# Bridging the Gap of Teacher Education about Child Abuse

## By Allison N. Sinanan

### Introduction

School personnel, particularly educators and school psychologists, are a first line of defense in protecting children from abuse. Teachers play an important role in the detection and reporting of child abuse. The relationship established between teachers and their students can facilitate the identification of child abuse. By virtue of their work, they have ongoing contact with children, thus placing them in a unique position to detect signs of child abuse. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recognizes that the most frequent reporters of child abuse, numbering 16.2% in 2003, were educators (Crosson-Tower, 2003).

In addition, teachers are in a position to observe children on a daily basis and compare behavior with peer norms and/or past behavior (Crenshaw, Crenshaw, & Lichtenberg, 1995). While school professionals are in a unique position to identify and report child abuse, much of the current literature indicates that school personnel, particularly educators, seriously underreport suspected

Allison N. Sinanan is an assistant professor of social work in the Division of Social and Behavioral Sciences at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, Pomona, New Jersey.

cases of child maltreatment (National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research, 1998). Research on over and underreporting by teachers is particularly important for the debate since the Third National Incidence Study (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996) reveals that public schools report more cases of child abuse and neglect than does any other institution. Zellman and Fair (2002) note that schools' low reporting rates to Child Protective Services (CPS) may reflect their tendency to report milder cases of maltreatment. These cases are screened out by increasingly strict standards imposed by CPS, caused by CPS's lack of resources to respond to the increased reporting of child abuse and neglect. This highlights the important role of educators and indicates that many educators are already involved in responding to this issue, yet more can be done to address maltreatment. Perhaps training and education of child abuse needs to occur for prospective teachers in their coursework on the undergraduate level.

## Possible Reasons for Not Reporting Child Abuse

There are a variety of reasons why school personnel may not feel comfortable when it comes to making the decision to report a possible child abuse case. These reasons include legal ramification for false allegations, consequences of disclosure, lack of knowledge regarding how to detect and report child abuse, and possible deterioration of relationship between the school and the family. For example, 63% of 568 elementary and middle school personnel reported a deep fear of the legal ramifications that might result in the case of a false allegation (Abrahams, Casey, & Daro, 1992; Compaan, Doueck, & Levine, 1997; Kenny, 2001). Compaan et al. (1997) found that concerns or apprehensions about child protective services prevented individuals from reporting a case. Another reason for failure to report was the fear of making an inaccurate report (Kenny, 2001).

Some education personnel may lack knowledge of the child reporting law or of their obligation as mandated reporters. Kenny (2001) found that only one-third of teachers were well aware of the legislated requirements and standard child abuse reporting procedures. Moreover, only 3% of teachers reported that they were aware of their school's procedures for reporting child abuse (Kenny, 2001). As reported by Payne and Payne (1991), many school principals have a preference of resolving child abuse quietly within the school community, while others personally investigate cases of suspected abuse brought to them by staff before making a report. Both of these actions are not in compliance with most state child abuse reporting laws.

Several studies report that teachers do not receive adequate training on child abuse during their college education or in-service training programs (Hazzard, 1984; McIntyre, 1987). Abrahams and colleagues (1992) found that the majority of teachers receive minimal instruction on identifying, reporting, and intervening in suspected cases of child abuse and neglect. Further, teachers are dissatisfied with the quality and amount of child abuse education they receive. Perhaps training provided to prospect teachers in their undergraduate level coursework by social workers, or more specifically by child protection workers, can lessen the gap in lack

of knowledge regarding child abuse and create confidence in CPS. In addition, the teacher education curriculum should stress the teachers' legal obligation to report child abuse.

## Child Maltreatment

Child maltreatment is a phenomenon that has a long history in the United States (Pogge, 1992). Not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were there concerted efforts in the United States to develop services to prevent the occurrence of child maltreatment (Zigler & Hall, 1989). In 1874, child abuse captured the nation's attention with news that an eight-year-old orphan named Mary Ellen Wilson suffered daily whippings and beatings by her caregivers. With this case came the realization that there were no laws to protect Mary Ellen Wilson from future maltreatment (Bremner, 1971), and there was no organization in existence to protect abused children. The case was then referred to the attorneys of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) (Watkins, 1990). These attorneys argued that laws protecting animals from abuse should not be greater than laws protecting children. The Mary Ellen Wilson case was pivotal in bringing attention to the existence of child maltreatment and the lack of attention given to this social problem. This case revealed that humans were protecting animals from cruelty though an established organization while they were not protecting children from acts of abuse, thus giving birth to the protection of children from maltreatment with the establishment of legislation of corporal punishment laws and the development of agencies such as The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC) and the Children's Defense Fund (Antler & Antler, 1979; Costin, Karger, & Stoesz, 1996). In 1877, the NYSPCC and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals gained support throughout the country and joined together to form the American Humane Association, an organization formed to address child abuse and neglect issues (Fallow, 1987).

Child maltreatment is a social problem that affects millions of American children and annually costs billions of dollars (U.S.DHHS, 2005). For the federal fiscal year of 2005, an estimated 3.3 million children were alleged to have been abused or neglected and received investigations or assessments by state and local CPS agencies (Child Maltreatment, 2005), and approximately 872,000 children were determined to be victims of child maltreatment (U.S.DHHS, 2005). Many children who have been maltreated become adults with serious social, health, mental, and emotional problems (DePanfilis & Zuravin, 2002). Of these abused children, a large number of them fail to receive adequate protection or treatment. The failure to develop and implement a comprehensive approach to prevent child maltreatment and recurrence costs the U.S. billions of dollars in medical, mental health, law enforcement, judicial, and public social services and nonprofit agency resources (Fromm, 2001). It is estimated that child maltreatment costs the U.S. roughly $258 million each day, totaling approximately $94 billion each year (Thomas, Leicht, Hughes, Madigan, & Dowell, 2003).

Despite this expenditure of billions of dollars, some believe that the current system for protecting children and preventing maltreatment recurrences is failing (Thomas, et al, 2003). For example, an examination of nationwide efforts to protect children by the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect led members to conclude that the system is so inadequate and poorly planned that the safety of the nation's children cannot be assured (U.S. DHHS, 2003).

Each week, CPS agencies throughout the U.S. receive more than 50,000 reports of suspected child abuse or neglect. Available data, as of 2002, indicates over two and a half million reports were made concerning the welfare of approximately 4.5 million children. In about two-thirds (67 percent) of these cases, the information provided in the report was sufficient to prompt an assessment or investigation, which found that some 896,000 children have been victims of abuse or neglect—an average of more than 2,450 children per day (Child Maltreatment, 2002). Nearly three million allegations of child maltreatment were made to CPS agencies in the U.S. in 2001. Educational personnel are one of the most commonly identified reporters of child maltreatment. Nationally, educators constitute 16% of all reports (U.S. DHHS, 2003).

## Reporters of Child Maltreatment

All 50 states in the U.S. have mandated reporting laws which require certain professionals who work or come into contact with children to report suspected child maltreatment (Kesner & Robinson, 2002). Mandatory reporting laws are predicated on the Child Abuse Prevention Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974 (NCCAN, 1999). Mandatory reporters are groups of individuals, required by law, to report suspected incidents of child abuse when there is reason to believe that children have been harmed or are at risk of harm. Mandatory reporters usually include doctors, nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, teachers, principals, school administrators, childcare workers, and law enforcement officers. Although all 50 states require professionals to report child maltreatment, compliance by these professionals is not always assured. For example, approximately 40% of mandated professionals have failed to report child maltreatment at some point in their careers, and 6% consistently fail to report (Kenny & McEachern, 2002).

Congress recognized the serious nature of childhood abuse and passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, Public Law 93-247, in 1974 (Wilson, Thomas, & Schuette, 1983). States followed this action by establishing mandatory reporting laws for some professions. All states have legislation requiring that certain professionals report child abuse. The following list includes education personnel who are mandated reporters: teachers, instructional aides, teacher's aides, teacher's assistants, classified employees, administrative staff, supervisors of child welfare and attendance, certified pupil personnel employees, school district police or security, nurses, school psychologists, school social workers, school counselors, school volunteers, and after school program staff. In all 51 U.S. jurisdictions, school teachers and administrators are mandated to report child abuse and neglect to CPS agencies (Crenshaw, Crenshaw, & Lichtenberg, 1995; Kenny, 2001).

## Objectives

This study was designed to examine which child characteristics (i.e., gender, age, race, prior victim of abuse, and disability) and which family risk factors (i.e., domestic violence, inadequate housing, financial problems, and substance abuse) are related to physical abuse reporting of educational personnel.

This study may be particularly relevant to school social workers as well as educational personnel serving minority and vulnerable populations of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds given that the race/ethnicity of a child is a factor that will be examined in relation to reports of recurrence by type of reporter.

The social work profession is predicated on understanding the person in relation to the social environment which is congruent with the tenets embedded within the ecological perspective. Therefore, utilizing this perspective to show the association of reports of child physical abuse recurrence with different risk factors reinforces the relevance of this study for the profession. When examining physical abuse or child maltreatment within an ecological perspective, one must acknowledge that the quality and character of parenting results in part from the social context in which families operate (Garbarino, 1992). The ecological perspective underscores the consideration of the concept of risk of child maltreatment beyond examining and/or blaming the victim or the perpetrator(s) by looking at the surrounding systems that can impact this risk (Garbarino, 1992, 1995).

## Theoretical Framework

### Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model was used as an analytic tool to understand how child factors and family risk factors are associated with reports of child physical abuse recurrence. Although Belsky's (1980) ecological perspective and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model have not yet been studied in relationship to reports of child physical abuse recurrence, both the perspective and the model have been used to investigate child maltreatment in general (Fraser, 1997; Garbarino, 1992, 1995; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model provides an understanding of human development and the complex systems within which families are embedded (Brunk, Henggeler, & Whelan, 1987; Fraser, 1997). Bronfenbrenner (1979) created the ecological model to provide a holistic understanding of child development (Ammerman & Hersen, 1990). This model looks at a child's development within the context of the system of relationships that form his or her environment. Bronfenbrenner's model defines complex "layers" of environment, each having an effect on a child's development.

### Belsky's Ecological Perspective of Child Maltreatment

Belsky (1980) emphasized three of Bronfenbrenner's systems: the microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Belsky (1980) was one of the first to create an approach that incorporated multiple causative factors for child maltreatment (Ammerman & Hersen, 1990). He was innovative in applying the ecological perspective to the study of child maltreatment, although it had previously been applied to the study of child development by Bronfenbrenner (Fraser, 1997). Rather than viewing child maltreatment as manifesting from a single cause, Belsky's (1980) ecological perspective emphasized that child maltreatment is determined by several interrelated factors. These factors are determined by forces at work in the individual, the abused child (ontogenic system), and the family (the microsystem), as well characteristics specific to the community (the exosystem) and the culture (the macrosystem) in which both the individual and the family are embedded.

In this study, the following systems were used to develop an association between reports of child physical abuse recurrence: the ontogenic system and the microsystem. The ontogenic factors that were studied included: a child's age, gender, race/ethnicity, disabilities, prior victim of abuse, and relationship to the perpetrator. The microsystem factors studied were the existence of domestic violence and substance abuse of caregiver(s)'s in the household.

### General Systems Theory and Reporting of Child Physical Abuse

General systems theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding social structures and institutions. An underlying concept is that of boundaries. A boundary binds together the components that make up the system, protects them from environmental stresses, and controls entry of resources and information (Miller, 1978). In reporting child abuse, boundary is a principal concept in defining and respecting autonomy, privacy and confidentiality. If child protective services get involved with a family with regards to child maltreatment, it crosses a significant boundary.

Child abuse, according to the tenets of general systems theory, represents a flaw in the family system's capability to uphold correct spatial relationships. Child abuse, therefore, creates an improper crossing of boundaries. The interplay between autonomy and interdependence within a family is exemplified in the relationship between the family and mandated reporters (Buckley, 1967). When a reporter intervenes in the abuse of the child, it crosses an important boundary. Although state interventions is vital for the well-being of abused children, Melton and Davidson (1987) argue it is unclear that state interventions will have positive effects greater than the harmful effects of disrupting families.

General systems theory offers a framework of the investigation of reporting of physical abuse by type of reporter. This theory allows for an examination of how certain professions that must adhere to the mandated reporting laws of child abuse. These mandated reporting laws places these professionals into a subsystem of reporting professionals.

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The examination of how factors embedded within different systems interact and play a part into the behaviors of reporters is essential when studying rates of child physical abuse reports by type of reporter. Therefore, type of reporter is a moderating variable in this study because it explains the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

## Method

### Sample

The sample population for the study was children in the U.S. between the ages of birth to 17 years who have had a substantiated physical abuse report record. The study population thus involved substantiated cases of reports of child physical abuse recurrence of children between the ages of birth to 17 years in the U.S. between the years of 2002-2004. For studying reports of child physical abuse recurrence, the inclusion criteria were: having a substantiated case of child physical abuse, children identified in the cases must be younger than 18 years of age and live in one of the seven states that were used in the analysis. The exclusion criterion was a child who was removed from the home by child protection services due to a substantiated report of abuse. The seven states that were used in this study are: Colorado, Maine, Minnesota, Missouri, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming.

The sample consisted of 8,269 reports of physical abuse of children ages 0-17 made by education personnel. Of the 8,269 reports made, the following is a demographic breakdown of the children: 40% were White, 12% were African American and 5% were Hispanic; 20% were less than 6 years of age, 60% were between the ages of 7-17; and 20% had prior reports of abuse. Please see table 1.

### Procedures

This is a secondary data analysis of an administrative dataset using the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) for the years 2002-2004. NCANDS collects and analyzes data that consists of three components, merging three different NCANDS data sources: the Child File, the Agency File, and the Summary Data Component (SDC), into a single dataset creating the Combined Aggregate File (CAF) (U.S. DHHS, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, 2001). NCANDS is a federally-sponsored national data collection effort created for the purpose of tracking the volume and nature of child maltreatment reporting each year within the United States. The years of 2002-2004 were merged into one dataset. Only physical abuse cases reported by education personnel were extracted from the dataset and used in the analysis.

### Measurement

Independent variables related to child characteristics included:

*Age:* In this study, age was measured by the documented age of the child on

the date of the disposition report. Children were classified into one of four age groups; 0 to 2, 3 to 5, 6 to 11, and 12 to 17. They reflect age categories used in prior research (Fluke, Yuan, & Edwards, 1999; Fryer& Miyoshi, 1994).

*Gender*: Gender was measured by the identification of the gender of the abused child at time of the report.

*Race/ethnicity*: Race/ethnicity referred to an ethnic quality or affiliation resulting from racial or cultural ties (USSHDS, 2003).

*Prior victim of abuse:* Prior victim of abuse referred to the existence of substantiated incidents of maltreatment of the child victim.

Family risk factors referred to the existence of substance abuse, domestic violence, inadequate housing, or financial problems:

**Table 1**
**Descriptives of the Sample Observed Frequencies,**
**Percentages for Child and Family Factors**

| *Child Characteristics* | N=8,269 |
|---|---|
| Age | |
| 0-3 | 449 (5.4%) |
| 4-6 | 1,155 (14%) |
| 7-10 | 2,352 (28.4%) |
| 11-13 | 2,342 (28.2%) |
| 14-17 | 1,971 (23.8%) |
| Gender | |
| Males | 1,870 (22.6%) |
| Females | 6,379 (77.1%) |
| Race | |
| White | 3,122(40%) |
| African American | 1,006 (10.2%) |
| Hispanic | 3,644 (44%) |
| Prior Victim | |
| Yes | 1,646 (19.9%) |
| *Family Characteristics* | |
| Substance Abuse | |
| Yes | 700 (8.5%) |
| Domestic Violence | |
| Yes | 671(14%) |
| Inadequate Housing | |
| Yes | 348 (4.2%) |
| Financial Problems | |
| Yes | 946 (11.4%) |

*Domestic violence*: Domestic violence referred to the attempt or existence of physical, sexual or psychological harm by one intimate partner over another.

*Substance abuse*: Substance abuse referred to the long-term, pathological use of alcohol or drugs which may involve an inability to reduce consumption, and impairment in social or occupational functioning.

*Inadequate housing*: Inadequate housing referred to substandard, overcrowded, unsafe or otherwise inadequate housing conditions, including homelessness.

*Financial problems*: Financial problems referred to a family's inability to provide sufficient financial resources to meet minimum basic needs.

The dependent measure for the study was *Child physical abuse recurrence:* Child physical abuse recurrence has been defined as non-accidental acts by parents or caretakers that cause or could cause physical injury to children less than 18 years of age. Physical abuse is characterized by physical injury (for example, bruises and fractures) resulting from punching, beating, kicking, biting, burning, or, otherwise, harming a child (CAPTA, 1996).

A moderating variable for the study was *Education personnel*. The following list includes education personnel who are mandated reporters: teachers, instructional aides, teacher's aides, teacher's assistants, classified employees, administrative staff, supervisors of child welfare and attendance, certified pupil personnel employees, school district police or security, nurse, school psychologist, school social worker, school counselors, school volunteers and after school program staff.

### Data Analysis

The Child Files for the years 2002, 2003, and 2004 were merged into one dataset to study child physical abuse recurrence. Prior to conducting the principal analyses of this investigation, the data were examined by generating, at the "univariate" level, frequency distributions for categorical variables. Bivariate analyses were conducted by generating chi-square tests for the independent categorical variables, with the dichotomous predictor variable, child physical abuse recurrence.

### Results

A Chi-Square was performed to determine if there was any difference in the number of reports made by education personnel, based on a child's age. Children between the ages of 4-6 had the highest number of reports: $x^2=(1)p=.000$, p<.01. The $x^2$ results indicated that with respect to gender, girls were reported 7% more than males: $x^2=(1)p=.000$. Another $x^2$ revealed that there was a significant difference in the number of reports based on race, such that African American and Hispanic children had more reports than White children: $x^2=(1)p=.003$, p<.05 and $x^2=(1)p=.000$, p<.01 respectively. With respect to the child being a prior victim of abuse, the analysis indicated that children with prior reports had more reports of physical abuse by education personnel: $x2=(1)p=.000$, p<.01.

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With respect to family risk factors, chi-square results indicated families of children that had the following risk factors had significantly higher rates of reports of physical abuse as compared with families that did not have the risk factors: substance abuse ($x^2=(1)p=.000$, p<.01), domestic violence ($x^2=(1)p=.000$, p<.01), inadequate housing ($x^2=(1)p=.000$, p<.01) and financial problems ($x^2=(1)p=.000$, p<.01).

The logistic regression analysis considered the following variables simultaneously to predict reporting behavior for education personnel by the following child's characteristics: age, gender, race, and prior victim and the following family risk factors: domestic violence, substance abuse, inadequate housing, and financial problems. In order to determine which set of variables best predicted reporting behavior, the stepwise method was used. The final model was a good fit, $x^2=(5)p=.000$, p<.05. Significant independent variables in predicting the reporting behavior of education personnel were all of the child characteristics: child's age (4-6), gender, race and prior victim. With respect to family risk factors, only substance abuse and domestic violence were significant.

## Discussion

The significance of this research is its focus on teachers, a large profession of mandated reporters, who report a large percentage of cases known to CPS, but who have had a problematic relationship with CPS (Zellman & Fair, 2002). According to Briere, Berliner, Bulkley, Jenny, and Reid (1996), failure to report suspected child maltreatment not only undermines the child abuse reporting system, but also greatly impairs society's ability to help children in need of protection. Underreporting by professionals denies children who have been maltreated an opportunity to receive protection, reduces professional support for mandated reporting laws, exposes professionals to anxiety and liability, and distorts the statistics of child abuse which can impact both funding and policy.

Studies found that disclosure of child abuse and observing or being informed of specific evidence of maltreatment, along with suspicions or feelings that a child was at risk, would increase their likelihood of reporting (Compaan, et al., 1997 Hawkins & McCullan, 2001). School personnel feel they have difficulty defining symptoms and signs of possible child abuse; due to their inadequate training pertaining to what is considered child abuse (Hawkins & McCullan, 2001; Kenny, 2001). The unique contribution of this study was its efforts to understand child physical abuse recurrence by cases with index reports of physical abuse and adding the interaction term of type of reporters with all of the hypothesized predictors.

### Implications for Teacher Preparation

To address the aforementioned concerns, training programs need to be developed, dissemination of basic information relevant to reporting child maltreatment needs to be implemented, appropriate guidelines should be available in order to inform and assure compliance during the initiation of reports, and methods of enhancing the relationship between mandated professionals and CPS should be explored.

Information on child abuse and neglect can be incorporated into training at a number of levels, including pre-service (i.e., implemented within undergraduate and graduate curriculums), practicum, internships, postgraduate training (fellowships), and continuing education requirements. In the undergraduate level, the curriculum for social foundation or introduction to education, classes specifically designed for aspiring teachers, should include signs of child maltreatment, operational definitions and indicators, the state statue defining child and neglect and legal and operational definitions and indicators of different types of abuse. Aspiring teachers should also be made aware that under Social Service Law, the willful and/or knowing failure to report child abuse may result in criminal action, civil liability, and/or professional board disciplinary action against the employee.

Workers and lecturers in social work should become involved in training on child abuse for school teachers. Although there is a significant overlap in the knowledge base and the issues raised for both teachers and social workers, each possess unique roles. The social work profession has extensive experience and knowledge about child abuse whereas few teachers have received any formal training about child abuse and their respective professional role (Pugh, 1992).

In addition, workshops and continuing education programs for teachers can focus on specific areas (i.e., reporting requirements, signs and symptoms), whereas information infused throughout pre-service training can help professionals build a knowledge base about child abuse. All schools should have clear, accessible, written policies (consistent with state statutes) for school personnel regarding child abuse reporting. Principals can help prevent further harm to children by implementing these procedures and providing appropriate training and support for their staff (Lowenthal, 2001). Training for educators should include identifying and reporting child maltreatment. Training efforts can be established at many levels, including college curriculums and continuing education requirements.

### Implications for Practice

Identification of possible factors associated with reports of child physical abuse recurrence can provide valuable information for informing policies as well as assisting professionals in identifying children at risk for abuse and recurrence of child maltreatment. The results of this study can inform practitioners and education personnel of the risk factors specifically associated with child physical abuse recurrence. When children exhibit one or more of the predictor variables (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, disabilities, prior victim of abuse, and relationship to perpetrator of abuse) examined in this study, practitioners need to use a risk assessment protocol that addresses the increased likelihood for abuse, and recurrence of this abuse. Using a child risk assessment protocol will promote a standardized protocol of policies, procedures and agreements to be followed when there is an allegation or suspicion of child abuse or recurrence. This protocol should be conducted when there is speculation of child maltreatment. The assessment protocol should address the following questions: How long has maltreatment been occurring? Is maltreatment

an isolated incident or chronic in nature? The duration of the maltreatment is an important influence on the likelihood of maltreatment occurring again (DePanfilis & Zuravin, 2002; Fryer & Miyoshi, 1999). When evaluating the child for abuse, the assessment should include a child's physical, behavioral, emotional/ temperament and cognitive functioning (Marks & McDonald, 1989; Platt, 2001). When gathering, documenting and analyzing child functioning information, the child's behavior, emotions, temperament, physical and cognitive functioning in terms of consistency, reasonableness, appropriateness with age and/or illustrative of the norm of expected development must be evaluated (Wells et al, 2004; Zellman, 1992).

## Implications for Future Research

For future research a qualitative study involving educational personnel could provide beneficial information regarding reporting practices. Such a qualitative study could provide a rationale for reporting behaviors for child maltreatment, specifically child physical abuse, since there is a lack of literature on the subject matter. A qualitative study would include interviews of educational personnel regarding their experiences with mandated reporting of child abuse and neglect. The study could provide a perspective into the nature of reporting, their perception of the requirements of the law, and their beliefs regarding the process designed to protect children and help families. All of these questions would provide insight into reporting practices and the perceptions of reporting.

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