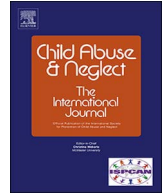


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# Child Abuse & Neglect

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## School staff members experience and knowledge in the reporting of potential child and youth victimization

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### ABSTRACT

Victimization has been widely demonstrated to have negative consequences in minors. Most crimes against children go unreported and victims tend to reach adulthood without receiving any of the available specialized support. Studies have highlighted the unique role of school workers in early detection and reporting of possible cases of victimization, and have also found high rates of underreporting by school staff. The present study analyzes the underreporting of child and youth victimization suspicions among school staff and aims to identify variables related to its detection and reporting. One hundred and eighty-four school staff members (83.7% females,  $M = 42.6$  years old,  $SD = 11.7$ ) from 17 different schools completed a self-administered questionnaire designed to record their knowledge and experience regarding the detection and reporting of potential victimization cases. Over 74% of the school workers had suspected at least one situation of victimization during their careers, but only 27% had actually reported these concerns. Higher rates of reporting were significantly associated with male gender, more years of experience, and awareness of five common misconceptions. Reporting behavior could be predicted by gender, years of experience and two statements assessing respondents' knowledge of victimization. In order to increase early reporting of possible cases of victimization, it is necessary to overcome certain misconceptions, raise awareness among school staff, design new training programs or interventions, and adapt the school dynamics in the light of these findings.

### 1. Introduction

Childhood and youth victimization has been widely demonstrated to affect victims' social and psychological development over their lifespan. Early detection and reporting is crucial in order to provide victims with support as soon as possible and thus to reduce the negative consequences (Winkel, Wohlfarth, & Blaauw, 2003). Although approximately ten million children are estimated to be suffering different forms of maltreatment in Europe, only 10–20% of these cases come to light (World Health Organization, 2013). Unreported crime against children is particularly high (Webster, O'Toole, O'Toole, & Lucal, 2005) even when adults close to them are aware of the situation (Finkelhor, Wolak, & Berliner, 2008). Once reported, only around 22% of cases receive professional attention (Cater, Andershed, & Andershed, 2016); as a result, most victims reach adulthood without having received any of the available specialized support, such as child welfare, health or security services (Finkelhor et al., 2008).

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Meta-analyses such as the one by Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Alink, & van Ijzendoorn (2015) have highlighted the challenges facing researchers who try to determine the true prevalence of children and youth victimization. Studies that have directly asked children and adolescents about their victimization experiences (such as Cyr et al. (2013) in Canada, Finkelhor (2011) in the United States; Radford, Corral, Bradley, & Fisher (2013) in the UK; and Pereda, Guilera, & Abad (2014) in Spain) have found higher rates than those published in official reports, demonstrating that the real extent of child and youth victimization remains unknown and uncertain and can only be estimated approximately (Hillis, Mercy, Amobi, & Kress, 2016).

Authors like Finkelhor (2011) have highlighted the need to reduce the gap between the cases identified by the system and the real prevalence in order to be able to provide adequate support for the victims who are currently neglected. To do this, early detection is a key factor; the role of school staff members is crucial since they interact with almost all the children in the population on a daily basis (Schols, de Ruiter, & Ory, 2013). This fact maximizes the importance of identifying the possible signs of being a victim, such as poor school achievement (Fantuzzo et al., 2011), less security and closeness towards peers and adults, and conflictual friendships (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). Another feature of the key role that school staff members play is the fact that they have regular access to children's families and circles (e.g., peers, other caregivers, and so on).

Several international studies (Dinehart & Kenny, 2015; Haj-Yahia & Attar-Schwartz, 2008; Kenny, 2001; Schols et al., 2013; Toros & Tiirik, 2016) have analyzed the behavior of different types of school staff members (e.g., early caregivers, educators, pre-elementary school teachers, elementary school teachers, special education teachers, psychologists) and have found that early detection and the reporting possible cases of victimization depend largely on these workers' knowledge, attitudes and professionalism. Training also appears to be particularly important (Kenny, 2004; Walsh, Bridgstock, Farrell, Rassafiani, & Schweitzer, 2008).

Unfortunately, as previous studies have noted (Crenshaw, Crenshaw, & Lichtenberg, 1995; Finkelhor, Wolak, & Berliner, 2001; Kenny, 2004), most of the people working in the educational setting lack the knowledge or personal motivation to extend their teaching role to include the monitoring of children and young people's rights. Researchers have identified a number of common barriers to detecting and reporting possible victimization cases: an inability to recognize the signs (Kenny, 2001), a fear of misinterpreting families' educational practices (Toros & Tiirik, 2016), a lack of awareness of the workings of child welfare systems, a lack of familiarity with their legal duties or with reporting procedures (Cater et al., 2016; Kenny, 2004; Walsh et al., 2008), bad experiences with reporting to institutions (e.g., child welfare services, police), a lack of faith in the child welfare system (Schols et al., 2013) and fears of embarrassment or possible retaliations (Alvarez, Kenny, Donohue, & Carpin, 2004). Schools in particular are reluctant to report suspicious cases of victimization because of concerns about their reputation (Finkelhor et al., 2008). Additionally, vague definitions of different types of the phenomenon (Kenny, 2001) and the fact that school staff members tend to make their reports inside the same institution rather than directly to experts or authorities make it even harder to raise their awareness of this professional obligation. Finally, the fact that most members of staff are unaware of the possible legal consequences of failing to report a suspected case has also been identified as an associated factor (Dinehart & Kenny, 2015).

In Spain, studies from different regions have reported alarming results regarding the detection and reporting of suspicious child abuse cases in schools (Prieto Jiménez, 2005). Liébana, del Olmo, and Real (2015) drew attention to the lack of knowledge regarding child abuse among teachers and called for further analyses to measure the factors that can contribute to develop efficient detection. This was also reported by studies focused only on one type of victimization, such as sexual abuse (e.g., Márquez Flores, Márquez, & Granados, 2016). Similar findings have been reported in studies performed with psychology (Pereda et al., 2012) and pedagogy students (Priegue & Cambeiro, 2016). But in spite of the fact that training can significantly improve detection and reporting among professionals (Cerezo & Pons-Salvador, 2004) and disclosure in minors (López & Del Campo, 2006) schools are not currently developing their potential for providing support for neglected victims.

### 1.1. Purpose of the present study

If we aim to protect child and youth victims from violence and to prevent its consequences, early detection and reporting of possible cases of victimization is crucial. School staff members have an important role to play in this respect. The Spanish school system offers several advantages with regard to detecting and reporting different kinds of victimization; schooling is mandatory in Spain between the ages of 6 and 16, in accordance with the *Ley Orgánica de Educación* of 2006 [Education Act 1/2006] which guarantees access to education. Reporting any suspicion of a potential case of victimization is also mandatory according to the *Ley Orgánica de Protección Jurídica del menor of 1996* [1/1996, Minors' Legal Protection Act]. Legislation is believed to increase reporting (see Mathews & Kenny (2008) for a review of reporting in regions with and without mandatory reporting).

The main aim of the present study is to examine school staff members' knowledge, experience, and behavior regarding childhood and youth victimization, its early detection and the reporting of suspected cases in Spain. We take a step forward from previous studies (Dinehart & Kenny, 2015; Liébana et al., 2015) in trying to explain the tendency not to report suspicions, which has already been observed in previous studies both in Spain (e.g., Prieto Jiménez, 2005) and abroad (e.g., Webster et al., 2005). We hypothesize that most suspected instances are not reported; we propose that this behavior is related to a lack of knowledge and professional experience and we analyze variables involved in it (Kenny, 2001, 2004; Walsh, Mathews, Rassa, Farrell, & Butler, 2012). We hope that the study will provide conclusions that may help to increase the early detection and reporting of possible cases of victimization.

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