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## ABSTRACT

Despite legal mandates that educators report their suspicions concerning abuse and neglect of their students, professionals fail to report their suspicions. In the present research, all schools in South Australia were surveyed to explore educators' experiences with mandatory notification training and school reporting practices. The purpose was to ascertain what led educators to report or not to report suspicions of child abuse and neglect. The sample (n=328) was made up of classroom teachers and educators in leadership positions. Findings are reported in three parts: the current mandatory notification situation for educators; the difficulties affecting educators' reporting practices; and strategies for improved reporting practices. It is time to review child protection practices in the light of a continued increase in child abuse and neglect statistics. This paper posits the view that improved professional development and positive and collaborative work with supportive leaders can assist the reporting practices of educators by confronting the personal and professional dilemmas associated with under-reporting. (Contains 38 references.) (MKA)

## CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATORS' REPORTING PRACTICES OF MALTREATMENT: AN AUSTRALIAN STUDY

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## INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to estimate the incidence of child abuse and neglect because the statistics represent only the reported cases referred to child protection services. The most recent statistics released in Australia, where this research was conducted, report that in 1997-1998, 5.6 per 1000 children under the age of 16 were the subject of substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 1999). These figures and the presumed incidence of unreported cases of suspected abuse, suggest that child abuse is a significant social problem in Australia, as it is worldwide. The consequences of child abuse and neglect have been extensively researched and reported in the literature (poor self image, delinquency, problems at school and with forming relationships, violence, drug and alcohol abuse, prostitution, homelessness, psychiatric disorders including anxiety and depression, and suicide). Strategies related to identification, intervention and prevention of child abuse and neglect have also been researched.

A tertiary prevention strategy, mandatory reporting, has been introduced in many countries including Australia. Despite differences between States there are legislative requirements that various professionals, eg educators, are required by law to report suspicions of child abuse and neglect. In South Australia, where this study was undertaken, the following law applies:

"Under Section 11 (1) and (2) of the Children's Protection Act 1993, teachers in any educational institution, are obliged by law to notify the Department for Family and Community Services (renamed Department of Family and Youth Services in 1998) if they suspect on reasonable grounds that a child/young person has been abused or neglected and the suspicion is formed in the course of the person's work (whether paid or voluntary) or in carrying out official duties (Family and Community Services, 1997, pp. 25).

Reasonable grounds is defined in the legislation as being when:

- a child/young person discloses that s/he has been abused
- your observations of a child/young person's behaviour and/or injuries leads you to suspect that abuse is or has occurred
- someone else tells you
- a child/young person tells you of someone they know who is or has been abused and they are actually referring to themselves.

The law does not require the mandated reporter to prove that abuse has occurred, it requires that they report their suspicions (Family and Community Services, 1997, pp. 189).

To promote mandatory reporting effectiveness there are penalties for not reporting and freedom from liability for reporting. Educators in South Australia attend compulsory training (introduced in 1989) to assist them in their reporting role. Called mandatory notification training and conducted by accredited child protection agency trainers over one day, it is an employment pre-requisite and compulsory component for exit from university teacher education courses. The training addresses myths that exist about child abuse and neglect, identification of child abuse and neglect, responding to victims, and procedures for reporting. Some schools provide follow-up training, in the form of in-service, which is conducted in schools after hours. However, this has not been well received by educators given their workload and the professional development model used to disseminate this information has also criticised. This training is not consistently or effectively executed in schools throughout the State, with some schools receiving no up-date and transient teachers often not aware that such sessions are even offered.

Despite the legal mandate that educators report their suspicions, and the preparation completed by all novice and experienced teachers, professionals fail to report their suspicions and under-reporting behaviours occur. The literature cites many reasons (fear of identification of self or victim, fear for personal safety, confusion with the law, lack of confidence to identify and/or report, reluctance to become involved, lack of professional experience, and fear for the future welfare of the child) for such behaviours. Of relevance to this study is the research conducted by Abrahams, Casey and Daro (1992) who identified inadequate training as a reason for under-reporting.

This and earlier research conducted by the author which looked at educators' and nurses' reporting behaviours (McCallum and Johnson, 1998), pre-empted a study conducted in South Australia exploring reasons for the inadequacy of educator training. The focus of this paper is on the difficulties experienced with mandatory notification training by educators. These in turn

affected their ability and confidence to report. Further influences found to affect teachers' reporting behaviours, other than training, will also be discussed.

## **METHOD**

All schools in South Australia (private and public), were surveyed to explore educators' experiences with mandatory notification training and school reporting practices. The purpose was to ascertain what led educators to report or not report suspicions of child abuse and neglect. The design of the survey tool was based on the findings of a previous pilot study using qualitative methods of research, purposive sampling and interview methodology. The survey was distributed to Principals of schools who were asked to randomly select two educators at their site to complete and return the survey directly to the researcher. Identity was anonymous and the information provided was treated confidentially. Ethics approval was granted by The University of South Australia and appropriate employing bodies. The quantitative results were analysed using SPSS and the qualitative comments using NUD.IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data. Indexing Searching and Theorising, Richards and Richards, 1997). A response rate of 47% was achieved.

## **PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS**

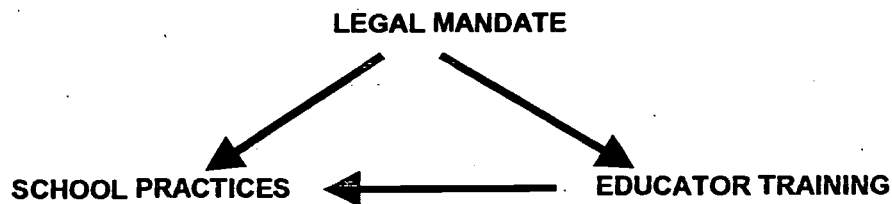
The sample (n=328) representation was: predominantly female (75%), aged in the 41-50 year old range (49%), employed in a public school (Department of Education, Training and Employment) 90%, at a primary level (42%), in a city location (61%) with a larger representation from the northern area (36%) and in mid (46%) to low (40%) socio-economic areas. There was an even balance of classroom teachers and those working in leadership positions within their school sites and the majority had more than 10 years teaching experience (76%). Some 67% of educators had completed their mandatory training over 5 years ago.

This sample represents a group of educators with significant years teaching experience, involvement in a variety of extended professional development programs, familiarity with mandatory reporting legislation and reporting practices, mandatory notification training and a likelihood of experience with incidences of suspected child abuse and neglect. Ethics considerations did not allow the investigation of the reporting and under-reporting statistics of this sample.

## **DISCUSSION**

The prime objective of this study was to find out how effective mandatory notification training was for educators that are legally obligated to report their suspicions of child abuse and neglect. Training and school reporting practices have a direct relationship with educator's confidence and ability to report suspicions of child abuse and neglect. The findings of this research will be discussed in three parts: the current mandatory notification situation for educators; the difficulties affecting educators reporting practices; and finally, strategies for improved reporting practices.

### **A. THE STATUS QUO**



**Figure 1: Current Situation Of Mandatory Notification Training In South Australia**

Figure 1 represents the existing situation regarding educators' mandatory notification requirements. The legal mandate states that educators are obliged to report their suspicions of child abuse and neglect. This, in turn, directly influences training and school practices. Educators are aware of the legislation and know that it is the guiding principle underlying the training and their subsequent reporting role. The training was introduced to heighten the awareness of the problem of child abuse and neglect, and most importantly, to assist in

recognition and reporting procedures. The training and legal mandate prompted some schools to develop school practices aimed at improving the quality of reporting.

However a range of issues impacted the implementation of mandatory notification at the school level. These included the level of awareness about knowledge and procedures, differing degrees of support for reporters and reporting practices, and varying levels of school control. Some educators experienced awareness raising about child abuse and neglect through in-school professional development but this was inconsistently provided and often ineffective. Some respondents reported self-initiating efforts to up-date themselves with information about child abuse and neglect. Support for educators was sometimes available 'in-house' but was more frequently self-initiated and sought from personal friends or colleagues. Issues regarding confidentiality exist for educators who choose to seek external support as this behaviour is not condoned by training providers.

Some schools implemented structures to assist staff to fulfil their mandate but in many cases these were 'controlled' by senior staff. They were also randomly developed and implemented and therefore did not apply to all school situations. Reporting practices varied, despite the clear guidelines provided during training. In some school sites, teachers were actually encouraged 'not to report', to do so alone or to notify a person in a leadership position (often the principal). Doubts existed with the latter practice because educators, usually classroom teachers, were unsure whether the reports ever reached child protection services. However, there were also instances where teachers reported positive support and guidance from leadership teams at the school level.

In other schools, staff collaborated together to establish clear policies and procedures at their schools and supported one another in their reporting. It was acknowledged by this group that the decision to report was a highly emotive one that required collaboration and partnerships with other stakeholders. Some schools had also put in-place very elaborate structural policies and

procedures but in other instances reporting was an isolated duty, or one that was completely handled by those in leadership positions. O'Toole, Webster, O'Toole and Lucal (1999) argued that reporting was affected in schools where teachers reported abuse to principals or review teams for a final decision before notifying authorities.

In summary, there were significant variations in the quality of implementation of mandatory notification and its procedures in the schools covered in this study. The findings identified difficulties with the training model of mandatory reporting which suggests that this model is an unsatisfactory one for preparing teachers to report suspicions of child abuse and neglect.

## **B. DIFFICULTIES AFFECTING EDUCATORS TRAINING AND REPORTING PRACTICES**

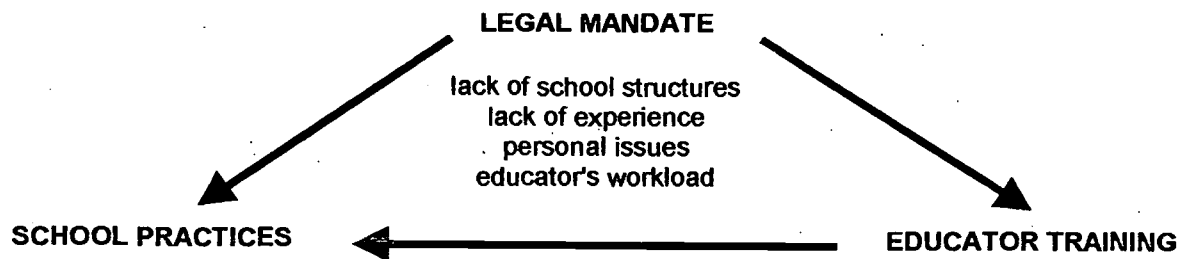
The tendency for educators to 'under-report' suspicions of child abuse and neglect is extensively reported in the literature (Johnson, 1995; Crenshaw, Crenshaw & Lichtenberg, 1995; Morris, J, 1985; Saulsbury & Campbell, 1985; Kalichman, Craig & Follingstad, 1988; Reiniger, Robison & McHugh, 1995; Hay, 1988; Bavolek, 1983; Barksdale, 1988; Nightingale, 1986; Kalichman & Craig, 1991; Zellman, 1992; Winefield & Castelle-McGregor, 1986; Newberger, 1983; Levin, 1983; McIntyre, 1990; Pollack & Levy, 1989) and is evident with other professional groups mandated to report (Lumsden, 1992 and Finkelhor & Zellman, 1991).

The ethical constraints on this study meant it was not possible to seek out reasons for not reporting suspicions of child abuse and neglect. However, educators alluded to the difficulties that influenced their decision. These included a lack of school structures, confusion regarding legislation, uncertainty with indicators of abuse, fear of personal safety, lack of leadership and a lack of knowledge and experience with child abuse reporting. O'Toole et al (1999) stress that because professionals overlook signs of abuse or fail to report abuse to authorities abused children fail to receive protection and treatment (pp. 1083).



Research into training programs with law enforcers (Portwood, Grady and Dutton, 2000) concurs with these findings and notes obstacles to the implementation of effective training programs. Whilst there are workplace variations between that of educators and law enforcers, commonalities exist. The difficulties highlighted in this research can be used to encourage collaborative relationships and assist in the development of more relevant training models and programs to apply within different jurisdictions.

The difficulties experienced by educators, indicated in figure 2, include: a lack of school structures, a lack of experience with teaching and with child protection matters, personal issues for educators with child abuse and individual cases, and the perceived increase associated with educators' workload.



**Figure 2: Difficulties Affecting Mandatory Notification Training And Educator's Reporting Practices**

*(i) lack of school structures*

The lack of school structures conducive to identifying and filing a report was seen by educators as a barrier to reporting. They reported feeling isolation which impacted on their behaviours and identified a need for internal school structures. Although this view was not a homogeneous one there was a feeling that structures (eg set policies and procedures), identified personnel, and support mechanisms (eg networks) would assist. Despite this view, O'Toole et al (1999) found that only a small percent of teachers' responses to possible abuse were affected by the school as an organisational setting. However, they stress that from a social policy point of view, there is a major concern that students in certain types of schools are not receiving the protection from

abuse that the law is promoting. For this reason alone, certain school structures would deem to be of value.

(ii) *lack of experience*

Two variables concerning experience and its effect on educators reporting practices were identified - a lack of experience at teaching and familiarity with the work of teachers, and a lack of experience in identifying and reporting suspicions of child abuse and neglect. Novice educators and those that worked in transient or casual conditions were grappling with transitioning to the world of teaching and often missed or were too busy to observe childrens' behaviour at an individual level. Likewise, experienced educators, both in classrooms and administrative positions, were not always familiar with the knowledge and procedures associated with the identification of child abuse and neglect. This was because they did not have consistent experience with reporting or dealing with child protection services, despite completion of mandatory reporting training.

A third variable relating to teachers' experience is proposed by O'Toole et al (1999) where after years of teaching experience and an increase in the number of children seen each day, a loss of sensitivity to the problem develops. They found that years of teaching were negatively associated with recognition of abuse, but not reporting (pp.1095). This was because teachers were more tolerant about behavioural signs exhibited by children, received no formal training in child abuse detection when they were trained to become teachers, or because an increase in student numbers affected time and type of relationship with individuals and smaller groups. O'Toole et al reported that the more involved teachers are with recognition and reporting, the greater is their response to higher recognition and reporting scores (pp. 1096). Strategies to increase regular contact with children and their families, with the workings of classrooms, and with reporting laws and procedures are paramount to educators' professional development requirements.

(iii) *personal issues for educators*

Individuals faced with the decision to report child abuse are confronted with many personal issues that influence the outcome. Educators can be faced with the anger and threats from parents who suspect them as the reporter. Educators can feel strong emotions as a result of identifying or reporting suspected abuse. They may also feel guilt for making the report based on suspicions alone, or for not acting more promptly or for not acting at all, and for any disruptions created for the children and/or family. For reporters, the decision to report represents a high level of personal investment. Many feelings are experienced when they are faced with distressed, traumatised children and despite their lack of expertise to handle the situation, they have no option but to respond. The investment educators place on this aspect of their role can cause added pressure and place additional demands on them. It is appropriate for this aspect of their work to be valued and taken into account in the management of school sites.

(iv) *perceived increase in the workload of educators*

It has been suggested that the nature of educators' work has changed. Educators, researchers and writers have alluded to possible causes of this although some are self-evident: the onset of technology, an ageing profession, increased class sizes, and a perceived increase in the number of duties. A succinct summary about this is provided by the *Senate Inquiry into The Status of the Teaching Profession* (1998) in Australia, and references the range of non-core teaching tasks now added to workload. Many of these responsibilities were previously handled by community, church and family organisations but were now the responsibility of the school,

"School's have become the first port of call for many families in crisis and in some schools teachers' welfare role threatens to engulf their primary function, that is, to teach" (pp. 132).

Educators did not seek out this role and many felt that they had not been trained or prepared to handle it, and they received little support to fulfil it. A quote from the Senate Inquiry supports this view,

"As well as preparing students academically, teachers (and) schools are expected to act in the roles of social worker, counsellor, surrogate parent, psychologist, law enforcer, disabilities educator and, as employment agents. These additional expectations placed upon teachers move teachers far beyond their traditional roles without adequate training or new ways of coping with and organising work" (pp. 132).

The workload for those associated with school systems appears to have increased and classroom teachers are also required to teach subjects or handle situations with which they are unfamiliar. A consequence of this practice without adequate preparation or follow-up is damaging to the profession because

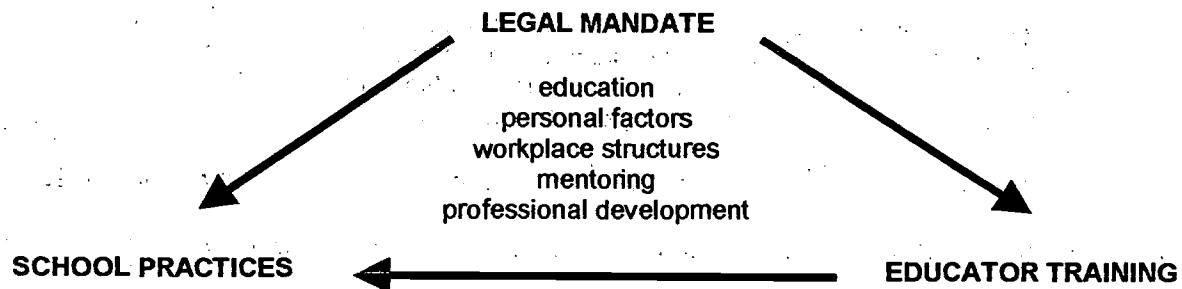
"It has been claimed in Australia that teachers are being deskilled while their work becomes intensified; and that teacher education is getting fewer resources, but classroom teaching is becoming increasingly demanding" (Lawnham, The Weekend Australian, 19-20 February, 2000, pp. 12).

Figure 2 shows that the local impact of schools, teachers' needs and concerns, conditions of teacher learning, and familial considerations have not been taken into account in the preparation of educators for mandatory reporting. Mandatory reporting training can be classed as a 'traditional model' of professional development, and as Little (1994) argues, it does not meet the needs of teachers and schools. This is because it does not recognise 'the importance of and variability of local contexts' (pp. 144).

### **C. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE REPORTING PRACTICES**

Model 3 developed out of the findings of the study, was influenced by the views of the educators who identified conditions conducive to their role as a mandated notifier, by a review of literature in the area, and by other research. It is suggested as a more effective model for addressing the needs of mandated notifiers which has the potential to positively influence the prevention of child abuse and neglect and improve reporting practices. The role of education, consideration of

personal factors that contribute to improved reporting, workplace structures, the use of mentoring programs, and the role of teacher professional development, to facilitate greater collaboration in child protection work and reporting, will be discussed.



**Figure 3: Strategies For Improved Practice**

*(i) the educative role*

The preparation of educators to identify and report their suspicions of child abuse and neglect can be improved through education. Objective knowledge and subjective appraisal of educators' knowledge have been suggested as two areas that relate to the recognition and reporting of abuse (O'Toole et al, 1999). Education, as pre-service and in-service professional development, are two key areas that can address the issues raised.

There already exists formal and compulsory training for pre-service educators in mandatory notification in South Australia. However, there is a need for continual focus and extension. The present training is 'one-off' and occurs early in a teacher training course before competence and confidence with children and teaching practicum has been accomplished. The Senate Inquiry (1998) has highlighted the importance of teacher training but suggests that the quality of pre-service teacher training is variable, and predictably they found some cases where students and teachers were dissatisfied. The Senate Committee recognised that there were institutions committed to rectifying known weaknesses but they were often hampered by a decrease in resources. This research has highlighted an essential weakness in the current training in mandatory notification and recommends that it be an area for review, as espoused by The Senate Inquiry,

"If we are serious about enhancing the status of teachers we must ensure that new teachers are adequately prepared for the complex and demanding task ahead of them. High quality, appropriate pre-service training is essential" (Senate Inquiry, 1998, pp. 200).

An improvement to the status quo may include a focus on child protection curriculum with an aim to increase the confidence of graduates to work within the child protection system, and for positive acceptance of teachers' professional responsibility and obligations (Watts and Laskey, 1994, pp. 126). Additionally, more exposure must be provided throughout the teaching course, particularly after major practicum and before graduation. Curriculum that develops a notion of a 'victimless' classroom is worth exploration as well as an increased focus on global child advocacy.

Guskey and Huberman (1995) argue for the importance of ongoing teacher learning through professional development programs. They state that in-service training and other forms of professional development are crucial components for improvement and change for all teachers - novice, experienced, casual, transient and those situated in challenging geographical and economic locations. Of particular note are educators working in geographically isolated areas where schools lag behind in reporting. Further research needs to be conducted that focusses on the factors that contribute to less reporting in these school settings (O'Toole et al, 1999).

The problems identified by the experienced educators in this study stresses the need for an ongoing role in child protection work at the tertiary level where currently courses with a child protection focus are absent. This need is because,

"... it is part of their (educator's) professional role to investigate and respond to children's (sic) needs. Beyond that, teachers have an obligation to protect children and enable them to experience not just freedom from pain but also to experience success, joy and growth" (Watts and Laskey (1994) pp. 126).

Such a focus would serve to increase the awareness of child abuse and neglect as a social problem and may influence more creative and effective school intervention programs.

(ii) *personal factors associated with reporting*

The personal side to child protection work appears to be unavoidable as mandated reporters and others who work in the field struggle with separating personal and professional feelings and responsibilities.

Values and attitudes about child abuse and neglect and how they relate to teachers' work is effectual. We have discussed the emotive and complex nature of this topic and that the very nature of teachers' work is often dependent on skills related to relationship building, trust and communication. These can be adversely affected by the values and attitudes that teachers bring to their work, and particularly, to their professional responsibilities whether mandated or not. Past experiences, childhood memories, known victims, upbringing, views about discipline, styles of parenting, the media, and stress can all impact decision making processes.

These values and attitudes can contribute to the development of moral stances and judgements. Fullan's work (1999) on the development of moral purpose in schools suggests that school effectiveness research tends to concentrate on management issues rather than on the complexity of the issues faced by teachers operating in disadvantaged circumstances (pp. 3). Tackling the challenges raised by personal dilemmas is to be addressed as values and attitudes permeate the work of educators in and out of the classroom.

This can be addressed by providing support that scaffolds reporters through the identification and reporting process of child abuse and neglect. Schools can establish formalised support for staff to include external assistance through personnel or agencies, and professional network groups on the site which may include a more experienced educator or leader. Fullan (1999) talks extensively about the advantages of collaborative workplace cultures that can also provide support for staff. He espouses that in schools where there exists a collaborative professional learning pedagogy, there is social support characterised by cooperative relationships, high

moral value and advantages for individuals and groups. Such practices if embedded in the workplace can, in the long term, affect student learning and performance. Schools that employ collaborative practices value personal relationships and this forms a type of support characterised by educators who look out for one another's personal and professional interests, who attend to matters of courtesy and caring, and that are successful in terms of interpersonal relations.

The under-reporting literature alluded to the need for mandated reporters having an adequate knowledge base. Knowledge is fundamental if educators are to fulfil the mandate placed upon them and, as Fullan (1999) points out, in turbulent and ever-changing environments, continuous processing of new knowledge is fundamental to growth (pp. 60). Knowledge for educators in the current context refers to knowing familial circumstances, the child/ren involved, conditions associated with the suspected incident, the policy, processes and procedures, understanding the work environment, and identification of certain behaviours or indicators.

*(iii) workplace structures to support reporting*

Educators in this study reported that in the successful schools that intervened in child abuse and neglect, there were school structures that supported the action and beliefs of educators. A balance in the type of structures needed to assist educators must be achieved, because, as Fullan (1999) says, structures can undermine the capacities of schools if they intervene (creating confusion) and fail to concentrate on improvements to teaching and learning. Too much structure and control can destroy and too little creates a weak environment.

The purposes for workplace structures that support reporting are threefold: to broaden the concept of professional development making it more workplace oriented; to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and skills learned through a training program; and, to contribute to an environment conducive to the implementation of a mandate. This creates a collective workplace



where joint responsibility is taken, voices are equally heard and teacher discourses are founded on sound educational grounds.

The first structure to assist and influence educators in their reporting role are the school leaders, principals and those involved in high levels of administrative work. In this study they contributed by:

- developing and maintaining a school culture that was supportive of reporting
  - making significant contributions to teacher professional development that affected reporting practices
  - supporting educators in their reporting role: before, during and after
  - influencing the way a school works
  - directly affecting the school ambience and consequently the reporter's behaviour.
- Coleman (1995) referred to this perspective of reporting behaviour as a mesosystem.
- working at 'connectedness' with staff to achieve greater coherence because those in leadership positions believe that fragmentation, overload, and incoherence in schools are endemic problems (Fullan, 1999, pp. 35).
  - encouraging other individuals and groups to take on leadership roles
  - mentoring other staff in their reporting role, and
  - promoting school collaboration as a feature in school environments

The roles played by those in leadership positions have direct influence on educators' reporting practices. Wallace (1999) also found that active encouragement, support and interest shown by superordinates fosters school practices.

The second structure is that of support. It has been shown that those in leadership positions can encourage educators' reporting practices by being supportive. Additionally, colleagues and others at the workplace can contribute to support, either in a spontaneous way or by

participating in established formal structures. These assist the emotional phase experienced by notifiers, informs their decision-making, and promotes the accountability of a wavering reporter.

A third structure is the establishment and existence of policies to support reporting practices and procedures. As Zellman and Faller (1996) established, child maltreatment is an important policy concern that is not likely to be eclipsed in the near future. Policies pertaining to child protection reporting have existed and their development is not new as debates exist on political, social and economic grounds. Policy making has had a pattern of using a top-down approach, leaving those at the bottom feeling powerless, but successful approaches should adopt a more collaborative approach to policy development. Educators in this study designed and used 'in-house' policies to assist their procedural role in the reporting of child abuse and neglect. These were developed collaboratively, were encouraged and supported by principals, found to be supportive, and assisted the management of reporting during the busy times of their day. Clear guidelines or policies also assist those teachers working in less supportive schools.

However, Coleman (1995) warns that structures and guidelines that constrain reporters' decisions about what and who to report to, or which add confusion to their role are to be avoided. The mandatory notifiers role in the South Australian context requires that individuals must report their suspicions directly to child protection agencies, and behaviours that direct a notifier to a superior are not condoned. However, the educators are clearly saying in this study that collaboration with colleagues and using a support network assists them in their reporting role.

Establishing and maintaining a positive workplace culture is another structure that assists teachers' reporting practices. Fullan (1999) referred earlier to the importance of a collaborative workplace culture that supports staff in challenging school sites. Wallace (1999) insists that collaborative cultures are not to be established for sole projects but '... are deep, personal and

enduring and are central to teachers' daily work' (pp. 67). Fullan (1999), as an advocate for collaborative work cultures, states that they should:

"Foster diversity with trust-building; provoke anxiety and contain it; engage in knowledge creation; combine connectedness with openness; and fuse the spiritual, political and intellectual" (pp. 37).

Coleman (1995), suggests that the working environment of the reporters, along with their backgrounds, and values and attitudes regarding child maltreatment and societal expectations, influences the types of children and families that are more likely to be reported for abuse (pp. 43). Outside child protection workers who can use their skill, expertise and support in dealing with suspected victims are valuable additions to workplace culture that supports child abuse and neglect reporting. Additionally, families are an integral part of the school culture and further resources should be directed toward meeting their familial and social needs. Fullan's (1999) view is that 'the most important task facing the school in the immediate future is collaboration with parents in building active communities of learners (pp. 61).

Work environments influence the reporting behaviour of reporters so it is vital that they are adequately prepared and supported (Coleman, 1995, pp. 33). Societally, time and resources need to be devoted to make the teaching profession and the school environment safe for all, or we must conclude the unlikelihood of ever making all environments risk-free for children (Horns-Marsh, 1999, pp. 157). Russell and Withers (1998) too, suggest that schools should establish positive, supportive, and responsive cultures if engaged in prevention and intervention work.

This study, supported by other research, suggests that a collaborative and supportive environment significantly increases recognition, reporting and support for the reporter. Relationships with reporting agencies and issues of parenting as they pertain to education are additional areas raised by the study that impact on the creation of a positive and influential safe school environment. These factors all contribute to educators' reporting practices. Consequently, a collaborative culture and conditions in the wider school environment have a strong connection. These include structural and organisational factors like peer relations, school

goals, scheduling arrangements and superordinate behaviours that should be recalled during the development of these environments because they impinge on the orientation and progress of collaboration (Wallace, 1999).

(iv) *the role of mentoring in school systems*

In addition to the above suggestions related to increased formalised training, extra focus on mentoring schemes may be able to address the concerns raised by both experienced and inexperienced educators. According to Tolentino (1999) certain structural characteristics should be in place in a workplace to aid the success of mentoring. For example,

- participation should be mandatory because entry into the program can be perceived as a prestigious occurrence
- participants should be involved in training
- support and accountability are vital
- personal commitment to work 1:1 with a mentee aids the cultivation of new knowledge, understandings, and/or skills
- supportive, trusting relationships between the two should be encouraged
- goal clarity, time commitment and structure should be outlined at the onset
- involve mentor and mentee in an alternative project where they can work together
- encourage school administrators to include and support mentoring programs at their school sites

Mentoring has been noted as an effective way to support novice educators transition to their new role. This has been acknowledged by practising educators as a difficult transition because of the complexity of teaching. It is not the fault of training institutions or the quality of graduates. The provision of a mentor is therefore one way to assist them in their transition and this is a view which is also recommended by The Senate Inquiry (1998, pp. 205). Additionally, the

emotional challenges associated with child protection work exist for both novice and experienced teachers, and mentors and mentees can support each other by having a mentoring relationship which also clarifies the situation. Hays, Gerber and Minichiello (1999) consider the concept of mentorship to be critical to quality education because,

"...it fosters the development and growth of individuals and is essential in the 'passing on' of skills and professional standards to the next generation" (pp. 84).

Functions would include role modelling, friendship, counselling, acceptance and confirmation. These skills are specific to the skills required for successful reporting of child abuse and neglect and develop in a rigorous, but nurturing environment. The benefits for the mentee include,

"...increased self esteem and confidence by being provided with a 'safe' environment where s/he can take risks while developing personal style and professional values" (Hays, Gerber and Minichiello, 1999, pp. 88).

The benefits for the mentor are professional development, career advancement, rejuvenation, a feeling of prestige, greater job satisfaction and increased productivity. Institutions can benefit by improved individual performance, professional development of all participants, smoother transitions of change, increased networking, better communication, greater teamwork and higher morale (Hays, Gerber & Minichiello, 1999). The presence of mentoring as a concept in a school fosters collaboration and supports staff with positive influences on reporting practices.

(v) *professional development as it relates to educators' reporting practices*

It is suggested that the above strategies may influence the quality of educators' reporting practices. Crucial to the success of implementation is professional development. The importance of this and teacher professionalism has been acknowledged in Australia through the *Senate Inquiry into the Status of Teaching* (1998).

Educational reform and school improvement is seen by some as "dependent upon the further development of teachers' knowledge, skills and expertise" (The Australian Principals

Association and Australian College of Education in Education Review, 1999, pp. 13). This report also acknowledges that "there is increasing concern in the community about a range of social, health and welfare issues and their impact on students and schools" (pp. 12). It would seem, therefore, to be a pertinent time to re-think teacher professional development to address the issues that exist in our schools and society and to skill teachers appropriately.

The problems associated with training and professional development programs that prepare educators to report their suspicions of child abuse and neglect need to be addressed. Alternative professional development programs, for the purpose of improving and developing further the educators' mandated role, need to be developed and consistently implemented. Review of programs should be conducted to check overall effectiveness and to instil growth in teacher learning. Educators' at all levels, are to be included in the designing, delivering, and evaluation of programs to ensure that they meet the needs of the participants by relating learning to everyday contexts for child abuse reporting.

Strategies to increase educators' participation need to be considered. For example, offering incentives (financing attendance costs, credits toward tertiary courses), teaming experienced and inexperienced educators with experts in child protection, formalising strategies for dissemination of knowledge back at the workplace, rewarding with resources or funds into future programs, involving on-site support and professional expertise, and providing extra time are relevant.

Finally, the success of professional development programs situated within a social context are characterised by:

- being comprehensive, flexible, responsive and persevering
- seeing children in the context of their families
- dealing with families as parts of neighbourhoods

- a long-term preventive orientation and a clear mission that continues to evolve over time
- well managed, competent and committed individuals with clear identifiable skills
- training and support that provides high quality, responsive services, and

operating in settings that encourage practitioners to build strong relationships based on mutual trust and respect (Schorr, 1997, cited in Fullan, 1999, pp. 73/74).

## CONCLUSION:

This research presents educators as an intelligent, committed and moral group of professionals grappling with the reporting of child abuse and neglect. They identified certain barriers that affected their reporting practices and presented a perspective dubbed 'a cry for help'. It is time to review child protection practices in the light of a continued increase in child abuse and neglect statistics. This paper posits the view that improved professional development and positive and collaborative work cultures with supportive leaders, can assist the reporting practices of educators by confronting the personal and professional dilemmas associated with under-reporting.

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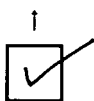
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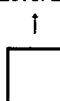
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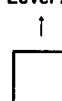
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