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Understanding Teachers' Uncertainty in Encounters with Pupils with Experiences of Domestic Violence

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ABSTRACT
Political, legal, and educational documents present expectations for teachers who encounter pupils with experiences of domestic violence. Teachers say they lack competence and confidence and experience uncertainty about their role in this area. This study sheds light on teachers' experiences of uncertainty in their encounters with these pupils. Data was collected in group conversations with ten teachers and coded thematically. Hoekstra & Korthagen and Lauvås & Handal concepts of trusted colleague/peer mentoring together with Bandura's self-efficacy theory were used as a framework. Three challenges generating teachers' experiences of uncertainty: *marginalized opportunities*, *"crumbled" support channels* and being *out of the information trail*. When concerned about a pupil, teachers rarely sought information online, tending instead to seek support from a trusted colleague or a supervisor. They mentioned the need to talk to somebody who knew the pupil and the need for external personal guidance from professionals of an independent state/municipal service.

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Introduction

Worldwide, domestic violence (DV) affects children's experiences at school, causing them to struggle personally, socially and academically (Fry et al., 2018; Skarstein & Schultz, 2018; Stanley, 2011). Pupils may have concentration problems due to post-traumatic stress including eg. lack of sleep, flashbacks to violence and/or threats made by their abusers (Chanmugam & Teasley, 2014; Elklit et al., 2018). Ideally, a troubled home situation will be recognized by the teacher. Alongside parents, teachers are the major group of adults who have daily contact with children (Lloyd, 2018). Educators can therefore be one of a few outlets through which pupils can disclose their experiences of DV and receive support (Eriksson et al., 2013; Lloyd, 2018). Teacher response may have consequences for the motivation of pupils to disclose experiences of DV. Pupils experiencing DV frequently describe their teachers as their closest contacts at school. They also report paying attention to, and carefully interpreting, how their teachers respond to their experiences of violence (Frederick & Goddard, 2010; Øverlien, 2015; Selvik et al., 2016). In Selvik et al. (2016), Norwegian pupils who experienced multiple relocations at refuges for abused women were highly attuned to teachers' responses to their living conditions. They suggest multiple reasons that may prevent their teachers from talking with them about the violence; including time constraints, general unwillingness, not considering the situation serious enough, or assuming that the pupil was already

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talking to other adults. A Norwegian survey of 9,240 adolescents aged 12–16 who had experienced violence indicated that more than half of the participants had not told their teacher or anyone else about their experiences of physical abuse at home. The main reasons included not feeling the need to share those experiences, blaming themselves, fearing the involvement of child welfare services (CWS), thinking the situation was not serious enough or fearing that their parents or others would find out that they had told the teacher (Hafstad & Augusti, 2019). Children's interpretations of teachers' behaviour, combined with their understanding of living conditions and the consequences of their disclosure, may prevent them from availing themselves of what Morrison (2016) identifies as an important factor for disclosing violence: namely, "the opportunity to tell". Accordingly, pupils may continually need to develop "concealing strategies" to guard against violent flashbacks, finding excuses, explanations or telling "white lies" to conceal their experience of violence (Selvik, 2018). Consequently, it is crucial that teachers carefully choose their actions when they are concerned about a pupil. These choices can be decisive for pupils' mental health and prevent dropout (Frederick & Goddard, 2010). Despite increased efforts to develop educational programmes to improve teachers' competence, teachers in Norway and worldwide still describe struggling in encounters with pupils experiencing DV (Alisic, 2012; Davies & Berger, 2019; Øverlien & Moen, 2016). A few studies have asked teachers about their challenges and what they need to uncover cases of concern, report to authorities and facilitate schooling for pupils experiencing violence (e.g., Alisic, 2012 (Netherland); Davies & Berger, 2019 (Australia); Markström & Münger, 2018 (Sweden)). These studies offer important insights, but they are broad in scope and concentrate on teachers' general perspectives on their challenges and needs. Less attention is given to teachers' experiences of uncertainty surrounding their responses to pupils' experiences with DV. We invited teachers to describe challenges and reflect on their experiences during and after these encounters with pupils experiencing DV. This paper intends to provide professionals and decision-makers with practical knowledge on how to meet Norwegian teachers' needs in this field and how to make use of their resources. The research questions are: How do teachers understand and reflect on their experience of uncertainty in their encounters with pupils' experiences with DV? And what solutions do they suggest?

This article adopts Hamby's definition of violence as "intentional … unwanted … nonessential and harmful" behaviour (p. 168). These elements are well integrated in all types of DV (physical, psychological, material, and latent) (Hamby, 2017).

The Norwegian Context

Expectations to teachers' role when encountering pupils who experience DV have been a subject of great political, juridical, and educational focus in Norway. Teachers are expected to teachers to teach, provide information and talk about DV (Moen et al., 2018). Regulations issued by the Norwegian Directorate for Education (21 December 2015) state that by graduation, prospective teachers should be able to identify signs of DV or sexual abuse and be able to react immediately (Lovdata.no, a). The Norwegian Child Welfare Act (§6-4) also requires teachers to notify CWS if they have "reason to believe" that a child or young person is experiencing DV or neglect (lovdata.no, a). Under the Norwegian Penal Code (§196), teachers have a preventive duty to contact the police if a child/young person is "most likely" undergoing any form of harmful experience (Lovdata.no, b). Teachers have a duty of confidentiality, requiring them to prevent others from accessing confidential information without consent (Leer-Salvesen, 2016). Today, few guidelines address the challenges and needs of teachers in encounters with pupils experiencing DV (Moen et al., 2018). In-school support structures for teachers may differ. School administrations usually decide which professions are included and how they are organized (Buland et al., 2011). Possibilities include counsellors, social workers, treatment staff (with different educational backgrounds, experiences, and skills), and nurses. Support structures outside the schools consist of two municipal services and one state service. The municipal services are the Psychological Pedagogical Services (PPT), for

pupil assessment and/or practical support, and the CWS if teacher is worried about the pupil's home situation. Both can be directly contacted by the school. The state-run child and adolescent psychiatric outpatient clinic (BUP) requires a referral from other services (Mælan, 2018; Vorland et al., 2018).

The majority of teachers still consider their education in this area insufficient (Moen et al., 2018). Teachers report lack of competence, time or opportunities for training (Vorland et al., 2018). Teachers seldom initiate conversations with pupils about matters of concern (Hafstad & Augusti, 2019). They feel reluctant to approach traumatized pupils, as they may wish to protect them from painful memories (Øverlien, 2015) or themselves from the potential emotional burden and discomfort of listening to painful stories (Albæk et al., 2018). They report reluctance to contact community services, such as child protective services (Vorland et al., 2018). At interdisciplinary meetings supposed to support pupil mental health, teachers feel marginalized: like spectators receiving instructions from external professionals (Mælan, 2018). Meanwhile, Norwegian schools and preschools continue to underreport harmful upbringing conditions for their pupils (Holte, 2012; Leer-Salvesen, 2016).

Previous Research on Teachers' Experiences

In multiple studies, teachers have described factors that influence their response when concerned about a pupil. Some teachers consider contact with vulnerable children as "voluntary" or "extra-role behaviour" (Ko et al., 2008; Somech & Oplatka, 2009). Uncertain "attitudes" towards psychological problems may be one reason why teachers are reluctant to address violence and inform authorities (Alisic, 2012; Byrne & Taylor, 2007). Teachers may also experience difficulties collaborating with school administrations and other services. For example, teachers in Vorland et al.'s (2018) Norwegian study emphasized a lack of national guidelines and follow-up routines. They claimed that school administrations cared mainly about pupils' achievements, rather than mental health. Further, teachers reported a limited exchange of information with involved services, making cooperation and adaptation to pupil needs difficult. International studies focus on the limited structured cooperation between professional groups. Research also shows that teachers tend to believe they lack the necessary knowledge, competence, and skills in understanding the emotional trauma inflected on children from their experiences of DV. They also say they lack knowledge of what to look for and how to act when a child is traumatized (Alisic, 2012; Byrne & Taylor, 2007; Davies & Berger, 2019; Münger & Markström, 2018). Teachers also need more information on how and when to talk to pupils about difficult issues, and guidance on when and where to refer them to specialized services (Alisic, 2012; Davies & Berger, 2019). Similar findings were reported in a Norwegian study by Albæk et al. (2018). This study adds a different perspective, explaining feelings of professional inadequacy as a way of externalizing feelings of emotional disturbance and discomfort when listening to painful stories. Teachers may also be reluctant because they are afraid of making the children's situation worse (Albæk et al., 2018; Øverlien, 2015). In an American study including a systematic literature review and teacher interviews, Ellis (2018) identified four themes that influenced teacher response to child disclosure or teacher recognition of child experiences of DV: First, teachers' feelings of emotional containment towards their role combined with their experiences of formal or informal support. Second, knowing procedures and who to talk to in such cases increased their confidence. Third, a relationship with the child and family allowed them to be more aware of changes in the child's behaviour, what a Swedish study by Forsner et al. (2020) calls "moral conflict". Finally, uncertainty about what teachers need to know seemed to be connected to the defensive process of denial or not being able to face the reality of the child's experiences of violence: what Albæk et al. (2018) calls "feelings of emotional disturbance". Teachers may also experience difficulties in providing support related to theoretical knowledge. In Alisic's (2012) Dutch study, teachers reported three challenges: balancing the needs of traumatized pupils with those of the rest of the class; meeting pupils' needs without positioning them as outsiders; and

managing the trauma focus versus the pupil's everyday normal life. According to an Italian study by Fiorilli et al. (2017) teachers' emotional competence and social support plays an important mediating part in teacher burnout.

Theoretical Framework

Bandura (1997) defines self-efficacy as people's beliefs about their capacity to perform under different sets of conditions with whatever skills they have. Teachers' self-efficacy has an enormous impact in the classroom. Research shows that self-efficacy influences the classroom activities teachers choose, how much effort they expend, how long they persist with struggling pupils or when confronting obstacles, how they deal with failure and how much stress they experience when coping with demanding situations (Bandura, 1997). Teachers' beliefs tend to predict their ambitions, attitudes towards innovation and change, practices and use of strategies (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). Thus, their perceptions of personal capacities and abilities are very important for their motivation, and the choice and actions they make on behalf of their pupils. Teachers' beliefs about their abilities may develop early during teacher education (Dyregrov, 2006). Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (2001) research on the development of teachers' efficacy beliefs among student teachers reveals that once these beliefs are established, they appear to be somewhat resistant to change. Bandura (1997) argues that perceived self-efficacy results from diverse sources of information. He proposes four general sources of efficacy-building information: verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, physiological arousal and mastery experiences. Mastery experiences most powerfully foster efficacy by providing direct feedback on capabilities (Bandura, 1997). In a Norwegian study, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) argue that teachers' self-efficacy and burnout are related to their perceptions of the school context and their job satisfaction. Since teachers' self-image is mainly based on their experiences, it is reasonable that their perception of burnout may affect their self-efficacy. For teachers, emotional exhaustion, which is a key aspect of burnout, is mostly related to time pressure and a perception of a heavy workload providing less time for recovery. However, individual capacity is not enough, since "personal agency operates within a broad network of socio-structural influences" (Bandura, 1997, p. 6). Theory therefore "extends the analysis of human agency to the exercise of collective agency" (p. 7). Bandura (1997) defines collective efficacy as "the group's shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given levels of attainments" (p. 477). Related studies show that group efficacy consensus has the strongest effect on collective teacher efficacy, and this intra-group consensus may differ across schools (Newmann et al., 1989). Regardless, teachers who encounter pupils with DV experiences need support in order to act adequately. Research shows that what teachers claim to learn from, more than anything else, is collaboration with trusted colleagues who know the context (Hoekstra & Korthagen, 2011). Lauvås and Handal (2017) also argue for peer mentoring as one of the most important prerequisites for teacher learning in schools. Through the collective reflective process, new knowledge is developed. Acknowledgement from a trusted leader is also important. According to Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010), a trusted leader whom teachers could ask for advice, and who provides emotional and cognitive support, strongly affects teachers' collective efficacy.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach to permit an in-depth understanding of teachers' reflections on their experiences and needs when encountering pupils' experiences with DV.

Sample

Two groups of five teachers were recruited from two schools at secondary (grades 8–10) and upper secondary (grades 11–13) levels in the West region in Norway in 2019. For accessibility reasons, the

schools were recruited through the authors' professional network. To obtain a purposive sample (Creswell, 2013), we asked the principals to select teachers who had met pupils who had experienced DV and who would like to contribute with varied and informed perspectives on the phenomenon. Written information was provided to the school principals and teachers. A contact person at each school, assigned by the principal, guided the recruiting process. During the scheduled two-hour interviews, the participating teachers were released from other responsibilities. Ten teachers (three men and seven women) participated, five from each school. Their teaching experience varied from three to seventeen years.

Data Gathering

Data was gathered through focus group conversations (Brinkmann, 2007). This method is well-suited for exploring respondent experiences, attitudes and beliefs (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2001). In a group conversation described by Brinkmann:

> The conversation partners were … positioned as responsible citizens, accountable to each other with reference to the normative order in which they lived, and the topic would therefore not be the narrative of the individual's life or his or her experiences but rather people's epistemic practices of justification. (2007, p. 1128)

The strength of this method is the conversational rules, which help to elicit participants' interpretations of their experiences. Allowing teachers to talk freely gives them the opportunity to discuss what is important to them. In focus group conversations (Liamputtong, 2011; Parker & Tritter, 2006), it is recommended to bring together people with shared experiences (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2001). Group conversations permit an in-depth exploration of a topic or experience and the contextual dynamics and emotions surrounding it. The focus group conversations were conducted by the authors, on school premises, and lasted for approximately two hours. Six questions guided the conversations: What experiences do you have with pupils' experiences with DV? What did you do or not do in your encounters, and why? How can you explain these experiences? What kind of support do you seek/need? How can your needs be met? What kind of solutions would you like to implement? Research triangulation was achieved through the authors alternating roles. The first author led the conversation while the other took notes, the second author had a mediator role and also participated in asking and supporting questions as part of the conversation, while the first author took notes.

Thematic Analysis

This study prioritizes respondent/data-based meaning (exploring teacher experiences and reflections), utilizing a descriptive analysis of the data through inductive-semantic coding (e.g., Byrne, 2021) to present the content of the data as communicated by the teachers. Data was analyzed using Clarke and Braun's six-phase TA (Guest et al., 2012). Phase 1, familiarization with the data, involves writing the first analytical notes which both authors shared after phase 2, to maintain triangulation in the analysis process. Phase 2, coding the data, organizes data using concise and descriptive labels (e.g., little opportunity to join courses, lack of school resources, information withheld from teachers). In Phase 3, searching for themes, three themes emerged: *marginalized opportunities, "crumbled" support channels,* and *out of the information trail.* A potential relationship between these themes was detected because teachers linked these themes to their experiences of uncertainty in their encounters with pupils' experiences of DV. Phase 4 involves reviewing themes to see if all themes fit the codes they represent; here, the developed themes were thoroughly discussed between the researchers. Phase 5 is defining and naming themes; results are presented underneath each theme in the findings. Phase 6 is producing the report. The findings and discussion sections in the article constitute this part, as they present the analysis and situate the findings within the literature. Our inductive approach to the data generated from the findings guided the choice of

theory. Teachers spoke about their individual and their collective experiences. Accordingly, the analysis involved individual as well as collective self-efficacy.

Ethical Concerns

This study followed the guidelines established by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) (reg. no.: 645929). Rights of confidentiality and consent were observed. The group's confidentiality rules were addressed and agreed upon in the beginning of the interviews. Collected data was anonymized and potentially identifying details for teachers and/or schools are not reported. Written consent from school administrations and verbal consent and confidentiality from teachers was obtained before participation. Teacher participation was voluntary, with no further obligation nor any consequences if a teacher decided to end participation. If teachers uncovered cases of DV during the group conversations, they followed the reporting guidelines of their respective schools.

Findings

This section presents the themes developed in Phase 5 of the analysis. They are grouped under two main headings related to the research questions: Teachers' experiences of uncertainty and their suggestions for improvement.

Teachers' Experiences of Uncertainty

All the teachers shared "strong" cases concerning pupils who had experienced DV. They emphasized that teachers were the adults with the closest relationship to pupils. They were willing to shoulder this responsibility, but found themselves unable to do so, due to *marginalized opportunities*, "*crumbled*" *support channels* and being *out of the information trail*. These themes provide an in-depth description of teachers' reflections on their experiences of uncertainty when responding to pupils' experiences with DV.

Marginalized Opportunities

Collectively, teachers spoke about three main marginalized opportunities: competence, time and the framework for professionals' roles. Not only did they feel a lack of competence, they also perceived few chances to improve their competence. Bernard put it clearly: "They aren't training the people who do the job. Other school workers with special functions are the ones who attend courses." Time and opportunities for education were often offered to other school workers who spent less time with pupils – school nurses, counsellors, treatment staff or school leaders – instead of teachers, who are required to identify, aid and follow up pupils experiencing violence. Teachers said that these courses were often filled with professionals from BUP, PPT and CWS, and that they lacked information about what courses were offered. For example, Dina said she " … had listened to one lecture on how to respond to children and young people in grief situations … " – her sole experience in this field during her sixteen years as a teacher. Other school professionals were prioritized for competence development.

Teachers referred to a heavy workload that allowed little time for follow-up, making it difficult to uncover cases of violence. They emphasized that conversation with pupils is an important tool for uncovering violence, but said they had no time resources for individual conversations. In order to talk with one pupil, they had to leave the rest of the class. Uncovering cases of violence could be difficult and time-consuming. Additionally, teachers lacked competence in conversing and supporting pupils concerning sensitive issues. They expressed uncertainty about how such conversations should develop, and how to provide further support. Teacher experiences of uncertainty when

talking with pupils seemed to be rooted in lack of time for training, rather than lack of knowledge. Their heavy workload left them no time to implement and follow up such conversations.

Teachers lacked a framework for their role and said that they were uncertain concerning the roles of other school professionals, such as treatment staff, nurse or school counsellors.

"Crumbled" Support Channels

The teachers said they lacked an overview of available help, supportive services and programmes for pupils. They were also uncertain what kind of support was available to them personally and who they could ask for advice. Berit, a recent graduate and contact teacher, had one pupil, a refugee, who had experienced traumatic situations. She entrusted the case to another experienced teacher at her school, but the other teacher could not tell what kind of support was available. Teachers also thought that support resources at their schools had increased. Olav said that " … teacher support had 'crumbled away'". In years past, schools had employed two social workers, a special needs educator and an extra teacher in the classroom. All the teachers could discuss pupils of concern. Now, these positions no longer existed, and there were few regular meetings. Teachers felt isolated and insecure after this "crumbling" of their "certainty support system". The teachers also mentioned various ways of arranging school and online support and discussed their experiences and how these generated experiences of uncertainty. For example, they discussed *interdisciplinary meetings* with professionals from within or outside the school. At these meetings, teachers from both schools collectively emphasized a sense of being "spectators": receiving advice from experts in different social services about how to support pupils of concern in their classrooms. Furthermore, they saw the solutions, in many cases, as possibly unrealistic. They often perceived the meetings to be vague and unclear. Consequently, teachers felt guilty when the meetings finished. Teachers also talked about their experiences of *support from other professionals within their school*. Both schools had one person representing the treatment staff and a school nurse. Teachers had contact with these professionals but their possibilities for support were not defined. They also mentioned the *resource team*, a group consisting of a principal, school nurse, school inspector, social teacher and/or social worker. When teachers were concerned about a pupil, they had to send a report to the resource team, which was supposed to follow up. Teachers were not always invited to the team meetings. They also experienced that it took a long time between registering a case and eventually getting feedback. However, teachers from one school stressed the importance of good *contact with the school principal*. When teachers were encouraged to discuss difficult matters regarding pupils, this was a personal support counteracting their uncertainty produced by deficiencies in the other themes.

The teachers also discussed *online information* available on public Norwegian websites concerning children experiencing DV. Because online information was scattered among different websites, seeking it out it could be confusing and time-consuming. They also found such websites difficult to navigate and had little time to delve into them. Searching online reports required not only time, but also an awareness of their existence. Teachers said they often found these reports by coincidence. However, they also said that when they were concerned about a pupil, they rarely sought information online, but tended to seek *support from a trusted colleague or a supervisor/leader*. Cecilie, a recent teacher graduate, was an exception. She said that she "Googled" concepts related to various services before her first meeting with CWS and the resource team. She wished that she had been informed about concepts and mandates in her teacher education, but that was not the case.

Out of the Information Trail

Teachers reported that their duty of confidentiality created uncertainty when working with pupils experiencing DV. Roger described this situation of uncertainty as being "*out of the information trail*". All the teachers had reported cases of concern to CWS more than once. Some had also testified as witnesses in court after episodes of violence. In both cases, they received little or no feedback, follow-up or guidance regarding the information they provided to other social services. The

confidentiality mandate of the different services often served as an obstacle to information exchange that might have helped them meet pupil needs. Instead, they observed that after a concern was filed, pupils might change schools abruptly, while they received no information. Anita said that she often felt guilty, and that such feelings could lead to "burnout". Teachers claimed that the duty of confidentiality resulted in a lack of confidence in other social services and caused underreporting. Some also reported "helplessness" after meeting pupils experiencing DV, only to lose them again suddenly. Roger, for example, described this by saying: "The feeling of powerlessness still remains in the body". As Anna reported; when teachers called other services to ask for information, they were always met with silence because of confidentiality concerns. Dagny experienced the same helplessness as Roger and asked angrily if confidentiality requirements "inhibit, rather than promote" the "best interests of the pupil".

Further, in some cases of suspected violence, teachers contacted the school nurse and/or the treatment staff (or in some schools, the resource team mentioned above). However, they did not receive any feedback. Anna described a girl who was misbehaving in class and had shared her experience of being sexually abused. Anna referred the girl to the school nurse and social worker, but because of their duties of confidentiality, all Anna ever knew was that the girl left school shortly afterwards. Cecilie was a contact teacher for a class in which two pupils received support from CWS because one of their parents was in prison. She knew little about these pupils and perceived limits to what she should know, compared to the school counsellor. Although rules state that contact teachers have the right to access all files concerning their pupils, conversations between pupils and school counsellors may be shared with the contact teacher only if the pupil consents. Teachers such as Cecilie and Roger felt "helpless" and reported experiences of uncertainty. Should they talk to pupils, or would this put the pupils in a worse position than before? They found it confusing not to receive information from other involved services or school staff with whom they were cooperating.

Teachers also experienced poor information transfer between primary and lower secondary schools. As Roger explained, in these cases teachers had to start from the beginning, which often meant it took longer time to discover pupils with experiences of DV. Teachers said there was no central register nor any clear policy about what information teachers and other agencies should share. They also experienced difficulties regarding their duty of confidentiality when communicating with pupils of concern. Elisabeth mentioned two such incidents. In the first, a pupil asked her, "If I tell you something serious, do you have to tell anyone else?" She answered that she could not promise to keep it to herself, and consequently no conversation occurred. In the second incident, a pupil had a breakdown and told her about experiencing DV, but said she only wanted to talk to her about it. Dina's opinion was that pupil did not want to talk about these experiences because they feared their parents would find out.

Teachers' Suggestions for Improvement

Teachers described different challenges which could induce an "experience of uncertainty" in their encounters with pupils with experiences of DV. This section presents their suggestions for improvements to overcome this experience. The need for more time was mentioned on various levels. Teachers wanted more time for cooperation: e.g., to discuss difficult issues with other colleagues who knew the pupils of concern. Teachers also wanted more time to talk to pupils outside of ordinary classroom instruction. They often had to begin class and ask pupils to work independently while holding conversations with individual pupils. Teachers also said they needed time to attend courses to increase their competence or acquire knowledge about how to investigate difficult issues: what actions to take, when to report a concern, how to open and carry-on difficult conversations. Finally, teachers said they needed time to gather information about issues of concern.

The teachers specifically asked for three types of professional guidance in cases of concern. The first was guidance opportunities inside school. School support sources ought to be grounded

around the teacher, and not *crumbled away*. They stressed the need to organize the school system in a way that enabled teachers to work together with colleagues who also knew the pupils and could understand and discuss their concerns. The importance of *mentors* for newly educated, and peer mentoring for experienced teachers was underlined. Second, teachers said they needed guidance opportunities outside school, e.g., an independent state/municipal service such as "resource hotline" or a "consultation system" they could call anonymously in each county where they could seek advice from professionals. Third, teachers said that available websites should be more accessible and user-friendly. However, there was united agreement that what they needed most was someone they trusted to talk to when they were concerned about a pupil.

Further, they brought up the need for information exchange. They wanted clear guidelines that regulated the duty of confidentiality mandate between them and the different social services in order to serve the pupil's interests at school. Besides better inter-agency information flow, teachers also said they needed more online educational information, and they needed such information to be easily accessible and available. In addition, they stressed the need to develop more competence during teacher education and in service. They especially wanted more training in initiating and engaging in difficult conversations. However, they stressed that training was not enough; they also needed time to practice. Therefore, they suggested more time for practical work in small groups during teacher education.

Discussion

This study underlines how teachers appear to experience *continuous uncertainty* that accumulates due to inadequate support structures within and outside the school. Uncertainty can influence teachers' "belief about their capacity" (Bandura, 1997) to help pupils who reach out and entrust teachers with their experiences. The teachers in this study often referred to uncertainty as a reason for burnout, which can be understood as the outcome of an accumulation of years of being unable to help. As they experienced uncertainty, and seldom mastery, in their encounters with pupils experiencing DV, their self-efficacy may have decreased (Bandura 1997). As Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2009) explain, the way teachers perceive their own capacities and abilities can affect their efforts and the choices they make on behalf of their pupils. An assumption is that the teachers in this study at times were less motivated to intervene because their past experiences confirmed their inability to make a difference. The underlying challenge can be understood as their paralyzing experience of uncertainty, which pupils may misinterpret as unwillingness to engage (Selvik, 2018).

Teachers in this study also demonstrated an understanding of their duty to uncover, report and follow up on cases of pupils experiencing DV. In contrast to previous findings (Alisic, 2012; Ko et al., 2008; Somech & Oplatka, 2009), their uncertainty was more related to the fact that they experienced *marginalized opportunities* to develop their competence in this area rather than just experiencing incompetence, especially when other school professionals were prioritized instead. Their "defused role" of duty combined with their position of being "not as important" as other school professionals (nurses, treatment staff, counsellors) who spend less time with the pupils but receive more resources to develop their competence may cause uncertainty. Further confusion can arise when white papers and action plans state that advancing teacher competence is a formal government priority. According to the teachers in this study, that goal may often not be implemented in practice. Teachers' experiences of *collective uncertainty* about their role when meeting pupils experiencing DV seem to be grounded in a lack of a clear framework. Their collective uncertainty can also be understood as a "group shared belief" (Bandura, 1997) of their "defused role". Vicariously experiencing the uncertainties of other teachers may have a contagious effect, strengthening "collective uncertainty". However, according to Newmann et al. (1989) this collective belief can differ between schools. Holte (2012) and Leer-Salvesen (2016) suggest this may be one of the reasons why Norwegian teachers refrain from intervening and notifying authorities in cases of concern. The teachers asked for organizational structures, including peer mentoring, where they can discuss their challenges

with colleagues who know the context. This finding is in line with Hoekstra and Korthagen (2011), who claim that peer mentoring is what teachers report learning most from and, according to Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010), feeds their experiences of collective efficacy.

Teachers in this study said that encounters with pupils experiencing violence remained difficult even when the school had an established routine for reporting DV. In line with the findings of Alisic (2012) and Davies and Berger (2019), their explanations involve uncertainty regarding how to talk to these pupils, how such conversations should develop, how the pupils can be further supported, how to investigate cases and when a message of concern should be sent. Nonetheless, teachers perceived *pupil conversations* as an important tool, yet lacked the necessary resources for these conversations. Due to time constraints, their heavy workload seems to result in emotional exhaustion, described as "the feeling of powerlessness ... " that, according to Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010), is highly correlated to experiences of burnout and decreased self-efficacy. As a result, uncovering cases of violence could be difficult and time-consuming. However, looking at these teachers' experiences from a different point of view, their arguments regarding lack of competence to converse with pupils may also be related to dissatisfaction with the way support services collaborate and provide help to these pupils. Their dissatisfaction can therefore be related to their experiences of uncertainty at being *out of the information trail*. This highlights the debated concepts of the "duty to notify and the duty to prevent" versus the "duty to confidentiality". Teachers experienced the way the confidentiality mandate was understood and practiced as both confusing and misleading. This finding is in line with Vorland et al.'s (2018) study. Different agencies understand and practice confidentiality differently, and in many cases this can work against the best interests of the pupil. Teachers said information was withheld from them about cases they had reported, due to confidentiality. It is possible to conjecture that their experiences of being deprived of information, combined with their experiences of uncertainty, hindered teachers from fulfilling their duties of identifying and reacting to the pupil needs, as addressed in parliamentary white papers (Regering.no). Further, teachers had to experience the sudden loss of pupils whom they saw change schools without explanation. These experiences of being *out of the information trail* can threaten teachers' belief in their capacity to help, and in many cases a lack of information can make it difficult for teachers to attain such a belief at all. For example, as in the cases of Cecilie and Roger, teachers sometimes do not know if talking to a pupil will improve the situation or make it worse. Uncertainty about what to do and not knowing what topics are occupying their pupil's minds and being discussed with other services may explain the experience of incompetence reported by teachers in this study. As presented in earlier research (e.g., Hafstad & Augusti, 2019; Selvik et al., 2016), it may therefore also make them hesitate to talk to pupils. Decisions by support services not to share information with teachers may boost teacher uncertainty about their proper role. This is also illustrated in the teachers' experience of being *spectators*, in line with Mælan's (2018) study: i.e., being told what to do when they meet with support services.

Similarly to Fiorilli et al. (2017) and Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010), the findings of this study show the importance of personal support (guidance), and its emotional support and burnout prevention value, for teachers who are concerned about a pupil. As in Hoekstra and Korthagen (2011) and Lauvås and Handal (2017), all teachers mention their need to be able to talk to somebody, preferably another colleague who knows the pupil. Possibilities to discuss the cases with their principal or another school professional were also suggested. This cognitive support, according to Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010), is also highly correlated with experiences of collective self-efficacy. Teachers also suggest the need for external personal guidance from different professionals in their field, preferably members of an independent community service (resource hotline). The teachers' embedded need for one-on-one professional conversation can also, according to Albæk et al. (2018), point to hidden needs for emotional support. According to Bandura (1997), this need explicitly demonstrates their need for verbal persuasion by a trusted source. It seems that teachers in these difficult situations not only need concrete advice, but also a supporting and confirming voice. Providing verbal arguments in support of their capabilities can help them not only overcome their emotional

disturbances when listening to pupils' experiences (Albæk et al., 2018; Bandura, 1997; Davies & Berger, 2019; Øverlien, 2015), but also counteract their experiences of uncertainty. It can be difficult, however, to accomplish such supportive conversations between teachers who know the pupils, especially when they experience that the "collegial sources" around them within their school have *crumbled away*, and when they carry the heavy workloads demanded by the educational system today, combined with their experiences of being *out of the information trail.*

The findings emphasize the importance of grounding teacher education in the four elements of Bandura's self-efficacy theory. According to Dyregrov (2006), what teachers believe about their personal capacity to meet pupils experiencing difficult life situations – based on their competence, knowledge, and skills – powerfully influences how they recognize and act to meet these pupils' needs. In line with Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001), we know that beliefs about abilities may begin to develop early during teacher education. Once efficacy beliefs are established, they appear rather resistant to change. The findings also stress the need to improve teacher education and the existing support structures, within and outside the schools, in a way that takes into consideration the experiences of teachers' uncertainty presented in this article.

Concluding Remarks

The findings of this study show that teachers are aware of and willing to shoulder their responsibilities and duties towards pupils experiencing DV. However, the organization of available municipal/state resources, school structures and the national guidelines may unintentionally generate experiences of uncertainty that can be paralyzing in teachers' encounters with pupils. This explains why teachers may experience limited and confusing possibilities to fulfil their duties and provide pupils with necessary support. Their voices underline that what they need most are opportunities to talk to colleagues (peer learning) and support from their school leaders. This article calls for authorities to rethink which structures and support services, inside and outside school, perpetuate teacher uncertainty, and consider how to provide uncertainty-sensitive support based on the suggestions made by teachers. Understanding teachers' uncertainty is important for facilitating suitable support and preventing "burnout". Further study, involving both student teachers and professional teachers is needed to refine and expand the literature on teachers' experiences of collective and personal uncertainty in their encounters with pupils' experiences of DV.

The study has some limitations. First, does not include primary school and kindergarten. Second, triangulation would be better taken care of through a combination of focus group conversations and individual interviews. In-depth interviews may solicit information that teachers are reluctant to share in a group because of the possibility of socially desirable responses. In the future, it would be of interest to analyse a larger and more diverse sample of teachers and follow them over time, and to include other staff members as informants.

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