

Identifying and Reporting Child Maltreatment in the Education Sector

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Abstract: This study sought to identify: (a) what educational professionals think about reporting child maltreatment; (b) how they deal with cases; and (c) their reasons for not reporting. The participants included 22 principals/coordinators and 139 teachers in public schools in two towns in the state of Sao Paulo, Brazil. A questionnaire was applied to identify socio-demographic characteristics and knowledge on the subject, and an open question addressed the act of reporting. The quantitative and interpretative analysis of data indicates that most teachers had had contact with suspected cases of abuse and reported such cases to the school administration. The school administration, however, often decided not to report cases but tried to resolve the situation by talking and/or referring those involved to treatment. The main reasons for not reporting cases included fear and lack of trust in the child protection system. As a consequence, these professionals are not playing their due role in the child protection system.

Keywords: family violence, child abuse, public school education, occupational attitudes

Identificação e Notificação dos Maus-tratos Infantis no Setor Educacional

Resumo: Este estudo teve como objetivos conhecer: (a) o que pensam os profissionais da educação com relação à notificação dos maus-tratos infantis; (b) o que fazem frente a esses casos; (c) suas alegações para não notificar. Participaram 22 diretores/coordenadores e 139 professores de escolas públicas de duas cidades do interior do Estado de São Paulo. Empregaram-se um questionário para a caracterização sociodemográfica e dos conhecimentos sobre o tema e uma questão aberta sobre o ato de notificar. A análise de dados, quantitativo-interpretativa, indicou que a maioria dos professores teve contato com casos suspeitos de maus-tratos que, majoritariamente, foram comunicados à direção; esta com maior frequência decidiu por não notificar, mas por tentar resolver a situação, conversando com os envolvidos e/ou encaminhando-os para tratamento. As principais razões para não notificar foram o medo e a falta de confiança no sistema de proteção. Desse modo, estão deixando de desempenhar o devido papel no sistema de proteção infantil.

Palavras-chave: violência na família, abuso da criança, ensino público, atitudes profissionais

Identificación y Informe de Malos Tratos Infantis en el Sector Educativo

Resumen: Este estudio tuvo como objetivo conocer (a) lo que piensan profesionales de la educación en materia de notificación de maltrato infantil, (b) lo que hacen hacia los casos, y (c) las razones para no notificar. Participaron 22 directores/coordinadores y 139 profesores de escuelas públicas, en dos ciudades del interior del estado del Sao Paulo. Se aplicó un cuestionario para la caracterización socio-demográfica y de la experiencia en la materia, y una pregunta abierta sobre el acto de informar. El análisis de datos, cuantitativo-interpretativo, indicó que la mayoría de los profesores han estado en contacto con casos sospechosos de malos tratos y informaron a la dirección, que decidió no notificar, pero resolver la situación hablando con los involucrados y/o enviándolos para tratamiento. Las principales razones para no notificar fueron miedo y falta de confianza en el sistema de protección. Así, están dejando de jugar el role que le corresponde en el sistema de protección de la infancia.

Palabras-clave: violencia domestica, abuso de niños, enseñanza en la escuela pública, actitudes profesionales

Childhood is the context of many forms of violence. Violence committed in the domestic environment, usually by the caregivers themselves, is one of the most severe due to the number of victims and sequelae it causes. This form of violence is termed child maltreatment by the World Health Organization and International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect and always occurs in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust and power, resulting in varied forms of physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse,

in addition to neglect and exploitation, representing real or potential harm to the health, survival and development or dignity of children (World Health Organization [WHO] & International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect [ISPCAN], 2006).

In the Brazilian context, since the promulgation of the Federal Constitution in 1988, guidelines for all citizens (or society in general) include the protection of children and adolescents, protecting them “from any form of neglect, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty and oppression” (Art. 227), which means the existence of an obligation to identify and make known cases in which their rights are violated. The Child and Adolescent Act (*Law n. 8.069, 1990*), provides for the involvement of education and health workers in child protection, establishing the

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mandatory reporting of suspected or confirmed cases that they encounter within their work environment (Art. 13 and 245). Law n. 10.498 (2000), promulgated in the state of São Paulo, endorses such content and provides a very simple report form to enable this mandatory action.

Educators and teachers are considered elements who are in a good position to identify a wide range of abuse because they come into daily contact with a large number of children during different activities (Feng, Huang, & Wang, 2010; McKee & Dillenburger, 2009). Educators and teachers are able to observe behavioral changes and physical signs that may indicate abuse and often can obtain explicit reports from children (Faleiros, Matias, & Bazon, 2009; Walsh, Farrell, Bridgstock, & Schweitzer, 2006). For these reasons, according to Goldman and Grimbeek (2011), education professionals are considered, in many countries, essential actors in the child protection system and are, therefore, increasingly addressed in recent years by studies in the field.

Reports that originate in the educational sector are, however, very few. In the United States for instance, Webster, O'Toole, O'Toole and Lucal (2005) estimate that one third of teachers do not report cases they suspect, even though public schools are the main source of child abuse reports. The reports provided by public schools are twice as likely to be confirmed than reports provided by other sectors, such as the health sector (Smith, 2010). In Canada, teachers only report one quarter of the situations they identify, though their suspicions also have the highest rate of confirmation (about 80% of confirmed cases are reported by teachers) (Tite, 1993). A similar situation is identified in Brazil. A significant number of cases of child maltreatment is suspected in the educational sector but few professionals report them (Faleiros & Bazon, 2008; Faleiros et al., 2009; Vagostello, Oliveira, Silva, Donofrio, & Moreno, 2006).

International studies have investigated the reasons why educators/teachers do not report child abuse despite their suspicions in many situations. These reasons are related to the characteristics of cases, teachers and the schools themselves. In relation to the characteristics of cases, both the severity and type of cases seem to influence reporting (Smith, 2010). Teachers seem to give greater importance to maltreatment that leaves marks on the child's body because they consider it to be more severe than abuse not associated with physical signs, such as emotional abuse or neglect, for which they seem to have greater tolerance. Lack of evidence or "proof" also influences the behavior of professionals (Kenny, 2001). In addition to the fear of being unfair to the family, many teachers fear becoming involved in a court situation without having "concrete evidence" to support their claims.

In regard to the characteristics of teachers, Feng, Huang, et al. (2010) highlight that the beliefs and

attitudes of professionals concerning educational practices influence their perception of abuse, and, consequently, their inclination to report cases. Additionally, the longer the professional experience of teachers, the greater the likelihood of reporting a case (Kenny, 2001). Teachers with a lower educational level or in administrative roles present a lower tendency to report cases (Webster et al., 2005). According to Horton and Cruise (2001), lack of information/training, as well as a lack of knowledge concerning laws and procedures required to submit reports, influence one's ability to recognize abuse. These authors state that professionals who hold strong negative opinions regarding Child Protection Services (Guardianship Council) also tend to report less frequently due to the fear of making a mistake, of potential legal repercussions, and as previously mentioned, of suffering retaliation and/or exposing the child to retaliation from caregivers.

In regard to the school's characteristics, Walsh et al. (2006) indicate that the "atmosphere" of the educational facility also influences the identification and reporting of cases, stressing that a negative attitude of the school's principal toward this subject would also lead to underreporting of cases.

Considering the crucial role schools and educational professionals play and should play in relation to child and youth protection, this study's objectives include identifying: (a) what educational professionals think in relation to the reporting of child abuse; (b) how they deal with cases; and (c) their reasons for not reporting cases.

Method

Participants

This study was conducted in two towns in the region of Riberão Preto, SP, Brazil because the Departments of Education of both consented to and supported the project. The entire area (100%) under municipal responsibility was included, which ensured good representativeness of the sample of professionals. Therefore, the study population comprised 161 educational professionals working in 14 facilities (daycare, preschools, and elementary schools) providing education to children aged between 0 and 10 years old. Twenty-two of these professionals were principals, assistant principals or coordinators; 100% were women, aged 48 years old on average ($SD \pm 11.9$), with 19.5 years of experience in the education field ($SD \pm 11.6$) and eight years ($SD \pm 7.2$) working in the studied school, on average. The other 139 participants were educators/teachers, 98% of which were women aged 37 years old on average ($SD \pm 8.4$), 11 years ($SD \pm 7.1$) of experience in education, and six years working in the school where this study was conducted, on average ($SD \pm 5.1$).

Instruments

Data were collected through two instruments:

(a) A questionnaire with closed and open questions was developed. It addressed the participants' socio-demographic characteristics, such as age and work experience, information about knowledge concerning the topic and underlying legal framework (specifically state Law/SP n. 10.498/00), as well as their attitudes toward it.

(b) An open question ("In your opinion, what causes educators/teachers to fail to report certain cases of maltreatment they suspect?") was used to identify the reasons teachers often do not report cases despite their legal obligation to report suspected cases of child abuse.

Procedures

Data collection. Data were collected within a larger project, the objectives of which were first to verify the ability of education professionals to identify cases of abuse and record how they dealt with the problem. Secondly, the study was also designed to develop, implement, and assess specific training that addresses this topic, observing its impact on the professionals' ability to identify cases and ways to deal with the problem. Hence, the aforementioned questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the project when the initial contact was made with the participants. The second instrument (open question) was administered after approximately 50 hours transpired after the initial contact with all the participants was accomplished, already within the context of the intervention.

Data analysis. A qualitative-interpretative approach was used in the analysis in accordance with the recommendations of Biasoli-Alves (1998). This approach was used because it enables one to work with a large quantity of qualitative data, that is, the participants' responses provided to various questions, aiming to synthesize content, systematize it around common meanings, going beyond the first level of analysis, that is, descriptive analysis. It recommends meanings to be grasped from the researcher's inferences, which are guided by the context of investigation, its objectives, and theoretical framework (André, 1983). Once the means have been grasped, they can be synthesized into analytical categories. Counting the answers serves to show the preponderance of certain meanings of "testimonies" and behaviors of the study's participants.

We initially proceeded to the analysis of answers in order to compile and summarize data. Afterward, we grouped equivalent answers, computing their frequency and percentages. The groups were then submitted to interpretative analysis to verify their meanings. These generated categories that comprised all data (answers) that had the same direction. Additionally, these categories were exclusive, to the extent that each category grouped a set of data (answers) distinctly different from those grouped in other categories (Biasoli-Alves, 1998).

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Administration at Faculdade de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras de Ribeirão Preto, da Universidade de São Paulo (Process n. 2006.1.538.59.8)

Results

A total of 73% of the principals/coordinators and teachers who answered the initial questionnaire ($n = 161$) reported having professional contact, over the course of their careers, with children who seemed to experience maltreatment (95% of the principals and 70% of teachers). When they were asked about their attitude in these cases, most principals (62%) and teachers (78%) reported that they attempted to solve the problem within the school context, without reporting the case. Only 38% of the principals and 14% of the teachers stated they reported the cases; 8% of teachers reported no action was taken.

In regard to the question asking what teachers normally did when facing cases in which they suspected abuse, most (57%) reported they referred the case to the school's administration and left to them the responsibility to reach a decision. Only 15% reported their action would be to report the case. The answers of the remaining participants were the following: Talk to the parents and children (11%); Investigate the situation to see whether it is severe/wait to see how it progresses (10%); Refer the case to professionals with the help of the school's administration (2%); feel appalled but do nothing (1%). There was missing information in 4% of the questionnaires applied.

The participants were also asked how they were supposed to deal with child abuse according to the education facility. Specifically in regard to the principals ($n = 22$), only 4% reported that the school should send the report to the authorities. The remaining, 32%, 27%, and 23%, respectively, reported that the procedure should be "talk to the parents", "refer to professionals", "investigate and observe". There was missing information in 14% of the questionnaires applied. In relation to educators/teachers, 27% reported that the school should submit the report to the authorities and most also indicated that the ideal strategy would be "talk to the parents"(32%), "refer to professionals" (21%) and "investigate and observe" (9%), while 6% reported they did not know what the ideal action would be. There was missing information in 5% of questionnaires completed by educators/teachers.

The participants were asked what the outcome of the cases of suspected child maltreatment was, which they had contact with over the course of their careers, considering the procedure they adopted to deal with them. Table 1 presents a synthesis of results.

Table 1
Categories of answers concerning the outcome of child abuse cases as a consequence of reporting provided by principals/ coordinators and teachers

Categories	Reported to Guardianship Council				Resolved within the school			
	Principal		Teacher		Principal		Teacher	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Child abuse continued	1	10	6	22	4	37	25	36
Do not know what happened/did not report the outcome	3	30	10	37	3	27	24	34
Child started treatment and behavior improved	4	40	6	22	1	9	7	10
Child abuse ceased	1	10	–	–	2	18	–	–
Missing information	1	10	5	19	1	9	14	20
Total	10	100	27	100	11	100	70	100

In regard to the existence of a standard procedure adopted by schools to deal with cases, 41% of the principals/coordinators (*n* = 9) reported there was a standard procedure and it included reporting cases to the Guardianship Council. Another 23% (*n* = 5) also reported there was a standard procedure but it did not include reporting, while 36% (*n* = 8) their schools had adopted no standard procedure. Among teachers, 41% (*n* = 57) reported their schools adopted a standard procedure that involved the Guardianship Council. Another 25% (*n* = 35) reported there was a standard procedure, but it did not include reporting; 23% (*n* = 32) reported no procedure was adopted in their schools, while 6% (*n* = 8) reported not knowing whether there was a standard procedure to deal with child abuse. In regard to the opportunity, within schools, to discuss cases and doubts about child abuse and reporting procedures, most principals/coordinators and teachers (86%) reported that the subject is considered and discussed within their schools but only 4% reported these discussions occur systematically.

Analysis of answers concerning knowledge of law related to the mandatory reporting on the part of educational professionals (*n*. 10.498, 2000) and the form that is provided for that purpose, indicated that only 36% of the principals and 6% of the teachers were aware of such documents. The remaining reported either that they had no access to such documents (46% of the principals and 42% of teachers) or they were aware of the law only, but not of the reporting form (36% of principals and 6% of professors).

When questioned about their opinion of the law, most principals/coordinators (54%) and teachers (49%) generically stated that the law is a good idea to help children and families to solve the problem of abuse. Only 9.6% of the respondents (teachers, principals/coordinators) stated that the legal device was important because it makes reporting mandatory in the education sector, taking into account that educational professionals are usually in contact with a large number of children.

In regard to what they understand by “reporting”, the analysis indicates that most principals/coordinators (86%, *n* = 19) understand “reporting” as being the action of communicating something to a competent authority, while for 9% (*n* = 2) it means communicating something wrong is happening with the family. Only one respondent considered reporting as being an indictment, a denouncement, or a police report. In relation to teachers, most also understood the act of reporting as communicating something to a competent authority, for 4% (*n* = 6) this action means communicating a concern with the child and family, and 7% considered that reporting would be equivalent to indictment, a denouncement, a police report, while 3% (*n* = 3) did not know what “reporting” meant.

In regard to the reasons given for not reporting cases, the categories of answers with their respective perspectives are presented in Table 2. It is worth noting that, though the total number of participants answering this question was 111 individuals, the total number of answers was 208.

Discussion

Based on this study’s results, we note that most of the interviewed professionals (73%) reported they had contact with or suspected child abuse over the course of their careers, confirming the findings of other Brazilian and international studies (Faleiros & Bazon, 2008; Tite, 1994; Vagostello et al., 2006). However, another considerable portion of teachers (30%) reported they never had such an experience, which is somewhat surprising, considering they have worked 11 years on average in education and have had contact with a large number of children. It is, however, possible to attribute this to a lack of preparedness on the part of the respondents to identify cases, which is in agreement with what has been observed in studies conducted in different sociocultural contexts (Feng, Fetzter, Chen, Yeh, & Huang, 2010; Feng, Huang, et al., 2010; Goldman & Grimbeek, 2011; Smith, 2010).

Table 2
Categories of answers concerning the reasons teachers do not report suspected child maltreatment (n = 111)

Categories	Subcategories	f	%
Fear	Fear of retaliation on the part of the parents/consequences to oneself	37	33
	Fear of consequences for the child	11	10
	Fear of “denouncement” (legal repercussions for oneself)	9	8
	Total	57	51
Critiques to the Protection System	Lack of response, nothing happens...	41	36
	Inefficiency of social programs	3	3
	Lack of support on the part of the Guardianship Council and Prosecution	3	3
	Total	44	42
Lack of knowledge/training to deal with the subject	No knowledge or training to deal with the subject	19	17
	Has no certainty whether it refers to abuse	14	13
	Has no proof (physical evidence)	4	4
	Has difficulty in talking about the subject	1	1
	Total	38	35
No personal commitment with the subject	Does not want to become involved in students’ private matters	24	21
	Lack of time (has no time available) – complacency	8	7
	Total	32	29
School	Lack of support on the part of authorities (principals, coordination, Guardianship Council, Prosecution)	27	24
	The educator’s word has no credibility	1	1
	Total	28	25
Value the family’s autonomy/privacy	Families do not accept help	4	4
	Should not report but keep a good relationship with families	2	2
	Total	6	5.4
Missing information		10	9

Taking into account the participants who reported having already suspected child abuse (more than two thirds of the total), the subsequent questions refer to the act of reporting or not reporting suspected or actually confirmed cases of child abuse. In general, data show that the action of reporting is rare, corroborating the literature in the field showing the severe problem of underreporting in this context (Faleiros & Bazon, 2008). The procedure most frequently adopted to deal with suspected cases, according to information provided, is try to solve the situation within the school context, without reporting. In the specific case of teachers, most would rely on principals/coordinators concerning what to do and how to proceed. The latter, in turn, would primarily attempt to talk with parents/guardians or refer the child/family to professional services in the public health network. These dynamics indicate that the legal provisions related to mandatory reporting and the social meaning behind this action are poorly assimilated into the context of education.

It is a fact that, on the one hand, a good portion of the respondents (46% of principals and 42% of the teachers) did not even have access to specific legislation that impose on them the obligatory nature of reporting suspected and/or confirmed child maltreatment. On the other hand, similar proportions of principals (54%) and teachers (55%) report

knowledge of the legislation (some were also aware of the “child abuse report form”) but such knowledge seems not to impact the attitude they adopt in relation to the problem. In the opinion of those who report knowledge of the legislation, it would be important to help children and families and solve the problem of child abuse. Such an opinion shows only superficial reflection upon the content of the law and the role it attributes to them as educators. Only 9.6% of these seem to actually understand the law, perceiving its practical – and mandatory – implications on the work developed in the education field. It is perhaps one of the reasons educational professionals opt, most of time, to deal with child abuse in an informal fashion, without reporting cases.

Lack of commitment to the problem is confirmed when the respondents express their opinion concerning the practices of their colleagues (other teachers) and when they express their conceptions of the ideal way to deal with the subject. Most teachers tend to pass their concern to principals/coordinators, who in turn, decide to talk with parents and/or the children themselves or to refer the family to specialized professionals. In this context, we note that the co-responsibility that should prevail among teachers and principals/coordinators is not verified. This pattern is recurrent in the educational context in different cultural

contexts and is sometimes even formalized in the schools' regulations (Kenny, 2001, 2004; Tite, 1994; Vagostello et al., 2006).

Certainly a report of child abuse should be based on very consistent suspicions, considering the impact it has on a family. The decision-making process about whether to report a case, or not, may even require a "conversation with parents" and "children" and even referring the family to professionals. What we question is that the decision not to report cases is all the more frequent the more it is restricted to the figure of the principal/coordinator, who individually assess each situation based on his/her own beliefs and considerations concerning the subject.

In this sense, we note that even though most of the principals (64%) and teachers (66%) in the studied sample reported there was a standard procedure in their schools to deal with both suspected and confirmed child maltreatment, this procedure does not necessarily imply the subject is included in a collective and systematic agenda. According to 86% of them, the issue is discussed in schools as cases emerge, that is, occasionally. For this reason, the international scientific literature indicates the need for principals/coordinators and teachers to jointly receive training to collectively deal with cases and establish an environment conducive to reflection on cases and the identification and management of them (Goldman & Grimbeek, 2011; Horton & Cruise, 2001; Walsh et al., 2006).

Reflecting on the practices most frequently implemented at the expense of reporting, Vagostello et al. (2006) state that "being in direct contact with families" may, depending on the type of situation, result in strengthening the aggressor, giving him/her credibility and exposing the child even more. In regard to "directly referring cases to specialized professionals", this procedure may sometimes help the child, however, it does not ensure the abuse ceases or that help provided to the family will address its multiple needs. "Talking to the child" in turn, should be a procedure – implemented with much caution and an appropriate technique – aimed to help, but more importantly, to obtain more information to substantiate suspicions grounding the reporting. According to Goldman and Grimbeek (2011), education professionals need to learn "how" to protect a child and that implies obtaining specific qualifications, which, according to the authors, should be mandatory and integrated into undergraduate program curricula.

In regard to the results concerning what the participants understand by reporting, we consider that their level of understanding is due to the fact they do not report cases or report them only occasionally. Even though most principals (86%) and teachers (67%) defined the term as being a communication of information to authority, which is an appropriate conception of it (Náufel, 2000), the fact that most also use the verbs "reporting" and "denouncing" interchangeably to answer

other questions to describe the action of contacting the Guardianship Council drew our attention.

We note that the term denouncement is, in its essence, equivalent to inculcate, to accuse formally, requiring the complainant to have, to some extent, "evidence" to substantiate the blame of those involved. Reporting, on the other hand, as established by law, even though it seeks legal accountability of those responsible for the act, provides, at least in the initial stage when dealing with the problem, understanding and then help is provided to the family. Considering such differences, one can think that when reporting gains an object (communicate what?) and is contextualized (to whom and what for?), it loses its neutrality and becomes more complex, adding a new dimension to its meaning, that of denouncing, which consequently adds a new dimension to the responsibility of those reporting a case. If the action of reporting is primarily understood as denouncement, a fear of becoming involved with this type of situation may emerge and increases the chances of not reporting a case. It seems, therefore, essential to disseminate to the community in general, and especially within the educational sector, references that enable people to distinguish between reporting and denouncing, reiterating that specific legislation (Law n. 8.069, 1990; Law n. 10.498, 2000) does not employ the term denouncement.

The reasons alleged for not reporting cases corroborate the confusion existing between reporting and denouncing, since fear was clearly the main reason reported, while in 8% of the cases, it was explicitly associated with the meaning of denouncing and having to face legal consequences. In this same direction, not being absolutely positive (13%) or not having proof (physical marks on the child) (4%), included in the category lack of knowledge/training to deal with the problem, seems to equally indicate that a perspective of denouncement, of accusing the family, predominates, that is, one needs to have material evidence to proceed with reporting. This scenario greatly resembles those arising in studies conducted in other sociocultural contexts (Feng, Huang, et al., 2010; Smith, 2010; Webster et al., 2005).

Fear was also associated with the possibility of retaliation on the part of parents (33%). In the same line of reasoning of Feng, Huang, et al. (2010), concerning the situation in Taiwan, it is possible that teachers resent the difficulty of maintaining balance between the obligation of reporting (and the benefits that may accrue from it) and the risk of becoming involved in a situation that is dangerous for them. Horton and Cruise (2001) state that true threatening situations, as a consequence of reporting, are very rare, although these authors are referring to the American context.

Additionally, respondents associated fear of reporting with potential negative consequences for the child, such as being removed from school and/or being physically

punished more severely. They also reported the fear that the child would no longer trust the teacher. In regard to this aspect, Horton and Cruise (2001) note that whenever one considers there to be too many risks to submit a report, the risks are in fact probably even greater if the case goes unreported, because it certainly implies a very severe situation of abuse and neglect.

Trust in the child protection system's ability to act efficiently and promptly would help to assuage such fears. However, critiques of the system are the second most frequent allegation behind not reporting maltreatment (42%), showing there is a lack of trust in the child protection system, which is also verified in different sociocultural contexts (Feng, Fetzer, et al., 2010; Horton & Cruise, 2001).

In the Brazilian context, such lack of trust, particularly in relation to the Guardianship Council, should however, be contrasted to information the respondents themselves provided concerning the outcomes of cases they dealt with over the course of their careers, considering whether they reported the cases or not. On the one hand, there is the number of cases that improved when they were reported and concomitantly referred to specialists, and on the other hand, the number of cases in which abuse continued, considering that the management of cases did not include reporting to the Guardianship Council (Table 1).

In summary, the option to report seems to produce better outcomes than not reporting, which, however, does not seem to have been assimilated in a way to encourage improved trust in the child protection system. It is possible that this situation results, among other things, from a lack of information, especially, in regard to the outcome of cases when they are reported, considering that 30% of the principals and 37% of the teachers claimed that the Guardianship Councils do not provide any information about the progress of cases. Such a lack of communication, as noted by Feng, Huang, et al. (2010), may fuel the belief that the system is inefficient.

Considering the outcome of cases, we note that only the principals (28%) offer a conception of a solved problem (cessation of abuse); the teachers provide no such answers (Table 1). This fact, again, leads us to infer that information tends to be centralized in the figure of the principals or that the perceptions of principals and teachers, concerning to what a solved problem refers, differs. Also taking into account the degree of proximity of teachers and principals to children in the school routine (Franklin, Kim, Ryan, Kelly, & Montgomery, 2012). Hence, we once more note the lack of coordinated actions between principals and teachers, which seems to provide motivation to the latter not to report cases (and perhaps, not to become involved with the problem), claiming lack of support on the part of the school administration and a feeling of having poor credibility and, therefore, not being included in decision-making.

Finally, the reasons for not submitting a report associated with the personal values of principals and teachers, upon which a personal lack of commitment in relation to this subject is supported, totaled a considerable portion of answers (29%). It is sometimes asserted that maltreatment is a private matter of students or that there is no time available to deal with this subject. In this sense, Feng, Fetzer, et al. (2010) state that many professionals perceive reporting child abuse to be a "difficult, tedious, and dangerous" topic that requires much time. In this context, the value that the family's autonomy and privacy, concerning practices for raising children, should be defended also emerges, in claims that families do not accept help or nothing can be done, which eases a passive coexistence of the educational sector with abuse where the legal obligation to report abuse is ignored.

Final Considerations

This study's results corroborate those reported by Brazilian and international studies and evidence the huge gap between the ideal procedure, advocated by law, concerning the role of professionals from the educational sector and in the child protection system, and their conceptions and behavior in relation to cases of children suspected of experiencing abuse. This study has the merit of clearly showing how crucial it is to promote specific qualification in the topic of child abuse within the educational context and directed to teachers, coordinators and principals, with an ability to change beliefs, values, and attitudes to enable these professionals to support each other in actions concerning child maltreatment (Faleiros et al., 2009; Horton & Cruise, 2001; Smith, 2010). In this sense, it is essential that future studies systematically experiment regarding qualification projects and assess their efficiency on this topic as directed to educational professionals, whether at the level of university courses, undergraduate programs, or in-service training.

This study presents some methodological limitations that should be considered. Even though a significant number of participants were included, especially if we consider the cities where the study was conducted, it is important to acknowledge that the universe of the educational sector is much larger and complex. We note, for instance, the fact that this study was restricted to the public sector, which certainly added some bias. Additionally, data were collected through self-reported questionnaires with closed and open questions. It is known that this method increases the chances of obtaining "convenient" answers at the expense of more spontaneous answers. We attempted to circumvent this limitation using the following procedures: anonymous questionnaires and voluntary participation, in addition to verbal and written guarantees (free and informed consented forms) that information would be confidential. Nonetheless,

further research should strive to better understand the characteristics related to schools and children, as well as parents/caregivers, who can influence the identification and management of cases, to understand the position of the educational sector more deeply in relation to violence and provide better grounding for an inclusive and effective public policy.

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