

Mandated Reporting in Education: A Review of Educators' Confidence, Accuracy, and Impact

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ABSTRACT

Mandated reporting laws require educators to report suspected child abuse or neglect, but inadequate training often leaves them uncertain and underprepared. This raises critical questions about the accuracy of reporting, teacher confidence, and the unintended impact on students and families. To write this narrative review, the author compiled information from existing literature reviews, government records, educator surveys, and statistics on abuse and racial profiling. This paper identifies key barriers to reporting, such as unclear legal terminology, inadequate training, personal attitudes toward discipline, and fear of damaging relationships with families. Educators, who have significant interaction with children, are often found to be undertrained for this responsibility. Findings show that educators file more unsubstantiated reports than any other profession. This leads to systemic inefficiencies, emotional distress, and a disproportionate impact on marginalized communities. The author was motivated by the significant gaps in existing literature, as most studies focus on the experiences of school counselors, medical professionals, or mental health professionals. This paper aims to highlight gaps in the existing literature on educators' experiences with mandated reporting, with the goal of informing reforms in training and support systems to reduce unintended harm.

Keywords: Mandated Reporters; Educator Training; Child Abuse; Child Neglect; Reasonable Suspicion; Child Welfare Policy; Racial Disparity

INTRODUCTION

Mandated reporters are key players in identifying children in unsafe situations. Mandated reporters are bound by legal, ethical, and moral obligations to alert the proper authorities of any potential cases of child abuse or neglect that they come across (1). Every state in the United States requires all professionals who work directly with children, such as teachers, counselors,

daycare workers, therapists, social service workers, and physicians, to adhere to the same ethical and legal standards (2).

Among these professionals, educators are uniquely positioned to detect signs of abuse. Their daily contact with students over extended periods allows them to observe behavioral and emotional changes that may indicate maltreatment. This proximity makes teachers some of the most likely adults outside the home to notice and report abuse or neglect, and it is a key reason why they are legally mandated to report such concerns.

Despite the importance of their role, educators face distinct challenges in fulfilling their roles as mandated reporters. Educators are already operating under significant constraints during the instructional

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period, frequently managing large class sizes. Outside of regular school hours, educators juggle additional responsibilities such as grading, planning lessons, and contacting parents. Unlike medical or mental health professionals, teachers are not extensively trained in recognizing the signs of abuse. Without a clinical background or clear guidance on what “reasonable suspicion” entails, expecting teachers to report at the same caliber as their more highly trained counterparts is unrealistic. However, their role is more critical than ever.

Research indicates that childhood trauma and neglect contribute to lifelong mental health problems, making early intervention essential (3). Many children lack consistent access to healthcare, counseling, and other protective services. In contrast, nearly all children interact regularly with teachers. For this reason, a teacher may be the only stable adult in a child’s life who is actively monitoring for signs of neglect. This review focuses on an understudied aspect of educational policy: the experiences of teachers as mandated reporters. While much of the existing literature on mandated reporting centers on the broader system or highlights professionals like mental health workers, social workers, and medical staff, there is limited research focused on classroom teachers, particularly compared to the focus on Professional School Counselors (PSCs). This paper aims to fill that gap by synthesizing the literature on teacher preparedness and exploring the impacts of both substantiated and unsubstantiated reports on students, families, and classrooms. Specifically, it tackles two primary aspects of mandated reporting in the education system: 1) How do the current mandated reporter training and guidelines affect teacher confidence and accuracy in reporting? 2) How does the confidence of educators in reporting affect students and their families after a report is made?

Background on Child Abuse and Maltreatment

As the definition of child abuse has evolved over the years, rather than creating a fixed requirement for abuse suspicions, many states have created overarching statutes to include all types of actions that damage children (4). Most studies agree that harm to children can be categorized into three main terms: child maltreatment, child neglect, and child abuse.

Child Maltreatment

Child maltreatment, rather than being a unique type of mistreatment, is a term used to encompass both

child abuse and neglect. Child neglect is an “act of omission rather than an act of commission” (2, pg 20). These omissions may not have been perpetuated by the parental figure with the intent to harm the child. The parents may have believed that withholding could be harmless or even beneficial (5). People most commonly associate physical neglect with a lack of clothing, assistance, or healthcare; however, neglect can include educational and emotional neglect (6). If child neglect is the lack of necessary elements, child abuse imposes harmful acts on a child. Child abuse can be divided into three main components: Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse, and Emotional Abuse. Abuse is defined by the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act as “any recent act... on the part of the parent or caretaker which results in serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation...” (7). Further specifics describe physical abuse as nonaccidental physical injury to a child, sexual abuse as persuasion, exploitation, or coercion of a child to engage in sexually explicit acts, and emotional abuse as any behavior detrimental to a child’s emotional development (6).

Child Abuse

Child abuse has not always been defined as such. In fact, before the late 1870s, unless a parent’s discipline resulted in the death of a child, society believed that discipline should be administered at the discretion of parents and should be considered an internal family affair (2). The first high-profile case of child maltreatment was in 1870: the Mary Ellen case (8). After Etta Angell Wheeler had been alerted to the mistreatment of a 9-year-old girl named Mary Ellen, she sought to find a legal avenue to rescue the little girl. As there had been no concrete way to remove Mary Ellen from her abusive home, Etta Wheeler removed her under the advice of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, stating that, “The child is an animal. If there is no justice for it [Mary Ellen] as a human being, it shall at least have the right of the cur in the street. It shall not be abused.” (8). The highly publicized story, fueled by the grotesque abuse details published and the unconventional manner of removal, directly sparked the creation of the first child abuse prevention society: the New York Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children (9).

Child Neglect

Still, before 1960, the federal government did not play a significant role in the rehoming of children;

instead, religious organizations or charities were allowed to undertake those responsibilities (10). However, American indignation towards child abuse was rekindled in the 1960s when a research study about Battered Child Syndrome helped Americans realize that child maltreatment was gruesome, a lifelong detriment, and highly prevalent in society (11, pg 204). Kempe described Battered Child Syndrome as “a clinical condition in young children who have received serious physical abuse... [that] is a significant cause of childhood disability or death” (11, pg 143). This study further showed that children who were abused could die, suffer permanent brain injury, or fail to thrive due to their injuries (11). In response to public outcry following the publication of Kempe’s study, all 50 states adopted child abuse regulations by 1966 that mandated reporting (12). Each state determined these initial laws, and subsequently, each state expanded the broad definition of abuse in its own way (12).

DEVELOPMENT OF MANDATED REPORTING LAWS

In 1974, the federal government took significant steps forward in unifying child abuse laws when it passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, commonly referred to as CAPTA. Through this act, the federal government required states to have more defined laws regarding mandated reporting, but still left it to state discretion (9). CAPTA was amended in 1988 with the Child Abuse Prevention, Adoption, and Family Services Act of 1988, which established the “National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN), the Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, and the Interagency Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect” which dedicated federal funding to the prevention and intervention of child abuse in America (13). The 1988 law also increased federal involvement in preventing child abuse by creating national data collection systems to track substantiated cases, unsubstantiated cases, and deaths due to abuse. Further, the Child Abuse Prevention, Adoption, and Family Services Act of 1988 made concentrated efforts to smooth the transition of minority, special needs, and “legally free” children into foster homes by providing grants and post-adoption aid (13).

EDUCATORS AS MANDATED REPORTERS

Educators have become an integral part of mandated reporting programs. With the initial introduction

of statewide and federally mandated reporter laws, only medical providers were required to be mandated reporters. This policy faced immense protest from the American Medical Association, which feared that medical providers would be alienated and scrutinized as the only profession who were required to report (12). In the following decades, mandated reporting would be expanded to include childcare professionals, social workers, administrators, and, in some states, law enforcement (14). As mandated reporters, educators capitalize on the fact that they have intimate knowledge of students’ behavior, lives, and work. In fact, Tracy Smith explains that Laura Berk, in the 6th edition of *Child Development*, estimates that students will spend 15,000 hours at school, with most of those hours spent interacting with educators (15).

AMBIGUITY IN REPORTING LAWS

The Child Abuse Prevention, Adoption, and Family Services Act of 1988, the Child Abuse Prevention Act, and the mandating of educators as child maltreatment reporters have all proved to be tremendous steps forward in child protection laws. However, ambiguity in law requirements and differences between state laws have led to varying, sometimes confusing definitions of reasonable belief. “Reasonable belief” or “reasonable suspicion” serve as general terms for the threshold of concern a reporter must meet before having an obligation to file a report (14). Because the definitions of reasonable belief or reasonable suspicion do not provide concrete thresholds for what should or shouldn’t be reported, reporters often determine whether an individual case should be reported based on personal factors such as faith in social services, feelings about abuse, and perceptions of blame (14).

GUIDELINES AND LEGAL OBLIGATIONS

Reporting in accordance with ambiguous guidelines can be challenging for mandated reporters. However, Lambie outlines several guidelines that mandated reporters should follow to comply with their mandated reporting obligations. Firstly, professional school counselors (PSCs) are ethically obligated to 1) “keep informed of legal statutes and policies regarding abuse,” 2) “protect their students by disclosing confidential information with or without consent,” and 3) to report such information to the appropriate authorities if abuse is suspected (6, pg 251). Obligation 2 is expanded

to explain that PSCs should keep all information confidential, unless disclosure is required to prevent a clear and imminent danger to the student or others. Obligation 3 requires teachers to personally inform the proper authorities within 24 to 72 hours of having reasonable suspicion of abuse. This obligation urges teachers to report directly to the authorities rather than inform their principals. Should educators choose to inform their administrators, and a report is not filed, the educator, rather than the administration, is held liable for a failure to report suit (6). Though Lambie details these regulations specifically for professional school counselors, these guidelines can reasonably be applied to other educational staff and mandated reporters outside the school system.

Consequences for Failing to Report

Several state laws protect mandated reporters. Reporters are not prosecuted or punished if reports are unsubstantiated and are protected against civil or criminal liability (6). These protections encourage mandated reporters to report any suspicious behavior freely, without fear of retribution. However, if a mandated reporter fails to report, proceedings will be taken to one of the three main courts: Criminal, Family, or Civil (2). In all states except Idaho, Illinois, Mississippi, Montana, and Wyoming, PSCs are criminally liable for noncompliance with mandated reporting laws (6). To prosecute for negligence, courts must prove all four of the elements (2). First, it must be shown that the teacher had a legal duty to report the suspected abuse. Second, the court must determine that the educator did not fulfill this duty. Third, there must be evidence that the child suffered actual injury. Finally, the failure to report must be proven to be the proximate cause of the child's harm.

According to Gulltatt, element number four is the most difficult to confirm. Even when statutes are proven, most states will only charge reporters with a misdemeanor, issuing a penalty of \$10-\$1,000, or subjecting the reporter to 5-30 days of jail time. Still, as abuse and mandated reporting laws are not federally dictated, sentencing and charging mandated reporters for failure to report (6).

MANDATED REPORTER TRAINING FOR EDUCATORS

The title of "Mandated Reporter," like many others, is a certification. To be certified as a "Mandated

Reporter," individuals typically complete online webinars. California's Child Abuse Mandated Reporter Training Project, a state-funded program, requires individuals to partake in a 2-hour general training (16). Moreover, for school personnel, social services, medical professionals, and childcare workers, their training consists of a four-hour course (17). This California "School personnel training" informs individuals of their legal obligations, indications of child abuse, and the process of filing a report. Before receiving a certificate of completion, individuals must pass a 20-question quiz with at least an 80% accuracy. This test may be retaken as many times as needed. Due to varying state requirements for mandated reporting and training, the length and specificity of courses differ; however, the general standard to become a mandated reporter is typically an online course (9).

When discussing the training that should be administered to mandated reporters, experts emphasize the importance of equipping individuals with all the necessary tools to help them fulfill their legal responsibilities. Value is placed in teaching mandated reporters about their legal obligations, teaching them to identify common signs of abuse, emphasizing the importance of understanding local school rules, and informing reporters about the prevalence of abuse (6). In reality, many of these programs remain limited in scope. Individuals are specifically instructed not to investigate their suspicions during these training sessions, only to report. However, they are also heavily warned about the legal ramifications of not reporting, being taught the principle of "when in doubt, report" (9). A heavy focus on legal ramifications may instill a mindset focused on liability and fear rather than care and empathy.

Despite appearing comprehensive, mandated reporter training often fails to prepare individuals for the realities of disclosure. Research identifies several areas where reporters require support. After examining mandated reporter deficiencies, it became clear that mandated reporters need more support in their initial training, stress management tactics, confidence in discussing sensitive issues with colleagues and experts, and a deeper understanding of reporting protocol definitions (18). To expand, mandated reporters do not typically receive formal training on the meaning and application of the term "reasonable suspicion," which is a broad and highly subjective term (14).

Although this training is consistent for all mandated reporters, as it is the required curriculum, different professions often receive more in-depth training than

educators. Whereas educators are often only required to complete this certification, professional school counselors (PSCs) undergo intensive training to become more familiar with identifying age-appropriate landmarks for child abuse. PSCs are also taught to perform “therapeutic interventions” (6).

Another highly trained category of mandated reporters is doctors. Though doctors follow the same mandated reporter certification, physicians receive years of additional training and studying that better equip them to identify signs of child abuse. In preparation for medical school, prospective medical students must attempt the MCAT exam. On the MCAT, one quarter of the exam focuses on Psychological, social, and biological foundations of behavior (19). The Association of American Medical Colleges describes the content as a test of knowledge regarding various behavioral changes, perceptions of the world, and sociocultural relationships related to behavior (19). Moreover, doctors expand on this knowledge during their third year of medical school. Medical students will undergo a “clerkship,” or a rotation in different specialties. One core rotation is Psychiatry (20). Both a foundational knowledge of behavior and a firsthand experience in Psychiatry better equip physicians to identify and handle situations in which a report must be filed. In addition to extended training in psychology, medical professionals are trained in cultural competence. The Office of Minority Health and the Accreditation Council on Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) require student physicians to conduct themselves in a manner that “demonstrates sensitivity and responsiveness to a patient’s culture” (21).

In contrast to the extended psychological training that physicians and PSCs undergo, educators in training are not guaranteed any education on spotting child abuse (22). Additionally, mandated reporting requirements do not always include cultural sensitivity training about the trauma inflicted by the foster care and welfare system (9). For educators, whose training is limited to these basic certifications, the lack of deeper instruction on child development, trauma, and cultural sensitivity can lead to procedural misunderstandings and reduced empathy in reporting decisions (22).

EDUCATOR COMFORT, CONFIDENCE, AND ACCURACY

Teachers are uniquely qualified to serve as effective mandated reporters due to the nature of their

interactions with children and adolescents. Unlike other professionals, such as primary care physicians who see children sporadically or mental health professionals who may never have the chance to interact with a child, educators can build intimate relationships with students. Continuous interaction over 9-10 months helps create a clear picture of behavioral norms. Regular interaction allows educators to identify abnormal behavior and signs of abuse or neglect more clearly (10).

Despite having an inherent advantage over many other professional mandated reporters, educators have consistently reported feeling underprepared in both training and practice. In Bryant’s 2009 study, teachers stated that they did not feel competent in their understanding of law or ability to identify abuse, whereas counselors felt confident in both areas (23). Similarly, Lambie found that educators express an intense fear and aversion to dealing with child abuse or neglect cases (6).

In addition to feeling stressed when tasked with child abuse cases, educators disclose that they feel as though their training is insufficient in preparing them to deal with real-world scenarios. A 1992 study cited by Anderson states that 65% of educator participants believed their ability to spot abuse accurately and report neglect was insufficient (10). The root of the problem becomes more apparent through a 2004 study cited by Hinkelman and Bruno. This study shows that 34% (of a pool of 200 educators) reported having any kind of child abuse education in their collegiate curriculum. Moreover, only 23% of the educators who reported having child abuse education in their curriculum found training to be sufficient (24).

Lastly, along with stress and insufficient training, educators indicate low confidence in their ability to recognize the landmarks of abuse. For example, when Illinois teachers were asked to disclose their comfort in identifying abuse indicators, 21% felt very aware of the markers of physical abuse, 19% felt very aware of the markers of emotional abuse, while only 13% admitted to feeling comfortable identifying signs of sexual abuse (6). This lack of confidence is echoed by an Iowa survey in which mandated reporters disclosed that the most challenging part of reporting was determining whether an injury originated from an accident or abuse. Thus, they felt unsure about reporting (25).

The issue extends past teachers’ uncertainty about their reporting responsibilities. Inadequate training has produced measurable consequences, contributing to systemic inefficiencies and an increase

in unsubstantiated reports. One core issue lies in the vagueness of reporting guidelines. Research finds that because educators do not receive concrete guidance on how to interpret the guidelines, individual thresholds for concern create variance in reporting. When mandated reporters were given two different frameworks to help them decide whether or not to report a scenario of suspected abuse, 83% of responses were inconsistent (14). This variability contributes to a troubling trend. Educators file more reports than any other profession, contributing to 21% of all reports filed. However, reports submitted by educators have less merit, as their reports “are 95% less likely to be substantiated than those from other professions” (26, pg 49). This data highlights the ineffectiveness of current training models and insufficient training requirements, raising concerns about entrusting educators with the responsibility of reporting their suspicions.

The literature supports the existence of four main reporting barriers for educators: ambiguous terminology, inadequate training, attitude toward reporting, and fear of damaging relationships (Table 1).

Ambiguous terminology and insufficient training have been previously addressed in this literature review. The ambiguous meaning of “reasonable suspicion” and differing terminology used when referring to child sexual abuse confuse reporters, create uncertainty, and discourage reporting (14, 24). Additionally, it has

been clearly established that educators lack immersive training. One researcher suspects that underreporting occurs because teachers lack knowledge about child abuse and are unable to detect its occurrence (10). A contrasting opinion is that mandated reporters are well-informed about their legal responsibilities and abuse markers, but allow their uncertainty about procedure to deter them (6). Regardless, a lack of fundamental knowledge about procedure, abuse, or legal responsibilities prevents educators from filing reports.

In addition to these well-documented barriers, another deterrent teachers face in reporting suspected abuse comes from internal attitudes and beliefs. Research involving teachers and other school professionals found that some educators held beliefs suggesting that the child was partially to blame for the abuse (24). When educators held this belief that the child could partially be to blame for the abuse, they did not report immediately and instead waited to find more conclusive evidence (24). Moreover, personal attitudes toward discipline, specifically corporal punishment, further deter some educators from filing reports. Studies found notable racial differences in support for corporal punishment, with Black preservice teachers finding physical punishment more acceptable. In contrast, their White and Asian preservice counterparts found physical punishment unacceptable (22). These differing beliefs about acceptable discipline practices

Table 1. Barriers to Accurate and Effective Reporting by Educators and the Impact of These Barriers on Educators’ Comfort

Barriers To Reporting	Impact
Ambiguous terminology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unclear thresholds for “reasonable suspicion” (14) cause reporters to have to rely on personal beliefs (trust in social services, views on child discipline, and perceptions of blame) (14). • Inconsistent definitions of child sexual abuse (14, 24) result in Educators hesitating and feeling discouraged from reporting (14, 24)
Inadequate training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited instruction in child development, trauma, and cultural sensitivity leads to procedural errors and reduced empathy (6, 22) • Some educators underreport due to a lack of knowledge about abuse detection (10) • Inaccurate reporting, caused by inadequate training, has also led to high volumes of unsubstantiated reports, adding a significant burden on the social systems service
Attitude toward reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some educators believed that the child was partly to blame for the abuse, leading to reporting early until more proof was uncovered (24) • Differing beliefs about acceptable discipline practices shape interpretations of abuse and reporting decisions (22, 24)
Fear of damaging relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educators fear reports may harm relationships with parents or create hostility between the school and parents (24) • Educators also fear that students may feel betrayed, leading to hesitation or a reluctance to report (24)

may either hinder or encourage reporting, as it shapes the educator's interpretation of "abuse."

Lastly, educators face an emotional barrier: the fear of damaging relationships. Educators may be concerned that filing a report, especially an unsubstantiated one, can create hostility between parents and the school or foster a sense of betrayal, leading the student to withdraw from participation. Due to these fears, educators often hesitate to report or even file reports at all (24).

IMPACTS OF REPORTING ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Systemic Inefficiencies

Despite educators' best efforts to support children by reporting suspicious disclosures or observations, a lack of educator preparedness can lead to both over- and under-reporting, causing detrimental effects on both children and parents (Table 2).

Educator error in reporting affects all aspects of the child welfare system. As discussed repeatedly, educators are the most likely profession to overreport and have unsubstantiated reports of abuse. The high volume of unsubstantiated cases contributes to an

already struggling system. Due to unsubstantiated cases, social workers are overwhelmed with referrals and are often prevented from providing practical aid to families who truly require intervention (22).

Child Trauma

Nevertheless, on average, law enforcement and welfare workers remove between 700 and 800 children from their homes without advanced notice (26) (Table 2). Removing a child from a familiar space is a sudden, traumatic, and often developmentally harmful decision. Even if the authority figure's presence is negative, if the child is attached to this figure, removing them from their source of comfort may cause more harm than good (9). Unfortunately, the investigation process often exacerbates trauma. Many children are removed from their homes and placed into temporary residences, during which they may be required to comply with questioning, strip searches, unwanted medical examinations, and psychological evaluations (25, 26). Even in cases where no formal investigation is pursued or the child is returned to the family, research indicates that children are burdened by the decision to maintain familial loyalty or loyalty to the teacher who reported their family (26).

Table 2. Groups Impacted by Inefficient Educator Reporting and Their Associated Consequences

Groups Impacted	Consequences
Systemic Inefficiencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educators' lack of preparedness leads to both over- and under-reporting (22) • Unsubstantiated reports overwhelm social workers and the social services system. This diverts resources from families and students who are truly at risk (22)
Child Trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Even when children are removed from dangerous and hostile environments, attachment to familiar figures makes removal traumatic (9) • Investigations may require strip searches, medical exams, and invasive questioning, intensifying discomfort and psychological trauma (26) • When children return home, it is possible for them to feel divided loyalty between their families and the teachers who reported them (26)
Parental Distress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigations incite feelings of shame, humiliation, and fear among parents (26) • Even when families are cleared of wrongdoing, being under investigation requires violations of privacy and may cause long-lasting social ostracization (25)
Perpetuation of Racial Disparity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black children are disproportionately represented in the foster care system, with Black children making up 14% of the adolescent population but 23% of children in foster care (22) • Black students are 70% more likely than white students to be identified as victims of abuse (26, pg.49) • Allegations of neglect correlate with income inequality, perpetuating the idea that poverty is a moral failing and that low-income families of color are less capable of parenting than white middle-class families (9)

Parental Distress

In addition to burdening children, over-reporting takes an emotional toll on parents. Being investigated by child protective services or other welfare groups can spark feelings of shame, humiliation, and fear (Table 2). Research explains that despite welfare workers taking steps to reduce feelings of anxiety around investigations of families, parents still felt fear and operated under the assumption that the workers did not have the children's best interests at heart (26). In addition to the emotional turmoil inflicted on parents during the process of being investigated, investigations into innocent families can result in violations of family privacy and cause long-lasting ostracization (25).

Racial Disparities

Lastly, overreporting disproportionately targets children and families of color (Table 2). Although Black children only comprised 14% of the US adolescent population, a 2020 data set reported that they made up 23% of the children in foster care. In comparison, White children made up 50% of the adolescent population but comprised only 44% of children in foster care (22). In addition to disproportionate numbers of Black children in foster care, this disparity is also apparent in HHS data reported by Goodman [2021], who explains that African American students "were 70% more likely than white students to be identified as victims" (26).

This inequity is likely rooted in how poverty and parenting practices are perceived. Research indicates that allegations of neglect are directly correlated with income inequality, resulting in variations in how reports are made and enforced (9). Poverty in communities of color is more likely to be deemed neglectful parenting, while similar socioeconomic conditions in White communities may be brushed aside as temporary hardship (9). Moreover, mandated reporters are instructed to ignore all cultural differences when deciding to report. Although this appears to be a safeguard to prevent racial profiling, it instead forces teachers to rely on their own beliefs. As mentioned previously, Asian and White reporters typically find corporal punishment unacceptable, in contrast to their Black counterparts. Moreover, studies show that 89% of Black mothers employ corporal punishment in comparison to their White (79%) and Asian (73%) counterparts (27). This difference in practice and perception may lead to disproportionate child removals and reports.

Lastly, these systemic practices reflect and perpetuate

harmful underlying assumptions about the ability of some parents in comparison to others. The unequal removal of children from their homes demonstrates the idea that poverty is a moral failing of the parent and that white middle-class couples are more capable of parenting than poor people of color. By associating poverty with a moral failure and the continuation of biased reporting, low-income families of color will continue to be overpoliced in the name of child protection.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the historical development of mandated reporter protocols, the current mandated reporter training for educators, and the factors that influence educator comfort in identifying and reporting suspected abuse. It also discussed how insufficient training manifests in tangible effects: Teachers feel uncomfortable, make mistakes, affect the stability of families, and unintentionally perpetuate racial stereotypes. Educators are among the most frequent reporters of suspected child abuse, yet often receive the least support and training among mandated reporters. By identifying key gaps in training and confidence, this research contributes to an underexplored area of the literature and highlights the root causes of educator discomfort. This offers insight into how we can better support both the educators tasked with a huge responsibility and the families they aim to serve.

Based on the findings of this research, two key policy recommendations stand out as essential steps toward enhancing educator preparedness, improving reporting accuracy, and mitigating unintended impacts on families.

Introduce Mandated Reporting Into Student Teachers' Curriculum

By introducing mandated reporter content early in a teacher's education, educators would be familiar with the guidelines and responsibilities earlier in their careers. By ensuring that this is introduced to teachers and not leaving this responsibility to online training, educators could have proficient training in the subject, and they would be brought up to par with mandated reporters.

Standardize the Term "Reasonable Suspicion"

Although neglect can indeed manifest differently in each case, making it challenging to establish a strict set of criteria, it is crucial to transform a subjective term like

“reasonable suspicion” into an objective one. Creating guidelines that make “reasonable suspicion” more tangible would reduce educator anxiety around reporting and likely decrease the number of unsubstantiated reports fueled by ambiguous terminology.

Despite thorough research, this narrative review had limitations. I was not able to access many of the original data or statistics. Many of the statistics I incorporated into my study were cited in the literature reviews accessible to me. This narrowed the type and context of information I could include. In line with that, some articles included invaluable and niche information regarding teachers that I was unable to access as a high school student with limited access to academic databases. Due to these limitations and because this particular aspect of mandated reporting has not been thoroughly studied, much of the available information is broadly related to mandated reporters.

In the future, several areas could benefit from further study. In the future, it may be beneficial to conduct updated surveys on teacher preparedness to report on post-COVID-19 experiences. Many surveys currently available in the literature were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic or in 2021-2022, when schools were still adjusting to life after COVID-19. It is essential to see how COVID-19 has reshaped our educators’ ability and confidence to report suspected abuse. Moreover, updating the types of questions that appear on these surveys may be the first step to meaningful change. Existing surveys primarily show whether teachers are comfortable or not. It may be informative to survey teachers to determine what specific resources they would find most helpful, what issues they encounter with the current training, and what they believe is the most effective way for them to be trained. This could occur through updated survey language or through focus groups, where 10-15 teachers discuss their personal experiences with reporting with researchers. With most literature focusing on PSCs, medical professionals, and mental health professionals, there is certainly room for growth in the field of educators and mandated reporting. Growth in literature is crucial in ensuring that teachers are well-equipped to support students, make them feel supported and safe, and prevent families from being put under unnecessary stress.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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