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When fear silences teachers: Inaction on child sexual abuse and consequences for learners

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Background: Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a pervasive global issue affecting millions of children and undermining their access to care, psychosocial support, and education. In South Africa, the *Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007* designates teachers as mandatory reporters of suspected or disclosed CSA. However, the sensitivity of such cases often results in under-reporting.

Aim: This study explored primary school teachers' perceptions of their competence in managing CSA disclosures and examined how teacher self-efficacy influences reporting behaviour.

Setting: The research was conducted in South African primary schools, involving participants from diverse school-based roles.

Methods: A qualitative, phenomenological design was adopted. Data were gathered through in-depth individual and focus group interviews with 15 purposively selected participants, including class teachers, life skills educators, Heads of Department, School Management Team members, and School-Based Support Team members. Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's framework.

Results: Findings indicated that CSA disclosures are relatively common in schools, yet many teachers feel ill-equipped to respond. Perceived incompetence stemmed from limited skills, inadequate knowledge, insufficient institutional support, and a lack of clear reporting guidelines, all of which hinder teachers' willingness and ability to act.

Conclusion: Despite legal obligations, teachers often feel unprepared to handle CSA disclosures, revealing significant gaps in training and systemic support.

Contribution: The study underscores the need for comprehensive teacher training and supportive institutional frameworks to strengthen competence, confidence, and responsiveness to CSA, thereby promoting safer school environments for vulnerable learners.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse; mandatory reporting; teacher competence; teacher self-efficacy; educational neglect; disclosure handling; primary education; phenomenological study; South Africa; teacher training.

Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO 2022), an estimated 120 million children experienced sexual abuse in 2022. Moreover, the International Child Sexual Exploitation Database emphasised the global magnitude of the issue, reporting that millions of children worldwide are subjected to sexual abuse. In addition, the Interpol and End Child Prostitution and Trafficking (ECPAT 2018) database contains over 2.7 million media files documenting instances of child sexual abuse (CSA) from across the globe. In South America, a total of 20.7% of adolescents aged between 12 and 17 have reported being sexually abused (Van der Kooij 2017). In 2017, Pakistan reported an increase of 10% in the reported CSA cases, with 11 children abused each day (Hasan 2017), and Turkey also reported an increase from 10.4% in 2016 to 12.1% in the same year (Turkish Statistical Institute 2017 in Citak Tunc et al. 2018). Reviewing CSA cases presenting in the paediatric department in Singapore, Lee et al. (2021) uncovered that a total of 790 patients accounted for 833 visits related to CSA. Of the total reported victims in the study, the majority were girls (747 out of 788; 94.8%). Regarding perpetrators, most were men (763 out of 790 identified perpetrators; 96.6%). The number of perpetrators slightly exceeds the number of victims because of some cases involving multiple offenders. Percentages were calculated based on the total number of victims and perpetrators reported separately. In 315 cases (39.9%), the abuse began before the victims reached the age of 13, which is the age that aligns with this study's focus.

The 2016 Optimus Study, which provided the first national estimates of CSA prevalence in South Africa, found that at least 784 967 children had experienced sexual abuse by the age of 17 (Ward et al. 2018). In the 2019–2020 reporting period, the South African Police Service (SAPS) recorded approximately 24 000 cases of CSA (Mahlakoana 2020). Furthermore, according to the Department of Social Development (2025), a total of 26 852 cases of child abuse and neglect were reported during the 2024–2025 financial year, with 9859 of these involving confirmed incidents of CSA.

Reporting child sexual abuse

Addressing CSA disclosures demands the active involvement of all community stakeholders, as such incidents severely impact the safety and overall well-being of affected children (Ahmed et al. 2021). According to Preston et al. (2019), teachers have a legal responsibility to report any suspected cases of child abuse. Boyana and Khua (2025) further emphasise the critical role of schools, as key community stakeholders, in the prevention, identification and reporting of CSA – particularly because children spend the majority of their day in school, where teachers act in loco parentis. In the South African context, school days typically run from Monday to Friday, with a minimum of 7 h per day (Republic of South Africa [RSA] 2015). In contrast, countries such as France, South Korea, Kenya and Ghana have an average school day of 8 h (Hughes & Chamberlain 2023). Given this extensive daily interaction, teachers are uniquely positioned to identify, prevent and report CSA, as they are able to form trusting relationships with learners and educate them on body safety and protective behaviours (Ahmed et al. 2021; RSA 2019).

The role of being a teacher encompasses many responsibilities and obligations concerning the teacher-learner relationship. These obligations and responsibilities spread beyond delivering the curriculum. The South African Council for Educators (SACE 2020) describes the qualities of a responsible teacher. South African Council for Educators (2020) states that a responsible teacher is proficient in identifying learner challenges, providing appropriate interventions for the challenges, and being adept in dealing with vulnerable learners. Child sexual abuse is a global phenomenon that leaves child victims extremely vulnerable (Citak Tunc et al. 2018; Fergusson, McLeod & Horwood 2013) and in need of timeous, holistic intervention.

The Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) identifies sexual abuse as a significant barrier to children's development and academic achievement (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2014). In line with this, teachers are legally mandated to report any reasonable suspicions or disclosures of CSA, as outlined in Section 10 of *the Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007* (RSA 2007b). This legislation requires educators to report suspected or confirmed cases of CSA to a designated child protection agency or law enforcement official. Furthermore, the DBE's Protocol for the Management and Reporting of Sexual Abuse and Harassment in Schools (DBE 2019) stipulates that teachers must create and maintain a safe and confidential environment for learners to disclose incidents of sexual abuse. Nonetheless, Capa-Aydin, Uzuntiryaki-Kondakci and Ceylandag (2018) argue that teachers must possess both competence and confidence to respond to CSA effectively and appropriately.

Randall (2019) purports that disclosure of CSA to an adult necessitates the protection of the child victim by minimising the abuse and ensuring that the victim receives the necessary support services. While it is mandatory for teachers to report CSA (*Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007*; *SACE Act 31 of 2000*; *SIAS policy of 2014*), findings of a study conducted in Israel indicate that teachers often feel overwhelmed when dealing with CSA (Tener & Sigad 2019). Research has also shown that not all cases that learners disclose to teachers are reported to the responsible authorities. Moreover, research also links the likelihood of reporting to the teachers' competence regarding the reporting procedures, among other factors (Burton & Leoschut 2013; Mpanza 2021; Olamide 2012; Preston et al. 2019).

Understanding child sexual abuse

The definition of child sexual abuse

The lack of collective awareness about CSA dynamics increases the risk of its continuation and recurrence (Mathews et al. 2015). The capacity of stakeholders such as policymakers, researchers and communities to respond to and prevent CSA has been limited because of the numerous conceptualisations of the phenomenon across cultures and contexts (Mathews & Collin-Vézina 2019; Murray, Nguyen & Cohen 2014). Nadan, Spilsbury and Korbin (2015) contend that for CSA to be understood, the involved people's holistic contexts, including their values and belief systems, should be explored. In South Africa's culturally diverse society, cultural norms, shapes and beliefs can shape whether teachers see CSA as something that must be reported, how they interpret what children share, and the potential emotional or social outcomes they foresee (Alazri, Eisenhauer & Hanna 2021).

It is important to consider the specific international instruments, such as the *United Kingdom and Wales Sexual Offences Act of 2003*, *India's Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 32 of 2012* (POCSO), the WHO (2003) definition and South Africa's Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) *Amendment Act of 2007* – because they reflect globally recognised legal and policy frameworks that shape how CSA is defined and understood. Although these instruments differ slightly, particularly in the legal age of consent (e.g. 16 years in some jurisdictions versus 18 years in others), they collectively highlight the worldwide recognition of CSA as a serious defilement of children's rights. Considering these definitions allows for a broader and more nuanced understanding of CSA that goes beyond national boundaries, facilitating cross-contextual comparison, aligning with international child protection standards, and reinforcing the importance of protecting all individuals

below the age of 18, as per the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This comparative approach strengthens the conceptual foundation of CSA in the South African context and supports informed advocacy, policy development and legal reform. The perpetrator in the case of CSA can be any gender, adult or child, stranger, family member, peer or close friend (Murray et al. 2014; Sigad & Tener 2022), and they employ the use of coercion, force or threats, and the use of a position of trust and authority to abuse the child.

The working definition of child sexual abuse (CSA) in this study draws on Mathews and Collin-Vézina's (2019) conceptual model and the World Health Organization's (2003) definition, both of which highlight CSA as a violation of a child's trust, safety, and developmental readiness. In alignment with South African law (Republic of South Africa, 2007b), CSA is defined as any sexual act, whether contact or non-contact, involving a minor who is under the legal age of consent or lacks the developmental capacity to give informed consent or comprehend the nature of the act. Such abuse often entails the use of coercion, force, threats, or an abuse of power and authority to satisfy the perpetrator's sexual needs.

Effects of abuse and child sexual abuse on the well-being of victims

Beyond school settings, CSA can take more extreme forms, such as child sex trafficking and online sexual exploitation. These crimes often occur at home or outside school hours, making them harder to detect (Boyana & Khau 2025). Online CSA includes grooming and the sharing of abuse material, while trafficking involves coercing children into sexual exploitation, often by someone they trust. Although less visible, these forms of abuse have severe psychological and emotional consequences and highlight the need for broader, community-based protection strategies.

Child sexual abuse has long and short-term consequences that can be detrimental to the lives of child victims (Barth et al. 2013). In addition to altered behaviour patterns, CSA harms various domains of the child's functioning (physical health and psychological well-being). Joleby et al. (2020) argue that both online and offline CSA lead to psychological harm in victims. The impact affects the child in more than one sphere of their lives. At school, a decrease in learning motivation, increased delinquency, poor academic performance and limited school attendance or heightened absenteeism have been observed. Victims also exhibit behaviour changes which include aggressive behaviour, passivity, suicidal behaviour, self-harm and social withdrawal. The children's mental health is harmed in many ways; this harm includes post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, low self-esteem and poor self-concept, conduct disorder, poor sleeping patterns and inappropriate sexual behaviour (Barth et al. 2013; Duffy et al. 2015; Joleby et al. 2020). Results from a study by Lo Iacono, Trentini and Carola (2021) indicate that CSA has a psychobiological impact on the victim, which includes dysfunctional cellular processes, hypothalamic-pituitary dysfunction and immune system dysfunction. Given the profound psychological and physiological impact of CSA on children, it becomes critical to examine how those in key protective roles, such as teachers perceive and act upon their responsibilities in responding to such disclosures. The aim of the study is discussed below.

Aim

This qualitative study explored how primary school teachers in Gauteng perceive their ability to fulfil their mandatory duty of reporting disclosed cases of CSA, as outlined in *the Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007* (RSA 2007a). It also seeks to determine whether guidelines can be developed to support and empower teachers in responding effectively to CSA. The study examined teacher self-efficacy as a cognitive factor influencing their response in dealing with such disclosures.

Theoretical framework

This study extends the work presented in the author's Master's dissertation (Gumbo 2023), which investigated teachers' competency to respond to CSA disclosures, and it is grounded in Albert Bandura's theory of self-efficacy. Teacher efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to successfully perform a specific task (Bandura 1997). According to the theory, individuals are less likely to engage in situations where they believe their competence is inadequate. In the context of CSA disclosures, teachers' perceptions of their own competence will influence how they respond; their actions are shaped by their perceived self-efficacy and their expectations regarding the outcomes of those actions (Lopez-Garrido 2020). Bandura (1997) identifies four primary sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion and physiological states.

Mastery experiences refer to a teacher's personal history in managing CSA disclosures, which significantly influences how they approach similar situations in the future. Successful experiences in handling such cases tend to strengthen self-efficacy, whereas repeated failures may lead to a decline in confidence. Vicarious experiences, on the other hand, involve learning through observing others' successes or failures in responding to CSA disclosures. In line with Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, witnessing others effectively manage these situations can bolster an individual's belief in their capabilities, while observing unsuccessful attempts may reduce their perceived competence. Applied to this study, when teachers observe their colleagues effectively handling CSA cases, it may boost their own sense of self-efficacy, whereas observing unsuccessful responses could lower it.

Verbal persuasion refers to the influence exerted by others to encourage individuals to take specific actions based on certain expectations. Within the context of this study, teachers who receive CSA disclosures may be persuaded to act, for example, by reporting the abuse to child protection authorities. The likelihood of action being taken may depend on the perceived credibility and reliability of the individual

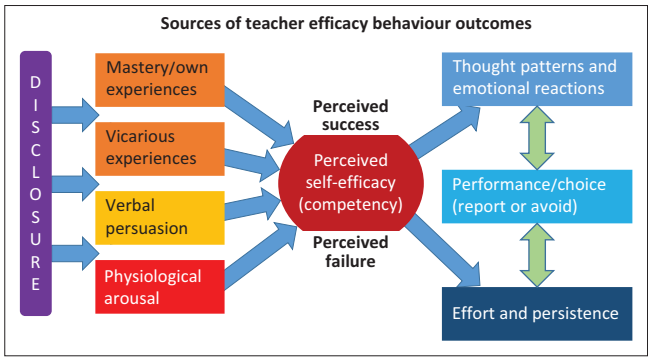
offering the persuasion; conversely, a teacher may choose not to report the abuse if advised against it by a trusted source. Lastly, physiological information pertains to how teachers interpret their emotional and physical states. For instance, feelings of anxiety may be perceived as indicators of personal inadequacy or a lack of competence (Bandura 1997).

The framework shown in Figure 1 serves as a guide to understanding teachers' competence in responding to CSA disclosures.

The diagram shown in Figure 1, adapted from Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, illustrates the development of teachers' confidence in their ability to respond appropriately to disclosures of CSA and how these beliefs shape their behaviour. A teacher's perceived self-efficacy is influenced by four primary sources: mastery experiences (personal past experiences), vicarious experiences (observing others), verbal persuasion (encouragement or influence from others) and physiological arousal (emotional and physical responses such as stress or anxiety). When these factors contribute to a sense of success, teachers are more likely to develop a strong belief in their capabilities, which positively affects their thinking, emotional responses and willingness to act, such as reporting abuse, and to maintain consistent effort. Conversely, perceived failure can diminish self-efficacy, potentially resulting in hesitation or inaction. The vertical 'DISCLOSURE' element highlights the pivotal moment when a child reveals abuse, underscoring the crucial role of teachers' self-efficacy in facilitating a supportive and appropriate response.

Research methods and design

A qualitative study rooted in a phenomenological design was employed to gather in-depth insights into how primary school teachers perceive their competency in responding to CSA disclosures and their lived experiences. This study is located within the interpretivist paradigm, as described by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018), which provides a framework for exploring individually unique, context-bound interpretations shaped by socio-cultural and socio-spatial factors; this paradigm is used here to examine how teachers interpret and deal with CSA disclosures in their specific contexts. As a deliberate point of departure, the study concentrated on teachers working in predominantly black communities in Gauteng, acknowledging the unique dynamics that may influence disclosure and response in these settings. This focus also opens avenues for future research to explore how these experiences may compare across different racial, cultural and socio-economic communities.



Source: Bandura, A., 1997, *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*, W.H. Freeman and Company, New York, NY

FIGURE 1: Teachers' understanding of child sexual abuse illustration adapted from the self-efficacy theory.

Setting

The research was carried out in Gauteng province, South Africa. Two mainstream primary schools located in the townships of Soweto and Diepsloot were chosen as the study sites. The school in Soweto serves learners from both middle-class and underprivileged backgrounds, primarily within black communities. The second school, located in Diepsloot, is situated in an informal, economically disadvantaged area, also predominantly inhabited by black communities.

Data collection

The data presented in this article were originally collected as part of the author's Master's dissertation at the University of Johannesburg (Gumbo 2023). To gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing teacher efficacy in responding to CSA disclosures within the school environment, data were gathered from 15 primary school teachers. These participants were purposively selected from a broader group of educators, including class teachers, life skills teachers and members of the School-Based Support Team (SBST) and School Management Team (SMT). According to the DBE (2008), teachers are bound to report to the SMT, any events that are beyond their scope of teaching and learning in the classroom environment. These participants were therefore selected because of their role in dealing with learners' psycho-emotional and psychosocial needs as outlined in the Educator Code of Professional Ethics (*SACE Act 31 of 2000*), and the Policy on South African Standard for Principalship (RSA 2015).

In-depth, semi-structured interviews (the main data collection tool) and focus group interviews per school (used for data triangulation) were employed as data collection tools. Interviews with the participants were 40–45 min long, followed by focus groups, which were also held per school to discuss the phenomenon further. In harmony with what is stated by Cohen et al. (2018), in this study, the in-depth interviews allowed a deep, personal exploration of each teacher's individual experiences, beliefs and interpretations regarding CSA disclosures, offering rich, nuanced insights into their perspectives. In contrast, the focus group interviews provided a collaborative setting where shared understandings, social dynamics and differing viewpoints could emerge, highlighting commonalities and divergences across participants. The combination of these methods enriched the data by enabling cross-validation, enhancing credibility and offering a more comprehensive understanding of the complex, context-specific ways in which teachers make sense of and deal with CSA disclosures.

Data analysis

An inductive method was used to analyse the data, allowing the researcher to interpret the qualitative information and identify themes relevant to the research questions. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The first step involved becoming thoroughly familiar with the interview data by repeatedly reading the transcripts, making notes and identifying recurring patterns in the teachers' responses regarding their perceived competence in handling disclosures of CSA.

In step 2, initial colour-coded labels were created based on similarities found in the participants' responses, which were then grouped into possible themes during step 3. Step 4 involved reviewing these themes at two levels: firstly, by examining specific excerpts from the interviews to identify consistent patterns (Wagner, Kawulich & Garner 2012), and secondly, by assessing whether the themes accurately represented the teachers' perceptions of their ability to respond to CSA disclosures. Each theme was carefully analysed to determine its meaning and how it related to the participants' views. In step 5, sub-themes were identified within the broader themes. Finally, step six involved compiling the findings into a written report that offered a clear, structured and meaningful interpretation of the overarching narrative presented by the data (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee of the University of Johannesburg (ref. no. SEM1-2023-074). Participation in both the individual in-depth interviews and the focus group discussions was entirely voluntary. In line with ethical guidelines outlined by Wagner et al. (2012), the study's purpose, procedures and potential implications were clearly explained to prospective participants to ensure informed consent. To maintain participants' confidentiality and uphold their privacy, identity protection was achieved through the use of coded identifiers. Codes were systematically assigned based on the data collection method and group classification to support both confidentiality and organised data analysis. Participants in individual interviews were labelled as IIP (Individual Interview Participant), followed by a unique letter (e.g. IIPA, IIPB, IIPC) to differentiate between them. Likewise, focus group participants were coded according to their group number and position within the group – for instance, FG1P represented a participant from focus group 1, with individuals coded as FG1PA, FG1PB, and so on. This structured coding approach ensured accurate attribution of responses while safeguarding participant anonymity.

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, a psychologist was available at no cost to provide debriefing sessions for participants if the interviews caused any emotional distress or triggered past trauma. However, no participants made use of this support. All participants provided written consent for the audio recording of the interviews. In order to preserve the authenticity and accurately reflect participants' perspectives, some responses are presented verbatim. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose and the limitations of confidentiality in focus group settings. They also signed a group confidentiality agreement, committing not to disclose any information shared during the discussions.

Results and discussion

This section presents the themes that emerged from the data analysis, accompanied by direct quotes from participants and supported by relevant literature. Table 1 provides a summary of the main themes and their corresponding sub-themes identified in the study.

Theme 1: Teachers' existing patterns of involvement in child sexual abuse disclosures

The results from this study indicate the impact of teachers' perceived level of competency on their response to CSA disclosures. From the data analysis, it emerged that CSA disclosures are common in schools; however, teachers' responses to these disclosures differ. Three categories of involvement were established, and these include direct involvement, indirect involvement and bystander effect, and are discussed below.

Sub-theme 1.1: Direct involvement

All participants indicated that they have dealt with CSA in one way or another in their teaching career. Teachers are directly involved when a learner (victim or friend of the victim) directly informs them (they would have to follow up) on a one-on-one basis that there is a case of sexual abuse. Three of the 15 participants' responses, of which two are quoted, alluded to this sub-theme when they noted the following:

FG2PA said:

> 'Yes, one of my learners was sexually molested by her older cousin.' (48 years old, Female, Hod in the Foundation Phase)

In concurrence, FG2PC said:

> 'My involvement happened when one of my learners accused a fellow learner of raping her outside the school setting.' (47 years old, Male, Life Skills teacher in the Foundation Phase)

TABLE 1: Summary of themes and corresponding sub-themes.

Themes	Sub-themes	Number of responses out of 15 per sub-theme
1. Teachers' existing patterns of involvement in CSA disclosures	1.1 Direct involvement	15
	1.2 Indirect involvement	9
	1.3 Bystander effect	13
2. Teachers lack the competence to deal with CSA disclosures	2.1 Lack of skills, knowledge and information	15
	2.2 No support and teamwork from management and colleagues	15

CSA, child sexual abuse.

Sub-theme 1.2: Indirect involvement

Nine participants who were not directly involved in handling a CSA disclosure reported offering guidance to colleagues on managing such situations in the classroom or addressing them in their roles as Heads of Department (HODs), SBST coordinators or grade leaders. In contrast, three participants admitted that, despite recognising signs of abuse, they chose not to report, investigate or intervene, adopting a passive, bystander approach. This was supported by their responses:

> 'Uh … indirectly, I would say. A teacher reported a disclosure to me in my role as part of the school's senior management team.' (58 years old, Female, HoD in the Foundation Phase)

In concurrence, FG2PB said:

> 'Not directly, but indirectly. A student in my class confided in my colleague about being raped by her father. My colleague then shared the information with me, and I advised them to report it to the principal.' (52 years old, Female, SBST coordinator)

However, FG2PA expressed that she did not take any action after noticing signs related to CSA. She said:

> 'I won't report cases where there are only signs, like specific smells I recognize, because I'm afraid that speaking up could get me into trouble. If a child doesn't disclose anything, I feel there's nothing I can do.' (48 years old, female, HoD in the Foundation Phase)

This was also supported by FG2PB, who said:

> 'You feel compelled to ask the child what happened … and then they disclose. But what are you supposed to do after that? Sometimes, it feels easier to just stay out of it.' (52 years old, Female, SBST coordinator)

These responses support the assertion made by Kruger and Spies (2006) and Ahmed et al. (2021), who note that teachers are in a key position to recognise and report cases of CSA, as their role enables them to form trusting relationships with learners and attend to their individual needs (SACE 2017). Similarly, Sigad and Tener (2022) observed that teachers frequently encounter instances of CSA as part of their daily professional responsibilities. Boyana and Khua (2025) also mentioned that there is a high likelihood that teachers will encounter victims of abuse in their classrooms and that fear and uncertainty of how to go about it may hinder the disclosure process.

Sub-theme 1.3: Bystander effect

The study's findings also reveal that, although teachers are likely to come across cases of CSA, not all incidents are reported to the appropriate authorities. Thirteen out of the 15 teachers expressed a lack of confidence in reporting such cases to child protection services. As a result, they chose to report the matter to the school's senior management and subsequently withdrew themselves from further involvement.

Individual Interview Participant E said:

> 'I would need to report it to my HOD, and she would then guide the process. It's a bit challenging to handle it on my own, you know.' (45 years old, Female, Foundation phase teacher)

In concurrence, FG1PD commented:

> 'Even when you report it to a superior or a colleague, you're still just telling another teacher who also doesn't know how to handle it. So sometimes, it feels easier to just leave it alone.' (46 years old, Female, Foundation Phase class teacher)

Echoing IIPE and FG1PD, FG2PC said:

> 'You can report it to the appropriate person, but in the end, you're putting yourself in danger. With all the corruption, even case files go missing while in police custody, and your name could be given to the perpetrator. You risk your life for trying to help a child. So sometimes, it feels safer to just stay silent.' (47 years old, Male, Life Skills teacher in the Foundation Phase)

These responses support Kruger and Spies' (2006), Olamide's (2012) and Alazri et al.'s (2021) findings that awareness of mandatory reporting does not always lead to action. A key reason identified in this study is that teachers fear for their personal safety after reporting CSA, especially in close-knit communities where retaliation is possible. This highlights a gap in the system: while teachers are legally required to report, they are not always protected when they do so. For reporting to be effective, the system must ensure teachers are supported through clear protocols, law enforcement cooperation and institutional backing. The findings in Theme 1 of this study, which highlighted the varying degrees of teachers' involvement in response to CSA disclosures, ranging from direct involvement, indirect involvement, to a bystander effect, align closely with Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory as outlined in the illustration shown in Figure 1. Bandura explains that a teacher's confidence in their ability to respond appropriately is influenced by various factors, including previous experiences, observing the actions of others, verbal reinforcement and emotional reactions. Together, these elements contribute to the development of the teacher's sense of self-efficacy. In this study, teachers with higher perceived competency, likely influenced by positive mastery experiences or support systems, were more directly involved in responding to disclosures. Conversely, those with lower self-efficacy may have experienced stress, uncertainty or a lack of prior success, resulting in indirect involvement or complete inaction (bystander effect). Thus, the variation in teacher responses observed in the data can be understood as reflective of differing levels of self-efficacy, reinforcing Bandura's assertion that perceived competence strongly influences thought patterns, emotional reactions and ultimately, behaviour in critical situations like CSA disclosures.

Theme 2: Teachers lack the competency to deal with child sexual abuse disclosures

Sub-theme 2.1: Lack of skills, knowledge and information

Effectively responding to CSA disclosures requires teachers to possess the necessary competencies, as their perceived

ability to handle such cases significantly impacts how they respond following a disclosure (Capa-Aydin et al. 2018; Lopez-Garrido 2020). Thirteen out of the 15 teachers felt they were not adequately equipped to manage CSA disclosures, citing a lack of training, knowledge, skills and information. The following participant responses illustrate this theme.

Individual Interview Participant D said:

> 'I'm not confident in my abilities. When it comes to handling a case like that – especially in a primary school where the learners are so young – you often don't even know what questions to ask. What are you supposed to ask the child? And when they respond, how do you interpret that? What steps should you take next?' (58 years old, Female, Hod in the Foundation phase)

In unanimity, FG2PC suggested the following:

> 'The group felt lacking in competence and expressed a need to receive guidance from someone to help chart a way forward.' (47 years old, Male, Life Skills teacher)

Echoing IIPD and FG2PC, FG2PE said:

> 'As a teacher, it's challenging for me when a child discloses something like this. I don't even know where to begin. It's a whole different kind of difficulty for me.' (47 years old, Male, Life Skills teacher)

All 15 participants acknowledged a lack of in-service training, skills, information and knowledge necessary to handle CSA cases, which contributed to their belief that they would be ineffective in responding to disclosures. They expressed feeling unprepared to manage such situations, noting that they were unfamiliar with the appropriate procedures to follow when a child reports abuse. This lack of guidance not only hinders their ability to provide proper support to CSA victims but also undermines their confidence and perceived competence. Concurring with the findings from Radford, Allnock and Hynes (2015) regarding lack of training to report CSA. Participants further stated that the absence of training in CSA reporting makes it particularly challenging to assist their learners. The following responses reflect this perceived lack of skills and preparation in dealing with CSA disclosures.

Individual Interview Participant C said:

> 'You know, we haven't been trained for this, so it's not easy. If I had to rate myself on a scale from 1 to 10, I'd give myself a 3.' (63 years old, Female, Vice principal)

In agreement, FG1PB said:

> 'We haven't received training, and I believe that's the biggest challenge, yes.' (58 years old, Male, class teacher)

FG2PA also said:

> 'We feel incompetent because we don't have the proper tools and resources to manage cases like these.' (48 years old, Female, Hod in the Foundation phase)

In concurrence, FG2PB said:

> 'Without the necessary knowledge and skills, it becomes challenging. Teachers tend to hold back and hesitate to take the initiative in trying to assist or learn more to support the child.' (52 years old, Female, SBST coordinator)

FG2PA mentioned that the lack of training also influences the advice they give each other as colleagues:

> 'However, I simply told the teacher that because we are not professionals and lack training, we don't know how to manage such situations.' (48 years old, Female, Hod in the Foundation phase)

These responses support the findings of Lu et al. (2022), who highlighted that despite teachers being well placed to address CSA, certain factors, such as insufficient training and limited knowledge on identifying and reporting abuse, hinder their active involvement. The responses also confirm Tener and Sigad's (2019) study's findings in Israel, indicating that teachers grappled with confusion and struggled to deal with CSA disclosures because they lacked information and training. However, Kruger and Spies (2006), and Hupe and Stevenson (2019) argue that a lack of training and information are not the only factors that hinder teachers from reporting CSA; personal beliefs and biases have a great influence on the teachers' reporting behaviours. Ayling, Walsh and Williams (2020) also argue that the decision to report is not solely determined by the level of knowledge a teacher has and that it stretches beyond knowledge and training.

Sub-theme 2.2: No support and teamwork from management and colleagues

All 15 teachers reported a lack of support from their colleagues and an absence of collaboration in responding to CSA disclosures. They stressed that insufficient backing from fellow staff members and school management significantly influences how they respond to such cases. Their feedback indicates that when teachers believe they will not receive the necessary support after reporting, they are less likely to refer the matter to the child protection service. Although this aspect was not explored, the findings align with those of Sawrikar and Katz (2017), who identified institutional culture as a potential barrier to the effective reporting of CSA cases. The following responses suggest the aforementioned theme.

Individual Interview Participant C shared a colleague's experience as she related her concern:

> 'The teacher followed the proper protocol by reporting to the principal, but the case was dismissed, and we were told that the school would not be involved and wanted to stay out of it.' (63 years old, Female, Vice principal)

Individual Interview Participant E concurred and said:

> 'When you share the story with your fellow teachers, no one encourages you by saying, "Go ahead, you have our support." Instead, they all warn you about the risks involved in handling cases like this.' (45 years old, Female, Foundation phase teacher)

FG1PD also agreed with IIPE and IIPC when he said:

> 'At our school, 95% of the staff would tell you to leave it alone because you'll be facing it alone, while only 5% would support

and help you. So, the chances are already stacked against you.' (45 years old, Female, Hod in the Foundation phase)

These findings align with those of a study conducted in Israel by Tener and Sigad (2019), in which teachers expressed a lack of social support following a disclosure. They reported feeling isolated in the process of reporting and supporting the victim, with one participant noting: 'I felt like I was thrown into the deep end' when a learner disclosed being abused. The results also confirm what Kruger and Spies (2006) and Alazri et al. (2021) alluded to when they said teachers are bound to report cases of CSA when they are fully supported by the school personnel (management and colleagues).

Randall (2019) argues that reporting CSA to the appropriate authorities is essential for ensuring the protection of the child victim, facilitating access to necessary support and preventing further abuse. The findings of this study support the view that teachers are in a strong position to identify, report and assist child victims of CSA (Ahmed et al. 2021), as all participants had previously encountered at least one such case. However, the results also reveal that, despite the legal requirement for teachers to report CSA under *the Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007* (RSA 2007a), compliance is not always achieved. Many teachers reported feeling ill-equipped to handle these situations. This supports existing literature, which highlights that teachers often lack the skills, knowledge and institutional support needed to respond effectively to CSA disclosures (Alazri et al. 2021; Rule 2017). Furthermore, Abrahams et al. (2004), as cited in Goebbels et al. (2008), pointed out that while insufficient training can affect reporting behaviour, even high levels of knowledge may either enhance, hinder or have no impact on whether teachers report CSA. This suggests that legal mandates alone are not enough to ensure consistent reporting by teachers (Alazri et al. 2021).

The findings related to the second theme can be effectively interpreted using Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, which emphasises that individuals' beliefs in their abilities influence how they behave. The theory identifies four primary sources that contribute to self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal encouragement and emotional or physiological states. In this study, the perceived lack of competence in managing CSA disclosures, reported by 13 of the 15 teachers, indicates a deficiency in mastery experiences and inadequate training. This, in turn, undermines their sense of self-efficacy. Furthermore, the absence of support from colleagues and school management, noted by all 15 teachers, indicates a lack of verbal persuasion and social reinforcement, both of which are essential in building a strong sense of efficacy. Without this support and prior success in similar situations, teachers are more likely to experience self-doubt or emotional distress (physiological arousal), which may lead them to avoid taking action, such as reporting to child protection services. This aligns with Bandura's assertion that low self-efficacy can result in inaction or avoidance. In addition, the influence of unsupportive institutional culture echoes the findings of Sawrikar and Katz (2017), who identified systemic barriers within schools as impediments to effective CSA reporting, further reinforcing how environmental and relational factors shape teachers' confidence and actions.

Overall, this study's findings suggest that teachers' low self-efficacy and lack of support in dealing with CSA disclosures can lead to educational neglect through missed learning opportunities for affected learners. When teachers feel unprepared, unsupported or uncertain about how to act, disclosures may go unreported or improperly addressed. When teachers do not respond appropriately, learners are often left without the critical psychosocial support needed to help them cope with the trauma of abuse. Without timely intervention, the emotional and psychological consequences of CSA, such as anxiety, social withdrawal, difficulty concentrating and behavioural issues, can significantly disrupt a child's ability to participate in and benefit from classroom learning. This ultimately impacts both their academic development and overall well-being. The inaction resulting from low self-efficacy thus perpetuates a cycle in which trauma is unaddressed, and children are left to struggle in silence, effectively leading to systemic educational neglect. Moreover, the absence of a collaborative and supportive institutional culture, as highlighted by the teachers, further isolates both educators and learners. When schools lack a coordinated approach to safeguarding, including strong referral systems and interprofessional teamwork, they fail to create a protective environment conducive to healing and learning. In this way, the combined effects of inadequate teacher training, low perceived competency and institutional inaction contribute to the ongoing marginalisation of vulnerable learners, with long-term consequences for their education and life outcomes.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the findings of this study and are tailored to the South African context. The results indicate that CSA disclosures are frequent in South African primary schools; however, teachers generally view themselves as lacking the necessary competence to effectively handle such disclosures within the school setting. The results also suggest that some cases disclosed to teachers remain unreported to child protection services because teachers feel they are incapable of effectively dealing with such a task. It is therefore essential to offer in-service training for teachers to equip them with the skills and knowledge required to handle CSA cases within the school environment. Such training could involve supplying educators with relevant resources to enhance their understanding, such as the Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Sexual Violence and Harassment in Public Schools (DBE 2008). Additionally, it is recommended that the DBE create opportunities for teachers to participate in external in-service workshops on CSA reporting, facilitated by community-based organisations like Childline and the TEARS (Transform Education About Rape & Sexual Abuse) Foundation.

A similar recommendation applies to pre-service teacher education. It is essential to integrate comprehensive training on CSA into initial teacher education programmes to prepare future teachers before they enter the profession. The training should incorporate practical instruction, scenario-based exercises and review of relevant policy documents – such as the Guidelines for Prevention and Management of Sexual Violence and Harassment in Public Schools (DBE 2008) – to enhance teachers' awareness, boost their confidence and develop effective strategies for responding to CSA within the school environment.

Contributions

There is a lack of research examining teachers' competency in fulfilling their legal duty as mandatory reporters of CSA (RSA 2007a) in South Africa. This study adds to the existing knowledge on CSA reporting within the South African school setting. The findings reveal a gap between teachers' perceived ability to handle CSA cases and their legal responsibility to report any suspected or disclosed abuse as required by South African law (RSA 2007b). According to the 2018–2019 sexual abuse statistics released by SAPS, 24 387 children were sexually abused during that period (Mahlakoana 2020), while Interpol reported that fewer than 1% of sexual assaults are officially reported in South Africa (News24 2014). These figures highlight the widespread nature of CSA, yet only a small fraction of cases are reported and prosecuted successfully. Ahmed et al. (2021) argue that teachers are in a strong position to support the prevention, identification and reporting of CSA. However, the teachers in this study felt they lacked the necessary competence to effectively manage CSA, which may impede their likelihood of reporting cases to the appropriate authorities.

This study contributes to the field by identifying a significant gap: the need for more research focused on effective approaches to enhance teachers' perceived competency in managing CSA. By establishing the connection between teachers' confidence and their reporting behaviour, the findings highlight a promising area for future investigation aimed at boosting teachers' preparedness and willingness to respond to CSA disclosures. Additionally, the results indicate a clear need for further research on context-specific training programmes that can be implemented in South African schools to provide teachers with the essential knowledge and skills to handle CSA cases effectively.

Limitations

The study was limited by its small sample size, involving only 15 primary school teachers from two township schools. As a result, while the findings offer insight into teachers' perceptions of their ability to report CSA, they cannot be generalised to the broader teaching population in Gauteng or across South Africa. The results are specific to the particular context, and given the diversity of schools nationwide, teachers' experiences and perceptions of CSA disclosures may differ from those captured in this study. Although the research successfully explored participants' experiences, perceptions and emotions, it focused solely on cases where CSA was disclosed. Investigating teachers' views on their competency in identifying and reporting undisclosed CSA in the classroom might have yielded different insights. Considering the context-specific nature of the findings, further research is recommended on teachers' competency in handling CSA disclosures in public mainstream schools, special needs schools and full-service schools across various provinces.

Conclusion

This study sought to examine teachers' perceptions of their competency in responding to CSA disclosures. The findings reveal that teachers generally view themselves as lacking the necessary skills, knowledge, support and information to effectively handle CSA cases within the school setting. However, existing literature suggests that barriers to reporting extend beyond inadequate training and lack of support, also involving subjective factors such as personal beliefs and biases (Goebbels et al. 2008; Hupe & Stevenson 2019; Kruger & Spies 2006; Mathews et al. 2013). The results further indicate that these concerns may lead to some cases remaining unreported to the appropriate authorities. This leaves child victims unprotected, denies them access to vital support services and allows the abuse to continue unchecked, despite the potential for prevention through reporting. Consequently, there is a clear need for comprehensive training and resources to empower teachers to manage CSA cases effectively and fulfil their legal responsibilities as mandatory reporters. Such training should be thorough and go beyond simply providing context-specific information on recognising and reporting CSA.

Way forward

It is recommended that schools collaborate closely with parents, the broader community, local police and child protection services to provide teachers with readily accessible support, which can improve their confidence and competence. To address teachers' uncertainty about the appropriate actions following a disclosure, schools can develop clear, context-specific policies and procedures based on resources like Preston et al.'s (2017) handbook. Kim et al. (2019) highlight that the absence of clear school reporting guidelines often leads to non-compliance with mandatory reporting requirements among teachers.

Building on the findings that underscore teachers' perceived challenges in responding to CSA disclosures, it becomes evident that a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach is essential for meaningful intervention. Collaboration between the school, community and different child welfare stakeholders is necessary to ensure that a holistic intervention is given to the victim of sexual abuse. This can be carried out through conversations on what steps to take to support the victim, as well as the implementation of context-relevant

prevention programmes. Different stakeholders can work together in one accord for the sake of safeguarding the child. For instance, organisations such as the Teddy Bear Foundation and the Department of Education can offer training to teachers and involve parents in child protection efforts. The local SAPS can assist schools and communities by providing prompt responses, while the Department of Social Development can collaborate with schools and communities to ensure that child victims are placed in safe environments when necessary. This collaborative model of child safeguarding can be applied universally across different cultures, with various stakeholders working together to support and protect the child.

This qualitative study explored how primary school teachers in Gauteng perceive their ability to fulfil their legal duty of reporting disclosed cases of CSA, as outlined in *the Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007* (RSA 2007a). It also seeks to determine whether guidelines can be developed to support and empower teachers in responding effectively to CSA. The study examined teacher self-efficacy as a cognitive factor influencing their response to such disclosures. The way forward, therefore, involves not only addressing individual teacher capacity but embedding that capacity within a broader, systemic network of support.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

L.G. contributed to the design and implementation of the research, analysis of the results and writing of the manuscript. N.P.M.M. supervised the study. L.G. and N.P.M.M. contributed to the article, discussed the results and approved the final version for submission and publication.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, N.P.M.M., upon reasonable request.

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