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Teaching's intentions to report suspected child abuse: the influence of compassion fatigue

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ABSTRACT
Teachers are legally mandated to report suspected child abuse – a role that positions teachers as crucial figures in the detection and prevention of child abuse. It is, thus, important to explore underlying determinants of teachers' likelihood to report suspected child abuse. In this research, we explore teachers' and school administrators' (N = 299) knowledge of abuse reporting policy and their self-reported intentions to report hypothetical instances of suspected child abuse. We also explore the relationship between compassion fatigue (i.e., job burnout and secondary traumatic stress stemming from vicarious exposure to client trauma) and teachers' attitudes toward reporting suspected child abuse. A significant minority of teachers indicate that they would not report suspected child abuse – a finding that holds even after eliminating the 10.3% of teachers who were unaware of policy requiring teachers to report suspected child abuse. Supporting hypotheses, as compassion fatigue increased, negative attitudes toward child abuse reporting significantly increased. Additionally, increased compassion fatigue was significantly associated with increased job efficacy cynicism, psychological detachment from students, and diminished knowledge about reporting child abuse – all factors that statistically explained the relationship between compassion fatigue and negative attitudes toward reporting suspected abuse.

Not only does child maltreatment persist within the United States, but recent years have been marked by an escalation in confirmed and suspected child abuse rates (Children's Bureau, 2018). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recorded 3.5 million child abuse cases that received a child protective services investigation or alternative response in 2016 – a 9.5% increase from 2012. Of these, there were nearly 676,000 confirmed cases of child abuse – a 3% increase from 2012. Unfortunately, the national estimate of 1,750 children confirmed to have died as a result of child maltreatment in 2016 reflects a 7.4% increase from 2012.

Evidence suggests that these sobering statistics are likely conservative estimates of child abuse (Fergusson, Horwood, & Woodward, 2000).
Although some reports of suspected child abuse are unsubstantiated upon investigation, the reverse is also true: Child abuse often goes untreated because it is often not reported (Fergusson et al., 2000). Yet, it is imperative for child abuse to be reported and for abused children to receive appropriate intervention because there are myriad unfortunate consequences for abuse victims. For instance, children who have been abused or neglected show impaired perceptual reasoning and reading ability (Mills et al., 2011) – cognitive deficits that may trigger a decline in school performance and snowball into future professional disadvantages. Mental health concerns, such as depression, anxiety, drug addiction, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are also consequences of child abuse (Perry, 2008). The well-documented relationship between experiencing child abuse and committing crime as adults (coined the “cycle of violence”) highlights the societal implications for unchecked child abuse (Curtis, 1963).

Recognizing child abuse and providing victims with evidence-based interventions, treatment, and support has the potential to not only alleviate child suffering, but also benefit society at large.

Of course, child abuse must be reported to the appropriate authorities for it to be curtailed. Yet, children often fail to disclose their own abuse experiences for many reasons (i.e., embarrassment, a desire to forget, a desire to avoid discussing it, etc.; Fergusson et al., 2000). Children often suffer abuse and neglect at the hands of their caretakers. In fact, among the documented child abuse cases in 2016, 77.6% of abusers were parents of the victim, while 6.2% of abusers were other relatives (Children’s Bureau, 2018). Thus, family members cannot be relied upon to root out and report most instances of child abuse. Teachers spend comparatively a great deal of time with children daily, making them well-positioned to notice signs of abuse and neglect (Goebbels, Nicholson, Walsh, & De Vries, 2007). Accordingly, legislators have enacted policies and laws legally requiring certain professionals – including teachers – to report suspected child abuse (Children’s Bureau, 2018; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Laws vary somewhat between states, but they generally indicate that a mandated reporter must report suspected abuse if he or she has a reason to believe that the child has been maltreated. In other words, according to law, if a teacher suspects abuse (which is, by nature, subjective), the teacher must report it. Importantly, reporting suspicions of child abuse does not reflect making an accusation. Reports are simply requests for authorities to assess if the child needs help (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013).

Although most reports of child abuse stem from school reportings, teachers sometimes fail to report instances of suspected child abuse (Alvarez, Kenny, Donohue, & Carpin, 2004). Survey data reveals that 74% of teachers have suspected child abuse, but a sizeable minority of those teachers (10%)
indicated that they failed to report the suspected abuse (Abrahams, Casey, & Daro, 1992). In a separate study, 73% of teachers indicated they had never made a report of child abuse, and 11% of the teachers admitted suspecting abuse and never reporting it (Kenny, 2001). This study contained a hypothetical scenario of abuse describing a student who revealed to her teacher that her step parent had been sexually violating her, and only 26% of the teachers stated they would make a report to child protective services in this case. In a second hypothetical child abuse case portraying a coworker at the school as the possible perpetrator, only 11% of the teachers surveyed indicated they would report the suspected abuse to a child protective agency (Kenny, 2001).

Of course, it is important to continue to explore base rates of teachers’ likelihood to comply with law requiring that they report suspected abuse. In the present research, we add to the paucity of research exploring this important question by assessing teachers’ and school administrators’ self-reported likelihood to report suspected child abuse. We expect to find evidence that a substantial minority of teachers will admit that they would fail to report suspected child abuse, consistent with the findings of the few studies published on this topic 26 and 17 years ago, respectively (Abrahams et al., 1992; Kenny, 2001). Moreover, we also explore predictors of teachers’ intentions to report suspected child abuse, including poor training in recognizing and reporting child abuse, but also a novel factor – compassion fatigue.

**Compassion fatigue among teachers**

Although most teachers report enjoying their profession, they also face significant challenges in the classroom, including limited time to devote to lesson planning, minimal opportunities for collaborative teaching, and a lack of administrative support for professional advancement (OECD, 2014). Juggling the job responsibility of meeting academic and disciplinary standards is burdensome for teachers (Kyriacou, 2001). Despite the taxing job demands, teachers frequently become attached to the children they teach, in turn, experiencing distress when they witness daily reminders of the hardships these children face at home, including abuse, neglect, divorce, household danger, and poverty (Sizemore, 2016). Indeed, children often disclose trauma to teachers, which can lead teachers to feelings of helplessness, frustration (Hill, 2011), and ultimately to compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue is experienced predominantly by those working within helping professions (e.g., nurses, counselors, teachers; Figley, 1995). Empathy is generally required among helping professionals to facilitate understanding of clients’ needs, but it can simultaneously cause the
professional to internalize the sufferer’s trauma, in turn, fostering compassion fatigue within the helping professional (Thomas, 2013). Compassion fatigue occurs when the capability and motivation to sympathize with and advocate for a suffering client is weakened (Adams, Bocarino, & Figley, 2006). Compassion fatigue is common among professionals who advocate for victimized children, and it is argued that it may be an inevitable outcome when working with traumatized youth (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006). Interestingly, previous research surrounding compassion fatigue predominantly focuses on the distress experienced by the professional, rather than on the potential client impact. Indeed, no research has explored the potential for compassion fatigue to directly impact teachers’ interactions with students. Only one study explored how social workers’ compassion fatigue impacted the outcomes of their hypothetical clients (i.e., children and families) involved in child custodial cases (Denne, Stevenson, & Petty, 2019). The results indicated that social workers experiencing high levels of compassion fatigue interpreted a hypothetical case of child abuse as “not that bad,” felt hopeless for the child’s future, and felt unable to positively impact the child’s life – such pessimistic feelings mediated social workers’ increased likelihood to return the abused child to the abusive parent. Given these results, there is reason to believe that teachers’ compassion fatigue will similarly be associated with reduced intentions to report suspected child abuse – a possibility we test in the present research. Moreover, we explore potential mediators of the relationship between compassion fatigue and teachers’ intentions to report suspected child abuse – secondary traumatic stress and job burnout.

**Secondary traumatic stress**

Secondary traumatic stress is the traumatic stress that professionals vicariously experience from close involvement with a traumatized client (Bride, Robinson, Yegidis, & Figley, 2004). Symptoms reflecting secondary traumatic stress reported among social workers include being emotionally numb, a tendency to distance themselves from clients (i.e., engage in depersonalization), and a reduction in memory when it comes to their work (Bride, 2007) – all factors that might negatively impact the quality of work provided by helping professionals. Teachers are at risk for experiencing secondary traumatic stress when they are exposed to traumatized children (Hill, 2011) – exposure that is likely quite common when considering more than 10 million American children annually experience trauma (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.). Although teachers find it intrinsically rewarding to become close to the children they spend so much time with (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011), such closeness to traumatized children
makes teachers vulnerable to secondary traumatic stress and its associated symptoms: physical and emotional problems, behavioral changes, cognitive dysfunction, interpersonal isolation, spiritual uncertainty, and diminished professional performance (Hydon, Wong, Langley, Stein, & Kataoka, 2015). Indeed, an examination of semi-structured interviews with 21 teachers revealed that teachers felt incapable and untrained to give their students ample support, lost in their role as a teacher, burdened by balancing time between their suffering students and the rest of the class, and emotionally damaged from exposure to the traumatized child (Alisic, 2012). Similar results were uncovered among a separate sample of interviewed teachers working in an impoverished U.S. city where children are regularly exposed to violence and substance abuse in their homes. Most teachers reported experiencing repeated haunting imagery of the victims, feelings of self-doubt and blame, emotional hyperarousal, and even physical complications like restlessness (VanBergeijk & Sarmiento, 2006). Due to the emotional strain teachers sometimes experience working with their students, compassion fatigue resources and workshops have been established to help teachers cope with their secondary traumatic stress symptoms (e.g., Healthy Caregiving, 2012).

Although secondary traumatic stress certainly reflects negative experiences for various professionals, it also has the potential to translate into negative consequences for the population they serve. In particular, depersonalization, or in other words, distancing oneself from clients (Hoffman, Palladino, & Barnett, 2007), reflects an unconscious psychological coping mechanism triggered by professionals’ stressful experiences working closely with traumatized individuals (Dane, 2000). Depersonalization from clients likely reduces helping professionals’ ability and willingness to contribute significant and sincere work (Negash & Sahin, 2011). In support, greater self-reported compassion fatigue among a sample of social workers predicted greater anticipated secondary traumatic stress symptoms (i.e., intrusive thoughts about the abused child) and psychological detachment from a child victim of abuse (i.e., diminished concern for the child’s well-being), which in turn, predicted recommendations that the child victim be reunited with a formerly abusive parent – a potentially dangerous environment (Denne et al., 2019). Similarly, we expect that psychological detachment will partially mediate the relationship between teachers’ compassion fatigue and diminished intentions to report suspected child abuse.

Job burnout

Another correlate of compassion fatigue is job burnout, which occurs when a demanding job with an overwhelming work load diminishes one’s psychological resources, leading to feelings of exhaustion and job inefficiency (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). Overwhelming work demands may
also produce cynicism regarding one’s ability to accomplish anything meaningful, in turn, driving a professional to disconnect from work demands and from their clients, ultimately contributing to job unproductivity (Maslach, 1998). Job burnout is also associated with a decline in workers’ mental health, stemming from beliefs that their work is meaningless (Schaufeli et al., 2009). Teaching is a job traditionally associated with high levels of stress stemming from various factors, including discipline issues, uninterested students, constant change in the classroom, overpopulated class sizes, too much paperwork, low salaries, parental conflicts, and unsupportive administration (Johnson et al., 2005; Kyriacou, 2001). Recent research reveals that perceived stress has a significant and direct effect on increasing job burnout among a sample of 387 teachers (Yu, Wang, Zhai, Dai, & Yang, 2015). Teachers’ job burnout was associated with a loss of passion for teaching, tiredness, diminished enthusiasm, and increasingly negative attitudes toward students. Based on such research, there is reason to believe that job burnout among teachers might be associated with reduced intentions to report suspected child abuse. Because compassion fatigue predicts increased job burnout (i.e., the belief that any efforts exerted will fail to produce meaningful change; Schaufeli et al., 2009), we expect that compassion fatigue will similarly predict teachers’ beliefs that no good will come out of their efforts to report suspected child abuse. Indeed, job burnout among social workers (i.e., the belief that their efforts will not help an abused child client), in part mediated the relationship between compassion fatigue and recommendations that the child be placed with a formerly abusive parent (Denne et al., 2019). Thus, we hypothesize that the relationship between compassion fatigue and teachers’ intentions to report child abuse will be mediated by teachers’ job efficacy cynicism, or in other words, the belief that there is nothing they could do to help an abused student.

Knowledge regarding child abuse reporting

Finally, existing research reveals that knowledge regarding how to report child abuse and neglect emerges as a significant predictor of intentions to report suspected child abuse (Kenny, 2001, 2004). Might compassion fatigue emerge as a predictor of diminished knowledge regarding child abuse reporting? Some evidence suggests that it might. Because compassion fatigue stems in part from an unsupportive work environment (Hoffman et al., 2007), professionals in such environments might not receive the training and mentorship necessary to understand how to appropriately report possible child abuse. Additionally, exhaustion, cynicism, inefficiency, and psychological detachment from one’s job (theorized components of compassion fatigue), presumably translate into diminished interest and
motivation to learn about child abuse reporting, generally. Thus, in our theorized model, we expect increased compassion fatigue will predict decreased knowledge regarding reporting child abuse, which will predict reduced intentions to report suspected child abuse.

**Study overview and hypotheses**

To date, few studies have explored predictors of teachers’ intentions to report child abuse (e.g., Kenny, 2001) and no research has explored the possibility that compassion fatigue predicts teachers’ intentions to report suspected child abuse. In this study, we first explore base rates of teachers’ self-reported intentions to report various hypothetical cases of child abuse. Consistent with past research (Kenny, 2001), we expect that a substantial minority of teachers will self-report that they would fail to report suspected child abuse (a violation of law and professional standards). We also test whether teachers’ compassion fatigue predicts diminished intentions to comply with law requiring suspected child abuse reporting. Moreover, we hypothesize that the relationship between compassion fatigue and attitudes toward reporting suspected child abuse will be mediated by (a) teachers’ emotional detachment from their students (i.e., depersonalization), (b) teachers’ job efficacy cynicism (i.e., perceived helplessness and hopelessness of affecting positive change in their students’ lives), and (c) teachers’ knowledge regarding child abuse reporting.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 299 teachers or school administrators recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk); 39.8% taught at the elementary school level, 24.1% at the middle school level, 24.4% at the high school level, and 11.7% selected other, but specified their role as an educator. MTurk is an online system that provides individuals the opportunity to participate in tasks for financial reimbursement, allowing experimenters to recruit a specific group of participants, whose results are generally reliable (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Teachers were 55.5% male, the average age was 34 (SD = 8.91, range = 19–72), and most were White (65%, 11% were African American, 19% were Asian, 5% listed “other” for ethnicity).

**Measures**

**Demographics**

We assessed participants’ gender, age, and ethnicity. We also included several questions assessing the participants’ history as an educator. Specifically,
we required them to indicate if they are currently or formerly an educator, the number of years they have spent teaching, and the grade level they taught.

**Compassion fatigue**
Participants completed the 13-item Compassion Fatigue Scale Revised (Cronbach’s alpha = .911; Boscarino, Figley, & Adams, 2004). Example items include: “I have felt trapped by my work,” “I feel I am unsuccessful at separating work from my personal life,” and “I have felt a sense of hopelessness associated with working with my students.” Respondents rated their agreement to each statement using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Higher scores reflect higher levels of compassion fatigue.

**Perceived knowledge of reporting abuse**
Participants also completed a 2-item scale assessing their perceived knowledge of child abuse reporting (Cronbach’s alpha = .616). Both questions in this scale were originally developed by Kenny (2001). The first item, measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree), was “I am aware of my school’s procedures for child abuse reporting.” The second item was, “At what level do you feel your training prepared you to deal with cases of child abuse?” Participant response options included 1 (adequate) to 3 (inadequate). We converted both items to z-scores and used the standardized versions of the items to form the scale. The entire scale was reverse scored so that higher scores reflect higher levels of knowledge of reporting abuse.

**Job efficacy cynicism**
Participants also completed a 5-item scale measuring job efficacy cynicism (Cronbach’s alpha = .855). Items were: “There is not much I can do as a teacher to help abused children,” “For the most part, I am helpless when it comes to improving an abused child’s life,” “Anything I try to do to help an abused child probably won’t accomplish much in the end,” “Reporting suspected child abuse is a waste of time because social services rarely improves a child’s life,” and “I feel that administration would support me if I made a child abuse report (reverse scored).” All response options ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). We modeled these items after those developed in a previous study, confirming evidence of both reliability and predictive validity (Denne et al., 2019). The entire scale was reverse scored so that higher scores reflect higher levels of job efficacy cynicism.
Psychological detachment
Psychological detachment was assessed with the following two items pulled from Denne and colleagues (2019): “I try not to think about my students outside of work” and “I do not worry much about my students’ well-being” (forming a reliable scale, Cronbach’s alpha = .642). Response options ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). The whole scale was reverse scored so that higher scores indicate higher levels of psychological detachment.

Attitudes toward reporting suspected abuse
We developed a 4-item scale to assess teachers’ attitudes toward reporting suspected abuse (Cronbach’s alpha = .690). The items were: “Reporting child abuse is important for teachers,” “Reporting child abuse is not a concern I have as a teacher (reverse scored),” “As an educator, I have an obligation to report child abuse (reverse scored),” and “Teachers should not be mandated to report child abuse.” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Higher scores reflect negative attitudes toward abuse reporting.

Suspensions of hypothetical abuse and intentions to report abuse
Participants also read four brief descriptions of possible child abuse. The four scenarios included identified signs and symptoms of abuse from the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2013). Additionally, each hypothetical instance of child abuse was reviewed by a convenience sample of 10 actual teachers to ensure ecological validity and increase realism. The hypothetical cases included (a) a 5-year-old who mimics adult-like sexual behaviors with toys, (b) a 10-year-old boy who is aggressive, disruptive, and comes to school with a broken leg and arm, (c) a 12-year-old girl who exhibits spontaneous behavioral chances of social exclusion, lethargy, diminished attention, and a dip in grades, and (d) a 6-year-old boy who wears the same clothes every day, has poor hygiene, and misses school often. After reading each case, participants indicated the extent to which they were suspicious of each hypothetical instance of possible abuse (items that formed a reliable scale, Cronbach’s alpha = .625) and their intention to report each instance of abuse (items that also formed a reliable scale, Cronbach’s alpha = .686). Response options for these items ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

Procedures
Participants were recruited via MTurk with a recruitment advertisement indicating we were seeking only those who were currently or formerly
teachers. After participants provided informed consent, they were prompted to indicate if they were currently or formerly employed as an educator (or neither). Only those participants who indicated that they were currently or formerly a teacher were subsequently allowed to advance in the on-line survey (those who selected neither were blocked from further participation). Of course, as in any paid study that includes eligibility requirements, it is possible that some participants lied about their eligibility (Lynch, Joffe, Thirumurthy, Xie, & Largent, 2019). Fortunately, evidence suggests that the vast majority of participants (90%) do not lie regarding their eligibility even when payment is contingent upon eligibility, and so we have reason to believe that the vast majority of participants in the present research do meet eligibility requirements. Eligible participants first provided basic demographic information and subsequently completed the compassion fatigue scale. Afterward, participants answered questions pertaining to their perceived knowledge of abuse reporting, job efficacy cynicism, psychological detachment, and attitudes toward abuse reporting. Participants then read the four hypothetical case vignettes depicting possible encounters with students. For each situation, participants rated their suspicions of abuse as well as their likelihood of making a report of abuse. Finally, participants were thanked and financially compensated.

Results

First, we present descriptive statistics designed to assess teachers’ attitudes toward and intentions to comply with law requiring them to report suspected child abuse. Because there are no official thresholds for abuse reporting, besides suspecting possible abuse (which is inherently subjective), we were able to identify participants who comply versus fail to comply with legislation by simultaneously assessing their abuse suspicions and intentions to report abuse. Next, we present a series of correlations designed to test the relationship between compassion fatigue and teachers’ attitudes toward and intentions to report suspected child abuse. Finally, we present the results of our hypothesized multiple mediation model exploring mediators of the relationship between compassion fatigue and attitudes toward reporting suspected child abuse.

Teachers’ attitudes and intentions regarding reporting suspected abuse

Although most teachers (87.6%) agreed that they have an obligation to report child abuse, 8.4% were “unsure,” and an additional 4% of teachers actually disagreed (i.e., reported either strongly disagree or disagree). Surprisingly, most (67.2%) teachers believed (i.e., reported either strongly agree or agree) that teachers should not be mandated to report child abuse
even though they are legally required to do so, while only a minority (17.6%) believed that teachers should be mandated to report child abuse or were “unsure” (15.4%).

For three out of the four hypothetical abuse cases, a majority of teachers (range for all four cases = 42.8%–77.8%) were suspicious of abuse, and for each of the four cases, only a minority of teachers (range = 11.4%–23.5%) were not suspicious of abuse (the remainder were undecided; see Tables 1 and 2). Although more teachers were suspicious than were not suspicious of abuse for each of the four hypothetical cases, a substantial proportion of teachers indicated that they would not report the possible abuse (range = 16.3%–45.9%). These results reflect that at least some teachers would fail to comply with law requiring them to report suspected abuse. In support, the proportions of teachers admitting no intent to report abuse outweighed the proportions of teachers who were not suspicious that abuse occurred, for every single hypothetical case. Indeed, when filtering out teachers who indicated that they were not suspicious of abuse (including only participants who were suspicious of abuse for each case), a substantial minority of teachers admitted that they would fail to report the suspected abuse (range = 4.8%–18.5% for all four cases), which reflects an admission

### Table 1. The proportion of teachers who were suspicious of abuse and who intended to report abuse.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Suspect case one (N = 297)</th>
<th>Suspect case two (N = 297)</th>
<th>Suspect case three (N = 297)</th>
<th>Suspect case four (N = 297)</th>
<th>Suspect all cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suspicious</td>
<td>66.3%</td>
<td>77.8%</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
<td>70.4%</td>
<td>64.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>33.7%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not suspicious</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. The proportion of teachers who intend to report suspicions of abuse.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intention to report case one (N = 195)</th>
<th>Intention to report case two (N = 229)</th>
<th>Intention to report case three (N = 127)</th>
<th>Intention to report case four (N = 208)</th>
<th>Intention to report all cases (N = 759)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Report</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
<td>63.8%</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>68.3%</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>44.1%</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not report</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. For the proportions in the rows “suspicous” and “report” we included both “strongly agree” and “agree” responses, and for the proportions in the row “not suspicious” and “not report” we included both “strongly disagree” and “disagree” responses.
of intended failure to comply with law (see Table 2). Even more teachers who were suspicious of abuse were undecided about whether they should report the abuse (range = 26.9%–44.1%).

Does failure to comply with law mandating that teachers report suspected abuse stem solely from ignorance of such policy? To test this possibility, we first explore the relationship between perceived knowledge of child abuse mandated reporting policy and teachers’ intentions to report suspected child abuse for each hypothetical case (filtering out teachers who were not suspicious of abuse). As expected, increased perceived knowledge was associated with increased intentions to report suspected child abuse for hypothetical case 1 ($r = -.240, p = .001$), case 2 ($r = -.267, p = .000$), and case 4 ($r = -.205, p = .003$), yet the correlation did not reach statistical significance for case 3 ($r = -.082, p = .361$). Even so, perceived knowledge of child abuse reporting policy is only imperfectly (albeit significantly) associated with actual awareness that teachers’ are obligated to report suspected child abuse, $r = -.410, p = .000$, explaining only 16.8% of the variance in actual awareness.

We next explore whether actual awareness of teachers’ obligations to report suspected child abuse (with the single item of “As an educator, I have an obligation to report child abuse,” rather than the scale assessing their perceptions of their knowledge regarding such policy) predicts their intentions to report suspected child abuse. Indeed, after filtering out participants who were not suspicious of abuse for hypothetical cases 1, 3, and 4, teachers’ level of awareness that they are mandated by law to report suspected child abuse did not emerge as a significant predictor of their intention to report suspected child abuse for each case ($r = -.114, p = .112$, $r = -.170, p = .057$, $r = -.028, p = .686$, respectively). Surprisingly, for cases 1, 3, and 4, teachers’ awareness of their obligation to report suspected abuse non-significantly predicted diminished intentions to report suspected abuse – a trend that emerged as marginally significant for case 3. Only in case 2 did teachers’ awareness of policy requiring that they report suspected child abuse emerge as a significant predictor of their intention to do so, $r = .179, p = .007$.

Moreover, although 89.7% of teachers indicate awareness of policy mandating teachers to report suspected child abuse, up to 18.5% of teachers indicate that they would not report an instance of suspected child abuse. In fact, after filtering out the 10.3% of teachers who are unaware of policy requiring that they report suspected child abuse, and after filtering out participants who were not suspicious of abuse for the hypothetical case 1, 45.6% of participants were “undecided” regarding whether they would report that case of suspected abuse, and 19% of participants indicated that they would not report the suspected abuse. Indeed, only a minority of participants (35.6%) who are aware of policy mandating teachers report
suspected abuse, actually would comply with such policy for this case. A similar pattern holds for the remaining three hypothetical cases of child abuse. In each case, a significant proportion of teachers who are aware of policy requiring them to report suspected abuse would fail to comply with policy for each hypothetical case (see Table 3).

**Compassion fatigue as a predictor of attitudes and intentions to report suspected abuse**

Because perceived knowledge regarding abuse reporting only imperfectly predicts intentions to report suspected abuse and actual knowledge does not at all, it is all the more important to consider the role that other factors might play in predicting abuse reporting. We next present analyses testing the role of compassion fatigue with respect to child abuse reporting.

In support of hypotheses, increased compassion fatigue was significantly associated with increased negative attitudes toward abuse reporting, $r = .255$, $p < .01$. In addition, increased compassion fatigue was associated with increased psychological detachment, $r = .307$, $p < .01$, and job efficacy cynicism, $r = .438$, $p < .01$. Also as expected, as compassion fatigue increased, perceived knowledge of reporting abuse significantly decreased, $r = -.172$, $p < .01$. However, there was no significant correlation between compassion fatigue and suspicions of hypothetical abuse ($r = .037$, $p = .530$) or intentions to report hypothetical abuse ($r = .078$, $p = .182$).

**Mediators of the effects of compassion fatigue on attitudes toward abuse reporting**

Next, we conducted bootstrapping analyses using Hayes’ (2012) Process Macros, to test our three potential mediators (i.e., job efficacy cynicism, psychological detachment, and perceived knowledge of abuse reporting) of the relationship between compassion fatigue and attitudes toward reporting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers’ intentions to report suspected abuse, only among those who are aware of policy mandating teachers to report suspected abuse</th>
<th>Intention to report case one ($N = 180$)</th>
<th>Intention to report case two ($N = 181$)</th>
<th>Intention to report case three ($N = 114$)</th>
<th>Intention to report case four ($N = 190$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Report</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>66.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
<td>24.9%</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not report</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. This figure reflects teachers’ self-reported intentions to report abuse after filtering out teachers who were not suspicious of abuse, and after filtering out teachers who had indicated ignorance regarding policy mandating that teachers report suspected abuse. For the proportions in the row “report,” we included both “strongly agree” and “agree” responses, and for the proportions in the row “not report,” we included both “strongly disagree” and “disagree” responses.
child abuse. Supporting evidence of multiple mediation, (a) psychological detachment, indirect effect = .0745, SE = .0253, CIs [.0338, .1363], (b) job efficacy cynicism, indirect effect = .1964, SE = .0374, CIs [.1306, .2750], and (c) perceived knowledge of reporting abuse, indirect effect = .0219, SE = .0110, CIs [.0046, .0481] significantly mediated the relationship between compassion fatigue and teachers’ attitudes toward child abuse reporting, total effect = .2648, SE = .0582, t = 4.5517, p = .0000; direct effect = -.0280, SE = .0521, t = -.5364, p = .5921. Specifically, as compassion fatigue increased, job efficacy cynicism and psychological detachment significantly increased, while perceived knowledge of reporting abuse significantly decreased. In turn, as job efficacy cynicism increased, attitudes toward reporting child abuse decreased. Likewise, as psychological detachment increased, attitudes toward reporting child abuse also decreased. Finally, as knowledge of reporting abuse increased, attitudes toward reporting child abuse decreased. See Figure 1 for respective path values.

**Discussion**

The present research reflects one of the few studies to explore predictors of teachers’ intentions to report suspicions of child abuse. We have provided further evidence that perceived knowledge of child abuse reporting predicts teachers’ intentions to report suspicions of child abuse, as others have found (Kenny, 2001, 2004). Even so, we discovered that teachers’ perceived knowledge of abuse reporting (i.e., self-reported belief that they understand abuse reporting policy) only imperfectly predicts their actual awareness that

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**Figure 1.** A multiple mediation model illustrating the relationship between compassion fatigue and teachers’ attitudes toward reporting child abuse as mediated by psychological detachment, job efficacy cynicism, and knowledge of reporting child abuse.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001
teachers are mandated child abuse reporters (i.e., their agreement that teachers must report suspected child abuse). Moreover, teachers’ actual knowledge that they are required to report suspected child abuse does not predict their intentions to report suspected child abuse. Interestingly, most teachers believe that they should not be legally required to report child abuse, despite law to the contrary (Children’s Bureau, 2018) – a finding that might have implications for why a substantial minority of teachers indicate that they would fail to report suspected child abuse, even when they are aware of laws requiring them to do so. These findings highlight the need to explore additional factors that predict teachers’ intentions and attitudes toward reporting child abuse. To that end, we revealed evidence of a novel predictor of teachers’ attitudes toward reporting suspicions of child abuse – compassion fatigue.

Supporting hypotheses, teachers’ compassion fatigue predicted negative attitudes toward reporting suspected child abuse. Such a relationship is to be expected when considered in the context of the realities associated with teachers’ working conditions. Although teachers generally report loving to teach, they also report receiving minimal support for their own professional development (OECD, 2014). Teachers – particularly those in the U.S. – also report working long hours and finding little time for collaborative teaching or planning (OECD, 2014). U.S. teachers are also particularly likely to report working in schools where over 30% of students are socioeconomically disadvantaged (OECD, 2014). Teachers across the U.S., from states including West Virginia, Kentucky, Arizona, North Carolina, and Oklahoma, have recently participated in mass strikes, protesting low wages and insufficient school funding (Strauss, 2018). Such job-related stressors reflect the conditions that are most likely to produce worker burnout (Yu et al., 2015). Of course, teachers are also often front-line workers when it comes to encounters with child abuse, setting the stage for teachers’ experiences of secondary traumatic stress. In turn, job burnout and secondary traumatic stress naturally produce compassion fatigue (Cieslak et al., 2014). A 2018 Reddit thread, devoted to the topic of teacher compassion fatigue, includes many heart-breaking accounts of the negative mental health consequences associated with teachers’ myriad vicariously experienced instances of trauma. One poster on this thread commented:

…every year, I learn about horrors that these kids deal with on a daily basis. My first year, it was a shock. My second year, I went into action - I poured myself into helping every kid I could, as much as I could, until it hurt. I ended up having something resembling a mental breakdown. (Reddit, 2018, para. 8)

Likely as a mechanism designed to facilitate coping with compassion fatigue, the teachers in our study report engaging in psychological detachment from students. Compassion fatigue also predicted teachers’ job
efficacy cynicism, or in other words, beliefs that nothing good would come out of making a report of suspected child abuse. Also, as expected, compassion fatigue predicted reduced perceived knowledge about the policies and procedures regarding reporting suspected child abuse. In turn, psychological detachment, job efficacy cynicism, and diminished knowledge about reporting child abuse all emerged as factors underlying the relationship between compassion fatigue and negative attitudes toward reporting suspected child abuse. Thus, not only does compassion fatigue have implications for the mental health and well-being of teachers (Hill, 2011), but we have discovered that it also has direct implications for the well-being of the children teachers are required by law to protect.

Implications for policy and practice

This research offers compelling implications regarding the effectiveness of law and policy requiring that teachers report suspected incidents of child abuse. About 10% of teachers in this study were unsure of their reporting duty, and even when teachers were aware of laws mandating them report, they often indicated that they would fail to report suspected child abuse. It appears that laws and policies alone will only go so far in ensuring that teachers report suspected abuse. This research suggests that further efforts are necessary to facilitate teacher compliance with mandated reporting policy, including perhaps the funding of training on reporting and additional programs designed to provide teachers with the support and education necessary to identify and report suspected child abuse. Importantly, funding initiatives and programs designed to mitigate teacher compassion fatigue might also go a long way toward facilitating teacher reporting of suspected child abuse. For instance, assigning teachers a more manageable workload (Kyriacou, 2001) and more support for professional development (Boscarino et al., 2004) has the potential to reduce worker burnout, and in turn mitigate compassion fatigue. Providing teachers with the mental health resources to cope with and reduce compassion fatigue could also help facilitate child abuse reporting. Fortunately, researchers who have explored the treatment and prevention of compassion fatigue have compiled a list of consistent factors that help relieve professionals of their compassion fatigue, simultaneously increasing their resiliency to vicariously experienced trauma (Gentry, 2002). Common themes include acknowledgement and understanding of symptoms, maintaining close relationships, stress management techniques, practicing self-care, desensitization and reprocessing therapy, and correcting distorted thinking (Gentry, 2002). Other researchers have established intervention techniques to assist professionals who are continuously vicariously exposed to trauma (Inbar & Ganor, 2003). Within the
United States, compassion fatigue workshops are available nationwide and online. Institutions may be able to provide their workforce with similar services designed to help mitigate compassion fatigue. Indeed, research reveals that providing workers with access to similar resources can reduce professionals’ level of job burnout and secondary traumatic stress (Abu-Bader, 2000). For instance, among a sample of mental health professionals, specialized trauma training boosted their self-efficacy and fostered peer support, in turn, reducing levels of compassion fatigue while increasing levels of compassion satisfaction (i.e., the pleasure that comes from caregiving; Sprang, Clark, & Whitt-Woosley, 2007). Results of such research suggest that similar workshops and trainings have the potential to foster better mental health of teachers, and also might help facilitate the reporting, detection, and prevention of child abuse.

**Limitations and future directions**

Although we found support for many of our hypotheses, we did not find that compassion fatigue predicted intentions to report the hypothetical instances of child abuse. Furthermore, each hypothetical case of child abuse was reviewed by practicing teachers for realism, but instances of child abuse can be complex. The presence of one sign of abuse or neglect does not definitively imply evidence of maltreatment. It is possible that the brief paragraph summaries, providing minimal contextual detail, limited the ecological validity of these dependent measures. Thus, future research should include lengthier and more detailed accounts of possible child abuse to better simulate real teachers’ experiences with children. Future researchers should explore the extent to which compassion fatigue predicts teachers’ actual rates of abuse reporting, which is presumably more generalizable than intentions to report hypothetical abuse.

Of course, due to the correlational nature of this research, no causal conclusions can be drawn, and so this research reflects only a preliminary examination of the relationship between teacher compassion fatigue and child abuse reporting. Future researchers should continue to explore this research question using mixed methodologies, including a longitudinal methodological approach to more definitively identify the development of compassion fatigue across time as a possible causal agent in affecting attitudes toward abuse reporting.

Another possible limitation of this research worthy of consideration is sample generalizability. Teachers collected from MTurk might not perfectly represent the teaching population within the United States. For instance, our sample’s mean age is 34, while the average age of U.S. teachers is 42 (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2018). Additionally, our sample included a
slightly higher proportion of men than is reflected in the general teacher population (Snyder, et al., 2018). Given that 81.9% of teachers in America are White (Snyder, et al., 2018), our sample was also slightly more racially diverse (i.e., only 65% of the participants were White). Of course, additional research should continue to explore these research questions with a more representative sample.

A relatively small proportion of the teachers within our study identified themselves as former (rather than current) teachers. We included former teachers in analyses because we aimed to generalize across the spectrum of teachers’ careers, including those who were relatively new to the profession and veterans. However, we did not assess why former teachers had left the profession, which could have provided more insight into their level of compassion fatigue associated with the job – an important next step for future researchers. Similarly, we did not ask about the types of schools teachers worked in, which might provide better understanding of how educational environment relates to compassion fatigue. Additionally, 11.7% of the participants indicated that they were not elementary, middle, or high school teachers, but rather identified as teacher's aids or school administration staff. We included these participants in data analyses because they have the same obligation to report child abuse, and they also work within the same constraints of the educational environment. Furthermore, it is possible for teachers to be particularly familiar with the developmental level of the grade/age that they teach, in turn limiting the generalizability of their responses to the individual hypothetical cases. Even so, all teachers are obligated to receive formal training on child abuse and neglect that includes information about the signs, indicators, and symptoms of child abuse, and are required to report all suspicions of abuse, regardless of grade taught (Children’s Bureau, 2018). Moreover, the abuse case descriptions in the present research incorporated what the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2013) specifies as abuse signs.

Despite these limitations, our preliminary findings reflect an important and novel first step when it comes to gaining insight into compassion fatigue and teachers’ attitudes toward abuse reporting. Future researchers should continue to explore predictors of teachers’ intentions to report suspected child abuse. Although we have found that most teachers who fail to report suspected abuse are actually aware of law requiring them to do so, we are reluctant to infer that these teachers are knowingly and willfully breaking the law. Future researchers should continue to explore the parameters surrounding levels of confidence in abuse suspicions that teachers require before being willing to report said abuse. Further exploration surrounding teachers’ understanding of the nuances of mandated reporting laws and policy is also necessary. Although there is no formal legal threshold for abuse evidence that is required for reporting abuse,
future research should explore the threshold level of abuse evidence that teachers feel they must have before making a report. Future researchers ought to also explore other factors that predict teachers’ compliance with laws requiring them to report suspected child abuse beyond their awareness of such laws. For instance, teachers may be aware of mandated reporting policy, but might not feel equipped with the knowledge of how to report suspicions of abuse. In support, teachers who always reported suspicions of abuse indicated that they had a strategy for making a report, whereas teachers who failed to report abuse suspicions admitted having no plan for recognizing or reporting abuse (Goebbels et al., 2007). Future research should extend these studies by exploring the possibility that compassion fatigue emerges as a predictor of the extent to which teachers develop plans for recognizing and reporting abuse. We suspect that such a relationship would exist given that compassion fatigue is typically a byproduct of an unsupportive, stressful work environment that does not foster employee professional success or preparedness (Boscarino et al., 2004).

Finally, we surprisingly discovered that most teachers believe that educators should not be mandated child abuse reporters. Kenny (2004) also found that some teachers disagreed with policy. This consistent finding might have implications for why a significant minority of teachers indicate that they would fail to report suspected abuse. Moreover, given that compassion fatigue emerged as a predictor of teachers’ beliefs that they should not be mandated to report child abuse, future researchers should develop and test interventions designed to prevent teachers from developing compassion fatigue – interventions that stand to improve teachers’ support of and compliance with policy designed to protect children suffering from abuse.

**Conclusion**

As the results of this research suggest, teacher compassion fatigue not only reflects the suffering of teachers, but it can also indirectly contribute to lack of intervention for child victims of abuse, in turn, perpetuating child suffering. Efforts within schools to eliminate the development of compassion fatigue among teachers are vital not only for the mental health and well-being of teachers, but also for their students. For many children, a teacher was responsible for detecting and ending the abuse they endured. David Pelzer, who was physically beaten and starved by his mother, expressed similar gratitude to the four school officials who reported the abuse and saved his life. Pelzer is now a famous motivational speaker and wrote a book on the accounts of his abuse titled “A Child Called It,” in which he thanks the school for recognizing his abuse and rescuing him from his unsafe home (Boldrini, 2018). But too often, child abuse and neglect goes unreported by teachers, as it did for
a 12-year old boy from Galien Township, Michigan. He had been denied access to food in the home and was repeatedly beaten with a broom stick, pelted with a belt, and burned with cigarettes. Investigations revealed evidence of emails between four school officials indicating that they noticed the signs of abuse and neglect but did nothing. Yet, their failure to report led them to be charged, convicted, and sentenced for not complying with mandated reporting law and policy (Uthoff, 2017). When it comes to reporting child abuse, the stakes are high for children and for society. Teachers need emotional support and guidance to effectively ensure child safety and well-being. By better supporting teachers, who too often suffer the psychological strain of compassion fatigue, we stand to better serve and protect our most vulnerable members of society – abused and neglected children.

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