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Combating violence against children: Jordanian pre-service early childhood teachers’ perceptions towards child abuse and neglect

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Early childhood teachers play major roles in defying child abuse and neglect and alleviating its detrimental effects on young children. Therefore, this study aimed at exploring how Jordanian pre-service early childhood teachers define and perceive violence against children and their role in child abuse detection and prevention. Furthermore, the study aimed at identifying pre-service early childhood perceived preparation needs in child abuse and neglect. To achieve the study purposes, an interpretive qualitative approach was utilised. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 pre-service early childhood teachers who completed a compulsory course in child abuse at the time of the study. Thematic analysis was applied to data through which findings were confined to three themes corresponding to the research questions: violence and abuse defined; perceived preparation needs; and perceived roles in child protection. Several implications and recommendations for educators and teacher preparation programmes were offered and discussed based on the findings of this study.

Keywords: child abuse and neglect; violence against children; Jordanian teachers’ perceptions

Introduction

Violence against children is recognised as a serious worldwide problem that appears in different forms and settings. According to the United Nations Secretary-General’s Study on Violence against Children (2006), child abuse and neglect were found to be global problems of alarming magnitude and consequences. For example, millions of children across the world suffer sexual, physical, or emotional violence on a daily basis and even larger numbers of children suffer caning, slapping, and other forms of corporal and degrading punishment in homes, schools, and other settings.

In Jordan, the concern over violence against children echoes the international concern. A recent national report on the intensity and spread of violence against children in the Jordanian society has documented that more than half the children of Jordan are punished and physically abused by parents or legal guardians, school teachers, administrators, and siblings, while two-thirds of them are verbally abused and around one-third are subjected to sexual harassment inflicted by neighbourhood adults, schoolmates, and sometimes parents (Elayyan, 2007).

There are different terminologies to describe the state and form of violence inflicted on the child. The World Health Organization (WHO; 1999, p. 15), in a global effort to
unify definitions and standardise knowledge about child abuse and neglect, provides a comprehensive definition of Child abuse to include:

[All] forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.

Despite the variation in the terminology use and the different forms that abuse manifests in, research (e.g. Cullerton-Sen et al., 2008; Eigsti & Cicchetti, 2004; Manly, Kim, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2001, Osofsky, 1995; Shen, 2009; Veltman & Browne, 2001) have indicated that violence against children and abuse can lead to hazardous outcomes including physical, cognitive, emotional, and psychological problems. This line of research has sensitised government officials, professionals, and even private citizens to this plight and held all those concerned accountable to counter this problem. Hence, school personnel including teachers should be seen as important change actors in detection and prevention of child abuse and neglect. According to Eckenrode (2004), teachers play a critical role in defying children’s violence which can be achieved through two ways: first, through teachers’ early identification of children who are victims of violence or are at risk of maltreatment and second, through teachers’ efforts in developing preventive school-based programmes and strategies (e.g. Crosson-Tower, 2003). For early childhood teachers, these roles become imperative, as they define early interventions to reduce childhood exposure to violence which is described by Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, and Zwi (2002, p. 1086) as the ‘key factors to reduce the far-reaching consequences of violence and its expression by children as they grow into adolescents and adults’.

Hence, equipping teachers – especially newly qualified teachers – with the necessary ability and competence to detect and respond to abused and neglected children becomes very critical (Baginsky, 2003; Baginsky & MacPherson, 2005). Yet, research studies (e.g. Feng, Huang, & Wang, 2010; Kenny, 2001) indicate that teachers receive inadequate training in child abuse signs, symptoms, and reporting procedures.

Studies that deal with pre-service early childhood teachers’ perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge towards child abuse and neglect are sparse especially in countries like Jordan where interest in empowering teachers to defy violence against children is relatively new. Therefore, this study aimed at exploring how Jordanian pre-service early childhood teachers define and perceive violence against children. Furthermore, the study aimed at exploring how teachers of young children perceive their future role in child abuse detection and prevention in addition to their perceived preparation needs. Specifically, this research intended to answer the following research questions:

(1) How do early childhood teachers define violence against children?
(2) What are Jordanian early childhood teachers’ perceived preparation needs in child abuse?
(3) What are Jordanian early childhood teachers’ perceptions about their role in child abuse detection and prevention?

The state of child protection in Jordan

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; United Nations, undated) is considered as an international legal instrument that establishes obligations for States and
governments to protect children and prevent violence directed to them. Specifically, Article 19 requires States to take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures to protect children from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect, and maltreatment, including sexual abuse while in the care of parents or legal guardians.

Jordan was among the first State parties that ratified the convention and provided specific measures for protection of children against violence. For example, as a response to this problem, national studies have recently been conducted to explore the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in the Jordanian society (e.g. Elayyan, 2007). Furthermore, a national team has been assigned the job of formulating a National Framework for Family Protection from Violence (National Council for Family Affairs [NCFA] & UNICEF, 2007). Many departments and centres through institutions and NGOs – with inter-organisational cooperation – were set up to handle and record cases of violence and abuse against children and offer social and psychological assistance such as The Family Protection Department established in 1997, Dar Al-Aman, and Queen Rania Family and Child Center (NCFA & the World Bank, 2004). Despite the increased efforts to draft Childhood Act and enact laws to protect children in Jordan, the legal system still lacks the needed repercussions and procedures to protect children; as it preserves, for example, Article 62, allowing parents and guardians to discipline children through a specific degree of force (NCFA & UNICEF, 2007). Furthermore, while there are laws in some countries such as the USA and Australia that mandate teachers and professionals to report child abuse and neglect, no similar laws are enacted in Jordan. Therefore, teachers’ decision to report cases of child abuse and neglect in Jordan totally rests on the personal and professional judgments that teachers make.

**Teachers’ beliefs and knowledge of child abuse and neglect**

Research studies that investigate the perceptions and enacted roles of teachers and school professionals towards child abuse and neglect have been growing in recent years. For example, Baginsky (2003) examined the views of newly qualified teachers in Great Britain regarding their role as teachers in child protection. The findings of her study indicate that the majority of surveyed teachers believed that they should have a role in child protection because of their daily contact with children and their general responsibility for children’s welfare. Similarly, Beck, Ogloff, and Corbishley (1994) surveyed teachers in British Columbia about their mandatory child abuse reporting. They have found that the majority of teachers see themselves responsible for the safety and welfare of the child which motivated them to report incidents of child abuse. Similar studies assure that teachers think they should have a role in child protection and hold themselves accountable for the safety of the children they teach (McCallum & Baginsky, 2001). From a different angle, studies on teachers’ acceptance and tolerance to certain forms of child abuse are also growing, yet lead to inconsistent findings across different cultures. For example, teachers in Ukraine have expressed negative attitudes towards corporal punishment and beating children, regardless of circumstances and justifications (Child Well Being Fund Ukraine & Nobody’s Children Foundation, 2009). On the other hand, teachers in South Korea tended to support the use of corporal punishment, believing that students’ behaviours have become worse over the years (Brown, 2009). Similarly, Kimani, Kara, and Ogetange (2012) reported that Kenyan teachers and school personnel perceived corporal
punishment as part of school culture and the majority believed that it is justifiable and necessary to maintain discipline in schools.

Yet, even when teachers have positive attitudes towards their role in child protection, they may still fail to enact on their role as reporters even in instances they suspected abuse may have occurred (Feng et al., 2010; Kenny, 2001).

Reference to the teachers’ knowledge base about child abuse and neglect has been identified in literature as an important factor for the reporting decision of the teachers. Specifically, literature points to varied levels of deficits in the knowledge base of the teachers. For example, lack of knowledge and awareness of signs of child abuse was among the most common reasons for not reporting abuse by teachers (Haj-Yahia & Attar-Schwartz, 2008; Kenny, 2004). Teachers’ lack of knowledge and confusion about policies and procedures directly influenced their confidence in identifying and reporting child abuse (McCallum & Baginsky, 2001). Lack of confidence and fear of making an inaccurate report was also an identified reason for not reporting child abuse (Kenny, 2001).

Similar concerns were found among pre-service teachers. For example, Goldman (2010) analysed the responses of Australian final fourth-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) student-teachers towards four aspects of child sexual abuse: their knowledge of child sexual abuse, their department policy on mandatory reporting, their professional competence in mandatory reporting of it, and their recommended educational and professional training in it. Results of their study indicated that teachers felt inadequately prepared to address child sexual abuse at all levels including mandatory reporting in schools and knowledge about its specific symptoms and the departments’ policy and procedures on mandatory reporting.

Furthermore, most student-teachers do not receive compulsory university training in child protection and the legal requirements and procedures of reporting abuse (Goldman & Grimbeek, 2011). In addition, teachers were found to depend on scattered and incidental sources of knowledge about child abuse, with a majority indicating not learning anything at all from any of these sources (Goldman & Grimbeek, 2011). Hence, teachers whether pre-service or in-service need hands-on and practical training to acquire the needed knowledge and skills in child abuse detection and intervention (Baginsky, 2003). Fortunately, research studies show that pre-service teachers benefit from training programmes on child abuse detection and prevention, and their knowledge and competency increase significantly after participating in a child protection training programme (McKee & Dillenburger, 2012).

Teachers also may perceive certain types of child abuse as more serious than others and therefore maybe willing to report these types more often (Beck et al., 1994). Palestinian preschool teachers, for instance, were more willing to report cases of child sexual abuse than were to report other types of child abuse and neglect (Haj-Yahia & Attar-Schwartz, 2008). In addition, case characteristics (i.e. frequency and severity of child abuse or neglect) were found to exert the strongest influence on detecting and reporting tendency among teachers (Walsh, Bridgstock, Farrell, Rassafiani, & Schweitzer, 2008). In sum, literature suggests that teachers’ beliefs and attitudes towards child abuse and neglect, their perceived role in child protection, and their knowledge of child abuse and neglect are major to understanding their actual and anticipated roles in child protection. Therefore, this study was carried out since there is a lack of knowledge about how teachers, specifically pre-service early childhood teachers, in Jordan perceive and view child abuse and neglect and their current training.
Research method
The study employed a qualitative methodology, as it sought to generate in-depth understanding about how pre-service early childhood teachers perceive violence against children. Specifically, the study used interviews as a method of data collection which allowed the researchers to make sense of and interpret data in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

Participants
Interviews were conducted with 25 pre-service early childhood teachers who were drawn from an urban public university in Jordan. Participants were self-nominated based on a written open invitation to participate in the study. All participants were females at their senior year and engaged in their teaching practicum at the time of the study. Participation in the study was limited to those who finished the compulsory Child Abuse course. Yet, in addition to the compulsory course on child abuse, six participants finished an elective course on children’s rights. It is noteworthy that all names mentioned in the study are pseudonyms.

Data collection
The researchers developed an interview protocol that consisted of semi-structured questions and prompts derived from the research questions set for this study. For instance, participants were asked questions like: how do you define violence? To what extent do you think it’s common in Jordan? How confident do you feel about your ability to detect child abuse? Will you be willing to report incidents of child abuse?

Interviews were individually conducted at the participants’ university during a time set by their choice with one of the research team. Interviews lasted between 80 and 120 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Arabic, the language of the participants, and were tape recorded based on their consent.

Data analysis
All interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis was applied to data following the procedural steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87): familiarising self with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Credibility of analysis
To ensure the credibility of analysis, each transcript was read and coded separately by two of the research team. Constant discussion among the research team helped refining the codes and the emerging themes. The written interview and the researchers’ notes were returned to four participants to affirm their intended meanings. From a different angle, because translation was employed to the emerging themes and some selected excerpts for the purpose of publication, translation and back translation were conducted by a research team member and warranted by a bilingual external reader.
Research findings

Study findings were confined to three themes corresponding to the research queries set for this study. In what follows, we present the findings under these themes: violence and abuse defined; perceived preparation needs; and perceived roles in child protection.

Violence and abuse defined

One of our main concerns in this research study was to uncover how early childhood pre-service teachers define and perceive abuse and violence against children and whether they justify certain forms of it. To that end, participants were asked to define child abuse, some exemplary responses were:

Dana: I define it as any behaviour that is meant to harm the child, could be physical or psychological.
Basemah: Its beating the child very hard… sometimes cursing him.
Rita: Parental or any guardians’ use of insults, belts or canes when their child does something that does not deserve hitting.
Salwa: Any conduct that causes the child harm; you know physical or psychological.

Interestingly, eight participants discriminated between the Arabic term ‘Onf’ which denotes violence and the Arabic term ‘Isa’a’ which denotes abuse. For example, Aysha mentioned, ‘I think Onf [violence] is intentional, but Isa’a [abuse] is not.’ Muneera also expressed this difference stating:

when the mother for instance go to work and leaves her child for long time unattended, she does not know she is doing harm to her child, because she is thinking of how to afford him food. This is abuse.

Another example is provided by Lama, ‘I think the violent person is psychologically ill and needs help, abusers may do things out of habit or because they were raised this way or they don’t think it harms the child.’ Participants reacted differently to the Arabic term ‘Onf’ than they did to the term ‘Isa’s’ and felt it denotes conducts that are intense with an intention to harm. These participants also seemed deliberate when making this distinction because as one participant mentioned, ‘when I hear the word violence I would be quicker to judge the action, but in abuse cases I wait to understand more about the situation’.

Regardless of the term that participants preferred to use, all provided a comprehensive view about what they considered abuse. Participants reported negligent treatment, emotional/psychological and sexual abuse as forms of conducts that they consider abuse. Yet, five of the eight participants who made a distinction between the two terms preferred to use the term ‘sexual violence against children’ instead of ‘sexual abuse’ because as Sameera puts it, ‘all sexual conducts that are practiced with the child are intense and intend to harm; so it is violence’.

It is noteworthy that when participants were asked if they justify certain violent conducts against children, all responded that they do not. However, when the question changed to whether they accept hitting, slapping, or spanking children, 18 participants responded that they do. Fatin justified the use of corporal punishments but only with older children. According to her, ‘when children do something that is so bad like
stealing or smoking … but I don’t think it’s appropriate with very young children’. In addition, Rita explained her understanding of current conditions of children at schools saying, ‘I think the moment schools disallowed hitting, children started to misbehave.’

Reema reflected on her own personal experience saying, ‘My parents used to hit us when we were kids. We’re okay now. They never hit my younger sister and now she is spoiled.’

It was evident from analysis of interview transcripts that the 18 participants base their justifications of the use of corporal punishment on three factors: the intentions behind the use of corporal punishment, the intensity and frequency of use, and how bad the child’s behaviour is. For example, Lubna stated when asked if she justifies the use of corporal punishment, ‘Only if it’s not harsh. I sometimes hit my own children, but not very hard. I intend to discipline them.’ Uniquely, two participants capitalised on their religious understanding of the use of physical punishment. Hala explained:

In our religion, we’re not allowed to hit children. There is a single case that allows us to use corporal punishment and that is through softly spanking the child on hand at age 10 if he/she doesn’t pray.

From a different angle, seven participants (six of whom completed a course on children’s rights) indicated that they do not justify the use of corporal punishment under any circumstances because it violates human rights. Furthermore, all of them had a strong belief in their ability to discipline the child without necessarily hitting, spanking, or caning him or her. Four of them reflected on the socio-cultural context and on their desire to change the social norms. According to Muna,

I remember one time that my teacher pinched me when I did not spell a word right. It still hurts deep inside although the physical pain disappeared. Teachers and parents need to stop hurting the children because even if the physical pain disappears, the emotional pain never fades.

Similarly, Leena added to this idea:

I think hitting, spanking, and slapping on face are social norms in Jordan. These methods of discipline are widely accepted, yet, I see some positive change in the society. We as teachers need to move forward and provide good models for parents

From a different angle, most participants felt that all forms of abuse (i.e. physical, emotional, sexual, and neglect) exist in the Jordanian society with varied degrees. Only two participants felt sexual abuse to be a marginal problem in Jordan, and 21 participants rated physical and verbal/emotional abuse to exist more than the other forms of abuse.

Moreover, participants were asked to put in order the type of abuse that concerned them the most. The majority of participants (19 participants) were concerned about sexual abuse. According to Hala, ‘I think sexual abuse has detrimental effect on the child more than any other kind of abuse and it is not easily treated.’ Reema, on the other hand, justified her choice stating, ‘It is the hardest to discover. I know from the Child Abuse course that perpetrators are usually close family members.’ Seventeen participants were concerned about emotional abuse because it is ‘common’, ‘hard to detect’, or ‘hard to convince others about its prolonged effects’. Also, 14 participants
were concerned about physical abuse and all justified their choice stating that it is the ‘most widespread’ form in Jordan.

**Perceived preparation needs**

All participants have completed a compulsory course on child abuse, therefore we aimed at understanding how they perceive their preparation in child abuse and neglect and whether they have certain preparation needs or not. Overall, all 25 participants were delighted to complete the compulsory course and felt such courses are very important for teachers as they help them acquire knowledge about child protection.

When asked about how confident they felt about their ability to detect child abuse, participants’ responses varied according to the type of abuse taken into consideration. Seventeen participants were uncertain about their ability to detect all child abuse types. These participants admitted that their knowledge did not qualify them to be certain about their judgment. For example, Rita explained:

> Suppose the child was imagining things. When a child keeps hugging you, how would I know he is neglected and not just passionate by nature?

Six participants, on the other hand, were certain to some degree about their ability to detect child physical abuse and neglect, but doubted their ability to detect sexual and emotional abuse. Twelve participants were very certain about their ability to detect physical abuse and neglect and little certain about detecting sexual and emotional abuse. Some of the reported physical abuse symptoms that participants capitalised on were: repeated bruises to which children give different explanations (mentioned by 25 participants), children are inappropriately dressed in the whether to cover bites and burns (mentioned by 19 participants), children express fear of going home (mentioned by eight participants), and children’s drawings of an adult holding a cane or belt (mentioned by six participants). As to emotional abuse, teachers were able to report the following symptoms: low self-esteem (mentioned by 15 participants) and child’s self report of fear from parents or siblings (mentioned by four participants). The symptoms of negligent treatment reported by participants were: poor academic stands (mentioned by 25 participants), poor hygiene (mentioned by 25 participants), and attachment to the teacher (mentioned by five participants). The only symptoms of sexual abuse that participants reported were: the child knows more than his age (mentioned by three participants), and the child’s self report (mentioned by eight participants). It is noteworthy that all participants reported the general symptom (i.e. a change in the child’s behaviour) although they were not able to specify a single example. Also, nine of the participants who reported they are certain or very certain in detecting child abuse were only able to provide at maximum two specific symptoms of physical abuse and failed to provide any symptoms of emotional and sexual abuse.

All pre-service early childhood teachers, even those who were certain about their ability to detect child abuse, identified several needs in their preparation in child abuse and neglect. In the following, we provide some excerpts taken from their responses:

Huda: The course left us with many unresolved questions. I wish we had the chance to take more courses and cover in depth more types of abuse.
Salwa: I felt that the design needs restructuring. For example, we could leave out the historical view of violence against children and focus on practical issues.

Muneera: The information were theoretical, I wished to be provided with information on real cases and get a chance to explore them.

The majority of participants (21) required hands-on and practical training, 16 participants required more courses and training on neglect and sexual abuse, while 15 required procedural knowledge about how to act when they detect an abuse case, and what happens after reporting. Eight participants required knowledge about how to deal with victims of abuse, especially sexually abused children. In addition, eight participants called for incorporating knowledge about the Jordanian laws and the legislations that relate to child abuse.

**Perceived roles in child protection**

With the absence of a law mandating teachers to report child abuse in Jordan, we desired to understand pre-service teachers’ perceptions about their future role in child protection and their tendencies to act. Analysis of participants’ responses suggests that participants can be classified into two general profiles based on shared characteristics regarding their tendencies to act. The first profile originated from the responses of 16 participants and was coded as ‘peripheral protector’. The second profile on the other hand originated from the responses of nine participants and was coded as ‘advocate role’. In what follows, we introduce the shared characteristic among participants in each profile.

**Peripheral protector**

Sixteen participants frankly expressed negativity towards their role in detecting and reporting child abuse. These participants felt that the responsibility of detecting and reporting abuse should lie with someone else; specifically the school counsellor or principal. The majority expressed concerns about their future role as teachers and felt that they will be faced with enough challenges such as class size and the pressure to complete the curriculum and having their students achieve certain academic standards.

It was obvious from analysis of data that these participants focus on many anticipated barriers to their role as reporters. For instance, Muna clearly expressed personal concerns about reporting, ‘I would be frightened to get in troubles. What if the abuser tried to revenge?’ Sameera also stated, ‘if I notice something wrong, I would talk to the parents … if they ask me to stop interfering, I will stop’. Another barrier to reporting that was anticipated by the participants is the lack of support from family members, friends, or school principal. According to Rita,

I will discuss the issue with the school principal. But frankly, I don’t think she will support reporting for the sake of the school reputation. I think the school will try to end it by just talking to the parents.

Generally these participants, however, felt more positive towards their role in child abuse prevention. When asked if they think school and teachers should have a role in child abuse prevention, participants saw merit in their role in: raising children’s awareness about certain types of abuse, especially sexual abuse (mentioned by 13
participants), incorporating information for children about their rights (mentioned by five participants) and what to do if they are abused (mentioned by 14 participants), and providing parents with awareness session about the harms of abuse to their children (mentioned by 14 participants).

**Advocate role**

Nine participants passionately expressed their role in child protection. These participants felt that they should have a role in child abuse detection, reporting, and prevention. In addition, these participants talked about the inherent responsibility that lies with their work as teachers and the necessity of promoting the development of the whole child through safeguarding children. According to Aysha, ‘we have learned during the course of our study that our role is to help the child develop psychologically, mentally, and academically’.

When asked if they would be willing to report, all of them affirmed that they will. It is noteworthy that these participants anticipated some barriers to their future role in child protection. However, all felt that the desire to fulfil their personal and professional ethical standards supersedes the personal considerations and lack of support to their role. Moreover, most of them expressed faith in the child protection system. For example, Muneera talked confidently and admirably about how the system works. The following excerpt, albeit lengthy, describes this idea well:

I know that you don’t even need to say your name when you make the call. Sometimes, the teacher can video-tape the bruises or record child reports and send to the child protection services center, they will act based on that. They maintain disclosure about the identity of the caller throughout the whole procedures.

These participants also held positive attitudes towards their role in child abuse prevention and intervention. They stressed on their role as advocate for children’s safety and well-being and their desire to bring about changes in parental and societal attitudes.

**Discussion and implications**

The wide recognition of teachers’ role in child protection has provoked research to focus on teachers’ perceptions of and preparation in child abuse. Hence, this study attempted to explore how Jordanian pre-service early childhood teachers define and perceive violence against children. Findings of this study indicate that Jordanian pre-service early childhood teachers react differently to the different terminologies based on the meanings and connotations they hold in their culture. The complexity of definition and the boundary setting of child maltreatment and abuse are inherent issues despite the global efforts to unify them (e.g. WHO, 1999).

Furthermore, comparing participants’ opinions about whether they justify certain forms of child abuse to the stand stressed by the UN study on violence against children that ‘no violence against children is justifiable; all violence against children is preventable’, we find that most participants bring in their own definitions of what they consider justifiable or not. That is for the majority of participants hitting, biting, slapping on face are acceptable and justifiable conducts based on how severe they are inflicted on the child, the perpetrator’s intention, and how intolerable the child’s behaviour is. These participants constructed their own boundaries in defining violent vs
acceptable behaviours, relying on different sources such as their own personal experiences, acceptance of the social norms, and to some extent their religious understanding. In that sense, Jordanian pre-service early childhood teachers were similar to professionals and teachers across different cultures in accepting and justifying corporal punishment as a legitimate means of disciplining children (Brown, 2009; Kimani et al., 2012). From a different angle, few participants criminalised the use of corporal punishment because they focused on the pain caused to the child and not on the perpetrator’s intentions. These participants adopted a human right approach through which they attempt to change the social norms. This finding, albeit represented by a few participants, provides an optimistic view about the future direction of professionals’ training in child abuse in Jordan. Therefore, this finding suggests adopting a human right approach in introducing corporal punishment as a violent behaviour for pre-service teachers in Jordan. Sensitising pre-service teachers about the harmful impacts of corporal punishment and helping teachers develop alternative methods for managing children’s misconducts may change teachers’ acceptance of corporal punishment (Brown, 2009).

Overall, pre-service early childhood teachers did not feel child abuse is a marginal problem which may indicate that they will be attentive to its symptoms and signs among the children they teach.

Although participants took a compulsory course in child abuse, findings indicate that they still find difficulties in detecting child abuse. Many participants felt uncertain about their ability to detect child abuse. Also, many exhibited scattered knowledge about the symptoms of physical abuse and failed to identify symptoms of other forms of abuse despite they felt confident in their ability to detect child abuse in general. This finding echoes the findings reported by Fărcaș and Roth (2011) who investigated the knowledge of child abuse and neglect indicators and the reporting attitudes of teachers working in mainstream preschool and primary school establishments in Cluj. They found that despite the certainty reported by the majority of teachers, teachers do not always show they have specific knowledge of physical and behavioural symptoms of all forms of abuse. Furthermore, this finding resonates with the findings of many other studies which point out to the dilemma that teachers usually receive minimal training in child abuse detection (e.g. Haj-Yahia & Attar-Schwartz, 2008; Kenny, 2004).

In general, participants in this study were most confident about their ability to detect physical abuse. This is expected because the symptoms of physical abuse are ‘dramatic’, ‘visible’, and ‘easily proved’ (Beck et al., 1994, p. 25). Yet, participants were least confident about their ability to detect sexual abuse. Goldman (2010) gave particular attention to pre-service teachers’ specific knowledge about sexual abuse and found that they were inadequately prepared to detect and address it; thus they require more training. While this may explain why they were very concerned about sexual abuse more than about other forms of abuse, it also entails the necessity of providing a content specific knowledge about each type of abuse, especially sexual and emotional abuses. Participants also identified certain needs in their general preparation in child abuse as they required hands-on and practical training, procedural knowledge about how to act when they detect an abuse case, and what happens after reporting and how to deal with victims of abuse sensitively. Carefully designed training programmes and courses in child abuse that take into consideration professionals’ needs can bring about the required changes in the knowledge and competencies of pre-service teachers (e.g. McKee & Dillenburger, 2012).
Moreover, two profiles which portrait participants’ anticipated roles in child protection have emerged through the analysis of data. The peripheral protector role which entails a limited role in detecting and reporting child abuse and the advocate role which entails major roles in child abuse detection, prevention, and even intervention.

Unfortunately, ‘peripheral protector’ profile has characterised the majority of participants, which indicates that the majority of Jordanian pre-service early childhood teachers do not have positive attitudes towards their role in child abuse detection and reporting. This finding came surprising, as it is inconsistent with the findings of many other studies conducted in different cultures (e.g. Beck et al., 1994) which indicated that teachers feel positive about their role in child protection. In addition, these participants were found to anticipate future barriers to their role which in turn made them portrait a limited role in child protection. This finding provides an important implication for teacher education programmes to empower pre-service teachers to take active roles in child protection. The programmes would benefit from the anticipated barriers to constructive dialogue among student-teachers on how best to overcome such barriers. On the other hand, some participants predicted that they will adopt an advocate role in child abuse detection, prevention, and intervention. These participants not only felt a great personal and professional responsibility towards protecting children, but also trusted the child protection system. In a study conducted by Carleton (2006), mandated and non-mandated reporters were questioned as to their perceptions of the seriousness of child emotional abuse cases in order to understand the variables that are associated with their intentions to report. Carleton found that faith in child protective services was a predictive factor of reporting for non-mandated reporters. This finding also encourages educators to design training courses which incorporates visits to child protection centres to explain more about the procedures of reporting and protecting.

Because of the general scarcity of research in professional’s attitudes and perceptions towards child abuse and neglect in Jordan, we recommend conducting research studies that involve in-service early childhood teachers’ and principals’ attitudes towards child abuse. Furthermore, the issue of child abuse and corporal punishment is complex and culturally rooted; therefore we suggest exploring how parents define abuse and what they consider as appropriate disciplining methods. Finally, researchers could explore the effects of a well-designed research-based training course that takes into consideration the needs of pre-service early childhood teachers on their attitudes towards their role in child protection and their knowledge of child abuse.

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