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## Understanding Mandated Reporting within a School Environment

Paula Schulte

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Understanding Mandated Reporting within a School Environment

Submitted by Paula Schulte  
May, 2012

MSW Clinical Research Paper

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present their findings. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

School of Social Work  
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### **Abstract**

The two distinct professions of teachers and school social workers work within the same environment of a school and share a common responsibility of reporting child abuse and neglect to child protection services as a mandated reporter. This is a unique situation to study because each profession is guided by their board of standards and code of ethics. This paper examines the different levels of knowledge on the responsibility of being a mandated reporter between these two professions and to what extent do they work together toward the same goal. A mixed method survey design was used in order to capture both qualities of the quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data collected allowed for statistical analysis and qualitative data collected captured the participants' narrative answer allowing for additional breadth and depth to the study. Survey questions consisted of five categories: demographics, level of training, knowledge, experience and professional responsibility. The findings of this study suggest that teachers and social workers do have common knowledge about their responsibility as a mandated reporter and that is to recognize child abuse and neglect and to make a report to the child protection services (CPS). However, responses to the open-ended questions on the survey suggest that there are differences between how teachers and social workers go about making the report.

*Keywords:* mandated reporting, school social workers, teachers

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## Introduction

Teachers, as mandated reporters are often the first people to observe child maltreatment, yet are not always clear when to report. With early intervention in the detection of suspected child abuse and neglect, the better the outcome it is for the child, the family and society. The long term affect of abuse and neglect impacts the stability of the child as well as impacts society. Abused children often have difficulties in school with low academic achievement, developmental delays, learning disorders, social difficulties, problems with relationships, depression, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, teen suicide, acting out and violent behavior (Lamont, 2010; Smith & Lambie, 2005).

There are many reasons why teachers may not report suspected child abuse and neglect. Contributing factors include (a) lack of knowledge toward the signs and symptoms of abuse, (b) unsure of how to make a report, (c) negative consequence for the client, (d) hold negative attitudes toward CPS, (e) fear of being sued or retaliation by family members, (f) lack of training on mandating reporting (types of abuse and definitions, reporting procedures and legal issues, (g) damage to relationships (Alvarez, Kenny, Donohue, & Carpin, 2004).

Child abuse and neglect is a social and public health problem in the United States (Lamont, 2010). The costs to society due to child abuse and neglect are often reflected in the cost for emergency room treatment, foster care, therapy, special education and ultimately prison. Approximately 772,000 children were found to be victims of abuse or neglect during 2008, representing a rate of 10.3 per 1,000 children in the population. (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). One-third of the abused and neglected children were between the ages of 1 and 4, the balance between the ages of 5 and 18 (Children's Bureau Express, 2010). Of the children who were abused or neglected in 2008, 71.1 percent experienced neglect, 16.1 percent

were physically abused, 9.1 percent were sexually abused, and 7.3 percent were emotionally or psychologically maltreated (Children's Bureau Express, 2010).

Legislation, *Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act* (CAPTA) of 1974 (P.L., 93-247) asserts that government has a role in protecting the interests of children and in intervening when parents fail to provide proper care. All 50 States plus the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Territories have mandatory child abuse and neglect reporting statutes that require certain professionals and institutions who come in contact with children to report suspected abuse and neglect to a child protective services (CPS) agency (Kesner & Robinson, 2002).

Minnesota statute 626.556, Subd 3, defines mandatory reporters as professionals who are engaged in the practice of the healing arts, hospital administration, psychological or psychiatric treatment, child care, education, social services, correctional supervision, probation or correctional services, or law enforcement to report suspected child abuse and neglect. For example, teachers and school social workers are ideal mandated reporters due to the close, long-term and frequent contact they have with their students (Smith & Lambie, 2005). Contrary to this belief, a study by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1988) reported that 89 percent of teachers do see abused or neglected children in their classrooms yet many are reluctant to report suspected abuse (Berrick & Barth, 1991).

Teachers roles as mandated reporters are important; they are the eyes and ears for the school social worker (Berrick & Barth, 1991). At the same time, teachers may be reluctant to report suspected abuse and neglect due to their fear, lack confidence and knowledge of the responsibility of being a mandated reporter. This would prevent children and their families from receiving necessary interventions to alleviate that problem.

Unlike school teachers, school social workers do know about child abuse, its symptoms and navigating the child protection system. Social workers also have a dual role as both educational consultants and social liaisons (Berrick & Barth, 1991). They are a supportive link as a liaison between children, parents, school staff and community coordinating services for the student and their family. Social workers could provide some in-service workshops to teachers and other school staff on topics of identification, reporting, coping with disclosures, legal and ethical issues, confidentiality, family dynamics, interviewing children, implications for child development and treatment approaches (Berrick & Barth, 1991).

### **Literature Review**

Teachers are one of many professionals who have direct contact with children. For this reason, federal and state laws require them to report to law enforcement or to a child protection service (CPS) any suspected child abuse and neglect of their students.

### **Federal Legislation**

Back in 1974, Congress enacted the National Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) (P.L. 93-247). This act has been amended and reauthorized numerous times, most recently on June 25, 2003, as the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003 (P.L 108-36) (Smith & Lambie, 2005) This legislation provided financial assistance to States to develop child abuse and neglect identification and prevention programs (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). The federal legislation defines child abuse and neglect as:

Physical or mental injury, sexual abuse or exploitation, negligent treatment, or maltreatment of a child under the age of eighteen or the age specified by the child protection law of the state in question, by a person who is responsible for the child's welfare under circumstances which indicate that the child's health or welfare is harmed or threatened thereby. (42 USCS § 5101, 2003)

**State Statutes (Minnesota)**

Child abuse is a state crime (Smith & Lambie, 2005). Minnesota law, Statute 626.556, Subd.3 requires professionals who are engaged in the practice of the healing arts, hospital administration, psychological or psychiatric treatment, child care, education, social services, correctional supervision, probation or correctional services, or law enforcement, to report suspected child abuse to CPS. The statute goes on to include standards for making a report. It states that a report is required when a reporter knows or has reason to believe that a child is being neglected or sexually or physically abused or has been neglected or physically or sexually abused within the preceding 3 years.

Failure to report this suspected abuse, according to Minnesota Statute 626.556, Subd. 6 may result in misdemeanor charges. Gross misdemeanor charges are charged if the mandated reporter knows or has reason to believe that two or more children have been physically or sexually abused by the same perpetrator within the preceding 10 years. Professionals who fail to report may face additional penalties such as suspension or revocation of professional license and civil liabilities (Kalichman, Cheung, & Lyness, 1999).

Additional research found on mandated reporting focused on five other areas of study: (a) level of knowledge and understanding of child abuse and neglect; (b) level of training of mandated reporters; (c) effects of child abuse and neglect on students; (d) the role of mandated reporters, and (e) deterrents or barriers to abuse and neglect reporting.

**Recognizing child abuse and neglect**

Literature suggests that due to the close day-to-day relationship teachers have with their students makes “good sense” for them to collaborate with child protection as a mandated reporter of suspected child abuse and neglect (Baginsky, 2000; Smith & Lambie, 2005; Baginsky, 2003).

A school setting is the first line of defense against child abuse and neglect because the classroom teachers interact with the children on a daily basis and it would be expected that they would be able to see changes in behavior more accurately than someone who has periodic contact with a student (Crenshaw, Crenshaw, & Lichtenberg, 1995). However, many teachers reported that they lack awareness, confidence and experience in identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect. The first step in overcoming these deficits is to learn to recognize the types and signs of abuse and neglect.

**Types of abuse and neglect.** There are four main types of child maltreatment that include neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse. Behavioral clues can be identified and associated to these different types of child maltreatment and can be observed in both the child and the parent or caregiver.

**Neglect:** most common form of maltreatment. Neglect usually involves the “failure of the primary care giver to (a) supply the child with necessary food, clothing, shelter, medical and mental health care, or appropriate supervision, (b) protect the child from conditions or actions that endanger the child and (c) take steps to ensure that a child is educated according to the law, (d) exposing a child to certain drugs during pregnancy and causing emotional harm to a child may also be considered neglect.” (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2012). More than one-half of all reported victims (59.2 percent) suffered neglect (including medical neglect), an estimated rate of 7 per 1,000 children (Crosson-Tower, Tracy, Newman, 2003). A study of 87 educators in New York found that neglect was the least likely child maltreatment to be reported (Crosson-Tower, et al., 2003).

Clues to look for in a child who is neglected include frequent absences from school; begs or steals food or money; lacks needed medical, dental care, immunizations, or glasses; consistently dirty and has severe body odor; lacks sufficient clothing for the weather; abuses alcohol or other drugs; reports that there is no one home to provide care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). Parental or caregiver signs to be aware of are that they appear to be indifferent to the child; seems apathetic or depressed; behaves irrationally or in a bizarre manner; is abusing alcohol or other drugs (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011).

**Physical:** Physical abuse is any physical injury or threat of harm or substantial injury inflicted by a caregiver upon a child other than by accidental means. These injuries range from bruises to internal injuries and death (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2012). Physical abuse can vary with intensity from extreme discipline or punishment that is inappropriate to the child's age or condition. Other factors that increase the risk of physical abuse include parental mental health, the immaturity level, stress, or the use of alcohol or illicit drugs use of the parent increase the risk for physical abuse (Crosson-Tower, 2003).

Physical abuse could be observed in a child that has unexplained burns, bites, bruises, broken bones, or black eyes; fading bruises or other noticeable marks after an absence from school; seem frightened of the parents or cries when it is time to go home; weary of adults or reports an injury by a parent or caregiver. Parents, on the other hand offer conflicting, unconvincing, or no explanation for the child's injury; describes the child as "evil" or in some other very negative way; uses harsh physical discipline with the child and has a history of abuse as a child (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011).

**Emotional:** Harm to the child's psychological capacity or emotional stability (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2012).

A child who has been emotionally maltreated shows "extremes in behavior, such as overly compliant or demanding behavior, extreme passivity or aggression; is either inappropriately adult (parenting other children) or inappropriately infantile (frequently rocking or head-banging); is delayed in physical or emotional development; has attempted suicide; reports a lack of attention to the parent" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). A parent who emotionally maltreats a child consistently blames, belittles, or berates the child; is unconcerned about the child and refuses to consider offers for help for the child's problems; overtly rejects the child (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011).

**Sexual:** Subjection of a child to a criminal sexual act or threatened act by a person responsible for the child's care or by a person who has a significant relationship to the child or is in a position of authority (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2012).

Clues to look for in a child that has been sexually abused include difficulty walking or sitting; genital or anal itching, pain or bleeding; victimization of others; suddenly refuses to change for gym or to participate in physical activity; change in eating habits; demonstrates sophisticated or unusual sexual knowledge or behavior; becomes pregnant at a young age or contracts a venereal disease; becomes depressed. Parental cues include overly protective or limit contact with other children especially those of the opposite sex; is secretive and isolated; displays jealousy and is controlling with family members (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011).

**Effects of abuse and neglect on the student.** The effects of child maltreatment were discussed across the literature and attributes neglect and abuse to the risk factors for poor outcomes at school (Staudt, 2001). Maltreated children have 2.5% more probability of repeating a grade than non-maltreated child. Neglected children have lower scores on standardized reading and math tests (Staudt, 2001), fewer A's and B's, increased absences than non-maltreated students.

Neglect cases are often due to educational neglect thus associated more with attendance problems (Jonson-Reid et al., 2007). Maltreated children were more likely to demonstrate disturbed behaviors (e.g., aggression, hyperactivity, anxiety, and depression) (Crosson-Tower, et al., 2003). Chronic lack of self-confidence from feelings of rejection in the home can manifest at school in the form of loneliness, accompanied by bullying and harassment from their peers. Physically abused children have higher reports of suspension and discipline referrals (Frederick & Goodard, 2010).

**Barriers to abuse reporting.** Teachers may struggle with ethical dilemmas from their responsibilities as mandated reporters. Should they report or shouldn't they? They need to make decisions as to what they believe they should do and what they say they will do when faced with an ethical dilemma (Kalichman et al., 1999). The conflict is between doing what is right for the abused and neglected child against breaching confidentiality, ruin relationships with the children and their parents expose families to the child protection system and make the report or break the law and not report (Kalichman et al., 1999).

Another barrier to reporting is that teachers lack a clear consistent protocol to follow on when and how to report suspected child abuse and neglect (Levi & Portwood, 2011; Smith & Lambie, 2005) and they are unprepared to report such cases (Kenny, 2001).

**Lack of clear definitions to statutory wording** Lack of clear definition to statutory wording was discussed in the literature as a barrier to a teacher reporting or not reporting suspected child maltreatment. For example, the meaning of the statutory wording in the law such as *reasonable suspicion* and *reason to believe* is vague which can be interpreted differently between the professions that are mandated to report. The law does not specifically identify what is and what is not reportable (Zellman & Antler, 1990) nor does it define the legal threshold for which to support a reporter's *suspicion* or *belief* that a child has been maltreated (Levi & Portwood, 2011).

The ambiguity surrounding the interpretation and meaning of this language forces the professionals to apply their own meaning of the word based on their personal standards and that could result in over reporting and under reporting of child maltreatment. Guidance and specific education is needed for mandated reporting to clearly define when child maltreatment must be reported.

**Need for training and support** Other common concerns across the literature are the need for training and support. Baginsky (2000) survey reported that approximately two-fifths of the teacher respondents received in-service child protection training and about two-thirds reported uncertainty about who to contact when they suspect child maltreatment. Also, many respondents expressed an interest in learning how to talk to children who have been abused.

Smith and Lambie (2005) recommend that frequent education for teachers relating to abuse symptoms recognition, intervention, and school policy is necessary for teachers to properly respond to the students needs. Baginsky (2003) reported that 54% of the study respondents received no training in mandated reporting responsibility since college. This lack of significant

training in their undergraduate studies could be due to a portion of their coursework may have had only a small element of child abuse and neglect within a larger course material content. Without this child protection and mandated reporting element in their coursework, teachers lack awareness, confidence and experience in identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect (Baginsky, 2000; Baginsky, 2003; Goldman, 2007; Smith & Lambie, 2005). Guidance and specific education is needed to clearly define when child maltreatment must be reported. To address the lack of child protection training, the literature recommended that pre-service and regular in-service training should be continuous and contain a child protection element and be required for teachers to maintain their teacher's license (Baginsky, 2003; Smith & Lambie, 2005). Additional training can provide teachers the skills and confidence needed to fulfill their role as mandated reporter.

**Clinical Interventions** Early detection of abuse and neglect results in early clinical interventions to alleviate further abuse and to increase the learning outcomes at school. Also, with early detection, social workers can begin to establish a “working alliance” with the student to make a thorough assessment and prepare necessary interventions (Ashton, 2007). A working alliance is a relationship between the therapist and the client that makes it possible to work together purposefully in therapy (Coopers & Lesser, 2011).

School social workers are a supportive link between the student's home, school and community (Berrick & Barth, 1991) and coordinate services between them. Graham (1993) identified other clinical services social workers can provide such as facilitate individual, family and group therapy, act as a community liaison and collect information about services offered by other community services and then refers clients to those services. Social workers provide in-service training to teachers and other school staff on topics related to child abuse and can

advocate for students to encourage evaluations and assist with the student Individual Education Plan (IEP). Finally, social workers can contribute to the curriculum development around abuse and prevention to review available curricula for content and cultural sensitivity (Graham, 1993).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is the Ecosystems Theory. It is a broad framework that synthesizes ideas from a number of human behavior and social work practice theories (Green, 1999). For example, concepts are adopted from *ecology* (micro, mezzo & macro systems); *ethology* (analyzing behavioral interactions between parents and children); *ego psychology* (understanding integrity of ego and functions, competence, coping); *stress theory* (adaptive mechanisms), the *Gestalt school of psychology* (the way behavior is perceived within a situational context); *role theory* (pattern of behavior and social position); *anthropology* (understanding personality development across cultures); *humanistic psychology* (caring therapeutic relationships); *symbolic interaction theory* (establishing meaning of self, generalized other), *general systems theory* (synergy, open systems, reciprocal causality); and the *dynamics of power relationships* (goodness-of-fit, does the environment provide resources, security and support that enhances development) (Green, 1999),

The ecosystem theory can be applied to a variety of settings because it involves concepts that emphasize the interactions and relationships among various individuals, groups organizations and communities and it also looks at how the environment impacts the actions, beliefs, and choices of the individual (Zastro & Krist-Ashman, 2007). The theory provides a lens that allows for a problem to be viewed in the context of the larger system in which the problem exists (Krist-Ashman, Hull, 2009). The focus is on the person-environment as a unitary system

in which humans and environment shape one another (Green, 1999). It is difficult to look at one system without considering the other; in other words, human behavior is influenced by the environment (Zastro & Krist-Ashman, 2007).

The ecosystem theory also suggests that people connect with and act simultaneously within several systems (Green, 1999). These interrelated systems are referred to as the Micro, Mezzo and Macro systems. A micro system refers to an individual that entails a biological, psychological, and social system. The system comprises a pattern of activities and roles and interpersonal fact-to-face relations in the immediate setting (Zastro & Krist-Ashman, 2007). Mezzo system refers to any small group that encompasses the linkages and processes occurring between the (developing) person and family, work groups, and other social groups. Macro systems refers to the larger group that focuses on the social, political, and economic conditions and policies that affect people's overall access to resources and quality of life (Zastro & Krist-Ashman, 2007; Green, 1999).

Normally, the ecosystem theory is an approach used as a frame of reference by social workers in their practice as they intervene with clients who are struggling with their day to day life events. Social workers focus on the degree of person-environment goodness-of-fit which is a person's interactions within their environment while simultaneously assessing whether or not the environment supports the person with necessary resources and security to enhance their development and well-being (Green, 1999). It also helps the social worker with interventions that are best suited for their client based on their individual needs.

For the purpose of this paper, the ecosystem theory is used as a theoretical foundation to follow as a way of thinking and moving forward with this research project. No evidence has

been found to support whether or not the ecosystem theory has been used to study this specific targeted population of just teachers and school social workers in the past. Normally, when looking at human behavior, the process starts at the micro level with the individual and then moves out to the mezzo and macro levels. The ecosystem theory applies to the school setting because it helps us to understand the relationships, influences and interactions between the multiple systems embedded within the school environment.

## **Methods**

### **Design**

This study asks the question, what are the different levels of knowledge on the responsibility of being a mandated reporter between two professions, teachers and school social workers and to what extent do these two professions work together toward the same goal? This study was mainly a predictive study in design because the hypothesis proposes that social workers would have an increased knowledge of their mandated reporter responsibility over the teachers. Also, there a quasi exploratory component that seeks to understand to what extent these two professions work together toward the same goal.

A mixed method survey design was used in order to capture both qualities of the quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data collected will allow statistical analysis to reject or fail to reject the hypothesis. Whereas, the qualitative data collected will expand a question with the participants' narrative answer allowing for additional breadth and depth to the question.

Data was collected using web-based survey software called Qualtrics to create, edit, distribute and analyze results of the data collected. Another software program, Minitab and

Excel spreadsheets were also used as a supplement to run additional statistical analysis that Qualtrics could not do.

### **Sampling**

A total of 50 survey invitations were sent to 25 teachers and 25 school social workers. Data was collected between January 11, 2012 and February 29<sup>th</sup>. A reminder email was sent on February 13, 2012 to those teachers and social workers who had not responded at that time.

Teachers and school social workers were identified and their contact information (email address) was gathered using publicly available contact information from the school's website. No link to the individuals name or school was collected. The email addresses of teachers and school social workers were copied into a single column in two excel spreadsheets (one for the teachers and one for the school social workers). In the second column on each spreadsheet, a random number was generated next to each email address using the Excel's "Randomize" function. The two columns were then sorted by the random number in the order from largest to smallest number. The first 25 names on each list were selected to be part of this study sample.

All elementary school social workers that were listed on the school website were included in this study. Pre-Kindergarten, Special education, autism, dance and theater teachers were excluded from the targeted sample plus all other district administrative and support staff was eliminated from the study.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

The protection of the participant for this study was seriously considered. Steps that were taken to ensure the protection of the participants include informed consent; protecting the

privacy of participants; retaining confidentiality of data, and approval from the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study.

Participation in this study was voluntary. Informed consent was sought from each participant on the first page of the survey with a brief explanation of the study, confidentiality of the participant and the data collected. Additional information in the consent letter included an estimated time to complete the survey and information that informs the participant that there are no incentives or any penalties for completing the survey. If the participants agree and consent, they were instructed to click the “Agree” button to continue on with the survey.

No identifying personal data was collected from participants. Email addresses collected from the website were stored in an excel spreadsheet on a secured computer and retrieved when this study was approved by the University of St. Thomas IRB for the purpose of disseminating the survey to the targeted population. This database will be deleted on or before May 31, 2013.

## **Measurement**

The measurement for this study was a survey with open and closed ended questions along with questions that measured the respondent’s answers for intensity by using a Likert scale. A Likert scale consists of a series of statements, with each statement followed by a number of ordered response alternatives ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” (Monette, Sullivan & DeJong, 2011, p.354).

The nature of the survey questions consisted of five categories:

- Demographics
- Level of Training
- Knowledge
- Experience
- Professional Responsibility

Demographic data was gathered to gain an understanding of who responded to the survey. The data variables included the respondent's age, gender, race, educational level and professional position. Professional position variable (social worker or teacher) will be matched against the other dependent variables to analyze the data collected.

### **Advantages and limitations**

An advantage of this study is that it is asking a question that has not yet been studied. The focus of this study is much smaller in scope and size compared to studies found in the literature. The population and sample of this study is limited to only teachers and school social workers in the east metro school districts. The strength of this study looks at how two distinct professions within the same environment respond to their legal responsibility as mandated reporters.

This is a unique situation to study because school social workers are guided by the Board of Social work yet they work in an educational environment. This governing board defined the social workers education that trained them to understand the biological, psychological and social effects of an individual as well as the necessary early interventions that are needed to alleviate the imbalance. The problem is that they are embedded in the school system environment that is guided by a separate governing agency, the Board of Education. Support and guidance from the school system may be lacking.

Teachers on the other hand, work in an environment familiar to them yet they are required to step out of their roles as teachers and into the role of social worker as a mandated reporter. Their education did not prepare them fully to interpret and understand the vagueness of

the law that requires them to report, or to identify the signs and the symptoms of abuse and neglect.

The choice to design the survey where only the person who received the invitation could respond to the survey eliminated the possibility of sharing the survey with their colleagues which limited the survey response rate

### **Analysis**

Based on the results of the survey, demographic analysis was calculated to show the respondents Professional Position to the respondent's gender, age, ethnicity and Level of Education. A descriptive statistic was performed on these questions and the results are presented in a bar chart to compare the variables.

Next, an analysis between the respondent's profession and the awareness of their schools procedures for reporting child abuse and neglect was conducted. An inferential statistic was performed on the variables of Professional Position and Awareness of School Procedures. This was done to test the hypothesis that social workers have an increased level of knowledge of the responsibility to report suspected child abuse and neglect. The findings are presented using a Chi Square to show the association between the two variables of Professional Position and Awareness of Schools Reporting Procedures and to determine whether or not the results reject the hypothesis or fail to reject the hypothesis.

Final analysis was performed to test the hypothesis whether or not there are discrepancies between their professional duties and legal obligation as a mandated reporter. A descriptive statistic was performed looking at discrepancies between Professional Position and Professional Duties and Legal Obligation to Report. The findings were presented using a cross tabulation

chart displaying the results and percentages in a bar chart to visually show the association between the two variables of Professional Position and Professional Duties and Legal Obligation to Report.

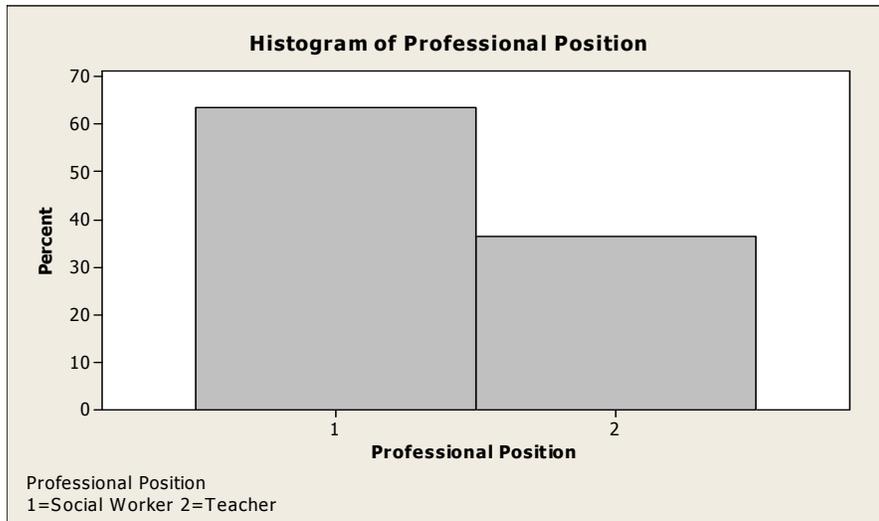
**Results**

**Respondents**

Of the 50 surveys sent out, a total 12 surveys were completed. The survey response was low with a 24% response rate. The demographic results of the survey shows that 67% of the respondents were social workers and 33% were teachers. The Histogram in figure 1 visually displays the results of the respondents.

Figure 1.

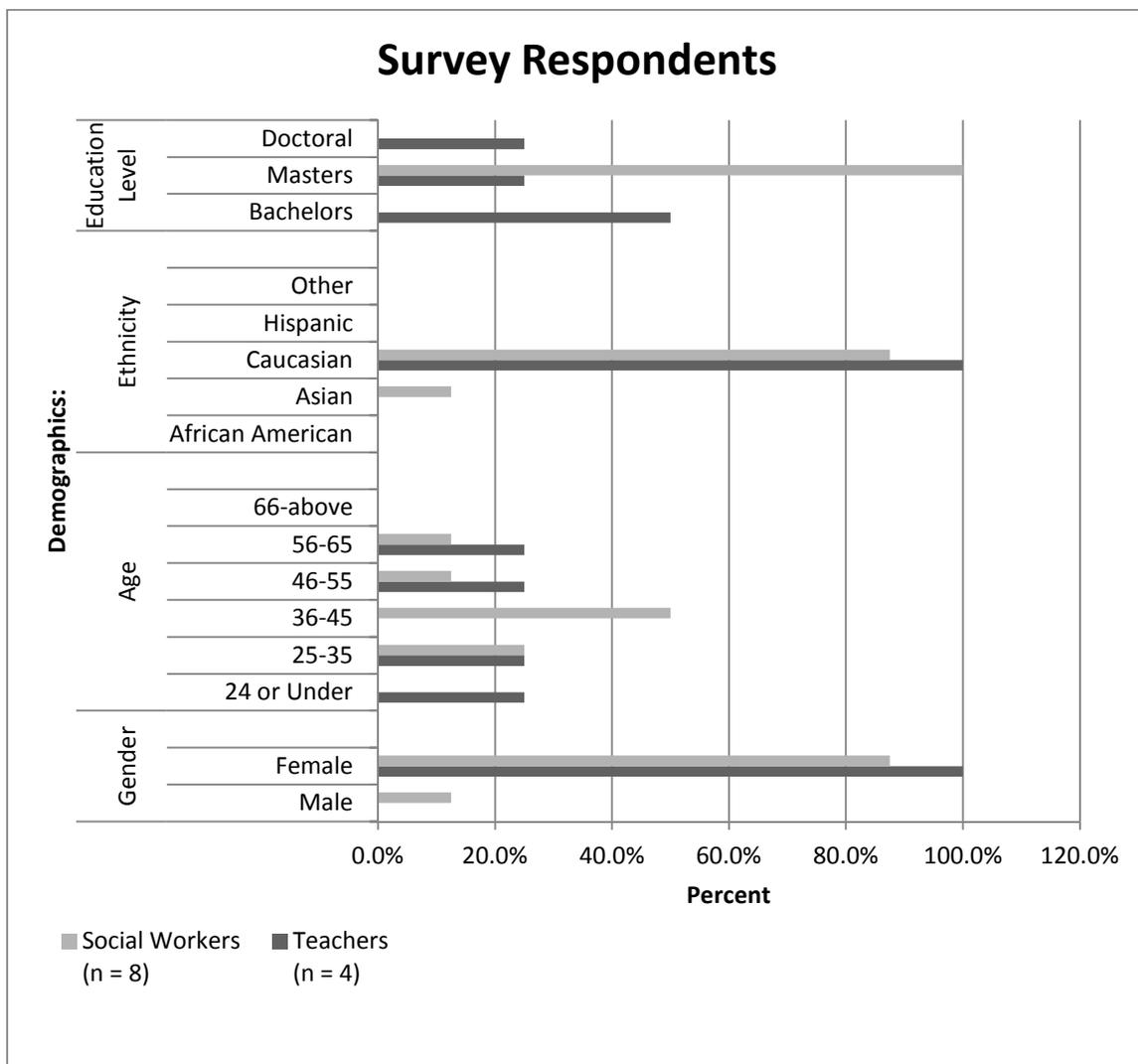
N=12



Further demographic analysis shows that 87.5% of social workers were female and 12.5% were male as compared to 100% teacher respondents were female. The majority of social workers 50% reported their age between 36-45 years old and the teachers ages were more spread out across the age groups. The highest and the lowest level of education were reported by teachers at the Doctoral level 8% and at the Bachelor level 17%. All social workers reported their level of education at the Masters level. Overwhelmingly, the respondents reported their ethnicity as Caucasian 92% with the remainder as Asian 8%.

Figure 2.

N=12



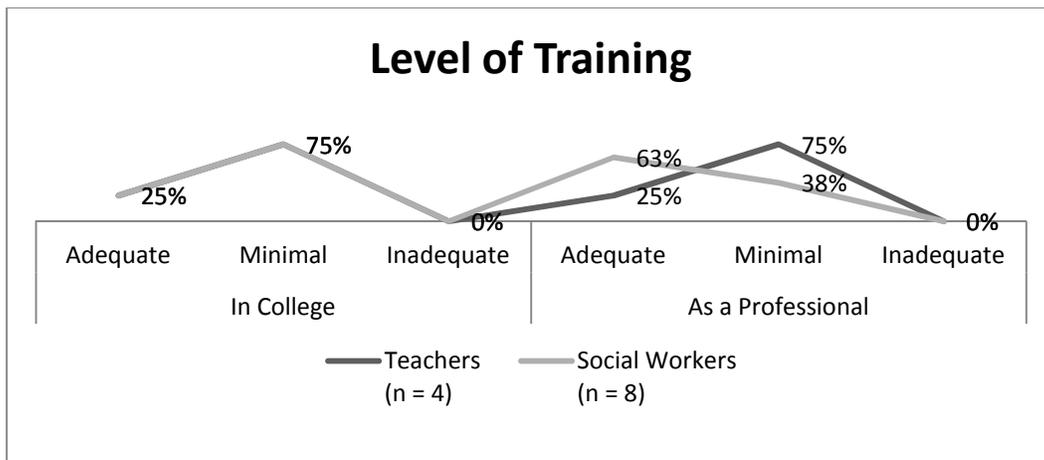
**Level of Training**

Most of the respondents 58.3% agreed that their school provided training on child abuse and neglect issues and the remainder 41.7% disagreed or were undecided. A closer look at these results shows a polar response between the teachers and the social workers in regard to the training offered by their schools. Among social workers a high level of agreement 50% reported that their school did provide child abuse training and among teachers a high level of disagreement 50% reported that their school provided training.

Both teachers and social workers reported that the level of training in college 75% and training as a professional 50% was minimal. Both respondents reported 25% adequate level of training in college and 50% level of training as a professional. Neither group reported that their training in college or as a professional was inadequate. A closer look at the breakdown between teachers and social worker on their level of training as professional shows that 75% of teachers and 38% of social workers responded that their level of training as a professional was minimal.

Figure 3.

N=12



## Knowledge

Overwhelmingly, both teachers and social workers strongly agree that they are aware of their school's procedure as well as feel an obligation as a professional to report suspected child abuse and neglect. An open-ended question was included in this section of the survey to capture the respondent's personal experiences and perspectives on their school's procedures for reporting child abuse and neglect. A common theme among the teachers is that they report the suspected abuse to someone else in the school such as the principal, assistant principal, social worker or school nurse rather than initiate the report themselves. The following quotes support this theme.

Report the neglect/abuse to the school principal, social worker, or asst. principal, and make sure the report gets to the county. If there are marks or other things shown to me, I contact the school nurse and she handles it from there.

One teacher responded that she would consult with the principal and together they would make the report. Another teacher responded that they would consult with the school social worker.

We have a school social worker that we talk to about our concerns. Then we have to fill out a form that is sent to the county. Once it is sent to the county, the county will review it and see if additional action needs to be taken.

Only one teacher responded that she would report directly to the child protection directly.

Call the county CPS to make an initial record. After this is completed we fill out a form where you go into more detail. Once this is done you fax it to the CPS department. From there CPS decides what to do and sends a letter or calls to tell you what has been decided.

Many social workers responded with a short explanation of the procedure of what needs to be done when child abuse and neglect is suspected. However, common themes did resonate from the social worker's responses in regard to their "role" as a school social worker in this process. For example, social workers described themselves as a coach and a consultant and they

offered support to the teachers and other staff when they suspect abuse and neglect. The following quotes endorse the support theme.

Teachers are encouraged to fill out the report form and make the call to the county but often I am involved and support this process. Sometimes I also talk to the child and assist in the reporting process. I do all of the reporting if I am the first person that is told about the abuse. Usually the teacher is the first contact.

Another social worker said this:

The adult who suspects abuse or neglect, or to whom the child reported abuse or neglect must call in to the appropriate county to make a verbal report. They then need to complete the written report within 24 hours of the verbal report. They are allowed to come to me, the school social worker, to help gather information from the child and to help them make the report together if they are uncomfortable doing it alone. I, as the school social worker, keep all of the written reporting forms in my office. Most teachers prefer to have my help when making a report.

The following quote supports the coaching theme.

As the social worker I make approximately 100+ child maltreatment reports each school year. If a staff suspect's maltreatment or neglect, they typically consult with me about situation and are required to make the verbal report to the county and write the written report. I am always available to sit with the staff member when they call and as they are writing the report. Often time's staff will hear a little piece of information in passing and ask me to follow up with the student regarding that information in which case I would make the initial report.

Finally, the following quote supports the consultation theme.

Staff member gets info from student. Tries to get some specifics without probing/leading Staff member consults with social worker, psych, and/or school administrator Staff member completes Child Protection report and gives it to social worker, psych, and/or school administrator Staff member and/or support staff (named above) makes call to Child Protection Report is faxed to Child Protection

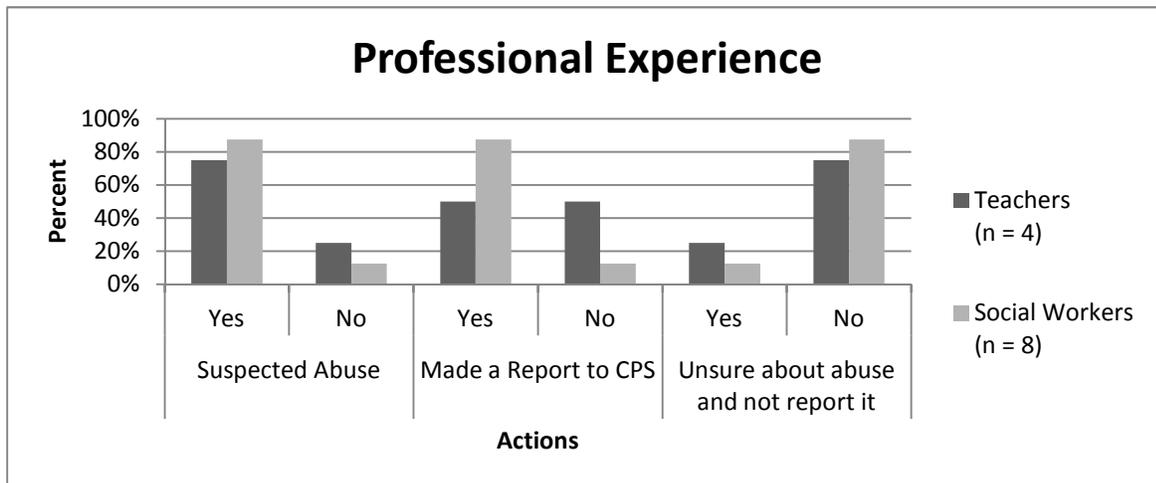
## **Experience**

An examination of the responses that represent the teachers and social workers experiences with suspecting and reporting child abuse and neglect show that 83% of the total respondents have suspected a child was abused or neglected and 75% have make a report to child

protection services. In both instances, teachers and social workers reported that they were confident 83% in their identification of suspected abuse and in their report to child protection services.

Figure 4.

N=12



**Professional Responsibility**

Teachers and social workers responded equally 50% that they disagree or strongly disagree that there are any discrepancies between their professional duties and their legal obligation as a mandated reporter. In a follow-up open ended question one teacher said:

No, your job as a teacher is to make sure the kids are safe, healthy, and ready to learn. If a child is not safe or healthy, then actions need to be taken to ensure that child is getting the necessary help.

Social workers who responded to the open ended follow-up question said: “As a social worker, I am a mandatory reporting. I will report any suspect child neglect or abuse to protect them in any circumstances” and “It is the LAW to report suspected abuse!”

Approximately 33% teachers and social workers were undecided about the discrepancy between their professional duties and their legal obligation as a mandated reporter. No teachers

offered any further comments in this section however, social workers comment expressed two themes about relationships. The first theme was building and maintaining positive relationships.

The following quotes from the respondents are examples of this theme.

As the school social worker I am expected to make connections with families and to try to increase their involvement in the schools and to build positive relationships with them. Often times if a report is made, the connection between the school and family is weakened. However, my other role of course is to serve as an advocate for the children and this is completely in line with that role.

The second social worker that responded to this question said this:

Sometimes I will have a positive relationship with a family and a situation will arise where I need to make a maltreatment report. I think the child's safety and well being trumps the relationship with the family but it does make it more complicated.

The second theme was strained relationships. The following quote is an example of this theme: "Relationships are sometimes strained between school and families, but reports still need to be made."

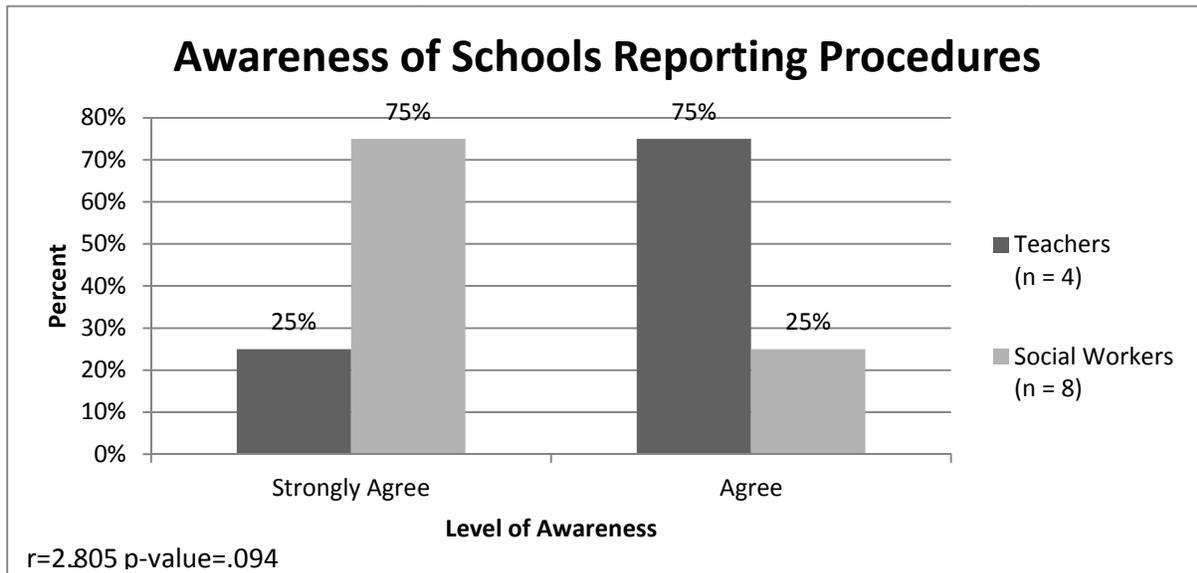
One social worker agreed that there are discrepancies between their professional duties and their legal obligation as a mandated reporter and offered this comment:

Yes...there have been times where my professional duty to keep a child safe has not been successful because I had to report and it led to further abuse, but high intimidation on the part of the parent (alleged abuser), not to talk to school staff about home matters.

There is no significant statistical difference between teachers and social workers in their level of knowledge as a mandated reporter. Therefore this study failed to reject the null hypothesis that there may have been a difference between these two professions. The results show that both professions either agree or strongly agree that they are aware of their schools reporting procedures.

Figure 5

N=12



### Discussion

The survey results failed to support the hypothesis that teachers and social workers have different levels of knowledge in regard to their responsibility as a mandated reporter. The responses to the survey suggest that teachers and social workers do have common knowledge about their responsibility as a mandated reporter and that is to make a report of the suspected neglect and abuse to the child protection services (CPS). However, responses to the open-ended questions on the survey suggest that there are differences between how teachers and social workers go about making the report. For example, it is interesting to note that the teachers sought help from other professionals when they suspected that a child was abused or neglected. They would contact another school professional such as a principal, an assistant principal, a social worker or a school nurse first and then complete the paperwork and submit the completed forms to the county CPS. Then they followed up mentioning what they would do after they consulted with other staff

On the other hand, social worker responses tended to be more of an action or active theme. For example, social worker themes that resonated from the study include consultation, coaching and support for the teachers involved in the reporting process.

These narrative responses support literature that social workers are a supportive link between the student, school and community (Berrick & Barth, 1991). Regardless of each professional governing board, the child's safety and well being are the focus. These two professions do work together toward the same goal; that goal is to protect the child wellbeing. Following are quotes from a teacher and a social worker supporting their commitment to the children. One teacher said:

No, your job as a teacher is to make sure the kids are safe, healthy, and ready to learn. If a child is not safe or healthy, then actions need to be taken to ensure that child is getting the necessary help"

A social worker summarized her duties and emphasized that her main duty was to be an advocate for the children, she said:

As the school social worker I am expected to make connections with families and to try to increase their involvement in the schools and to build positive relationships with them. Often times if a report is made, the connection between the school and family is weakened. However, my other role of course is to serve as an advocate for the children and this is completely in line with that role.

Another area of the study that supports findings in the literature is the fact that teachers and social workers reported that their training in college to prepare them to deal with child abuse and neglect was minimal. This is a concern because the omission or lack of training on abuse and neglect and the responsibility of being a mandated reporter in their coursework could weaken the teachers' awareness and confidence in this area (Baginsky, 2000).

Although the teachers and social workers responded that their training in college was minimal, their narrative responses knowing the procedures and their commitment to the children doesn't support the fact that they had minimal education. Further look at the respondents' data shows that the average age of the respondents is between 36 and 45 years old. It is possible that experience may have compensated for the lack of training.

This study has shown that teachers and social workers do collaborate together to identify and respond to suspected abuse and neglect of a child. Regardless of their education while in college and who governs their profession, Board of Education or the Board of Social Work, these two professions have important roles as mandated reporters. No they are not the same roles but they do complement one another and the end goal of each role is to protect the child.

### **Implications for Practice**

Social workers are not the dominate professional in the school setting yet their contribution to the school is important. The results from the study show that social workers consult, guide and support teacher during the process of identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect. The need for social workers in school is evident and broad in scope. Social workers can screen for risk factors and stressors in the home that can have a negative effect on students. Social workers can also provide some in-service workshops to teachers and other staff to identify other family stressors that contribute to child abuse and neglect or that may get in the way of the students ability to learn. The social worker can be more proactive rather than reactive with interventions with the child and the family to prevent abuse or neglect of the child.

### **Directions for Further Research**

One recommendation would be to increase the sample size by soliciting respondents from all over the state to capture a variety of experiences within a variety of environments. The survey should not be restricted only to the person receiving the invitation. Although the sample chosen for this study was randomly selected, the email invitation should have included a phrase that encouraged the participants to share the survey with a colleague (another teacher or social worker). Also, consider the use of social media outlet common to teachers and social workers, such as Facebook or Twitter to solicit participants for your survey.

This study found the narrative responses of the teachers and social workers very interesting and insightful. A qualitative study is recommended for future studies to capture more firsthand experiences. For example, it would be interesting to do a follow-up on the relationship between the student that was reported to CPS and the social worker and between the student's family and the social worker to learn the effects the report had on their relationship.

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**Appendix B****UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS  
INFORMED CONSENT****MANDATED REPORTING RESPONSIBILITIES WITHIN A SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT**

The Principal Investigator, Paula Schulte, a graduate student at St. Catherine University and University of St. Thomas joint MSW program is conducting this research study. The Research Advisor for this study is Ande Nesmith, Ph.D., Professor, School of Social Work at the University of St. Thomas/St. Catherine University. You are eligible to participate in this study if you currently are a teacher or school social worker in an elementary school. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

**WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?**

Teachers, as mandated reporters are often the first people to observe child maltreatment, yet are not always clear when to report. With early intervention in the detection of suspected child abuse and neglect, the better the outcome is for the child, the family and society.

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to respond to:

- Some basic, non-identifying demographic information about yourself; and
- Questions regarding your level of training, knowledge, experience and professional responsibilities of being a mandated reporter.

**HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY?**

It is estimated that completion of the survey should take less than 5 minutes.

**ARE THERE ANY RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS THAT I CAN EXPECT FROM THIS STUDY?**

It is possible that some questions could create some discomfort; however, the questions included in the survey are within the normal range of questions a professional colleague or student might ask you during the course of your professional responsibilities as a teacher or social worker. Therefore, it is asserted that the proposed study will present no more than minimal risk to you.

**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS IF I PARTICIPATE?**

You will not directly benefit from your participation in the research.

**WILL I BE PAID FOR MY PARTICIPATION?**

You will receive no payment for your participation.

**HOW WILL INFORMATION ABOUT ME AND MY PARTICIPATION BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?**

You will not be asked to provide your identity. This information will be unknown to this researcher unless you choose to reveal this information in your survey responses. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain

confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of recording your responses directly into a secure password-protected web-based database through Qualtrics.com. Only the Principal Investigator and the faculty sponsor will have access to responses. The IP address of the computer you use to complete the survey will not be stored in the survey results.

Presentations or reports that emerge from this study will not identify specific individuals, and data will be analyzed in groups and presented in aggregate form.

### **WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS IF I TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?**

Taking part in this study is your choice. You can choose whether or not you want to participate.

- You have a right to have all of your questions answered before deciding whether to take part
- You may choose to withdraw at any time and for any reason by not completing/discontinuing the survey
- You may leave unanswered any question you decline to respond to
- If you choose not to answer a question, or choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study, there will be no penalty

### **WHO CAN I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?**

**The Research Team:** You may contact the principal investigator, Paula Schulte at [schu8765@stthomas.edu](mailto:schu8765@stthomas.edu) or the research advisor, Ande Nesmith, at [nesm3326@stthomas.edu](mailto:nesm3326@stthomas.edu) with any questions or concerns about the research or your participation in this study.

By clicking on the “**Next**” button at the bottom of this page, you indicate that you understand the purpose of this study and accept the terms of the study.

**Appendix C**

Survey Questions

DEMOGRAPHICS:

Gender	Male (1) Female (2)
Age	24 or Under (1) 25 - 35 yrs (2) 36 - 45 yrs (3) 46 - 55 yrs (4) 56 - 65 yrs (5) 66 or above (6)
Ethnicity	African American (1) Asian (2) Caucasian (3) Hispanic (4) Other (777) Please explain-----
Level of Education	Bachelors(1) Masters (2) Doctoral (3) Other(777) Please explain-----
What is your professional position?	Social Worker (1) Teacher (2) Other Licensed Staff (777)

LEVEL OF TRAINING:

My school provides training on child abuse and neglect issues	5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Undecided	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
The level of training in college to prepare you to deal with child abuse and neglect was:	Adequate (1) Minimal(2) Inadequate(3)				
The level of training as a professional prepared you to deal with child abuse and neglect was:	Adequate (1) Minimal(2) Inadequate(3)				

KNOWLEDGE:

I am aware of my school's procedures for reporting child abuse and neglect?	5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Undecided	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
Describe your schools procedures for reporting child abuse and neglect.					
As a school professional, I feel an obligation to report child abuse and neglect	5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Undecided	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree

EXPERIENCE:

Have you ever suspected that a child was being abused or neglected	Yes(1) No(2)
Have you made a report of abuse or neglect to Child Protection services?	Yes(1) No(2)
How many reports of child abuse or neglect have you made?	
Have there ever been times when you were unsure about whether or not a child was being abused and did not report?	Yes (1) No (2)
What impacted your decision not to report?	Uncertain of making an inaccurate report (1) Feelings as though child protective services does not generally offer help to maltreated children (2) No physical injury visible, just the child's self report (3) Believing reporting abuse might bring about negative consequences for the family and child (4) Feeling as though it is not my job (5) Uncertain of misinterpreting cultural discipline styles (6) Not wanting to get caught up in the legal proceedings (8) This was the right decision (9)
What actions did you take?	Referred (1) No action needed (2) Did nothing (3) Other (777)Please explain-----

PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Do you think there are any discrepancies between your professional duties and your legal obligation as a mandated reporter?	5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Undecided	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
Please comment					
Who do you consult with when you suspect child abuse and neglect?	Teacher (Colleague)(1) Social Worker (Colleague)(2) Nurse (3) Other (777) Please explain-----				