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# The Role of Secondary School Educational Leaders in Identifying and Responding to Child Sexual Abuse

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## Abstract

In response to an ever-increasing number of child sexual abuse (CSA) cases in Malta, this paper explores the way secondary school educational leaders are involved in identifying and responding to CSA. Additionally, it highlights the individual thoughts and feelings of secondary school educational leaders in responding to potential CSA cases. The sources of data of this mixed methods research include: 63 questionnaires completed by secondary school educational leaders occupying the role of Assistant Head of School or Head/Acting Head of School, as well as 10 semi-structured interviews conducted with secondary school educational leaders occupying the role of Head/Acting Head of School. Participants were recruited from three different school sectors: state, church, and independent. Whilst participants' responses showed a willingness to fulfil mandatory reporting obligations and contained evidence of good practice in dealing with CSA, knowledge pertaining to CSA proved to be somewhat lacking amongst the participating educational leaders. This is likely attributed to the lack of pre-service and CoPE (Community of Professional Educators) training opportunities on all aspects of CSA available to educational professionals in all school sectors. The study reveals that dealing with CSA poses significant emotional challenges for educational leaders; however, the active involvement of different stakeholders and professionals facilitates the process of CSA referrals.

## Keywords

Child Sexual Abuse, Identification and Response, Knowledge, Attitude, Personal Experiences, Educational Leadership

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## Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) affects millions of children from all backgrounds (Tener & Sigad, 2019). It is estimated that 7.9% of men and 19.7% of women globally experience sexual abuse prior to the age of 18 (Singh et al., 2014). However, these figures only present estimates of the incidence of CSA based on reports received and validated by child protection agencies. Therefore, the situation is even more alarming as up to two thirds of CSA victims do not disclose the abuse to anyone, mainly due to feelings of fear, shame, and guilt (London et al., 2005). Consequently, it is not exactly known how many children are in fact victims of sexual abuse.

Despite being labelled as one of the worst forms of violence against children, the incidence of CSA is undeniably a growing epidemic (Damayanti et al., 2019; Karsna & Kelly, 2021; Mitchell, 2010; Putnam, 2003). Regarding the local context, CSA is a far cry from a rare occurrence. Since 2017, 317 CSA-related cases have been filed in court by the CID within the Malta Police Force, clearly indicating the high prevalence of this kind of abuse. This observation is all the more worrying given the sharp increase of online CSA (Karsna & Kelly, 2021).

Following the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1990, Malta is bound to respect the rights of children irrespective of its political and economic circumstances (Office of the Commissioner for Children, 2015). This gave rise to the necessity of implementing a child protection policy for schools. Consequently, the Ministry for Education drew up the Child Protection Procedures for Schools (Education Division, 1999), a policy which sets out clear guidelines pertaining to child protection to all educational establishments and to all members of staff working within educational establishments, including non-teaching members of staff. Similarly, in an effort to further support all schools falling under its auspices in the area of child abuse identification and response, the Secretariat for Catholic Education issued its own policy entitled Safeguarding Children in our Schools (2019).

Both policies give schools the responsibility to appoint a Designated Safeguarding Officer (DSO), ideally an SLT (School Leadership Team) member, whose task is to maintain a strong collaborative approach with social services (namely the National School Support Services, Appoġġ, and other entities or NGOs involved in child protection) and the different teams within the school

(Interdisciplinary Team, Pastoral Care Team, Discipline Team, etc.), all of which have in common the holistic wellbeing of the children. Being the first point of reference for any member of the Interdisciplinary Team, school staff members, and visiting professionals, the policy attributes a lot of responsibility to the individual fulfilling the role of DSO. Whilst under both policies every school can designate a member of staff for child protection matters, the ultimate responsibility for all cases of abuse lies in the hands of the Head/Acting Head of School.

The recent enactment of the Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act (2020) has further emphasised educators' legal responsibility to report their concerns and suspicions pertaining to any form of child abuse and neglect. In fact, a complementary publication entitled *Mandatory Reporting Guidelines for Professionals (2020)* was produced. It provides a list of essential definitions pertaining to child abuse and neglect, as well as a clear set of guidelines to be followed by all professionals and volunteers working with children, formally or informally, in case of any child abuse suspicions. There are two facets to the enactment of this legislation. On the one hand, it serves as a reminder to all educational professionals of their duty to report child abuse and neglect under Maltese law. On the other hand, it transforms the concept of mandatory reporting from being one which is solely linked to an exclusive sector or category of professionals, to one which demands collective effort, collaboration, and cooperation amongst all professionals working, directly or indirectly, with children. Therefore, in maintaining a strong collaborative approach with social services, educators play an essential role in ensuring that cases of CSA are not overlooked in order to minimise the risk of long-term and dramatic impact of this kind of abuse upon children.

Whilst Mitchell (2010) argues that CSA is a school leadership issue, existing research has failed to acknowledge and account for the role played by educational leaders in identifying and responding to CSA. In many jurisdictions around the world, individuals who work in direct contact with children and young people are legally bound to notify their suspicions of different forms of child abuse and neglect (Mathews & Kenny, 2008). Whilst this implies that in a significant number of jurisdictions educational professionals are expected to address reasonable suspicions or knowledge of child maltreatment, research

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suggests that not all educators are reporting cases of child abuse (Falkiner et al., 2017; Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008; Kesner & Robinson, 2002; Zellman, 1990). This is even more problematic since one of the main reasons teachers fail to report incidents of CSA is the lack of support from or involvement of educational leaders (Abrahams et al., 1992; Kenny, 2001; Sulovski, 2017).

It is recognised that the significant role played by educators in child protection carries legal, ethical, and moral responsibilities (Mathews, 2011). However, educators' knowledge of their CSA identification and reporting duty, as well as other key features pertaining to child protection, are not matters which could be learned intuitively. Consequently, it should not be assumed by schools or by legislative and professional ethics authorities that all educators have adequate knowledge to deal with issues pertaining to CSA (Baginsky & Macpherson, 2005; Goldman, 2008; Haynes, 2015; Walsh et al., 2010). Research suggests that educators' failure to deal with CSA cases is due to several factors, such as the stigma linked to the phenomenon of CSA (Sivis-Cetinkaya, 2015); the lack of training pertaining to CSA identification and reporting procedures available to both in-service and pre-service educators (Kenny, 2004; Payne, 1991; Zeuthen & Hagelskjær, 2013; Martínez Álvarez et al., 2011, 2012; Márquez-Flores et al., 2016); the complexities of mandatory reporting legislation and policies (Falkiner et al., 2017); the fear of being sued by families for a false allegation (Bellows, 2007; Delaney, 2007); the fear of disrupting existing relationships between the educator and the child, the parents and the child, or the educator and the child's family (Crosson-Tower, 2003; Collin-Vézina, 2013); the potential negative impact on the educator's professional reputation (Wurtele et al., 1993); the additional work that comes with filing a report for child abuse and neglect (Alvarez et al., 2004); the emotional and psychological distress that the reporting process causes the educator (Atkinson & Hornby, 2002; Burrows-Horton & Cruise, 2001); and the length of time of the reporting process (Chait, 2010).

Having established the prevalence of victims of CSA and the fundamental role played by secondary school educational leaders in CSA identification and response, this study considers the following research issues:

- i. How are secondary school educational leaders involved when it comes to identifying and responding to child sexual abuse?
- ii. What are the experiences of secondary school educational leaders in responding to potential cases of child sexual abuse?

Therefore, this study focuses on analysing the involvement of secondary school educational leaders in CSA identification as well as their experiences in dealing with CSA cases.

## Material and Methods

### Research Approach

In order to examine a wide range of interrelated issues, both quantitative and qualitative research techniques were used in this study. On the one hand, quantitative data was generated from a questionnaire distributed to secondary school educational leaders occupying the role of Assistant Head of School or Head/Acting Head of School, with the aim to investigate the extent of their involvement in identifying and responding to CSA. On the other hand, the individual thoughts and personal experiences of secondary school educational leaders occupying the role of Head/Acting Head of School when responding to potential cases of CSA were gathered through semi-structured interviews.

### Participants

The following table (Table 1) illustrates the distribution of educational leaders in state and non-state (church and independent) schools during the scholastic year 2020–2021:

**Table 1**

*Number of educational leaders by sector*

<b>Scholastic Year 2020–2021</b>			
<b>Grade</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Non-State</b>	<b>Total</b>
Assistant Head of School	113	76	<b>189</b>
Head of School	23	28	<b>51</b>

*Note:* Data provided by the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability within the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation.

The research data of this study was collected from three secondary school sectors: state, church, and independent. Semi-structured interviews invited the participation of educational leaders occupying the role of Head/Acting Head of School, whereas the online questionnaire invited the participation of educational leaders occupying the role of Head/Acting Head of School or Assistant Head of School.

Qualitative data emerging from semi-structured interviews involved the selection of 10 secondary schools as indicated in Figure 1. Such distribution of schools was adopted to ensure that the collected qualitative data is fair, comparable, and equally distributed across the different school sectors (Gray & Grove, 2020; Wengarf, 2001). The sole criterion for selection of schools was to ensure the fair representation of all three school sectors.<sup>i</sup> It is pertinent to point out that the choice to only recruit informants occupying the role of Head/Acting Head of School for semi-structured interviews was not made haphazardly. It was felt that this study's qualitative component specifically called for the recruitment of informants fulfilling this criterion given that in schools, the ultimate responsibility for all cases of abuse and neglect falls within the remit of educational leaders occupying the role of Head/Acting Head of School. Table 2 presents a description of the 10 participants, 1 from each of the chosen 10 schools, who completed an in-depth semi-structured interview.

## Figure 1

*Selection of schools for qualitative data collection*



**Table 2**

*Semi-structured interview participant information*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Professional Experience (in years)</b>	<b>School Type</b>	<b>Current Role</b>
HOS1	Male	14	State Middle School	Head of School
HOS2	Female	4	State Middle School	Acting Head of School
HOS3	Female	13	State senior school	Head of School
HOS4	Male	8	State senior school	Head of School
HOS5	Male	30	Boys' Church secondary school	Head of School
HOS6	Male	5	Boys' Church secondary school	Head of School
HOS7	Female	5	Girls' Church secondary school	Head of School
HOS8	Female	7	Girls' Church secondary school	Head of School
HOS9	Male	22	Independent secondary school	Head of Middle and Senior School
HOS10	Female	3	Independent secondary school	Head of Senior Sector

*Note:* The name tag 'HOS' stands for 'Head of School'. Professional experience refers to professional experience as a Head/Acting Head of School.

This study's quantitative component called for a wider consideration of educational leadership roles. In fact, all educational leaders occupying the role of Assistant Head of School or Head/Acting Head of School in secondary schools across the three different school sectors were invited to complete an online questionnaire. This was because, firstly, dealing with suspected or disclosed cases of CSA generally involves a collective effort involving multiple SLT members. Secondly, an Assistant Head of School could be asked to fill in the role of an Acting Head of School in the absence of a Head of School, and

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hence shoulder temporary responsibility. Thirdly, any Assistant Head of School could be an aspiring or eventual Head of School. Therefore, the participation of both Heads/Acting Heads of School and Assistant Heads of School was crucial to investigating educational leaders' training, attitudes, and knowledge about CSA response. The quantitative sample in this study comprises 63 secondary school educational leaders. More participants occupied the role of Assistant Head (n=45, 71.4%) than that of Head/Acting Head of School (n=16: 25.4%; n=1: 1.59% respectively). The other respondent (n=1, 1.59%) occupied the role of School Rector. Therefore, given the target population, the questionnaire response rate stood at 26.3% (63 out of 240 eligible participants).

### Instrumentation

On the one hand, qualitative data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews. On the other hand, a questionnaire was administered to investigate the extent of secondary school educational leaders' involvement in identifying and responding to CSA. The questionnaire used for the purpose of this study was partially based on the Teacher Reporting Questionnaire developed by Mathews et al. (2010) in a study conducted in New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia, which sought to investigate the law, policy, and practice of primary school teachers' reporting of CSA. Permission to adapt the questionnaire for the context of this study was sought and granted directly from the researchers. It was ensured that the questionnaire would be adapted in such a way to reflect the Maltese educational context and the study's target participants.

### Procedure

Formal requests to collect research data from the different school sectors were presented as follows: the MFED Research Ethics Committee (MREC), within the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability, for state schools; the Secretariat for Catholic Education for Church Schools; and the individual schools for independent schools. Once approval was granted from the respective authorities, information letters and consent forms were sent to the concerned schools and participants. Prior to the data collection process, all



potential participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and that the data obtained would not be used or retained for any other purpose. Additionally, the necessary measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and security of processing of data.

### Data Analysis

An inductive approach to thematic analysis was used to identify the major themes, subthemes, and patterns emerging from the semi-structured interviews in an effort to investigate the essential role played by secondary school educational leaders in identifying and responding to CSA. After analysing the interview transcripts repetitively, the different notes and labels emerging from each of the interviews were compared and classified in order to generate a set of themes and concepts. The questionnaire yielding quantitative data was designed using Google Forms and circulated online to different secondary schools. Once extracted, the data was inputted in the software IBM SPSS Statistics (SPSS) for further analysis and validation.

## Results

Two main themes and 10 subsequent themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews with Heads/Acting Heads of School, as seen in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Semi-structured interview themes/subthemes*

<b>Theme 1: Child Wellbeing and Protection Knowledge</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. The Needs of Children</li> <li>ii. Defining CSA</li> <li>iii. Educational Leaders' Perception of CSA</li> <li>iv. Perceptions on CSA in Malta</li> <li>v. Identification of CSA cases</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 2: CSA as an Educational Leadership Issue</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. The Responsibilities of the Head of School</li> <li>ii. The Referral Process</li> <li>iii. Training and CoPE sessions</li> <li>iv. The Emotional Challenges Posed by CSA Cases</li> <li>v. Personal Support Networks</li> </ul>

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The questionnaire designed for this study included five sections, capturing information on the topics of Demographics and Professional Information; Education and Training; Experience in Dealing with CSA; Attitudes Towards CSA Response; and Knowledge About CSA Response.

### CSA as an Educational Leadership Issue

Interviewed Heads perceive their professional role as both challenging and complex. This argument was expressly illustrated by one of the Heads who describes the role of a Head of School as one which entails an "A to Z job description" (HOS8). All participants touched upon the following responsibilities in their responses: the day-to-day running of the school, the teaching and learning processes, inclusion, the School Leadership Team, the duties of school personnel, disciplinary issues, and the wellbeing of school personnel and pupils. All interviewed Heads hold frequent meetings with other members of staff within the school involved in child protection to discuss potential and existing cases of child abuse and neglect.

Three Heads spoke about their responsibility to pay special attention to the behaviour of children to identify potential CSA cases. The referral procedure is central to any CSA case being identified in a school; the interviewed Heads demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the various steps it entails. One Head specifically referred to educational leaders' responsibility to respect Article 9 (4) of the Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act (2020), which legally binds professionals working with children to address abuse cases by immediately taking the necessary actions. The same participant compared the role of the Head of School with that of an "informal investigator" (HOS4). Nine Heads explained that there is a strong nationwide network of professionals (namely the Psychosocial Team for state schools and the Interdisciplinary Team for church schools) involved in CSA intervention, all of whom take immediate action when the need arises.

### Experience in Dealing with CSA

Concerning the subject of CSA identification and response in schools, most respondents (n=40, 63.5%) had suspected CSA at some point in their role as educational leaders. Out of these respondents, a significant number of educational leaders (n=26, 65%) had fulfilled their role as mandated reporters.

On the other hand, some of the respondents (n=14, 35%) stated that they had chosen not to report their suspicions. Out of these 14 respondents, 12 (85.7%) claimed that their decision not to report their suspicions had happened during a time when they were bound to disclose this information according to specific educational authority policy or formal school policy.

In an effort to understand the reasons behind educational leaders' failure to act as mandated reporters, respondents were asked to provide information about the different reasons which might have led them not to report their abuse suspicions. The main reasons for failure to respond to CSA were the retaliation by parent(s)/guardian(s)/community member(s) (n=6, 42.9%) and the concern about the legal implications of reporting (n=6, 42.9%). The results indicate that the following items were not likely to be the reasons behind respondents' failure to report suspected cases of CSA: concern regarding possible damage to the school's relationship with the child's parents/guardians; lack of knowledge regarding reporting procedures; belief that child protective services are unlikely to provide effective help; belief that discussing the situation with the concerned family is the best solution; and concern regarding the school's reputation.

#### Attitudes Towards CSA Response

In order to assess educational leaders' attitudes towards CSA response, participants were asked to mark their agreement to a total of 16 statements. The results clearly indicate that, to a large extent, respondents believe that reporting CSA is necessary to protect children (Strongly agree: n=55, 87.3%; Agree: n=8, 12.7%), and that reporting guidelines pertaining to CSA are necessary for education leaders (Strongly agree: n=55, 88.7%; Agree: n=7, 11.3%). Similarly, a significant number of respondents (n=62, 98.45%) claimed to have the intention to report any future CSA suspicions, with 46 out of 63 respondents (73%) opting for the 'Strongly agree' answer. Most respondents (n=49, 77.8%) claimed to be familiar with the procedures in place to report CSA. However, it suffices to note that only 18 out of 63 respondents (28.6%) opted for the 'Strongly Agree' variable. In a similar vein, 58 out of 62 respondents (93.6%) confirmed that they are willing to fulfil their professional responsibilities as educational leaders by reporting potential CSA cases. However, one cannot overlook the fact that one of the respondents opted for the 'Strongly disagree' variable.

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On the other hand, two of the statements indicated a shared sentiment of disagreement amongst respondents. For instance, almost all respondents (n=59: 93.6%) indicated that they do not agree with the statement that reporting CSA is not necessary because no one will look into the report. To a lesser extent, a considerable number of respondents (Strongly disagree: n=11, 17.5%; Disagree: n=20, 31.7%) responded that the challenge to gather ample evidence would not stop them from reporting CSA.

### Knowledge About CSA Response

Most respondents (n=49, 77.8%) indicated that they were aware of a formal policy under which educators are obliged to report potential CSA cases. However, despite a high percentage of respondents knowing this, one cannot overlook the fact that some respondents were either unsure (n=10, 15.9%) or unaware (n=4, 6.35%) of their legal duty to the legal obligation to report any suspected or confirmed cases of CSA. A similar observation was noted when respondents were asked to assess their familiarity with reporting procedures. The majority of respondents (n=45, 71.4%) claimed to be familiar enough with their reporting duty.

Regarding the specificities of the Mandatory Reporting Guidelines (2020), the results indicate that a significant number of respondents were aware of the salient points included in the risk positioning guide set forth in the policy. Firstly, most respondents were aware of their legal duty to report on the grounds of reasonable suspicion (n=43, 95.6%). Secondly, most respondents (n=41, 91.1%) were aware of their obligation to report incidents of CSA that are likely to occur in the future. Thirdly, a substantial proportion of respondents (n=33, 73.3%) were aware that reporting is still mandatory when the harm to the child is insignificant or where there is no apparent harm at all. Similarly, an important number of participants (n=27, 60%) were aware of their obligation to report incidents of CSA forwarded by other members of staff within the school. However, it is essential to note that several respondents (n=9, 20%) claimed to believe that their identity is not protected from being disclosed when making a report in good faith. An even higher proportion of respondents (n=15, 33.3%) were unsure of this.

## Education and Training

All interviewed Heads recognised the importance of training for educators on CSA identification and response. Regarding the matter, a somewhat negative sentiment was observed in Heads' responses. Whilst all Heads claimed to have followed some form of training linked to CSA, they believe that it is not sufficient to meet their legal obligations to report CSA. This is mainly due to the fact that the provision of training is either sporadic or insufficient, as explained in the following excerpt: "We have training but not enough. Unfortunately, we are so taken by changes and reforms that unfortunately, these things appear as a periphery. When we decide that we're going to have training between us as staff, first the learning outcomes, because without them, what shall we do?" (HOS3).

Concerning educational leaders' experience in receiving both pre-service and CoPE training sessions pertaining to CSA identification and response, results emerging from the questionnaire indicate that the provision of training opportunities in this field was considerably low. Educational leaders in the sample have an average of 6.63 hours of CSA training in their careers. The majority of respondents (n=39, 61.9%) had not followed any form of pre-service training specifically related to CSA identification and response. To a lesser extent, just over half of the respondents (n=32, 50.8%) had not followed any CoPE sessions (as teachers and/or educational leaders) about CSA, indicators of CSA, or reporting processes. Only a limited number of respondents (n=10, 15.9%) had followed CoPE training sessions pertaining to CSA during the last 20 months (September 2020 – May 2022). Quantitative results also indicate that respondents were somewhat unsure about their ability to identify potential cases of CSA. In fact, out of 63 educational leaders, only one respondent (1.6%) claimed to have a very high level of confidence. Most respondents opted for the 'Moderate' (n=38, 60.3%) and 'Low' (n=13, 20.6%) variables.

## Emotional Challenges

It is reasonable to argue that when dealing with CSA cases, educational leaders are exposed to emotionally provocative and distressing situations. The ten Heads who participated in the study noted the salient experiences of anger, stress, and frustration when contending with CSA, as could be observed in the following excerpt: "When I see this waste, this cruelty, with minors, I do

not remain who I am, I become a different person. It means that my rationale changes, it means that I do not remain focused, for honesty of character starts to change into anger." (HOS4). Five Heads made it a point to emphasise their worry, sadness, and feeling of helplessness in dealing with CSA cases. One Head expressed that CSA cases are always "heart-breaking" (HOS7), whereas another Head maintained that such cases "break you emotionally" (HOS10). When dealing with CSA cases, one Head explained how both her physical and mental health are directly affected: "I pass through months where I do not sleep a single night and I pass through months where I feel miserable. I feel that even my health can become weak." (HOS3). Similarly, one Head described the experience of having to appear in court following a referral to court as scary. The same Head went on explaining that certain Heads of Schools, especially those in the initial stages of their career, might experience feelings of fear when submitting a referral concerning a CSA case.

Tragically, there are some educators who violate the trust bestowed on them and sexually abuse learners. For two of the interviewed Heads, dealing with CSA proved to be especially difficult in two separate cases, each of which involved a teacher as the perpetrator of this abuse. Both Heads expressed a mixture of feelings, namely deception, guilt, anger, and betrayal. This is especially relevant because in both cases, the Heads were the ones involved in the recruitment process of the abusers.

Interestingly, despite acknowledging the fact that dealing with CSA is an emotionally challenging experience, three Heads pointed out that given their professional responsibilities, educational leaders should not allow their emotions to interfere with their duties. These participants explained how failure to balance work-related issues and personal life could negatively impact one's relationships and professional performance.

## Discussion

This study had two main objectives. On the one hand, it sought to analyse the extent of secondary school educational leaders' involvement in identifying and responding to CSA. On the other hand, the study highlighted the individual thoughts and feelings of secondary school educational leaders in responding to potential CSA cases. The data from this research have confirmed that educational professionals play a significant role in identifying and responding to CSA, especially considering the amount of time children spend at school (Briggs & Hawkins, 1997).

Previous studies (see Kenny, 2004; Payne, 1991; Zeuthen & Hagelskjær, 2013) shed light on the fact that many educators self-report poor knowledge about CSA identification and response. This idea is further supported by the finding that less than half of the educational leaders surveyed ( $n=23$ , 36.5%) claimed to be knowledgeable about the different indicators of CSA. Similarly, only a limited number of respondents ( $n=12$ , 19.1%) claimed to have high levels of confidence in their ability to accurately identify potential cases of CSA. Therefore, in line with observations made by Sainz et al. (2020), it could be argued that the results emerging from the questionnaire indicate that educational leaders are likely to have limited to intermediate knowledge of CSA. Similar to what was confirmed by various researchers in different studies (see Arnold & Maio-Taddeo, 2007; Baginsky, 2007; Greytak, 2009; Mathews et al., 2010), training opportunities about CSA for local educators are equally limited. The quantitative data suggests that both pre-service and CoPE sessions pertaining to CSA identification and response are lacking. In fact, a high number of participants ( $n=39$ , 61.9%) confessed to not having received any type of pre-service training on the topic. This observation corroborates with previous studies made by Márquez-Flores et al. (2016), who revealed that over 60% of participants involved in their study had never received pre-service training pertaining to CSA. Similarly, these findings concur with the observations made by Borg & Barlow (2018) in the local health sector, which show that 77.4% of local paediatricians had never received specific child protection training. To a lesser extent, less than half of the educational leaders ( $n=28$ , 44.4%) surveyed followed relevant CoPE sessions. An important number of participants stated that the pre-service training did not adequately prepare them to identify ( $n=6$ , 25%) or respond ( $n=7$ , 29.2%) to potential CSA cases. Similarly, several participants stated that the CoPE sessions did not adequately prepare them to identify ( $n=7$ , 25%) or respond ( $n=6$ , 21.5%) to potential CSA cases.

The notion that educators play an essential role in identifying, reporting, and preventing different forms of child abuse and neglect, as previously set forth by several researchers (see Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008; Minard, 1993; Schols et al., 2013; Sinanan, 2011; Walsh et al., 2010), is confirmed in this study. In fact, the obtained results show that most educational leaders completing the questionnaire ( $n=40$ , 63.5%) had suspected CSA at some point in their role as educational leaders, clearly confirming that they are in an ideal position to

identify and respond to suspected abuse. Whilst a significant number of such respondents (n=26, 65%) had fulfilled their role as mandated reporters, a limited number of respondents (n=14, 22.2%) confessed to not having reported their suspicions. The results indicate that the legal implications of reporting are of a particular concern to the study's participants (n=11, 78.6%). This observation builds on existing evidence of educators' reluctance to report CSA out of fear of the legal consequences (Alvarez et al., 2004). Furthermore, out of these 14 respondents, the majority (n=12, 85.7%) claimed that they would have reported their suspicions if any specific educational authority policy or formal school policy had required them to do so. As put forth by Kenny & McEachern (2002), the lack of clear guidelines prior to the entry into force of the Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act (2020) could have attributed to an impediment to reporting CSA. Regarding educational leaders' attitudes towards CSA response, it is essential to point out that research about this phenomenon is scarce (Allen et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2010), especially when it comes to solely focusing on educational leaders. This being said, most respondents (n=62, 98.4%) confirmed to have the intention to report any future CSA suspicions, as well as to fulfil their professional responsibilities as educational leaders by reporting potential CSA cases (n=58, 93.6%), even though respondents (n=48, 76.2%) agreed that responding to CSA is emotionally overwhelming. These observations corroborate the results of the study by Walsh et al. (2005) whereby most teachers agreed that they had a moral (98.8%), professional (93.3%), and legal (86.5%) responsibility to report child abuse and neglect.

Consistent with the literature (see Webster & Hall, 2004), the results from the qualitative data show clear and convincing evidence that educational leaders assume multiple roles as they become necessary, including, but not limited to, that of a counsellor, social worker, parent. Apart from providing children with ample learning opportunities, a significant part of the educational leader's duties is to help them thrive and flourish as well as to ensure that they are protected from harm. For this reason, educational leaders play a pivotal role in providing moral and emotional support to children in challenging situations, particularly to victims of sexual abuse. On this point, the statistical data provided by the CID within the Malta Police Force, as well as that published in the research report EU Kids Online (Smahel et al., 2020), have shown that a significant proportion of children aged 10 to 16 are at risk of sexual abuse, in other words, when they



are in secondary school. In fact, despite being a small-scale study, a significant number of participants confirmed that at some point in their professional role as educational leaders, they encountered situations in which CSA was suspected. These results support the idea that the secondary school educational leader is ideally placed to intervene and to play a meaningful role in identifying and responding to CSA.

The interview data indicates that educational leaders' lack of skills in dealing with CSA are not solely linked to its identification. In responding to potential cases of CSA, educational leaders touched upon their lack of skills in several areas, as demonstrated in previous studies: dealing with abusive parents/guardians or being pressured by parents/guardians not to proceed with referrals (Collin-Vézina, 2013; Crosson-Tower, 2003); being confronted by the perpetrator/s (Crosson-Tower, 1992); being summoned to testify in court (Crosson-Tower, 2013); having limited knowledge of the legalities and the technicalities of the legal system (Falkiner et al., 2017); and inability to achieve a healthy work-life balance (Burrows-Horton & Cruise, 2001). In this regard, this study has been unable to demonstrate that all educational professionals coming from the different school sectors are provided with sufficient initial and ongoing training in abuse prevention, identification, and response, as set forth in the Ministry for Education's Child Protection Procedures for Schools (Education Division, 1999).

The study has identified several observations and key considerations that need to be considered in order to combat CSA. Firstly, CSA is becoming more prevalent in the local context, so much that secondary school educational leaders are dealing with an increased number of CSA cases being identified in schools. Secondly, the consequences of sexual abuse on children have damaging, long-lasting consequences. Thirdly, the participants perceived they have a responsibility in fulfilling their role as mandated reporters. Fourthly, despite this commitment, educational leaders are likely to have limited to intermediate knowledge of CSA; therefore, they are not necessarily adequately trained to fulfil their role. Finally, dealing with CSA can pose significant emotional challenges for even the strongest, most resilient educational leaders.

## Final Remarks

The sensitive nature of the research area made the data collection process challenging. Since anything linked to sex is, to a certain extent, still a taboo subject, recruiting participants proved to be challenging. Many invitations sent to Heads/Acting Heads of School to participate in a semi-structured interview were either rejected or left unanswered. As mentioned, the questionnaire was completed by 63 educational leaders (out of 240 current registered educational leaders). A larger sample size would have generated a more thorough statistical analysis. Additionally, the study sampled only secondary school educational leaders; therefore, results cannot be generalised to other school sectors, namely Early Years and primary.

There are several additional areas for further research that have been highlighted by the different studies referred to in this dissertation. These include the further investigation of educational leaders' knowledge, attitude, and practice towards reporting CSA in the local context. Investigating these three factors is particularly essential because all three factors are complex and variable over time and across situations. Further studies might, for example, also investigate the role played by primary school educational leaders in identifying and responding to CSA or the role played by educational leaders in CSA prevention.

Educational leaders are essential partners in identifying and responding to CSA. Due to their close and consistent contact with children, they are in a unique and critical position to protect children against any form of abuse, as well as to contribute to a strengthened cooperation between schools and child protection services. While the provision of training may contribute towards the consolidation of knowledge pertaining to CSA, there are complex issues underlying educational leaders' practices in CSA identification and response. Such issues should be the subject of additional research.

## Notes

- i. It is essential to point out that state secondary schools are organised in separate middle and senior secondary schools. Therefore, it was deemed necessary to include both groups in the study to ensure a fair representation of all educational leaders working in state secondary schools.

## Notes on contributor

**Neal Sammut** graduated B.Ed. (Hons) with French and Maltese from the University of Malta and furthered his studies at M.Ed. level at the same institution. He also recently completed a Master's in Educational Leadership. He participated in various projects and followed courses related to language teaching, both locally and abroad (France, Belgium and Canada). Neal Sammut has been involved in the education sector since 2009, teaching in primary and secondary schools as well as adult learners. He is currently based in Luxembourg and teaches English and Maltese at a European School.

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