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Preparing social workers as reporters of suspected child maltreatment

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Social workers are an important source of reports to child protective services in the United States (US). However, it is unclear what role social work education plays in preparing social workers for this responsibility. The current study explores how undergraduate and graduate social work programs in the US prepare students as reporters. This study found that while almost all programs that participated in this study provide students with some content related to their role as reporters of child maltreatment, there are varying ways such content is provided, and many avenues for improvement. International implications are highlighted.

Keywords: Child abuse and neglect; Mandated reporting; Curriculum development-education; Professional conduct-education; Law-knowledge; Social policy-knowledge; Ethics and values; Child protection; Children & families

Introduction

Reporting of suspected child maltreatment

Child abuse and neglect is a global issue. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that globally one quarter of all adults were physically abused as children (2014). An estimated 1 out of 5 women, and 1 out of 13 men, globally, were sexually abused as children. However, information and official statistics are not readily available from every country. Additionally, definitions of abuse vary from country to country, as do the processes through which child maltreatment is identified and remediated.

An estimated 3.5 million reports of suspected child abuse or neglect were made in the United States (US) in 2013 (US Department of Health and Human Services,

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Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2014). In the US, more than one-half of all reports of suspected child abuse or neglect to Child Protective Services (CPS) are made by professional reporters, including child care providers, educational personnel, law enforcement personnel, medical personal, mental health professionals, and social services personnel (US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2014).

In the US, most professionals who make reports to CPS are mandated by the law in their state to do so. The policy of mandating professionals to make a report when they suspect child abuse and neglect ('mandated reporting') developed in the mid-twentieth century in the US and has evolved to a complex system of federal, state, and local mandates that exists across the country today (Lau, Krase, & Morse, 2008). In fact, social workers are mandated to report suspected child abuse and neglect in all 50 states (Lau, Krase, & Morse, 2008). However, mandated reporting in general is not the global norm.

Many countries have some form of mandated reporting laws, including: the US (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014), England (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2015), South Korea (Shin, 2013), Taiwan (Feng, Chen, Fetzner, Feng, & Lin, 2012), Israel (Oz & Balshan, 2007), New Zealand (*Children, Young Persons, & Their Families Act, 1989*, 2015), Sweden (Sundell, 1996), Canada (Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal, 2015), and Australia (Australian Institute for Family Studies, 2014; Francis et al., 2012; Hawkins & McCallum, 2001). In some countries, like Northern Ireland, laws that require the reporting of certain crimes could encompass forms of child abuse and neglect (Wallace & Bunting, 2007). Although there may be laws about the abuse of children in other countries, they do not necessarily require specific people to report their suspicions.

Recognition of the need to respond to child abuse and neglect has propelled advocates in other countries to push for reporting laws. In 2010, the Democratic Revolution Party in Mexico attempted to pass laws in the Latin American Parliament to protect children and teens from abuse (Campos, 2010). In 2012, the parliament in India approved a bill to protect children from sexual abuse (All India Press, Press Trust of India, 2012). China plans to enact a law to increase the protection of minors by increasing reports of child abuse (China Plan, 2014).

As policies aimed to support the identification, reporting, and remediation of child maltreatment evolve around the globe, consistent concerns with the current system designed to respond to such maltreatment should be considered.

Concerns in the reporting of suspected child maltreatment: under-reporting

The failure to report suspicions of child abuse to the appropriate authorities is a global phenomenon (WHO, 2013). Research consistently shows that professionals in the US fail to report more than half of their suspicions of child maltreatment to the proper authorities (Kenny, 2001b; Kesner & Robinson, 2002). An inadequate reporting system was identified in South Korea (Shin, 2013). Feng et al. (2012)

report 'most professionals in Taiwan have never reported a child abuse case' (p. 276). Inconsistencies in the reporting of child abuse, although it is mandated by law, have been highlighted through research in Israel as well (Oz & Balshan, 2007).

Research in the US exploring why professional reporters fail to report suspicions of child maltreatment found many professionals did not feel adequately prepared to deal with child abuse and neglect (Levin, 1983). Professional reporters did not know the signs of abuse and neglect (Alvarez, Kenny, Donohue, & Carpin, 2004; Hazzard, 1984; Kenny, 2004). They struggled with differentiating 'parental excesses from "normal" parental disciplines' (Levin, 1983, p. 18). Additionally, professionals often assumed someone else will make the report (Crenshaw, Crenshaw & Lichtenberg, 1995).

Professional reporters are not consistently knowledgeable about, nor comfortable with, reporting procedures (Abrahams, Casey, & Daro, 1992; Kenny, 2001b, 2004; Levin, 1983; WHO, 2013). They fear legal ramifications for logging reports that are unfounded (Abrahams et al., 1992; Alvarez et al., 2004; Kenny, 2001a; WHO, 2013). Some reporters expressed concern for potentially losing rapport with a family if they report them to Child Protective Services (Abrahams et al., 1992; Kalichman, Craig, & Follingstad, 1989; Levine & Doueck, 1995; Zellman, 1990a). Other professionals attributed their failure to report by citing concern for disrupting the functioning of families and sparking conflict with families by reporting (Levin, 1983; Kenny, 2001a) or the report may do more harm than good to the child (Delaronde, King, Bendel, & Reece, 2000; Kenny, 2001b). Some reporters cited the feeling that CPS does not actually help maltreated children and their families as a reason why they do not report suspected child abuse and neglect (Kenny, 2001b; Zellman, 1990b). Much of the existing research is dated, and lacks focus on social workers as a professional group.

In recognition of the chronic problem of under-reporting, policy efforts in the US have been made at the federal, state, and local levels of government to increase reports of child maltreatment. In 2011, there was proposed legislation in the US Congress that would have encouraged states to require all adults to report suspected child abuse and neglect. Such a requirement was attached to certain federal-funding streams (United States Senate Bill 1887, 2011). Additionally, numerous State governors and legislatures have expanded the list of mandated reporters in their states in the past five years (Louisiana Executive Order, 11/16/11; New York State Assembly Bill 8901, 2011; Virginia House Bill A3, 2011; Wisconsin Executive Order #54, 2011). However, there are no known efforts to evaluate the efficacy of these policy changes.

When reports of suspected child maltreatment are not made, children and families are denied access to services to protect their health and safety. Professionals, including social workers, need knowledge and support to make appropriate reports of suspected child maltreatment so that the children and families suffering from child maltreatment are protected, and children and families at risk are provided services to minimize such risk (Lau, Kruse, & Morse, 2008).

The other concern: unsubstantiated reports

In the US, even when a report is made to child protective services, the resulting investigation will likely fail to yield enough evidence of child maltreatment to substantiate the report. In 2010, 63.5% of all reports made to Child Protective Services in the US were not substantiated after investigation (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

The failure of a report to be substantiated after investigation by Child Protective Services does not necessarily mean that a report was incorrectly made. A small minority of unsubstantiated reports are falsely made in an effort to hurt the accused (Besharov & Laumann, 1996). Intentionally false reports are unlikely to come from professional report sources, and more likely to be lodged by disgruntled neighbors, family, friends, and acquaintances.

Unsubstantiated reports are likely to be made by concerned service providers, family members, friends, or neighbors who believe their call to Child Protective Services will provide the family with needed support services (Besharov & Laumann, 1996), even though no abuse or neglect is occurring as defined by law. Some reports are not substantiated because Child Protective Services does not find adequate evidence to substantiate the allegations, even though abuse or neglect is occurring (Besharov & Laumann, 1996). Additionally, differing policies across states, or even local Child Protective Services offices, as well as differing quality and qualifications of investigative staff, can impact the likelihood that a report is substantiated (Krase, 2010), suggesting that the quality of the report itself is not the only factor related to the disposition of such report.

Efforts of concerned professionals to assist families in need should not be discouraged. However, professional reporters, including social workers, need knowledge and support to make appropriate reports of suspected child abuse and neglect so that the child protective system is not overwhelmed by unnecessary reports (Lau, Krase, & Morse, 2008).

Social workers as reporters of suspected child maltreatment

The roles of professional social workers vary from country to country. In some countries, the role of professional social worker may be synonymous to 'child protective worker'. In the US, however, fewer than half of the child protective workers are trained social workers (Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapman, & Dickinson, 2008). Instead, professional social workers in the US serve clients through a diversity of roles (Center for Health Workforce Studies, 2006).

A 2004 survey of licensed social workers in the US found 37% of respondents practicing in the area of mental health, with only 13% practicing in the areas of health or child/family welfare. Eight percent of respondents practiced social work in school settings. The practice areas of the other 29% of respondents were spread

among 11 other diverse categories (Center for Health Workforce Studies, 2006). This research focuses on the American role of professional social worker, and is not limited to social workers working in child protection.

Social workers are unlike most other reporters of suspected child maltreatment in the US. Unlike social workers, many reporters have no legal or ethical obligations to the children and families they report (i.e. all non-professional reporters). Similar to social workers, some professional reporters juggle the ethical and legal obligations to protect client confidential information with the legal obligation to report suspicions of child maltreatment (i.e. medical personnel and other mental health professionals). However, many professional reporters do not have an ethical obligation to challenge individual and social injustice, as social workers do (American Medical Association, 2001; American Psychological Association [APA], 2010; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008). Additionally, no other reporter has an ethical obligation to the 'Broader Society', as social workers do (NASW, 2008, Section 6). As a result, social workers considering a report to child protective services face a decision-making process often more complex than other reporters.

In the US, the NASW Code of Ethics outlines the social worker's responsibility to protect client confidentiality and privacy in Standard 1.07 (NASW, 2008). The Code simultaneously allows disclosure of confidential client communications to prevent 'serious, foreseeable, and imminent harm to a client or other identifiable person' (NASW, 2008 at 1.07). There is nothing in the NASW Code to preclude social workers from making a report to Child Protective Services when legally required.

However, there are additional ethical standards for social workers to consider related to their obligations as mandated reporters. At the start of a relationship with a client, Standard 1.03 requires social workers inform clients of the protections and limitations of client confidentiality (NASW, 2008). Even after a report is made, Standard 1.07(c) requires social workers to disclose the least amount of confidential client information as necessary (NASW, 2008).

Internationally, social workers are guided by 'Ethics in social work, statement of principles' as approved in 2004 by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IFSW, 2014). This code focuses on human rights, dignity, social justice, and professional conduct (IFSW, 2014). It can serve as a guide for social workers facing ethical dilemmas but does not provide a specific standard for involvement in child welfare cases.

Training for reporters of suspected child maltreatment

Training, either during or after professional training, is often highlighted as the answer for addressing the problems associated with reporting of suspected child maltreatment (Alvarez et al., 2004; APA, 1996; Champion, Shipman, Bonner, &

Howe, 2003; Starling & Boos, 2003). However, concerns about access, content, and quality of such training are abundant (Donohue, Carpin, Alvarez, Ellwood, & Jones, 2002; Kenny, 2007). For instance, those who provide training often receive limited training in the subject themselves (Lanning, Ballard, & Robinson, 1999).

Some states in the US require training of certain mandated reporters with the most exposure to children and families in order to secure a professional license (Reiniger, Robinson, & McHugh, 1995). However, most states do not require such training. Additionally, there has been opposition to providing legal requirements for the training of mandated reporters (Alvarez et al., 2004).

While there is demand for training for mandated reporters (APA, 1996; Champion et al., 2003, Starling & Boos, 2003), there is a lack of evidence supporting its effectiveness (Donohue et al., 2002; Kenny, 2007). There are numerous non-empirically derived training programs available to mandated reporters across the US (Donohue et al., 2002; Gallmeier & Bonner, 1992). Existing evaluation is often limited to self-reports on increased comfort and confidence, and satisfaction (Lanning et al., 1999). Only one randomized controlled evaluation of a training program for mandated reporters was found in the professional literature (Alvarez et al., 2010). Other research, exploring the use of role-play in training (Donohue et al., 2002) and web-based training (Kenny, 2007), found both methods effective using a single-case study design, and pre-test/post-test design, respectively. However, even training models that have been evaluated for efficacy lack fidelity to the model as the training is utilized outside the confines of the study setting (Alvarez et al., 2010).

Although limited, existing evaluation of training can inform training improvements. Studies have found that participants often find training to be helpful to them in their role as mandated reporter (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010). However, participants also express concern that training is minimal and does not adequately prepare them for their role (Kenny, 2001b). Training participants report benefiting from learning about unfamiliar statistics, such as the prevalence of child maltreatment, the process of reporting, how the law protects reporters, and how the law responds to mandated reporters who fail to make a report (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010; Kenny, 2007). Training participants also express interest in learning more about how to identify sexual abuse and psychological maltreatment (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010). Participants seek more information on how to work with families affected by abuse, improve their relationships with Child Protective Services, and better understand the Child Protective Services process itself (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010).

Role of professional education in preparing mandated reporters

Many mandated reporters of suspected child maltreatment have traditionally receive related training 'on-the-job' during in-service opportunities and staff meet-

ings (Lanning et al., 1999). Training of mandated reporters is sometimes provided during professional education programs (Botash, 2003, Champion et al., 2003). Training can also be provided through pre-service training, and continuing education programs (Alvarez et al., 2004).

Medical schools in the US sometimes provide training on the obligation to report suspected child maltreatment to medical students (Botash, 2003; Starling & Boos, 2003). The Residency Review Committee of the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) requires all programs that prepare pediatric residents to include training on child physical and sexual abuse (ACGME, 2007). However, there are no guidelines as to what content must be included, how that training should be delivered, and how long the training should be (ACGME, 2007; Flaherty, Sege, & Piazza Hurley, 2008). The existing training provided by these programs has been deemed poorly instituted (Botash, 2003; Starling & Boos, 2003).

A survey of Initial Teacher-Training programs in the UK revealed more than 90% of programs providing coursework on child protection issues, with 85% of programs reporting such content as compulsory for all students (Baginsky, 1999). The number of hours spent on child protection content ranged from less than 1 h to eight hours, with the vast majority of programs providing between 1 and 3 h (Baginsky, 1999). Unfortunately, more recent data is not available, thus limiting the applicability of these findings to present day practice.

Since the 1980s, the APA has committed to increasing training in the identification and reporting of child maltreatment in graduate psychology programs (American Psychological Association Child Abuse and Neglect Working Group, 1996; Champion et al., 2003). As a result of the efforts of the APA, over 80% of doctoral programs in clinical, school and counseling psychology cover minimal content on child maltreatment. More than half of these programs cover child maltreatment in multiple courses, but fewer than 11% provided specific courses or training on the subject (Champion et al., 2003). While there was much expansion in the availability of such training in these programs in the 1980s and 1990s, the growth has slowed. By 2001, more than 20% of these graduate programs still failed to provide the minimum standards set forth by the APA (Champion et al., 2003).

The authors were unable to find any directive that explicitly requires social work programs in any country to provide training to students on their obligations as mandated reporters of child maltreatment. However, an obligation to prepare social workers for this role in the US could be inferred through the 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) authored by The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2008). Core Competency, EPAS 2.1.2, 'Apply social work ethical principles to guide professional practice', and related practice behaviors, obligates undergraduate and graduate social work programs to prepare social work students for making ethical decisions in professional practice (CSWE, 2008 at 2.1.2). The responsibility of a social work program to prepare students for their legal and ethical responsibility to report suspicions of child maltreatment, arguably, falls within this standard.

This exploratory study attempts to gauge the current role social work education programs play in preparing social workers for that responsibility. This study does not attempt to gauge the quality of whatever preparation is provided to students.

Methods

Approval of this project was received from the investigator's local institutional review board prior to the initiation of this project. A cross-sectional design was employed using an online survey administered through Qualtrics Survey Software. Data were collected from November 2011 through December 2011.

Sampling

Representatives of each undergraduate and master level graduate program in social work in the US that was accredited by the CSWE as of November 2011 received an invitation to participate in this study by electronic mail in November 2011. The closing date of the survey was included in the initial invitation and two follow-up email messages sent over the course of five weeks.

Electronic mail addresses for each program representative was manually retrieved from the CSWE website. A total of 617 email addresses were obtained. The electronic invitation included an introduction to the project, details to inform the participant's decision to consent, contact information for the principal investigator, and a link to the online survey. If the recipient of the electronic invitation did not have adequate information or knowledge to answer the survey questions, they were encouraged to forward the invitation to another representative of the social work program with such knowledge or information. Consent to participate was implied through completion of the survey.

Schools with both an undergraduate and a master-level graduate program in social work were able to provide information for both programs in one survey (if the responses to the survey were the same for both programs). If the responses to the survey differed by program, the school was encouraged to complete separate surveys for each program.

The survey included five (5) questions to ascertain characteristics of the program(s) responding to the survey. One question was related the role of the individual completing the survey. Programs then responded to a series of 10 questions about how they provide social work students with content related to the obligation to report suspected child maltreatment. Programs reported on when such content was provided to students, as well as the content, and methods for providing such information.

Results

Sample

An overall response rate of 29% was achieved. This rate is comparable to past studies in social work that utilized online surveys that report response rates ranging from 8.1% (GlenMaye & Bolin, 2007) and 32% (Dedman & Palmer, 2011).

Social work programs from 37 different states were represented in the sample. Although programs most often reported being located in urban areas (35%), programs in rural areas represented 33.5% of the sample, and programs in suburban areas represented 31% of the sample. Both undergraduate and master-level graduate programs were represented in the sample. More than half (55%) of the sample included undergraduate social work programs only. Fewer than 10% of the sample included master-level social work programs only. More than one-third (35%) of the sample included schools with both an undergraduate and a master-level graduate program in social work. There were no significant differences on any variable by varying program characteristics (see Table 1).

Providing mandated reporting content

Almost the entire sample reported providing information relating the social worker's obligation to report suspected child maltreatment to their students (97%). Almost half of responding programs provide this material before students begin coursework (44.4%), probably during orientation to the program. Almost the entire sample reported providing such material to students prior to beginning fieldwork (94%). Thirty percent of programs report providing continuing education to social workers on the obligation of social workers to report suspicions of child maltreatment (see Table 2).

Table 1 Characteristics of respondent social work programs ($n = 179$)

Variable	
Number of states represented	37
Programs located in:	
Urban Areas	35%
Rural Areas	33.5%
Suburban Areas	31%
Undergraduate program only	55%
Master-level program only	9.4%
Both undergraduate and Master-level program	35%

Programs reported covering content related to the social worker's obligation to report suspected child maltreatment through many different means of dissemination. Eighty percent of programs provide such content through more than one means of dissemination. More than 95% of programs report providing information on the social worker's obligation to report suspected child maltreatment through required courses, and almost two-thirds (64.7%) provide this information through elective courses (see Table 2).

Programs provide content on the social worker's obligation to report suspected child maltreatment most often through social work practice courses (88.9%). The social worker's obligation to report suspected child maltreatment is covered in policy courses in more than half (53%) of the respondent programs. This content is covered in ethics related courses in almost 40% of respondent programs. Social work programs also cover this content in courses in diversity (21%), research (13%), child welfare (6%), and introduction to social work (3%) courses (see Table 3).

Some programs provide this content through required training (15%), and others provide such content through optional training (12.6%). Only 6.6% of programs provide this content through online/web-based training. More than one-third (34.7%) of programs provide information to students through handouts, fliers, and brochures. Programs reported additional ways that such content is provided to students, including guest speakers from child protective services.

More than three-quarters of programs (76.4%) report their curriculum guarantees that information on the obligation of social workers to report suspected child maltreatment is conveyed to students. Less than 20% of programs (18.6%) acknowledge that their curriculum does not guarantee this information will be conveyed to students. Five percent of respondents were not sure if their program's curriculum guarantees coverage of such content (see Table 2).

Table 2 Social work program provision of mandated reporting content

Variable	Percent
Some kind of information	97
Through required courses	95
BEFORE fieldwork	94
Through more than one means of dissemination	80
Through elective courses	64.7
Through handouts, fliers, brochures	34.7
BEFORE coursework	21.7
Continuing education program on topic	30
Through required training (outside coursework)	15
Through optional training (outside coursework)	12.6
Web-based training	6.6

Table 3 Courses where content is covered (when provided through coursework)

Variable	Percent
Social work practice	88.9
Policy	53
Ethics	40
Diversity	21
Research	13
Child welfare	6
Introduction to social work	3

Twenty-percent of respondents report that their program's most recent self-study for accreditation or re-accreditation under CSWE included discussion of provision of information on social worker's obligation as mandated reporters. More than half of programs report that their program's most recent self-study does not provide such a discussion. More than one-quarter of respondents were unsure if their self-study included such a discussion.

Discussion

The results of this study are an important first step to increasing awareness of how professional education prepares social workers for their role as reporters of suspected child abuse and neglect, whether mandated or not. These findings should also serve as the starting point in a discussion of what can be done to improve these efforts. In this study, the overwhelming majority of programs that participated reported providing some content on reporter responsibility to their students. In addition, there is a multitude of ways that programs provide this information to students.

Once a social work program decides to provide information about the social worker's role as reporter of suspected child maltreatment to students, there are many choices still left to navigate. Programs must determine when to provide the content, through what means, and what type of content to include.

Structural decisions

While almost all respondent social work programs provided students with content on reporting prior to fieldwork, almost half also provided such information before coursework even began. Additionally, many programs report covering this content through multiple forms, in concert with one another.

Prior research found professional reporters desiring more preparation on their role as report (Kenny, 2001a). In response to that research, and the findings of the current study, more social work programs should consider providing content on reporting more often in the curriculum, and perhaps outside the curriculum.

As some respondent programs have done, relevant content can be explored in multiple courses across the curriculum, sequentially, as social work students gain more knowledge and improve their skills. Inviting guest speakers from CPS is a popular method used by some respondent social work. However, the authors caution programs to not consider a CPS presentation sufficient preparation by itself. Training provided by American CPS usually focuses generally on the process of reporting, and may not provide social work specific content and case examples. Such opportunities should not be avoided, however, as such training may improve trainee opinions of CPS.

The opportunity to inform and educate social workers about their obligations as mandated reporters does not end with graduation. While almost a third of respondent programs already provide continuing education on this subject, any program that provides continuing education to their alumni, field instructors, and other local social workers should expand their offerings to include advanced training on mandated reporting. Such offerings will be particularly welcome in states where licensed social workers need training specifically on ethics.

Content decisions

The legal and ethical obligation of a social worker to report suspected child maltreatment is not a simple concept. Any mandated reporter of child abuse and neglect faces a complex and multifaceted process of identifying and responding to potential child maltreatment (Ashton, 2004). This process generally involves three stages: (1) observing a situation; (2) assessing and labeling parental behavior; and (3) responding to that behavior, either by making a report or not (Ashton, 2004). Personal characteristics of the mandated reporter, including his/her beliefs, attitudes, and opinions, as well as professional education and training, serve as a filter through which he/she processes the decision to report suspected child maltreatment (Ashton, 2004). Prior research, congruent with the authors' experience as social work educators and trainers on the reporting of suspected child maltreatment, suggest that social work programs provide content related to the Who/Where/What/When and How of reporting child maltreatment suspicions to Child Protective Services.

Social workers, like all other professional reports, should be aware of the basics of *where* (or to *whom*) they report their suspicions. In the US, reporters should contact the child abuse hotline in his/her state or locality. A simple search on an internet search engine using the keywords 'report child abuse' and your particular country, state, or locality will provide relevant results.

Social workers should be informed as to *what* is reportable. Preparation should help reporters identify the different types of child maltreatment (Neglect, Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Emotional Maltreatment, Medical Neglect) (Alvarez et al., 2004), and the prevalence and incidence of each type.

Social workers also should know *what* information he/she is expected to provide when they make a report to Child Protective Services. In the US, reporters are generally expected to provide the name(s) and contact information of the child (ren) and family involved, and identifying information for the social worker (in most states). Some states allow anonymous reports by professional reporters, but most do not (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014).

Social workers should be informed about *when* they are required to make a report. In the US, social workers are required to make a report *when* there is **reasonable cause to suspect** is abused or maltreated. Reasonable cause to suspect child maltreatment is a very low standard in the legal system, and requires no proof, or certainty, on the part of the reporter. Legal standards differ across, and often within, countries.

Even when social workers are mandated reporters, their responsibility may be limited. For instance, in most of the states in the US, social workers are only mandated reporters in his/her professional role, but not in his/her personal role. Social work programs should be aware of the law in their particular jurisdiction and inform their students accordingly.

Social workers should also know *how* the law protects/enforces mandated reporting of suspected child maltreatment. American federal law requires states to provide laws that protect mandated reporters as well as enforce the requirement for reporting (Lau, Krase, & Morse, 2008). Therefore, American social work programs should inform students about the level of confidentiality provided to reporters of suspected child maltreatment, immunity from criminal and civil liability for reports made in good faith, penalties for making false reports, and criminal and civil sanctions for failing to make a report when legally required.

Efforts to prepare mandated reporters should provide more than information. Research suggests training that incorporates skill development is most effective (Donohue et al., 2002). Reporters express interest in learning about how to interact with clients before and after making a report and how to enhance the relationship with child protective services (Alvarez et al., 2004). These two skill areas provide an excellent opportunity for social work educators to use role-playing to work through common scenarios.

Any discussion of the social worker–client relationship relative to mandated reporting of suspected child maltreatment should center on the importance of informed consent. American social work students should learn, pursuant to NASW Code Standard 1.03, that social workers must inform clients of the protections and limitations of client confidentiality (NASW, 2008). At an international level, informed consent is one component of professional conduct as a social worker as outlined in the International Federation of Social Work Code (IFSW, 2014). This process should always include a discussion of mandated reporting obligations, even

if children are not expected to be discussed in the social worker–client relationship. Special attention should be paid to tailoring informed consent to the language and developmental needs of the particular client.

Making a report is just the beginning of the process. Social workers should understand their responsibilities to clients after a report is made. NASW Standard 1.07(c) requires social workers to disclose the least amount of confidential client information as necessary (NASW, 2008). Social workers should be thoughtful and purposive about the amount and specific content of information, verbal and written, provided to Child Protective Services as a result of a report or in the process of an investigation.

Social workers should be encouraged to seek guidance from colleagues and supervisors when determining whether they should make a report of suspected child maltreatment. While no other person, even in a position of authority, has the right to interfere with a social worker's decision to make a report to Child Protective Services, conferring with professional peers can help inform a social worker's thought process.

Social workers may be concerned about whether they should disclose to clients their role in a report to Child Protective Services (Lau, Krase, & Morse, 2008). While social workers in the US should know that they are never legally obligated to inform their client that they made a report, there is nothing obligating them to keep their role a secret either. Social workers should be offered guidance on how to process their decision whether or not to disclose, taking into consideration first and foremost, their safety and the safety of others, and consistent with the law in their country. Whether or not to disclose, and when (before or after a report), is generally at the professional discretion of the social worker his/herself.

Regardless of the role of the social worker in making a report to Child Protective Services, social workers should be empowered to advocate for their clients. Social workers have the skills and knowledge to bridge potential gaps between Child Protective Services and their clients, and support relationship building that can be instrumental in preserving families and protecting children.

Social workers are integral in the social service system that provides services to prevent maltreatment as well as provide services to minimize harm after maltreatment has already occurred. Ultimately, whether a social worker makes a report of suspected child maltreatment, or not, the social workers primary role is to provide services to the child or family before them.

Evaluating preparation of social workers as reporters of suspected child maltreatment

Programs can evaluate how they prepare social workers as reporters of suspected child maltreatment. Programs can add statements to any pre-/post-test of student-reported confidence in their social work skills. Statements such as: 'I am confident in my ability to identify child maltreatment' or 'I know how to report my suspicions to child protective services' are examples.

Knowledge testing should include evaluation of student's awareness and understanding of their legal and ethical obligations related to mandate reporting. A possible true-false question would be: 'My obligation to protect client confidences is second to my legal obligation to report suspicions of child maltreatment (T/F)', where false is the correct answer.

Programs can also evaluate student decision-making by using case examples, and then measuring the social worker's evaluation of the likelihood that maltreatment is occurring, their self-reported likelihood of making a report, and identification of services the social worker could provide the family. Case examples should include various types of child maltreatment, and involve common issues that complicate decision-making, such as poverty and/or parental mental illness.

Limitations

As with all studies, a number of limitations exist in this study. The survey subjects were all from American social work programs, and thus global implications may not be directly relevant. Since the survey was anonymous, it is possible participants completed the survey more than once or that those who were not eligible participated.

Although the overall response rate for the study is comparable to previous studies in social work (Dedman & Palmer, 2011; GlenMaye & Bolin, 2007), it is not a probability sample. The likelihood that the programs that responded to this study differed from those who did not is feasible. For instance, programs that responded to the survey may be more likely than programs who did not respond to the survey to address reporting of suspected child maltreatment through their curricula, thus skewing the results of this study.

Determining if the participants who responded to the study solicitation were different from those who did not is difficult to establish. An attempt was made to compare the characteristics of the programs that participated in this study with the 2010 Annual Statistics of Social Work Education published by the CSWE, but comparable measures from both sources were unavailable (CSWE, 2011).

This study does not evaluate the effectiveness of the preparation provided by any program in the study to their students. Effectiveness research on the methods used to prepare social workers as reporters of suspected child maltreatment is an area ripe for further research.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes significantly to the knowledge base of social work education program administration. To the authors' knowledge, this is the only empirical study that assesses the extent and means through which social work programs prepare students and alumni for their role as mandated reporters of suspected child maltreatment.

Conclusion

While the vast majority of American programs provide social work students with some content related to their role as reporters of child maltreatment, the results of this study suggest there are many avenues currently used to provide this content, and many avenues yet to be explored. The suggestions provided through the above discussion are offered as the starting point for a greater discussion on the role of social work education towards supporting the very important goals that mandated reporting laws in the US intend.

Globally, social workers are guided by a code which focuses on human rights, dignity, social justice and professional conduct (IFSW, 2014). Although this document does not specifically provide guidelines for the international social worker in cases of child maltreatment, it can serve as a guide for social workers facing ethical dilemmas that involve child welfare cases. Additionally, training international social workers about the impact of child abuse and neglect could be the gateway, for countries with limited mandated reporting laws or child protective services, to begin strengthening child protective services and laws.

While social workers in many countries cannot escape the legal & ethical responsibility to report suspected child maltreatment, there is not a single case of suspected child maltreatment that gets reported with ease. The role of social work education in preparing social workers for the responsibility to make report is integral to efforts to protect child from harm and to support families in need.

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