

2013

# Exploring Predictors of Professional School Counselors' Ability to Accurate Recognize and Likelihood to Appropriately Report Child Sexual Abuse

Richard Joseph Behun

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EXPLORING PREDICTORS OF PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL COUNSELORS'  
ABILITY TO ACCURATELY RECOGNIZE AND LIKELIHOOD TO  
APPROPRIATELY REPORT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Education

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Richard Joseph Behun

December 2013

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Richard Joseph Behun

2013

**DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY**  
**SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**  
**Department of Counseling, Psychology and Special Education**

*Dissertation*

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

**Executive Counselor Education and Supervision Program**

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**October 11, 2013**

EXPLORING PREDICTORS OF PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL COUNSELORS'  
ABILITY TO ACCURATELY RECOGNIZE AND LIKELIHOOD TO  
APPROPRIATELY REPORT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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## ABSTRACT

### EXPLORING PREDICTORS OF PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL COUNSELORS' ABILITY TO ACCURATELY RECOGNIZE AND LIKELIHOOD TO APPROPRIATELY REPORT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

By

Richard Joseph Behun

December 2013

Dissertation supervised by Dr. David L. Delmonico

The purpose of this study was to investigate predictors related to personal characteristics (i.e., level of moral reasoning and personal attitudes toward reporting child sexual abuse) and professional characteristics (i.e., experience, and training) of the professional school counselor influencing ability to accurately recognize and likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse. This study used the Defining Issues Test, Version 2 to measure moral reasoning and a modified version of the Teacher Reporting Questionnaire to measure accuracy to recognize and likeliness to report child sexual abuse. A multiple regression analysis was used examine personal and professional predictors. The results of the multiple regressions on the overall model did not predict the professional school counselors' ability to recognize or likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse based on these predictors chosen for this study.

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to the toughest woman I know, my mother. From GED to Ph.D. and everything in between, you never, ever, gave up on me!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude and special thanks to Dr. David Delmonico for supervising my dissertation while “sabbating.” Your willingness to chair my dissertation speaks volumes of your sense of humor and mental health. You have played an instrumental part in my growth as a counselor educator and as a person. You have been a great mentor, colleague, and friend. I am proud to have been supervised by such an international expert. I also would like to thank my committee members Dr. Jered Kolbert for the overnight turnarounds on my dissertation edits and Dr. Robert Furman.

I will take this opportunity to thank Dr. Bill Casile for his guidance and support over the years both in my development as a counselor educator and as a leader. The opportunities you have given me are priceless.

Thank you to Mrs. Jane Geyer, my principal at Montross Middle School and my friend. During my first school counseling job interview with you five years ago, when you asked me where I see myself in five years, I told you finishing a Ph.D. Well...here I am! You did not have to invest in me but you did. My career started with you, you took a chance on me, and because of that, I will forever be in your debt.

Finally, thank you to the love of my life, Dr. Julie Cerrito. With respect to saving the best for last, you will be the last quote of my dissertation: “Hey, I had to put up with you!” That being said, thank you for putting up with me! I thank God for every day you are in my life and that He made it possible for us to be able to take this journey together. I have learned so much from you, and I am a better person because of you.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

No child is immune from sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse can occur at every level of education, at public and private institutions in all geographic locations, at all socioeconomic levels and within all cultures, races, and religions. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Children's Bureau (2012) report, of all confirmed child sexual abuse cases in 2011, 16.7% were that of pre-kindergarten aged students, 34.7 were elementary school aged students, 26.3% were middle school aged students, and 21.8% were high school aged students.<sup>1</sup> Because child education in the United States is compulsory, there is a unique group of professionals who serve at the front line of preventing, identifying, and reporting child sexual abuse—the professional educator. Not only do these professionals have the opportunity to intervene with suspected abuse, they are mandated by law in all 50 states to report such suspected abuse (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1992).

While there is no empirical evidence to support that one professional educator is better than another at recognizing or reporting child sexual abuse, research suggests an overwhelming majority of educators make reports of abuse to professional school counselors—much more than to child protective services (Abrahams, Casey, & Daro, 1992). Furthermore, the professional school counselor is in an even more unique and powerful position that may provide more opportunities to recognize and report child

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<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau report (2012), confirmed that 9.1% of victimized children in 2011 were sexually assaulted. Though this report has confirmed that 9.1% of victimized children were sexually assaulted, it is imperative to point out that this study does not include alleged sexual assault cases nor can it report actual sexual assault cases as a vast majority of child sexual abuse goes unreported.

sexual abuse (Abrahams et al., 1992; Daro, 1991; Milton, Berne, Patton, & Peppard, 2001; Nelson, 2000). This key position is powerful in that professional school counselors often have a unique insight into the personal lives of sexually abused children through a safe and empathic counseling environment.

The responsibility of recognizing and reporting a sexually abused child has to begin with an observation made by the professional school counselor that denotes a reasonable suspicion that child sexual abuse has occurred. This study focused on examining the personal and professional characteristics which were be divided into (a) moral reasoning, (b) personal attitudes toward reporting child sexual abuse, and (c) the professional school counselor as a professional. Specifically, this study was interested in the relationship among professional school counselors' ability to recognize and report child sexual abuse based predictors related to professional school counselors' personal characteristics (i.e., level of moral reasoning and personal attitudes toward reporting child sexual abuse) and professional characteristics (i.e., knowledge of child sexual abuse detection and reporting laws, experience, and training).

## **Background**

### **Moral Reasoning**

Moral reasoning is a relevant variable to consider in the reporting of child sexual abuse. Case in point is the November 2011 firing of Penn State head football coach, Paterno. The board of trustees fired him amid his response to the child sexual abuse allegations against former assistant coach, Jerry Sandusky, which took place nearly a decade earlier. Recognizing that Joe Paterno fulfilled his legal obligations as a mandated reporter, Mark Dambly, a Penn State trustee, believed that there was more than a legal

obligation but a moral obligation that needed to be met. Dambly stated that the board of trustees unanimously agreed that “Joe Paterno did not meet his moral obligation” and for that reason could no longer be employed by Penn State. With this statement alone, Dambly is suggesting that there is a moral obligation to be met beyond the legal obligation of mandated reporters. In essence, the board of directors questioned Paterno’s level of moral reasoning to not pursue the protection of children beyond his legal obligation.

This raises the question not only in this case, but in others: Does one’s ability to make moral judgments impact his or her ability to recognize and likelihood to report child sexual abuse? This question alone introduces the theoretical underpinning of this study: Component II of James Rest’s Four Component Model (FCM)—Moral judgment/moral reasoning. This underpinning theorizes that “once the person is aware of possible lines of action and how people would be affected by each line of action, then Component II judges which line of action is more morally justifiable (which alternative is just, or right)” (Rest & Narvaez, 1994, pp. 23-24). Rest and Narvaez also believed that “people define the most important issue of a dilemma in different ways and that the selection of items indicates a person’s developmental level” (p. 12). This study was interested in this observed moral developmental level in regards to recognizing and reporting child sexual abuse.

### **Personal Attitudes Toward Reporting Child Sexual Abuse**

Studies have been able to show that a strong predictor of reporting child abuse is a professional’s attitude about specific child abuse cases (Alvarez, Kenny, Donohue, & Carpin, 2004; Delaronde, King, Bendel, & Reece, 2000; King, Reece, Bendel, & Patel,

1998). Warner and Hansen (1994) reported that one of these attitudes is the perceived negative consequences of reporting child abuse, suggesting the belief of further harm to the child, fear of legal consequences due to incorrect reports, and parental denial of reports (Abrahams et al., 1992; O'Toole, Webster, O'Toole, & Lucal, 1999; Pollack & Levy, 1989; Smyth, 1996). These attitudes may have come from a result of their own or somebody else's prior negative experiences with mandated reporting (Smyth, 1996). These attitudes also could include educators in fear for their own personal safety in the aftermath of making a report (Zellman, 1990a; Zellman & Bell, 1990). Walsh, Mathews, Rassafiani, Farrell, and Butler (2012) used three subscales in their study that included attitudes towards commitment (attitudes related to commitment and to comprehension of professional role and responsibilities), confidence (confidence in the child protection system to respond effectively to a mandated report), and concern (concerns about consequences of mandated reports) that were adopted for the purpose of this study.

### **Professional Characteristics**

In addition to considering the personal characteristics of professional school counselors, this study also examined the professional characteristics that may have influenced the accurate identification and reporting of child sexual abuse. According to Kenny (2004), a number of studies have introduced factors related to professional educators' ability to identify and report child abuse. Studies have found that strong predictors of reporting behavior could be the mandated reporters' professional background such as knowledge, training, and experience. Many professionals in education refer to their lack of knowledge (Payne, 1991; Tilden et al., 1994) and training of how to detect child abuse (King et al., 1998) and their ability to report it (Payne,

1991). One reason for this incongruence in training and knowledge may be contributed to the suggestions that pre-service training of educators in colleges and universities and on-the-job training on child abuse is insufficient (Abrahams et al., 1992; Kenny, 2001) and is not always current (Alpert & Paulson, 1990). It also has been suggested that a professional's amount of professional experience plays a role on the decision to report child abuse; however, this varies by profession (Rodriguez, 2002).

### **Statement of the Problem**

In 1983, Bavolek conducted a study of Wisconsin state school personnel to examine the degree to which school personnel were aware of their responsibility to report suspected cases of child abuse. Bavolek found that 49% of school personnel had suspected a case of child abuse; however, only 31% of these suspected cases were ever reported. Needless to say, nearly 70% of mandated reporters have never made a report. It could be determined that this was due to a lack of knowledge or awareness which was seen in 63% of responses. What is frightening about Bavolek's study is that 56% of respondents claimed to have never received any training in regard to reporting child abuse. Additionally, of the 44% who did claim to have received training, only 13% claimed to have received this training in the last year. According to Kenny (2007), this lack of training was still insufficient nearly 25 years later. Additionally, in my opinion, it is highly likely that this training is still insufficient in 2013. Even though professional school counselors are at a significant advantage to recognize and report child sexual abuse due to their unique positions and deeper insight into the personal lives, the question remains whether the professional school counselors are prepared to accept this responsibility.

The first area to consider under school counselor's preparedness is whether or not they have received adequate instruction through the academic programs or elsewhere that would assist them in accurately identifying and reporting cases of child sexual abuse. Studies from over two decades ago have shown that there have not been many efforts nationwide to establish university-based training in child abuse and neglect (Gallmeier & Bonner, 1992) even though it has been recommended that school personnel "receive formal, coordinated, workshop training on child abuse/neglect covering issues of identifying, referring, reporting and laws" (Baxter & Beer, 1990, p. 75). Only until recently in light of a child sex abuse scandal that received nationwide attention have employers made an effort to fulfill the standard of care by requiring their employees to receive further training.

Secondly, there appears to be a significant lack of literature that examines the importance of the characteristics of the professional school counselor and mandated reporting practices of child sexual abuse. Several studies explore the personal and professional characteristics of educators in Australia and their mandated reporting behaviors regarding child abuse (Walsh, Mathews, Rassafiani, Farrell, & Butler, 2012). In the United States, only a few studies have focused on American professional school counselors (Bryant, 2009). Regardless of Australian or American professional school counselor, there has never been a nationwide study that has examined level of moral reasoning as a predictor of their ability to recognize and report child sexual abuse. This study is the first of its kind.

Lastly, in addition to the nationwide legal mandate to report suspected child sexual abuse, America has witnessed over the last few years that the need to protect

sexually abused children is not only a legal one but a moral one as well, as publically stated by the Penn State Board of Trustees in the case of Joe Paterno. If this holds true when challenged by the courts, then the required duty of care for mandated reporters will greatly increase from what has been expected in the past and a new precedent will have been set.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate predictors of the professional school counselors' ability to accurately recognize and likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse. Specifically, this study examined predictors related to personal characteristics (i.e., level of moral reasoning and personal attitudes toward reporting child sexual abuse) and professional characteristics (i.e., knowledge of child sexual abuse detection<sup>2</sup> and reporting laws<sup>3</sup>, experience, and training) of the professional school counselor.

### **Research Questions**

1. Is the professional school counselor's level of moral reasoning a significant predictor of his or her ability to recognize and report child sexual abuse?
2. Which attitudes towards reporting child sexual abuse (i.e., commitment, confidence, and concern) are most influential in predicting a professional school counselor's ability to recognize and report child sexual abuse?
3. Which professional characteristics (i.e., reporting knowledge, detection of child sexual abuse knowledge, years of experience, and training in the last

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<sup>2</sup> Knowledge of child sexual abuse detection was omitted as a predictor variable from this study after pre-screening data indicated a lack of variance.

<sup>3</sup> Knowledge of child sexual abuse laws was omitted as a predictor variable from this study after pre-screening data indicated a lack of variance.

year) are most influential in predicting a professional school counselor's ability to recognize and report child sexual abuse?

### **Importance for the Study**

The goal of this study was to identify variables that predict professional school counselors' accuracy in identifying and reporting child sexual abuse. The focus was on the personal and professional characteristics thought to be important in fostering a professional school counselor's accuracy to recognize and report child sexual abuse. Based on the results of this study, it is hoped that pre-service training programs can utilize this information in helping professional school counselors increase their knowledge and self-awareness in their ability to accurately recognize and likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse.

In addition, by increasing the professional school counselor's knowledge and self-awareness of what factors may be influencing his or her identification and willingness to report child sexual abuse, one can better control any possible negative influences that may be interfering with his or her ability to accurately identify and report cases of child sexual abuse. The findings of this study also may increase the knowledge and awareness of the counseling supervisor and the school principal. As one's moral reasoning and attitudes towards mandated reporting have the potential to change over time, this data may act as a springboard to future research as well in both the practice of school counseling, supervision, and mandated reporting of child sexual abuse.

Lastly, it is hoped that this addition to the literature could serve professional school counselors as through in-service training, on the job training, or in their own professional development with the same goal in mind: protecting the welfare of the

children in our schools. The outcome of this study will not be only for the development of professional school counselors, but for mandated reporters in all professions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used in this study was based on a cognitive developmental approach to moral development, grounded in the research of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, but mainly focused on the Four Component Model (FCM) theory of moral behavior by James Rest. The theoretical framework, based on Rest's model, specifically focused on component II of the FCM—moral judgment.

Component II of the FCM states that “once the person is aware of possible lines of action and how people would be affected by each line of action, then Component II judges which line of action is more morally justifiable (which alternative is just, or right)” (Rest & Narvaez, 1994, pp. 23-24). Rest and Narvaez also believed that “people define the most important issue of a dilemma in different ways, and that the selection of items indicates a person's developmental level” (p. 12), meaning, as people develop, they will make moral decisions according to patterns of behavior or specific schemas (representations “of some prior stimulus phenomenon, applying organized prior knowledge to the understanding of new information;” Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999, p. 297). In other words, the theoretical framework for this study indicates that moral judgments, in regards to recognizing and reporting child sexual abuse, are situation specific, and as people develop as mandated reporters, they will make moral decisions based on their prior experiences and their previous knowledge.

## **Summary of Methodology**

This study used a correlational, exploratory, non-experimental, research design in order to investigate what predicts a professional school counselor's ability to accurately recognize and report child sexual abuse. Specifically, this study examined predictors related to personal characteristics (i.e., level of moral reasoning and personal attitudes toward reporting child sexual abuse) and professional characteristics (i.e., knowledge of child sexual abuse detection and reporting laws, experience, and training) of the professional school counselor.

Participants consisted of males and females who were currently employed as professional school counselors at elementary, middle, or secondary schools in the United States in 2013. Each participant was employed in either a public or private school and in a rural, urban, or suburban community and represented diverse personal and professional backgrounds. Instrumentation for this study consisted of a measurement of moral reasoning and a measurement of accuracy to recognize and likeliness to report child sexual abuse. This study used the Defining Issues Test, Version 2 (DIT-2) to measure moral reasoning and a modified version of the Teacher Reporting Questionnaire to measure accuracy to recognize and likeliness to report child sexual abuse. Upon the collection of data and through the use of SPSS, a multiple regression analysis was used to examine predictors of a professional school counselor's (a) ability to accurately recognize child sexual abuse and (2) likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse.

## **Definition of Terms**

**Child**—"A person younger than 18 years of age or considered to be a minor under State law" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for

Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2012, p. 114).

**Child Abuse**—“Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or an act or failure to act, which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (The CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010, Public Law 111–320, 42 U.S.C. 5106a).

**Child Sexual Abuse**—“A type of maltreatment that refers to the involvement of the child in sexual activity to provide sexual gratification or financial benefit to the perpetrator, including contacts for sexual purposes, molestation, statutory rape, prostitution, pornography, exposure, incest, or other sexually exploitative activities” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2012, p. 125).

**Mandated Reporter**—“A person who, in the course of employment, occupation or practice of a profession, comes into contact with children” (Child Protective Services Act, 1995).

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this study was to investigate predictors of the professional school counselors' ability to accurately recognize and likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse. Specifically, this study examined predictors related to the personal characteristics (i.e., level of moral reasoning and personal attitudes toward reporting child sexual abuse) and professional characteristics (i.e., knowledge of child sexual abuse detection and reporting laws, experience, and training) of the professional school counselor. The first section of this literature review examines moral reasoning; the second session examines attitudes toward reporting child sexual abuse; and the third section of this literature review examines the professional characteristics.

#### **Personal Characteristics**

Personal characteristics refer to features of the professional school counselor as a person. In this study, the personal variables examined include moral reasoning and attitudes toward reporting. These variables are used to determine if they influence a professional school counselor's ability to recognize and likelihood of reporting child sexual abuse.

#### **Moral Reasoning**

The first question to be answered in this study was if the professional school counselor's level of moral reasoning could be a significant predictor of his or her ability to accurately recognize and likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse. The first section of this literature review reviews the theoretical framework for describing and assessing moral development based on a cognitive developmental approach grounded in

the research of Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and James Rest. This section ends with an introduction to the Defining Issues Test – Version 2.

### **Jean Piaget**

The research and life work of Jean Piaget began to define how people use moral judgment when challenged with ethical dilemmas. Piaget, a developmental child psychologist, is known for developing theories of moral judgment and cognitive development. Focusing mainly on children, Piaget designed a constructivist model that identified four stages of cognitive development that occur for children in the following sequential order: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational. His findings supported that moral judgment is a process that children develop during these stages of cognitive development based on their interactions with their environment. Basically, children progress to higher levels of moral reasoning as they attain knowledge (Piaget, 1965).

### **Lawrence Kohlberg**

Inspired by Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Lawrence Kohlberg, a cognitive-moral development theorist himself, focused his research on the thought processes of arriving at a moral decision. Like Piaget, Kohlberg also believed that there were two key factors that influenced people's moral development: cognitive thinking and personal experiences based on social interactions. He rejected the behaviorist viewpoint that morality consists of conforming to societal norms and focused on the perspective of the individual. Kohlberg was more interested in cognition and the processes an individual goes through to arrive at a moral decision than he was about whether the individual's choice was morally right or wrong (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987).

Kohlberg believed that a moral decision could be categorized into various stages and wrote about three levels of cognitive moral development in his 1958 doctoral dissertation (Kohlberg, 1958). Drawing from Piaget, Kohlberg's model of cognitive moral development also is based on the constructivist ideology that suggests an individual will progress through sequential stages. Kohlberg's research posits that, starting in childhood and progressing through adulthood, individuals will sequentially advance through three levels of moral development (pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional). At the pre-conventional level of moral development, individuals are basically aware of what is right and wrong or what is good and bad. At this level, children recognize the consequences of their actions set forth by authoritative figures. At the conventional level of moral development, individuals become aware that other individuals also have views and opinions and that the views and opinions of others are just as important as one's own. Individuals begin to identify with groups, conform to expectations of society, and engage in maintaining a social order. Finally, at the post-conventional level of moral development, individuals no longer judge what is good or bad or right or wrong, but establish values and moral principles based on what is good for humanity (Kohlberg, 1981).

Beginning with more simplistic understandings and moving towards more complex ways of moral reasoning, each of the three levels of moral development contain two separate stages (Kohlberg, 1981) the second stage being more advanced than the first. Kohlberg proposed this schematic stage theory in that children through adulthood will acquire the cognitive skills at stages in an invariant order. Individuals will acquire the cognitive skills at each stage that is needed to prepare them for the next stage and

each stage of moral development builds on the previous stage (Kohlberg, 1980). These progressions through the stages require both social experiences and cognitive development, and each stage of each level could be thought of as an updated or revised moral view of the world (Kohlberg, 1981). The stages of Kohlberg's cognitive moral development are as follows:

1. The Stage of Punishment and Obedience—Right is literal obedience to rules and authority, avoiding punishment, and not doing physical harm.
2. The Stage of Individual Instrumental Purpose and Exchange—Right is serving one's own or other's needs and making fair deals in terms concrete exchange.
3. The Stage of Mutual Interpersonal Expectations, Relationships, and Conformity—The right is playing a good (nice) role, being concerned about the other people and their feelings, keeping loyalty and trust with partners, and being motivated to follow rules and expectations.
4. The Stage of Social System and Conscience Maintenance—The right is doing one's duty in society, upholding the social order, and maintaining the welfare of society or the group.
5. The Stage of Prior Rights and Social Contract or Utility—The right is upholding the basic rights, values, and legal contracts of a society, even when they conflict with the concrete rules and laws of the group.
6. The Stage of Universal Ethical Principles—This stage assumes guidance by universal ethical principles that all humanity should follow. (Kohlberg, 1981, pp. 409-412)

At each stage, the individual becomes less self-centered like a child would be and acquires a greater awareness for others (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). For example, a child will eventually learn to share.<sup>4</sup> A child, as in this example, who has not yet learned to share, does not yet have the necessary skills needed to function at a higher stage or moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1984).

Kohlberg stated that individuals are naturally drawn to a higher level of moral development and individuals do not revert back to a lower stage once a higher stage is reached. He stated that once a higher level or stage is reached, moral development is irreversible (Kohlberg, 1981). The reason for this belief is that individuals learn that reasoning at a lower stage is not adequate for a higher level of moral judgment/reasoning (Kohlberg, 1980).

### **James Rest**

Understanding that Kohlberg primarily focused on moral judgment/reasoning, James Rest addressed Kohlberg's deficiencies and introduced a broader conception of morality that included elements of moral sensitivity, moral motivation, and moral character (Rest, 1986). Therefore, based on Kohlberg's six-stage model of cognitive moral development and the addition of the aforementioned three elements, Rest established the Four Component Model (FCM) of Moral Behavior. This model conveys how cognition, affect, and social dynamics are interconnected, influence one's moral behavior (Rest et al., 1999), and do not have separate tracks of development (Rest, 1986). Furthermore, he posited that ethical decision making is processed through the following

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<sup>4</sup> Kohlberg's theory also would suggest that an individual's age is not necessarily a primary factor in moral development.

four components: sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and character (Rest, 1986). These four components are described as:

1. Component I: Moral Sensitivity—Moral sensitivity is the awareness of how our actions affect other people. It involves being aware of different possible lines of action and how each line of action could affect the parties concerned. It involves imaginatively constructing possible scenarios, and knowing cause-consequence chains of events in the real world; it involves empathy and role taking skills.
2. Component II: Moral Judgment—This is the component that Kohlberg's work advanced and that the Defining Issues Test (DIT) purports to assess. Once the person is aware of possible lines of action and how people would be affected by each line of action, then Component II judges which line of action is more morally justifiable (which alternative is just, or right).
3. Component III: Moral Motivation—This component has to do with the importance given to moral values in competition with other values. Deficiencies in Component III occur when a person is not sufficiently motivated to put moral values higher than other values—when other values such as self-actualization or protecting one's organization replace concern for doing what is right.
4. Component IV: Moral Character—This component involves ego strength, perseverance, backbone, toughness, strength of conviction, and courage. A persona may be morally sensitive, may make good moral judgments, and may place high priority on moral values, but if the person wilts under pressure, is

easily distracted or discouraged, is a wimp and weak-willed, then moral failure occurs because of deficiency in Component IV (weak character). (Rest & Narvaez, 1994, pp. 23-24)

This model and these components are situation specific, represent what needs to be processed in a moral act, and are not general traits of people (Rest, 1984). These components may interact and influence one another; however, they each have a very distinctive function (Rest, 1986). It is possible that an individual could demonstrate ability in one component yet be inadequate in the other three. In fact, anyone could fail at any one component at any given time (Rest & Narvaez, 1994).

**Schemas.** Rest and Narvaez (1994) believed that “people define the most important issue of a dilemma in different ways, and that the selection of items indicates a person’s developmental level” (p. 12). As people develop, they tend to make moral decisions according to patterns of behavior or specific schemas (Rest et al., 1999). A schema, according to Rest et al., “consists of a representation of some prior stimulus phenomenon, applying organized prior knowledge to the understanding of new information” (p. 297). Furthermore, Rest et al. stated that

The function of schemas are essential to human understanding: schemas guide attention to new information and provide guidance for obtaining further information, give structure or meaning to experience by logically interrelating the parts, enable the perceiver to “chunk” an appropriate unit, and to fill in information where information is scarce or ambiguous, and provide guidance for evaluating and for problem-solving. (p. 297)

These schemas (personal interest, maintaining norms, and postconventional), modes of thinking and behaving, conform to Kohlberg's structured stages (preconventional, conventional, and postconventional), respectively, all being grounded with the six stages of moral development in mind. The personal interest schema conforms to Kohlberg's stages 2 and 3 and is the lowest form of moral reasoning/judgment, occurring mostly during childhood. The maintaining norms schema conforms to Kohlberg's stage 4, and like the conventional level, occurs during adolescence. Lastly, the postconventional schema conforms to Kohlberg's stages 5 and 6 and is the highest form of moral reasoning/judgment.

**Defining Issues Test.** Based on the FCM (most importantly, Component II—Moral Judgment), Rest (Rest & Narvaez, 1994, pp. 23-24) developed the Defining Issues Test (DIT) which quantitatively measures an individual's level of moral judgment through the use of the three schemas. Rest et al. (1999) described the DIT as

A device for activating moral schemas (to the extent that a person has developed them) and for assessing them in terms of importance judgments. The DIT has dilemmas and standard items; the subject's task is to rate and rank the items in terms of their moral importance. As the subject encounters an item that both makes sense and taps into his or her preferred schema, that item is rated and ranked as highly important. Alternatively, when the subject encounters an item that either doesn't make sense or seems simplistic and unconvincing, the item receives a low rating and is passed over for the next item. The items of the DIT balance "bottom-up" processing (stating just enough of a line of argument to activate a schema) with "top-down" processing (stating not too much of a line of

argument such that the subject has to fill the meaning from schema already in the subject's head). In the DIT, we are interested in knowing which schemas the subject brings to the task (are already in his or her head). Presumably, those are the schemas that structure and guide the subject's thinking in decision making beyond the test situation. (p. 6)

The DIT was developed to be a more reliable measurement of moral judgment and easier to use. More importantly, Rest (1984, 1986) wanted to measure moral reasoning beyond what an individual was able to articulate such as in an interview. Prior to the development of the DIT, an individual's level of moral judgment was commonly measured by using Kohlberg's Moral Judgment Interview (MJII). The MJII consists of personal interviews in which hypothetical moral dilemmas are proposed and participants provide reasoning as to why they chose a particular course of action. This type of administration and scoring was thought to be an overall complex process and labor intensive (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987).

### **Attitudes Toward Reporting**

In their 1995 research, Crenshaw, Crenshaw, and Lichtenberg conducted a study of teachers, school counselors, school psychologists, and school administrators examining (a) a desire to adhere to mandatory reporting laws and (b) perceived inadequacy in child protective services. Furthermore, the research of O'Toole et al. (1999) interviewed several hundred teachers around numerous characteristics, confirmed Crenshaw et al. findings, and inquired about attitudes around (c) if children sometimes suffer due to reporting. While conducting a factor analysis in their 2012 study aiming to understand Australian teachers reporting of child sexual abuse, Walsh et al. (2012) also

found these three aforementioned attitudes using a 14-item *Teacher Reporting Attitude Scale*. Walsh et al. concluded that these factors included attitudes towards commitment (attitudes related to commitment and to comprehension of professional role and responsibilities), confidence (confidence in the child protection system to respond effectively to a mandated report), and concern (concerns about consequences of mandated reports). These factors are being used as predictors in this dissertation study.

### **Commitment**

In their survey, Crenshaw et al. (1995) gave participants five scenarios of possible child abuse in an ability to study educators as mandated reporters and their desire to adhere to mandatory reporting laws. Participants read each scenario and had to decide to either report or not report labeling them in the category of either reporter or nonreporter for the purpose of this study. They found that the law was less impactful for nonreporters in more ambiguous (i.e., neglect and emotional abuse) cases of child abuse and more impactful for less ambiguous cases (i.e., physical and sexual abuse). Crenshaw et al. suggested that one explanation for this phenomenon is that nonreporters believe that they will not be held accountable for failing to report an overly ambiguous case of suspected child abuse. On the contrary, those labeled as reporters were more likely to follow their professional responsibilities as mandated reporters and report possible cases even in uncertain circumstances. Crenshaw et al. concluded by suggesting that the law is not enough to compel mandated reporters to report what they determine to be ambiguous cases of possible child abuse.

These findings are further consistent with those of Kenny in 2001. Kenny stated that the desire to follow the legal standards of mandated reporting is outweighed by the

fear of making a false report. Additionally, a very recent nationwide study of professional school counselors, Bryant (2009) found that one of the biggest factors influencing a decision to report child sexual abuse was the professional school counselor's commitment to following the law; however, this study did not factor in fear of making a false report.

### **Confidence**

In their 1995 study, Crenshaw et al. also studied educators' attitudes toward the perceived inadequacy of child protective services. This study concluded that educators in this study distrusted child protective services and this distrust had an impact on one's decision to not report. In a 1998 study, King et al. supported prior findings, suggesting that a substantial number of mandated reporters had a low confidence in the efficacy of child protective services. Mandated reporters in this study expressed opinions that an intervention by child protective services would do more harm than good. This leaves the possibility that some mandated reporters consider themselves better trained and capable of providing therapeutic interventions than child protective services (Zellman & Faller, 1996) and, therefore, elect to do so (King et al., 1998).

However, to the contrary, mandated reporters who believed in the professionalism and success of child protective services were found to be more likely to recognize and report child abuse than those who did not (O'Toole et al., 1999). This confirms Zellman and Bell's (1990) findings as well. Recently, in a 2009 study by Bryant, professional school counselors seldom reported that child protective services played a role in one's decision to report child abuse.

## Concern

Failing to report suspected child abuse may result in criminal and civil penalties resulting in imprisonment and fines; however, educators still may decide not to report (Reniger, Robinson, & McHugh, 1995). Factors that may inhibit making a report of suspected child abuse are the fear of legal consequences for making a false allegation, retaliation against the abused child by the abuser, and the uncertain reaction of the accused abuser (Abrahams et al., 1992; O'Toole et al., 1999; Pollack & Levy, 1989; Smyth, 1996). In a very recent nationwide study of professional school counselors, Bryant (2009) found that one of the biggest factors influencing a decision to report child sexual abuse was the professional school counselor's concern for the safety of the student.

The uncertain reaction of the accused abuser could be retaliation against the mandated reporter. Mandated reporters may fear for their own safety and wellbeing after making a suspected report of child abuse (Bavolek, 1983; Zellman, 1990a; Zellman & Bell, 1990). The fear of legal consequences for making a false allegation is a common one as well; however, mandated reporters are usually protected from liability (Foreman & Bernet, 2000) if they make the report in good faith. Individuals making reports not in good faith will not be protected from civil liability (*Vacchio v. St. Paul's United Methodist Nursery School*, 1995). In the case of *Vacchio*, a nursery school teacher noticed a child with a black eye and immediately contacted child protective services without conducting any type of investigation. The judge ruled that suspecting abuse without performing an investigation was negligent and that negligent reporting behavior

is not protected. Mandated reporters must use some professional judgment before making reports about abuse.

### **Professional Characteristics**

Numerous studies have examined professional characteristics that may influence reporting behavior; however, studies of educators have produced numerous conflicting results. Both positive and negative associations have been found for knowledge of reporting duties (Abrahams et al., 1992; Beck, Ogloff, & Corbishley, 1994; Hinson & Fossey, 2000; Kenny, 2001, 2004; Walsh, Bridgstock, Farrell, Rassafiani, & Schweitzer, 2008), years of experience (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Kenny, 2001; O'Toole et al., 1999), and training (Hawkins & McCallum, 2001; Kenny, 2004; Walsh et al., 2008; Warner & Hansen, 1994).

### **Experience**

According to Rodriguez (2002), the influence of age on report behaviors are often confounded by years of experience; however, studies suggest that experienced educators are more likely to report child abuse (Kenny, 2001). Kenny's research suggests that having over 5 years of experience is a contributing factor in the likelihood of making a report. To better support this finding, Bryant (2009) found that the most frequently endorsed method of acquiring knowledge was through experience.

In contrast, O'Toole et al. (1999) found that years of experience "would result in a loss of sensitivity to the problem of child abuse" (p. 1095) though this research does not suggest child sexual abuse. O'Toole et al. suggested that a greater tolerance for signs of child abuse with more experienced educators came from experienced educators not

receiving the specialized training they do today as part of a regular curriculum, as posited by Zellman and Bell (1990).

### **Training**

Mandated reporters need to be knowledgeable of the signs and symptoms of child abuse and “should receive formal, coordinated workshop training on child abuse/neglect covering issues of identifying, referring, reporting, and laws” (Baxter & Beer, 1990, p. 75). However, Kenny’s (2001) sample of 197 teachers reported that their pre-service (graduate level education) and in-service (on the job training) preparation did not adequately prepare them to make child abuse reports. Furthermore, research has shown that the presenters at these in-service trainings have received limited training themselves (Lanning, Ballard, & Robinson, 1999). A deficiency of education leaves many mandated reporters with a lack of familiarity as to the signs and symptoms of child abuse (Alvarez et al., 2004; Kalichman, 1999; Payne, 1991). Therefore, due to a lack of knowledge regarding child abuse, mandated child abuse reports are potentially not being made.

King et al.’s (1998) study suggests that training in recognizing and reporting child abuse has more to do with how much was received and not when it was received. Therefore, education about child sexual abuse could have been received during pre-service or during in-service training. In this study, a multivariate analysis revealed that mandated reporters who had received between 10–19 hours in identifying child abuse were more likely to report a suspected case of child abuse than those who received less. Interestingly, this analysis also found that mandated reporters who had acquired over 19 hours of training were not significantly more likely to report a suspected case of child abuse. King et al. believed that this finding suggests that some (between 10 and 20 hours)

formal didactic programs may improve a mandated reporter's knowledge and attitude about child abuse resulting in greater ability to recognize and likelihood to report.

**Knowledge.** Professional school counselors need to be knowledgeable regarding the recognition of child sexual abuse and with the reporting of child sexual abuse and studies have suggested how this knowledge is gained.

**Sexual abuse.** Identifying child abuse is complex because it rarely involves the mandated reporter as a direct witness of the child abuse (Kalichman, 1999; Morris, Johnson, & Clasen, 1985; Tilden et al., 1994; Warner-Rogers, Hansen, & Spieth, 1996; Zellman, 1990b). Therefore, mandated reporters must have to have a degree of certainty or reasonable suspicion that child abuse has occurred (King et al., 1998). According to Foreman and Bernet (2000), "reasonable connotes an objective standard by which to measure a mandatory reporter's decision regarding whether to report possible child [sexual] abuse" (p. 194). At a minimum, this objective standard asks the question: what would a reasonable person (an ideal model of conduct) of ordinary prudence exercise in like circumstances (Valente, 1994)? However, because professional school counselors are specially trained and educated, they are then held to a higher standard than an ordinary person without equal education or training. Therefore, for professional school counselors, this objective standard would ask: what would a reasonable competent professional school counselor exercise in similar or like circumstances?

Bavolek (1983) indicated that a lack of reporting could be due to school personnel waiting for concrete evidence or proof rather than just the reasonable suspicion required. This type of thinking was seen in 51% of respondents his 1983 survey and supported in many studies since then (Ashton, 1999; Escobar, 1995; Gardner, Schadler, & Kemper,

1984; Saulsbury & Campbell, 1985; Zellman, 1990a, 1990b). These findings suggest that, to some, child sexual abuse may seem black and white; however, more frequently, to others, it is not. This means that the majority of the time, reasonable suspicion of child sexual abuse is left to the interpretation of the mandated reporter, therefore, leaving a great variability among what professionals believe may or may not be reportable (Terao, Borrego, & Urquiza, 2001).

In a 2011 study, Levi and Crowell investigated whether a common interpretation of reasonable suspicion exists among child abuse experts. What Levi and Crowell found, despite the appellate court rulings that hold reasonable suspicion is understood by any person of common intelligence, is that there is no standard upon which child experts agree for reasonable suspicion of child abuse to exist. This research is incongruent with the U.S. appellate court rulings and, therefore, raises the question of whether professionals should be expected to truly understand and correctly interpret the meaning of reasonable suspicion.

***Mandated reporting.*** In some cases, the school administrator has the final say in whether there a reasonable suspicion to make a child sexual abuse report. These cases are usually mandated by a state law that requires the mandated report be made to an administrator or designee (i.e., professional school counselor) within an institution who will then report directly to the state. It is a very common policy in many schools that it is the principal to whom the teachers and counselors are required to make a suspected report of child abuse (Abrahams et al., 1992; Ferris & Linville, 1985; Hinson & Fossey, 2000). There also are cases when the decision to report is strictly left up to the individual teacher, nurse, professional school counselor, or even a coach. This type of individual

reporting happens in states that require the person who witnessed or discovered the child abuse to make the mandated report directly to the state (Kalichman, 1999).

Although the specific language in each state law varies, these laws all have very common features (Foreman & Bernet, 2000). According to Bell and Tooman (1994), all mandatory reporting laws address seven components: (a) definition of reportable conditions, (b) who is required to report, (c) degree of certainty to report, (d) failure to report, (e) immunity for good faith reports, (f) abrogation of certain communication privileges, and (g) a description of reporting procedures.

In addition, many schools establish their own policies and procedures for making mandated reports of child abuse. In this case, it is extremely important to note that the state laws always supersede school policies. When state laws and school policies are incongruent with each other, it creates uncertainty of a professional's responsibility to make a report (Kenny, 2004). This leads to both over-reporting, which creates an overburden on the state (Finkelhor, 1992), and under-reporting or failing to report (which ultimately harms the abused child). Although over-reporting has received much less attention than under-reporting or failing to report, Foreman and Bernet (2000) believed that over-reporting is a problem and occurs as a consequence for mandated reporters misunderstanding mandated reporting laws.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to investigate predictors of the professional school counselors' ability to accurately recognize and likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse. Specifically, this study examined predictors related to personal characteristics (i.e., level of moral reasoning and personal attitudes toward reporting child sexual abuse) and professional characteristics (i.e., knowledge of child sexual abuse detection and reporting laws, experience, and training) of the professional school counselor.

#### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were posed for this study:

1. Is the professional school counselor's level of moral reasoning a significant predictor of his or her ability to recognize and report child sexual abuse?
2. Which attitudes towards reporting child sexual abuse (i.e., commitment, confidence, and concern) are most influential in predicting a professional school counselor's ability to recognize and report child sexual abuse?
3. Which professional characteristics (i.e., reporting knowledge, detection of child sexual abuse knowledge, years of experience, and training in the last year) are most influential in predicting a professional school counselor's ability to recognize and report child sexual abuse?

In order to address each of these questions, the following hypotheses were created:

- HA1. The level of a professional counselor's moral reasoning is a significant predictor of his or her ability to accurately recognize and increases his or her likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse.
- HA2. The attitudes towards reporting child sexual abuse (i.e., commitment, confidence, and concern) of professional school counselors are a significant predictor of their ability to accurately recognize and increases their likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse.
- HA3. The professional characteristics (i.e., reporting knowledge, detection of child sexual abuse knowledge, years of experience, and training in the last year) of professional school counselors are a significant predictor of their ability to accurately recognize and increases their likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse.

### **Research Design**

This study used a correlational, exploratory, non-experimental, research design in order to investigate what predicts a professional school counselor's ability to accurately recognize and report child sexual abuse. Specifically, this study examined predictors related to personal characteristics (i.e., level of moral reasoning and personal attitudes toward reporting child sexual abuse) and professional characteristics (i.e., knowledge of child sexual abuse detection and reporting laws, experience, and training) of the professional school counselor.

### **Participants**

The target population from which a sample was drawn to conduct the present study was comprised of professional school counselors associated with American School

Counselors Association throughout the United States. The rationale for targeting this population was that those professionals involved in their respective professional organization are often more likely to participate in research studies—this was thought to increase response rates. Also, in order to secure the highest response rate possible and to minimize missing data, surveys were distributed to participants during the summer months of July and August 2013 while professional school counselors' workloads are at a minimum, giving them the maximum amount of time to complete the instrument. Additionally, this instrument was distributed immediately following the American School Counselor Association's annual conference with the hope that professional school counselors would have the highest level of motivation to be active in research studies following that conference.

The sample consisted of male and female participants who are currently employed as professional school counselors at elementary, middle, or secondary schools in the United States. Each participant was employed in either a public or private school and in a rural, urban, or suburban community. Participants represented diverse cultural backgrounds, political ideologies, age groups, and years of experience.

The number of participants in this study met the required sample size defined by the desired power, alpha level, number of predictors, and expected effect size (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). To attain a desirable level of precision, an a priori power analysis was conducted using G\*Power Statistical Software (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009; Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) to determine the sample size necessary for a model using multiple regression. The original model determined the correlation between the 8 independent variables (moral reasoning, commitment,

confidence, concern, reporting knowledge, detection of child sexual abuse knowledge, years of experience, and training in the last year) and the dependent variables (ability to accurately recognize and likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse). The convention of achieving a power of .80 is widely accepted in research and signifies that “success (rejecting the null) is four times as likely as failure” (Murphy & Myors, 2004, p. 19). This convention factors in the relative importance of Type I and Type II errors and are represented by  $\alpha = .05$  and  $\beta = .15$  (medium effect size). Therefore, to achieve power of .80 with a medium effect size ( $f^2 = .15$ ), a sample size of 109 was required to detect a significant model ( $F(8,100) = 2.032$ ). Anonymous data for this study were collected from 226 professional school counselors.

## **Data Collection**

### **Instrumentation**

The instruments used in this study included a measure of moral reasoning. In addition, instruments were used to ascertain the subjects’ ability to accurately identify and report child sexual abuse. This study used the Defining Issues Test, Version 2 (DIT-2) to measure moral reasoning and a modified version of the Teacher Reporting Questionnaire (TRQ) to measure ability to recognize and likeliness to report child sexual abuse.

**Defining Issues Test.** According to the Office for the Study of Ethical Development at the University of Alabama, the Defining Issues Test (DIT) is an instrument for “activating moral schemas (to the extent that a person has developed them) and for assessing these schemas in terms of importance of judgments” (2013, p. 1). This instrument was created by James Rest in 1979 and revised in 1999 for clarity, brevity,

and better validity, which created the DIT-2. Both the DIT and the DIT-2 have many similarities. With the creation of the DIT, Rest had established an “alternative method for obtaining moral judgment data” (Rest et al., 1999) to Kohlberg’s complex and labor intensive MJI. The DIT is fairly easy to administer and easy to score. With the DIT, participants are given a multiple-choice survey as opposed to being personally interviewed about dilemmas and asked to explain their rationale for the choices they made as with MJI. The responses from this measurement are intended to inform the investigator which moral schema one makes when making a moral decision: personal interests—stage 2/3 (personal motivating factors), maintaining norms—stage 4 (maintaining normalcy and order), post-conventional—P-score—stage 5/6 (human rights and moral principles).

Additionally is the N2 Score which is the newest index based on the P-score and an improved way of scoring the DIT as it more accurately determines postconventional thinking (Rest et al., 1997). The N2 Score is an adjustment to the P-score based on the test-taker’s ability to distinguish between postconventional moral principles and the other two schemas (Thoma, 2006). If the test-taker rates postconventional items as more valuable than the other two schemas, the N2 Score increases. If the test-taker rates postconventional items as less valuable than the other two schemas, the N2 Score decreases. Most importantly, because the N2 Score is the most effective index to identify postconventional moral principles among older and more educated professionals, this score was used as the independent variable, which predicts moral reasoning.

The DIT-2 consisted of five dilemmas which consisted of a father stealing food from a rich man for his starving family, a newspaper reporter reporting a negative story

about a political candidate, a school board member deciding to hold an open meeting that could be damaging, a doctor killing a patient to stop suffering, and college students protesting U.S. foreign policy. Each dilemma was followed by 12 issues that could be part of the decision making process and respondents rated each issue by choosing the first, second, third, and fourth most important issues for each of the five dilemmas. The participant was directed to read the dilemmas and standard items and then rate and rank each item in terms of its moral importance. When an item was read that made sense to the participant or stimulated the participant's preferred schema, the participant was likely to rate that item highly. In contrast, if the item did not make sense or was unconvincing or too simplistic, the participant was likely to rate the item lower. These answers contributed to the scoring of the test.

According to Rest et al. (1999), Thoma (2002), and Thoma (2006), validity of the DIT has been cited in over 400 published articles in the following seven criteria: Criteria have shown differentiation of (a) various age/education groups and (b) longitudinal gains. Additionally, DIT scores are significantly related to (c) cognitive capacity measures, (d) sensitive to moral education interventions, (e) linked to prosocial behaviors and professional decision making, and (f) linked to political attitudes and choices. Finally, the DIT is (g) reliable. The Cronbach's alpha is in the upper .70s to low .80s, which is confirmed in test-retest reliability, meaning this test measure has a good internal consistency.

**Teacher Reporting Questionnaire.** The TRQ was developed by Walsh et al. (2012) based on their previous research of numerous articles of mandated reporting practices. The TRQ is a self-administered survey with eight sections that collect data

about respondent's demographics, job responsibility, education and training, previous Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) reporting history, attitudes about reporting CSA, knowledge of requirements to report CSA under school policies, knowledge of requirements to report CSA under legislation, and responses to six CSA scenarios. The authors reported the TRQ underwent preliminary testing in a five-stage validation process; however, they did not report reliability or validity for the overall instrument.

The TRQ was designed for educators in Australia with Australian laws and policies pertaining to reporting child sexual abuse. With permission of the authors, a modified version of the TRQ was created and used for the purpose of this study. Sections A-E of the TRQ were modified from pertaining to Australian educators to American professional school counselors. Additionally, in section F, because school policies vary by school district, questions pertaining to school policies could not be scored and were, therefore, eliminated. Section G of the TRQ evaluates the legislation, which uses wording that is consistent with wording used in legislation of all 50 states in America. The language in this section did not need to be modified.

Section H, the last section of the TRQ, consists of 6 scenarios. Of these six scenarios, two scenarios are clear indicators of child sexual abuse, two scenarios are less clear indicators of child sexual abuse, and two scenarios had no clear indicators of child sexual abuse. In the modified version, there were still six scenarios. One scenario was a clear indicator of child sexual abuse while two only were trending as indicators of child sexual abuse. In the other three scenarios, one scenario had no clear indicator of child sexual abuse while the other two were trending as having no indicators of child sexual abuse.

In order to develop, field-test, and determine reliability and validity of scores from the modified Section H, these scenarios were submitted to two panels of mandated reporting and child sexual abuse experts. The first panel consisted of six members who worked as experts of child sexual abuse. The first panel was asked to comment on the structure of each question to ensure clarity to the reader and answer the questions to determine validity of the content. The panel's comments were then reviewed and changes were made and resubmitted to them for a final review. Upon a final review, additional changes were made and the scenarios were sent to a second set of mandated reporting experts. The second panel consisted of six members who worked as professional school counselors and had completed training at the doctoral level or higher. The second panel also was asked to comment on the structure of each question to ensure clarity to the reader (the professional school counselor) and answer the questions to determine validity of the content. The panel's comments were then reviewed and final adjustments were resubmitted to them for a final review. Upon a final review, no new changes were made and the scenarios were incorporated at the end of the instrument.

## **Procedures**

Upon approval from Duquesne University's Institutional Review Board, the completed instrument containing the DIT-2 and modified TRQ was distributed to participants electronically via numerous listserv postings and specific e-mail invitations describing the purpose and risks of the study and time constraints of the participant, and contained a link to the online survey at Survey Monkey. The invitations were sent out on August 1, 2013, informing participants to please complete the survey within the next two weeks. On August 10, 2012, a reminder was sent to all participants, reminding them that

the survey will close in five days. The link to the survey was disabled on August 15, 2013, not allowing for any further surveys to be started or submitted.

Once participants followed the link to the online survey, they were first instructed to read the online informed consent and explicitly agree to the conditions before beginning the online survey (see section on Human Participants and Ethics Precautions). Upon completion of the survey, the participant automatically received a thank you note.

### **Data Analysis**

I analyzed the data using SPSS 21.0 to report descriptive statistics, relationships among variables, and predictive factors. Multiple regression analysis was used to examine predictors of professional school counselors' (a) ability to accurately recognize child sexual abuse and (b) likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse. Statistical tests were completed in SPSS to check that assumptions of regression were being met.

Multiple regression involves more than one IV or predictor variable. For this study, there are eight predictor variables. Specifically, the independent variables or predictor variables are the personal characteristics (i.e., level of moral reasoning and personal attitudes toward reporting child sexual abuse) and professional characteristics (i.e., reporting knowledge, detection of child sexual abuse knowledge, years of experience, and training in the last year) of professional school counselor. The two separate and single dependent variables are (a) their ability to accurately recognize child sexual abuse and (b) whether it increases their likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse.

### **Human Participants and Ethics Precautions**

Participants were given the link to the survey through e-mail invitation. Upon following the link, the participant was instructed to read the online informed consent and agree to the conditions before beginning the online survey. Participants were informed that there were no risks greater than those encountered in everyday life and that there was no compensation for completing this survey. They were informed that no name would ever appear on any survey or research instruments. Internet Protocol (IP) address collection was disabled to ensure survey responses remain anonymous. Participants' responses only appeared in statistical data summaries and will be deleted 5 years after the completion of the research. Participants were informed that they are under no obligation to participate in this study and they were free to withdraw their consent to participate at any time. If a participant chose to withdraw, any information collected was immediately deleted. If a participant submitted an incomplete survey, the information collected also was immediately deleted.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESULTS**

The purpose of this study was to investigate predictors of professional school counselors' ability to accurately recognize and likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse. Specifically, this study examined predictors related to personal characteristics (i.e., level of moral reasoning and personal attitudes toward reporting child sexual abuse) and professional characteristics (i.e., years of experience and in-service training in the last 12 months) of professional school counselors. This chapter presents the results, as well as a summary of the statistical analyses in both a narrative and tabular format.

#### **Analysis of the Sample**

Data were collected from a nationwide sample of professional school counselors during the summer months of 2013. Using Survey Monkey, 13,370 emails were sent out with 13,104 emails received by a valid email address, and 632 school counselors participated, yielding a response rate of roughly 4.82%. Of the 632 professional school counselors who responded to the survey email, only 226 participants finished the survey in its entirety. Per the informed consent, an incomplete survey indicated a respondent's desire to withdraw his or her data. Therefore, 402 surveys were deleted due to the respondent's right to withdraw at any time, meaning 406 participants dropped out of this study before they finished, leaving a completed response rate of 1.72%. According to Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2009), this low response rate could be due to the excessive length of the survey or a lack of interest during the summer months when professional school counselors are not working. However, a response rate of nearly 2% is

not uncommon for an online survey, as online surveys are much less likely to achieve response rates as high as paper surveys (Petchenik & Watermolen, 2011).

The Office for the Study of Ethical Development at the University of Alabama scored the remaining 226 surveys to identify the DIT-2 results. High reliability of the DIT-2 is attributed to four reliability checks that have been shown to improve Cronbach's alpha by more than 10% (Rest et al., 1999). These reliability checks for the 226 completed surveys were run in order to identify random responses, confirm that 75% of the surveys were completed, review for the selection of meaningless items, and examine that no more than 11 items that should have different values were given the same value. These checks needed to be confirmed before participants' surveys could be assigned N2 scores. Because all surveys were completed from start to finish, it was determined that 4 participants either responded randomly to questions in the DIT-2, selected meaningless items, or gave numerous items the same value that should have been given a different value. Basically, 4 participants thoughtlessly selected items in the DIT-2 and, therefore, had to be removed from this study.

The removal of these four surveys left 222 completed surveys for preliminary data screening for missing data and outliers. A preliminary regression was run to calculate Mahalanobis' distance, which indicates how far a case lies from the average of all other cases on a particular IV. Using a chi-square table, a critical value of chi-square was found at  $p < .001$  with  $df = 6$  to be 22.46. The Mahalanobis' distance screening led to the additional elimination of two cases identified as outliers, leaving a final sample size of  $N = 220$ .

Upon further analysis of raw data, very little to no variance was found in two of the predictor variables: measurement of knowledge of child sexual abuse detection and reporting laws. These scores were determined based on a series of five questions about child abuse detection and mandated reported laws. The majority of respondents answered all questions correctly with only around 5% answering one or more questions incorrectly. Therefore, these two predictor variables were then dropped leaving this study with six predictors.

Using a standard error of skewness of .164, further data screening procedures found skewness in both dependent variables and in all predictor variables with the exception of the N2 Score. Dependent variable ability to recognize and dependent variable likelihood to report were both moderately negatively skewed. The predictor variables confidence and concern were moderately negatively skewed as well; however, the commitment variable was found to be severely negatively skewed. The predictor variable, years of experience, was found to contain a moderately positive skew and the predictor variable in-service training in the last 12 months contained substantial positive skew. All skewed variables were then transformed allowing for the data to be re-expressed in different units (Johnson & Wichern, 2008). An examination of test assumptions was re-run and all test assumptions for normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were met. According to Mertler and Vannatta (2010), once data have been transformed and all assumptions have been met, the results of the statistical analysis will be more accurate.

Using G\*Power Statistical Software (Faul et al., 2009), a post hoc power analysis was then conducted to incorporate the recalculated actual sample size ( $N = 220$ ) with the

six predictors used to determine the observed power and effect size. For both dependent variables, the sample size ( $N = 220$ ) with six predictor variables, represented by  $\alpha = .05$ , revealed a  $\beta = .008$  (very small effect size) and with an observed power of 0.13 ( $F [6,213] = 2.141$ ).

The sample ( $N = 220$ ) in this study consisted of male and female professional school counselors throughout the United States (including the District of Columbia) who were currently employed at both public and private elementary, middle, or secondary schools in rural, urban, or suburban communities. Age ranged from 24 to 68 years, with an average age of 45 years. The majority of participants were female (85.0%), Caucasian (86.8%), and Christian (74.1%) which is representative of the general population of PSCs. Table 1 gives a detailed explanation of the personal demographic variables collected in this study, and Table 2 gives a detailed explanation of professional demographic variables collected.

Table 1

*Personal Demographics*

	Frequencies = N	Percent = %
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	33	15.0
Female	187	85.0
<b>Primary Culture</b>		
African American	13	5.9
Caucasian	191	86.8
Other	16	7.3
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>		
Christian	163	74.1
Jewish	7	3.2
Atheist / Agnostic	20	9.1
No Preference	16	7.3
Other	14	6.4
<b>Political Ideology</b>		
Very Liberal	31	14.1
Somewhat Liberal	84	38.2
Neutral	55	25.0
Somewhat Conservative	37	16.8
Very Conservative	13	5.9
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	31	14.1
Married	160	72.7
Separated/Divorced	28	12.7
Widowed	1	0.5
<b>Parental Status</b>		
Yes	160	72.7
No	60	27.3

Table 2

*Professional Demographics*

	Frequencies = N	Percent = %
Position Status		
Full-time	213	96.8
Part-time	7	3.2
School Setting		
Urban	45	20.5
Suburban	108	49.1
Rural	67	30.5
Institution		
Public	198	90.0
Private-Religious	13	5.9
Private-Non-Religious	9	4.1
Grade Levels		
Elementary School	68	31.0
Middle School	72	33.0
High School	80	36.0
Degree		
Master's Degree	95	43.2
Master's + Additional	84	38.2
Doctoral Degree	21	9.5
Other	20	9.1
CACREP		
Yes	150	68.2
No	70	31.8
CSA Graduate Level Training		
Yes	124	56.4
No	96	43.6
CSA In-Service Training		
Yes	176	80.0
No	44	20.0
Reported CSA		
Yes	184	83.6
No	36	16.4
Suspected CSA/Did Not Report		
Yes	16	7.3
No	204	92.7

## **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

This study examined two dependent variables, professional school counselors' ability to recognize and report child sexual abuse, based on six predictors related to professional school counselors' personal characteristics (i.e., level of moral reasoning and 3 personal attitudes toward reporting child sexual abuse) and professional characteristics (i.e., experience and training). Quantitative scores for the two dependent variables were derived from 6 scenarios developed creating a modified version of the Teacher Reporting Questionnaire. Participants ( $N = 220$ ) received one point for each of the six questions answered correctly for both dependent variables. Scores for dependent variable ability to recognize child sexual abuse ranged from 2-6 ( $M = 4.80$ ;  $SD = .941$ ) and scores for dependent variable likelihood to accurately report child sexual abuse ranged from 2-6 ( $M = 4.88$ ;  $SD = .901$ ; see Table 6 later in the chapter for correlations, means, and standard deviations of transformed variables). To determine which six independent variables (moral reasoning, commitment, confidence, concern, experience, and training) were predictors of the professional school counselors' ability to recognize and likelihood to accurately report child sexual abuse, three research questions and three hypotheses were examined in this study.

### **Research Question and Hypothesis #1**

The first research question posed for this study was:

1. Is the professional school counselor's level of moral reasoning a significant predictor of his or her ability to recognize and report child sexual abuse?

In order to address this question, the following hypothesis was created:

HA1. The level of a professional counselor's moral reasoning a significant predictor of his or her ability to accurately recognize and increases his or her likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse.

Multiple regression was used to determine if level of moral reasoning, combined with other personal and professional characteristics, was a significant predictor of ability to accurately recognize child sexual abuse. Quantitative scores were derived for each of these three stages: personal interests—stage 2/3 (personal motivating factors), maintaining norms—stage 4 (maintaining normalcy and order), post-conventional—P-score—stage 5/6 (human rights and moral principles). The post-conventional or P-Score indicates the degree to which participants' principled forms of reasoning for moral decision making. Principled forms of reasoning reflect the use of abstract rules, such as justice and equity, in reasoning about moral dilemmas. By adjusting the P-score based on the test-taker's ability to distinguish between postconventional moral principles and the other two schemas (Thoma, 2006), personal interests and maintaining norms, a new score is derived.

The N2 Score is the newest and an improved way of scoring the DIT as it more accurately determines postconventional thinking (Rest, Thoma, Narvaez, & Bebeau, 1997). The N2 Score will increase if the test-taker rates postconventional items as more valuable than the other two schemas. In contrast, the N2 Score will decrease if the test-taker rates postconventional items as less valuable than the other two schemas. The N2 Score is thought to be the most effective index to identify postconventional moral principles among older and more educated professionals, such as professional school counselors. In this study, the N2 Score ranged from 0-75 ( $M = 38.53$ ,  $SD = 14.44$ ; see

Table 3 for moral reasoning mean scores or Table 6 for correlations, means, and standard deviations of Stages).

Table 3

*DIT-2 Mean Scores*

Level of Moral Reasoning	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Personal Interest (Stage 2/3)	222*	22.87	11.41
Maintain Norms (Stage 4)	222*	31.77	13.97
Post Conventional (P-score)	220	40.49	14.94
N2 Score (N2 Score)	220	38.53	14.44

*Note.* \*sample size before Mahalanobis' distance screening led to the additional elimination of two cases identified as outliers. Personal interest and maintain norms were not imputed into any preliminary regression analysis and are inaccurate +/- .10 of the actual sample ( $N = 220$ )

Regression results indicate that moral reasoning does not predict the professional school counselor's ability to accurately recognize child sexual abuse, *N2 Score*  $\beta = -.015$ ,  $t(213) = -.215$ ,  $p = .830$  (see Table 4). Multiple regression also was used to determine if level of moral reasoning, combined with other personal and professional characteristics, was a significant predictor of likelihood to accurately report child sexual abuse.

Regression results indicate that moral reasoning does not predict the professional school counselor's likelihood to accurately report child sexual abuse, *N2 Score*  $\beta = .036$ ,  $t(213) = .527$ ,  $p = .599$  (see Table 5).

Table 4

*Coefficients for Model Variables for Dependent Variable #1*

	<b>B</b>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Bivariate <i>r</i>	Partial <i>r</i>
Moral Reasoning	.000	-.015	-.215	.830	-.008	-.015
Commitment	-.009	-.010	-.129	.898	.002	-.009
Confidence	.025	.039	.535	.593	.025	.037
Concern	-.026	-.058	-.729	.467	-.026	-.050
Experience	-.024	-.078	-1.104	.271	-.071	-.075
Training	-.006	-.012	-.170	.965	-.018	-.012

Table 5

*Coefficients for Model Variables for Dependent Variable #2*

	<b>B</b>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	Bivariate <i>r</i>	Partial <i>r</i>
Moral Reasoning	.001	.036	.527	.599	.040	.036
Commitment	.019	.021	.278	.781	.036	.019
Confidence	.000	-.001	-.010	.992	-.016	-.001
Concern	-.018	-.042	-.526	.600	-.036	-.036
Experience	-.019	-.064	-.902	.368	-.062	-.062
Training	-.004	-.007	-.104	.917	-.017	-.007

## Research Question and Hypothesis #2

The second research question posed for this study was:

2. Which attitudes towards reporting child sexual abuse (i.e., commitment, confidence, and concern) are most influential in predicting a professional school counselor's ability to recognize and report child sexual abuse?

In order to address this question, the following hypothesis was created:

- HA2. The attitudes towards reporting child sexual abuse (i.e., commitment, confidence, and concern) of professional school counselors are a significant predictor of their ability to accurately recognize and increases their likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse.

Multiple regression was used to determine if attitudes toward reporting child sexual abuse, combined with level of moral reasoning and professional characteristics, was a significant predictor of ability to accurately recognize child sexual abuse.

Quantitative scores consisted of summations from each of the three attitude factors.

Factor 1, commitment, consisted of six items with a possible aggregated score ranging from 1-30. The actual range for factor 1, commitment, was 21-30 ( $M = 28.47$ ,  $SD = 1.900$ ). Factor 2, confidence, consisted of three items with a possible aggregated score ranging from 3-15. The actual range for factor 2, confidence, was 3-15 ( $M = 11.00$ ,  $SD = 2.193$ ). Factor 3, concern, consisted of five items with a possible aggregated score ranging from 5-25. The actual range for factor 3, concern, was 11-25 ( $M = 20.75$ ,  $SD = 3.115$ ; see Table 6 for correlations, means, and standard deviations of transformed data).

Regression results indicate that attitude toward reporting child sexual abuse does not predict the professional school counselor's ability to accurately recognize child

sexual abuse, *Commitment*  $\beta = -.010$ ,  $t(213) = -.129$ ,  $p = .898$ ; *Confidence*  $\beta = .039$ ,  $t(213) = .535$ ,  $p = .593$ ; *Concern*  $\beta = -.058$ ,  $t(213) = -.729$ ,  $p = .467$  (see Table 4).

Multiple regression also was used to determine if attitudes toward reporting child sexual abuse, combined with level of moral reasoning and professional characteristics, was a significant predictor of likelihood to accurately report child sexual abuse. Regression results indicate that attitude toward reporting child sexual abuse does not predict professional school counselors' likelihood to accurately report child sexual abuse, *Commitment*  $\beta = .021$ ,  $t(213) = .278$ ,  $p = .781$ ; *Confidence*  $\beta = -.001$ ,  $t(213) = -.010$ ,  $p = .992$ ; *Concern*  $\beta = -.042$ ,  $t(213) = -.526$ ,  $p = .600$  (see Table 5).

### **Research Question and Hypothesis #3**

The third research question posed for this study was:

3. Which professional characteristics (i.e., years of experience and training in the last year) are most influential in predicting a professional school counselor's ability to recognize and report child sexual abuse?

In order to address this question, the following hypothesis was created:

- HA3. The professional characteristics (i.e., years of experience and training in the last year) of professional school counselors are a significant predictor of their ability to accurately recognize and increases their likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse.

Multiple regression was used to determine if professional characteristics (years of experience as a professional school counselor and hours of in-service training in the last 12 months), combined with level of moral reasoning and attitudes toward reporting, was a significant predictor of ability to accurately recognize child sexual abuse. Years of

experience ranged from 2 to 33 years ( $M = 11.21$ ,  $SD = 7.008$ ) and total hours of in-service training in the last year ranged from 0 to 80 ( $M = 13.66$ ,  $SD = 17.834$ ; see Table 6 for correlations, means, and standard deviations of transformed data).

Regression results indicate that professional characteristics do not predict professional school counselors' ability to accurately recognize child sexual abuse, *Years of Experience*  $\beta = -.078$ ,  $t(213) = -1.104$ ,  $p = .271$ ; *In-Service Training in Last 12 Months*  $\beta = -.012$ ,  $t(213) = -.170$ ,  $p = .865$  (see Table 4). Multiple regression was used to determine if professional characteristics, combined with level of moral reasoning and attitudes toward reporting, was a significant predictor of likelihood to accurately report child sexual abuse. Regression results indicate that professional characteristics do not predict the professional school counselor's ability to accurately recognize child sexual abuse, *Years of Experience*  $\beta = -.064$ ,  $t(213) = -.902$ ,  $p = .368$ ; *In-Service Training in Last 12 Months*  $\beta = -.007$ ,  $t(213) = -.104$ ,  $p = .917$  (see Table 5).

### **Correlations**

Pearson correlation coefficients were run with the multiple regressions. "Correlation is a statistical technique that is used to measure and describe a relationship between two variables" (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2009, p. 520). Ideally, predictors should be significantly correlated with the dependent variable and uncorrelated with each other; however, this is unlikely to happen because almost all variables are correlated to some degree (Stevens, 2009)

### **Dependent Variables**

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between the dependent variables, professional school counselors' ability to recognize child sexual

abuse and their likelihood to report it. A very strong positive correlation was found ( $r(118) = .839, p < .001$ ), indicating a significant linear relationship between the two dependent variables (see Table 6).

### **Independent Variables**

A Pearson correlation coefficient also revealed that there were significant relationships among several of the independent variables (see Table 6). Among the personal characteristics, attitudes, a weak negative relationship was found, indicating a significant linear relationship between the independent variables commitment and confidence, ( $r(118) = -.277, p < .001$ ); a moderate negative relationship was found, indicating a significant linear relationship between the independent variables commitment and concern ( $r(118) = -.399, p < .001$ ); and a moderate positive relationship was found indicating a significant linear relationship between the independent variables confidence and concern ( $r(118) = .341, p < .001$ ).

Among the attitude, concern, a negligible or very weak negative relationship was found indicating a significant linear relationship between the independent variables concern and experience ( $r(118) = -.168, p < .05$ ); and concern and training ( $r(118) = -.173, p < .05$ ). Additionally, a negligible or very weak negative relationship was found indicating a significant linear relationship between the independent variables moral reasoning and training ( $r(118) = -.120, p < .05$ ); and a negligible or very weak positive relationship was found indicating a significant linear relationship between the independent variables experience and training ( $r(118) = .192, p < .05$ ).

Table 6

*Summary of Intercorrelations and Significance of Transformed Data*

Measure	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. DV #1	1.45	.317	1.00						
2. DV #2	1.42	.308	.839**	1.00					
3. N2 Score	38.53	14.44	-.008	.040	1.00				
4. Commitment	.6103	.3374	.002	.036	-.029	1.00			
5. Confidence	2.18	.5010	.025	-.016	.054	-.277**	1.00		
6. Concern	2.18	.7163	.071	-.036	.071	-.399**	.341**	1.00	
7. Experience	3.18	1.042	-.092	-.061	-.092	.016	-.033	-.168*	1.00
8. Training	.8145	.5938	-.120	-.017	-.120*	-.012	-.065	-.173*	.192*

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .001$ .

### Additional Findings

In this study, 7.3% of professional school counselors reported suspecting child sexual abuse at one time or another and intentionally chose to not report it. The most common reasons why professional school counselors did not report when they suspected child abuse were they were concerned how this report would impact the school relationship with the family or they did not know how to make the report. The second most common reason why professional school counselors in this study chose not to report was fear; they feared of being sued for making an unsubstantiated report (fear for self) and they feared that the child would be removed from the family (fear for child). The third most common reasons for professional school counselors in this study to not make a suspected report of child sexual abuse were fear of retaliation by the family for making

the report or they just thought it would be better to work through the sexual abuse issue with the family first.

### **Summary**

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the accuracy of the independent variables (moral reasoning, commitment, confidence, concern, experience, and training) predicting professional school counselors' ability to recognize and likelihood to accurately report child sexual abuse. The results of the regression indicated that the overall model does not predict the professional school counselors' ability to recognize child sexual abuse,  $R^2 = .008$ ,  $R^2_{adj} = -.020$ ,  $F(6,213) = .297$ ,  $p = .938$ . Furthermore, the results of the regression also indicated that the overall model does not predict the professional school counselors' likelihood to accurately report child sexual abuse,  $R^2 = .008$ ,  $R^2_{adj} = -.020$ ,  $F(6,213) = .276$ ,  $p = .948$ .

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to investigate predictors of the professional school counselors' ability to accurately recognize and likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse. Specifically, this study examined predictors related to personal characteristics (i.e., level of moral reasoning and personal attitudes toward reporting child sexual abuse) and professional characteristics (i.e., years of experience and in-service training in the last 12 months) of the professional school counselor. This chapter presents a summary of the study, conclusions of the results, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

#### **Summary of the Study**

The results of the multiple regressions on the overall model did not predict the professional school counselors' ability to recognize or likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse. Both dependent variables were moderately negatively skewed and lacked variance and thus reported an observed power of 0.13. An observed power of 0.13 could be interpreted as only having a 13% chance of finding significance if significance existed. Therefore, it is extremely likely that the dependent variables in this study did not measure what they were designed to measure—professional school counselors' ability to accurately recognize and likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse.

Furthermore, this model only accounted for .8% of the variance in the professional school counselors' ability to recognize child sexual abuse and .8% of the professional school counselors' likelihood to appropriately report. The independent variables do not sufficiently explain the variance of the professional school counselors'

ability to recognize or likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse, therefore, preventing a firm conclusion to this study.

## **Conclusions**

### **Analysis of the Sample**

A response rate of 1.72% is extremely low for any type of survey; however, it must be noted that these surveys were sent to professional school counselors who belong to a professional organization. It can never be determined, but it is very possible that these emails went to unchecked work email addresses during the summer months. By the time professional school counselors returned to work to begin the new school year, the link to the survey was disabled and the survey was closed.

One issue to note about the sample size is that 632 professional school counselors responded to the email to participate in a research study and began answering questions before voluntarily withdrawing. This withdrawal of 406 participants could be due to the length and difficulty of the instrument, particularly the Defining Issues Test-2. Participants were informed before beginning the survey that it would take about 45 minutes to complete the entire survey from start to finish. By looking at an analysis provided by Survey Monkey, 286 of the 406 participants who withdrew did so sometime during the first scenario of the DIT-2, which was the first page of this survey. By the end of the fifth and final scenario of the DIT-2, 390 of 406 withdrawn participants had voluntarily withdrawn from this study.

Only 16 participants withdrew during the collection of the demographic information or while taking the modified version of the Teacher Reporting Questionnaire (which asked questions about child sexual abuse and mandated reporting), which left 226

completed surveys. Of those 226 surveys, four surveys were eliminated during reliability checks for the DIT-2. It appears that four participants aimlessly selected random items on the DIT-2 in order to more quickly complete the survey. It could be that the 406 who withdrew did so because the DIT-2 was either too time consuming or required a lot of thought. It also could be that the other four participants eliminated during reliability checks just simply did not withdraw during the DIT-2, but instead quickly answered questions to move past the DIT-2 and on to the next section.

### **Research Question and Hypothesis #1**

This study was the first study of its kind to use one's level of moral reasoning as a predictor variable for recognizing and reporting child sexual abuse; however, moral reasoning was found to not be sufficient as a predictor variable in this study.

**Moral reasoning.** Kohlberg stated that individuals are naturally drawn to a higher level of moral development and individuals do not revert back to a lower stage once a higher stage is reached because individuals learn that reasoning at a lower stage is not adequate for a higher level of moral judgment/reasoning (Kohlberg, 1980, 1981). This study hypothesized that higher levels of a professional counselor's moral reasoning would be a significant predictor of his or her ability to accurately recognize and increase his or her likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse. However, it is possible that ability to recognize and likelihood to report can be achieved at a low stage of moral reasoning. For example, recognizing and reporting child sexual abuse may be accomplished at the personal interest stage when people are "motivated to follow rules and expectations" (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 409) or at the maintaining norms stage when people believe that "right is doing one's duty in society" (p. 411).

The DIT-2 is based on the Four Component Model which posits that ethical decision making consists of four components: sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and character (Rest, 1986). Though moral sensitivity plays a major part in one's decision to report child sexual abuse from an empathic perspective, it was not the focus of the DIT-2. This lack of focus also holds true for moral motivation (placing moral values higher than other values) and moral character (doing what is right no matter what the consequence), which also play very big parts in recognizing and reporting child sexual abuse. The DIT-2 and this study focused on Rest's theory of moral judgments—Component II.

Rest's (1984) theory of moral reasoning indicates that moral judgments are situation specific and as people develop they tend to make moral decisions based on prior experiences and knowledge (Rest et al., 1999). Kohlberg's theory might suggest that these judgments, such as recognizing and reporting child sexual abuse, could easily have been achieved as early as adolescence if they are taking place in stage 4. Considering the specifics of the situations describing child sexual abuse in the six scenarios in this study, professional school counselors could easily have achieved the appropriate moral stage or have been experienced and knowledgeable enough to recognize and appropriately report child sexual abuse regardless of their high level of moral reasoning and, therefore, this study would not have found significance.

Being that all mandated reporting decisions are, in one way or another, moral decisions, Rest's theory also could hold true for the remaining predictor variables in this study as well. That is, moral judgments, such as those required to recognize and report child sexual abuse, are situation specific and as people develop, they tend to make moral decisions based on prior experiences and knowledge (Rest et al., 1999). As school

counselors develop as professionals, specifically as mandated reporters of child sexual abuse, it is highly likely that they become much more experienced and much more knowledgeable with every possible situation of abuse.

### **Research Question and Hypothesis #2**

This study hypothesized that attitudes towards reporting child sexual abuse (i.e., commitment, confidence, and concern) of professional school counselors are a significant predictor of their ability to accurately recognize and increases their likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse; however, reporting attitudes were not found to be a sufficient predictor variable in this study.

**Commitment.** Crenshaw et al. (1995) suggested that mandated reporters who choose not to report overly ambiguous cases such as cases of child sexual abuse do so with the belief that they will not be held accountable for failing to report. On the contrary, Crenshaw et al. also suggested that those mandated reporters who were most likely to report suspected cases were likely to do so under any circumstance without fear of making a false report. Because the desire to follow the professional role and responsibilities are outweighed by the fear of making a false report (Kenny, 2001), these findings contributed to the hypothesis that one's commitment attitudes would be a predictor of ability to recognize or likelihood to report.

In this study, there was no accountability for reporting or failing to report, meaning, participants could have over-reported or under-reported without fear of ramifications. Because this attitude scale was self-reporting, it is very possible that participants would not self-report that they are anything but fully committed to the comprehension of the professional role and responsibilities, which they did. Therefore,

the commitment variable was found to be severely negatively skewed and may not have accurately measured the participant's true commitment.

**Confidence.** Studies (Crenshaw et al., 1995; King et al., 1998; Zellman & Faller, 1996) have suggested that mandated reporters lack confidence in child protective services to respond effectively to a mandated report and this distrust had an impact on one's decision to report. These findings contributed to the hypothesis that one's confidence attitudes would be a predictor of ability to recognize or likelihood to report. Because recent nation-wide publicity of high level officials in education involved educators losing jobs and facing jail time, it is possible that concern over the ramifications of not reporting could outweigh the distrust for child protective services, meaning, regardless of the attitudes towards child protective services, professional school counselors may still be recognizing and making reports. It is also possible that since the majority of these studies were conducted in the 1990s, child protective services and the government's handling of recent child sexual abuse cases may have restored the faith in professional school counselors. What held true in the 1990s may not hold true today.

**Concern.** Factors that may inhibit not making a report of suspected child abuse are the fear of legal consequences for making a false report, fear of retaliation against the abused child by the abuser, and fear of the uncertain reaction of the accused abuser (Abrahams et al., 1992; O'Toole et al., 1999; Pollack & Levy, 1989; Smyth, 1996). Even though failing to make a mandated report may result in criminal and civil penalties resulting in imprisonment and fines mandated reporters still may decide not to report (Reiniger et al., 1995). Therefore, these findings contributed to the hypothesis that one's

attitudes toward concern would be a predictor of ability to recognize or likelihood to report.

Concern could have not been influential in predicting a professional school counselor's ability to recognize and report child sexual abuse because this was a self-report study and there was no accountability for reporting or failing to report, meaning, participants could have over-reported or under-reported without fear of any concern of consequences. This self-report scale was found to be moderately negatively skewed, meaning that the majority of participants answered that they had strong concerns about the consequences, but reported anyway. In a real-world mandated reporting experience, having strong concerns about the consequences may not play such a large role in child sexual abuse being recognized, but it certainly could play a large part in whether or not it is reported.

### **Research Question and Hypothesis #3**

The final research question of this study hypothesized that years of experience and in-service training would be significant predictors of professional school counselors' ability to accurately recognize and increase their likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse; however, reporting years of experience and in-service training were not found to be sufficient predictor variables in this study.

**Years of experience.** Kenny (2001) has suggested that experienced educators are more likely to report child abuse, specifically stating that having five or more years of experience is a contributing factor in the likelihood of making a report. Kenny's findings contributed to the hypothesis that one's years of experience would be a predicting factor in ability to recognize or likelihood to report. The vast majority of the sample in this

study had five or more years of experience (16.8% with less than five years and 83.2% with five years or more), meaning 4 out of 5 professional school counselors should have had a greater ability to recognize and likelihood to report based on the years of experience they had alone; however, years of experience was not a significant predictor in this study.

**Training.** Furthermore, King et al. (1998) stated that having between 10 and 20 hours of formal training may result in a greater ability to recognize and likelihood to report, and that research did not appear to support any additional benefits for training beyond 20 hours. In this study, if broken down into hours, 65.9% of participants in this study had over 10 hours of formal in-service training in the last year alone, meaning that 2/3 of professional school counselors in this study should have had a greater ability to recognize and likelihood to report based on the amount of in-service training they received in the last year alone; however, hours of in-service training in this study was not a significant predictor.

## **Correlations**

**Dependent variables.** There was a significant, nearly perfect, very strong positive relationship ( $r = .839$ ) between professional school counselors' ability to recognize child sexual abuse and their likelihood to report it, meaning, when professional school counselors recognized child sexual abuse, they were more likely to report it. Because this relationship is not perfect, professional school counselors do not always report when they suspect.

Even if there are strict criminal and civil penalties (Reiniger et al., 1995), some professional school counselors will still decide not to report. In this study alone, 7.3% of

professional school counselors reported suspecting child sexual abuse at one time or another and intentionally choosing to not report it. In this study, 83.6% of professional school counselors had made past reports of suspected child sexual abuse. With such a large percentage of reported cases, it is very possible that professional school counselors may choose not to report cases of child sexual abuse based on negative past experiences and attitudes toward reporting such as confidence in child protective services and concern of consequences for reporting. Regardless of one's personal feelings about reporting, not reporting suspected child sexual abuse is irresponsible, unethical, and morally negligent.

**Independent variables.** Significant correlations were also found among several independent variables. The first set of relationships was between the three personal attitudes: commitment, confidence, and concern. It was found that significant relationships existed among and between all three attitudes.

A weak negative relationship was found between the independent variables commitment and confidence and a moderate negative relationship was found between the independent variables commitment and concern. Basically, it is possible that as professional school counselors' attitudes related to commitment and comprehension of their professional role and responsibilities pertaining to reporting child sexual abuse increased, their attitudes regarding their confidence in the child protection system to respond effectively to a mandated report of child sexual abuse decreased. This relationship could very well be considered consistent with King et al. (1998) and Zellman and Faller (1996) who found that some mandated reporters consider themselves better trained and capable of providing therapeutic interventions than child protective services and, therefore, elect to do so.

It also is possible that as professional school counselors' attitudes related to commitment and comprehension of their professional role and responsibilities pertaining to reporting child sexual abuse increased, their concerns about the consequences of making such reports decreased. This correlation is consistent with Kenny's (2001) finding that the desire to follow the legal standards of mandated reporting is outweighed by the fear of making a false report. In comparison, this relationship may suggest that the desire for professional school counselors to be committed to their professional role as mandated reporters outweighs their concerns about any types of consequences from making such reports.

A moderate positive relationship was found between the independent variables confidence and concern, meaning, these variables either increase or decrease together. This correlation may be considered consistent with the King et al. (1998) finding that suggested a substantial number of mandated reporters believed that an intervention by child protective services would do more harm than good. In other words, it could be interpreted that as negative attitudes regarding confidence in the child protection system to respond effectively to a mandated report of child sexual abuse increased, so did the professional school counselor's concerns about the consequences of making such reports.

There also were several negligible or very weak negative and positive relationships found. Among the attitude, concern, a negligible or very weak negative relationship was found between the independent variables concern and experience and concern and training. This can be interpreted that the more experience and training a professional school counselor obtains, the less concern they have about the consequences of making such reports. In contrast, the less experience and training a professional school

counselor has, the more concerned they are about the consequences of making such reports. Additionally, a negligible or very weak negative relationship was found between the independent variables moral reasoning and training. Rest's (1984) theory of moral reasoning indicated that, as people develop, they tend to make moral decisions (i.e., recognizing and reporting child sexual abuse) based on prior experiences (Rest et al., 1999). It could very well be possible that professional school counselors with higher levels of moral reasoning seek less training on issues of moral common sense, such as mandated reporting child sexual abuse because they are making these decisions based on prior mandated reporting experience. Finally, a negligible or very weak positive relationship was found between the independent variables experience and training. With more experience, professional school counselors seek more training.

### **Limitations**

#### **Lack of Research**

According to Bryant (2009), "no national survey has been conducted with school counselors as a specific mandatory reporter population" (p. 334) until her study was conducted around 2009. Bryant's study focused on physical abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, supervisory neglect, and emotional abuse. In terms of a nationwide study solely focusing on child sexual abuse and mandated reporting of professional school counselors in America, this study could easily be considered the first of its kind. Needless to say, there is a severe lack of research on professional school counselors in America as mandated reporters of child sexual abuse. Consistent with her research, the majority of the research found for this study is relatively old, most of it from the 1990s.

## **Instrumentation**

Another limitation to this study was the modification of the TRQ with the re-creation of six scenarios used for this study to quantify the dependent variables. Both dependent variables were moderately negatively skewed and lacked variance and thus observed power. This study had a very small effect size ( $\beta = .008$ ) with an observed power of 0.13. Small effect sizes are very common in social science research and the poor power in this study could be the result (Stevens, 2009). Nevertheless, an observed power of 0.13 could be interpreted as only having a 13% chance of finding significance if significance existed. Therefore, it is extremely likely that the dependent variables in this study did not measure what they were designed to measure, professional school counselors' ability to accurately recognize and likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse.

Another limitation was the re-creation of the six scenarios, which, in the end, gave a quantitative score that was used as the measurement of the dependent variables. These six scenarios were re-created to reflect only one scenario containing a clear indicator of child sexual abuse with two trending as indicators and one scenario having no indicator with two trending as having no indicators. These scenarios were then sent to child sexual abuse experts for content validation. Experts then gave advice on how to better formulate the scenarios to reflect whether or not child sexual abuse was indicated. Similar to child abuse experts not agreeing on reasonable suspicion of child abuse to exist in Levi and Crowell's (2011) study, child sexual abuse experts used to validate the content of these scenarios in this study could not agree on indicators of child sexual abuse as discovered in three rounds of content validation.

Because child sexual abuse rarely involves the professional school counselor as a direct witness (Kalichman, 1999; Morris, Johnson, & Clasen, 1985; Tilden et al., 1994; Warner-Rogers et al., 1996; Zellman, 1990b), reasonable suspicion is all mandated reporters have when recognizing indicators of child sexual abuse. Just like any other ethical decision, recognizing or reasonably suspecting child sexual abuse is not usually clear-cut and contains many “gray areas.” It is very seldom a black and white case. This could mean that reasonable suspicion could only lie within the eyes of the beholder. That could also mean that whether or not to follow through with a child sexual abuse report also lies within the opinion of the beholder.

To further complicate matters, the question is raised about the blackness and whiteness of when a person knows his or her answer is anonymous, there is not an actual abused child, and there are no chances of ramifications for making a report. How do the answers to scenarios read on a computer screen differ from real life events? It is very possible that by taking the emotional element out of the ethical decision making around mandated reporting, the attitudes toward commitment, confidence, or concern were taken out of the equation as well. It is very easy to select a yes or no to an unsure answer when there is no one to be harmed.

In the end, it could be very possible that there are so many variables (i.e., personal and professional characteristics) that go into making a decision surrounding recognizing child sexual abuse, formulating a reasonable suspicion, and making a mandated report, that they may be impossible to define or quantify.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

It could be very possible that there are so many variables (i.e., personal and professional characteristics) that go into making a decision surrounding recognizing child sexual abuse, formulating a reasonable suspicion, and making a mandated report, that they may be impossible to define or quantify. But if one's ability to recognize and likelihood to report child sexual abuse is possible to quantify, a more reliable and valid measurement needs to be created. It may be helpful to reevaluate the scenarios in this study from a qualitative perspective to gain a deeper understanding of how professional school counselors make decisions to recognize and report.

There were numerous significant positive and negative correlations found in this study; however, correlation does not mean causation. Theories, based on the direction of the correlations, were then created to possibly explain the causation. Quantitative researchers may want to further examine the causation of the correlations found in this study.

Rest's (1984) theory of moral reasoning indicated that, as people develop, they tend to make moral decisions (i.e., recognizing and reporting child sexual abuse) based on prior experiences (Rest et al., 1999). Continuing with Rest's (1984) theory, he did not suggest years of experience indicated making better moral decisions; however, he did indicate that better moral decisions are made by those having prior experiences. As school counselors develop as professionals, specifically as mandated reporters of child sexual abuse, it is highly likely that they become much more experienced and much more knowledgeable with every possible situation of abuse. Future research, focusing on

Rest's theory, could examine the moral decision making of professional school counselors who are seasoned mandated reporters.

### **Summary**

It was hypothesized that moral reasoning, commitment, confidence, concern, years of experience, and in-service training were all significant predictors of professional school counselors' ability to accurately recognize and likelihood to appropriately report child sexual abuse; however, none of these were determined to be significant predictors. This could be for a number of reasons.

Previous research has suggested that a substantial amount of variance in one's decision to report may be related to the seriousness or type of abuse (Beck & Ogloff, 1995; Crenshaw et al., 1995). Variables regarding recognizing and reporting child sexual abuse could be influenced by personal experiences, organizational behavior, professional standards, and social policy (King et al., 1998). While researching factors that influence clinicians (i.e., dentists, physicians, and psychologists) assessment and management of abuse, Tilden et al. (1994) found evidence to support that reporting behavior is influenced more by a professional's background than by a professional's actual knowledge of child abuse. Consider professional educators, for example. Educators, especially professional school counselors, account for the overwhelming majority of mandated reports in the United States. They have much more of a background as mandated reporters than dentists, physicians, or psychologists, for example. Therefore, it can also be assumed that they have more prior experiences with abused children than any other profession.

Relating this back to Rest's (1984) theory of moral reasoning, it is believed that as people develop, they tend to make moral decisions (i.e., recognizing and reporting child

sexual abuse) based on prior experiences (Rest et al., 1999). As school counselors develop as professionals, specifically as mandated reporters of child sexual abuse, it is highly likely that they become much more experienced with every possible situation of abuse and child sexual abuse. Therefore, in conclusion, it is extremely likely that the background of the professional school counselor, simply based on his or her daily work as a mandated reporter, accounts as the biggest influence of mandated reporting behavior, nevertheless making other personal and professional characteristics irrelevant.

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