Department of Education Policy on Mandatory Reporting of Child Sexual Abuse; Primary School Student-Teachers' Knowledge and Confidence

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Abstract

The introduction of a new departmental educational policy, such as the mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse by teachers, has wide-ranging implications for both the lives of children and for the role of teachers. Some Departments also mandate that teachers know about the Policy itself, as is required in the state of Queensland, Australia. However, little is known, and little literature has been found, that measures what student-teachers know about their Department of Education's Policy on child sexual abuse, and its mandatory reporting by teachers. The aim of this study is to examine student-teachers' knowledge, and their confidence in the knowledge, of the Department of Education's Policy on child sexual abuse and mandatory reporting. A graduating cohort of 52 Bachelor of Education (Primary School) student-teachers at a Queensland University volunteered Likert-scale quantitative, and open-ended qualitative, anonymous responses to a five-page questionnaire containing direct and inferred statements from the Policy. The results suggest that this group of student-teachers appear able to identify most of the items listed as part of the Policy. However, they appear uncertain about the limits of this Policy as it relates to general behaviour and to the behaviour of school employees. Further, the 27% who also provided open-ended responses were not reassuring about the extent to which they felt prepared by teacher-training for their role as mandatory reporters of sexual abuse. In the light of legal and departmental requirements that these student-teachers will be expected to report sexual abuse once employed in teaching positions in Primary Schools, the study's outcomes support and confirm an international body of research concluding that much greater attention needs to be paid to delivering substantive and comprehensive pre-service preparatory

courses to student-teachers, to enhance their knowledge, confidence and effectiveness in this new role.

Keywords: student-teachers, child abuse, mandatory reporting, schools, educational policy, departmental policy

Introduction

In an increasing number of countries, teachers are required, by law, to report suspected cases of child sexual abuse. Legislation has been introduced, and policies and procedures developed, to mandate that professionals working with children report their suspicions of child abuse to appropriate authorities. One effect of this new responsibility is that on any school day teachers might suspect the possible sexual abuse of a child and have to report this to the school principal. To fulfil this new role requires professional knowledge and confidence about that knowledge, as well as the skills, judgements and attitudes that are essential to the delicate nature of the reporting process (Baginsky & Macpherson, 2005; Briggs & Hawkins, 1997; Darby, 2006; Goldman, 2005; Hawkins & McCallum, 2001a, 2001b; Laskey, 2004; Queensland Board of Teacher Registration, 2004). Briggs and Hawkins (1997: 17) point out that “no other professionals have such close, continuous, daily contact with child abuse victims on a day-to-day, long-term basis or have such an extensive knowledge of the children in their care”. So, teachers are ideally situated to respond effectively and quickly to signs of abuse.

However, little is known internationally, or in the Australian state of Queensland, about the extent to which teachers or student-teachers know their departmental Policy, which usually also includes Procedures to be followed in reporting these suspicions, nor how confident they are in that knowledge. It is important to address this topic because, in Queensland, the need to provide child protection services in schools has endowed its Department of Education's Policy with at least two mandates for teachers: the reporting of suspected child sexual abuse, and teacher knowledge about the Policy itself.

Most Department of Education policies identify specific roles for schools, teachers, students and other staff. These policies usually identify a role for the department itself. In relation to the policy of mandated reporting of child sexual abuse in Queensland, the Departmental role is specifically delimited. For example, the Department of Education ‘... will respond diligently to a report of suspected or actual harm, or risk of harm to a student’ (2003: 4). That is, the Department plays a significant role in its child sexual abuse mandatory reporting Policy, and also in its Procedures.

This study aims to examine the knowledge, and confidence in that knowledge, exhibited by student-teachers about the role of the Department and the procedures in this Policy.

Child sexual abuse definition

Child sexual abuse may be defined as any contact or non-contact sexual experience perpetrated on a child (Fish, 2001; Goldman & Padayachi, 1997). Some definitions specify an age difference of 5 or more years between the child and the perpetrator, although this does not take into account non-consensual sexual activity between adolescent peers (Richardson, 2004). Specific distinctions can be made between *contact* and *non-contact* sexual abuse (Akande, 2001; Lowenthal, 1996). Acts considered to be *contact* sexual abuse include kissing, fondling, oral sex, and vaginal or anal intercourse. Acts considered to be *non-contact* sexual abuse include making sexual remarks to a child, exhibitionism, voyeurism, and making a child view pornographic material. An increasing range of global research data identifying these behaviour patterns validates this distinction (see Finkelhor, 1994; Freeman, 2000; Johnstone, Moyle, Kelly & Dowling, 2000).

Mandatory reporting of suspected child sexual abuse

Mandatory reporting legislation, in Australia, can be defined as “legislation which specifies who is required by law to report suspected cases of child abuse and neglect” (National Child Protection Clearinghouse (2004: 1). Laws requiring the mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse were first introduced in the 1960s in the United States. By 1967, all American states had passed child-reporting statutes (Ainsworth, 2002; Rodriguez, 2002). Such laws require professionals, such as school teachers, school counsellors, social workers, medical practitioners, and mental health workers, to report any case of suspected child abuse to the appropriate specified authorities (see Goldman & Padayachi, 2000, 2001, 2002).

In Australia, mandatory reporting laws have been introduced in all states and territories. Teachers are amongst those listed as mandatory reporters in New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria, South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory, the Northern Territory and Queensland, with Western Australia recently enacting such legislation. Whereas laws in other states include fairly broad definitions of the types of abuse teachers are required to report, the laws in Queensland are more specific, with teachers mandated to make a report only in cases where they suspect that a child under the age of 18 years has been sexually abused by an employee of the school (Bromfield & Higgins, 2005). That is, when sexual abuse by a perpetrator other than a school employee is suspected, teachers in

Queensland are not required *by law* to report their suspicions. However, Department of Education *Policy* does require teachers to report such cases to their appropriate authorities (Department of Education, 2003; Mathews & Walsh, 2004; Walsh, Farrell, Schweitzer & Bridgstock, 2005).

Teachers' knowledge about child sexual abuse and mandatory reporting

Teachers who fulfil their role as mandatory reporters of child sexual abuse must not only be able to recognise the signs of sexual abuse but must also be aware of all relevant laws, Departmental regulations, and school-based policies and procedures. Research in the USA, UK and Australia suggests that teachers often feel inadequately prepared to deal with the issue of child abuse (Baginsky, 2001; Crenshaw, Crenshaw & Lichtenberg, 1995; Kenny 2001a, 2001b; Kesner & Robinson, 2002; McCallum, 2000). Laskey (2004) reports that teachers are 'frustrated . . . , worried, unconfident and stressed' about their ability to comply with mandatory reporting legislation (2004: 1).

A study by Crenshaw *et al.*, (1995) study in Kansas, USA, explored the preparedness of educators to identify and report child abuse. Participants were elementary, middle and high school personnel, including teachers, counsellors, principals, school psychologists and district superintendents. Crenshaw *et al.* found that 89% of respondents indicated familiarity with the mandatory reporting laws of Kansas. However, while school counsellors and school psychologists typically viewed themselves as very or fairly well prepared to recognise and report child abuse, teachers were more likely to see themselves as "barely adequate, poorly or not at all prepared" (1995: 1099).

Kenny (2001a, 2001b) reports that teachers in Florida have limited knowledge of child abuse. Using a sample of 197 kindergarten-to-high school teachers, Kenny (2001a) found only 3% of teachers aware of their school's procedure for reporting child abuse. Kenny (2001b) studied 28 first-year teachers of elementary, middle and high schools in a partial replication. When asked whether they were aware of the signs of child sexual abuse, 7% of respondents strongly disagreed, 46% disagreed, and 32% were undecided. That is, only 14% agreed that they were knowledgeable about the signs of sexual abuse. Respondents were also largely unaware of their school's procedure for reporting child abuse, with 43% disagreeing, and 29% strongly disagreeing that they were aware of their school's procedure. Lack of knowledge of the mandatory reporting laws was also evident when teachers were asked about whether a family could sue them for making a false report. Even though the law states that no penalty can be enforced if the

report is made in good faith, half of the sample agreed or strongly agreed they could be sued, with a further 36% undecided.

Signs of evidentiary suspicion

If professionals, such as teachers, are to be able to identify suspected cases of child sexual abuse, they must first be aware of the signs of abuse that can provide evidence for their suspicion, that is, evidentiary suspicion (see Melton, 2005). Children who have been sexually abused can exhibit a variety of symptoms that can be broadly classified as either physical or behavioural (see Cates, Markell & Bettenhausen, 1995; Colorado Department of Education, 2002; Education Queensland, 2003a; Lowenthal, 1996; Nunnolley & Fields, 1998).

The physical indicators of sexual abuse include difficulty walking or sitting; bruises or other injuries to breasts, buttocks, arms, lower abdomen or thighs; pain or itching in the genital area; torn, stained or bloody underwear; sexually transmitted infections; persistent headaches or recurrent abdominal pain; and recurrent urinary tract infections. Some behavioural indicators of child sexual abuse include abrupt changes in behaviour or mood; withdrawn/isolated behaviour or depression; difficulties concentrating; an unexplained drop in school performance; frequent absences from school that are justified by a parent or caregiver; finding reasons to stay at school and not go home; acting-out such as aggression, lying stealing or running away; difficulty sleeping; a change in eating patterns; seductive behaviour with other youngsters or adults; a knowledge of sex that is age-inappropriate; acting out adult sexual behaviour with adults, dolls or other children; reluctance to be touched by adults; reluctance to undress (e.g., for school sporting functions); and self-destructive behaviour (see Brilleslijper-Kater, Friedrich & Corwin, 2004).

Child sexual abuse incidence and costs in Australia and Queensland

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2006) reported that during 2004-05, over 46,000 cases of child abuse in Australia were substantiated, and by 30 June, 2007, there were 29,406 children aged 0-17 years under care and protection orders (Productivity Commission, 2008). However, many more thousands of cases were also known to the Departments of Child Services, other government departments, and other agencies (Kovacs & Richardson, 2004a). For example, in Queensland, in 2004-05, there were over 40,000 notifications of child abuse and neglect (Queensland Department of Child Safety, 2006), with 17,473 notifications involving more than 13,000 distinct children being verified. The severity of the problem in Queensland has also been highlighted in a retrospective study of uni-

versity students (Goldman & Padayachi, 1997), which showed that 45% of female respondents and 19% of male respondents reported an unwanted sexual experience prior to the age of 17 (see also Goldman & Goldman, 1988). In order to reduce these figures, many government policies, schools and educators are increasingly focusing on child protection.

Recurrent expenditure on child protection, out-of-home care and supported accommodations services across Australia exceeded \$1.7 billion in 2006-07 (Productivity Commission, 2008), while the indirect and cascading costs of child abuse to health, education, justice, housing, productivity, individual wellbeing and social functionality may exceed \$10 billion annually (see Blakester, 2006; Kovacs & Richardson, 2004b). Prevention and early intervention, then, are highly desirable and cost effective strategies.

To ensure teachers are effective in dealing with child sexual abuse, an ideal place and time to address associated issues is during pre-service education for student-teachers. Student-teachers should learn about the scope and importance of their new mandate to detect and report such abuse (Goldman, 2005; Goldman & Torrisi-Steele, 2004), develop knowledge about the Department of Education's role, definitions and implementation of the process, and encourage confidence in the Policy. Programs that are developed, however, also need to take into consideration the extent to which student-teachers know about child sexual abuse, and are confident about this knowledge, and about their own mandatory role in detecting and reporting such abuse, including departmental policy requirements and their role in compliance.

Responses of student-teachers to professional pre-service training preparation

An increasing number of studies about the teacher's role as a mandatory reporter of child abuse are being published (see Laskey, 2004), but, significantly, little attention to date seems to have been paid to the knowledge and confidence in that knowledge exhibited by Primary school student-teachers. This is worrying indeed, since as qualified teachers they will be dealing with child sexual abuse of Australian children, which mostly occurs in pre-pubertal children of Primary school age (Goldman & Goldman, 1988). Further, no literature has been found in this area on student-teachers in Queensland, which is one of the last Australian states to implement mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse by school teachers.

A study by Hodgkinson and Baginsky (2000), in the UK, explored the provision of child protection *training* for student-teachers.

Specifically, that study focussed on the training provided in “school-based training courses or SCITT’s (School-Centred Initial Teacher Training)” (2000: 270). Of the 14 SCITT managers (seven Primary schools and seven Secondary schools) who returned postal surveys, only nine reported including a child protection element in their training, with the time dedicated to this topic ranging from one to three hours over the duration of the course. To gain further information about the training provided, follow-up interviews were conducted with one group of secondary school trainees and one group of mixed Primary and Secondary school trainees. Overall, both groups wanted more information about child abuse. The mixed Primary/Secondary group in particular wanted “more advice and clearer guidance on detection of signs of abuse and reporting procedures” (2000: 277. See also Baginsky, 2000, 2003; Baginsky & Macpherson 2005).

A comparative study by McCallum and Baginsky (2001), also in the UK, found that

... pressure over performance standards has left the issue of child welfare on hold, though one UK standard states that qualified teachers should demonstrate a working knowledge and understanding of teachers’ legal liabilities and responsibilities. Student teachers who participated in training with the newly developed Child Protection in Initial Teacher Training Tutor Pack have indicated that this course needed to be integrated into, not grafted onto, the main program. Through most students believed teachers had a role in child protection, many expressed anxiety and confusion over the issue, including those who felt confident in their role related to child protection. Students also wanted more training on child protection (2001: 1).

The necessity of providing new teachers in Australia with child protection training is becoming increasingly recognised by State and Territorial authorities. For instance, Hawkins and McCallum (2001b) note that all individuals wanting employment in the South Australian State education system must complete the Mandatory Notification Training program. Likewise, the Student Protection Training program developed by the Department of Education Queensland (at the time called Education Queensland, 2003b: 11) states that school principals or managers ‘will be responsible for ensuring all new employees receive student protection training as part of their induction’. This statement becomes problematic in its use of the future tense ‘will’, rather than the present tense use of “are”, possibly allowing some school principals to continuously defer implementation. The suggested training program addresses topics such as the signs and symptoms of abuse, the teacher’s role in responding to suspected abuse, and the processes undertaken by other government agencies involved in child

protection. However, because it is still in the early stages of implementation in Queensland Primary schools, the effectiveness of this program has not yet been fully assessed.

McCallum and Baginsky's (2001) comparative study also surveyed student-teachers in South Australia who had completed compulsory pre-service training. They found that student-teachers '... highly valued it, though they were confused about who mandated reporters were, categories of child abuse and neglect, and whether or not they had civil immunity if they reported in good faith. Confusion about policies and procedures directly influenced their confidence in identifying and reporting' (2001: 1).

Student-teachers' confusion and apprehension is also reflected in Clarke and Healey's (2006) study of pre-service teachers at the University of Western Sydney, in New South Wales, who had received two hours' training in child protection. The student-teachers were asked about their attitudes towards child protection, their rates of knowledge retention, and their perceptions of risk for male teachers, and while they reported 'minimal but adequate' knowledge bases supporting their reporting responsibility, they also held 'unfounded and worrisome views' in relation to child protection issues, and were 'clearly ignorant' in regard to accusations of child abuse against teachers (Clarke & Healey, 2006: 57).

Teacher Training Programs

In some countries, however, moves are underway to ensure that teachers do receive adequate training in child abuse and about their role as mandatory reporters. For example, teaching professionals in New York are required to take a 2-hour course entitled 'Identification and Reporting of Child Abuse and Maltreatment' in order to receive state licensing (Reiniger, Robison & McHugh, 1995). This training provides participants with information about the indicators of abuse and the statutory reporting requirements (e.g., when and how to report, the actions required by the mandated reporter, the extent of legal protection given to reporters, and the consequences of failing to make a report). Such training appears to be vital for teachers, with 60% of the teachers involved in the study by Reiniger et al., indicating that the course provided them with all or mostly new information about their legal responsibilities as mandatory reporters.

In South Australia, teachers are also expected to complete a 1-day Mandatory Notification Training program (Hawkins & McCallum, 2001a). This programme aims to improve teachers' knowledge about the indicators of child abuse and neglect, as well as increase their

awareness of their legal responsibilities, and the policy and procedures for making a notification. Initial findings by Hawkins & McCallum (2001a) suggest that this program is achieving these aims. For instance, whereas 81% of respondents who had not received training felt that they were barely, adequately or poorly prepared to report child abuse and neglect, 93% of respondents who had participated in the training program recently felt they were fairly well or very well prepared. Further, compared to those who had received no training, teachers who *had* received recent training reported being more confident in their ability to recognise indicators of sexual abuse, more aware of reporting responsibilities, and more aware of what constitutes reasonable grounds for a report. Teachers who had received training recently were also more likely to respond appropriately to a child's disclosure than those without training.

In sum, while there is an increasing awareness about the need to provide student-teachers with training in child protection issues, more training is required about substantive issues related to child sexual abuse, including legal issues, departmental policy and procedures, departmental definitions, and the role of the Department of Education in child protection.

Policy on Student Protection

In Queensland, the Department of Education's Policy on child sexual abuse and its mandatory reporting in the State's schools is predominantly located in the Department of Education Manual (commonly referred to as the DOEM). The policy is embedded in 'Health and Safety, HS-17: Student Protection' (Department of Education, 2003). This 53-page document begins with a global statement that acknowledges that "All students have a right to be protected from harm", and that Department of Education "...is committed to providing a safe and supportive learning environment for its students and required its employees to model and encourage behaviour that upholds the dignity and safety of students' (Department of Education, 2003: 4).

In terms of categories of harm, it is interesting to note that the policy on 'Preventing harm to students from outside the state educational institution environment' identifies that, 'Over 85% of children are harmed by someone they know and trust – a parent, sibling, other relative, family friend or care provider' (Department of Education, 2003: 28). This statistic could have generated more policy guidelines and have been given more than four pages, half of that devoted to the eight-page section "Preventing employee harm to students". "Preventing harm to students by other students" takes just over three pages, and the final section "Preventing student self harm" takes lit-

tle over two pages. These quantitative facts aside, this policy document is easy to read, and student-teachers should find it accessible since it is well laid out, with clear headings and dot points.

The significant paragraph in the Policy for teachers, and other school staff, states that;

“Employees *must*:

- not cause harm to students in the department’s care
- actively seek to prevent harm to a student in the department’s care
- *report suspected student harm in accordance with this policy*
- *inform themselves about the content of this policy*” (italics added, Department of Education, 2003: 4).

Therefore, the Department of Education mandates that teachers need to know about this Policy, and that, as employees, they become mandated reporters of student harm, which includes child sexual abuse. It consequentially becomes relevant for teacher-educators to audit both the extent to which student-teachers know about this Policy and how confident they are about their knowledge of it. This kind of audit can be helpful when educators are designing appropriate courses for student-teachers. The present paper reports on what Queensland student-teachers know about the Policy on child sexual abuse, their future role as mandatory reporters, and their confidence in this knowledge.

Since the university sample lacks compulsory pre-service courses for student-teachers on the Policy for child sexual abuse and its mandatory reporting, none of the student-teachers included in this study has undertaken such a course in their Bachelor of Education (Primary School). Their only introduction to these issues was a one-hour condensed lecture by a concerned and interested lecturer, without which, these student-teachers would have probably entered the teaching profession with minimal knowledge about the Departmental policy on child sexual abuse or mandatory reporting, and with little or no confidence in their knowledge, all of which hinders their fulfilment of this role.

It is clear that understanding the role of the Department of Education is an essential step for student-teachers to learn about this area. This necessitates finding out what knowledge student-teachers have of the role of the Department of Education in this mandated Policy, their knowledge of its Procedures and practices for reporting, and their understanding of their duty towards the Policy, that is, their knowledge of the provisions of the Policy.

Thus, the aim of this study is to audit a sample of Queensland student-teachers for their knowledge, and their confidence in the knowledge, about the role of the Department of Education, including definitions, categorisations, procedures and implementation, in its policy on child sexual abuse, and of the role of teachers as mandatory reporters of sexual abuse.

Method

Sample

The sample includes a total of 52 student-teachers, all attending a Queensland university. They were completing the final semester of a Bachelor of Education (Primary School), as a prerequisite to becoming eligible to be employed in Primary schools. The majority of the sample was female ($N = 42$, 81%), which is an historically common enrolment characteristic in Bachelor of Education [BEd](Primary School) degrees in Australia. The age of participants ranged from 21 to 45 years, with a mean age of 26 years.

Materials

Participating student-teachers completed a five-page questionnaire examining the nature and extent of their knowledge, and their confidence in that knowledge, concerning the Queensland Departmental Policy "Health and Safety, HS-17: Student Protection", as summarised earlier. As stated above, it specifies Queensland Primary school teachers as mandatory reporters of child sexual abuse, and specifies teachers' knowledge about the Policy itself.

Questionnaire

In the questionnaire, (besides other questions), these student-teachers were provided with 11 Policy Statements on the Departmental role and its definitions, and were asked whether they thought these Statements were included in the Policy. Ten statements were directly quoted from the policy, and were an accurate reflection of it. The remaining statement was not found in the policy, but was included to ascertain whether or not student-teachers could identify this nuance of the Policy. The 10 Statements included a spread from throughout sections in the Policy that included Principles, Accountabilities, School Principals, Procedures and Definitions, and Preventing Harm to Students.

Participants were asked if they thought each statement was included in the Department policy document, with student-teachers responding on a 3-point scale, namely, "the policy would not include it", "don't know", or "the policy would include it". The 3-point scale was used instead of a 5-point scale because even though a larger scale

would add to the reliability of responses, this three-point scale had the advantage of encouraging forced-choice decisions related to their knowledge of the Policy statement.

Further, student-teachers were then asked to assess their confidence in this knowledge. For each of the 11 questions, a companion question enquired about the surety of their reply, with response items that ranged from “I am very unsure”, “I am mostly unsure”, and “I am mostly sure”, to “I am very sure”.

The final page of the questionnaire then invited student-teachers to provide open-ended comments about their knowledge, and confidence in the knowledge, concerning the Education Queensland policy on child sexual abuse and their role as a mandatory reporter.

Procedure

After securing University Ethics Committee clearance, the questionnaire was offered to each of three 4th Year Bachelor of Education (Primary School) classes. Volunteers were requested for this anonymous and confidential questionnaire. As required by the Ethics Committee, student-teachers were informed about the content of the research project, including who was conducting the research, why the research was being conducted, what respondents would be asked to do, and the expected benefits of the research. They were told that students would not be excluded from participating, that there were no potential risks to students, that records would remain confidential, and results anonymous. They were told they would be given feedback, were asked to express consent, and then were given information about the mechanism for distribution and return. Finally, the researcher answered respondents' questions about the questionnaire. All students participated, with most completing the whole questionnaire in less than one hour.

Quantitative Results

Extent to which student-teachers agreed that statements would be included in Departmental Policy

Student-teachers were asked to identify which of the 11 statements about the Departmental role and definitions they thought would be included in the Policy.

As illustrated in Figure 1 (see appendix for all tables and figures), more than 70% of student-teachers were able to accurately identify eight of the 11 statements as included in the policy. These eight included four statements related to Departmental roles and four related to Departmental definitions. Of the remaining three state-

ments, two comprised definitions “*Sexual abuse occurs when a school employee involves a student aged under 18 years in sexual activity*”, and “*Sexual conduct is any behaviour that might reasonably be interpreted as intended to arouse sexual desires*”, that were only identified by fewer than 40% of student-teachers.

The remaining statement that, “*The law does not require school principals and teachers to report suspected cases of child sexual abuse, but the Department of Education Policy does*,” was included to test student-teachers’ depth of knowledge. Less than 10% agreed that this statement was included in the Policy. Although factually correct, it is not specifically stated.

Overall, it appears that a good percentage of student-teachers can identify four statements related to knowledge of the Department’s role, and also four of related definitions. However, only a minority correctly identified two definitions related to sexual abuse as part of their necessary knowledge.

Extent to which student-teachers agreed that statements would not be included in the Departmental Policy

Student-teachers were asked to identify which of the 11 statements about the Departmental role and definitions they thought would *not* be included in the Policy. As shown in Figure 2, less than 10% of participants agreed that eight of the 11 statements would *not* be included in Departmental Policy.

However, approximately 30% of student-teachers agreed that the definition, “*Sexual abuse occurs when a school employee involves a student under age 18 years in sexual activity*”, would not be included in the Policy, and approximately 25% agreed that the statement, “*The law does not require school principals and teachers to report suspected cases of child abuse, but the Department of Education Policy does*”, would not be included. Finally, approximately 20% agreed that the statement, “*Sexual conduct is any behaviour that might reasonable be interpreted as intended to arouse sexual desires*”, would not be included in the Policy. These statements are, of course, included.

Extent to which student-teachers were uncertain that statements were included in the Departmental Policy

Student-teachers were asked to indicate if they *did not know* which of the 11 statements about the Departmental role and definitions were included in the Policy. Figure 3 shows that a significant percentage of students indicated they were uncertain about the inclusion of 10 of the 11 items in the Policy.

Between 10% and 30% of these student-teachers expressed uncertainty about eight of the 11 statements. However, approximately 32% expressed uncertainty about whether or not, “*Sexual abuse occurs when school employees involve students in sexual activity*”. About 45% expressed uncertainty whether or not the statement, “*Sexual conduct is any behaviour that might reasonable be interpreted as intended to arouse sexual desires*”, was included in the Policy. Finally, more than 60% indicated uncertainty about the incorrectly included statement that, “*The law does not require pupils or teachers to report child sexual abuse but EQ policy does*”.

Extent of student-teachers’ confidence in their knowledge of the Departmental Policy

Student-teachers were asked to indicate their level of surety, or confidence, in the accuracy of their knowledge on which of the 11 statements about the Departmental role and definitions were included in the Policy. Figure 4 shows that a clear majority were mostly sure or very sure about all 11 responses.

Students reported the highest level of surety, at 90%, related to the Department of Education definition that “*A child is an individual under 18 years of age*”, and the lowest level of surety at 65%, related to the statement that “*Sexual conduct is any behaviour that might reasonable be interpreted as intended to arouse sexual desire*”. Two other statements about which these student-teachers were relatively less confident included, “*Sexual abuse occurs when school employees involve students in sexual activity*”, and the incorrectly included statement that, “*The law does not require pupils or teachers to report child sexual abuse but EQ policy does*”.

Inferential statistics on extent to which responses can be associated with participant characteristics

Younger female student-teachers were significantly more likely, than other student-teachers, to think that sexual abuse occurs when a school employee involves a student under 18 years in sexual activity ($X^2_{(1)}=5.093$, $p<0.05$). They were also significantly more likely to think that sexual conduct is any behaviour that might reasonably be interpreted as intended to arouse sexual desires ($X^2_{(1)}=6.064$, $p<0.05$). However, none of the 11 responses related to level of confidence were associated with age and gender at statistically significant levels.

Qualitative results

Open-ended comments

At the end of the questionnaire, student-teachers were provided with an opportunity to respond to an open-ended question about the Edu-

cation Queensland Policy on sexual abuse of children and its mandatory reporting (HS-17 Student Protection). Of the 52 participants, 14 provided written comments that could be categorised in terms of education, knowledge, or some combination of these, as follows:

Education

- “I have not been formally informed about this policy by either the University or Department.” (female, 31 years).
- “[The policy was] Never made explicit” (female, 24 years).
- “The policy is definitely something ALL preservice and current teachers should read regularly to keep well-informed” (female, 24 years).
- “Have not been ‘taught’ about this policy, only know of contents from own research – it should be included in Bachelor of Education course” (female, 29 years).
- “University has failed to educate us in this department” (female, 22 years).
- “We were not taught policy” (female, 30 years).
- “Never taught to us” (female, 24 years).

Knowledge

- “Shows how little I know of the policy - frightening.” (female, 34 years).
- “I now know I haven’t got much idea on the policy and should read it” (female, 44 years).
- “I have not read the policy. My responses are what I think the Department should have in this kind of policy” (female, 36 years).
- “I don’t know much about it at all” (female, 23 years).
- “I don’t know a lot about it – only the basics” (female, 30 years).
- “Have not seen the policy at all” (female, 35 years).

Both Education and Knowledge

- “I feel I don’t really know much about the policy. I based my answers [in this questionnaire] upon my feelings. More information must be given to pre-service teachers” (female 28 years).

To summarise, these open-ended comments indicate an awareness of a lack of education on the Policy, and a lack of knowledge about it. None of these comments is indicative of a student-teacher who feels knowledgeable and confident about Departmental policy.

Discussion

Quantitative outcomes in Figures 1 and 2 suggest that these student-teachers are reasonably knowledgeable and confident about most of the 11 statements about Departmental policy. As one might expect, only a small percentage agreed that the nuanced statement

that, *"The law does not require pupils or teachers to report child sexual abuse but Department of Education policy does"*, was included; a large percentage were sure it was not; and a relatively large percentage expressed uncertainty about its status.

However, two other statements encapsulating policy definitions, *"Sexual abuse occurs when school employees involve students in sexual activity"*, and *"Sexual conduct is any behaviour that might reasonably be interpreted as intended to arouse sexual desires"*, joined the statement discussed above as items where relatively small percentages of participants could agree were included, relatively large percentages agreed they were not, relatively large percentages expressed uncertainty, and about which, relatively, participants were less confident on average. This dissonant pattern is reflected in a statistical lack of unanimity about these two definitions, with younger females being more likely to agree to these two definitions than other student-teachers, e.g. older females, or males.

The 14 qualitative responses listed above provide further evidence of dissonance inasmuch as they provide strong indications that students feel ignorant about the Policy. Seven students' responses indicate that they have never been taught about the policy during their BEd (Primary). Another seven student-teacher responses indicate definitively that they do not know much about the Policy at all. These dissonant results are worrying for teacher-educators concerned about the level of student-teacher understanding of the child sexual abuse mandatory reporting Policy and Procedures that these students might well have to implement as teachers in Primary Schools.

In summary, these student-teachers as a group appear able to identify more than 70% of the items listed as part of the Policy, but dismiss the nuanced item. However, they appear hazy about the limits of this policy as it relates to general behaviour and to the behaviour of school employees. Also, the 27% who provided open-ended responses were not reassuring about the extent to which they felt prepared by teacher-training for their role as mandatory reporters of sexual abuse.

Conclusion

Recent research suggests that teachers often feel inadequately prepared to deal with the issue of child abuse (See Baginsky & Macpherson, 2005; Goldman, 2005, 2009; Goldman & Torrisi-Steel, 2004; Laskey, 2004) The results reported here supplement such previous research, by identifying specific areas of weakness in student-teachers' knowledge about the Departmental role in the mandatory reporting policy. This is well supported both in terms of responses to

survey items and in terms of open-ended responses. It follows that if teachers are to fulfil their role as mandatory reporters of child sexual abuse, more care must be taken to prepare them to recognise the signs of sexual abuse and to enact their role as specified by the Department in its policies and procedures. The outcomes reported here might usefully inform the development of appropriate and effective compulsory pre-service education curriculum programs, that can ensure that teachers entering the profession are better prepared to deal with child sexual abuse and its mandatory reporting.

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Appendix

Figure 1. Percent of student-teachers indicating that each of 11 statements about Department of Education role and definitions would be included in the Departmental policy

Figure 2: Percent of student-teachers indicating that statements about the Department of Education's role and definitions would not be included in the Departmental policy

Figure 3: Percent of student-teachers who did not know if the statement was or was not included in the Departmental policy.

Figure 4: Percent of student-teachers who were mostly or very sure of the accuracy of their knowledge on which of the 11 statements about the Departmental role and definitions were included in the Policy.