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**Schoolteachers' perceptions and experiences of recognizing
and identifying children exposed to domestic violence - a
qualitative study from Iceland**

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Abstract

Background

Violence against children is a serious public health of growing global magnitude. Children exposed to domestic violence risk developing long-term mental and physical health problems such as depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder (PDST). Over the last thirty years studies have consistently shown that there is no difference in health consequences for children in witnessing violence between adults in their home and being physically abused. Children spend majority of their time in schools and schools in Iceland are required by law, to report any suspicion to the child protection services. However, figures from 2018 show that schools in Iceland are responsible for only 13,2% of the total number of reports to social services regarding children exposed to domestic violence.

Aims

The overall aim of this qualitative study was to understand the possibilities and barriers for school teachers in Iceland to support children exposed to domestic violence.

Methods

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers working in Iceland with work experience from 2 ½ - 25 years. Manifest and latent qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data.

Findings

Teachers in Iceland lack knowledge and education about domestic violence and children. They underestimate and hesitate to report to children protection service due to distrust and bad experiences with previous collaboration. Finally, teachers expressed the need for more professional support and guidelines to identify and recognize children being exposed to domestic violence.

Conclusion

It is important that teachers in Iceland get guidelines, education and help to identify and recognize children being exposed to domestic violence to support children that grow up in unstable environment. The public and school professionals need to recognize that children are also subjected to domestic violence and preventions must be taken to make sure that every child grows up in a safe environment.

Keywords: Domestic violence, teachers, mandatory report, child protection service, identification

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1. Introduction

1.1. Violence against children - a public health issue

Violence against children is a serious public health problem that is estimated globally to affect 1 billion children aged 2-17 years in 2018. The World Health Organization has identified this as a growing problem of global magnitude (WHO, 2018). Violence against children in any kind or form is a social and human rights problem, with damaging consequences for the child (Hillis et al, 2016). Domestic violence or family violence is a form of violence that is identified as an abuse that an individual is exposed to by someone he or she is related or connected to, such as a spouse, child, parent, sibling or guardian. This abuse can include physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse or emotional abuse and all these elements are covered in the definition (Farestveit & Sveinsdóttir, 2013; Kristinsdóttir, 2014). In the last thirty years attention has been focused on the harmful consequences on children exposed to domestic violence such as witnessing violence between adults in their home, seeing physical injuries, overhearing arguments or other displays of violence such as broken furniture. Studies have shown that children who witness domestic violence develop the same health problems as children who are neglected and physically abused. There is no difference in the health outcomes. (Cunningham & Baker, 2004; Holt et al, 2008).

Experiencing domestic violence as a child has a negative impact on health both physically and mentally. It can also cause behavioral changes and create difficulties in social relations. Children can develop mental illness such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression disorders that can continue throughout their adulthood. Abused children often experience difficulties in concentrating which affects their learning abilities and socializing with peers (Byrne et al, 2007; Erikson, Bruno and Näsman, 2013). A study by Bauer et al (2006) showed that children who are exposed to domestic violence are at increased risk of problematic levels of physical aggression and internalizing behaviors such as social withdrawal and sadness.

Exposure to domestic violence can also influence perception on violence as an acceptable method in solving conflict (Bauer et al, 2006). Being exposed to domestic violence as a child is thus a serious public health problem that can result in a vicious circle from generation to generation if not eradicated. Schools are therefore in an important position to eradicate and identify children being exposed to domestic violence.

1.2. Schools role in identifying children exposed to domestic violence

Research regarding how school professionals identify and report children that are exposed to domestic violence are few on international level (Eriksson, Bruno, and Näsman, 2013). The focus has been on the impact of domestic violence on children's behavior, educational outcome and the psychological and social effects (Münger & Markström, 2018a).

In Sweden, qualitative studies about domestic violence have shown that school professionals find it hard to identify children exposed to domestic violence and that it is not prioritized (Markström & Münger, 2018a, 2018b, 2019). Some teachers in these studies expressed that to identify children exposed to domestic violence they must cross the boundaries to private life which they don't consider as their role as teachers. The studies also indicated that teachers in Sweden lack knowledge about children and domestic violence and have limited trust in child protection service (CPS) institutions. The authors argue that due to this lack of knowledge, children's problems in schools are often labelled as learning problems or social problems with peers instead of individual problems related to for example difficult home conditions (Markström & Münger, 2018a, 2018b).

Both qualitative and quantitative research from Iceland on children's perspectives on violence at home showed that well-educated professionals are insecure when it comes to talking directly to children about violence (Kristinsdóttir, 2014). They prefer to talk to other adults about their concerns and thought that talking to children about domestic violence is only for highly specialized professionals. The studies also showed that children that are exposed to domestic violence want to get help and express their feelings to

somebody they trust especially in schools. However, they also indicate that it is difficult to find someone in their school that they find trustworthy.

A report from Save the Children in Iceland about children exposed to domestic violence showed that about 2000 children (2,5% of Icelandic children) witness domestic violence every year. The report also underlined that the problem of children being exposed to domestic violence is an underestimated issue and that people do not seem to fully understand the consequences it has for the child (Thorlacius, 2011). In 2009 a qualitative study was carried out, where interviews were conducted with ten principals in primary schools in Iceland. The results showed that there is lack of knowledge regarding domestic violence and its consequences for children among principals, uncertainty about school responsibilities and lack of protocols on how and what to do (Sederholm, 2009).

1.3. Laws and regulations

The Convention on the Rights of the Child was enacted in Iceland on 20th of February in 2013 at the parliament Althingi and states that children have personal rights and also rights to provision and protection (Lög um réttindi barnsins nr 19/2013). In Iceland, as in many other countries, there are reporting laws requiring teachers and other school staff to report to the Child Protection Committee if they have reason to believe that a child is living in unacceptable upbringing conditions, are subjected to violence or other degrading conduct that endangers their health and development (Barnaverndarlög nr 80/2002). Primary schools should, according to the school act, have a comprehensive policy on how to prevent the occurrence of physical, mental or social violence in school activities. There should also be a plan for how to carry out the reporting obligation under the Child Protection Act and on how to supervise cases of bullying, other violence and social isolation. Each student must have a supervisory teacher who closely monitors the education and development of the students, their general well-being and guides them in their studies and work, assists and advises them on personal matters and contributes to strengthening cooperation between school and household (Lög um grunnskóla nr 91/2008).

Children spend majority of their average day in school and with their teachers. Schools should therefore be consistent in their attendance of children and report the majority of cases to the child protection service, but current data show otherwise. The 2018 report from the child protection service in Iceland showed that reports of children exposed to domestic violence constituted 7,3% of all reported incidents and that the majority of these reports came from the police (42,4%) and that only 13,2% came from schools (Barnaverndastofa, 2019). In every school the principal forms a student protection council in accordance with laws and regulations. The aim is to improve specialized service to students and make it more effective (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 1996). Often if teachers have a concern or suspect that a student is being exposed to domestic violence, they consult with the school administrator or colleagues. The case is then referred to the student protection council for discussion. The student protection council include the principal, school nurse, social worker, student counselor, child psychologist and head of every educational level. Here the cases are discussed, and decisions are taken about reporting to child protection service (Lög um grunnskóla, 2008).

Teachers experiences and perceptions on children exposed to domestic violence and their knowledge on the subject has not been studied before in Iceland. There is a lack of research that can explain why schools are not reporting their concerns and why children who witness domestic violence are not considered as children exposed to violence (Thorlaciuss, 2011; Kristinsdóttir, 2013). Research show that teachers are lacking knowledge or awareness about children exposed to domestic violence (Eriksson, Bruno and Näsman, 2013). Therefore, there is a need for a greater understanding on what general knowledge teachers in Iceland have regarding domestic violence and children but also how they handle these cases in the schools. The rationale for this study is that there is a need to raise awareness and increase knowledge about children and domestic violence in Iceland and elsewhere to improve prevention and increase individual life quality.

2. Aim and research questions

The overall aim of this qualitative study was to understand the possibilities and barriers for Icelandic school teachers to support children exposed to domestic violence.

The specific research questions were;

- What are school teachers' knowledge and perceptions of domestic violence?
- How do school teachers perceive and experience recognizing and identifying children exposed to domestic violence?
- How do school teachers' reason when considering reporting children exposed to domestic violence?
- What are school teachers' perceptions and experiences of the tools available to support them?

Exposure to domestic violence is in this study defines as being physically, emotionally abused and/or witnessing domestic violence.

3. Methods

3.1. Study design

A qualitative study design was used to investigate teachers views on domestic violence as well as their own experiences of meeting children that may be exposed to domestic violence. Qualitative methodology allows the informants to freely express their thoughts and experiences and was therefore considered the most appropriate method for this research topic (Dahlgren et al, 2007). Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions was used to collect data since the topic was about expressing personal experiences to a sensitive topic. Qualitative content analysis was considered to be appropriate for interpreting perceptions and experience from the informants' point of view on both a manifest and latent level (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

3.2. Study setting

The study was conducted in Iceland a Nordic island in the North Atlantic with a population of 357.050 people (Statistics Iceland, 2019). The two-thirds of the population live in the capital, Reykjavík, which is located in the southwest of the island. The country was chosen due to lack of research in this field.

3.3. Sampling of Informants

The aim of the purposive sampling was to reach teachers from both urban and rural settings in Iceland to have a range in variation regarding school environment and to reach both male and female teachers with varying experiences in length of work at various study levels.

Recruitment of informants was performed through different channels, starting with advertising on Facebook to reach informants from different places in Iceland to give this study range and variation in working experiences. Three informants saw the advertisement on Facebook and contacted the author through email. An elementary teacher in Reykjavík, Iceland acted as a gate opener to help enroll more participants to the study and provided contact with five informants. Efforts were also made to reach informants through snowball sampling, but they didn't respond. Therefore another gate opener was engaged and helped contacting the last two participants that fitted the description of working outside the capital, Reykjavík. In total the interviews involved 10 elementary school teachers, five provided by Facebook and five through gate openers.

3.4. Data collection

The interviews were conducted from 3th of March to 1st of April 2019. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Icelandic and recorded on a digital recorder. Seven interviews were conducted face- to face in Iceland and three through Skype. The interviews were expected to take around 30-45 minutes but varied from 16 minutes to 1 hour. Even if some of the interviews were short, they gave rich information about the studied phenomenon. Most of the interviews were conducted during working hours

and took place in schools where refreshments were offered. Three of the informants preferred to do the interview in their home which was accepted in order to make them feel comfortable (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Prior to the interviews the informants were sent an information letter about the study aims and the interview procedures. Seven informants signed consent form, gave recorded verbal consent and were handed a copy of the information letter. Ideally every interview would have been face to face but due to location of the researcher and informants, three interviews had to be through skype, the informants gave recorded verbal consent and received the information letter by email (See Appendix 1 & 4) (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

An interview guide and a mind map were developed to ensure that all the research areas were covered (See appendix 2 & 3). The themes included in the interview were 1) *Teachers awareness on Domestic Violence and Children*, 2) *Work Procedures* and 3) *Reporting and Prevention*. Open-ended questions were used to conduct semi-structured interviews. The interview started with an introduction about the study and with questions about the informants teaching experiences and why they decided to become a teacher. The main purpose was to get to know them and get them to open up about personal experiences. The questions also provided an openness and helped to provide rich description from the informants. Focusing on attentive listening and allowing silence was used to make informants feel relaxed and comfortable when recalling their experiences. At the end of every interview informants were asked if they wanted to add any comments that they wanted to share. After each interview time was spent on reflecting and taking personal field notes that helped in the following interviews as well as in the analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

3.5. *Data analysis*

The data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis as described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). The data was transcribed and coded in Icelandic, but sub-categories, categories, themes and citations were translated into English. First the transcriptions were read several times to understand the meaning and to see patterns and similarities within the data.

The analysis started with meaning units being summarized and shortened to condensed meaning units still emphasizing on the meaning of the text. From condensed meaning units, codes were developed to capture the statements significance. Codes were then grouped into clusters to create categories and sub-categories presenting the manifest meanings (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The programs NVivo and Excel were used to facilitate the data analysis process. **Table 1** shows an example of the analysis process moving from meaning unit to category.

The second level of the data analysis process moved to the latent level, where a theme was developed to capture the underlying meaning of the informant's experiences of recognizing and identifying children that are exposed to domestic violence (Graneheim & Lundman 2004).

Table 1: An example of the analytical process, moving from meaning unit to category.

Meaning units	Condensed meaning units	Codes	Sub-categories	Categories
<i>"I as a teacher, need to know what the symptoms are and why this is so and so. I mean I don't know anything. I don't even know how or when I should react. Teach us! We need somebody to come and teach us about bullying and communication and like. Also about drugs and who's in the high-risk group and so on. I have to know what I'm suppose to do and what to observe. We need somebody to teach us!"</i>	I as a teacher need to know what the symptoms are. I don't know anything. How should I act? We need somebody to teach us about various subjects. I have to know what I'm suppose to do.	Lacking knowledge and education. Not knowing what to look for and observe. Demanding more preventions in schools.	Having no specific education.	Not knowing how to act as a teacher.

3.6. Ethical considerations

Research on violence against children is always sensitive, so ethical considerations were seriously considered throughout the study process. The study followed the four basic ethical principles for conduct, i.e. principle of

autonomy, beneficence, non-malevolence and justice (Dahlgren et al, 2007). The principle of autonomy guided in respecting informants' voluntary participation. The informants were informed about the study aims before the interviews and both written and verbal informed consent were obtained. Furthermore, the informants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that the interviews would only be used only for this study (See appendix 1). No names of informants or names of schools were mentioned. The informants were named V1 to V10 in the transcript and in the presentation of results to ensure anonymity. Principles of beneficence was considered by justifying the importance of the research and raise awareness of the topic. Principle of non-malevolence guided the interviews by being sensitive to informants' perceptions and feelings to avoid creating stress and anxiety when discussing sensitive issues. Principle of justice was applied by treating informants equally (Dahlgren et al, 2007).

The Data Protection Authority (Persónuvernd) in Iceland was contacted but formal approval from them was not necessary. No harm was expected for the informants, and they were asked if they had any final statements or questions before ending the interview. Data was stored safely and will be deleted from the devices in June 2019 after the Master program ends (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

4. Results

The informants in the study were 10 female teachers that had different work experiences in teaching in elementary schools, but the majority had experience working with the youngest age group. The age of the informants ranged from 30-55 years and work experience from 2 ½ years to 25 years (see table 2). All of the informants had higher level of education. One informant was a kindergarten teacher but had added one year at university to become an elementary teacher. Another informant was an elementary teacher that had added two years in guidance and study counseling and was working as such but had previously been a teacher. Two of the informants were currently working in a special education program with children with

disabilities but also had previous working experience as elementary school teachers in Reykjavík.

Table II. Characteristics of the informants and the length of the interview.

Identity code	Length of interview	Years of experience	Students age	Residency
V1	40:05 min	2,5 years	6-8 years	Capital Area
V2	32:32 min	12 years	6-8 years	Capital Area
V3	25:08 min	25 years	6-8 years	Capital Area
V4	31:15 min	8 years	6-8 years	Capital Area
V5	16:24 min	8 years	6-8 years	Capital Area
V6	23:23 min	15 years	6-12 years	Capital Area
V7	35:36 min	10 years	6-12 years	Capital Area
V8	23:40 min	15 years	12-15 years	South-West of Iceland
V9	26:38 min	6 years	6-9 years	North-coast of Iceland
V10	1:00:06 min	10 years	13-15 years	North-coast of Iceland

5. Description of results

The qualitative content analysis of how school teacher's perception and experiences of recognizing and identifying children exposed to domestic violence resulted in one main theme **Seeing the problem but lacking tools and trust to address domestic violence** illustrating the perceptions and experiences the teachers expressed on children exposed to domestic violence. This main theme was supported by six categories and 13 sub-categories. The first category, *Acknowledging the hidden nature of domestic violence* illustrates how the informant understand and experience domestic violence and children being exposed while the second, *Not knowing how to act as a teacher* gives an understanding of the lack of education and knowledge about children and domestic violence among informants. Category three, *Identifying physical abuse is easier than emotional* clarifies how teachers identify children and violence and the distinction they make between different form of abuse and the forth category, *Feeling left alone by social services*, gives an understanding on how teachers view their limited support they receive from the Child Protection Service during the reporting process. *Needing professional support within the school* was the fifth category, giving an understanding of the informant's views on their needs for institutional support while the sixth category, *Urging for guidelines and awareness* refers more to their needs from outside the school system with other professionals, authorities and the public in raising awareness to address children exposed to domestic violence.

Table 3 provides an overview of the content area, categories, subcategories and the overall theme. The results are presented under the headings of the categories (**bold & italics**), with sub-categories (*italics*) and supporting citations from the informants given in the text to illustrate the interpretations of the experiences.

Table III. Content area, categories and sub-categories and the overall theme of the study.

Content area	Categories and Sub-categories	Theme
Perception about domestic violence.	<p>Acknowledging the hidden nature of domestic violence.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Domestic violence-also affecting children. - Perceiving students being exposed to domestic violence. <p>Not knowing how to act as a teacher.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Underestimating and hesitating to be involved. - Having no specific education. . 	Seeing the problem but lacking tools and trust to address domestic violence.
Recognizing, identifying and reporting within the school system.	<p>Identifying physical abuse is easier than emotional.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identifying physical abuse right away. - Identifying emotional abuse is much harder. - Recognizing neglect is more visible. <p>Feeling left alone by the social services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Getting no information from CPS. - Having negative experiences with CPS resulting in distrust. 	
Suggestion for the future	<p>Needing professional support within the school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Getting professional help in identifying and recognizing DV. - Providing students with better accessibility of professional help within the school system. <p>Urging for guidelines and awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Having protocols would be helpful. - Needing education and prevention. 	

Note: Overview of findings

5.1. Acknowledging the hidden nature of domestic violence

From the interviews it was clear that domestic violence was a hidden and sensitive issue. They admitted that they both hesitated and underestimated the impact domestic violence has on children and lacked education and tools to address the problem. They realized how hidden domestic violence is but

still they knew that domestic violence is more common than they noticed. Informants acknowledged that children are also affected by domestic violence but underestimated the health impact that it has. All of the informant had actually experienced having a student exposed to domestic violence and illustrated insight by giving examples. The informants did not recall having learnt about domestic violence and children specifically. When asked if they remembered taking a course or getting a lecture about domestic violence the answer was no among all of the informants. The informants expressed a desire to get more knowledge and raise awareness of the subject.

5.1.1. Domestic violence - also affecting children

It was clear that the informants had the knowledge that children can also be exposed to domestic violence and that it could consist both of physical and emotional abuse.

“Yes, it is physical violence, if a spouse or father or mother or parent actually abuses a spouse or child physical and mental violence. Beaten or humiliated” (Informant 10).

The concept domestic violence was defined as all violence that happens at home. Physical and emotional abuse was always given as an example of domestic violence.

“You know, domestic violence is just all violence that happens at home. Can be both mental and physical. It’s just violence that happens at home. Yes, both emotional and physical” (Informant 8).

It was also clear that domestic violence was not just between grown-ups but also can have an effect on children.

“Ehmm domestic violence is a behavior that occurs, at home, which is not desirable, weather physical or mental, and I think that it is not just the parents, it can also affect children” (Informant 6).

5.1.2. Perceiving students being exposed to domestic violence

All informants gave examples of a student that lived in a violent household or was considered to be exposed to domestic violence. It was expressed by some informants that they had no experience in dealing with a case of domestic violence but after giving examples and elaborating the question, they all expressed examples of different cases. Some had experienced that students came to them and talked about their violence experience at home, but it could also be a suspicion that they had.

“I have experienced that a student comes to me and tells me that his father is violent to him. I have experienced that a student, basically two students, have come to me and told me [about the violence], and one more student that I have suspected but never [told me], we have been trying to get him to talk but it hasn’t worked”. (Informant 1).

Others had experienced getting information from a third person about students being exposed to DV and been informed by parents about violent upbringing methods.

“I found out that there were brothers in my class exposed to domestic violence and the CPS handled it. And yes, I remember one incident where a father told me that if his child was misbehaving, I had his permission to slap the child” (Informant 2).

The informants also acknowledged that children brought up in an addictive environment where a parent is abusing drugs and exposing the children to strangers were exposed to domestic violence.

“I reported one time, siblings that were in my class living with a mother that was an addict and inviting strangers’ home. These children experienced something that no child should experience” (Informant 4).

5.2 Not knowing how to act as a teacher.

Informants expressed that domestic violence is still considered to be a taboo and children are not recognized as victims in Iceland. There was a mutual perception among informants that children need to be recognized as victims in domestic violence cases and awareness is needed to prevent and help children. Informants had no previous education in domestic violence when asked and no clear preventive guidelines existed within the schools about the subject.

5.2.1. Underestimating and hesitating to be involved

The informants regarded domestic violence a very sensitive and delicate subject demanding a third party to get involved in the privacy of your home. The informants recognized that domestic violence has been considered to be a taboo that results in victims not wanting to seek help or talk about their experience, but they still hesitated to get involved themselves

“It's the shame and the fear. They dare not to say, and it also plays into the development of the teacher's responsibility. We can't get too involved” (Informant 1).

The informants acknowledged their role in helping children exposed to domestic violence but still expressed a concern that they did not know how and what to do.

“This is extremely flammable and delicate topic, both this and everything related to violence. The privacy of households is so strong” (Informant 3).

Three informants came from a small rural area in Iceland. One informant reflected that domestic violence must exist also in her area but maybe was a well-hidden problem that was needed to be addressed and educated about.

“We haven't dealt with a lot of these cases, but this place is definitely like other places. Is it so well hidden? I don't know the prevalence, but it must be happening without us knowing” (Informant 8)

5.2.2. *Having no specific education.*

The informants did not remember having had any direct education on DV neither as a teacher or as a student at the university. Some remembered attending lectures by independent speakers or organizations. Blátt Áfram was commonly mentioned and is an independent organization focusing on sexual violence against children by raising awareness and instruct guidelines to school staff.

No, I haven't got any specific education on that topic. Blátt Áfram has educated us but not as a teacher just about general awareness.

(Informant 9).

Another informant acknowledged the importance of raising awareness and educate teachers about domestic violence. She also expressed the lack of education.

"I just think that teachers need to be more open about this. I do not remember in my studies or anything, it's just not high on my mind."

(Informant 7).

There was also a direct concern about not having the tools and knowledge on how to handle these cases and approach these children and a request for education and awareness in this topic.

"I as a teacher, need to know what the symptoms are and why this is so and so. I mean, I don't know anything. I don't even know how or when I should react. We need somebody to teach us!" (Informant 8)

5.3. *Identifying physical abuse is easier than emotional abuse.*

All informants were aware of their responsibility to pay attention and react if a child expresses or shows signs of being exposed to violence. However, they talked more about physical violence and sexual violence than witnessing violence as child abuse. Some of the informants were not aware

that witnessing domestic violence is also an abuse and has the same health effect as physical abuse and neglect. Informants acknowledged emotional abuse but expressed how hard it was to identify. When asked about witnessing domestic abuse they asked for more details about what that meant.

“Like domestic violence, like do you mean that there are parents arguing and they are witnesses?” (Informant 7).

5.3.1 Identifying physical abuse right away

When the informants were asked about identifying physical abuse versus witnessing domestic violence, they all expressed that physical abuse was easier to identify because you have concrete evidence.

“No, I think, physical trauma, maybe, you can't help but to face it. You might be able to ignore the other and postpone. I think so.”
(Informant 2).

The informants talked about how when you see and face a physical trauma it is harder to ignore. When it comes to witnessing violence and knowing that a child lives in domestic violence household the identification process is much harder and takes longer. There were those that had experienced that that physical trauma causes quicker reactions from the school.

“If I get a student who comes to school, who has been exposed to violence and has physical trauma then it is immediately reported”
(Informant 6).

After giving the informants specific examples about witnessing domestic violence and that is also is considered as an exposure to violence one informant expressed that she thought that the criteria for the school to act is having visible evidence.

“Now I'm just realizing when I am talking to you that the criteria lies if you were punched or hit” (Informant 10).

5.3.2. *Identifying emotional abuse is much harder*

The general perspective from the informants was that recognizing and identifying children that are witnessing or experiencing emotional abuse was hard. It was seen a especially difficult for a teacher to claim that something is happening in the privacy of your home.

“It is of course difficult to be a school employee and claim that something is going on at your household. You can say: ‘I see that you are feeling bad want to talk about it’?” (Informant 7).

The informants expressed that the main criteria to act and report is if the student themselves tell that they are witnessing and/or exposed to domestic violence. Others said that they should act and report every form of violence, but that the lack of knowledge is a hindrance.

“I think you should report if there is any suspicion and I just think sometimes your just so ignorant that you don't realize that this could be the reason why” (Informant 3).

Witnessing domestic violence was not taken too seriously according to one of the informants.

No, I think that witnessing is not taken too seriously. The thought is, it will just go over (Informant 8).

5.3.3. *Recognizing neglect is more visible*

Neglect was seen as more visible and recognizable than if children are witnessing domestic violence. Here you have clear evidence when you see how the children are dressed and prepared for school.

“I have experienced neglect. Neglect is not about whether you have money or not. It is about if the parents are aware if the child is in too little shoes or if they spend time with their children. I find it more common here, neglect. You see it clearly. It is the career that comes first and not the children” (Informant 4).

The definitions of the term neglect and violence were sometimes mixed together, and the informants didn't seem to differ between the concepts.

“Neglected children are dirty, don't have packed lunch and there a lot of them that I didn't even realize but I knew it was neglect” (Informant 5).

Neglect was something that the teacher's felt unsure about. It was easy to identify but sometimes not so easy to judge if to report.

“It is visible on children, they are poorly cared for and in this case the child's hair was uncombed and never did their homework or anything. Isn't that something to report? That is neglect in my opinion” (Informant 7).

5.4 Feeling left alone by the social services

This category portrays the informants' perceptions and experiences of working with The Child Protection Services (CPS) in Iceland. It highlights challenges in the collaboration, the delays often encountered as well as the resulting general distrust in the services

5.4.1. Getting no information from CPS.

The informants all agreed that having no information from CPS after reporting was an obstacle to report again. After reporting, their perception was that they had fulfilled their teacher's responsibility and CPS had taken over the case, but experiences showed otherwise.

“When I heard of a teacher that had reported something, neglect or anything, a process starts but the teachers is completely held outside. The confidentiality is so strong that you don't know what is going on at the social service while you are teaching the child on a daily basis. That is hard!” (Informant 10).

Another informant also talked about the break of trust to CPS after failing to handle a case she reported, and nothing had been done for some time.

“A case you report is open, and you think they are handling it. Then you call and you get to know that the case is closed, and you ask: on what grounds? Was there really nothing that raised a red flag?”

(Informant 2).

There were also informants that wished for more feedback on how the cases were handled so they could help the students better and work better together with the CPS to to keep the children safe.

“I feel like I need more information because we are around the children every day. We lack information and of course it is confidential but if we knew, we would be able to respond better and help them” (Informant 3).

5.4.2. Having negative experiences with CPS resulting in distrust

The reporting process was according to the informants too time consuming. After fulfilling all their work, it seldom resulted in helping the child or being acknowledged by the CPS.

“My experience with CPS is ‘impotence’ and it can take a year before anything is done. I report and it can take weeks before something happens. Sometimes the cases are forgotten, and you think it is being processed but then it isn’t, they send you a questionnaire two to three months later and you think, WOW! Nothing has been done all this time. They should be more effective in immediately intervene”

(Informant 2).

All of my informants had something to say about CPS. The lack of resources was noticeable from the discussion and the slow response from the CPS after they report. The formality of the process was also discussed as explained by one of the informants.

“These meeting are often with the representative of the CPS, but sometimes nothing is done. Maybe that is the reason why teachers are not reporting as they should. Because when you have a student

throughout the elementary school from the age of six and nothing is done in their affairs” (Informant 3).

Distrust in the system and in the whole CPS process was clear. The informants expressed a lot of disappointment towards CPS and not trusting that they were fulfilling their responsibilities.

“In all of the reports that I have submitted for various cases, I have not been aware that anything is being done. Unfortunately, I’ve been a teacher for two and half years and my belief in CPS is not existent” (Informant 1)

Other informants illustrated that the tolerance limit varied between CPS committees and narrated experiences of having reported cases that were being belittled if no direct violence had happened to the child.

“I think the tolerance limits are just different. I know some cases where there is no direct violence, but some kind of neglect and the CPS and social service is just turning a blind eye” (Informant 4).

5.5 Needing professional support within the school

The significance of having professional support within the schools was referred to by many interviewees. The informants described how teachers’ role have changed the last two decades and that their responsibility has increased. They talked about having to deal with many social and behavioral problems that they are not trained or educated about. Every teacher is responsible for around 25 children per class in Iceland and every individual requires a lot of work regarding their learning outcomes, collaboration with parents, following learning protocols and look after their best interest. The informants expressed having duties that led to work overload expressed a need for professional help to have more time with the children and be able to identify and recognize problems. They wanted professional support within the schools for all parties involved such as, students, teachers, school

authorities and the CPS so that helping children exposed to domestic violence could start earlier.

5.5.1. Getting professional help in identifying and recognizing domestic violence

A suggestion for professional help was to place a professional with training and expertise in children and domestic violence within the schools, to guide and support the teachers in identifying and reporting concerns.

“We need to have other professionals to help us. What can we do? Then things would maybe happen faster” (Informants 6).

Others had more general thoughts and welcomed any support and help in recognizing the children exposed to domestic violence.

Like if I suspect a child... what is the best thing to do. Yes, it would likely to have a better access to any support within the school that would help (Informant 10).

5.5.2. Providing students with better accessibility of professional help within the school system

The informants all describe the need of having a professional help within the school system to help students with all kinds of social and mental problems, such as a counselor or a psychologist.

“That they have somebody to talk to a counselor or someone like that. To have somebody within the school that is here for the kids. I think so, to have a psychologist in schools. He would have a lot to do” (Informant 3).

They also expressed the need of having a counselor available during school hours and defined the job of the student counselor in general because terms since it varies between school.

“Have a better access to any support within the school would help. Students don't necessarily trust me for this. We need a third party within the school to address these concerns.” (Informant 10).

When reflecting on solutions, one informant expressed the need of having a safe place within the school where students with difficult feelings could get a break and professional guidance to deal with these emotions.

“I would say that the solution is to have a support within the schools, that we as teachers can send them somewhere within the school so it is possible to grab them if they have any issues or feelings. Just have a safe place to relax and just, you know, talk if they want to talk and just get some privacy if they need. Support service within the schools is so undervalued” (Informant 1).

5.6 Urging for guidelines to follow

All informants expressed that there was no specific guideline or protocol to follow when it comes to identifying, recognizing or handled child being exposed to domestic violence. It varied how the informants handled these cases, but all expressed collaborating with colleagues or the principal. They wanted guidelines or protocols to follow so that the cases would be handled equally.

5.6.1. Having protocols would be helpful

The informants expressed how difficult it became to identify and report without any protocols or guidelines to support their actions. They are unaware about how important it is to recognize these students.

There is maybe something missing, as a teacher you will need a checklist or something to help you if you suspect something but are not sure. It might be helpful to have something like that. You could tick in the boxes. (Informant 3).

What they wanted were protocols or guidelines that would support them in a concrete way of responsibilities and actions to take.

“Yes, that would be really good because then you would have something concrete in your hands” (Informants 5).

5.6.2. *Needing education and prevention*

There was a lot of interest in the subject of children and domestic violence and the school environment could be more conducive in to react at an early stage.

“Like I say I think we need to create a process for us, and to teach children more about emotional abuse. That something is done to keep the ball rolling not always this stagnation” (Informant 1).

The informants recognized the lack of knowledge in general and that education is needed to raise awareness on this topic. They described the importance of stopping turning a blind eye and talk about the issue because of how common it is.

“There is no discussion or awareness about this topic. Nothing about teaching children and the public to recognize that something is going on. Domestic violence is more common than people realize” (Informant 6).

Still some informants were uncertain about the definition of domestic violence and was struggling to define it which implying a need for further education.

“I am not sure if it is domestic violence, again it comes to this definition. Sometimes you knew that there was a bit of alcohol consumption in homes. Back to the definition. Is that domestic violence?” (Informant 10).

6. Discussion

6.1 Summary of results

This study explored how teachers are perceiving and identifying children exposed to domestic violence. The main findings were that informants understand the seriousness of the effect that domestic violence has on children but underestimate the consequences of indirect violence due to the lack of knowledge and guidelines. The lack of professional support results

in teachers not recognizing or identifying children being exposed to domestic violence unless they have visible evidence. Furthermore, the study verifies that the reporting process has many obstacles that leads to teachers not reporting the way they are expected to. The main obstacle is distrusting the child protection services. Having had bad experiences with the whole reporting process becomes a hindrance to report again. Finally, the study explored suggestions for the future indicating a need for stronger institutional support as well as more detailed guidelines regarding domestic violence to hopefully increase recognition and identification of children being exposed to violence.

6.2. Discussion of findings

The informants identified children also being part of the domestic violence equation. A Nordic study regarding experiences and perceptions from children growing up in the proximity of violence showed that they experience indifference on the part of teachers and staff if they tried to open up about violence. The teachers sometimes pushed the problem away and the children experienced rejection and lack of understanding (Weinehall, 2005). This also relates to the findings of the study that teachers don't have the proper training, education or support to handle these cases. The personal experiences or interest of the teacher influence how the cases are handled.

Teachers knowledge plays a huge role in identifying and recognizing children being exposed to domestic violence. Previous studies have shown that there are failures in identifying and reporting children exposure to violence. People who are working with children such as teachers and other school staff find it hard to report their concerns if the violence is not visible (Ellonen & Pösö, 2014; Lloyd, 2018). The results from this study also illustrates that teachers find it difficult to make the decision to report to the children protection service (CPS) without any visible evidence and approach suspicions about emotional or witnessing violence. Their lack of knowledge on witnessing violence as an exposing factor in domestic violence and having the same health impacts as physical abuse was also illustrated by the informants. They acknowledge that

it could have some negative emotional consequences but underestimate the seriousness of it due to lack of knowledge and awareness. The informants also viewed neglect, violence and abuse in one category.

The results from this study suggests that personal beliefs and different ethical values of the principal and other professionals in schools are obstacles to report cases of domestic violence to the social services. Some informants experienced lack of support and understanding about reporting of witnessing domestic violence. That can result in that the report is unresolved or even forgotten and never receives CPS. It also indicates a lack of knowledge among principals and other school professionals. The findings are supported in another study from Iceland showing that principals lack knowledge about domestic violence and express uncertainty about the reactions of children witnessing or living with domestic violence in the household (Sederholm, 2009). This may explain why informants in this current study, had different experiences of getting support from their principals to report student being exposed to domestic violence.

6.3. Obstacles to report

Informants in this study described that silence remains about the issue of domestic violence and that people are scared to approach it. There was a fear of getting too close and risking reporting without concrete evidence. Lack of confidence in their concerns, lack of guidelines and bad experiences influenced their decision to report. The teachers either had experienced themselves or heard from colleagues about worse result in involving CPS. Obstacles in reporting are associated with other findings that teachers are afraid of the consequences for themselves but also for the student, not having concrete evidence and not trusting the follow-up help that is provided (Schols et al, 2013). The teachers in this study stated that involving CPS did not result in any help or action for the child. It only resulted in students distrusting their teachers and authorities. The formality and the workload of the reporting process was also considered to be an obstacle where teachers are needing to fulfill a lot of requirements that is considered to be a barrier to

report. These findings are similar to the Swedish situation where Markström & Münger, (2018;2019) has shown that teachers are not reporting their concern about domestic violence because they lack education and distrust the capacity of the social services to handle cases and that gap between school and the CPS exists.

Suggestions for the future

The study showed that there are no guidelines or protocols to follow to help teachers identify and recognize children and domestic violence. Teachers are lacking professional support and have no specific education on domestic violence. Prevention on domestic violence are non-existent for students and training of school professionals is also missing. The informants stated that they wanted more professional support to identify, recognize and make the decision to report to the social services. They suggested that resources, actions and communication with the social services needed to be improved to refine procedures and cooperation. Preventions must also be improved according to the teachers and holistic prevention policy must be established to eliminate school inconsistency when it comes to prevention.

6.4. Methodological considerations

The quality criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research include credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Dahlgren et al., 2007). In this study various steps were taken to ensure that the categories from the data truly described the perception and experiences of the informants. Credibility relates to being able to portray the realities of the informants by having different age groups from varying settings and with varying work experiences were targeted. Additionally, quotes from informants' statements were provided to support the interpretation of findings. (Dahlgren et al., 2007)

Confirmability relates to ensuring that biases in the shape of personal interest of the researcher are avoided (Dahlgren et al, 2007). The author

tried to limit own biases by reflecting and putting pre-understanding within bracket. Confirmability is also about the neutrality of the data. That the interviews were transcribed verbatim, notes were taken after each interview and discussed with the supervisor and fellow students helped to ensure the confirmability of this study. However, still there is a risk that the author's background in research job-experiences on domestic violence in Iceland influenced the interviews as well as the interpretations. (Creswell, 2013). During the study process, interview guide and data collection, discussion with the thesis supervisor occurred to help with the process.

Dependability of the findings refers to the ability of the researcher to take in to account continuous changes of the research phenomenon (Dahlgren et al, 2007). To increase dependability, a step-by-step of procedures were made by presenting the report with other documents to ensure an "audit trail" in the research process.

Transferability is the potential to transfer the findings to other settings. Qualitative researcher study in-depth phenomenon with few cases and critics have argued that no qualitative research can be transferred to other settings because of the methodology (Dahlgren et al., 2007). However, providing *thick descriptions* about study context, the characteristics of the informants and the methodology used help to reader to assess the transferability of the results to other settings.

7. Conclusion and implications

The study emphasizes on the need for preventions and education among teachers in Iceland. The teacher's responsibilities have changed in recent years and more work is required on recognizing and identifying social and behavioral problems among students. Teachers are not trained or educated in this topic that indicates that many issues regarding domestic violence are not informed and children are not getting the support they need.

Professional support is needed within the schools to help teachers recognizing and identifying children but also to provide children support in school with their social problems. There is a need to raise awareness in

Iceland that children are also exposed to domestic violence and get the support to live in a safe environment.

It is very important that the Children Protection Service in Iceland improves the communication with school authorities and teachers so that children who are exposed to domestic violence are recognized and get appropriate help to avoid serious mental and physical illnesses both in the short and long term. Ministry of Education need to consider having a general prevention program within the school's curriculum that applies for all schools in the country to improve the knowledge and education of domestic violence. Furthermore, it is essential to increase research regarding children and domestic violence in Iceland to get a better overview of the problem, to evaluate and improve present protocols.

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9. Appendices

Appendix I. Information letter to participate in the study.

To whom concerned.

I am a Master student of International Public Health at Lund University conducting interviews for my master thesis. The purpose is to understand perception and experience of Icelandic teachers in recognizing and identifying children exposed to domestic violence. The thesis will follow the ethical guideline of research and approved by my supervisor.

The thesis will follow the ethical guidelines, for research. To participate in the interview is voluntary and you can choose whether or not you want to answer the questions and also to withdraw from the study at any time. The interview will focus on your thoughts about the possibilities and challenges for you as a teacher to recognize and identify children exposed to domestic violence. I will be conducting the interviews in Icelandic and would like to record the session to be able to remember what has been said for later analysis. The interview will take around 30 min to 45 min of your time. All information will be treated confidentially throughout the thesis process and no information will be possible to track down to individual persons in the presentation of the final results. The results will be presented in my Master thesis in Public Health at the University of Lund. The recording of your interview will be destroyed at the end of course.

If you have any questions, you find my contact information below. If you want to participate in an interview, please email me, with a confirmation so I can arrange a date and time.

Contact Information:

Kristín Ómarsdóttir

kr0308om-s@student.lu.se

telephone: +46732452381

Appendix II. Interview guide

Interview guide - English

Teachers awareness domestic violence and children

1. What is your understanding of what domestic violence is?
2. Can you describe what type of education or a training in domestic violence and children have you had?
3. What is your experience of working with children that have been exposed to domestic violence?
4. Can you describe the last time (most complicated, least complicated) you had a student where you suspected that domestic violence was an issue?
5. It has been said that schools/teachers are not sufficiently reporting their concerns of children that are exposed to domestic violence. What is your perception on that?
6. Studies have shown that children who are exposed to domestic violence want to express their experience with domestic violence but don't get an opportunity or trust somebody in their schools. What is your perception on that?

Work procedures and reporting

1. What support tools to you have in your school to help you in identifying and recognizing student exposed to domestic violence?
Describe, how helpful, perceptions about their usefulness
2. What is your experience in getting support from school authorities or the child protection service, when you suspect a child is living with domestic violence?

3. What is your experience in making the decision to report a child witnessing domestic violence versus being abused themselves? Are these cases handled differently?
4. What are the main challenges in recognizing children exposed to domestic violence?

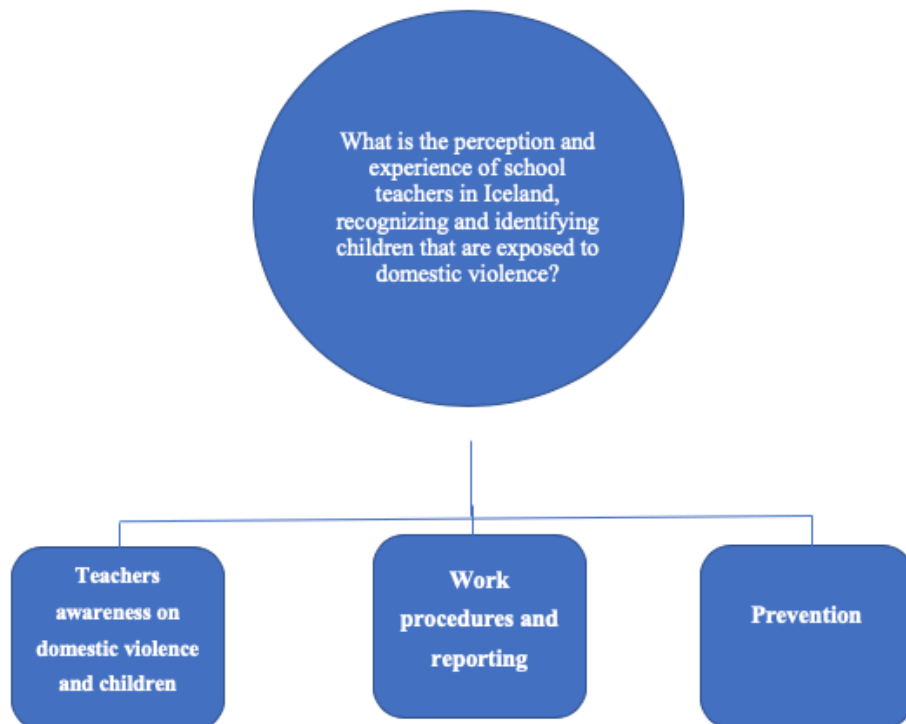
Prevention

1. How is prevention and education to children about domestic violence included in your school curricula?
2. How do you include violence against children in your daily teaching? Can you describe it?
3. How do you think violence against children has been dealt in the school over time?
4. What do you think is still lacking in the school's services for children exposed to domestic violence today?
5. Is there anything you would like to add?

Thank you so much for your time. I'm so grateful 😊

Appendix III. Interview map

Mind map for the interview:



Appendix III. Interview consent form

I have received oral and written information about the study and have had the possibility to ask questions. I can keep the information letter.

- I consent to participate in the interview study about **Icelandic teachers' perceptions and experiences in recognizing and identifying children exposed to domestic violence**
- I consent to the information about me being treated as described in the information letter.

Place and date	Signature

Popular Science Summary

Domestic violence is a form of violence that happens within the home where an individual is exposed to violence by someone close to him, related or connected. Children can also be exposed to domestic violence, such as witnessing violence, physical or emotional abused by a parent, relative or step-parent. Children that grow up with domestic violence can develop mental and physical problems that can affect them long term. Children that are exposed to domestic violence experience anxiety, shame, depression, fear and have low self-esteem that effects their concentration, behavior and learning abilities. Reports from Children Protection Service (CPS) show that schools are only reporting 13.2% of overall reports which is relatively low. This study tried to understand how teachers recognize and identify children being exposed to domestic violence and what their experience and perception is handling these cases. Interviews with ten Icelandic teachers was conducted that had different range of work experience. Analysis of the interview showed several obstacles and hindrance in reporting and identifying children affected. There is a lack of knowledge, professional support and distrust in the CPS to handled cases. Preventions and general awareness of children being also victims to domestic violence is needed and better support within the schools. Therefore, this study concludes that it is important to educate teachers and other school staff about children and domestic violence and improve professional support within the schools to recognize, identify and support these children. Furthermore, it is important to improve communication between schools and CPS because that is a barrier that need to be fixed.