teachers were not mandatory reporters.
2. Teachers were generally unsure (overall average of 3.40 on a 5 point scale) about their ability to accurately identify child abuse and neglect. This was particularly the case for child sexual abuse. Teachers working in schools where there was frequent discussion about child abuse and neglect were more confident in their ability to identify child abuse and neglect. This did not apply for child sexual abuse, which was the most difficult type of child maltreatment for teachers to accurately identify.

3. The majority of teachers (63.8%) believed that child abuse and neglect occurred equally in all communities. Teachers who worked in school communities rated as low socioeconomic status, teachers who had suspected or identified abuse or neglect previously, and teachers in schools where there was more discussion about child abuse and neglect tended to think differently and to understand that rates of child abuse and neglect varied from community to community.

4. Three-quarters (74.5%) of teachers have suspected child abuse or neglect at some stage in their careers. In accordance with institutional policy, the majority of teachers (94%) who had suspected child abuse or neglect reported their suspicions to their principal. Teachers believed principals reported cases to authorities approximately two thirds of the time (63%). Ten percent (10%) of teachers have decided to not report suspected child abuse or neglect at some stage in their careers.

5. Teachers were more likely to detect and report neglect and physical abuse when they have self-reported confidence in their ability to accurately identify it. Given a positive identification, experienced teachers use discretion about whether to report or not, particularly in the cases of neglect and emotional abuse. In these cases, their decision about reporting was influenced by their predictions of the likely outcomes for the child. Teachers tend to consider the child's welfare both inside the child protection system (where the child may be removed from a family, or a family may move away from the school), and outside the child protection system (where the teacher and school may have an informal, yet positive impact).

6. Teachers often do not know about the outcomes of the cases they report, even to the extent that, in many cases (27.7%), they do not know what has happened once they have reported the case to the principal. This has implications for their confidence in the child protection system, their development of a professional practice-based knowledge about case management, and ultimately, their ability to accurately detect and report.

7. Formal child protection training does not currently impact upon teachers' propensity to detect or report suspected child neglect or abuse. Informal discussion between teachers (for example, passing on incorrect information about such things as whether they have a legal obligation to report) and background characteristics of the teacher (such as whether or not they are a parent) seem to have much stronger effects on what a teacher will do. This may be related to the nature and extent of their training. Half of the teachers surveyed had less than five hours of child protection training, with an overall average of 2.8 hours of training across the sample.

Recommendations

Any enhancements to teachers' preservice or inservice training, provision of support for teachers, and reconsideration of teachers' legal obligations must be considered in the light of current reform processes and broader policy initiatives underway in Queensland and nationally.

Teacher preparation and training

1. Professional development for Queensland teachers should be enhanced. Training in child protection must be detailed and focus on multiple dimensions to the teachers' role with the aim of increasing teachers' confidence to fulfil *all* aspects of their role. These dimensions include: detecting and reporting; responding specifically to the needs of child victims; teaching all children prevention strategies; and working with other agencies to support children and families at-risk. Consideration should be given to the South Australian model of using accredited or specialist child protection trainers with thorough understanding of school contexts. Both pre- and inservice training must be linked to rigorous evaluative study. Inservice training must be continual.
2. Preparation of teachers for their role should begin with compulsory study in initial teacher training. The most effective models for delivery would include a combination of content embedded across programs of study, and focused study in dedicated units. Consideration should be given to child protection training forming a prerequisite to employment.
3. Specialist professional development should be undertaken for school principals to address their particular support needs in relation to leadership and management issues relating to implementation of effective school-level child protection policy and practice. Explicit attention should be given to decision making processes and models in initial teacher training programs and professional development for practicing teachers.

Support for teachers

4. Employing authorities should promote strategies to build teachers' resilience in the face of the difficulties associated with detecting and reporting, particularly for those teachers working in schools with a higher incidence of cases. Institutional arrangements should facilitate schools to document, examine and share practices that enhance their schools' and teachers' coping strategies.
5. Employing authorities should provide effective access to support staff to assist teachers with the task of accurate and timely reporting following detection. Following the South Australian model, consideration should be given to designating child protection officers

in schools to provide a resource to teachers in the decision-making process. These staff require expertise in child abuse and neglect and child protection issues. This may require expansion of and enhancements to existing staffing arrangements to ensure better support for teachers and better outcomes for children.

Reporting obligations for Queensland teachers

6. Queensland teachers should be provided with accurate information about their legal and policy obligations with respect to reporting different forms of child abuse and neglect.

7. Further cross-jurisdictional Australian research should be undertaken investigating the impact and effectiveness of different types of legal reporting obligations on teachers' reporting patterns, and outcomes for children.

Conclusions

This study has confirmed that teachers in Queensland State schools encounter child abuse and neglect as part of their work and perceive they have a responsibility to report it. They are morally committed to the notion of child protection and recognise its significance as a social issue. Yet despite this commitment, teachers are unsure if they can accurately identify child abuse and neglect. This is particularly so for child sexual abuse. Overall, teachers have received little training to enable them to adequately fulfil their role. The current findings suggest that many teachers hold misconceptions about their legal responsibilities to report. While training may assist teachers to develop a more extensive knowledge base, there are complex issues that influence teachers' detecting and reporting practices. These issues should be the subject of further research.

Literature Review

Introduction

International figures indicate that child abuse continues to be a serious problem. In the United States (US) in 2002, for example, 12.3 in 1000 children were substantiated as victims of child abuse and neglect after investigations (National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, 2004, p.xiv) and in Canada in 1998, 9.7 in 1000 children were the subject of substantiated maltreatment investigations (Trocme, MacLaurin, Fallon, Dacuik, Billingsley, Tourgiay et al., 2001, p.27)¹. Although generally lower than US and Canadian rates, notifications in Australia have consistently risen over the past decade, with child protection substantiation rates ranging from 1.8 per 1000 children in Tasmania to 10.1 per 1000 in Queensland (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2004, p.xiii).

There were 198,355 child protection notifications to Australian state and territory authorities in the year 2002-2003 (AIHW, 2004, p.xiii). In Queensland 31,068 children were the subject of a notification and in 12,203 of these cases, abuse or neglect was substantiated (AIHW, 2004, p.14). Some children are the subject of more than one notification during a year. In all States and Territories, boys are more frequently the subject of substantiated physical abuse, and girls are more often the subject of substantiated sexual abuse (AIHW, 2004, pp.17-18). Younger children (0-9 years of age) are more likely to be the subject of substantiated abuse or neglect overall (AIHW, 2004, p.19). Children from Indigenous backgrounds are up to ten times more likely to be the subject of substantiation compared to other Australian children (AIHW, 2004, pp.19-20). Types of maltreatment that account for the most substantiations in Australia have varied over time in response to changes to what is classified as a substantiation². Generally, child sexual abuse has been the least common type of substantiation in all jurisdictions except for recent differences in Tasmania and Western Australia. In Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia, the most commonly substantiated category was neglect, whereas in New South Wales and Victoria, the most commonly substantiated category was emotional abuse (AIHW, 2004, p.16).

The number of cases reported to, investigated by, and substantiated by authorities, however, may not represent the full extent of child abuse and neglect (Briggs, 1997; McGurk & Hazel, 1998). Some researchers have argued that these official statistics represent “only the tip of

¹ These studies provide the most recent rates available in both the US and Canada at the time this report was compiled.

² Cases defined as substantiated vary between the states and territories of Australia. According to the AIHW (2004) “some jurisdictions substantiate the harm or risk of harm to the child, and others substantiate actions by parents or incidents that cause harm. In focusing on harm to the child, the focus of the child protection systems in many jurisdictions has shifted away from the actions of parents towards the outcomes for the child” (p.5).

the iceberg” (Briggs & Heinrich, 1985, p.41), as these figures are calculated on the number of cases actually reported to child protection authorities (James, 2000). Research into child sexual abuse using general populations of adults has placed the rate of child sexual abuse of girls at 14-25% and boys at 8% (James, 1996).

The roles of teachers and schools

Teachers are key professionals in child protection. Teachers spend more time in daily contact with children than any other professional or any adult, apart from the child’s family (Briggs & Hawkins, 1997). They have expertise in child development and they have the potential to detect changes in appearance, behaviour and progress, and to observe unusual or uncharacteristic behaviour that may be warning signs of abuse or neglect (Briggs & Heinrich, 1985; Crenshaw et al, 1995). Teachers are also likely to become confidants to children (McGrath, Cappelli, Wiseman, Khalil & Allan, 1987), and to receive disclosures about maltreatment (Bradley & Wood, 1996). Because there is an important relationship between the duration of abuse and neglect and its negative impact (Nurcombe, Wooding, Marrington, Bickman & Roberts, 2000), there is a need for prompt action by teachers to interrupt and stop abuse and neglect. Early identification of risk and prompt intervention may lower the risk of future abuse and its consequences and less intensive interventions may be sufficient to achieve positive outcomes if families are identified before problems become entrenched (Browne, 1988).

An important dimension to the teacher’s role in child protection is that of making child protection notifications to statutory authorities alleging child abuse or neglect based on reasonable suspicion. Notification is the culmination of a process whereby a teacher must first *detect* abuse or neglect, and then *report* it. In this research we are particularly interested in detection and reporting because the purposes of notifying child protection authorities are many: to identify child victims, to intervene to stop abuse or neglect, and to prevent it from recurring, to obtain support for children and families, and to bring perpetrators to justice. Notifying is, therefore, considered a “critical antecedent” (Warner & Hansen, 1994, p.11) to addressing the harm and injustices caused by child abuse and neglect.

School personnel are the most common sources of finalised child protection investigations in many States and Territories in Australia³. Table 1 presents the percentages of finalised investigations in each jurisdiction in which school personnel were the source of the notification. School personnel account for 13% of finalised reports in Queensland. Of particular relevance to this study is that, in Queensland, finalised reports from

³ In Australian states and territories a “finalised investigation” is a notification which was investigated by child protection authorities in order to assess the degree of harm to the child and to determine her/his protective needs. When an investigation is finalised, an outcome is recorded as either “substantiated” or “not substantiated” (AIHW, 2004, p.11, 21).

parents/guardians (17%), police (14%) and friends/neighbours (13%) are greater than or equal to those for teachers (13%) (AIHW, 2004, pp.21-22). Finalised reports from other relatives account for 12% (AIHW, 2004, pp.21-22). This is of concern given that all children must attend school.

Table 1

*Finalised investigations made by school personnel in Australian States and Territories*⁴

State/Territory	Percent of finalised investigations (%)	Reporting status
Tasmania	20	Mandatory
South Australia	18	Mandatory
New South Wales	17	Mandatory
Victoria	17	Mandatory
Western Australia	14	Voluntary
Queensland	13	Voluntary
Australian Capital Territory	11	Mandatory
Northern Territory	10	Mandatory

Detecting and reporting alone, however, cannot fully address the problem of child abuse and neglect. Reporting suspicions of abuse and neglect must be situated within broader community responses to the care and protection of all children. Teachers play a vital part in this. Other important dimensions of teachers' and schools' roles include responding specifically to the needs of child victims; teaching all children prevention strategies; supporting children and families by working with other agencies to stop and prevent child abuse and neglect; and engaging in advocacy against child exploitation (David, 1993, 1994; Farrell, 2001, 2004; Watts, 1997).

Although there are many dimensions to teachers' and schools' roles in child protection, this study investigates one dimension – that of detecting and reporting child abuse and neglect. The aim of this research is to gain a better understanding of the critical factors which influence teachers to detect and report child abuse and neglect to statutory authorities. Our research focused on Queensland state primary school teachers. We found that multiple case, teacher and school characteristics influenced their decisions⁵.

⁴ This data is extracted from *Child Protection Australia 2002-2003* (AIHW, 2004). This information was accurate at the time of data collection for this study but has since become outdated by changes to Queensland laws.

⁵ This study is limited to primary school teachers. Other teachers working in before school settings such as community kindergartens and preschools, and long day care, as well as teachers in secondary schools and vocational education programs also have important roles to play in child protection. Studies are also required with these teachers.

Educational consequences of child abuse and neglect

The consequences of child abuse and neglect have been researched extensively. Although long-term effects depend on a number of factors such as degree and duration of abuse, family structure and support, intervention type and the perpetrator (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995; Edari & MacManus, 1998), children who are abused typically experience a range of deleterious consequences throughout their lives.

Immediate negative psychological factors ensuing from abuse can include poor self-image (Bolger, Patterson & Kupersmidt, 1998) and difficulties at school and forming relationships (Cicchetti, Carlson, Braunwald & Aber, 1987; Dukewich, Borkowski & Whitman, 1999; Rowe & Eckenrode, 1999; Solomon & Serres, 1999). Abused children can also experience impaired cognitive and physical development (Culp, Watkins, Lawrence, Letts, Kelly & Rice, 1991; Oates, Gray, Schweitzer, Kempe & Harmon, 1995)

Hence, children who have experienced abuse and neglect are less likely to achieve well at school and are more likely to leave school at an earlier age, without the qualifications they need for future participation in society (CREATE Foundation, 2001). In 2002, Queensland mapped educational outcomes for 281 children and young people who had experienced abuse or neglect and were in state care. Results of the state-wide Year 3, 5 and 7 tests showed that children in state care did not perform as well as other children at their school or within their state. Thirty-two percent (32%) required additional literacy support and 37.4% required additional numeracy support. Further, 43% had been suspended or expelled from school (CREATE Foundation, 2003).

Experiences of child abuse have been linked to later mental health problems, particularly anxiety, depression, anger and aggression, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, and self-injury (Briere & Runtz, 1988a, 1988b, 1990; Lipschitz, Winegar, Hartnick, Foote, & Southwick, 1999; Silverman, Reinherz & Gioconia, 1996). Childhood abuse may also be a determinant of conduct disorders (MacMillan & Munn, 2001, MacMillan et al, 2001). Abuse and neglect in childhood increases the risk of later juvenile delinquency, crime, and serious violent offending (Jonson-Reid, 1998; Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000, National Crime Prevention, 1999).

Many of these consequences also incur a significant social and economic cost to the community, both directly and indirectly (i.e. resulting from the long term and/or secondary effects of child abuse). There are enormous costs associated with physical and mental health care, child welfare, law enforcement and judicial programs, foster care, special education, drug and alcohol treatment, permanent disability, injury, and loss of productivity (Courtney, 1999; Fromm, 2001; McGurk & Hazel, 1998). Further, there are significant costs associated with training professionals for their role in child protection.

Legislation

Child protection is a responsibility of the States and Territories in Australia. Each jurisdiction has its own legislation⁶ and its own government department with responsibility for child protection⁷. There is no national definition of child abuse and neglect in Australia and no national commitment to align definitions across the States and Territories. Advocacy groups such as the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN), Australians Against Child Abuse and the Kids First Foundation have called for national coordination of definitions for many years (see Andersen, 2001; Sinclair & Ginn, 1989; Tucci, Goddard, Saunders & Stanley, 1998). Data collection agencies such as the AIHW, attempting to make accurate statements about the incidence and prevalence of child abuse within Australia, have drawn attention to the difficulty in comparing child protection data because legislative definitions, policies and practices vary across the states and territories (AIHW, 1999a, 1999b, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004; Angus & Hall, 1996; Angus & Wilkinson, 1993; Angus, Wilkinson & Zabar, 1994; Angus & Woodward, 1995; Broadbent & Bentley, 1997⁸).

The State and Territory legislative definitions of child abuse and neglect are important because they determine what is considered a child protection matter and direct how child protection authorities are to intervene. For professionals working with young children, definitions and their translation into policy and practice stipulate the point at which a notification should be made. However, in reality, the decision to notify is not so precise. How professionals establish their suspicions and decide whether or not to report is inexact and influenced by a multitude of issues quite apart from legislative definitions, as we will soon discuss. Yet, in principle, definitions create shared understandings.

In Queensland, the *Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld) provides a broad definition of the child's experience of "harm" [s9]. Harm to a child is defined as any detrimental effect of a significant nature on the child's physical, psychological or emotional wellbeing ... Harm can be caused by — (a) physical, psychological or emotional abuse or neglect; or (b) sexual abuse or exploitation [s9]. Intervention is required when a child is "in need of protection". A "child in

6 See for example Child Welfare Act 1947 (WA); Community Welfare Act 1983 (NT); Children and Young Persons Act 1989 (Vic); Children's Protection Act 1993 (SA); Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1997 (TAS); Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 (NSW); Children and Young People Act 1999 (ACT); and Child Protection Act 1999 (QLD).

7 See for example Department for Community Development (WA); Department of Health and Community Services (NT); Department of Human Services (VIC); Department for Families and Communities (SA); Department of Health and Human Services (TAS); Department of Education and Training – Office for Children, Youth and Family Support (ACT); Department of Child Safety (QLD).

8 AIHW publications were referenced according to their authors until 1998 (see for example, Angus & Wilkinson, 1993; Angus, Wilkinson & Zabar, 1994; Angus & Woodward, 1995; Angus & Hall, 1996; Broadbent & Bentley, 1997) and then referenced according to the organisation (see for example, AIHW, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003).

need of protection is a child who — (a) has suffered harm, is suffering harm, or is at unacceptable risk of suffering harm; and (b) does not have a parent able and willing to protect the child from the harm” [s10]. The Queensland legislation does not define child abuse and neglect as such, nor does it describe what behaviours constitute the various forms of child abuse and neglect, rather it qualifies the broader term “harm” and defines the point at which intervention is necessary.

The introduction of the *Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld) provided the basis for child protection reform in Queensland and redefined the role of statutory agencies in protecting children and supporting their families. The Queensland *Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld) is based upon a set of principles that guide implementation including: children’s best interests and welfare are paramount [s5]; and child protection is the responsibility of families, communities and governments [s5]. Child protection reform in Queensland continued in 2004 with the introduction of a new government department with responsibility for statutory child protection, the *Department of Child Safety*, and the *Implementation Blueprint* (Department of Child Safety, 2004). The *Blueprint* presents a plan of action for implementing 110 recommendations arising from the Crime and Misconduct Commission’s (2004) public inquiry and report *Protecting children: An inquiry into abuse of children in foster care* (CMC, 2004) which called for comprehensive reforms to the child protection system in Queensland to “ensure that all children at risk from harm, abuse or neglect will be properly protected, cared for and supported” (Department of Child Safety, 2004, p.7).

Legal obligation to report

Given the serious consequences of child abuse and the important role of teachers, there is a legal obligation, in all jurisdictions in the United States and in most of Canada and Australia, for them to report child abuse and neglect to statutory authorities (Briggs & Hawkins, 1997). Where legal obligations exist, nominated professionals are usually required to make notifications of child abuse or neglect as soon as possible after they have gained knowledge of or formed a suspicion based on *reasonable grounds*. This is known as *mandatory reporting*. In jurisdictions with mandatory reporting provisions, reporters are usually protected from legal liability (in the event of false reports made in good faith), and penalties apply for failure to report (Mathews & Walsh, 2004).

For over three decades, the case for and against mandatory reporting has been argued vigorously, both in Australia (Harries & Clare, 2002; Tomison, 2002) and overseas (Faller, 1985; Kalichman, 1993). Arguments in favour of mandatory reporting emphasise that it can: prevent child deaths, facilitate early intervention, provide strong messages about children’s rights, increase reporting of children at risk, educate the community about appropriate ways to treat children, and provide professionals with a means by which they can intervene while still maintaining their professional integrity (Harries & Clare, 2002). Arguments against mandatory

reporting highlight that it can: do more harm than good, intrude on the sanctity of the family, overload the child protection system with inaccurate reports, work against the development of trust in communities, inhibit self-disclosures by perpetrators, and discriminates against vulnerable populations (Harries & Clare, 2002).

All of the Australian States and Territories except for Western Australia have enacted legislation requiring members of particular professional groups to report different types of child abuse and neglect. In Queensland, at the time of this study, however, medical practitioners were the only professional group legally obliged to report all types of child abuse and neglect⁹. Queensland teachers were *not* legally obliged to report any form of child abuse and neglect until April 2004 when, following the *Report of the Board of Inquiry into Past Handling of Complaints of Sexual Abuse in the Anglican Church Diocese of Brisbane* (O'Callaghan & Briggs, 2003), legislation was introduced compelling Queensland teachers to report one type of child abuse or neglect - child sexual abuse perpetrated by school staff. This new legal obligation does not require Queensland teachers to report any other type of abuse or neglect. Instead, in education policy, teachers are directed to report all types of child abuse and neglect to statutory authorities via their principal (Education Queensland, 2004).

Policy

Education Queensland has maintained an official child protection policy since 1989 when the Department of Education (1989) issued *Information Statement No. 128: Suspected Child Abuse* in a supplement to the *Education Office Gazette*. Further versions of this policy followed in 1993, 1998, 2000, and 2003 (see Department of Education, 1993; Education Queensland, 1998a; 2000; 2003a).

The 1998 policy appeared to remove the voluntary element from teachers' reporting suspected child maltreatment by using the term *mandatory* to describe teachers' responsibility to report their suspicions of child abuse and neglect to the school principal. The term was also used in the *Child Protection Training Package* (Education Queensland, 1998b) which was used for state-wide compulsory child protection training for school staff beginning in 1999. *The Child Protection Training Package*¹⁰ was distributed to every State school for use by principals and guidance officers who were trained to deliver the training. It covered topics such as: defining child protection; determining how harm is recognised by staff; recommending what is an appropriate staff/student relationship; discussing how staff maintain

⁹ Medical practitioners report child abuse or neglect under an amendment to the *Health Act 1937* (Qld). In future, Queensland nurses will also be legally obliged by the subject of extensions to mandatory reporting requirements for health professionals under a further amendment to the *Health Act 1937* (Qld) which takes effect on 31 August 2005. This was recommended in the Crime and Misconduct Commission's (2004) report *Protecting Children: An Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Foster Care*.

the best interests of students without leaving themselves vulnerable; determining the reporting roles of staff; and prescribing what is appropriate physical contact with students (Education Queensland, 1998b). It was the largest inservice training effort ever undertaken with in excess of 45, 000 teachers and other staff having contact with children. Principals had to ensure that all existing staff were trained by June 1999 and to make certain, thereafter, that all new staff received training. Despite these initiatives, the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC) (2000) found discrepancies in the training provided to new employees.

Use of the term *mandatory* to describe a policy requirement for teachers and school staff to *inform the principal* of children “requiring protection from harm” (Education Queensland, 1998a, s3.2), may have implied to teachers that they had a specific statutory requirement (legal obligation) to notify in this way. The term was removed following the recommendations of the CJC (2000) report *Safeguarding Students: Minimising the Risk of Sexual Misconduct by Education Queensland Staff* which stated that Education Queensland’s Child Protection Policy was:

a daunting mix of policy and procedural guidance and convoluted and contradictory statements that do not give substance to the Policy’s stated focus: the care and safety of students ... the accountabilities of staff are not set out in an organised fashion ... some employees would have difficulty in understanding what was expected of them (p.13).

This is an important historical context in which this research was undertaken.

The present policy is entitled *Health and Safety – HS-17: Student Protection* (Education Queensland, 2004). It was initially written in 2003 and updated in 2004 to comply with legal obligations for reporting of sexual abuse by school staff introduced in the *Education (General Provisions) Act 1989* (Qld). This policy addresses student protection from harm in four categories: harm caused by an Education Queensland employee; harm caused by other students; harm caused by forces outside the state educational institution (defined as parents, siblings, other relatives, family friends or care providers); and student self harm. It provides lists of warning signs and indicators of different types of child abuse and neglect and includes examples of appropriate and inappropriate reactions in response to detecting abuse or neglect. At the time of this study, teachers were required to *inform their principal* of children requiring protection from harm, a protocol known as notification by employer (or policy) direction (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 1997¹¹).

¹¹ At the sixth Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs meeting in Melbourne in 1997, Ministers adopted a national strategy in schooling to prevent paedophilia and other forms of child abuse. One of the key elements of the strategy included: “mandatory notification, either by legislation or *by employer direction*, for all school-based staff, of suspected sexual, physical and emotional abuse and neglect” (MCEETYA, 1997, p.2. Emphasis added).

At the time of this study, therefore, Queensland teachers had two systemic features impacting on their detecting and reporting of child abuse and neglect – absence of reporting obligations and a history of confusing policy directives. This created a unique situation for Queensland teachers.

Teachers' detecting and reporting

As with other professionals, teachers may not always detect or report abuse and neglect (see for example Abrahams, Casey & Daro, 1992; Briggs 1997; Finkelhor & Zellman, 1991; Schweitzer, Buckley, Harnett & Loxton, 2003; Van Haeringen, Dadds & Armstrong, 1998; Zellman, 1990a). This occurs whether or not teachers are classified as mandatory reporters. In the literature, this phenomenon has been termed “under reporting” (Winefield & Bradley, 1992) and “discretionary reporting” (Zellman, 1990b).

In the United States (US), Romano, Casey and Daro (1990) researched 152 elementary and 34 high school principals' reporting practices and found that all detected at least one case of child abuse or neglect in their schools each year. Yet *not* all, in fact 61% of elementary principals and 67% of high school principals, stated they reported every case, even though they were legally obliged to do so. In contrast, Abrahams et al.'s (1992) *National Teacher Survey* which yielded a sample of 568 elementary and middle school teachers, also in the US, found that approximately three quarters (74%) of teachers, all of whom were legally obliged to report, had suspected child abuse or neglect at some time, and of these, 90% had reported the case, usually to the school principal. Also in the US, in Kansas, Crenshaw et al.'s (1995) study of 664 school staff including teachers, school administration and support staff in primary, middle and secondary schools found that in the two years prior to the study, many participants had not suspected abuse or neglect (e.g. 36% had not suspected physical abuse). Of those who had suspected, participants reported 78% of cases of suspected physical abuse, 66% of suspected sexual abuse, 22% of suspected emotional abuse and 40% of suspected neglect (see p.1109). Kenny's (2001) survey of 197 Florida teachers working in kindergarten through high school produced similar findings. Where teachers suspected abuse or neglect, they reported it in 89% of instances¹². Failure to report a significant proportion of suspected cases can be inferred from these studies.

In the United Kingdom (UK) where teachers are not legally obliged to report child abuse and neglect, 52% of 1119 newly qualified teachers sampled nationally, reported they had been involved in a child protection issue (presumably a report) within five years of graduating (Baginsky, 2003). Smyth (1996) studied 102 Dublin teachers working at single sex National schools and investigated their knowledge and awareness of child sexual abuse. Twenty-three

¹² Kenny (2001) notes that within the teacher sample, “only 11%” (p.86) stated there were times when they suspected abuse but did not report it.

percent of the sample had suspected that a child was being sexually abused, and half (50%) had reported it.

In Australia, there are few similar studies. Hawkins and McCallum (2001a) studied 3 groups, including teachers, participating in mandatory notifier training in South Australia. Of the entire sample (145 people), 20% acknowledged they had suspected child abuse or neglect, but decided to not report it. Goldman and Padayachi (2002) used a Queensland state-wide sample of 122 school counsellors to determine that most would report hypothetical cases of child sexual abuse to appropriate authorities even though they were not legally obliged to do so at that time. Determining reasons for reporting and not reporting is important when the law is not the main factor compelling teachers and school personnel to report.

Researchers in the US and the UK have examined variables influencing professionals' detecting and reporting practices and propose that these variables are of three types: characteristics of the abusive event and the individuals involved; individual and professional characteristics of the observer; and organisational characteristics that create contexts for handling cases of abuse and neglect (O'Toole, Webster, O'Toole & Lucal, 1999; Warner-Rogers, Hansen & Speith, 1996). We will refer to these three groups of variables as: case characteristics; teacher characteristics; and school characteristics. Below, we use research findings from research with teachers and other professionals to review the influences in each group.

Case characteristics

First, some researchers have found that teachers are better at reporting particular kinds of abuse over other kinds. They are more likely to report cases of physical abuse than emotional abuse or neglect (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Pelcovitz, 1980) and to consider physical abuse cases as more reportable (Kenny, 2001; Tite, 1993; Webberley 1985). This tendency has been attributed to teachers' difficulty in recognising symptoms as evidence of abuse (Crenshaw et al., 1995) and the complexities involved in determining if abuse has occurred when the signs and symptoms of abuse are difficult to distinguish from other childhood and developmental difficulties (Hawkins & McCallum, 2001a).

Second, the seriousness of the abuse or neglect influences professionals' responses, although professional groups respond differently. Welfare workers, are more likely to report severe or repeated instances of abuse and cases where there are previous child protection notifications (Shapira & Benbenishty, 1993). Teachers tend to delay reporting until they feel they have sufficient evidence (Goldman & Padayachi, 2002; Hawkins & McCallum, 2001a, 2001b; Tite, 1993) and sometimes do not report because of their perceptions that the abuse or neglect is not serious enough to report (O'Toole et al., 1999).

Child characteristics are a third set of influences on reporting patterns. In all States and Territories of Australia, boys are more frequently the subject of substantiated¹³ physical abuse, and girls are more often the subject of substantiated sexual abuse (AIHW, 2004, pp.17-18). Yet in studies of teachers, the gender of the child victim has no effect on reporting tendency (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Younger children (0-9 years) and children from Indigenous backgrounds are more likely to be the subject of substantiated abuse or neglect of any type (AIHW, 2004, p.19-20). In an Australian community study, Manning and Cheers (1995) found a higher tolerance for physical neglect in cases of family poverty (Manning & Cheers, 1995). Overseas studies reveal that children from equity groups, particularly lower socioeconomic groups are more likely to be reported (Hampton & Newberger, 1985; Zellman, 1992). Yet this is contested in other studies where professional responses are not influenced by race or socio-economic status (O'Toole et al., 1999).

Fourth, family factors may sway a professional's decision to report. These include: whether the parents were wilfully harming the child; whether the parents viewed the child as inherently good; whether the parents were law-abiding citizens; and whether the parents displayed a positive attitude in their relationship with the professional worker (Alter, 1985). Similarly, when deciding whether to report, teachers take into consideration the quality of their relationship with the child and the child's family, and their knowledge of relationships within the family (Zellman & Bell, 1990).

Teacher characteristics

First, teacher gender, parental status, years of experience, and teaching context may predict whether teachers will report. In US studies, male teachers are less tolerant of abuse and neglect and will recognise and report it more frequently (O'Toole et al., 1999) and more consistently (Zellman & Bell, 1990). In contrast, other US studies have found that females are more likely to report and to assist others in making a report (Kenny, 2001). Status as a parent decreases the likelihood that teachers will detect or report child abuse (O'Toole et al., 1999). Experienced teachers are more likely to report, or to assist with a report (Kenny, 2001). Special education teachers are also more likely to report (Kenny, 2001). Teachers who work with greater numbers of children can accurately detect abuse and neglect, but report it less (O'Toole et al., 1999).

Second, teachers' knowledge about the indicators of child abuse and neglect and reporting procedures also influences their tendency to report. Much of the literature in both of these

13 A notification (report) of child abuse or neglect will be labelled "substantiated" where "it is concluded after investigation that the child has been, is being or is likely to be abuses, neglected or otherwise harmed" (AIHW, 2004, p.3). What is classed as "substantiation" varies in different Australian states and territories.

areas has consistently criticised teacher training as being inadequate to equip teachers with the knowledge necessary to report suspected child abuse and neglect (e.g. Baxter & Beer, 1990; Beck, Ogloff & Corbishley, 1994; Hazzard & Rupp, 1986; Wurtele & Schmidt, 1992). Teachers themselves often do not feel prepared to meet the challenges of detecting and reporting (Dodge Reyome & Gaeddert, 1998; Tite, 1994a, 1994b). Also, in some jurisdictions, teachers are not as knowledgeable about reporting procedures as they need to be (Abrahams et al., 1992; Beck et al., 1994; Levin, 1983; Sundell, 1997). There is little research linking the timing, frequency, nature or extent of teachers' training to teachers' ability to make accurate and timely reports, although some studies have emphasised the positive impact of recent training on confidence in identifying signs and symptoms of abuse and neglect (Baginsky, 2003; Hawkins & McCallum, 2001a).

A third category of teacher-specific influences includes their concerns and fears about the negative consequences of their reporting. This may be the result of prior negative experiences with reporting, fear of legal consequences due to false allegations, fear of reprisals against the child, and parental disapproval and denial of reports (Abrahams et al., 1992; O'Toole et al., 1999; Pollack & Levy, 1989; Smyth, 1996). In most jurisdictions, teachers are exempt from legal liability in cases of false allegations. Yet despite this, teachers still harbour fears about the legal consequences of reporting (see also Baxter & Beer, 1990; Wurtele & Schmitt, 1992). They may even fear for their own personal safety in the aftermath of a report (Zellman, 1990c; Zellman & Bell, 1990). Teachers' concerns and fears of the consequences of their reports may lead them to conclude that, in some cases, informal school-based interventions rather than referral to statutory authorities will have better outcomes for children (Kalichman, 1993; Tite, 1993; Zellman & Bell, 1990).

Fourth, regardless of training, teachers' desire to fulfil mandatory reporting obligations and their belief that schools should be involved in child protection have strong positive influences on reporting tendency (Hawkins & McCallum, 2001b).

School characteristics

Schools, and the educational institutions of which they are a part, create a climate that can influence teachers' detecting and reporting. Yet this group of influences have received scant attention in the literature, perhaps because of the difficulty in measuring elements of school environments or *climate*. First, policies outlining professional roles in child protection and describing processes for reporting influence teachers' confidence to report, yet there is little recent research explaining exactly how these aspects interact or what features of policy can promote detecting and reporting. Studies of teachers' knowledge, however, reveal that following appropriate training (including information about policies and procedures), teachers report gains in knowledge that help them feel better equipped to deal with the challenges of

identifying and reporting abuse and neglect (Allsop & Prossen, 1988; Randolph & Gold, 1994).

Second, research emphasises the role and attitude of the school principal as influential in whether or not a report will be made. When teachers are unfamiliar with their role in reporting suspected child abuse and neglect, the attitude of the principal of the school is a crucial determinant (Lumsden, 1992). There is little research, however, linking features of the school community or geographical location (e.g., rural or urban) with tendency to report.

Third, there is evidence that the size of the school influences reporting. O'Toole et al. (1999) found that smaller schools and lower child - teacher ratios were indicative of more reporting. In terms of staffing, however, teachers in schools with larger teaching staff overall tended to make more reports. This latter finding might be explained by the availability of teaching colleagues who may assist with a report.

Teachers' decisions to notify

It is evident that a number of critical factors influence teachers' decisions to notify child abuse and neglect. To detect abuse or neglect, teachers must make complex judgements about their suspicions. To report it, they must decide to take action by informing statutory authorities. This type of decision making, involving *judgement* and *action*, has been the subject of a number of studies with child protection workers – professionals who receive notifications, make risk assessments and order investigations about suspected child abuse and neglect (Dalgleish, 2003).

In this research, Dalgleish (2003) demonstrated that child protection workers differ in terms of the point at which they will decide to take action in response to their suspicions. To explain these differences, Dalgleish (1988, 2003) developed a *General Judgement and Decision Making* (GJDM) model which uses the concept of differential thresholds for both *judgements* and *actions*. A threshold can be visualised as a point along a continuum where values above the threshold lead to one particular decision and values below the threshold lead to another decision (Dalgleish, 2003). Although the concept of thresholds in decision-making is not unique to Dalgleish's (1988, 2003) GJDM work (see for example, Hammond, 1980), the application of thresholds to both judgements and actions make this model conceptually useful to understanding teachers' detecting and reporting of child abuse and neglect.

For example, Dalgleish (1988) studied *judgements* and *actions* made by individual social workers dealing with cases of child abuse in families. He found that two social workers who both judged that a particular situation constituted child abuse recommended very different actions. One recommended intervention (action), advising that the child should be removed from the family. The other recommended no intervention (no action), advising that the child

should remain with the family. Dalgleish (1988) proposed that these different outcomes occurred because, despite holding the same judgement threshold, the two social workers differed in their action thresholds.

Like social workers, teachers must make child protection decisions, albeit in different contexts and for different purposes. First, teachers must make complex judgements about the existence of potential abuse, that is, they must detect it. They must gather and organise information to assess the presence of abuse or neglect to develop a suspicion. Dalgleish's (1988) work reminds us that in doing this, teachers will use information about the case, their previous experience with similar cases, and their personal values, beliefs and history to determine their *judgement threshold*. They will then judge the severity of the situation. If the severity is above the teachers' threshold, they will judge the situation to involve child abuse or neglect. Teachers who judge the situation to involve abuse or neglect have a further decision to make. These teachers must decide whether or not to take action by reporting. Here, Dalgleish's (1988) work suggests that in doing so, teachers will consider the consequences of reporting or not reporting in relation to the child, the family, and themselves. They will also take into account the quality of their suspicion and decide if action is required. This is their *action threshold*. If the potential negative outcomes for the child and the quality of their suspicions are below the teachers' threshold, they will decide to take action by reporting. Otherwise they will not report.

Knowing where teachers place their judgement and action thresholds does not explain the whole of their judgement and decision-making process and many other theories and models for decision-making and risk assessment have conceptual ideas that may extend our understandings of teachers' detecting and reporting child abuse and neglect (see for example Alter, 1985; Munro, 2002; Warner & Hansen, 1994). We have chosen to use the GJDM model because it has not been used previously to investigate teachers' decision-making in cases of child abuse and neglect, and it has practical application. In using this approach with teachers, we hope to advance understanding of the critical influences on teachers' detecting and reporting child abuse and neglect, and gain new insights that can be applied to enhance their preparation and training.

Summary

Child abuse and neglect is a serious problem that potentially every teacher will face. Teachers' detecting and reporting of child abuse and neglect can be considered a critical first step towards addressing the lifelong impacts of abuse and the prevention of further generations of abusing and neglecting families (Briggs & Hawkins, 1997). Teachers must make decisions in the face of considerable uncertainty about whether what they have detected indicates that a child has been abused or neglected, and whether the potential outcome of a report renders reporting the most likely option. This is particularly relevant in

Queensland where teachers are not legally obliged to report all categories of abuse and neglect. We need to know what factors influence Queensland teachers to detect and report child abuse and neglect so that we can adequately prepare them for their important role in responding to child maltreatment. In this study we examine a range of issues relevant to teachers' detecting and reporting role including their:

- awareness of laws governing teacher reporting of child abuse and specific policies and/or procedures pertaining to child abuse and neglect within the Queensland education sector;
- knowledge of the indicators of different forms of child abuse and neglect;
- knowledge of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in their school community;
- experiences of reporting to statutory authorities; and
- perceptions of the motivators for, and deterrents to reporting to statutory authorities for themselves, families, and individual children.

Furthermore, we apply an innovative GJDM methodology to explore the effects of case, teacher, and school characteristics on teachers' thresholds for detecting and reporting child abuse and neglect. We predict that a range of critical factors will influence where individual teachers place their judgement and action thresholds. These factors include:

- case characteristics - type of abuse or neglect, frequency of abuse or neglect, the effect of the abuse or neglect on the child, the socioeconomic status of the child's family, and the perceived cooperativeness of the child's family;
- teacher characteristics - gender; age, parental status, educational qualifications, years of experience, teaching position, amount and recency of child protection training, beliefs about legal obligations to report, self-reported confidence in identifying child abuse and neglect, previous experiences in detecting or reporting child abuse and neglect, beliefs about the proportion of children who are helped or harmed by a report, and beliefs about the prevalence of child abuse in their school community; and
- school characteristics - size of the school, location of the school, socioeconomic status of the general school community, amount of discussion at the school about child abuse and neglect, estimated frequency of child abuse and neglect in the school community, and level of administrative support for reporting.

We propose that teachers' judgement (detecting) thresholds will be influenced by factors relating to the case, their previous experience with similar cases, and their personal background. We also propose that their action (reporting) thresholds will be influenced by their consideration of the severity or magnitude of the case and the potential consequences of reporting. Overall, this study will provide new perspectives for understanding teachers' detecting and reporting patterns and provide a basis for recommending practical strategies to

build the capacity of teachers and schools to deal effectively with detecting and reporting child abuse and neglect.

Methodology

Participants

Registered teachers currently working in state primary schools (preschool to year 7) in South East Queensland were the targeted participants. They were accessed via the school principal and a school contact person as described below. Districts in South East Queensland were selected because of the likelihood that they would yield a good cross-section of teachers.

Survey

Data were collected using a survey instrument, the *Child Abuse and Neglect Teacher Questionnaire (CANTQ)*, developed by the research team to meet the research objectives. The CANTQ comprised five sections measuring a variety of teacher and school characteristics and eliciting written responses to open-ended questions about child protection related issues. The survey sections included:

- teacher background and experience;
- school characteristics;
- knowledge of and training for child protection;
- previous contact with child abuse and neglect; and
- thresholds for identifying and reporting (32 case vignettes).

In the final section, 32 case vignettes were used to quantify the effects of teacher and school characteristics on whether or not teachers would detect and report these hypothetical cases.

Two versions of the questionnaire were developed – version A and version B. The surveys were identical in content; only the order of vignettes in the final section was altered to account for the effect of response bias. Surveys took approximately 40 minutes to complete.

Procedure

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from QUT's University Human Research Ethics Committee and from Education Queensland's Strategic Policy and Education Futures Branch.

An information sheet inviting schools to participate in the study and a fax-back response form was mailed to the Principals of all State primary schools (N=302) in 13 administrative districts in South East Queensland closest to the Brisbane Metropolitan area. The districts included: Bayside, Coopers Plains, Corinda, Darling Downs, Geebung, Gold Coast North, Gold Coast South, Ipswich, Logan Beaudesert, Mount Gravatt, Murrumba, Stafford, and West Moreton.

One hundred and nineteen schools (39.4%) responded to the invitation. Of these, 35 schools (11.6%) accepted the invitation to participate and 84 schools (27.8%) declined. The most

common reason given for declining participation was that the school was too busy with other projects. Several said they could not see the benefit in participating, and others were averse to the topic. Schools accepting the invitation to participate comprised a wide geographical spread with at least one school from each of 10 administrative districts represented.

Principals in each of the 35 participating schools nominated a contact person on the school staff who was to be paid a small incentive, in the form of a book voucher, to distribute and collect surveys and return 80% of them to QUT in a reply-paid envelope.

Participating schools had preschool to year seven classes with enrolment numbers ranging from 15 to 1250. School staff ranged in size from one teacher to 32 teachers. A total of 1077 surveys were mailed to the contact person in each of the 35 participating schools. Packages contained:

- surveys for the school's entire teaching staff;
- instructions for administering the survey;
- a large reply-paid and pre-addressed envelope; and
- a claim form for the incentive payment to be completed if 80% of originally mailed surveys were returned.

Response rates

After receiving the surveys, one of the 35 schools declined and a further four schools did not return surveys. No schools returned 80% of the surveys. Finally, a total of 30 schools across 10 administrative districts returned surveys. In all, 254 surveys were returned of which 55% were type CANTQA and 45% were type CANTQB. The final sample size is comparable to other similar studies in Australia¹⁴ and overseas¹⁵. Ours is the largest study of Australian primary teachers' reporting practices to date. The findings of the study are presented in two parts in the following sections.

Findings 1 presents findings relating to the specific aims of the study which were to examine teachers':

¹⁴ See for example the following: Hawkins & McCallum's (2001a, 2001b) South Australian study of the effectiveness of mandated notifier training on professionals' reporting practices which included 145 trained and untrained personnel including 41 teachers; Goldman & Padayachi's (2002) study of factors influencing Queensland school counsellors' decisions to not report child abuse and neglect with 122 participants; and Briggs & Heinrich (1985) study of 280 South Australian graduating teachers' views of child abuse.

¹⁵ See for example Kenny's (2001) study of deterrents to teachers' reporting child abuse and neglect in the USA with a sample of 197 teachers; Shor's (1997) study of identification and reporting by teachers in Israel with 161 respondents; and Beck, et al.'s (1994) study of Canadian teachers' knowledge, compliance and attitudes towards mandatory reporting with 216 participants.

- awareness of laws governing teacher reporting of child abuse in Queensland and specific policies and/or procedures pertaining to child abuse and neglect within their education sector;
- knowledge of the indicators of different forms of child abuse and neglect;
- knowledge of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in their school community;
- experiences of reporting to statutory authorities; and
- perceptions of the consequences of, motivators for, and deterrents to reporting to statutory authorities for themselves, families, and individual children.

Findings 2 presents findings of the innovative component to this study exploring the effects of case, teacher, and school characteristics on teachers' thresholds for detecting and reporting child abuse and neglect.

Findings 1

Data analysis

In Part 1, teachers' responses to the quantitative items on the questionnaire were coded and analysed using *SPSS 12.0*. Analysis involved descriptive and non-parametric inferential statistics (primarily Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis χ^2) to examine the demographic and background characteristics of the teachers and their schools; teachers' awareness of laws and policies relating to child abuse and neglect; their knowledge of child abuse/neglect indicators and their confidence in accurately identifying child abuse/neglect; and their previous experiences of suspecting, identifying, and reporting. Teachers qualitative comments were content analysed to generate a set of categories and subcategories (Altheide, 1987; Silverman, 2000).

Characteristics of the sample

Teacher characteristics

Teachers' background and experience were measured via eight questions about: gender; age; parental status; highest education level attained; number of years experience as a teacher; year level usually taught; overall amount of child protection training; and recency of their child protection training. These characteristics are presented in Table 2. The sample comprises 254 registered teachers working in state primary schools. The sample is predominantly female (86.2%)¹⁶. The largest group of respondents were in the age-range 41-50 (36.9%). More teachers were parents (63.2%) than non-parents. Most teachers (87.8%) had undergraduate teacher qualifications (three-year diplomas - 12.6%, four-year degrees - 53.9%, graduate diplomas and degrees - 21.3%), and the remainder (12.2%) had postgraduate qualifications. Teachers in the sample were experienced teachers. The average number of years teaching experience was calculated as just less than 15 years ($M = 14.68$ years, $SD = 9.3$). There was a good spread of teachers from all year levels within the school and from school administration, with 40.6% of respondents from the upper school (years 4-7), 36.2% from the lower school (preschool – year 3), and 23.2% principals, deputy principals and other specialist teaching staff. Teachers in the sample have an average of 3 hours of child protection training in their careers. Seven percent (7%) have received no training at all. In the past year, 61% have had some child protection training.

¹⁶ According to Education Queensland data sources, female teachers comprise approximately 72% of the total teacher workforce (Education Queensland, 2002).

Table 2

*Teacher Characteristics (N=254)**

	Statistic
Female	86.2%
Age – modal age range	41-50 – 36.9%
Parents	63.2%
Undergraduate qualification	87.8%
Years of teaching experience	Mean = 14.7 years (<i>SD</i> = 9.3)
Lower school (early childhood) teachers	36.2%
Amount of child protection training	Mean = 2.8 hours (<i>SD</i> = 1.19)
Completed child protection training in the past 12 months	61%

* N represents the number of teachers responding to these questions.

School characteristics

School characteristics were elicited via six questions about: size of the school; location of the school (metropolitan or rural/regional); socio-economic status of the school community; amount of discussion at the school about issues associated with child abuse and neglect; estimated frequency of child abuse in the school community; and level of administrative support for reporting. Characteristics of the school communities are presented in Table 3. The research schools represented in the sample are mainly larger schools (71% had more than 500 children, 24% had 200-500 children, and only 5% had less than 200 children). The schools are predominantly inner or outer metropolitan schools (74.1%) with a smaller portion of rural or regional schools (24.4%). Teachers within a particular school tended to agree on the socio-economic status of the children at that school. Most school populations were rated by teachers as average socioeconomic status (66.8%), a smaller portion with low socioeconomic status (27.6%) and the smallest portion with high socioeconomic status (5.6%). Approximately half of the respondents (49.6%) indicated there was discussion about child abuse and neglect at their school. The majority of teachers (63.8%) believe that child abuse and neglect occurs equally in all school communities rather than more frequently in their community (14.0%) or less frequently in their community (22.1%). Teachers indicated a very high level of administrative support for reporting child abuse and neglect, with 98% of the teachers responding that their school administration would support them in making a report.

Table 3

*School characteristics (N=254)**

	Statistic
Large schools (500+)	71.0%
Outer metropolitan	46.5%
Average socio-economic status	66.8%
There is discussion about child abuse and neglect at the school	49.6%
Child abuse happens equally in all communities	63.8%
School administration will support reports	98.0%

* N represents the number of teachers responding to these questions.

Awareness of laws and policies relating to reporting child abuse and neglect in Queensland

Teachers were asked if they were required by law to report suspicions of child abuse and neglect. Most teachers (86.5%) agreed that they had such an obligation. A very small number (2%) believed they did not and a significant minority (11.5%) were unsure. We did not ask them to specify the types of abuse or neglect they believed they were legally obliged to report. Professional and moral responsibilities to report child abuse and neglect were strongly indicated by the teachers with 93.3% indicating a professional responsibility, and 98.8% indicating a moral responsibility to report. Of note is the outcome that *only one* teacher in the 254 respondents did not accept a professional responsibility to report, and *no* teachers in this sample refused a moral responsibility to report.

Teachers were more likely to believe they were legally obliged to report if:

- there was informal discussion amongst teachers about child abuse and neglect at their school, and this is more likely to occur in schools rated by teachers as having relatively lower socioeconomic status;
- they had previously detected child abuse or neglect;
- they had previously reported child abuse or neglect;
- they had received more than 5 hours of child protection training; or
- they were a preschool teacher (as opposed to a year 1-3 teacher, a year 4-7 teacher, or a member of the administration/support staff).

No significant difference was found in beliefs regarding legal obligation by parental status, confidence in identifying physical abuse, years employed as a teacher, socioeconomic status of the school, location of the school, size of the school.

Teachers were more likely to be unsure of their legal obligations if:

- there was not much discussion in their school about child abuse and neglect ($\chi^2(2)=6.20$, $p<.05$);
- they had received less than 5 hours of child protection training ($\chi^2(10)=24.47$, $p<.004$);
- they had never detected child abuse and neglect ($\chi^2(2)=9.44$, $p<.01$); or
- they had never reported child abuse and neglect ($\chi^2(4)=14.28$, $p<.007$);

Three quarters (76.3%) of teachers surveyed were aware of Education Queensland's *Student Protection* policy. Few teachers, however, could correctly identify the current policy's four categories of harm that employees are responsible to prevent and respond to. When asked to whom they would report child abuse or neglect, nearly all teachers (94.9%) nominated their school principal. One-third (27.6%) might also report to the Department of Families and one-quarter (23.2%) to Education Queensland. Reporting directly to the police was another option commonly selected (15.4%).

Approximately 200 teachers responded to an open-ended question asking them about what their school does to address child abuse and neglect. The results of this question provide an informal audit of child protection strategies used in state schools participating in this study. Of note, one quarter of the teachers responding to this question could not identify any initiatives undertaken in their school to address child abuse and neglect. Over half of all comments in this question related to schools providing in-service training on legislative changes, and new policies and processes introduced in 2004. Other comments related to initiatives such as:

- Establishing a school-based Special Needs Action Committee (SNAC) for regular meetings for teachers to discuss suspicions, monitor children's progress, and allocate resources to children suffering effects of abuse and neglect;
- Increasing teacher access to specialist resources in the form of support staff to assist teachers, for example school administration (principal and deputy principal), guidance officers, learning support teachers, sexual harassment officers, and advisory visiting teachers (behaviour management). The school chaplain and school nurse were viewed as individuals to whom children could make disclosures of abuse and were considered, mainly, to be resources for children alone rather than for both children and teachers;
- Developing whole-school systems for monitoring student absences from school, critical incident reports, supplying best practice examples to help teachers hone observation and record-keeping skills, providing resource books in teacher library reference collections, and funding teachers to attend information sessions about child abuse and neglect conducted by other organisations;

- Introducing parenting programs including *Management of Young Children Program* (MYCP) and *Triple P* in collaboration with other government departments such as Queensland Health;
- Introducing child abuse prevention programs for children such as protective behaviours programs (mentioned infrequently - only five times in this sample) but in three of these instances the programs were referred to as *Stranger Danger* programs;
- Establishing a breakfast club for children arriving at school without a meal, and provision of spare clothing and food during the day;
- Intervening to address the effects of abuse and neglect in children through behaviour programs, anti-bullying programs, social skills and self-esteem programs; and
- Working with other agencies to integrate support services into the school community was evidenced albeit infrequently. Examples included Lifeline counsellors working in the school at designated times each week and Red Cross services at the school to provide material resources for disadvantaged families. In two instances, the Child Care and Family Support Hub coordinator was nominated as a key support for children and families.

Knowledge of the indicators of different forms of child abuse and neglect

Teachers were asked to rate their confidence in appropriately identifying signs of physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse and neglect on a five-point scale from *very unprepared* to *very prepared*. Higher scores mean higher confidence in identifying the type of abuse or neglect. An overall confidence score was created from combining the four scores. Results are presented in Table 4. Teachers were generally unsure (overall average of 3.40 on a 5 point scale) about their ability to accurately identify child abuse and neglect. They were slightly more confident about identifying physical abuse and neglect than emotional abuse, and were least confident about identifying sexual abuse.

Table 4

Confidence in appropriately identifying types of abuse and neglect and overall confidence

Confidence in identifying	Mean	SD
Physical abuse	3.65	0.85
Neglect	3.72	0.88
Emotional abuse	3.27	0.97
Sexual abuse	2.98	1.02
Overall (all categories)	3.40	0.80

Note: Scores are ranked highest to lowest (score 1 = very unprepared to 5 = very prepared).

There were significant correlations between teacher confidence in accurately identifying abuse and neglect and some teacher characteristics. Teachers were more likely to be confident in identifying child abuse and neglect if:

- they were parents – significant for all types except emotional abuse;
- there was informal discussion at their school about child abuse and neglect – significant for all types except sexual abuse;
- they were more experienced teachers – significant only for neglect;
- they had recent child protection training – significant only for neglect;
- they had previously identified child abuse or neglect – significant only for sexual abuse and neglect; or
- they were confident in identifying other types of child abuse – in particular, teachers who were confident in identifying physical abuse were also confident in identifying other types of abuse or neglect.
- they worked at a large school (>500 students) or a small school (<200 students) rather than a medium-sized school – significant for physical abuse and neglect but not for emotional abuse or sexual abuse.

The following teacher and school characteristics were found to have no effect on teacher confidence in accurately identifying child abuse and neglect: gender of the teacher; teacher qualifications; year level taught; previously having made a report; beliefs about the frequency of abuse; beliefs about socioeconomic status of the school; or the location of school. There was insufficient variability in the data to examine the effect of beliefs about administrative support of reporting.

Warning signs prompting reports

We did not ask teachers to list indicators of the different forms of child abuse and neglect. Instead, we asked an open-ended question with a practical application. From cases they had reported, we asked teachers to identify warning signs in the child that provoked a suspicion and subsequent report. Approximately 200 teachers responded to this question, some giving multiple indicators. Results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

*Warning signs prompting teachers to report**

Factor	Number of responses
Behavioural and emotional indicators	75
Physical signs of abuse/neglect	45
Comments/disclosure from the child	33
Basic needs not met	30
Concern for child's safety	17
Quality of school work and class participation affected	12
Absenteeism	7
Prior history of abuse/neglect	1

*Based on teachers' written responses to an open-ended question

The majority of teachers noted behavioural and emotional indicators had determined their decision to report. For example in relation to physical and sexual abuse respectively:

Timidity, passiveness, fear of failure, unwillingness to try, lack of friendships, frequent tearfulness. Acting out. (Teacher 398)

Child frequently touching/talking about other children's private parts. Seemed to have more knowledge of sexual events than usual for a child of her age. (Teacher 102)

Obvious physical signs of physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect were also noted. For example:

Severe hidden bruising. (Teacher 081)

Child smelled of urine. Child was bruised, scratched and had red school sores. (Teacher 126)

Rope burns on child's neck. Cigarette burns on child's body. (Teacher 342)

Teachers described disclosures from children:

Stories the child told were corroborated by others. (Teacher 016)

Child reported incident of physical abuse by parent. Child's behaviour and learning were severely affected. (Teacher 070)

The child came and told me what was happening to him after a lesson on abuse.
(Teacher 303)

Children's basic need for food, clothing and medical attention was identified:

Obvious signs of neglect. No lunch, Dirty clothes – same ones worn all week.
Unwashed and smelling. (Teacher 337)

No lunch or food day after day. Child says he has to make all the lunches for siblings
and do housework. Dirty clothing. Poor health. (Teacher 413)

Immediate concerns for the child's safety were expressed:

Concerns for the child's well-being and safety. The possibility of it recurring. The child
needed protection. (Teacher 031)

Beliefs about the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in school communities

The majority of teachers (63.8%) believed that child abuse and neglect occurred equally in all communities. Others indicated that child abuse happened *less frequently* in their community than in others (22.1%), and *more frequently* in their community than in others (14%). No teachers believed that their school community was free from child abuse and neglect.

Teachers who worked in school communities characterised by low socioeconomic status, however, generally believed child abuse and neglect was more common in their school community than others ($\chi^2(4)=71.21$, $p<.001$). Teachers from schools where there was informal discussion about child protection were significantly more likely than teachers at schools where there was no discussion, to indicate that child abuse and neglect happened more in their communities than others ($\chi^2(2)=20.58$, $p<.001$). Also, teachers who had suspected or identified abuse or neglect in the past were significantly more likely than those who had not, to believe that child abuse happened more frequently in their communities than others ($\chi^2(2)=7.08$, $p<.03$).

Teachers' beliefs about prevalence did not differ by the amount or recency of child protection training they had undertaken, their qualifications, previous experience of reporting, or size of the school.

Experiences of reporting child abuse and neglect

Teachers suspected child abuse in more instances than they reported it. Three quarters of teachers (74.5%) suspected child abuse and neglect at some time in their careers. Half (48.5%) reported child abuse or neglect. Over fifty percent of teachers (52.2%) suspected it in the past year and more than one third (36.6%) reported in the past year. In accordance with institutional policy, the majority of teachers who suspected child abuse or neglect (94%) reported their suspicions to their principal. Teachers believed principals reported cases to authorities approximately two thirds of the time (63%). These results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6

Proportion of teachers who have suspected and reported child abuse and neglect (N=254)

	Suspected	Reported
Ever	74.5%	48.5%
In past 12 months	52.2%	36.6%
Reported to principal when suspected	94%	80.9%
Principal reported to authorities	63%	62.9%
Principal did not report to authorities	9.6%	15.3%

Teachers stated they did not know the outcome of a principal's decision in 27.7% of instances where they expressed their concerns to her/him.

Six percent (n=16) of teachers did not answer the question asking if they had personally suspected child abuse and neglect and decided to *not* report it. Ten percent (10%) of teachers responding to this question had decided to not report child abuse or neglect at some point.

Teachers noted the total number of times they had suspected and reported each category of abuse or neglect. Results are displayed in Table 7 in descending order of frequency. The number of times sexual abuse was suspected was much lower than other types. In terms of reporting, teachers indicated that they reported physical abuse every time they encountered it (100% of the time). For sexual abuse it was nine out of ten times (88.8%), and for both emotional abuse and neglect it was four out of five times (79.9% and 80.4% respectively).

Table 7

Total number of times teachers had suspected, identified, and reported types of child abuse and neglect

Type of abuse	Suspected		Identified		Reported	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Neglect	2.86	5.79	2.17	2.37	2.30	2.38
Physical abuse	2.26	3.69	2.23	4.30	2.29	3.98
Emotional abuse	1.99	2.51	1.81	2.87	1.59	0.94
Sexual abuse	1.74	1.19	1.53	1.00	1.59	0.92

Teachers were asked what percentage of abused children they thought were helped or harmed by reporting. The mean 'helped' percentage was 63.22% ($SD = 25.1$, $Mdn = 70\%$, $n = 155$). The mean 'harmed' percentage was 32.03% ($SD = 19.1$, $Mdn = 30\%$, $n = 123$). That is, teachers believe that, on average, one-third (32%) of children are harmed by teachers making a report.

Teachers who were also parents assigned significantly higher 'harmed' percentages than non-parents ($U = 1358.00$, $p < .008$) while teachers with more recent training assigned significantly higher 'helped' percentages ($p = .17$, $p < .04$). The size of school approached significance in terms of percent 'harmed', with teachers from smaller schools possibly more likely to assign a higher 'harmed' percentage ($\chi^2(2) = 5.54$, $p = .06$). Teachers who reported discussion about child abuse and neglect at their schools assigned significantly lower 'harmed' percentages than teachers from schools where discussion did not occur ($U = 1375.00$, $p < .02$), but there was no significant difference in 'helped' ratings ($U = 2644.5$, $p = .63$).

Factors influencing decision to report or not report suspected cases to statutory authorities

Teachers were asked to write responses to questions about what influenced their decision to report or to not report child abuse or neglect. To further explore the influences on teacher decision making to report, teachers were asked open-ended questions regarding the influences on their decisions in each of four areas: child factors, family factors, school factors, and self factors. Table 8 displays these results.

Table 8

Factors influencing teachers' decisions to report

Factor	Number of responses
Child	
Behavioural and emotional indicators	75
Physical signs of abuse/neglect	45
Comments/disclosure from the child	33
Basic needs not met	30
Concern for child's safety	17
Quality of school work and class participation affected	12
Absenteeism	7
Prior history of abuse/neglect	1
Child's family	
Inappropriate or inconsistent behaviour of parent(s)	33
Family instability/dysfunction	33
History of abuse or neglect patterns in the family	13
Child's appearance/characteristics/comments about family	13
Parent(s) lacking support/education/skills	8
Defensiveness/avoidance or no contact with family	8
Apparent lack of concern	6
Parent disclosure	4
School	
Supportive atmosphere	61
Expectation to report	27
Clear procedures in place	11
Teacher (self)	
Care and concern for the child	56
Moral responsibility	24
Legal obligation	23
Knowledge, evidence, and the need to take action	19
Zero tolerance for abuse	7
Own experience of being abused	2

To further explore what influences teachers to *not report*, teachers were again asked open-ended questions regarding the influences on their decisions in each of four areas: child factors, family factors, school factors, and self factors. Table 9 displays these results.

Table 9

Factors influencing teachers' decisions to not report

Factor	Number of responses
Child	
Lack of evidence/not serious enough/considered 'one-off'	29
Fear of consequences of report for child	7
Reporting process was already underway	4
Child didn't disclose	2
It would have continued (neglect)	1
Child's family	
Family were cooperative	5
Fear of retaliation from child's family	3
Family already known to child protection authorities	3
Empathised with the family situation	3
School	
Left it up to others to report	7
Lack of support for report	6
School not willing to get involved with the family	1
Teacher (self)	
Fear of being identified as reporter/parent anger and revenge	5
Desire to help child in classroom without reporting	3
Inexperience	3
Fear of being wrong	2
Acting on advice from others	1
Experience	1
Not wanting to make the situation worse	1

Findings 2

Data Analysis

This part of the study used a powerful methodological approach similar to that used by O'Toole, et al. (1999) – a fully factorial vignette design. Teachers responded to a series of 32 case vignettes containing a combination of 5 variables in a potential child abuse scenario. The case variables were chosen because they had been identified previously in the literature as important factors influencing reporting behaviour and they could be observed easily in a classroom. Each of the 5 variables had two levels as described below. Vignettes were generated so that each level of each variable was included with each level of each other variable. This allowed us to assess the effects of numerous case, teacher, and school characteristics on how likely teachers are to detect child abuse and neglect, and how likely they are to report it, given detection. The specific independent variables are presented in Table 10.

We conducted ordinary least squares regression analyses to determine whether and to what extent teacher background variables, school-related context variables and case variables were related to teachers' tendencies to a) detect child abuse and neglect, and b) report child abuse and neglect. We then used an hierarchical regression model to examine the variables which are related to teachers' decisions to report a case once they have detected it.

Categorical variables (e.g. gender, or parental status) were effect coded, so that the direction of relationships could be easily ascertained. Continuous variables (e.g. number of years experience as a teacher, confidence in identification) were entered into the models as they were.

Table 10

Case, Teacher and School Independent Variables

Case characteristics	<p>Type of abuse or neglect (physical abuse vs neglect)</p> <p>Frequency of abuse or neglect (high repeat vs low repeat)</p> <p>Effect of abuse or neglect on the child (high impact vs low impact)</p> <p>Socio-economic status of the child's family (high SES vs low SES)</p> <p>Cooperativeness of the child's parent(s) (high cooperation vs low cooperation)</p>
Teacher characteristics	<p>Gender</p> <p>Age</p> <p>Parental status</p> <p>Highest education level attained</p> <p>Number of years experience as a teacher</p> <p>Year level usually taught</p> <p>Amount of child protection training</p> <p>Recency of child protection training</p> <p>Beliefs about a legal obligation to report</p> <p>Confidence in identifying child abuse and neglect</p> <p>Previously suspected or identified child abuse or neglect</p> <p>Previously decided to report suspected child abuse or neglect</p> <p>Beliefs about the proportion of children helped and harmed by reporting</p> <p>Beliefs about the frequency of child abuse in the school community</p>
School characteristics	<p>Size of the school</p> <p>Location of the school (metro or rural/regional)</p> <p>Socioeconomic status of the general school community</p> <p>Amount of discussion at the school about child abuse and neglect</p> <p>Estimated frequency of child abuse in the school community</p> <p>Level of administrative support for reporting</p>

Two hundred and fifty-four (254) teachers responded to 32 vignettes so that, in all, 8128 vignette responses were obtained. Teachers rated each of the vignettes for 'likelihood of abuse' (detection) and 'likelihood to report' (reporting) on 1 to 5 scales.

The mean vignette detection rating was 2.79 ($SD = 0.56$), that is, between 'probably not' and 'unsure'. The mean vignette reporting rating was 2.82 ($SD = 0.83$), that is, also between 'probably not' and 'unsure'. These results are shown in Table 11.

Table 11
Vignette detection and reporting ratings

Vignette variable	Detecting		Reporting	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Type of abuse				
Physical	3.06	0.91	3.17	1.19
Neglect	2.54	0.88	2.54	1.15
Frequency of abuse				
High repeat	3.08	0.89	3.20	1.16
Low repeat	2.52	0.89	2.52	1.16
Effect of abuse or neglect on the child				
High impact on child	2.95	0.93	2.99	1.22
Low impact on child	2.65	0.92	2.71	1.19
Socio-economic status of the child's family				
High SES	2.79	0.93	2.85	1.21
Low SES	2.81	0.93	2.85	1.21
Cooperativeness of the child's parent(s)				
High cooperation	2.69	0.93	2.73	1.19
Low cooperation	2.91	0.92	2.98	1.22

Note: Scores are ranked lowest to highest. For detection (score 1 = definitely not abuse/neglect to score 5 = definitely abuse/neglect). For reporting (score 1 = definitely won't report to score 5 = definitely will report).

Teachers' likelihood to detect child abuse and neglect

For each of the 32 vignettes, we asked a detection question - 'how likely is it that this child has been abused or neglected?' The adjusted R^2 value with all vignette (case), teacher and school variables entered was 0.266, indicating that a significant yet moderate proportion of the variance in teacher detection was accounted for by the measured variables (see Appendix A).

Of the vignette variables entered (type of abuse, repetition, change in the child's behaviour and family cooperativeness) all obtained beta weights which were significant at the $p < .001$ level. Vignettes containing possible physical abuse, repeated signs of abuse, a change in the child's behaviour, and a low level of family cooperativeness were all assigned higher mean 'likelihood of abuse' scores than vignettes containing possible neglect, first-time signs, no change in the child's behaviour, and a friendly, cooperative family. Compared to the teacher

and school characteristics, the vignette variables accounted for the highest level of variance explained in the dependant variable. The only vignette variable which was non-significant at $p < .05$ was socioeconomic status of the child's family.

Teacher variables which were significant predictors of 'detection' included: year level usually taught; education level; parental status; and confidence in identifying abuse or neglect. Teachers in the lower primary school were more likely to indicate that vignettes depicted physical abuse or neglect than upper primary teachers or principals ($p < .001$), as were teachers with postgraduate qualifications ($p < .01$), non-parents ($p < .01$), and teachers who were confident at identifying child abuse and neglect generally ($p < .001$). Teachers who had previously reported a suspected case of child abuse or neglect, as opposed to not report the case, were also more likely to detect physical abuse or neglect in the vignettes ($p < .001$).

Teacher variables for which beta weights for detection were non-significant at $p < .05$ included: gender; belief in legal mandate to report child abuse and neglect; recency of child protection training; previous experience in identifying abuse and neglect; and number of years experience as a teacher.

School variables which were significant predictors of detection included: school size; socioeconomic status of the school community; amount of discussion at the school about child abuse and neglect; and beliefs about the frequency of child abuse in the school community. Teachers from large schools with 500 or more children were more likely than those from smaller schools to indicate that vignettes depicted physical abuse or neglect ($p < .001$). Teachers working in schools rated as having low socioeconomic status ($p < .05$) and teachers from schools where there was regular discussion about child protection ($p < .05$) were more likely to detect physical abuse or neglect in the vignettes. A belief that child abuse occurred less frequently in the school community than in other communities was also a significant positive predictor of likelihood to detect abuse or neglect.

The location of the school was not a significant predictor of detection at $p < .05$.

Teachers' likelihood to report child abuse and neglect

For each of the 32 vignettes, we also asked a reporting question - 'how likely is it that you will report this case to the authorities?' The adjusted R^2 value with all vignette (case), teacher and school variables entered was 0.27, indicating that a significant yet moderate proportion of the variance in teacher reporting was accounted for by the measured variables (see Appendix A).

Of the vignette variables entered (type of abuse, repetition, change in the child's behaviour and family cooperativeness) all obtained beta weights which were significant at the $p < .001$ level, as in the model for detection. Vignettes containing possible physical abuse, repeated

signs of abuse, a change in the child's behaviour, and a low level of family cooperativeness were all assigned higher mean 'likelihood of reporting' scores than vignettes containing possible neglect, first-time signs, no change in the child's behaviour, and a friendly, cooperative family (see Appendix A). Compared to school and teacher characteristics, the vignette variables accounted for the highest level of variance explained in the dependant variable. As for detection, the only vignette variable which was non-significant at $p < .05$ was socioeconomic status of the child's family.

In many cases, teacher background variables which were significant predictors of 'detection' were also significant predictors of 'reporting' including: year level usually taught; parental status; and rated confidence in identifying abuse. Lower primary teachers indicated that they were more likely to report a possible case of child abuse or neglect than upper primary teachers or principals ($p < .001$), as were non-parents ($p < .01$), and teachers who were confident at identifying child abuse and neglect generally ($p < .001$). Teachers who had previously decided to report a suspected case of child abuse or neglect, as opposed to not report, were also more likely to indicate that they would report ($p < .001$). Also, like the model for 'detection', teacher gender was not a significant predictor of reporting at the $p < .05$ level.

Unlike the model for 'detection', however, the beta weights for teacher qualifications and beliefs about community prevalence of abuse were not significant at $p < .05$ for 'reporting'. However, other teacher variables which were not significant for 'detection' were significant predictors for 'reporting'. These included: recency of child protection training; belief in legal mandate to report; previously identifying abuse or neglect; and years of experience as a teacher. Teachers with more recent training were less likely to report ($p < .01$). Teachers who believed they had a legal obligation to report ($p < .05$), teachers with previous experience in identifying child abuse and neglect ($p < .05$), and more experienced teachers ($p < .001$) were significantly more likely to report from the vignettes.

School variables which were significant predictors of reporting included: school size; and amount of discussion at the school about child abuse and neglect. Teachers from large schools were more likely to indicate they would report the vignette cases ($p < .001$). Also, teachers from schools where there was regular discussion about child protection were more likely to report ($p < .05$). However, unlike the model for detection, teacher-rated community socioeconomic status was not a significant predictor of reporting. The location of the school was not a significant predictor of reporting at the $p < .05$ level.

Teachers likelihood to report child abuse and neglect given detection

An ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model was fitted for reporting ('how likely is it that you will report this case to the authorities?') given detection, i.e. to investigate which variables predicted reporting when detection had been taken into account already. The 'likelihood to detect' scores were entered into the equation first, yielding an R^2 value of .599. The vignette, teacher and school variables were then entered in as a block, yielding an overall R^2 value of .630, and a small but significant R^2 (change) value of .03.

As for the models for detection and reporting, the vignette characteristics of possible physical abuse and repeated abuse were significant predictors at $p < .001$ for the model of reporting given detection. However, a change in the child's behaviour, family cooperation and friendliness, and the socioeconomic status of the family were not significant predictors of likelihood to report given detection.

Teacher characteristics that were significant positive predictors of reporting given detection were: being a non-parent ($p < .01$); belief in a legal mandate to report ($p < .001$); having reported a case of child abuse or neglect in the past ($p < .001$); being confident in identifying child abuse or neglect ($p < .001$); and more years experience teaching ($p < .001$).

Teachers stating that child abuse and neglect happened more frequently in their community than others assigned higher 'likelihood to report given detection' ratings ($p < .01$) than other teachers. This is an interesting finding, given that teachers with this belief were less likely to detect child abuse or neglect than other teachers ($p < .05$).

Teacher characteristics that were significant negative predictors of reporting given detection were: more recent of child protection training ($p < .001$); and having previously identified child abuse or neglect ($p < .001$). Teachers with these characteristics were less likely to report once they had detected.

Teacher variables which were non-significant at $p < .05$ were: gender; year level taught; and education level.

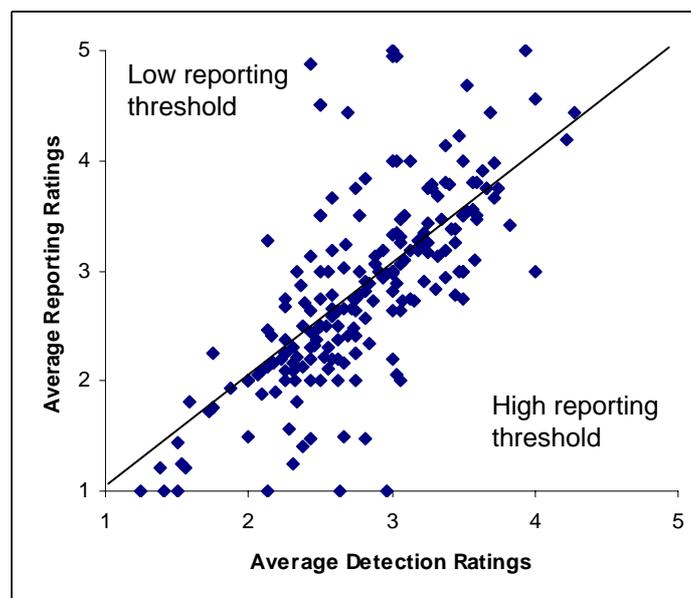
The only school variable which was a significant predictor of reporting given detection was location, with teachers from metropolitan schools more likely to report given detection than teachers from rural or regional schools. School size and whether or not there was discussion at the school about child protection were not significant predictors in this model.

Teachers' Reporting Thresholds

In addition to examining predictors of likelihood to detect and report child abuse and neglect, it was of interest to explore the correlates of reporting thresholds, operationalised as the difference between 'detection' and 'reporting' ratings for each teacher. Teachers with low reporting thresholds had relatively high mean reporting ratings when compared to their mean detection scores, and teachers with high reporting thresholds had relatively low mean reporting ratings when compared to their mean detection ratings. A scatterplot of mean detection ratings plotted with their relative reporting ratings is represented in Figure 1. The average mean difference between detection and reporting ratings was 0.035, with a standard deviation of 0.578. Mean differences between reporting and detection ratings ranged from -1.97 to +2.44. The Spearman's rho simple correlation between detection and reporting scores was fairly high and positive at 0.72 ($p < .001$).

Figure 1.

Teachers' Mean Detection Ratings by Mean Reporting Ratings (N=228)



Because of a number of positive outliers, a disproportionate number of cases clustering around zero and uneven sample sizes for independent variables, nonparametric tests were conducted to determine which teacher variables were associated with differences in reporting threshold. Simple correlations were conducted between reporting threshold and continuous variables. For the categorical variables, either Mann-Whitney U tests or Kruskal-Wallis tests were conducted as appropriate.

Teacher-rated confidence in identifying child abuse and neglect was the only continuous variable significantly positively correlated with reporting threshold. Teachers who indicated

that they were confident in identifying child abuse and neglect were more likely than teachers who indicated that they were not confident to have low reporting thresholds. That is, they were more likely to report a case than another teacher, assuming that they assigned the same 'detection' rating ($\rho(228) = 0.148, p < .03$). Significant correlates of teacher confidence in identifying child abuse and neglect are discussed elsewhere in this report.

The only categorical variable for which there was a significant difference in teacher reporting threshold was 'belief in mandate to report'. Teachers who did not believe in a legal mandate to report, or who were unsure, had significantly higher reporting thresholds than teachers who believed in a legal mandate to report child abuse and neglect ($\chi^2(2) = 6.154, p < .05$). The mean difference between reporting and detection ratings for teachers who were unsure was -1.86 ($SD = 0.74$). For teachers who did not believe in a legal mandate the mean difference was -0.07 ($SD = 0.26$). For those who did believe in a legal mandate the mean difference was 0.07 ($SD = 0.55$). On average, teachers who believed in a legal mandate to report assigned 'likelihood of reporting' ratings which slightly exceeded their 'likelihood of abuse/neglect' ratings. For those who did not believe in a mandate or who were unsure, their 'likelihood of abuse/neglect' ratings were higher than their 'likelihood to report' ratings.

Table 12

Nonparametric Tests of Effect of Teacher Variables on Reporting Thresholds (N=254)

Teacher Variable	Test Statistic
Categorical Variables	
Gender	U=2439.00 ^{ns}
Parental status	U=5818.00 ^{ns}
Year level usually taught (lower vs upper primary)	U=5117.00 ^{ns}
Highest education level attained	U=2819.00 ^{ns}
Previously identified child abuse or neglect	U=4853.500 ^{ns}
Previously reported child abuse or neglect	U=867.00 ^{ns}
Belief in legal mandate to report	$\chi^2(2)=6.154^*$
Continuous Variables	
Years experience teaching	$\rho=0.01^{\text{ns}}$
Recency of child protection training	$\rho=-0.09^{\text{ns}}$
Confidence in identifying child abuse and neglect	$\rho=0.15^*$
Beliefs about proportion of children helped by reporting	$\rho=0.12^{\text{ns}}$

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$ ns=not significant

All other teacher variables – highest education level, year level usually taught, parental status, previous experience in identifying or reporting child abuse and neglect, years of experience as a teacher, and recency of child protection training – had no significant effect on reporting threshold. The positive correlation between threshold and the continuous variable 'beliefs regarding the proportion of children helped by reporting' approached statistical significance.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the critical factors which influence Queensland teachers to detect and report child abuse and neglect to statutory authorities. Our research advances new knowledge about a range of issues relevant to Queensland teachers' role in child protection and corroborates findings reported in the research literature over 30 years of studying teachers' involvement in child abuse and neglect. Our research confirms that this sample of Queensland teachers were aware of and responsive to the issue of child abuse and neglect. The teachers were committed to fulfilling their role and generally acted in accordance with institutional policy. In this research, we focused on teachers' detecting and reporting suspected child abuse and neglect – the components that make up a child protection notification - because, along with others (e.g. Warner & Hansen, 1994), we regard notifying as an important first step towards addressing the significant harm and injustice caused by child abuse and neglect. We sampled Queensland state primary school teachers because, by virtue of their availability to all children, their schools provide a safe place for children to learn and grow, and a potentially crucial link to early intervention services with the potential to improve the quality of life for abused and neglected children and their families.

In this section we discuss the findings of the research in 5 areas:

- Awareness of laws and policies;
- Knowledge of the indicators of different forms of child abuse and neglect;
- Beliefs about the prevalence of child abuse and neglect;
- Reporting child abuse and neglect; and
- Effects of case, teacher and school characteristics.

We then address the implications of the research in 3 areas:

- Teacher preparation and training;
- Support for teachers; and
- Reporting obligations for Queensland teachers.

Awareness of laws and policies

Most teachers agreed that they had a moral (98.8%) and professional (93.3%) responsibility to report child abuse and neglect. Interestingly, most also concurred they had a legal (86.5%) responsibility. A significant minority were unsure about specific legal and policy requirements. When we collected data for this research, there was *no* legal obligation for Queensland teachers to report any type of child abuse or neglect, that is, teachers were not mandatory reporters. Since this time, an amendment to the *Education (General Provisions) Act 1989* (Qld) created mandatory reporting requirements for Queensland teachers for one type of harm to children – child sexual abuse perpetrated by school staff. Since April 2004, Queensland teachers must report known or reasonably suspected child sexual abuse by

school staff to the school principal, who, in turn, reports the matter to the Executive Director, Schools, who reports the matter to police. According to legislation, it remains voluntary for teachers to report other types of child abuse and neglect such as that occurring within families. Although legislatively voluntary, reporting is strongly recommended in policy, *HS-17 Student Protection* (Education Queensland, 2004). This policy directs teachers to report other types of known or suspected child abuse or neglect to the school principal who then reports to child protection authorities (Education Queensland, 2004, p.22). So strongly recommended is this reporting, that failure to comply with the policy constitutes a breach of the *Code of Conduct* (Education Queensland, 2003c) and carries disciplinary measures.

It is not clear why Queensland teachers believed they had a legal obligation to report all types of child abuse and neglect. We can only speculate as to why this may be so. Perhaps the use of terminology in policy documents for Queensland teachers, in particular, the use of the term “mandatory” in policy documents and training materials introduced in 1998, has influenced their thinking. The term *mandatory reporting* has been used for more than thirty years in the field of child protection to refer to a specific statutory requirement (legal obligation) for a listed class of professionals to notify child protection authorities of known or reasonably suspected child abuse or neglect. In Queensland education policy, this term has been used to describe a policy requirement for teachers and school staff to *inform the principal* of children “requiring protection from harm” (Education Queensland, 1998a, s3.2). Teachers may have assumed, therefore, that they had a legal obligation to report and/or that there had been changes to the law. The use of the term *mandatory* was also carried through to the *Child Protection Training Package* (Education Queensland, 1998b). This may have further reinforced teachers’ beliefs in a legal obligation to report all forms of child abuse and neglect.

Teachers’ inaccurate interpretation of their legal responsibilities in relation to reporting child abuse and neglect have not been reported elsewhere in the literature. Teachers’ understanding of their reporting responsibilities is important because desire to adhere to mandatory reporting laws was found by Crenshaw et al. (1995) to influence teachers’ reporting, particularly in ambiguous or unobvious cases. When confronted with an ambiguous case, teachers who adhere to the “letter of the law” (p.1107) will report simply because they believe they have a legal obligation to do so. Given that Queensland teachers so strongly believe they have a legal obligation to report all types of child abuse or neglect, we assume there may be a number of inaccurate reports made because teachers may believe they will be penalised for *not* making reports and may then err on the side of caution. Clearly, this may mean that some families are drawn unnecessarily into the child protection system. A further effect is that inaccurate reporting, over time, may impact on the ways in which teachers’ reports are perceived by child protection authorities. This phenomenon has been reported in a relevant US study by Zellman (1990c) who found that teacher training was very successful in encouraging teachers to report. She found that school personnel reported child abuse more than

any other group of mandatory reporters and, because of their overzealous reporting, teachers' reports were "screened out" by child protection authorities. This would be a most undesirable outcome for Queensland teachers and children. Maintaining a focus on reporting accuracy is an important consideration for future teacher training programs and future empirical research.

Where problems in teachers' interpretations of legislation and policy have been identified in the research literature, this has been attributed to lack of knowledge of the statutes or inadequate training. For example, Abrahams et al. (1992) attributed US teachers' discretionary reporting practices to deficiencies in knowledge about jurisdictional reporting procedures, and Beck et al. (1994) found that teachers in British Columbia knew about mandatory reporting laws but were less knowledgeable about specific components of the legislation, and that this hampered their reporting. Reiniger, Robison & McHugh (1995) found that teachers in New York, along with other professionals, were more familiar with indicators of abuse and neglect than they were with the technical aspects associated with reporting, including the law. Queensland teachers seem to have difficulties with both aspects.

Regarding their familiarity with reporting responsibilities according to the law, Queensland teachers require (and deserve) accurate information about their reporting status. Although the *HS-17 Student Protection* policy (Education Queensland, 2004) has gained clarity in its latest form, it may still retain remnants of past deficits identified by the CJC's (2000) *Safeguarding Students* report. Our research indicates that teachers may not have engaged thoroughly with the details of the revised policy and training materials, and/or the policy may need further clarity to distinguish legal and policy responsibilities.

Knowledge of the indicators of different forms of child abuse and neglect

Teachers were unsure (overall average of 3.40 on a 5 point scale) about their ability to accurately identify child abuse and neglect. This was particularly the case for child sexual abuse. Where teachers were confident in identifying one type of abuse or neglect, they seemed to be confident in identifying other types of abuse and neglect. Importantly for school cultures where there was frequent discussion about child abuse and neglect, teachers at these schools reported feeling more confident in their ability to identify child abuse and neglect, perhaps because it was acceptable to raise it, more knowledge about it circulated, and teachers felt supported by their colleagues. Yet this did not apply for child sexual abuse, which was the most difficult type of child maltreatment for teachers to accurately identify.

Previous studies have emphasised the positive impact of recent training on teachers' confidence in identifying signs and symptoms of abuse and neglect (Baginsky, 2003; Hawkins & McCallum, 2001a). This was not reflected in our findings. Recent child protection training

improved teachers' confidence only in identifying neglect, but not other types of abuse. This may point to ways in which current training materials could be enhanced. To detect child abuse or neglect, teachers must ask themselves "Is this abuse or neglect?" To make this judgement, they must process multiple sources of information about the event, the child and the child's family. They need to be able to reasonably interpret and assess indicators and warning signs. Not feeling adequately prepared for this task and/or lacking confidence in their ability to appropriately identify warning signs may affect teachers' ability to develop a reasonable suspicion with reasonable accuracy. This may mean that teachers may inaccurately report, or that potential cases may not be detected in the first instance.

Our results are consistent with previous research suggesting that teachers themselves report feeling unprepared to meet the challenges of detecting and reporting (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Dodge Reyome & Gaeddert, 1998; Kenny, 2001; Tite, 1994a, 1994b). Previous studies show that teacher training has not adequately equipped teachers with the kinds of knowledge necessary to detect and report suspected child abuse and neglect (Baxter & Beer, 1990; Beck et al., 1994; Hazzard & Rupp, 1986; Wurtele & Schmidt, 1992). Both versions of the *Child Protection Training Package* (Education Queensland 1998b, 2003b) have had a strong focus on familiarising staff with protocols for reporting abuse and neglect, but may not have emphasised the knowledge base sufficient to improve teachers' confidence in detecting all types of abuse and neglect. Both detecting and reporting are twin parts in the notification process.

Future training initiatives should properly consider the role of initial teacher training as a foundation for teacher professional development in child protection. In initial teacher training, education about ethics and decision making could be enhanced to make overt decision making processes. Importantly for teacher education programs, Baginsky (2003) reported marked differences in confidence levels of teachers who participated in preservice child protection education as tertiary students (higher confidence) and those who had only received inservice training as practicing teachers (lower confidence). Baginsky's (2003) study was undertaken with a large sample of recent graduates (n=308) in England and Wales where teachers do not have a legal obligation to report child abuse and neglect which may make their findings more comparable to the Queensland context than studies from the US where teachers in all states have legal obligations to report. With this in mind, it is important, as Briggs and Potter (2004), Bishop, Lunn and Johnson (2002), and McCallum and Baginsky (2001) advocate, for child protection concepts to permeate initial teacher training programs. Subsequently, annual training on-the-job would provide opportunities for teachers to review and update their knowledge (Abrahams et al., 1992; Laskey, 1995).

Future studies might explore the accuracy of teachers' reports relative to the amount and type of their child protection education (both preservice and inservice). A longitudinal study of

Queensland teachers like that undertaken by Baginsky (2003) in the UK, may provide greater understandings of the day-to-day dilemmas of detecting and reporting, determine the essential components of high quality training, and identify the resources most likely to assist teachers to make accurate, timely and informed decisions. This could complement the implementation of the *National Safe Schools Framework* (DEST, 2003) which aims to identify the key elements and approaches for providing effective school-based child safety initiatives, including best practice examples for responding to child abuse and neglect across Australian jurisdictions. These elements, approaches and examples will require critical appraisal and will, in turn, have implications for future preservice and inservice teacher training.

Beliefs about the prevalence of child abuse and neglect

The majority of teachers (63.8%) believed that child abuse and neglect occurred equally in all communities. Teachers who worked in schools in low socioeconomic areas, teachers who had suspected or identified abuse or neglect previously, and teachers in schools where there was more discussion about child abuse and neglect tended to think differently and to understand that rates of child abuse and neglect varied from community to community. These teachers seemed to be aware that the observable effects of poverty may mean that child abuse and neglect is more visible in their school community than in others.

Research evidence suggests that although child abuse and neglect are found in all socio-economic groups, it does not occur equally across all socio-economic groups. In fact, there is strong evidence to the contrary: what Pelton (1978; 1981) referred to as the “myth of classlessness” (1978, p.608; 1981, p.23). Research has identified a complex association between poverty and child abuse and neglect (Macdonald, 2001). Australian studies by Vinson, Baldry and Hargreaves (1996) and Vinson, Bereen and McArthur (1989) have established a link between *reported* child abuse and low socioeconomic status. Research indicates that poverty does not *cause* child abuse or neglect, but poverty interacts with other risk factors to amplify problems which may contribute to child abuse and neglect (Gelles, 1992). Poorer social groups are over-represented among families reported and investigated for child abuse and neglect. For example, in Australia, single parents, welfare recipients and Indigenous Australians are disproportionately represented (AIHW, 2004). These groups may be more visible to child protection authorities (and potential reporters) and subject to more rigorous surveillance and scrutiny than their wealthier or more privileged counterparts.

Future initial teacher training and ongoing professional development might focus on building upon teachers’ evidence-based practice in relation to the consequences of social disadvantage. Teachers may need explicit information about the complexities of child abuse and neglect delivered in training based on current, systematic and rigorous research with the aim of building teachers’ evidence base regarding the risk factors associated with different forms of maltreatment. Teachers inducted into work in school communities characterised by

low socioeconomic status may need to know more about the compounding effects of poverty and social isolation, as well as the consequences of discrimination. There are now excellent longitudinal studies underway in Australia¹⁷, Canada¹⁸ and the United Kingdom¹⁹ that, in future, will provide an evidence base for such training.

Reporting child abuse and neglect

Three-quarters (74.5%) of teachers suspected child abuse or neglect at some stage in their careers. Over one third (36.6%) reported their suspicions in the past year. These results confirm that reporting child abuse and neglect is not an uncommon experience for teachers. In accordance with institutional policy, the majority of teachers (94%) who had suspected child abuse or neglect reported their suspicions to their principal. Teachers believed principals reported cases to authorities approximately two thirds of the time (63%). Ten percent (10%) of teachers decided not to report suspected child abuse or neglect at some stage in their careers. These results reflect previous claims that schools and teachers are committed reporters (Abrahams et al., 1992; McCallum, 2000; Zellman, 1990c).

For teachers who detected abuse or neglect but did not report it, we conclude that although they reasonably suspected abuse or neglect and judged that it had occurred, this judgement did not exceed their threshold to take action by reporting. We found that this threshold was different for different types of maltreatment. In terms of reporting, teachers said that they reported physical abuse every time they encountered it (100% of the time). For sexual abuse it was nine out of ten times (88.8%), and for both emotional abuse and neglect it was four out of five times (79.9% and 80.4% respectively). We found that experienced teachers used discretion about whether to report or not given a positive identification, particularly in cases of neglect and emotional abuse.

When teachers know or reasonably suspect a child has been abused or neglected, but do not report it, their decision not to take action can be based upon what they perceive the likely consequences to be. We found that, on average, teachers believe that one third (32%) of children are harmed by teachers making reports. In these cases, their decision about reporting was influenced by their predictions of the likely outcomes for the child. Teachers tended to consider the child's welfare both inside the child protection system (where the child may be removed from a family, or a family may move away from the school), and outside the child protection system (where possibly the teacher and school could have an informal, yet directly positive impact). Teachers working in schools where there was open discussion about child abuse and neglect considered that fewer children were harmed by teachers' reports. We

¹⁷ See Growing up in Australia: A Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC).

¹⁸ See National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY).

¹⁹ See Children of the 90s: Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC).

expect that in such a climate, teachers were more likely to hear a range of anecdotes from their colleagues and become informed about the potential outcomes of reports for children. They may then use this knowledge and weight these potential outcomes in deciding whether to report or to not report.

Teachers often do not know about the outcomes of the cases they report, even to the extent that in many cases (27.7%) they do not know what has happened once they have reported the case to the principal. This has implications for teachers' confidence in their school administration, the child protection system, their development of a professional practice-based knowledge about case management, and ultimately, their ability to make judgements and take action by reporting. These findings concur with those of Giovannoni (1995) and Zellman (1990a, 1990b, 1990c) who reported professionals' fearfulness that reporting would exacerbate the situation for the child and/or the family contributed to professionals' failure to report. In this research we *did not* find evidence of teachers' concern that child protection authorities would not provide much-needed help for children and families. This is despite the damning report of the Queensland child protection system (CMC, 2004) which was released in the month before we began data collection.

Current emphasis in the literature, legislation and policy on "strong and enduring partnerships" (Department of Child Safety, 2004, p.27) and integrated service provision can capitalise upon teachers' good will by forging better communicative links across government departments and between government and non government sectors. Further acknowledgement by employing authorities of the emotional component to teachers' work in detecting and reporting child abuse and neglect and the provision of appropriate professional and personal supports for teachers who encounter child abuse and neglect will also enhance their good will and their resilience, particularly for those teachers working in schools with a higher incidence of cases.

Our findings show that Queensland state schools are beginning to take responsibility for pedagogical interventions to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for children with a history of child abuse or neglect. Increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of education planning for these children is underway, to a limited yet positive extent, in the form of in-school initiatives prompted by the CREATE Foundation (2003) and *Education Queensland Kids in Care Education Committee Working Group* (Education Queensland, 2003d), such as special needs advisory committees.

Effects of case, teacher and school characteristics

Based upon the reasonably large sample size in this study and the large number of vignette responses that were obtained, we sought to develop a model that would determine whether

and to what extent teacher, school and case characteristics were related to teachers' likelihood to i) detect child abuse and neglect, and ii) report child abuse and neglect.

Overall, using the 32 vignettes, when asked the question "How likely is it that this child has been abused or neglected?" we found that teachers were somewhere between 'probably not' and 'unsure' about detecting physical abuse or neglect (2.79 on a 5-point scale). When asked the question "How likely is it that you will report this case to the authorities?" we found that they were also somewhere between 'probably not' and 'unsure' about reporting physical abuse or neglect (2.82 on a 5-point scale). These results support our other findings suggesting that teachers are generally not confident about their ability to identify child abuse and neglect, and that they are not sure about the consequences of reporting. These findings also highlight the real difficulty teachers experience in making a decision to notify about suspected child abuse or neglect when this decision is based on a complex interplay of knowledge, attitudes and values, biases, perceptions, personal feelings and other relevant considerations.

The threshold model for decision making (Dalglish, 2003) provided a useful heuristic for our research. Consistent with this model, the decision to notify child protection authorities is viewed as a two part process involving *judgement* ("Is this abuse?") and *action* ("Will I report?"). To detect abuse or neglect, teachers must make complex judgements about their suspicions. To report it, they must decide to take action by informing statutory authorities (or in the case of Queensland teachers, their school principal). A decision to notify child protection authorities will be made when a teachers' level of concern exceeds a certain threshold. We found that different factors influenced teachers' judgement (detection) and action (reporting) thresholds.

More likely to detect

Teachers are more likely to detect a case if: there are signs of physical abuse; it is not the first time the child has shown signs; the child's behaviour has changed; and the child's family is uncooperative and unfriendly. Teachers are more likely to detect a case if: they teach in the lower school; have postgraduate qualifications; are not parents; have self-reported confidence in identifying child abuse and neglect; have previous experience reporting child abuse and neglect; and they believe that child abuse and neglect happens less frequently in their community than others. Teachers are more likely to detect a case if: their school is large; the school is situated in a lower socio-economic area; and there is regular discussion at the school about child protection issues.

Interestingly, teachers are more likely to detect maltreatment if they believe it happens *less* frequently in their community than others. The converse is perhaps easier to explain: teachers are less likely to detect maltreatment if they believe it happens more frequently in their

community than others. This may be explained in terms of a loss of sensitivity (which equates to a higher threshold for detecting) when confronted with the magnitude of the problem in some school communities.

These findings demonstrate the importance of teachers in the lower school who may have closer contact with children's families, and may be party to more information about parent and child relationships. These teachers hold positions of particular trust with children, families and communities. The importance of further education for practicing teachers is highlighted in the finding that teachers with a record of tertiary study beyond initial teacher training are also more likely to detect abuse or neglect, but not necessarily to report it.

More likely to report

Teachers are more likely to report a case if there are signs of physical abuse and this is not the first time the child has shown these signs. They are more likely to report it if they are experienced; not parents; have self-reported confidence in identifying child abuse and neglect; believe they are legally obliged to report it; have no previous experience in identifying it; believe that child maltreatment happens more frequently in their community than others; and *have less recent child protection training*. They are more likely to report it if they work in a metropolitan school.

The apparent insignificance of child protection training on reporting practice is more cause for concern. The current round of child protection training does not appear to have impacted significantly upon teachers' propensity to detect or report suspected child abuse or neglect. Informal discussion between teachers (for example passing on incorrect information about things such as if they have a legal obligation to report) and background characteristics of the teacher (such as whether or not they are a parent) seem to have much stronger effects on what a teacher will do. This may be related to the focus, nature and extent of their training as previously described.

Obvious and repeated physical abuse is more likely to be both detected and reported. This is consistent with the findings of previous research suggesting that teachers are better at reporting particular kinds of abuse over others. Like Crenshaw et al. (1995), we found that teachers are more likely to report cases of physical abuse than neglect and, like Kenny (2001) and Tite (1993), we found that they consider physical abuse cases as more reportable. Our findings with a teacher sample concur with Shapira and Benbenishty's (1993) study of welfare workers in that repeated or ongoing instances of abuse are more likely to result in reporting. This finding is of concern because some types of physical abuse require urgent action and cannot wait for evidence to accumulate. To assist teachers with the task of accurate and timely reporting following detection, Peake (2002) suggests a scheme of careful observation, detailed record keeping and provision of open-ended classroom activities. The New South

Wales Department of Community Services (DoCS) has developed a useful method for teacher documentation in the form of a report checklist *A Guide for Making Reports to DoCS about Children at Risk of Harm* (DoCS, 2000). Consideration of the use of such tools, and study of their effectiveness may be warranted.

Implications for Practice

Teacher preparation and training

Half of the teachers surveyed have had less than 5 hours of child protection training, with an overall average of 2.8 hours of training across the sample. This is despite compulsory training, the first wave of which began in 1999. Training is managed by school districts and delivered by a trained facilitator, usually a member of school staff, and most likely the school principal or guidance officer. The training takes approximately 3 hours. Within this timeframe it is not possible to address complex issues associated with child abuse and neglect such as decision-making processes. Rather, it is intended that the training materials form the basis of ongoing conversations about child abuse and neglect in schools. The focus of the training since 1999 has been on addressing appropriate staff conduct and preventing staff sexual misconduct with children. Although this is an important issue for schools, child sexual abuse by school staff comprises a small number of cases. Much more abuse and neglect is perpetrated by isolated, stressed, angry and unwell parents and adults within children's homes. The focus of the training materials may have inadvertently shifted the focus away from understanding the multiple dimensions of the teacher's role with respect to all types of child abuse and neglect. The current training materials have adjusted the focus to a broader perspective in keeping with the revised policy, *HS-17 Student Protection* (Education Queensland, 2003a, 2004). This policy was released in September 2003 and updated in 2004 with an emphasis on all employees preventing, detecting, notifying and responding to four categories of harm to students: harm caused by an Education Queensland employee; harm caused by other students; harm caused by forces outside the state educational institution environment; and student self harm.

Teacher preparation and training to detect and report can be improved with education (Hawkins & McCallum 2001a, 2001b; Randolph & Gold, 1994). Training should be detailed and focus on multiple dimensions to the role with the aim of increasing teachers' confidence to fulfil *all* aspects of their child protection role including: detecting and reporting; responding specifically to the needs of child victims; teaching all children prevention strategies; and working with other agencies to support children and families at-risk (David, 1993, 1994; Farrell, 2001, 2004; Watts, 1997).

Preparation of teachers for their role should begin in initial teacher training. In 2000, the CJC's *Safeguarding Students* report recommended that students in initial teacher training programs complete compulsory studies relating to their legal and ethical responsibilities in relation to teaching, specifically in relation to child protection. The report recommended that some training should occur prior to students' first field experience. Further to this type of ethical and conduct preparation, preservice teachers require further in-depth study of child protection

issues. Baginsky (1999), and Hodgkinson and Baginsky (2000) propose two models for child protection content within initial teacher training programs: a diffuse, permeation model where content is embedded in a number of relevant subject areas; and a more concentrated stand-alone model treating child protection as a separate issue with higher status. A combination of the two models would seem most effective in addressing the training limitations identified in our research.

To further enhance teachers' skills, consideration could be given to child protection training forming a prerequisite to employment, similar to the current requirement for first aid certification. Comprehensive training of at least one day's duration would provide more time to explore the issues in more depth than is currently provided. This more intensive training could be repeated at intervals. Updating teachers' knowledge of institutional policies is an institutional responsibility that should be part of a systematic yearly training schedule such as fire drill or other occupational health and safety measures. This has been emphasised by Layton (2003) in South Australia's child protection review entitled *Our Best Investment: a State Plan to Protect and Advance the Interests of Children*.

To promote the effectiveness of teacher's role, in general, Education Queensland might look to the South Australian model of using accredited child protection trainers (McCallum, 2003). The Queensland training materials present school staff with the option of inviting representatives from other agencies or child protection authorities to attend the training, but it is not known what effect this medium for delivery has on the effectiveness of the training. Our study did not extend to teachers in other private and independent school systems. Clearly, a comparative study with these teachers would provide further evidence of the extent of the need for reform of child protection training.

Any enhancements to teachers' preservice or inservice training must be considered in the light of current reform processes and broader policy initiatives underway in Queensland. Ideally, these processes should complement each other and capitalise on the established momentum and the exemplary work done by teachers elsewhere. In particular, enhancements must be consistent with the Queensland *Blueprint* (Department of Child Safety, 2004) which outlines a range of initiatives fostering the importance of information sharing and coordinated whole-of-government responses to child protection. This means that government departments, such as Education Queensland, have dual responsibilities: first to address child protection within their own portfolios, and second, to join with other portfolios in whole-of-government initiatives to address children's needs in a holistic way. Additionally, future directions for training could be informed by best practice case studies of schools which are currently underway in Queensland as part of the implementation of the *National Safe Schools Framework* (DEST, 2003) with the aim of sharing effective practice with the broader education community in early 2005.

Support for teachers

We found that some schools were establishing internal support networks to assist teachers in identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect and engaging with educational planning for children who have suffered abuse or neglect. This was evident in teachers' reports of special needs committees or key support personnel such as guidance officers, school chaplains, and school-based nursing practitioners. However, this was not widespread and approximately one quarter of the sample could not nominate anything that was happening at their school to address the issues related to child abuse and neglect. Several teachers mentioned the establishment of a Special Needs Action Committee (SNAC) in their school. Membership of the committee included school chaplain, guidance officer, school administration and learning support staff. One of the purposes of this committee was to identify the physical and emotional needs as well as academic needs of abused and neglected children. Teachers could make submissions to this committee, cases could be openly discussed and plans for monitoring and follow-up were implemented. Frequency of meetings varied from weekly to fortnightly. There was reference to the SNAC group as an advisory team for the school administration in reporting decision-making. In at least one case, the teacher reported that the school principal acted on recommendations from SNAC. There was a view that these committees provided an appropriate venue for teachers to discuss their suspicions and have their concerns for children heard in a professional context.

The role of the school principal is crucial. The attitude of the school principal influences the decision to report or not report suspected child abuse or neglect (Lumsden, 1992; Walsh, 1995). Within the school it is reasonable to suggest that despite what policies may require, a "school climate" is created that facilitates or inhibits the reporting of child abuse and neglect. Apart from the school principal, professional support staff are also important resource personnel for children and teachers. A project currently underway in central Queensland, the *Social Workers in Mackay Schools (SWIMS)* project (Teghe, Knight & Knight, 2003) has placed a senior social worker within a group of three state schools located in close proximity with the aim of linking "statutory child protection response frameworks to interdisciplinary service provision in schools" (p.3). Preliminary findings indicate that the SWIMS program increased the capacity of teachers to deal more effectively with child protection issues as they arose. The findings of this project will provide useful service provision models for future consideration.

Reporting obligations for Queensland teachers

We found that Queensland teachers were open to reporting child abuse and neglect: they were morally committed to the notion of child protection and recognise its significance as a social issue. Given this context, Queensland has the opportunity to be proactive in its

response. Rather than wait for a future tragedy to prompt the introduction of mandatory reporting laws for professionals, as was the case in Victoria (Goddard & Liddell, 1993; Swain, 1993), Queensland has the chance to be resourceful. Yet, as stated in the literature review, previous research has demonstrated that the introduction of mandatory reporting laws is not without its problems and critics. Serious arguments can be made both for and against its introduction. Directly affecting teachers would be problems associated with overzealous reporting, as noted by Zellman, (1990a, 1990b, 1990c) and collaboration with community-based intervention services for children and families. Any future consideration of extending Queensland teachers' legal responsibility to report all forms of child abuse and neglect, therefore, should be preceded by research determining the current accuracy of their reports, and assessment of the adequacy of local follow-up services for children and families.

Whatever teachers' mandatory reporting responsibilities are, we must work towards continuing to improve teachers' preparation for the multiple dimensions to their role in child protection. It is an ideal time to do this, because Queensland teachers are open to the issues and they do not hold negative views of the child protection system. One way to capitalise upon this present situation and to achieve even better outcomes is via enhanced preservice and inservice training that is linked to rigorous evaluative study.

Lessons may be learned from the introduction of mandatory reporting obligations for Queensland nurses. New reporting obligations for Queensland nurses was recommended by the CMC's (2004) report *Protecting Children*. From August 2005, Queensland's registered nurses will be required by law to report suspected child abuse and neglect to the Department of Child Safety. Of relevance to the discussion of teachers reporting obligations is that the arguments used to justify introducing these laws for nurses included the statement that registered nurses "are often the first professionals in a position to suspect a child has been abused or neglected, particularly in relation to Indigenous and rural and remote communities" (Reynolds, 2004). The same arguments can be applied to teachers, not only in rural and remote communities, but in *all* schools, preschools, kindergartens and child care centres.

In our research, we found that this sample of Queensland teachers was accepting of their ethical and professional responsibilities in relation to child abuse and neglect. The majority of teachers within this sample believe they already have a legal obligation to report all types of child abuse and neglect. The introduction of mandatory reporting laws for teachers to report all types of child abuse and neglect has been achieved in every other Australian jurisdiction apart from Western Australia. Arguably, abused and neglected children in other states and territories are advantaged because their teachers work under a legal obligation to report abuse and neglect, and conceivably, teachers in other states and territories are advantaged because they have access to different types of protections under the law when they make reports based on reasonable suspicion.

Conclusions

This study has confirmed that teachers in Queensland State schools encounter child abuse and neglect as part of their work and perceive they have a responsibility to report it. They are morally committed to the notion of child protection and recognise its significance as a social issue. Yet despite this commitment, teachers are unsure if they can accurately identify child abuse and neglect. This is particularly so for child sexual abuse. Overall, teachers have received little training to enable them to adequately fulfil their role. The current findings suggest that many teachers hold misconceptions about their legal responsibilities to report. While training may assist teachers to develop a more extensive knowledge base, there are complex issues that influence teachers' detecting and reporting practices. These issues should be the subject of further research.

Recommendations

Any enhancements to teachers' pre-service or in-service training, provision of support for teachers, and reconsideration of teachers' legal obligations must be considered in the light of current reform processes and broader policy initiatives underway in Queensland and nationally.

Teacher preparation and training

Queensland teachers and children will benefit from explicit attention to child protection issues in initial teacher training programs, and improved professional development about child abuse and neglect for practicing teachers. Although the current inservice training program has been successful in informing teachers about institutional policy and process, it needs to focus on understandings of the contextual issues – the conditions, circumstances and characteristics of child abuse and neglect. Any changes to teacher inservice training must address teachers' ability to accurately identify different types of child abuse and neglect and expand their current understandings of individual, family and community factors that create vulnerability and risk of abuse and neglect, for example, poverty. Training must also address teachers' concerns about the consequences of their reporting and a more thorough appreciation of statutory authorities' differential responses to child protection notifications. Further, school principals and support staff may require professional development specifically tailored to address the leadership and management issues involved in school-based child protection initiatives, including establishing discussion forums and mechanisms for feedback to teachers. The school system needs to be open to providing this professional learning and development on a continual basis. Initial teacher education must begin from the premise that child abuse and neglect are complex problems requiring integrated and interdisciplinary approaches, for example they must clarify legal obligations, address the roles of various professionals, raise awareness of support services, and examine models for decision-making.

We recommend:

- Professional development for Queensland teachers should be enhanced.
 - ❖ Training in child protection must be detailed and focus on multiple dimensions to the teachers' role with the aim of increasing teachers' confidence to fulfil *all* aspects of their role including detecting and reporting, responding specifically to the needs of child victims, teaching all children prevention strategies, and working with other agencies to support children and families at-risk.
 - ❖ Consideration should be given to the South Australian model of using accredited or specialist child protection trainers with a thorough understanding of school contexts.

- ❖ Both pre- and inservice training must be linked to rigorous evaluative study.
 - ❖ Inservice training must be continual.
- Preparation of teachers for their role should begin with compulsory study in initial teacher training.
 - ❖ The most effective models for delivery would include a combination of content embedded across programs of study, and focused study in dedicated units.
 - ❖ Consideration should be given to child protection training forming a prerequisite to employment.
 - Specialist professional development should be undertaken for school principals to address their particular support needs in relation to leadership and management issues relating to implementation of effective school-level child protection policy and practice.
 - Explicit attention should be given to decision making processes and models in initial teacher training programs and professional development for practicing teachers.

Support for teachers

Queensland teachers require support at the school-level to adequately fulfil their role. Research attests to the pivotal role of teachers and schools in providing an educationally rich and emotionally supportive environment for children who have experienced abuse and neglect. Teachers in some schools may deal with the effects of abuse for in excess of 36 hours per week, every week of the school year. This work is difficult and demanding. To do it well, teachers require support. Even when teachers do not encounter child abuse or neglect frequently, they need to know where they can obtain help and how to best work to ensure a just outcome for the child. Schools where teachers reported there was open discussion about child abuse and neglect seem to have a climate that is more supportive of detecting and reporting, and teachers in these schools feel more confident that they detect and report effectively. Clearly, the school principal has a crucial role, and as such, principals also require support from their institution.

We recommend:

- Employing authorities should promote strategies to build teachers' resilience in the face of the difficulties associated with detecting and reporting, particularly for those teachers working in schools with a higher incidence of cases. Institutional arrangements should facilitate schools to document, examine and share practices that enhance their schools' and teachers' coping strategies.

- Employing authorities should provide effective access to support staff to assist teachers with the task of accurate and timely reporting following detection. Following the South Australian model, consideration should be given to designating child protection officers in schools to provide a resource to teachers in the decision-making process. These staff require expertise in child abuse and neglect and child protection issues. This may require expansion of and enhancements to existing staffing arrangements to ensure better support for teachers and better outcomes for children.

Reporting obligations for Queensland teachers

Queensland employing authorities, schools, and teachers must recognise that serious decision making takes place when child abuse is detected and reported. Teachers' decision-making in cases of child abuse and neglect is based on a complex interplay of knowledge, attitudes and values, biases, perceptions, personal feelings and community expectations. To detect child abuse or neglect, teachers will ask themselves "Is this abuse or neglect?" To make this judgement, they must process multiple sources of information about the event, the child and the child's family. To make this judgement accurately, they require great skill and professionalism. We have uncovered some problems in teachers' understanding of their legal obligations, which require immediate attention. On the issue of extending Queensland teachers' legal obligations to reporting all types of child abuse or neglect, there is scant empirical evidence on which to make recommendations. There is a lack of large-scale cross-jurisdictional Australian research into the impact and effectiveness and impact of different types of legal obligations for teachers.

We recommend:

- Queensland teachers should be provided with accurate information about their legal and policy obligations with respect to reporting different forms of child abuse and neglect.
- Further cross-jurisdictional Australian research should be undertaken investigating the impact and effectiveness of different types of legal reporting obligations on teachers' reporting patterns, and outcomes for children.

Appendix A

Regression of Effect Coded Vignette, Teacher and School Variables on Detection, Reporting and Reporting Given Detection¹ (N=8128)

	Detection		Reporting		Reporting Given Detection	
	R ² (adj)=.266		R ² (adj) =.270		R ² (adj) =.63	
	F=58.397***		F=56.017***		F=247.893***	
<i>Variable</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>
Detection					.705	54.613***
<i>Vignette Variables</i>						
Physical abuse	.280	18.393***	.260	16.748***	.063	5.416***
(Neglect)	-.280	-18.393***	-.260	-16.748***	-.063	-5.416***
High repeat	.300	19.700***	.287	18.479***	.076	6.480***
(Low repeat)	-.300	-19.700***	-.287	-18.479***	-.076	-6.480***
High impact on child	.161	10.568***	.114	7.363***	.001	.090 ^{ns}
(Low impact on child)	-.161	-10.568***	-.114	-7.363***	-.001	-.090 ^{ns}
High family SES	-.012	-.768 ^{ns}	-.003	-.198 ^{ns}	.005	.467 ^{ns}
(Low family SES)	.012	.768 ^{ns}	.003	.198 ^{ns}	-.005	-.467 ^{ns}
High parent cooperation	-.118	-7.776***	-.103	-6.653***	-.020	-1.790 ^{ns}
(Low parent cooperation)	.118	7.776***	.103	6.653***	.020	1.790 ^{ns}
<i>Teacher Variables</i>						
Female	-.023	-1.425 ^{ns}	-.026	-1.530 ^{ns}	-.009	-.770 ^{ns}
(Male)	.023	1.425 ^{ns}	.026	1.530 ^{ns}	.009	.770 ^{ns}
Parent	-.060	-3.437**	-.103	-6.653***	-.033	-2.638**
(Non-parent)	.060	3.437**	.103	6.653***	.033	2.638**
Education level - Postgraduate	.043	2.715**	.028	1.722 ^{ns}	.002	.829 ^{ns}
(Education level - Undergraduate)	-.043	-2.715**	-.028	-1.722 ^{ns}	-.002	-.829 ^{ns}
Years experience teaching	.033	1.878 ^{ns}	.080	4.401***	.056	4.370***
Lower primary teacher	.105	6.421***	.072	4.293***	.002	.844 ^{ns}
(Upper primary teacher)	-.105	-6.421***	-.072	-4.293***	-.002	-.844 ^{ns}

Recency of child protection training	.000	-.019 ^{ns}	-.046	-2.797 ^{**}	-.046	-3.922 ^{***}
Belief in legal mandate to report	-.009	-.570 ^{ns}	.042	2.550 [*]	.049	4.145 ^{***}
(No belief in legal mandate to report)	.009	.570 ^{ns}	-.042	-2.550 [*]	-.049	-4.145 ^{***}
Previously suspected or identified abuse	-.003	-.179 ^{ns}	-.058	-3.337 ^{**}	-.056	-4.527 ^{***}
(Had not previously suspected or identified abuse)	.003	.179 ^{ns}	.058	3.337 ^{**}	.056	4.527 ^{***}
Previously decided to not report suspected abuse on at least one occasion	-.177	-10.802 ^{***}	-.232	-13.834 ^{***}	-.107	-8.817 ^{***}
(Previously decided to report suspected abuse on at least one occasion)	.177	10.802 ^{***}	.232	13.834 ^{***}	.107	8.817 ^{***}
Belief that child abuse happens more in their community than others	-.043	-2.406 [*]	.005	.253 ^{ns}	.035	2.694 ^{**}
(Belief that child abuse happens less in their community than others)	.043	2.406 [*]	-.005	-.253 ^{ns}	-.035	-2.694 ^{**}
Years experience teaching	.033	1.878 ^{ns}	.080	4.401 ^{***}	.056	4.370 ^{***}
Confidence in identifying abuse	.082	5.099 ^{***}	.135	8.202 ^{***}	.077	6.567 ^{***}
<i>School Variables</i>						
School Size	.116	7.160 ^{***}	.101	6.130 ^{***}	.020	1.657 ^{ns}
High SES School	-.041	-2.306 [*]	.012	.642 ^{ns}	.041	3.145 ^{**}
(Low SES School)	.041	2.306 [*]	-.012	-.642 ^{ns}	-.041	-3.145 ^{**}
Child abuse discussed at school	.040	2.368 [*]	.035	2.024 [*]	.007	.546 ^{ns}

(Child abuse not discussed at school)	-.040	-2.368*	-.035	-2.024*	-.007	-.546 ^{ns}
Metropolitan school	-.024	-1.533 ^{ns}	.013	.779 ^{ns}	.030	2.588*
(Regional or rural school)	.024	1.533 ^{ns}	-.013	-.779 ^{ns}	-.030	-2.588*

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001 ns=not significant

¹The following variables were excluded from the analysis because they were highly correlated with other variables in the models ('multicollinearity'): age of teacher, amount of child protection training (hours), beliefs about frequency of child abuse. The following variable was excluded from the analysis because of insufficient variability: beliefs about admin support.

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