To What Extent are Social Work Students in England & Denmark Equipped to deal with Child Sexual Abuse?

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**Introduction**

When it comes to preventing, ‘predicating’, protecting children and working with the aftermath of child sexual abuse¹ in many countries social workers have a decisive role to play. Generally, in such cases social workers follow up concerns about abuse and/or neglect; carry out needs and risk assessments; intervention/protection; coordinate multidisciplinary cooperation, treatment, and support services; ‘predict’ and prevent serious harm to children and young people wherever possible. What is more, when it comes to deciding the futures of children, young people and their families social workers have a decisive influence – the decisions are often hard and the consequences of misjudgement or non-action serious (as is often highlighted in the media). If individual social workers and other ‘professionals’ working with children and young people are to intervene appropriately, effectively, in the best interest of the child, and contribute towards positive outcomes in such cases, then it is paramount that they are adequately equipped and trained for the job. Equipping ‘trainee’ social workers to intervene appropriately/effectively, and in the best interest of the child should be an essential part of pre-qualifying and post-qualifying social work education.

Social work education is significant when it comes to preparing tomorrow’s social workers to prevent, tackle, and to work with the aftermath of child abuse in all its forms. The formal social work education is the foundation of learning for the social work student. The pre-qualifying social work education can be viewed as the basis for future ‘professional’ work and development – or coining the phrase from Berger and Luckmann (1966), ‘primary socialisation’ into the ‘profession’ of social work. The formal pre-qualifying education is the fundamental phase of learning for the potential social work practitioner. This is the stage where the trainee² social worker ought to learn the skills, methods, ‘knowledge’ and the ‘know how’ about how to deal with future ‘areas of work’. Social work education is fundamental to ‘professional’ development and the dissimilation of social work ‘knowledge’ to students. The formal education is significant because it shapes and ‘resocialises’ students through teaching, written course work, and through practice placements in relation to the current important issues and challenges to social work along with social work ‘norms’ and the core values. It is during the pre-qualifying education that students ought to be equipped with fundamental ‘tools of the trade’ – especially in relation to working with perhaps the most vulnerable group in society, i.e. children. Within this context, students ought to be given sound training and ‘knowledge’ about how to prevent, ‘predict’, tackle and work with the aftermath of child abuse in all its forms based on what we know from international methodologically sound research and good practice. This can only contribute towards lessening incidents of poor judgement, non-action and poor practices amongst social workers in such cases. The qualification and education of social workers should be an integral part of a national strategy towards tackling child abuse in all its forms.

**Problem Arena**

Most cases of sexual abuse do not come to the attention of any child welfare agency or any professional. The nature of the problem – its secrecy and shame, the criminal sanctions against it, and the young age and dependant status of its victims – inhibits discovery and discourages voluntary reporting. (Finkelhor, 1986:18).

When child protection concerns come to light, social workers employed by regional or local authorities in most countries normally have a decisive role to play concerning the immediate safety and future of children, young people and their families. The decisions are normally difficult and the consequences of misjudgement and non-action often severe - as we hear about frequently through the media. Generally, (depending on national & local variables) child welfare services (often in cooperation with other agencies) have the task of following up concerns about the abuse and neglect of children, risk assessment, assessment of needs, intervention/protection, coordinating support services, and wherever possible predicting and preventing serious harm to children and young people. Because of the very nature of child sexual abuse surrounded by shame, secrets, lies and taboo, and because of the vulnerability of the victims many cases of child sexual abuse are never reported. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that the authorities will act upon information received concerning child abuse and/or neglect. There is plenty of evidence exemplifying this point where some local authorities fail to act in response to information received or act incompetently and fail to protect children from abuse, suffering and torment. Recently, the media in Denmark has highlighted several such cases, where local authorities have left children in abusive settings (despite receiving

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¹ And other forms of child abuse and neglect.
² It should not be taken for granted that every student will qualify.
referrals outlining serious concerns from other agencies/professionals'). For example, the local authority of Stubbekobing (despite serious concerns from the police and hospital paediatricians) failed to remove a child to a place of safety after her father was formerly charged with sexually abusing her (Ekstra Bladet: 21/12/2005). Another case that made news headlines in the summer of 2005 continues to do so today (14/05/2006) as approximately 15 men are processed through the judicial system for sexually abusing a 10 year-old girl. The ‘Tønder case’ (dubbed by the media), highlights how two local authorities let a case drift for over five years despite serious concerns for the welfare of the two young children involved. The local authorities of Løgumkloster and Tønder received a minimum of 28 referrals from concerned educational, health, and care staff over this period (Berlingske Tidende: 07/05/2006). The two children were later removed and placed into care after police investigated an anonymous tip disclosing how the oldest girl was systematically sold for sex to anyone willing to pay the ‘going price’ to her so-called father. Considering that Denmark is a ‘contemporary’ and ‘progressive’ ‘Welfare State’ argued to be one of the most ‘progressive welfare systems’ by Esping-Andersen (1990) in his social policy analysis – and bearing in mind ‘our’ advances in ‘knowledge’ about what is considered to be abusive, harmful and dangerous to children - and taking into account that local authorities in Denmark under the consolidation Act on social services are required to investigate the living conditions of children and young people when information is received indicating that they are in need or at risk of harm (Guidance About Special Support to Children and Young People: Social Service Act Guidance 2006). Then, what can explain this seemingly, lack of regard for the welfare and safety of some of the most vulnerable children in society by those employed to look after the safety and welfare of children?

**Background/Motivation for Study/Thesis**

This study/thesis was inspired by the author’s experience of social work training and practice, in both England and Denmark, in the field of childcare and child protection. The research took a comparative approach to English and Danish social work education with a particular focus on how social work students are trained to tackle child sexual abuse (CSA). This research represents a pioneering comparative qualitative study focusing on the education of social workers in England and Denmark in relation to the social problem of CSA. It was carried out as part of a dissertation submitted to Aalborg University (Denmark) in September 2005. This was the final project in the educational programme leading to the Danish Masters of Science in Social Work and was successfully defended at examination (5/10/05) and awarded a distinction.

**A Widespread Social Problem with International Dimensions**

I chose to look at social work education/training in relation to the complex social problem of child sexual abuse (CSA) for the following reasons: Firstly, CSA is considered to be a major European (Pringle 1998:155) and worldwide social problem (World Health Organisation (WHO) Geneva 29-31 March 1999). According to WHO studies conducted in 19 countries report prevalence rates for sexual abuse ranging from 7% to 34% among girls and from 3% to 29% among boys (Report of the Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention, WHO, Geneva 29-31 March 1999).

**Initial and Long-Term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse**

Secondly as highlighted by Thylefors (1999) below, many abused children experience a whole range of initial and long-term effects because of the abuse they suffer:

Abused children suffer a wide variety of physical, emotional and developmental problems which can hamper their ability to live healthy and productive lives. In addition to health consequences, abused children have difficulty in school, problems with substance abuse and problems with the law (Thylefors: Report of the Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention, March 1999).

The following behavioural and emotional reactions have been found to be evident as initial effects of CSA; fearfulness (Browne & Finkelhor 1986:149), depression, withdrawal and suicide (Friedrich et al 1986; Calam 1998; Korela et al 1993), violent behaviour and aggression (Gomes-Schwartz et al. 1990; Calam et al. 1998), eating/sleeping disorders (Browne & Finkelhor 1986; Calam et al. 1998),

1 Browne & Finkelhor (1986) use the term ‘initial effects’: meaning all effects up to two years after abuse has taken place. Although long-term effects can still occur even though there has been no apparent signs of initial effects (Corby 2001:171).
Danish Media & CSA

Thirdly, my social work experience in Denmark leads me to believe that many social workers lack or simply have no knowledge concerning CSA. Through experience gained from working in six Danish local authorities it is my impression that many social workers only know about CSA through following the media and not through formal training. It is important to recognise that the media is an essential means in relation to setting focus on CSA and on shortfalls in the ‘system’. For example, Ekstra Bladet (28/10/2004) highlights the story of how the ‘judicial system’ orders a four year-old child to have unsupervised visits with his father suspected of sexually abusing him. TV2 (19/4/2004) broadcast a story concerning Farsø Local Authority that failed to act upon a referral/allegation concerning the sexual abuse of a child for 14 months (http://nyhederne.tv2.dk). Recently (15/12/2004) Berlingske Tidende (BT) published an article describing the plight of a 13-year-old girl removed from her foster carers by the local authority whilst they considered forcefully reuniting her with the man convicted of sexually abusing her (http://www.berlingske.dk). However, some ‘facts’ highlighted in newspapers often give misleading information or reinforce ‘myths’ about CSA. This point was highlighted recently in a tabloid newspaper. This leading article concerned the sexual abuse of a 13-year-old boy by Flemming Oppfeldt⁴ (member of parliament). The article gives weight to the idea that child sexual abusers have at some point in their childhood self been victim to CSA - this idea is known as the ‘intergenerational transmission child sexual abuse’:

Paedophilia is thought to be mostly a crime committed by people, that have themselves fallen victim to sexual abuse, thus in a gruesome and tragic way have their own sexual inclination distorted (B.T. 20 October 2004:02).

However, evidence from research shows that the idea of the ‘intergenerational transmission of child sexual abuse’ is in many cases open to question. Evidence shows that not all victims of CSA go on to abuse others. For example Dobash et al. found that over two thirds of child sexual abusers in their study had never been abused (found in Waterhouse et al. 1996:07). In addition, Ben-Tovim et al. 1988 found that only five out of a sample group of 274 child sexual abusers had been victims themselves (found in Corby 2001:112). Moreover, evidence from research shows that the majority of victims of CSA are girls whilst the majority of offenders are men or boys. For that reason, if the idea of the ‘intergenerational transmission’ of CSA was the primary explanation then why are the vast majority of child sexual abusers men or older boys? (See for example, Finkelhor 1984; Finkelhor 1993; Nash et al 1985; Ben-Tovim et al. 1988; Pringle 1995). Therefore the idea of the ‘intergenerational transmission’ of CSA is misleading and potentially could have serious consequences for the victims of CSA. Potentially, in accordance to this idea, the victims of CSA could be labelled as tomorrow’s child sexual abusers and barred from having contact to everyone under the age of 18 years – or forbidden to have children of their own. Therefore, misleading information published by the media can only add to the confusion of both ‘trainee’ and qualified social workers that do not receive formal training on the subject. This issue therefore reinforces the need for actual training concerning CSA on social work programmes.

Social Work Practice in Denmark

My fourth reason for looking at this area is because, through my social work practice in Denmark, I have witnessed cases where mistakes or non-action have occurred because of a fundamental lack of knowledge /understanding by individual social workers and in the agencies that they represent. I have observed cases where some social workers actually disbelieve or reject the notion that so-called nice fathers could even contemplate having sex with his child. Moreover, I have witnessed cases were social workers have acted to protect the child involved but forgot to take into account the welfare and safety of the siblings - many similar cases come to mind. The following two cases highlight examples of bad practice and poor procedures within a local authority children and families team.

Examples 5: A social worker is concerned about the welfare of a teenage girl because of her mother’s substance misuse. The girl was removed from home, placed with her aunty (on her mother’s side). The girl’s mother protests to
the social worker involved, she claims that her sister’s ‘partner’ is a suspected child sexual abuser. However, the worker completely rejects the mother’s protests saying she is ‘mud-slinging’ and trying to put her own sister in a ‘poor light’. Six months later, the girl discloses to the social worker that her ‘uncle’ regularly touches her genitals and breasts. The worker tells the girl to pipe down, or else she will have to find her a new placement (Service user and mother August 2003). One week after the disclosure, the girl moved back home after her mother and a delegation from her family marched into the social service department and demanded action (ibid). In August 2003, the man involved had three outstanding ‘allegations’ of child sexual abuse against three separate children (source: police officer August 2003).

Example 2: During a case conference concerning a boy with behavioural difficulties, the social worker in charge of the case told how she suspected that he had been the victim of ‘incest’ – the social worker continued to tell how she had sent a written report to the police concerning her suspicions and simultaneously sent a copy of the referral to the family involved. This would effectively forewarn the suspected abuser(s) giving valuable time to tamper with any evidence and time to precondition the boy in relation to any subsequent investigation (Case conference March 2005). If the workers suspicions were correct, she destroyed valuable evidence from the prime witness and left the child in the home for further abuse. These examples of non-action and poor practice are strong motivating factors for undertaking this study.

**Children’s Rights Perspective**

Fifthly, from a children’s rights perspective it is my belief that all children have the right to a good and safe childhood, nurtured by their surroundings, not exploited. Moreover, all adults have a responsibility to ensure children that right. Those employed in health and social services have a duty to work together to help combat and prevent all types of abuse, including CSA. Furthermore, they have a duty to support and provide appropriate services to the victims of CSA. This idea is outlined in Article 34 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which requires member states to protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. What is more, it is important for all those that work with children to respect and value them as human beings from the moment of birth. This idea does not exclude the reality that children change and develop throughout childhood.

Nonetheless, this notion implies that children should have full human status from birth and accordingly full human rights (IFSW 2002:08): (See Social Work and the Rights of the Child: A Professional Training Manual on the UN Convention: IFSW 2002 in relation to children’s rights and social work). Commensurate with the UN Convention on children’s rights and in tune with legislation in England and Denmark social workers should take an active approach in relation to tackling ageism, they have a duty to involve children in decisions affecting their lives. As demonstrated time after time many ‘professionals’ do not listen to children or simply ignore or discount their testimony because of their status as children (ibid). When considering the above, it is clear that professionals employed in the health and social services need adequate training in relation to children’s rights, ageism and communicating with children if they are to contribute positively to the future outcomes of victims of CSA and their families.

**Comparative Study**

Finally, the reasons for undertaking a comparative study between England and Denmark are somewhat straightforward. To begin with, the Danish welfare/social system is often put forward as providing a good model of childcare as opposed to the UK. Therefore, it is interesting to look more closely at two contrasting systems in relation to tackling CSA to see what we can learn from each other. Additionally, social work practice experience from both countries leads one to believe that possibly England and Denmark are at different stages of development in relation to social work practice and CSA, this is an interesting angle to consider. Furthermore, methodologically speaking social work in both countries has a similar historical development and has had similar systems in place during the 1970s. For a full overview of the historical development of the ‘child protection systems’, and the welfare systems in Denmark and England, see Harder and Pringle (1997 & 1999). From a strategic standpoint comparing social work education in the two countries is a logical decision when carefully considering language skills, cultural awareness, knowledge/understanding of the institutions at the centre of this study and a limited budget. Finally, it is important to underscore an invested commitment in relation to current and future practice development in both countries.

**The Study & Underpinning Framework**

The underpinning theoretical framework for this study,
within a multi-factorial framework, is that feminist and pro-

feminist approaches offer the most significant contribution to

explanations for the majority of cases concerning child

sexual abuse in society. A small purposeful sample of

‘trainee’ social workers, social-work educators, newly

qualified social workers, and ‘experts’ were selected from

both England and Denmark. Altogether twenty-one

interviews were carried out and transcribed during this

study – eleven in England and ten in Denmark. Respondents were interviewed using a semi-structured

interview design. Responses were transcribed in full and

analysed using Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis to

come and contrast the extent and the content of

teaching in relation to CSA. As well as a cross-national

comparison, the data were also examined in the light of

knowledge derived from international, methodologically

sound research, as reported in the literature.

**Summary of Findings**

Generally, the accounts given by the Danish and English

participants point towards significant differences in the

general training of students in relation to issues

surrounding the labour market, oppression and
discrimination in society. These differences are further

demonstrated in relation to equipping students to

communicate with children and tackle child sexual abuse.
The research indicates an adult centred approach in

Denmark centring on the labour market, and a more child-
centred approach in England. The accounts moreover

identify differences in the ‘systems’ in place in both
countries in relation to tackling CSA and other harmful

behaviour towards children. The accounts given by the

Danish students, educator, and newly qualified social

workers suggest that the main focus of the Danish

‘Professional Bachelor in social work’ programme is on

unemployment/labour market from different angles. For

example, the labour market and immigrants, young people

without an education, handicapped people or drug addicts.

All of the Danish students and the newly qualified worker

reported that their written assignments had focused on the

labour market in one-way or another. In comparison, the

accounts of the English participants showed a more

‘holistic’ approach in relation to the focus of the study and

in relation to the written assignments with more focus on

issues affecting children and women. Generally the texts

from Danish participants indicate that this particular

programme was adult-centric and did not seem

particularly child orientated in comparison to the English

DipSW.

The Danish students, educator, and newly qualified social

workers revealed that issues surrounding ‘power’ ‘gender

roles’ and ‘patriarchy’ were only looked at within the

context of integration and ethnic minority families. This

phenomenon highlighted by these participants is worrying
to say the least. If issues concerning ‘gender roles’ and

ideas about ‘patriarchy’ are only addressed in the context

of ethnic minority families then students might get the

idea that these phenomena only occur in those families.

On the other hand – the English texts indicate that students

were schooled in power, oppression, and discrimination,

and about how to work anti-oppressively and how to tackle
discrimination in society. All of the written assignments

produced by the English students had to demonstrate the

students understanding about anti-oppressive and anti-
discriminatory practice along with the core social work

values.

The accounts given by the Danish participants strongly

indicate that students receive no teaching/training about

physical or sexual violence towards children. Moreover,

according to these participants the subject of child sexual

abuse was more or less absent from the programme.

According to the accounts of the students, CSA was only

referred to briefly during teaching about neglect. The

accounts of the Danish students agree considerably that

neglect is the dominant social problem focused upon in

relation to children on this particular programme. As

pointed out above by one of the participants SocWorkStu1 it

is almost as though the social problem of child sexual

abuse does not exist in Denmark as a distinct social

problem:

‘… Again … we have not had any information about this subject … so we could actually go around thinking that its not something that goes on in our society … well especially in our local community what? (Laugh) … Well its like that if you are not informed about these things … but when you actually follow whats going on through the media and read supplementary literature then of course that influences your understanding of the extent of child sexual abuse’ (SocWorkStu1: May 2004).

However, recent research in Denmark indicates that CSA is

a significant social problem (see Helweg – Larsen 2000; Helweg – Larsen & Bøving Larsen 2002). Therefore, the

question must be asked why there is no discrete teaching

about CSA on this social work programme? Similar findings
in Sweden were made by Pringle (2002) concerning the training of social workers in connection to child abuse and neglect. Respondents from that study suggested that social work training often failed to make social work students aware of all the forms of child abuse or neglect and failed to inform them how they should deal with such cases. This point was closely tied to a further serious critique of social work with children, namely that many social workers failed to communicate sufficiently with children. In a number of cases this was largely attributed to shortfalls in social work education – whereby social work students were not trained/taught how to communicate directly with children. Despite some variables there are perhaps some similarities between the findings of Pringle’s (2002) study in Sweden and the findings of this study. In England, students had the option of studying a ‘child-protection module’. The English students were encouraged to choose modules to fit in with their chosen ‘pathways’. The English students were able to specialise in their last year of study towards particular ‘service user groups, i.e. children and families, etc.

The accounts given by the Danish participants suggest that there was no training on this particular social work programme relating to communicating with children. One distinct theme that emerges from the texts is that students were only taught about when it is at all necessary to talk to children, not that it is a necessity to communicate with children. There is a significant difference between getting told when you should talk to children and actually receiving training about how to communicate with children. The overall picture emerging from the texts of the Danish students is that they are not taught/trained how to communicate with children or even why it is important to communicate with children. One student summed up this teaching as just that: ‘so it wasn’t about how you talk to children it was more about when you should’ (SocWorkStu2: May 2004). In comparison, all the English accounts indicated that communicating with children was integrated into that particular programme.

The accounts from the English and Danish participants points towards a marked difference in relation to the understanding of CSA in society. In relation to this the Danish participants emphasised certain discourses not well grounded in empirical research. The Danish participants pointed towards individual psychological explanations with weight on the ideas of social inheritance and the intergenerational transmission of child sexual abuse. Both these ideas are very much along the same lines: The idea that social problems are ‘inheritable’ stems from the work of Gustav Jonsson – basically this notion puts forward the idea that social problems are handed down from generation to generation. This concept implies that social problems may be socially determined and ignores the dimensions of power and agency. As we know many social problems such as gendered violence, child sexual abuse and substance misuse cross all social layers in society. In relation to the idea of the intergenerational transmission of as outlined above this concept is misleading to say the least and could be compared to the myth about the ‘vampire’. In comparison, in relation to understanding the existence of CSA in society the English participants point towards looking at CSA from a multi-factorial standpoint with weight on feminist and pro-feminist explanations.

Newly educated social workers in Denmark are often left alone to work with complex cases concerning child abuse – sometimes within days of starting their first jobs. In Denmark cases are allocated to case managers either because of the national insurance number of the mother, or because of the geographical location of the family – this could be described as a sort of lottery system. The accounts indicate that in England social workers have to have at least two years post-qualifying experience of working with children and families, have to have undergone mandatory induction training in relation to ‘protecting children’, and have to complete the PQ Award (post qualifying award) and pass a professional examination at panel in order to achieve level 3 senior social worker status, before being allowed to be the key worker on child protection cases. Moreover, in England there is a co-worker system in place, this helps to prevent cases drifting.

The accounts of the Danish students indicate that they do not feel especially equipped to work with children and young people. In particular, two students said they would avoid working with children for that very reason – these two students said especially that after studying on this course they did not feel equipped to make decisions about children that will possibly affect the rest of the child’s life – the quotation below highlights this:

KP: Can you elaborate about why you don’t want to work with children?
SocWorkStu1: ‘…Well it’s not anything to do with me as a person because I really like children … it’s more to do with the education … and that is a huge weakness in the
education ….. they talk about how important it is to know about the child interview (bornesamta) … they talk about how the child should be in the centre etc … but we don't get any teaching around these issues ... argh its so bloody frustrating … are we supposed to fill in these important gaps in the teaching ourselves or what?” (op cit).

CM, a newly qualified Danish social worker (in post six months at the time of interviewing) did not like to ‘talk to’ children. CM was afraid to ‘upset’ children or to make ‘the child’s situation worse’ through ‘talking to them’. Therefore, CM did everything to avoid communicating with children. CM had two cases concerning child sexual abuse amongst her caseload. CM had inherited most of her cases from the previous post holder. CM had stumbled upon one case of CSA after visiting a family – during the visit CM noticed that a younger child was displaying behaviour she did not understand. Subsequently, CM sought advice from a psychologist connected to the children and families team in an attempt to explain the behaviour (this shows initiative). The psychologist gave CM advice in relation to communicating with children. CM utilised the psychologist’s advice and the child later disclosed sexual abuse.

**Implications for Research**

This study highlights the dissimilarities between the two ‘systems’ and identifies implications for research, such as, **why** the labour market and issues surrounding the labour market is the overriding concern for the Danish Professional Bachelor Degree in Social Work; **why** there is an absence of training concerning gendered violence/child abuse and communicating with children in Denmark; **why** there is an absence of broad power perspectives and a lack of awareness concerning anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory issues and perspectives within social work teaching in Denmark. In light of ‘Every child matters (2003)’, **why** there is a decline of child protection training and a lack of emphasis concerning child protection training in England – with training moving away from mandatory to optional modules with less time allocated; **why** individual psychological explanations dominate the entire question about child sexual abuse in Denmark? **Why** the concepts of ‘social inheritance’ and ‘the intergenerational transmission’ idea of sexual abuse are organising principles for understanding CSA in Denmark; **The extent to which local authorities in England adhere to the codes of practice set by GSCC; and why** there is a distinct lack of guidance/procedures in local authorities in Denmark concerning incidence of CSA.

**Recommendations**

First and foremost, it is important to highlight that child sexual abuse (CSA) is an extremely serious form of child abuse and can have serious initial and long-term repercussions for the victims and their families. For this reason alone, it should be a very high priority for social workers and all other ‘professionals’ from relevant agencies to intervene when they receive information concerning the suspected sexual abuse of children. However, in order to intervene appropriately local authorities need to have appropriate policies and procedures in place about how to deal with such cases. Moreover, the workers involved need to work from a multifactoral framework, and have a comprehensive knowledge/understanding of CSA and the other forms of child abuse and neglect. This is just one of many reasons why it is fundamental to include this subject area on social work training programmes. Moreover, all social workers despite their particular area of speciality should have a basic understanding of CSA as they often have contact to children in various settings. Furthermore, there is ample and credible research showing that CSA is a significant social problem in society today. CSA to a large extent is a crime carried out by a minority of men and older boys, the majority of victims are girls; this is a significant and fundamental feature of prevalence studies carried out in the UK, USA, DK, and other European countries. Within the multi-factorial underpinning theoretical framework for this study, this significant fact reinforces the starting point for this study, which is sexual violence against children and women is a fundamental feature of patriarchal power relations deeply rooted in structural oppression. Commensurate with this perspective it can be suggested that CSA may be one of the consequences of the power imbalance between the ‘genders’ at all levels in society. Possibly, the social cleavage of ‘gender’ plays a significant role in relation to the derivation of CSA (Pringle 1995:40). This idea is clearly supported by evidence from research. What is more, the links between violence against women and child sexual abuse are firmly established (Hester et al 2000). Additionally, evidence from research demonstrates that children suffer significant immediate and long-term harm simply by living in ‘homes’ where violence is a regular occurrence (NCH 1994). Furthermore, research suggests that children living in violent homes stand a higher risk of becoming victims of CSA as opposed to children not living in violent surroundings, although this
warrants further research. For these reasons, the social problem of gendered violence should be included on social work training programmes. Evidently, gendered violence has serious ramifications for both women and children. It is likely that social workers will meet this problem face-to-face at some point in their careers – therefore social workers need to be equipped with the right tools for the job. According to contemporary commentators like Keith Pringle and Jeff Hearn violence between men and women, men and children and between men is the outcome of complex oppressive power relations closely connected to structural oppression. According to Pringle (1998), the ‘complex interaction’ of ageism, racism, classism, sexism and sexuality is the cause of sexual violence (Pringle 1998:154-155). Therefore, it is of paramount importance that schools of social work give social work students the critical tools needed to work against oppression and discrimination at all levels in society. Moreover, after considering the above it is essential that social work students are given knowledge about violence against women, violence in the place of abode and given tools to deal with such issues in practice. Evidently, oppression and discrimination are an abuse of power in society. The core purposes and values of social work put forward by IASSW and IFSW are very much about tackling the causes of oppression and discrimination in society, not just about intervening in person-focused psycho/social processes. This is another reason why social work students need to receive ‘knowledge’ concerning this subject area within pre-qualifying and post-qualifying education. After all, it is difficult for social workers to tackle oppression and discrimination in society if they are unaware of the issues. Therefore, anti-discriminatory/oppressive perspectives are essential to tackling gendered violence, and other oppressive acts shaped by power relations and structural oppression.

Effective anti-oppressive practice requires social work practitioners to have a comprehensive theoretical knowledge base informing their values and thereafter enabling anti-oppressive work. For these reasons it is paramount that schools of social work give students ‘knowledge’ about structural oppression, power relations, discrimination, oppressive practice, and the social cleavages in society. This can only lead workers to work towards the ideals of empowerment. Moreover, evidently tackling oppression and discrimination in society is fundamental to tackling CSA.

Additionally, what is essential to finding out what is going on in the lives of children and young people is communicating, seeing, listening, talking and including them in the processes focused on them. The English Department of Health (DOH) in its framework for assessment (2000) also puts this idea forward:

Fundamental to establishing whether a child is in need and how those needs should be best met is that the approach must be child centred. This means that the child is seen and kept in focus throughout the assessment and that account is always taken of the child’s perspective (DOH 2000:10 (England).

Not only is this approach commensurate with the rights of children to participate in decisions affecting their futures; it is also an essential method of gaining first hand information. Direct work with children is an essential part of assessment. This principle applies to all children including disabled children who tend to be forgotten because of their ‘lower’ status. According to the DOH Framework for the Assessment of Children (2000), there are five critical components in relation to assessing children: seeing, observing, talking, doing and engaging (ibid). In England it is a duty for social workers to ascertain the views, wishes and feelings of children when assessing their needs. Additionally, evidence (see Egelund 1997) suggests that children in the past have been excluded from the decision making process by some local authority social service departments. In addition, recent research (see report by Sociale Ankenævn 2005) shows this practice to be routine today in many local authority social service departments despite recent changes to legislation requiring case managers to offer children and young people an ‘interview’. Apart from the need for stronger legislation making it a duty for social workers to communicate with and include children in assessments, this lack of child involvement on the behalf of social workers is probably due to a lack of training about communicating with children.

Finally, when assessing the needs of children, it is crucial that social workers carrying out assessments have a comprehensive ‘knowledge’ of child development. Clearly, at different stages in children’s lives there are a series of diverse intricate developmental needs that have to be met if they are to reach their full potential (DOH 2000:11). It is important to remember that all children are unique and their development is formed according to their own
particular experiences and the interaction between a series of factors. Frequently, when social service departments receive referrals concerning children in need or at risk it is likely that ‘normal’ child development has been compromised for diverse reasons. For this reason and in relation to carrying out a comprehensive needs led assessment it is important for social workers to know about the significance of the developmental ‘milestones’ children need to reach. However, with this in mind, social workers also need to understand that all children are individuals and therefore differences in the sequence of development can happen. Nevertheless, on the other hand some deviations from the developmental milestones often show that social work intervention and support is needed. Therefore, it is essential that social workers know what children need at the different developmental stages of their lives if they are to assess the child’s needs effectively.

This study highlights the importance of designing social work training programmes based on evidence from international methodologically sound research and not on presuppositions. Moreover, this study maintains that social work education has an important role to play in relation to preventing and tackling child sexual abuse in society. What is more, social work education has a cardinal role in relation to preparing social workers for the complex challenges ahead, which more than often include child abuse in all its forms. To summarise, this study puts forward and finds that to specifically prepare students to tackle child sexual abuse/gendered violence in society and to inform future practice, social work training programmes need to include comprehensive elements of the following:

- Discrete teaching about all forms of harmful behaviour towards children, split into discrete modules.
- Teaching that specifically tackles power, oppression and discrimination in society.
- Discrete teaching concerning gendered violence.
- The dynamics/issuus surrounding CSA including explanations about the occurrence of CSA, Definitions of CSA, prevalence of CSA (international perspectives, to tackle ‘CSA-denial’), how to support the non-abusing carer, signs and symptoms of sexual abuse, ‘grooming’ and ‘groomed environments’, support services and needs for the victims of CSA (and families /siblings), case management for social workers concerning CSA.

- Child development and communicating with children.

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