Adolescent Violence Towards Parents in New South Wales: The Challenges and Perspectives of Secondary Education Professionals

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Author’s Declaration

I hereby certify that:

I. This thesis comprises only my original work towards the Master of Education by Research degree;

II. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used;

III. The thesis does not exceed the word length for this degree;

IV. No part of this work has been used for the award of another degree; and

V. This thesis meets the University of Sydney’s Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) requirements for the conduct of research.

Signature:

Name: Ashleigh Haw

Date: 01/05/2014
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Adolescent Violence Towards Parents in New South Wales: The Challenges and Perspectives of Secondary Education Professionals

Abstract

Adolescent violence towards parents (AVTP) has received limited attention in research and practice. Despite some empirical and anecdotal evidence suggesting that the school environment is rich in potential to support affected families, no prior studies have examined the perspectives of professionals in the education sector. This thesis explores the perspectives of six education professionals in New South Wales (NSW) with emphasis on challenges and recommendations associated with supporting affected families. Utilising a phenomenological theoretical framework guided by a social constructionist epistemology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with one counsellor, two teachers, one psychologist and two support workers employed across two independent secondary schools for youth with behavioural problems in NSW. Interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, allowing key themes to emerge from the data. Results indicated that all six participants had encountered AVTP and the majority believed that education professionals have an important responsibility to support affected families. Participants’ recommendations included: improving access to resources and professional development in schools; the implementation of holistic approaches to providing support; and the establishment of relationships between education professionals and trained service providers who can offer specialised assistance to families. The results highlighted a need for further empirical exploration of the issue in both mainstream and independent schools. Awareness-raising initiatives and training specifically focused on AVTP in schools is also recommended. With consideration of previous AVTP literature, this thesis discusses all of the current findings with emphasis on the implications for future research, policy and practice. The value of employing a social constructionist framework to examine education professionals’ perspectives is also highlighted by these findings.

Key words: Adolescent violence, abuse, youth, parents, families, education professionals, service providers, schools, perspectives, challenges, phenomenology, social constructionism
1.0 Introduction

Adolescent violence towards parents (AVTP) refers to the deliberate and ongoing infliction of abuse from an adolescent child towards a parent or guardian, with the intention of exerting power and control. Whilst existing empirical data is limited, prior literature and anecdotal evidence indicates that AVTP impacts many families (Bobic, 2004; Frizzell, 1998; Gallagher, 2008). Accounts of AVTP tend to focus on the social, physical, and personality changes associated with adolescence, which is understood as a unique developmental period where behaviours such as truancy, substance use, promiscuity, defiance, and aggression often emerge (Robinson, Power & Allan, 2010). The relationship between a parent and their child can alter significantly during this period, in some cases, resulting in abuse (Robinson, et al, 2010).

Existing literature has identified the following effects of AVTP on parents: diminished self-esteem (Eckstein, 2004; Gallagher, 2004a); social isolation (Bobic, 2004; Howard & Rottem, 2008; Micucci, 1995); financial strain (Howard & Rottem, 2008; Jackson, 2003; Stewart, Burns, & Leonard, 2007); increased risk of homelessness (Haw, 2010); mental-health issues (Howard & Rottem, 2008); and physical health deterioration (Price, 1996). AVTP can also have serious consequences for adolescents, including: elevated risk of homelessness (Sheehan, 1997); suicidal ideation and self-harm (Haw, 2010; Sheehan, 1997); and increased risk of engaging in anti-social behaviour during adulthood (Moffit, 2006; Patterson, et al, 1991). It is therefore important to consider AVTP as a serious phenomenon in need of widespread attention and intervention (Haw, 2010).

A dilemma faced by many parents affected by AVTP is the belief that they have responsibilities to continue caring for their children regardless of the
circumstances (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation, 2001). This often causes them to become reluctant to disclose their experiences as they believe that doing so is not socially accepted. Agnew and Huguley (1989) described AVTP as “the ultimate challenge to a parent’s authority” (p. 699). It is important, therefore, to consider AVTP in light of its unique complexities resulting from the nature of the parent-child relationship.

One complexity associated with AVTP is that defining the issue is difficult in professional practice as it is not always clear when behaviours are acceptable and when they cross the line into abuse (Stewart, Wilkes, Jackson & Mannix, 2006). As Gallagher (2008) asserted, “there are no clear empirical definitions of abuse and no clear cut-off point where a growing child becomes ‘abusive’ rather than merely aggressive” (p. 43). To address the complexities regarding conceptualisations of AVTP, Anglicare Victoria and Precision Foundation (2001) identified seven key principles that are integral to understanding the issue, especially when responding to affected families. These principles are as follows: violence is a choice; it is never acceptable to use abuse; anger and temper are not the same constructs as violence and abuse; victims of any form of family violence will typically want to end the abuse without ending the relationship; families can assist abusive young adolescents to take responsibility for their actions; and victimised parents are not responsible for AVTP.

While the establishment of the above principles may assist professionals to respond to families, few studies have examined the viewpoints of service providers. Furthermore, despite the fact that AVTP affects high-school aged children, no research to date has focused on the education sector’s relationship with the issue. However, as this thesis will demonstrate, professionals in the education sector are
rich in potential to provide support to families affected by AVTP. The need to conduct research on this topic in schools is supported by existing literature that has highlighted the importance of appropriate responses from education professionals.

Prior studies have indicated that adolescents who experience problems at school are often affected by complex issues in the home (Ellickson & McGuigan, 2000; Haw, 2010; Pagani, Tremblay, Nagin, Zoccolillo, Vitaro, & McDuff, 2004; Routt & Anderson, 2011). Similarly, peer influence has been identified as a factor for AVTP (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Gelles, 2001) and schools are a common setting for the development of peer relationships during adolescence.

Another incentive for greater empirical focus on AVTP in the context of education professionals’ responses, is that previous literature has uncovered that many victimised parents fear the repercussions of involving formal agencies (Eckstein, 2004), and often prefer to disclose their situations in schools (Haw, 2010). However, some research has suggested that responses from education professionals have been ineffective in the past with parents reporting that their experiences have been trivialised and/or minimised (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation, 2001; Haw, 2010; Paterson, Luntz, Perlesz & Cotton, 2002; Stewart, et al, 2007).

Nonetheless, there is empirical support for the notion that professional responsiveness is important to disrupting cycles of AVTP, enabling parents and children to access needed intervention (Haw, 2010; Howard & Rottem, 2008; O’Connor, 2007). As education professionals may be approached by parents who are seeking support and/or advice, their responses may influence future help-seeking efforts. It is therefore critical to develop an understanding of educational professionals’ experiences and perspectives regarding AVTP.
This thesis sought to address the identified gaps in the body of knowledge about AVTP by focusing on the perspectives and experiences of professionals in secondary education settings. In turn, the views of teachers, support workers and counsellors from secondary schools in New South Wales were explored. Emphasis was placed on professionals’ beliefs about causal factors for AVTP, their concerns and priorities from a service provision perspective, the challenges associated with responding to the issue, and their recommendations for improving resources available in educational settings.

This thesis starts by providing a rationale for the current research via a discussion of the available literature, with particular emphasis on empirical gaps regarding service provider responses and the importance of exploring the views/experiences of education professionals (chapter 2, p.13). The literature review is followed by a discussion of the applied methodology with emphasis on the research design, theoretical framework, and method of analysis (chapter 3, p.33). The results and discussion chapter follows the methodology by describing and analysing the themes generated during the data collection phase (chapter 4, p.48). These themes provide further empirical support for increased focus on responses to AVTP in the education sector. Participants provided their definitions of AVTP and voiced a number of beliefs about causal factors and family circumstances that may contribute to abuse. Their views on both parents and children affected by AVTP were also discussed and various themes were identified. These discussions addressed the first aim of this study: to uncover education professionals’ perspectives about AVTP and find out how they conceptualise the issue. The second aim of this research was to shed light on school professionals’ experiences with the issue and ascertain how these experiences have influenced their beliefs. To address this aim,
participants talked about how their experiences with AVTP have shaped their knowledge of the phenomenon, with emphasis on the challenges they have faced when dealing with the issue in the school environment, and their subsequent best-practice recommendations. This thesis concludes by discussing how participants’ views, experiences, reported challenges, and recommendations have reinforced the importance of further empirical exploration of AVTP in educational settings (chapter 5, p.88). The implications of these findings are discussed with emphasis on key recommendations for improving responses and options for families affected by AVTP.
2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Adolescent violence towards parents (AVTP) has received limited attention in research and practice (Bobic, 2004; Brezina, 1999; Crichton-Hill, Evans & Meadows, 2004; Kethineni, 2004). It has been proposed that this lack of empirical attention results from a societal failure to recognise AVTP as a social problem (Stewart, Jackson, Mannix, Wilkes, & Lines, 2004) due to widespread notions that all children love and respect their parents (Straus & Gelles, 1990). Bobic (2004) suggested that a lack of clarity concerning what is acceptable behaviour and what constitutes abuse may also account for the limited awareness and available information on AVTP.

As this review of the literature will demonstrate, previous research has predominantly focused on AVTP risk-factors and victim/perpetrator characteristics. Few studies have explored the perspectives and experiences of service providers who provide support to families, and no prior research has investigated AVTP from the perspective of education professionals. With regard to methodological considerations, developmental, feminist, and social learning theoretical perspectives have been predominantly employed in prior research - Whilst such studies have contributed valuable information to this research area, there is a lack of empirical focus on individual constructions of AVTP, including how perspectives derive from experience and social influence. The strengths and shortcomings of the existing literature with respect to understanding AVTP from a professional perspective are discussed and contrasted in this chapter. Emphasis is placed on the rationale for an interpretative, phenomenological approach to exploring conceptualisations about AVTP in education settings.
2.1.1 The Effects of Adolescent Violence Towards Parents (AVTP)

Existing literature on the effects of AVTP suggests that it is a significant social problem (Bobic, 2004; Frizzell, 1998; Gallagher, 2008). The reported effects on victimised parents include: loss of self-esteem (Eckstein, 2004; Gallagher, 2004a); social isolation (Bobic, 2004; Haw, 2010; Howard & Rottem, 2008; Micucci, 1995); financial strain (Howard & Rottem, 2008; Jackson, 2003); increased risk of homelessness (Haw, 2010); mental health issues (Haw, 2010; Howard & Rottem, 2008); and physical health deterioration (Price, 1996). Furthermore, the adverse affects on adolescents cannot be ignored. For instance, Sheehan (1997) conducted quantitative research with adolescents who had engaged in AVTP and found that 38% had run away from home on at least one occasion, 25% had criminal charges, 25% had self-harmed, and 32% had either attempted suicide or talked about committing suicide. Additionally, developmental studies have found evidence suggesting that individuals who engage in abusive behaviours after the early childhood period are at increased risk of engaging in anti-social conduct during adulthood (Moffit, 2006; Patterson, et al, 1991).

2.1.2 Defining the Issue

For the purposes of this research, adolescence is defined as a developmental stage where young people are no longer children but are yet to be considered adults (Bobic, 2004). The most widely recommended age range for this period is between 12 and 24 years (Bobic, 2004; Gallagher, 2008; Howard & Rottem, 2008). During adolescence, one’s relationship with their parents alters and conflict commonly arises (Robinson, Power & Allan, 2010). Understanding AVTP is fraught with difficulty as some literature conceptualises it as ‘juvenile delinquency’ (Robinson,
Davidson, & Drebot, 2004) whereas others consider it a facet of family violence (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation, 2001; Browne & Hamilton, 1998; Downey, 1997; Haw, 2010; Holt, 2009; Howard & Rottem, 2008; Jackson, 2003). Conceptualising AVTP within the discourse of family violence recognises that abuse is a means of exerting power and control over another family member (Haw, 2010).

This thesis has adopted this family violence definition.

According to Sheehan (1997), family violence occurs when a power imbalance exists between two or more people in a domestic relationship. When this occurs, abusive behaviours may occur in one or more of the following forms: physical abuse; verbal abuse; emotional abuse; sexual abuse; spiritual abuse; and financial abuse (Sheehan, 1997). Bobic (2002) argued that when adolescents engage in AVTP, they use abuse as a means of exerting power and control (Bobic, 2004; Gallagher, 2008; Haw, 2010). For the purposes of this study, an adolescent’s behaviour can be considered abusive if said behaviour results in the parent experiencing fear and intimidation (Paterson, et al, 2002).

2.2 Key International Literature

International AVTP research has focused predominantly on prevalence, family dynamics, and risk factors (Boxer, Gullan & Mahoney, 2009; Kethineni, 2004; Routt & Anderson, 2011). In the US, males have been found to be more likely to engage in AVTP than females with the proportion of male perpetrators ranging from 57.4% (Boxer, et al, 2009) to 65% (Routt & Anderson, 2011). US studies have also commonly found that mothers are more likely than fathers to experience AVTP with Routt and Anderson (2011) finding 83% of victimised parents to be mothers. Furthermore, in Kethineni’s (2004) research, three-quarters of the adolescents
studied had committed at least one violent offence before engaging in AVTP and 54.5% reported problems with substance abuse.

US research has also uncovered the co-existence of some psychiatric disorders with children who engage in AVTP. The prevalence of these disorders has varied from 13.3% (Kethineni, 2004) to 39% (Routt & Anderson, 2011). Histories of intimate partner violence have also been reported in US research into AVTP. A number of adolescents in Kethineni’s (2004) study had experienced or witnessed domestic violence on a regular basis and 48.4% had fathers with criminal convictions. Whilst the trends uncovered in these studies provide valuable insight into AVTP, there are evident limitations. For instance, Boxer, et al (2009) focused only on physical aggression as a definer of AVTP despite the widespread understanding in research and practice that abuse can be emotional, financial or psychological (Anderson, 1997; Bancroft, 2002; Bobic, 2004; DeKeseredy; 1993). Another limitation of Boxer, et al’s (2009) research is that only data from two-parent families was included, yet some research has indicated that sole-parent mothers are at increased risk of being targeted (Howard & Rottem, 2008; Jackson, 2003). Furthermore, none of these studies focused on the impact of AVTP on parents nor did they examine professional responses.

In Canada, some research has attempted to uncover the views of service providers and victimised parents. In Cottrell and Monk’s (2004) sample of 39 adolescents, 45 parents, and 34 service providers, issues such as substance misuse, stealing, and truancy were common amongst the adolescents. In some cases, service providers and parents identified behavioural and academic problems in adolescents’ school histories. With regard to the ability of services to provide effective responses to families, several mothers reported receiving ineffective support from the police,
whom they claimed had a tendency to minimise or justify the abuse (Cottrell & Monk, 2004). It was recommended that service providers receive education about the wide range of contributing factors in AVTP cases. A limitation of Cottrell and Monk’s (2004) research is that they only focused on justice system responses whereas studies have found that parents who experience AVTP are reluctant to involve the justice system and prefer to confide in social workers, medical practitioners, school staff, mental health workers and youth/family services (Haw, 2010; Howard & Rottem, 2008; Jackson, 2003). Therefore, Cottrell and Monk (2004) may have benefited from focusing attention on agencies both inside and outside of the justice system.

In UK research, Holt (2009) interviewed fifteen mothers and two fathers who had received a Parenting Order as a result of having children involved in the youth justice system for abusive behaviours. A number of these parents reported that when they sought help, it was suggested that they change their own behaviour (Holt, 2009). Almost all parents had approached numerous agencies and many reported that the only form of assistance they received was a Parenting Order, which came too late to make a difference (Holt, 2009). Holt (2009) recommended specific, targeted support for families and services to be offered outside of the criminal justice system. While Holt’s (2009) study offered some valuable insights, the perspectives of education professionals was not examined, and as this chapter will demonstrate, the perspectives of school staff are important in the context of AVTP.

2.3 Key Australian Literature

In Australia, no literature has focused solely on professionals’ attitudes and responses to AVTP, although some studies have uncovered findings relating to
service provider responses (Anglicare Victoria and Precision Foundation, 2001; Edenborough, Jackson, Mannix and Wilkes, 2008; Gallagher, 2008; Gallagher, 2004a; Gallagher 2004b; Haw, 2010; Howard and Rottem, 2008; Stewart, et al, 2004). While there are significant gaps and an evident need for more focus on professional constructions of AVTP, existing research has made valuable contributions to the current state of knowledge in Australia.

2.3.1 Victoria

AVTP Research conducted in Victoria has predominantly focused on adolescent characteristics, perspectives of victimised parents, and evaluations of group programs (Howard & Rottem, 2008; O’Connor, 2007; Paterson, et al, 2002; Sheehan, 1997). In Sheehan’s (1997) research, findings included: financial abuse as highly prevalent; the majority of perpetrators of AVTP were male (78.3%); 41.6% were enrolled in school but not attending classes; 48.3% had substance use problems; and 81.7% had either experienced or witnessed domestic violence. However, this study only accounted for situations involving physical violence and only included data from cases with police involvement. This is a limitation given that numerous cases discussed in research and practice have not involved physical abuse and many parents keep AVTP to themselves (Charles, 1986; Eckstein, 2004; Harbin & Madden, 1979; Haw, 2010; Sheehan, 1997).

Paterson, et al (2002) examined the experiences of parents who attended a group program. Results indicated that victimised parents experienced feelings of ‘walking on eggshells’ and reported that they were living in fear every day (Paterson, et al, 2002). Many also reported that because their adolescent did not direct their abusive behaviour at others (e.g. teachers and peers), they felt that they must be
doing something wrong. However, like Sheehan’s (1997) research, Paterson, et al (2002) only included data from parents who had participated in a program and few references were made to professional responses and the meanings that participants ascribed to the issue. In O’Connor’s (2007) study, 24 mothers and two fathers who attended a support group completed a questionnaire about their experiences. All participants recommended the program as it provided them with support, information, strategies and useful tips for handling their situation (O’Connor, 2007). While information about these parents’ experiences of abuse was derived, the focus on service provider responses was scarce. Some investigation into how service providers have responded to these families could have benefited the literature on AVTP by pointing out the strengths and shortcomings of such responses, resulting in a stronger rationale for improved resources for professionals.

In Howard and Rottem’s (2008) research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten mothers who had been victimised by adolescent sons. Some of the common trends identified were: adolescents who engaged in AVTP were often abusive towards siblings; all had witnessed abuse against their mothers perpetrated by fathers, step-fathers or mothers’ ex-partners; fathers were either completely absent or unsupportive as parents in all cases; many of the sons had experienced anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation; sons’ poor education outcomes were common; and most of the mothers reported that they became socially isolated as a result of the abuse (Howard & Rottem, 2008). Some interesting patterns and perspectives with regard to professionals’ ability to provide support were also highlighted. For example, many of the mothers had gone to great lengths to seek help for the abuse but reported that services failed to meet their needs as they were often inflexible or inaccessible (Howard & Rottem, 2008). However, service
provider responses were not a major focus of the study and data pertaining to professionals’ perspectives was not collected. Given that educational issues were identified by some of these participants as key problems affecting their adolescent children, further examination of understandings of AVTP and responses to affected families from education professionals is warranted.

2.3.2 New South Wales (NSW)

Prior to the current study, New South Wales (NSW) research has centred predominantly on victimised parents’ perspectives and experiences with AVTP. For instance, using feminist theory, Jackson (2003) interviewed six women who had experienced AVTP. Common themes and trends were identified including: all of the adolescents were male; all participants initially kept their experiences hidden; adolescents were often abusive towards other family members; and all mothers reported that they could have benefited from some kind of professional support (Jackson, 2003). Like its predecessors, this research paid little attention to the ability of service providers to assist victims, and participants’ conceptualisations of AVTP (including how their perspectives were constructed) were not a key focus.

In a more recent study, Stewart, et al (2006) surveyed 129 mothers and found that the majority experienced some form of AVTP and sons were the usual perpetrators. A number of the women reported that their children had witnessed violence in the home prior to the onset of the AVTP (Stewart, et al, 2006). With regard to their help-seeking efforts, more than half of the women had not disclosed the abuse prior to the study and many reported that they were given conflicting advice about how to handle the situation (Stewart, et al, 2006). Although this study utilised a significantly larger sample of participants than previous Australian
research, its quantitative nature meant that an in-depth analysis of perspectives and themes was not possible. If this research focused on the meanings ascribed to AVTP within this sample, a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences could be established. There was also no mention of service provider responses, which is important in order to establish where organisations can direct resources and policy decisions concerned with managing this issue.

Edenborough, et al (2008) collected data from 185 victimised mothers and found that victimised mothers often sought help via medical services, the police, and counselling/psychological services, and they tended to have high expectations about the effects of placing their children in counselling. However, some were disappointed with the outcome as they believed that counselling would completely “fix” the problem (Edenborough, et al, 2008). A common limitation across all NSW studies described is that professional constructions of AVTP have not received specific attention and therefore, one is unable to draw conclusions pertaining to how service providers who may respond to AVTP conceptualise the issue and where their perspectives derive from.

2.3.3 Western Australia (WA)

Western Australia (WA) has only produced one study focused on AVTP to date. In Haw’s (2010) research, interviews were conducted with seven mothers who had experienced AVTP and 22 professionals from a range of disciplines who had encountered the issue. A key finding that both mothers and service providers disclosed was that education professionals’ responses were often considered ineffective as they had a tendency to minimise the abuse or blame the mothers (Haw, 2010). Including the perspectives of education professionals may have shed further
light on this finding and represents one limitation of the study. Consequently, Haw (2010) recommended that future research efforts focus on the perspectives of school professionals in more depth.

The lack of literature concerned with professionals’ understandings of AVTP requires attention as the future help-seeking efforts of parents may be influenced by the responses they receive during encounters with service providers (Haw, 2010). Half of the mothers interviewed in Haw’s (2010) study commented that they were discouraged from disclosing their situations to others due to dismissive responses they received during early help-seeking efforts. The issue of limited information available about professional constructions of AVTP suggests that training initiatives and the establishment of resources for service providers cannot be adequately informed, nor is it probable that the need for such initiatives will be recognised by relevant agencies and funding bodies. Therefore, evidence that uncovers professionals’ perspectives and the challenges they have encountered when dealing with AVTP may prove invaluable to the family violence, social work, education, and community welfare sectors.

2.4 The Secret Nature of AVTP

The secret nature of abuse and the fear and shame experienced by parents who have experienced AVTP is important to understand when researching this issue (Haw, 2010). Help-seeking behaviours are likely to be influenced by a parent’s shame and fear of responses if they were to come forward (Cottrell, 2005). It is well documented that victims of AVTP tend to minimise the frequency of the abuse and trivialise the harm caused (Bailey, 2002; Gallagher, 2008; Howard & Rottem, 2008). The guilt and shame that parents often experience has been identified in various
studies as a key reason for their reluctance to disclose their situation to others (Bobic, 2004; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Eckstein, 2004). For example, one mother who attended a group program in Victoria called “Breaking the Cycle” reported that she felt that she would be ‘dobbing’ on her son if she were to seek assistance for his behaviour (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation, 2001).

In another example, Gallagher (2004a) described a mother who took out an intervention order on her son and subsequently experienced negativity from her relatives, local church and the boy’s school, who treated her as though she was uncaring and disloyal (Gallagher, 2004a). According to Howard and Rottem (2008), the only way to alleviate a victimised parent’s fear of disclosing their situation is for agencies to show evidence that they are consistently providing supportive and proactive responses. In the words of one victimised mother interviewed in Victoria: “Being believed and validated was the first step in my reclaiming power” (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation, 2001, p. 39).

2.5 Potentially Damaging Beliefs about AVTP

Some of the available literature has made reference to perspectives about AVTP that trivialise abuse and inhibit victims’ ability to receive support. Common beliefs about AVTP identified as potentially problematic include: parents are to blame for AVTP (Gallagher, 2008; Haw, 2010); adolescents who engage in AVTP have an underlying mental disability (Cottrell, 2001; Gallagher, 2004b) and/or are victims of abuse themselves who are defending themselves or lashing out in response to their victimisation (Laing, 2001); and there is no such thing as AVTP as these behaviours do not constitute ‘abuse’ and merely represent normal parent-teen conflict (Edgette, 2002; Haw, 2010).
Social attitudes about AVTP that remove responsibility from the perpetrator and place it on the victim reflect the lack of information on the topic (Gallagher, 2008). According to Gallagher (2008), society remains prone to believing that adolescents’ behaviour is a direct product of the parenting they receive. This suggests that society may draw conclusions based on the assumption that parents are the sole influence on their children’s conduct (Gallagher, 2008). In Gallagher’s view, blaming the victim allows professionals to “preserve their belief in a just world by seeing the parent as guilty by implication of either abuse, neglect or at best, stupidity” (2008, p. 22). Gallagher (2004a) argued that although parenting is very important, it is only one influence on an adolescent’s behaviour with peers, siblings, and the media also being relevant.

Another common belief about adolescents who engage in AVTP is that they do so as a result of a psychiatric disorder (Gallagher, 2008; Haw, 2010). Gallagher (2008) argued that the problem with this assumption is that when violence is viewed as the product of a disorder, the victim’s experience of abuse can be minimised while the choices and rights of the abuser are favoured. Furthermore, such a belief does not take into consideration that many individuals with mental disorders are not abusive and there are numerous AVTP cases described in the literature where no disorder has been diagnosed or suspected (Price, 1996; Stewart, et al, 2007).

There is some evidence to suggest that some professionals have a tendency to assume that adolescents perpetrating AVTP are the real victims. For instance, in Frizzell’s (1998) study, all participants made comments suggesting that adolescents who are abusive towards parents are not responsible for their behaviour. Rather, participants characterised these adolescents as: victims of domestic violence; suffering from a mental impediment; or acting out due to society’s mistreatment of
them (Frizzell, 1998). According to Gallagher (2004b), viewing adolescents who engage in AVTP as victims can result in a failure on their part to take responsibility for their actions, which increases the likelihood of the abuse recurring. Gallagher (2004b) also warned that this may also cause adolescents to show a lack of respect for professionals who attempt to provide support due to their increased notions of power and entitlement. However, Gallagher (2004b) also pointed out that labelling the adolescents as ‘abusers’ is equally problematic as doing so may cause them to believe that they are inherently ‘bad’ whilst parents may feel more guilt and shame as the parents of an ‘abuser’.

Another common belief concerning AVTP is that these behaviours are nothing more than normal parent-teen conflict and the adolescent will simply grow out of them (Edgette, 2002). Edgette (2002) suggested that such a belief can result in adolescents adopting an inflated sense of entitlement and failing to take responsibility for their actions. Gallagher (2008) emphasised the importance of drawing clear distinctions between AVTP and occasional tantrums or ‘out bursts’, generic disobedience, and play-fighting. Demonstrating healthy conflict within the family during the transition from childhood to adulthood is normal and acceptable for adolescents (Cottrell, 2005). However, one must not confuse expressions of anger with abuse as anger is an emotion and violence is a choice (Howard & Rottem, 2008). Viewing AVTP within an anger-management framework posits that anger resulting from a loss of control causes violence rather than violence being a mechanism for establishing control in the first place (Gallagher, 2004b). This could be problematic as viewing AVTP as merely an expression of emotions may support claims of provocation, promoting victim-blaming (Gallagher, 2004b).
2.6 Professional Constructions of AVTP & Responses to Families

Whilst attention to professional constructions of AVTP is scarce, some research suggests that service providers’ understandings vary considerably, with some aspects of the problem being understood more comprehensively than others. For instance, Frizzell (1998) conducted qualitative interviews with various professionals (including probation officers, social workers, counsellors, crisis line support workers, and police officers) in order to ascertain how they construct AVTP. Adopting a social constructionist (SC) theoretical framework allowed Frizzell (1998) to explore the meanings that these groups ascribed to AVTP. In research focused on human perspectives and experiences, an SC approach enables one to explore individual views with careful consideration of how meanings are derived and socially influenced (Spector & Kitsuse, 1987). SC approaches have seldom been applied to AVTP research, however there appears to be an important need for in-depth examinations of professional perspectives – a research area ideally suited to an SC epistemology (Frizzell, 1998).

Frizzell’s (1998) findings indicated that the majority of participants recognised and defined AVTP as a serious problem. However, some had a tendency to remove responsibility from adolescents by suggesting that their abusive behaviours were the result of their own victimisation, parental deficits, or mental disorder (Frizzell, 1998). This finding suggests an element of ‘parent-blaming’ and a tendency to trivialise AVTP. However, it is important to note that Frizzell’s (1998) research was conducted fifteen years prior to the current study and therefore these results should be interpreted with caution as they may not reflect current perspectives.
In Haw’s (2010) research, seven mothers were asked to comment on responses they received when they approached services for help. The majority stated that they found responses dismissive and uncaring with some suggesting that their disclosures of abuse were not taken seriously. Some mothers felt blamed for their child’s behaviour due to suggestions that they need to change their own approaches to parenting in order to end the abusive cycle. One mother reported that she once called the police during an altercation with her daughter and upon arrival the officer only listened to the daughter’s version of events and then commented ‘your mother is a nag isn’t she?’ (Haw, 2010).

A similar finding was reported by Edenborough, et al, (2008) who interviewed 185 women who had experienced AVTP in NSW. While some women found police intervention to be somewhat of a deterrent to their teen’s abusive behaviour, a number of others stated that the police were unsupportive and told these mothers that they were exaggerating and hysterical. In Victoria, a woman in Howard and Rottem’s (2008) research stated that she sought help from six services before receiving an acceptable response. Many other participants reported that services were not responsive or helpful, with some stating that professionals simply could not grasp the complexity of AVTP (Howard & Rottem, 2008).

One of the mothers who attended the “Breaking the Cycle” program in Victoria stated “the ignorant attitudes of police, judiciary, and court personnel all added to our pain” (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation, 2001, p. 39). This finding suggests that any problems with service provider responses to AVTP do not necessarily result from negative attitudes as they may stem from limited knowledge and experience with the issue. For example, Stewart, et al (2004) argued that providing adequate support is dependent on practitioners’ ability to apply knowledge
of family violence issues to AVTP. Furthermore, Frizzell (1998) emphasised the importance of professionals’ ability to label AVTP behaviours as ‘abuse’ when dealing with victimised parents as this may relieve parents’ shame and guilt, especially given the high probability that they have not made the connection between their children’s behaviour and abuse. In Haw’s (2010) research, many of the mothers did not realise they were experiencing abuse until their participation in the study or until they received support. No prior studies have examined whether behaviours that parents do not explicitly describe as ‘abusive’ are identified as such by professionals, yet some research has suggested that unless a victim articulates their situation as abuse, the behaviours in question are often seen as normal teenage behaviour (Haw, 2010). It is therefore important to investigate professionals’ capacity to acknowledge these situations as abusive, irrespective of how the behaviours are articulated by victims, pointing to a further need for interpretative, phenomenological approaches to investigating AVTP.

2.7 The Significance of the Current Research

Existing empirical and anecdotal evidence suggests that investigating AVTP in the educational context is important. The average adolescent spends approximately 35 hours at school in a typical week (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1994). One could argue, therefore, that schools are rich in potential to influence adolescents’ attitudes and behaviour. In addition, adolescents’ experiences of difficulties at school may be symptomatic of issues in the home (Ellickson & McGuigan, 2000). Cottrell (2001) theorised that children who are bullied at school may act out this victimisation at home by engaging in violence toward family members. Research is yet to determine whether adolescent problems in the home
lead to problems at school or vice versa. Whichever is the case, some research has supported a relationship between both phenomena. For example, Routt and Anderson (2011) found that 49% adolescents in their sample were disengaged from their education and 50% exhibited ongoing behavioural problems at school (Routt & Anderson, 2011).

In Haw’s (2010) research, issues involving peer groups, truancy, bullying, defiant behaviour, academic problems, and aggression toward fellow students and teachers were identified as possible factors for AVTP. One mother reported that her son was expelled for truancy six weeks before he was set to graduate and that the school’s principal blamed her for her son’s truancy (Haw, 2010). Gelles (2001) also emphasised the importance of considering peer influence by asserting that young people with friends who are violent are more likely to engage in abusive behaviours themselves. A similar finding was reported by Agnew and Huguley (1989) who found that adolescents who perpetrated AVTP were more likely to have friends who engage in abusive behaviour and/or approve of violence.

Other research has pointed to a possible relationship between AVTP and adolescents’ problems at school. For instance, Pagani, et al (2004) found that adolescents were nine times more likely to verbally abuse a parent and four times more likely to physically assault a parent if they also behaved aggressively at school. Furthermore, Paulson, Coombs, and Landsverk, (1990) examined the characteristics of adolescents who had physically assaulted a parent, and found that adolescents classified as ‘hitters’ were more likely than ‘non-hitters’ to report that they were bored at school, and the ‘hitters’ were also more prone to commit truancy or fail to complete set tasks. Of the ‘hitter’ group, 34% believed their education was unimportant compared to 19% of the ‘non-hitters’, and 12% of the ‘hitters’ reported
that they would consider dropping out of school in contrast with 3% of the ‘non-hitters’ (Paulson, et al, 1990).

Another incentive for talking to education professionals about AVTP is that it has been reported that some parents fear certain types of agencies and are reluctant to approach them (Eckstein, 2004; Haw, 2010). For example, Eckstein (2004) found that victimised parents did not feel comfortable approaching the legal system for assistance. Haw (2010)’s study proposed that parents may fear the repercussions of involving agencies such as legal, police and child protection services that may be required to take formal action, and instead prefer to speak to professionals in schools. If victimised parents prefer to approach school staff for help as opposed to legal services, the views of those education professionals becomes more important.

The final reason that examining AVTP in an education context is important is that few studies have shed light on how education professionals recognise, understand and respond to the issue. No prior literature has focused explicitly on this issue in an educational context, however some research has investigated the importance of understanding how secondary school personnel respond to the issue of domestic violence (DV) in general. For instance, Protner (2013) examined the challenges faced by secondary education professionals when supporting adolescents who have been exposed to DV. Protner (2013) found that both secondary school teachers and counsellors expressed great fears concerning their responsibility for intervening and this fear reportedly influenced their decision-making about reporting cases to authorities. For participants of Protner’s study who did make official reports, the majority felt helpless and dissatisfied with the ability of other agencies to support these families. Protner (2013) also found that one quarter of the teachers and
school counsellors in their sample did not have the support of their management when attempting to assist a family affected by DV.

In addition to Protner (2013), Byrne and Taylor (2007) identified some challenges faced by secondary education professionals when attempting to support families affected by DV. They found that several teachers and social workers who have encountered DV whilst working with adolescents felt that they were not suitably qualified nor informed enough on DV issues to offer adequate support (Byrne and Taylor, 2007). Byrne and Taylor’s (2007) findings indicated that, as a result of these professionals’ beliefs about their limited experience and expertise, they often failed to recognise key signs of adolescents’ DV exposure and in many cases, when DV was identified, it was neither confirmed nor addressed. According to Byrne and Taylor (2007), a desire to respect the privacy of family life represented the most common reason for a lack of intervention by education professionals who had encountered DV. The results of these two studies have important implications for the current research - It is important to uncover whether similar perspectives can be identified in the context of AVTP, including whether these challenges impact on education professionals’ appraisals of AVTP and subsequent responses to affected families.

Whilst no research has directly investigated how education professionals understand and respond to AVTP, some studies have uncovered evidence to suggest that responses from school staff when approached by victimised parents have previously been ineffective (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation, 2001; Haw, 2010; Paterson, et al, 2002; Stewart, et al, 2007). For example, two mothers in Stewart, et al’s (2007) study asked school staff for help with their situation and received a dismissive response as it was suggested to them that the abuse they had
endured was normal teenage behaviour. One mother who attended the “Breaking the Cycle” program in Victoria spoke of an instance where she approached a counsellor at her son’s school because he had been skipping classes. In addition to the fact that the school failed to take action to stop the truancy, the school counsellor commented “you know, we don’t get too many parents dobbing their children in” (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation, 2001, p 3). According to this mother, this attitude and the failure of the staff to act on her son’s truancy made her feel as though she could not approach them for assistance and in her own words, it “reinforced the whole thing that I shouldn’t tell anyone about the problems” (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation, 2001, p 3). A similar encounter was described by Paterson, et al (2002), who found that one victimised mother had been shamed by a teacher at her son’s school for ‘dobbing him in’. This mother felt she was harming her son’s reputation and self-esteem by discussing his behaviour (Paterson, et al, 2002).

In Haw’s (2010) research, one mother reported that when she disclosed her situation to school psychologists, the responses she received were unsympathetic and the abuse was trivialised. Additionally, a mother who approached a social worker from her daughter’s school was told that she was simply experiencing ‘normal teen-parent conflict’. This mother felt that the social worker could not offer her any meaningful or practical guidance. Moreover, most of the mothers who approached their adolescents’ school staff also reported that these encounters with the school were their first or only attempt at obtaining help (Haw, 2010), and therefore these responses become more important as the perspectives of school professionals could offer valuable insight.

The above findings suggest that education professionals’ responses to victims are likely to influence future help-seeking efforts. Feeling discouraged from
disclosing AVTP was often a consequence of a first attempt being met with an unfavourable response (Haw, 2010). Haw’s (2010) study emphasised the importance of education and training programs for agencies that are likely to encounter AVTP. There is a need to further understand the ways in which school professionals acknowledge and reflect upon AVTP. By exploring these aspects it may be possible to unlock the potential for matching victim needs to system policies and empowering all parties during this process. Most importantly, it is vital not to underestimate the role that the school environment can have in influencing young people’s attitudes and behaviours. Bobic and Robinson (2002) argued that this relationship requires attention to ensure that the school environment can effectively promote both peer and familial relationships that are free from abuse. As Bailey (2002) articulated:

Where young people live in a culture of violence in their homes and neighbourhoods, school has the potential to offer positive outlets to satisfy needs for belonging and recognition and acceptance through non-violent means (p. 102).

The significance of the current research is also evidenced by the limited phenomenological research into AVTP. As noted, the majority of existing AVTP literature has utilised developmental, feminist, and social learning theoretical frameworks with limited focus on how meanings are constructed when understanding and responding to the issue. This highlights the importance of conducting interpretative research enabling education professionals’ perspectives to be identified with a sound appreciation of the meanings they ascribe to AVTP.
3.0 Methodology

3.1 Objectives & Research Questions

The key aims of this research were: to explore the views of secondary education professionals regarding adolescent violence towards parents (AVTP) with emphasis on their recommendations for: best practice in educational settings; and resources required in schools to help staff improve their understanding of the issue. This research also endeavoured to uncover the experiences that have shaped the viewpoints of participants. These aims were achieved by addressing the following research questions:

1. How do participants conceptualise AVTP?
2. What experience and knowledge of AVTP do the education professionals interviewed demonstrate?
3. How have their professional experiences influenced their views on the topic?
4. What recommendations (if any) do participants have for best practice in schools with regard to responding to families affected by AVTP?

3.2 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design. As Willig (2012) explains, “qualitative research is concerned with the quality and texture of human experience and with the ways in which people construct and communicate meaning in social contexts” (p. 22). As the focal questions of this research are concerned with the perspectives of participants, these questions cannot be answered quantitatively in the degree of depth desired. Furthermore, in Patton’s (2002) definition, qualitative research consists of in-depth inquiry that produces detailed descriptions of an issue under investigation. These descriptions can be derived via the following methods:
interviews or focus groups that capture direct quotations from participants; case studies; or the careful review of documents (Patton, 2002). In light of the above definitions, it was ascertained that the most effective way to examine the issue of AVTP for the purposes of this study was to do so qualitatively.

3.3 Theoretical Framework

This research adopted a phenomenological framework (Creswell, 2007), which followed Heidegger’s ontological perspective (Heidegger, 1962) and was informed by social constructionist (SC) epistemology (Berger and Luckmann 1966/1991). Phenomenology seeks to explain how meaning is applied to social situations (Reeves, Albert & Kuper, 2008) and suggests that an exploration of conscious experience (including judgments, perceptions and emotions) is pivotal to understanding the nature of a particular phenomenon from the perspectives of those most closely connected with it (Balls, 2009). In phenomenological research, the goal is to enhance understanding of the meaning of human experiences and behaviours (Cohen & Omery, 1994). Phenomenological scholars have argued that there are given features of a person’s life-world (for example, their sense of identity) that are shaped by experiences that have occurred within their environment (Ashworth, 2006). In phenomenology, the key focus lies with the relationship between the individual and the meanings ascribed to a given phenomena (Crotty, 2011).

Edmund Husserl (1859–1939), a German philosopher and mathematician, founded phenomenological theory (van Manen, 1990). For Husserl, the aim of phenomenology was to create an understanding of how the world is experienced and interpreted through consciousness (van Manen 1990). A student of Husserl, Heidegger (1889–1976), rejected the notion that people are passive and separated
from the phenomena that they are attempting to understand (Magee, 1988). By contrast, Heidegger posited that individuals cannot be understood independently of the environment they are engaged with (Magee, 1988), and he emphasised the importance of considering one’s practical involvement in their environment (Draucker, 1999). Schutz (1972) agreed and theorised that an individual’s morals, values and beliefs originate from meanings encountered in their social world including their everyday experiences. Meanings are an important component of qualitative research because they are established as people engage with their everyday activities and most importantly, they are subject to differing interpretations across different individuals (Flood, 2010).

Cohen and Omery (1994) identified two main phenomenological approaches that can be applied to social qualitative research: descriptive (eidetic) and interpretive (hermeneutic). In descriptive phenomenology, researchers attempt to either ignore or eliminate any existing beliefs or predictions they may have regarding their topic in order to avoid potential biases in their results (Connelly, 2010). Husserl (1970) posited that subjective data is a much-needed tool for researchers to have when studying human motivation and behaviour as both are strongly influenced by one’s beliefs about reality (Flood, 2010).

Contrary to the descriptive approach, interpretive phenomenology is based on the premise that preconceived ideas cannot be put aside as the researcher’s interpretations, applied methods, and knowledge of their topic will inevitably be influenced by these ideas (Connelly, 2010). This viewpoint suggests that researchers can note any presuppositions and report the effects these may have on the outcome of the study, however it is not realistic to expect that these ideas can remain separate from the research process. Heidegger (1962) agreed that it is not possible to rid a
researcher’s mind of preconceived notions about a topic as these understandings are most likely what motivated the researcher to explore the topic to begin with. Therefore, the interpretive phenomenologist posits that personal knowledge is a valuable component of qualitative research (Geanellos, 2000). With regard to the role of the researcher in phenomenological research, Walters (1995) believed that in hermeneutical studies, the researcher is an active participant in the interpretive process rather than a passive recipient of information. The researcher of the current project has a particular theoretical sensitivity to the topic through previous work with families experiencing AVTP. As such, an interpretive rather than descriptive approach was deemed more appropriate including a careful consideration of any potential bias in the findings.

In addition to adopting Heidegger’s inductive, hermeneutic approach, the current study drew upon social constructionism (SC) as an overriding theoretical framework. The concept of SC originated with Berger and Luckmann (1966/1991) who were interested in how human interaction shapes the development of meanings that become entrenched over time. Berger and Luckmann (1966/1991) sought to apply the theoretical perspective of phenomenology to widely researched concepts such as identity, socialisation, social roles, and language. They argued that an analysis of the societal conditions responsible for the construction and enhancement of knowledge is crucial to understanding how human beings prescribe meaning that inform their beliefs and actions. SC posits that individuals’ perspectives derive from social interaction and cultural norms that are embedded into their daily lives (Creswell, 2007). According to Schutz (1972), previous experiences and exposure to social attitudes influence and ultimately determine how a person perceives,
experiences and understands a given phenomenon. Thus, these socially-constructed perceptions prescribe how one responds to a particular situation.

SC emphasises that understanding the reasoning behind ascribing labels to certain issues is of utmost importance in the social sciences (Rubington & Weinberg, 1995). Spector and Kitsuse (1987) argued that when conducting social research, scholars are responsible for determining how individuals apply their own conclusions, particularly if adopting the theoretical perspective that social problems are socially constructed. Furthermore, the manner with which individuals behave in response to situations or issues is of great importance to sociologists as these responses are likely to reflect the social and cultural construction of the issue (Spector & Kitsuse, 1987). When applying this theory to social and educational research, perspectives are derived from focusing on the specific contexts in which people live and work, allowing researchers to grasp the meanings others possess about the world they live in (Creswell, 2007). For example, exploring the perspectives of a group of individuals employed in a specific sector or profession enables an issue under investigation to be understood in the context of how participants’ views surrounding the issue are influenced socially and culturally within their professional encounters. More specifically, applying the SC framework to the current research project has enabled an exploration into how professionals in the education sector understand AVTP on the basis of their own experiences and social interactions within the school environment.

3.4 Sampling

This research used purposive sampling, whereby participants are selected according to particular criteria that is necessary to answer the research questions
When purposive sampling is applied, all participants share the experience they have been asked to discuss, which fits within phenomenological research (Smith, 2008; Willig, 2008). It is a non-random form of sampling and the researcher can use a wide range of methods to locate participants whose data will be especially valuable to the research due to their capacity (background, experience and expertise) to be ‘information rich’ on the topic (Creswell, 2007). All participants were selected on the basis that they were employed at secondary independent schools in New South Wales (NSW).

Participants were recruited with the assistance of a staff member at a community organisation based in NSW that provides services for young people aged 12-21 facing issues such as homelessness, drug and alcohol dependency, exclusion from school, neglect and abuse. Five high schools are associated with this organisation and each school was invited to take part in the research via email. A Memorandum of Understanding was executed between the organisation and the University of Sydney allowing the research to take place within the schools concerned. In addition, each school provided separate approval for the research to take place within their organisation. The organisation presented details of the research to staff members, who were invited to participate. Approximately ten staff expressed interest in the project with a total of six interviews eventually taking place across two schools in May 2013. Small sample sizes are ideally suited to interpretative phenomenological studies. If a sample size is too large, the researcher may be unable to produce an analysis in-depth enough to address the research questions sufficiently (Smith, 2008). A sample of between five and eight participants was therefore considered most beneficial for this research.
3.5 Participants

Six participants were recruited from two secondary schools for behaviourally challenged students in NSW. Demographic details are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Details of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th># Years’ Experience in Sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pamela</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>New Zealander</td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>2 years, 11 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Manager – Education &amp; Community Services</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Intake &amp; Aftercare Coordinator</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>9 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Australian (Chinese Heritage)</td>
<td>Counsellor</td>
<td>3 years, 4 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>8 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As illustrated by Table 1, participants are represented by pseudonyms to protect their identities, and each pseudonym begins with the same letter as the participant’s type of role in the education sector (e.g. the two in support worker roles have been given names beginning with ‘S’ and the two teachers’ pseudonyms begin with ‘T’). Furthermore, this table illustrates that the sample was diverse in terms of their roles and experience within the education sector.

3.6 Materials

A dictaphone was used to capture participants’ responses during the interview process. Smith (2008) asserted that if a researcher does not record interviews, and instead takes notes, important nuances will be missed and the data
captured will only represent the ‘gist’ of what participants were saying (Smith, 2008). The added benefit of tape-recording interviews is that doing so allows dialogue between the researcher and participants to run smoothly, increasing the chances of gaining rapport (Smith, 2008). Each interviewee was provided with hard copies of a Participant Information Statement (PIS), detailing the research and outlining their role in the study, and a Consent Form to be signed prior to interviews commencing. See Appendix A for a copy of the PIS and Appendix B for a copy of the consent form used in this study. Further, each participant was presented with a vignette depicting a situation involving an adolescent female behaving abusively toward her mother, which aligned with the working definition of AVTP applied to this research.

3.7 Procedure

3.7.1 Data Collection

Data was collected from each participant once via semi-structured interviews including the presentation of a vignette depicting an AVTP incident (see Appendix C for a copy of the interview schedule and vignette). Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data because this is the recommended approach in interpretative phenomenological research (Smith, 2008; Willig, 2008). Smith (2008) posited that there are four benefits to the use of the semi-structured interviews in phenomenological research: the researcher can establish rapport with participants; the ordering of questions is less important than the content of the interviews; the interviewer is free to probe as interesting points arise; and the interviewer can direct the interview based on the interviewee’s interests and concerns.
Furthermore, semi-structured interviews enable greater flexibility in the data collection process, which as Smith (2008) argued, has a tendency to result in richer data. However, Smith (2008) noted the following aspects of semi-structured interviews that a researcher needs to be cautious of: the degree of control that the researcher has over the interview situation is somewhat reduced; and it can be time-consuming to analyse semi-structured interview transcripts. Smith (2008) also pointed out that it is important for research questions to be framed openly, allowing the participants to provide their perspectives without being directed to a specific response (Smith, 2008). Willig (2008) agreed, emphasising that questions must be non-directive and that any focused questions should encourage elaboration only (as opposed to asking participants to agree with a given concept). In light of these challenges, two pilot interviews were conducted and analysed prior to the collection of data for this project. This enabled the researcher to ensure that the questions included in the interview schedule could sufficiently elicit responses that address the research questions. Furthermore, these pilot interview transcripts were analysed independently by a third researcher as a means of ensuring the reliability of the chosen method of analysis (see the following section for more details on the analysis method utilised in this research).

The justification for using a vignette was that it was considered a beneficial way to generate meaningful discussion with participants about the topic. Vignettes are stories about situations under examination in a research project, which can be generated from a range of sources including anecdotes, case studies, prior research findings, and field experiences (Hughes, 1998). As there was no requirement for participants to have encountered AVTP before taking part in the study, providing an example that embodied some of the key facets of AVTP allowed participants to refer
to a specific, hypothetical case. According to Hughes (1998), vignettes are an effective means of focusing interviews and giving participants a ‘snap shot’ of a given situation they can comment on, especially if they require some extra assistance to discuss the topic (for instance, if they have limited experience with it, or find it difficult to discuss for personal reasons). Hughes (1998) also suggested that when a topic is complex and sensitive (like AVTP), vignettes are a useful way of generating discussion in a manner that is less confronting for participants. The interview durations ranged from 25-55 minutes and were recorded using a dictaphone. The audio recordings were then transcribed verbatim resulting in six transcripts.

3.7.2 Method of Analysis

The data generated in this study was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Meaning is central in interpretative phenomenological research Smith (1996) and IPA involves a process of exploring in detail how participants ascribe meaning to a given phenomena (Smith, 2008; Sokolowski, 2000) allowing individual experiences to be uncovered (Willig, 2008). Participants in IPA research provide data whilst trying to make sense of an issue and the researcher is faced with the task of trying to make sense of participants during this process (Smith, 2008). Therefore, IPA recognises that the researcher has an active role in the research process as their appraisal of the data generated is central (Smith, 2008). IPA is commonly used in health and nursing research and lends itself well to studies involving complex topics (Smith, 2008).

In an example of previous research that has adopted IPA, Smith and Osborn (2007) analysed semi-structured interviews with six patients affected by chronic lower back pain to ascertain their views about how their condition affects their sense
of self and identity. The in-depth nature of IPA allowed Smith and Osborn (2007) to uncover participants’ experiences of the social implications of chronic back pain as the negative impact of their condition on their sense of self and the subsequent tendency to direct negative affect onto other people were highlighted as emerging themes. Both of these studies illustrate how IPA is useful in research that seeks to uncover the meaning that individuals ascribe to a given issue or circumstance, particularly when a topic is complex and when an in-depth understanding of participants’ perspectives and/or experiences is warranted.

Due to the complexity of AVTP and the aims of the current research, IPA was deemed the most appropriate method of analysis. An IPA approach enables participants’ words to create a composite image of their stance on the topic (Bainger, 2011) even if they have not previously developed an opinion of AVTP. According to Bainger (2011), IPA is inductive in nature, which was essential for this research as the research questions were centred upon participants’ perspectives, and IPA allows these perspectives to emerge from the data. A key point highlighted by Willig (2012), is that IPA requires researchers to be reflexive during their analysis of the data by being aware of, and recognising, how the results of the research will ultimately be shaped by their own assumptions, views, and investment in the topic (Willig, 2012). This was recognised during the entire research process for this study and is commented on in more depth in the Conclusion section of this thesis.

3.7.3 Analysis Procedure

The first stage of the IPA process required a thorough reading of each of the six transcripts. During this process, annotations were made by the researcher every time a potential theme or detail of interest emerged from the data. According to
Willig (2008), during this stage of IPA, these annotations can include associations, comparisons to attitudes in previous research, questions, and comments on language use. These notes are a method of documenting the issues arising in the text as the researcher works through the data (Willig, 2008). In the current study, this note-taking process enabled the researcher to exercise reflexivity by using these notes to recognise how their previous experience in the field has shaped their interpretations of the data.

The second stage of analysis required the researcher to identify themes that emerged in the text (as identified in the previous, note-taking stage). Willig (2008) argued that the labels ascribed to the themes generated in the data are conceptual and capture the essence of the theme they are representing. During this stage, the initial notes generated in stage one were transformed into concise phrases. Smith (2008) stated that these phrases must accurately summarise what the researcher has read in the transcripts to ensure that the results reflect the words of the participant, rather than the perspective of the researcher (Smith, 2008). It is not a requirement of IPA research that every statement or line of data will generate themes (Smith, 2008). Rather, the number of emerging themes in the data is a reflection of the richness of a particular piece of text (Smith, 2008). Although IPA is not concerned with the frequency of themes in data (Smith, 2008), categorising statements into themes and noting these every time they emerged allowed the researcher to ascertain which themes were dominant in the research.

In the third stage of the analysis, the themes identified in stage two (for all six transcripts) were listed. In this stage of IPA, it is important for the researcher to think about the listed themes as they relate to one another (Smith, 2008; Willig, 2008). Participants’ descriptions and views are identified and then clustered into categories
according to the themes that their responses generate. Collectively, these themes paint a picture of the experiences and perspectives of participants (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). In this research, the themes that related to one another formed clusters and were categorised under ‘master theme’ titles. See Appendix D for the list of themes generated in this research.

As Willig (2008) emphasised, it is important to ensure that any groups of related themes identified during this phase can be easily traced back to the original data. In other words, the connections between themes identified during analysis must be reflected in participants’ words (Willig, 2008). To ensure that the themes identified in this research accurately represented the accounts of participants, the locations of specific, verbatim quotes were recorded to allow the researcher to refer back to the original text and use the quotations in the final write-up of results to illustrate the themes discussed. Such a process is essential to ensure transparency of the analysis.

The fourth stage of the analysis involved the production of a summary table documenting the identified themes aligned with quotations to illustrate each theme with references to where the extracts appear in the transcripts. Refer to Table 2 for an excerpt from the summary table of themes generated in this research. Smith (2008) and Willig (2008) both advised that the summary table should only include the themes that address participants’ experiences and perspectives concerning the topic to ensure that the data is relevant to the research questions. Therefore, some of the themes generated during stage two may be omitted during this phase (Willig, 2008). In IPA research, some master themes identified will contain more subordinate themes than others, and there may be a number of quotations that support one particular theme, while others appear in the text less often (Willig, 2008).
### Table 2: Excerpt from Table of Themes Generated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Master Theme</th>
<th>Subordinate Themes</th>
<th>Quotations from Interview Transcripts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Viewing drugs and/or alcohol as causal factors for AVTP</td>
<td>(1,3,6) Adolescent drug and alcohol use noted as a factor&lt;br&gt; (1) Sarah’s drug/alcohol issues seen as a factor (in Vignette)&lt;br&gt; (2,3,6) Suggests that AVTP parents may have problems with drugs/alcohol, which could be a factor</td>
<td>1.6.177 “Self-esteem issues, resentment issues, drug and alcohol issues are all going to contribute to the family situation.”&lt;br&gt; 3.4.130 “Boys using drugs is another reason. They can’t get their drugs so they take it out on their parents.”&lt;br&gt; 1.2.55 “The other thing is the drugs and alcohol, because I work in the drug and alcohol sector, that violence or anger can come about as a result of using drugs as well.”&lt;br&gt; 2.5.149 “Whether that’s highlighting the fact that the parent has AOD issues, whether they have, you know, other issues which are there.”&lt;br&gt; 3.9.301 “Mum might be a drug addict.”&lt;br&gt; 3.9.335 “It’s like ‘I get why you hate your mum, I get why, not that you’re violent, but I can understand it cause mum will go off when she’s drunk or she’s been on ice for four days, or whatever it may be’.”&lt;br&gt; 6.7.263 “Mum might be resolving her issues from that situation through drugs or alcohol, and that causes neglect for a young person, if she is just lashing out for attention.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final stage of analysing the data involved translating the themes identified in the preceding phases into a narrative account (Smith, 2008). Here, the themes were described and discussed in relation to how the data addressed the research questions. Smith (2008) suggested two ways that an IPA researcher can
write-up the results of their analysis: writing up a single participant’s transcript in case study form; or incorporating the data from interviews across all participants into one write-up, allowing for a discussion and comparison across all of the data collected for the study. Given the aims of this research, the latter approach was adopted.

Smith (2008) noted that researchers can either use the themes identified in the first transcript to guide the subsequent analyses, or work on subsequent transcripts from scratch, ignoring the themes generated in previous transcripts. Smith (2008) argued that regardless of the approach a researcher adopts, they need to be disciplined enough to both identify repeating patterns without failing to acknowledge new themes that emerge. Smith (2008) recommended working on each transcript independently when performing IPA on small sample sizes. This approach was adopted for this study and each transcript was analysed independently of the other five to ensure that no key themes were missed, which is a significant risk when looking for themes in a text rather than allowing themes to simply emerge (Willig, 2008).
4.0 Results & Discussion

Numerous perspectives concerning adolescent violence towards parents (AVTP) were uncovered during the analysis phase of this study. These are discussed in the following section with emphasis on the meanings inherent in participants’ statements and how the current findings relate to previous research.

4.1 Conceptualisations of AVTP

The majority of definitions that participants applied to AVTP align with the domestic violence (DV) definition guiding this thesis, which conceptualises AVTP as the deliberate and ongoing infliction of abuse by an adolescent towards a parent or guardian with the intention of exerting power and control. This abuse can take the following forms: physical abuse, emotional abuse, manipulation and intimidation, threats, sexual abuse, damage to property, and financial abuse. Most participants included verbal and emotional abuse in their definitions. For instance, Pamela, a psychologist, conceptualised AVTP as follows: “So I would define it as an adolescent who, in some way, shape or form, becomes aggressive through physical or even emotional kind of violence towards their family or their parents.”

In another example, Tom, a teacher, included threats of violence in his definition:

Actual threats of physical violence to parents, or physical damage to property, or actually inflicting physical, yeah or verbal as well, that’s the thing, adolescent violence, so verbal as well. Definitely there are lots of ways that they can verbally abuse their parents or caregivers.

Damage to property and power and control were also noted in participants’ descriptions of AVTP. For example, Tom commented: “You know, they’ve been bullied or abused in the past and this is the way they can regain some control and power in life.” Manipulation was also believed to be a component of AVTP, as
Christine, a counsellor, stated: “It’s just kind of a pattern, there’s definitely some kind of manipulation and stuff going on to coerce the other person.” All participants included elements of the DV definition when conceptualising AVTP. It appears that their understandings of what constitutes AVTP were consistent with standard definitions. Participants’ background knowledge and/or experience of AVTP appeared to shape the link between AVTP to DV when constructing their own meanings. This is explored further later in this chapter (see 4.2.1).

4.2 Views on Causal Factors

Participants identified a number of possible causes for AVTP including: limited boundaries and/or ineffective discipline from parents; physical discipline or abuse from parents; histories of family dysfunction, including domestic violence and parental separation; adolescent drug/alcohol use; parental drug/alcohol use; adolescent mental health issues; adolescent self-esteem problems; adolescents’ lack of respect for parents; adolescents’ expression of emotions; and low socio-economic-status (SES).

4.2.1 Histories of Domestic Violence (DV)

The most common factor identified by participants was past domestic violence (DV) between an adolescent’s parents. All participants saw exposure to, or experiences of, DV as a precursor for AVTP. For example, Tina, a teacher, stated: “I suppose a lot of it is to do with what they are exposed to at home, you know maybe they have been victims of domestic violence.” It was also suggested that AVTP could result from young people having abuse modelled to them through DV:
The young people that I’ve sort of come across, violence is one of the tools they have in their toolkit that they can quite easily revert to and that’s a way that they can deal with situations because that’s been modelled to them (Sam).

In another example, Christine referred to abuse as a learned behaviour and suggested that Sarah’s actions in the vignette may result from seeing her mother as an easy target: “If she is used to being a victim and Sarah, maybe once dad has gone, then has been able to learn from her mum, she’s able to see how easily overpowered her mum is maybe”. It was also suggested that Sarah may have even experienced abuse first-hand before becoming abusive herself. For instance, Sam, a support worker, noted: “I’d say that a large percentage of young people that actually progress to this level of violence, that they have experienced it and probably been on the end of it.” The link between DV and a young person’s self-esteem was also discussed as a potential factor:

There are always repercussions from domestic violence, and there’s always a huge impact on the young people, always, and that can cause, I think that can cause a real damage to the young person’s development and self-esteem and understanding herself or relationships (Tom: Teacher).

It was also suggested that the past DV described in the vignette may have inhibited Jean’s ability to effectively parent Sarah as Tina commented: “I think being exposed to the domestic violence as a child, and who knows what Jean was like. It doesn’t sound as though she was a strong motherly figure after suffering domestic violence.” Similarly, resentment of a parent who has experienced DV was discussed in relation to factors for AVTP. For example, Tom suggested that young people who engage in AVTP following DV may be acting out of frustration or resentment towards the abused parent: “Sometimes the young person can be angry at their mum for being weak and not protecting them from their dad. Obviously there is nothing they can do, so they look down on them.” This statement suggests that some
adolescents who have grown up witnessing or experiencing DV may hold the victimised parent responsible for the abuse causing them to rationalise their own violent behaviours because they see this parent as a deserving victim.

The fact that all participants saw histories of DV as a factor for AVTP is a key finding. It is well documented in the literature that childhood exposure to DV causes young people to become more susceptible to behaving aggressively themselves, particularly during adolescence and adulthood (Boxer, et al, 2009; Edleson, 1999; Ehrensaft, Cohen, Brown, Smailes, Chen & Johnson, 2003; Fergusson & Horwood, 1998; Gilliom, Shaw, Beck, Schonberg & Lukon, 2002; Haw, 2010; Howard & Rottem, 2008; Kethineni, 2004; Richards, 2011; Sheehan, 1997). Coupled with these prior findings, the current results highlight the need for more focus on the intergenerational transmission of violence in families in research and intervention efforts.

4.2.2 Parental Separation

The second most commonly cited factor for AVTP was the impact of parental separation on the young person. For instance, Sam noted the impact of parental separation on a child’s life in the context of factors for AVTP: “Obviously the separation of the family is a huge issue. We know that has a huge impact, whether at the time or later on in the young person’s life.” Pamela elaborated further by suggesting that a young person’s identity and self-esteem are adversely impacted by parental separation, even with an otherwise healthy upbringing:

I get kids who say to me ‘I don’t know what it’s like to have a dad’ and they feel kind of empty so then you get someone who will kind of develop unhealthy relationships and behaviours as they get older because they don’t know how to deal with stuff and again it’s just because dad’s not been around and they have identity issues and
trust issues and self-esteem issues. And it’s like “I’ve got a really healthy mum, I just don’t have my dad”.

It was also suggested that Sarah’s behaviour towards Jean (in the vignette) may be the result of her parents’ separation, irrespective of the history of DV, as Sally, a support worker, stated: “If Sarah hasn’t seen it and it’s behind closed doors, she’s not going to understand why mum’s leaving dad, she’s going to be lashing out on mum, saying ‘it’s your fault, you’re splitting up the family unit’.” Sally has highlighted that young people from families with histories of DV and parental separation are not necessarily aware of the DV (and consequently, the reasons for the separation). These findings are reflective of prior research indicating a link between parental separation and AVTP (Haw, 2010; Howard & Rottem, 2008; Stewart, et al, 2006). For instance, in Howard and Rottem’s (2008) study, all ten victims were sole-parent mothers and therefore none of the adolescents in question had relationships with their fathers.

The fact that participants made links between parental separation and AVTP suggests that they may hold expectations that AVTP families have experienced some form of family dysfunction. This is important given that prior research has indicated that people who do not fit the socially constructed ideal of a ‘typical victim’ often fear that their experiences of abuse will not be taken seriously or their needs will not be prioritised because they appear to be highly functioning members of society (e.g. Haw, 2010). For instance, Haw (2010) found that service providers appeared reluctant to assist one mother because she did not come across as ‘helpless’. Consequently, this mother started to believe that she did not deserve help and that services were not interested in supporting her, which made her reluctant to seek further assistance (Haw, 2010).
4.3 Perspectives on Parents & Adolescents Affected by AVTP

Following the presentation of the vignette depicting the situation between Jean and Sarah (see Appendix C), participants were asked to comment on their views on both parties (Jean and Sarah). This prompted some discussion on the plight of both parents and adolescents who are affected by AVTP. Firstly, a common theme was sympathetic views about victimised parents. For example, Pamela suggested that she relates to Jean as a mother:

I can’t even imagine what it would be like to be a parent and actually having to ring the police on your kid. I just, it kind of makes me sick thinking about it because I am a mum. It’d be horrible to do that.

Additionally, two participants demonstrated that they understood the plight of parents. Sam suggested that Jean is probably feeling as though she is running out of options: “The mother seems like she’s what you would describe as a ‘beaten woman’ and she’s had a hard life and she’s coming to the end of her capacity in terms of what she can do to manage her daughter.” It was also recognised that parents experiencing AVTP do not want be in an abusive situation: “Deep down I’m sure Jean wants a good relationship with Sarah as well (Tina). “I mean most of the time these parents and these kids don’t want to be in the situation they’re in. They don’t want to be in a violent situation. They know that they want something different” (Sam: Support worker). Similarly, Tina expressed the view that children do not want to be in abusive relationships with their parents: “Deep down through all this abusive behaviour, what they want is a functional relationship with their parent. I would find that really uncommon if there was a kid that didn’t actually want a nice relationship with their parent.” These findings illustrate an understanding of AVTP’s impact on the quality of relationships between parents and their children whilst acknowledging the importance of working to repair these relationships.
4.4 Potentially Damaging Views about AVTP

There were some views expressed by participants of this study that were reminiscent of popular beliefs about AVTP identified in previous literature as potentially damaging to affected families. These views are: that AVTP is ‘typical teenage behaviour’ and does not constitute abuse (Haw, 2010; Stewart, et al, 2007); and that parents who experience AVTP are responsible for the abuse (Haw, 2010; Paterson, et al, 2002; Stewart, et al, 2007).

4.4.1 Viewing AVTP as Typical Teenage Behaviour

While the majority of participants of the current study recognised the behaviours in the vignette as abusive and believed the case was serious, there was one participant, Sally, who saw the situation between Sarah and Jean as normal teenage behaviour. Sally has several years of experience working with at-risk youth and stated that she has encountered more serious cases of AVTP than the scenario depicted in the vignette: “This is just a normal kid. Yeah she swears at her mum, buying pot and alcohol, whoopity bloody doo, this sort of stuff, so this is quite mild. This is a typical youth kind of behaviour when things aren’t going right. So they are taking it out on mum.” Sally also believed that the conflict between Sarah and Jean was typical of a parent-teen relationship.

This belief is supported in Australian research where parents reported that they were told by education professionals that their situation reflected nothing more than normal parent-teen conflict spanning from typical teenage rebellion (Haw, 2010; Stewart, et al, 2007). Due to Sally’s experience, her comments may suggest that education professionals experienced with AVTP may not regard situations as abusive if they see them as less severe relative to others they have encountered. This
could be problematic if a family experiencing a situation reminiscent of this vignette was to seek assistance in a school, as there is a risk that their situation could be trivialised or simply not identified as abuse.

In contrast to the above finding, two participants emphasised that AVTP is more than typical teenage behaviour. For example, after being presented with the vignette, Pamela commented: “She’s a teenager and teenagers go through teenage phases but it seems to be a lot more than that.” In addition, the majority of participants defined Sarah’s behaviour towards her mother in the vignette as abusive. For example, Christine stated: “To me, that’s pretty straight out abuse.”

Previous literature has emphasised the importance of recognising AVTP as abuse in order to ensure that perpetrators take responsibility for their actions and the consequences (Frizzell, 1998; Gallagher, 2008; Haw, 2010). As most participants in the current study recognised Sarah’s conduct as abusive, this suggests they would take similar cases seriously and acknowledge the abuse these families are enduring.

### 4.4.2 Assigning Responsibility to Victimised Parents

Another common assumption inherent in some participants’ comments was that victimised parents are responsible for AVTP. For instance, Sally suggested that AVTP rarely happens in families with a loving mother:

I believe if they’ve been brought up in a beautiful, loving home with a loving mother, I can’t see so much of that happening. They think “you know what mum, you’re nothing but scum” and they’re quite right, their mother is not even worth being called a mother.

These comments point to a belief that parents who experience AVTP have done something to either warrant or explain the abuse they are enduring. The reason that this view may be problematic is that prior studies have found that parents experiencing AVTP often feel ashamed and are unlikely to seek help if they
encounter any parent-blaming attitudes (Bobic, 2004; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Cottrell, 2005; Eckstein, 2004; Haw, 2010). If a parent who discloses their situation to a professional who then blames them for the abuse decides not to seek help in the future, the situation could continue to escalate without any support being offered to the family. Prior studies documented cases where this has occurred (Haw, 2010; Howard & Rottem, 2008) and the implications for families affected by any form of family violence who do not receive support are serious as their emotional and physical safety are jeopardised. Therefore, it is important to identify and possibly critique any parent-blaming attitudes amongst service providers and address these views before they are voiced to families who need help.

There was also a tendency for participants to assume that parents experiencing AVTP have problems with drug and/or alcohol use. Interestingly, the vignette did not mention any drug or alcohol use on the part of the mother, yet three participants suggested that Jean may have used drugs and alcohol, and stated that this could be a factor in Sarah’s behaviour. For example, Tom commented: “Mum might be resolving her issues from that situation through drugs or alcohol, and that causes neglect for a young person, if she is just lashing out for attention.” These comments were made in the context of ascertaining why Sarah has become violent towards Jean. Sam elaborated further and suggested a number of potential actions on the part of Jean that may have contributed to the situation:

We don’t know, from the time the father left, we don’t know what choices the mother made from that point and whether there was any impact on the daughter. I mean, was the mother turning to alcohol or to drugs? Was there, you know, partners along the way which caused further problems? Did she continue to live her own life and not provide support for the daughter?

All of these possibilities (i.e. drug/alcohol use, subsequent partners, lack of support for Sarah) suggest that this participant is attributing Sarah’s behaviour to her
mother’s problems. Given the context of this statement, one could argue that there is an element of parent-blaming inherent in these comments. This view is consistent with previous research that has found that some service providers have a tendency to rationalise AVTP on the basis of victimised parents’ deficiencies, with some suggesting that parents are responsible for the abuse (Frizzell, 1998; Haw, 2010; Holt, 2009; Paterson, et al, 2002; Stewart, et al, 2007). When responding to AVTP cases, assigning responsibility to victimised parents can be counterproductive as previous findings suggest that parents who have felt blamed for AVTP will often feel reluctant to seek help in the future (Bobic, 2004; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Cottrell, 2005; Eckstein, 2004; Haw, 2010). Keeping any form of abuse hidden is dangerous to all family members concerned, as research has shown that when abuse continues over time, it can escalate resulting in severe and even fatal consequences (Bobic, 2004; Cottrell, 2005).

4.5 The Relationship Between AVTP & the Education Sector

4.5.1 Participants’ Experiences with AVTP in Schools

All six participants had encountered AVTP at some stage during their careers in the education field with two stating that they come across it regularly. The vignette presented to participants helped to facilitate discussion about their’ experiences with the issue. For example, Sam noted the likeness of the scenario to a number of cases encountered: “That’s really typical of the students we get here, it’s really common.” Similarly, Tina commented: “That’s all my kids rolled into one.” As this vignette was based largely on case studies from previous literature, the finding that it closely resembled cases encountered by participants suggests that it was reminiscent of real-life AVTP situations. One may therefore conclude that
participants’ views and recommendations generated in response to the vignette were likely to represent their real-life responses and recommendations to AVTP cases.

In terms of how cases of AVTP have first come to the attention of participants, three believed that it is commonly reported in schools by parents. For example, Tina noted that school staff members are often treated like counsellors by parents experiencing AVTP: “You have some parents that are really open about it and... often treat us as counsellors sometimes about the difficulties that they are having and the abuse that they suffer at the hands of their children.” Furthermore, four participants believed that the school is the first point of contact for families experiencing AVTP. For example, Pamela stated:

Being at the school, you know, just by default, you are the first person they trust, the first person they see and that’s how a lot of disclosures happen. I think that it’s first point of contact in terms of before you get the other services involved, school would be the first place where people would notice the young person’s behaviour.

This finding falls in line with previous research that has found that AVTP parents commonly disclose their situation to school professionals (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation, 2001; Haw, 2010). The fact that schools have been found to be a common first port of call for families experiencing AVTP highlights the importance of ensuring that education professionals are well-versed on the issue and have the resources required to provide responses that help support families in a constructive way. Therefore, this finding has important implications for future research, policy and practice. In addition to parental disclosures, it was also reported that school staff often see patterns in a young person’s behaviour indicating that there are problems in the home. For example, Tina suggested that the way adolescents speak to (and about) their parents can often serve as warning bells for AVTP:
If you hear the way students talk about their parents, and the language that they use when referring to them, you hear them on the phone to their parents, calling them every name under the sun. That often is a warning bell.

This finding suggests that warning signs of serious problems in adolescents’ family lives can be recognised by education professionals, which may imply that they do not require a disclosure from a parent or child in order to become aware that AVTP is occurring. This is an important finding given that previous research has found that parents affected by AVTP do not necessarily realise they are experiencing abuse or they do not articulate it as such when they speak to other people about what is going on in the home (Haw, 2010). Therefore, one could argue that being able to recognise the signs of AVTP without relying on verbal disclosures is of critical importance to education professionals. This is because families experiencing AVTP that do not know how to go about disclosing their situation could still receive support if professionals are able to recognise and respond to the signs they have picked up on in the school environment.

4.5.2 Education Professionals’ Roles in Assisting Families

A number of participants advised that they believe school staff can have a role in assisting AVTP families. Sam stated that schools represent an integral component of adolescents’ and their family’s lives: “I think that schools are critical and are a central part of any young person and family life.” It was also suggested that school staff can be role models for young people, and that by doing so, they can provide support in AVTP situations, as Tom articulated: “I think that kids get to spend a lot of time at school and we model behaviour and can model conflict resolution and we can model respect.” Given that participants noted that schools are often first points of contact for families, the fact that the majority of participants
viewed education professionals as having high potential for providing support in AVTP situations is a key finding.

However, two participants suggested that whilst certain professionals within the education sector can have a role in supporting families, it is too much to expect teachers to become involved in AVTP situations. For example, Christine commented: “Obviously teachers know that’s not their job.” The danger of school staff becoming involved in AVTP situations was discussed by Tina, who spoke of a particular incident involving an adolescent girl who became distrustful of her for intervening and in turn, became disengaged from her education: “We ended up losing her because she was like ‘well I don’t like schools getting involved in my family life, and I used to be able to come to school and just forget about everything else’. From that moment, I have been careful to not get too involved in family issues, cause I don’t want to risk losing a student who’s engaged in their education.” Tina noted that she has since become reluctant to intervene in situations involving students’ family lives because adolescents’ educational engagement can be adversely affected when their personal issues are addressed in the school environment.

There were three participants who suggested that while school staff can support families to some extent, they might not be the most qualified service providers to assist in the longer-term. For instance, Christine commented: “They might be able to impact on the students and obviously hold meetings with the parents, but in terms of more intense support, like I don’t think that can be provided.” Tom suggested that there are agencies that are more qualified than schools to support AVTP families: “I don’t know if we can do some conversations and have family here and discuss things like that, we have that option, but I think there is probably people better equipped for that.”
The finding that the majority of participants believed that education professionals can have a role in assisting families affected by AVTP is a key finding given that previous studies have indicated that children who engage in AVTP often experience educational and/or behavioural difficulties at school (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Haw, 2010; Roult & Anderson, 2011). Furthermore, the fact that half of the participants believed that school staff may not be able to provide long-term support suggests that these participants have realistic views about their capacity to effectively support families and that they are aware of their own potential shortcomings when it comes to dealing with AVTP. This finding is consistent with the recommendations of prior research emphasising the importance of appropriately qualified professionals providing support for family issues such as abuse (Campbell, Raja & Grining, 1999). If participants do not believe that education professionals are the best-equipped to deal with AVTP cases, it is important that they are able to recognise this and act accordingly to avoid misinforming families.

4.5.3 Distinctions Between Mainstream & Independent Schools

There was an additional finding relating to the role of education professionals in dealing with AVTP relating to the difference between mainstream schools and independent schools. Four participants recognised that the propensity for mainstream schools to identify and respond to AVTP is likely to be considerably different to their school. For instance, Sally commented that AVTP may not be encountered as frequently in mainstream schools: “If I wasn’t doing the job I was doing, then I don’t think I would see nearly as much violence towards parents, because it’s just not displayed out there.” Christine shared similar views:

I worked in mainstream schools and stuff and to be honest I don’t think I really heard about it that much, it’s a bigger pool of kids...
about 500-600 students or about 400 in primary school, but definitely when I came to this organisation, I remember dealing with a couple of kids where their parents had a couple of AVOs out on them, and I remember thinking ‘whoa, this is really weird’.

These views were expressed in the context of the potential for education professionals to assist AVTP families. It was also posited that the nature of their school (i.e. one that works with at-risk youth) makes it easier to support families affected by AVTP because of the relationship that staff members have already developed with their students and/or their parents. For example, Christine stated:

In this environment and this organisation, I think it would be easier because we are a support service, so in that way I guess we have a relationship with our clients that they hopefully trust us enough that we’d be doing what’s best, or helping them to try and get what’s best for them.

In reference to the role of teachers, it was suggested that the focus, experience and ability of teachers in mainstream schools to work with AVTP families is likely to be considerably different to this type of school. Sally proposed:

It takes nearly two years for a mainstream teacher to try and change that behaviour of being in a straight line, so listening, being quiet in class, this sort of stuff, and then to come into our industry, and to do what they do here, where they are here from seven in the morning until seven at night, or we’re down at the police station, or we’re down at the home, it’s very different. There is so much more to what the teachers do here, to what they do there.

The recognition that responses to AVTP from professionals employed in mainstream schools may differ to that of the participants in this study is an important finding. In order to ascertain whether this perceived difference exists, examination into the perspectives of professionals from mainstream schools is required.

### 4.6 Challenges Encountered when Faced with AVTP

Participants identified a number of challenges associated with responding to AVTP in school settings. These challenges included: parents’ reluctance to seek
help; difficulties engaging families in intervention; complexities associated with culture; and limited services available to refer families.

4.6.1 Parents’ Reluctance to Seek Help

Participants identified a number of issues regarding the help-seeking of victimised parents. Firstly, the willingness of parents to report or disclose AVTP was commented on by the majority of participants. The possible reasons suggested as to why parents may be reluctant to disclose AVTP were: fear of the young person who is behaving abusively; the shame and stigma associated with being victimised; loyalty to their children and aversion to getting them into trouble; and fear or mistrust of formal services. One of the most commonly discussed barriers to parents’ help-seeking was the stigma of AVTP. For instance, Sally likened AVTP to how hidden and taboo DV used to be: “It’s very much like DV used to be about forty years ago, where everything was swept under the table and nobody knows what’s going on.” Christine shared similar views when asked to comment on barriers to seeking help: “It’s a big stigma attached to that.” Previous research supports the notion that the shame and stigma of AVTP is a key reason for victimised parents to be reluctant to seek support (Bobic, 2004; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Eckstein, 2004). Therefore, this finding illustrates a well-versed appreciation across participants of how it feels to be a victim of AVTP.

Sam proposed that another reason for parents’ reluctance to disclose AVTP may be a fear of involving formal services such as the police or community services:

Often there are other issues in the family that they might want to cover up, because obviously there can be issues of, you know, that they don’t want to get the police involved or family and community services because they’ve had previous interactions with them, or they might be, there might be some other things that they need to keep away from the police’s eyes.
This comment suggests that parents may not wish to involve particular services either out of fear of repercussions or negative perceptions of these agencies. This is consistent with previous findings in AVTP literature that victims are more likely to engage with agencies they consider less authoritative than those concerned with justice or child protection due to prior negative experiences (e.g. Cottrell & Monk, 2004), misconceptions about these agencies, or fear of what the outcome will be for the family (Eckstein, 2004; Haw, 2010; Jackson, 2003).

It was also suggested that families might be reluctant to involve particular agencies in their situation due to cultural reasons. For instance, Sam commented: “We don’t know the cultural background of the family either. So, sometimes there are cultural issues in terms of dealing with authority figures and a lack of trust in establishments and that sort of thing.” This recognition of the cultural differences with regard to reporting AVTP is an important as it suggests that cultural factors have already come into play for these participants and therefore, these considerations require further attention in research, policy and practice.

4.6.2 Complexities Associated with Culture

As previously noted, cultural factors were considered as a challenge for education professionals when faced with AVTP situations. For instance, Sally believed that migrant children are much more difficult for school staff to work with when violence in the home is an issue:

Those sort of kids are very hard to work with, because it’s instilled in them. Their fathers are instilling this behaviour and they are the ones that we have to really watch out for, because we can’t help those kids, because they don’t want help, because they don’t believe what they are doing is wrong.
Sally’s views suggest some reluctance on her part to deal with AVTP cases involving migrant families. If this view is common across education professionals, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families affected by AVTP may be treated differently to non-CALD families and in turn, they may not receive the adequate attention that their situation warrants. This could cause these families to feel singled-out or discriminated against, adversely affecting their willingness to disclose their situation in the future. Sally also stated that with AVTP cases involving CALD families, she would not work with the family as she feels that there are services better-equipped to assist: “We stay away from that because that is more about culture, and there are a lot of cultural programs around, so we would refer the mother to a cultural program.”

Although Sally has recognised the need to involve a service more qualified to assist migrant families, her comments indicate that she would respond to these cases differently to those involving non-CALD families. This could be problematic given that previous literature has emphasised the importance for all service providers to be able to demonstrate culturally competent approaches to providing support for CALD families as opposed to simply referring them to other agencies (Armstrong, 2010). According to Armstrong (2010), when services treat CALD families differently to non-CALD families in the context of offering support, these services come across as ill-equipped to deal with CALD clients.

This finding is also important given the growing cultural diversity of children accessing education in Australia. Over one quarter (26%) of Australia’s population is born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012a). Furthermore, in 2010, migrants in NSW accounted for 60% of the state’s total population growth and the state currently experiences the highest rate of new arrivals of all states and territories
in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012b). There is currently no available literature specifically addressing cultural considerations in AVTP situations despite recommendations in the literature (Bobic, 2002; Stewart, et al, 2005). For instance, Stewart, et al (2005) proposed that by conducting research increasing awareness of cultural considerations that relate to AVTP, the development of appropriate responses to families from CALD backgrounds can be facilitated.

4.6.3 Issues with Engaging Families in Intervention

In addition to their views on parents’ reluctance to disclose AVTP, participants noted the reluctance of both parties (parents and children) to engage with intervention efforts as a significant barrier to assisting families. Some participants believed that young people are harder to engage than their parents when AVTP is occurring. For example, in reference to the vignette, Pamela predicted that Sarah would be more difficult to engage than her mother: “There’s a good chance Jean would come in and I could see what’s going on for her but there’s a good chance Sarah wouldn’t talk to anyone.” The fact that some participants saw adolescents’ willingness to engage as a challenge for them when working with families suggests that these education professionals have seen some evidence of this first-hand. This finding is consistent with prior literature that has noted adolescents’ reluctance to engage as a key challenge for service providers (Bailey, 2002; Gallagher, 2004b). For example, Gallagher (2004b) posited that constructively engaging adolescents who are violent in the home is harder than engaging parents as these children are often ashamed of their behaviour to some degree and prefer not to address it. Similarly, Bailey (2002) suggested that adolescents who engage in AVTP often feel persecuted when professionals try to intervene as they interpret engagement efforts
as scrutiny, blame and criticism. Bailey (2002) proposed that this can cause these young people to become skilled at avoiding addressing their behaviours, resulting in passive or hostile responses to intervention efforts.

In contrast to the belief that children are harder to engage than parents in AVTP cases, some participants believed the reverse to be true. For instance, Sally recalled cases where she tried to help, but the victimised parent wouldn’t engage:

We have offered many times for the parents to come here in the afternoon, after school and sit with us, and do some work on how they can also interact with their child. We can’t get them to show up.

Sally also recognised that parents often feel like failures and tackling this problem is a significant challenge when trying to engage them in support: “How do you help a parent? How do you help a parent that thinks that they’re failing? That’s our hardest job.” These comments indicate that Sally wants to provide support to parents experiencing AVTP, but has often encountered difficulties when trying to do so. This highlights the complex nature of disclosing AVTP in the school environment. These results point to an importance in understanding that all cases and families differ and therefore, an approach that effectively engages one person in support may fail to engage another.

### 4.6.4 Limited Availability of Services to Assist Families

Another challenge highlighted by participants was the limited services available to assist families. For example, Sally expressed concerns that she only knows of services suitable for referring people experiencing intimate-partner violence even though they may not be appropriate in AVTP situations:

I’m sure there are thousands and thousands of parents that deal with this every day, and there’s nothing for them. They just feel alone and we can’t even refer them anywhere, we can refer them to DV but normally it’s partner DV.
Sally also suggested that she would know the correct referral pathway if the abuse was perpetrated by the parent against the child, but not the other way around: “If a parent did that to a child we’d ring DOCS, if a child does that to a parent, who do we ring, who do we tell?” Sally mentioned the Department of Children’s Services (DOCS) as a potential agency for assisting with AVTP, but she recognised that DOCS may not be the appropriate service: “If you report it to DOCS, I’ve had lots of parents that have reported their kids physically harming them, but DOCS won’t look at a child over ten.” Sally’s recognition that DOCS may not be the appropriate agency for referring AVTP cases is an important finding as previous studies have found that parents who have been referred to services that could not meet their needs experience frustration and feelings of being ‘passed around’ (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation, 2001; Edenborough, et al, 2008). Understanding that some agencies are not suitable for AVTP cases suggests that these professionals want to find appropriate sources of support before referring, even if this results in some referrals simply not being made.

With regard to the shortcomings in the education sector that make addressing AVTP challenging for school staff, Sam noted some bureaucratic limitations:

> There are bigger problems as well in terms of policy and in terms of funding and in terms of the way that services are structured, because often that is the only thing, that the worker is sitting in front of this family and there is nothing they can do because they aren’t funded or they don’t have the resources, or they finish at five o’clock and there’s all these bigger picture things that are part of the structure that we can’t fix. You know, we all want to do better, but sometimes there are other parameters there which are out of our control.

Another participant commented that education professionals often find it difficult to assist AVTP families because as service providers, they have limited power with regard to making changes and influencing these families: “We have no power. You know, it’s like ‘what do you do?’ The parent still walks away from here,
the child still walks away from here, we try to advise the parent but what do you do? That’s their child.” This finding allows for a greater understanding of why parents have often found service providers’ responses and understanding of the issue ineffective (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation, 2001; Haw, 2010; Paterson, et al 2002; Stewart, et al, 2007). It could also be argued that acknowledging the under-resourced nature of school staff to assist families affected by AVTP is an important first step in addressing education professionals’ responses to AVTP.

4.7 Participants’ Recommendations

With regard to their biggest concerns about AVTP situations, the issues emphasised by participants were: adolescents’ relationships with peers; adolescents running away or sneaking out of their homes; adolescents’ drug and alcohol use; adolescents’ educational engagement/academic outcomes; outcomes for adolescents’ siblings; the escalation of the abusive behaviours; and the safety of all family members concerned. In light of their concerns, participants gave numerous recommendations for responding to families affected by AVTP and commented on the types of resources they would like to see implemented in schools. The following recommendations were provided: prioritising the education of adolescents; prioritising the safety of all family members; the provision of support for children and parents; holistic approaches to dealing with AVTP (focused on the whole family); considering the causes and deep-seated issues in AVTP cases; involving services that are qualified and experienced to manage AVTP; early intervention; improving resources and access to information in schools; and professional development and awareness-raising in schools specifically focussed on AVTP.
4.7.1 Prioritising Education

The most commonly reported concern across participants was that of adolescents’ engagement with their schooling and the majority recommended focussing on the young person’s education in AVTP cases. For instance, when asked to comment on their biggest concerns for Sarah in the vignette, all participants discussed her education. Tina commented:

Being really clever but not passing her assignments and her behaviour is like talking back to teachers, swearing, bullying. So I think from an academic stand point then that needs to be addressed within the school and it sounds like Sarah is going downhill quickly.

Two participants expressed concerns about Sarah not attending school altogether or being suspended or expelled, as Sam stated: “From a school perspective, obviously the behaviours she’s displaying are going to put her in a situation where she’s probably on the way to, if not already, suspension or expulsion.” When discussing how to address these issues, Sam commented on the importance of re-engaging adolescents with their education:

Often I find the most effective strategies to be if we can get this young person back engaged with school because that’s the centre of their life at this age and we know that that’s an important place for them to be.

Sam has emphasised that adolescents’ participation in education is a highly important aspect of their lives irrespective of other issues they may be facing. It was also suggested that if a young person engaging in AVTP is attending school, their at-risk behaviours are less likely to occur, as Tom stated:

At school you can get stuff done, so if she is coming to school and you are encouraging her to come to school and then she’s not with people that are at risk behaviour and not at home causing problems.

This finding relates to previous literature that has suggested that adolescents’ failure to attend classes and poor educational outcomes are common in AVTP cases.
Therefore, these participants’ recommendations for keeping AVTP children engaged with their education may represent effective strategies for managing their behavioural issues. The fact that all participants were concerned about Sarah’s education and many saw addressing her academic future as a priority is not surprising given their careers in the education sector as they are trained to focus on academic outcomes and the engagement of youth in education. However, other issues affecting the family in the vignette (i.e. Sarah’s mental health and Jean’s safety), received less focus from participants in the context of their concerns for the future of the family. Only one participant expressed concerns about Sarah’s suicide attempt, which may be problematic as one could argue that her psychological well-being and safety represent greater dangers than her engagement with her education.

Interestingly, research exploring education professionals’ concerns about outcomes for at-risk students has not been consistent with the above finding. For instance, Howard and Johnson (2000) found that children were more inclined than teachers to express concerns about learning outcomes for students experiencing issues in the home. Instead, teachers in Howard and Johnson’s (2000) sample prioritised providing social support in schools over addressing educational disengagement and academic issues. It was noted that this finding was surprising given that learning is typically the core focus in educational settings. Howard and Johnson (2000) proposed that some education professionals may view academic problems as a product of a student’s personal issues and therefore believe that addressing these issues is more important than focusing on the young person’s learning outcomes. There is no existing research specific to AVTP and/or family violence that explores whether there is a tendency for education professionals to
express greater concern about academic outcomes than mental wellbeing and further study may help unpack the complexity of competing foci for those with an education role. Addressing this gap in the literature may shed further light on the current findings.

4.7.2 Prioritising Personal Safety

Although educational engagement received more attention from participants than safety when discussing concerns and recommendations, three participants stated that they regard safety as a priority when dealing with AVTP. In reference to the vignette, Pamela stated: “My number one priority would be the safety, the wellbeing of the family. She’s saying she’s afraid for her family’s wellbeing so there’s obviously real fear there that possibly Sarah could do something really bad.” Pamela suggested that there is a well-founded concern that Sarah’s behaviour could result in serious harm to the family. Tom shared similar concerns but instead focused more on Sarah’s safety due to her previous threat of suicide: “Suicide would be the most important, I would be very careful for that. I would investigate that as a priority.”

Two participants recommended encouraging parents to contact the police in AVTP situations, especially when the parent is in fear of their safety and/or the safety of other family members. For example, Pamela stated:

> If I assessed that there was serious fear of kind of, life threatening, then I would encourage Jean to be calling the police because it’s just kind of safety first. Nothing can happen if Jean comes home and she’s not safe.

In light of their concerns about safety in AVTP cases, participants were asked to discuss how these concerns could be addressed. Tom suggested that adolescents may need to be temporarily removed from the family home: “It might require a different kind of accommodation for the young person.” Tom believed that the
parent and child could still have a relationship, but that alternative accommodation for the adolescent may be the safest and most constructive option to allow both parties to work on repairing their relationship:

Maybe some support and accommodation for the young person. If she’s not happy there, then find another place for her to stay and she can come back every now and then, or not live with her, but regularly meet with her.

Whilst it is encouraging that some participants recommended focusing on safety first, the fact that only half emphasised safety as a priority is concerning, especially when one considers that the same amount of participants recommended focussing on adolescents’ educational outcomes. One possible reason for this finding is that all participants are employed in the education sector and therefore their key focus is typically schooling. If one were to compare the recommendations of education professionals with service providers in services concerned with justice or welfare, one might expect that the latter would be more concerned about safety and less concerned about education. However, there is no previous research to date that has compared these two groups – This is discussed further in the conclusion section of this thesis as an implication for future research (p. 94).

4.7.3 Support for Adolescents

Providing support to the young person perpetrating AVTP was a key focus of participants’ recommendations. For example, two participants stated that in AVTP cases, they would refer the young person to the school counsellor for further support, as Tina suggested: “If we suspect something’s going on, we might refer the student to the counsellor.” Counselling for young people in AVTP situations has been highly recommended in prior research (Edenborough, et al, 2008; Gallagher, 2008; Haw, 2010), and therefore it is encouraging that these participants would
utilise their school’s counselling services (or an external counsellor) to assist AVTP families.

Another recommendation concerning support for young people came from Sally, who asserted that labelling AVTP children as ‘bad’ is counterproductive: “The kids always come to us, and go ‘oh yeah, we’re bad’, and there’s no such thing as a bad child, there’s bad circumstances, but there’s no such thing as a bad child.” Sally recommended that professionals who attempt to work with these young people discourage them from believing any statements that label them as ‘bad’ and internalising their AVTP behaviours: “Bringing the child back and saying ‘you know don’t even listen to what other people have said, just because they’ve labelled it doesn’t mean that’s you’.” Gallagher (2004b) argued that labelling adolescents in AVTP situations as ‘abusers’ is counterproductive as such labelling often leads them to believe that they cannot change their behaviour.

In the context of recommendations for supporting families in AVTP situations, there was a tendency for participants to make comments suggesting that they would prioritise working with the young person over the parent. For example, Sally, a support worker, stated: “We would still be working with a child, and then maybe with working with that child and stopping the violence with that child, then things are going to go better at home anyway.” This statement was given in the context of parents being considered more difficult to work with than young people. It therefore suggests a perception that supporting the adolescent to address their abusive behaviour (without also supporting the parent) will result in improved outcomes in the home. Christine, a counsellor, felt the opposite in terms of where she would recommend directing her attention and instead suggested that she would provide more support to the victimised parent than the young person. However, she
demonstrated the same tendency to prioritise the wishes of the young person as illustrated by the following statement with reference to the vignette:

It would have to be tip-toed around really carefully, but I think maybe trying to get mum as much support as possible, and saying 'I can mention it to Sarah’, but if that’s the course she doesn’t want to go down, then I’m not going to push it.

This comment suggests that Christine would base her decisions on the wishes of the young person as she has indicated that she would not push the issue with Sarah if she was unwilling to participate in intervention efforts. It can be argued that although Christine did not recommend prioritising working with the child over supporting the parent, she has suggested that she would favour the wishes of the young person in this instance. This is an example of emphasising the needs of the young person over those of the victimised parent.

Previous research suggest that it is common for service providers to focus a disproportionate amount of attention on the needs and rights of the adolescent in AVTP cases, adding to parents’ feelings of shame and isolation (Gallagher, 2004b; Stewart, et al, 2004). Prior researchers have argued that when service providers fail to work with families in instances where the young person will not engage, positive outcomes cannot be achieved and the abuse can escalate further (Gallagher, 2004b). For instance, Gallagher (2004b) stated that the approach of solely working with perpetrators of AVTP (or only supporting families when all parties will engage) “penalises the most victimised parents and siblings” (p.100). The majority of the literature addressing responses to AVTP has advocated for approaches that are open to supporting all impacted family members rather than focusing solely on the needs of any one party (Bailey, 2002; Gallagher, 2004b; Haw, 2010; Paterson, et al, 2002). In light of the recommendations in the literature, the finding that participants tended
to favour the wishes of adolescents (whom they also suggested are more difficult to engage) requires further attention in research and policy and practice.

4.7.4 Support for Parents

In contrast to some of the views in the previous section that tended to put the needs of adolescents ahead of their victimised parents, there were two participants who stated that they would engage the parent before trying to offer support to the young person. In reference to the vignette, Pamela, a psychologist, commented: “I would call, um, Jean, on her own and kind of just listen to what she had to say and offer her support and then I would try to engage with Sarah.” Pamela also talked about the importance of listening to parents affected by AVTP and suggested that this should be done before taking any further action: “Just validating feelings and listening to the parents and then if there was concerns, you know, following the steps.” This recommendation for professionals to listen to the parent when AVTP is disclosed in the school environment was also emphasised by Sally, who asserted: “We have to listen to what the parent says, talk to the parent.” Listening to parents who have been affected by AVTP has been widely recommended in the literature to help alleviate their feelings of shame and ensure that they feel empowered to start implementing strategies to manage the situation (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation, 2001; Howard & Rottem, 2008).

In addition to listening to parents and ascertaining their needs, providing support that addresses their general well-being was recommended by three participants. For example, when discussing the vignette, Pamela recommended counselling for Jean focused on enabling her to manage her stress levels and look after herself: “Perfect world has Jean getting some counselling for kind of managing
stressful situations and parenting, you know, a lot of parents um, kind of deal with everything and then seem to not look after themselves, that goes.” Similarly, Sam believed that parents could benefit from participating in something that builds their self-esteem and allows them to focus on doing something for themselves:

If the parents can actually work on some things themselves so they’re being engaged in something positive and productive, you know, often the young mother in this situation may not have had the opportunity to finish school, to get an accredited qualification, or to even just to have a safe time in her life where she hasn’t had to answer to an abusive partner or to look after kids.

It was also recognised that Jean’s past experiences of DV may have resulted in emotional distress that should be a focus of any support provided for her AVTP situation, as Sally commented:

If mum’s been in DV and if she’s already split up from the husband, she’s going to be going through a whole world of hurt herself. I would offer her or give her some numbers that are going to be some support for her definitely.

The need for parents to be provided with support has been highlighted in previous research that has found that parents affected by AVTP who are yet to receive support do not always know how to go about getting help (Jackson, 2003). Therefore, knowing of available services and recognising the need to ensure that parents receive support is important for professionals who are likely to be faced with AVTP situations.

4.7.5 Support for the Whole Family (A Holistic Approach)

The majority of participants stated that they see AVTP as an issue that affects entire families. These participants recommended a holistic approach focused on supporting all family members with the aim of improving the relationship between all parties concerned. Pamela commented: “It needs to be a holistic
approach. It can’t just be ‘oh you’re the kid and we’ll only talk to you.’ You know there should be family sessions together or just communicating between the families as well.” Furthermore, in reference to the vignette, there were two participants who recommended counselling for the entire family. For example, Pamela stated: “The mum would need counselling, Sarah would need counselling and they all would need to do a family unit of counselling. So mum and Sarah would have to be part of that process as well.”

Tina emphasised the importance of focusing on repairing the relationship between AVTP children and their victimised parents during this process: “I think just relationship improvement between parents and children needs to happen.” In order to achieve this relationship improvement, two participants recommended focusing intervention efforts on the goals of the family members. For example, Tina recommended: “Look at objectives and what they both want and goals and stuff.” Similarly, when asked to comment on how they would respond to an AVTP case, Sam stated: “I would try to focus the family on where they want to be. So ‘this is what’s happening now, let’s recognise it and acknowledge it. Where do you want to be?’” Sam further elaborated by suggesting that he would work with the family to identify and implement short-term, achievable goals that can help address the AVTP situation in a constructive way:

- Give them the ideal scenario but also put just really simple, basic steps to try and get, at least ‘what can they leave this meeting with, something positive they can do? What can they do tonight? What can they do tomorrow morning to make the situation better?

This recognition of the importance of considering the needs and goals of the entire family suggests that these participants understand the need for families affected by AVTP to feel as though they have a say in the outcome of their situation. Holistic approaches to dealing with AVTP have been recommended in the literature
(Richards, 2011; Sheehan, 1997; Tomison, 2000). For instance, Sheehan (1997) argued that supporting both parties allow perpetrators of abuse to be held accountable for their actions whilst focusing on restoring their relationship with the victimised parent.

4.7.6 Intervention from Specialised Service Providers

Participants made a number of recommendations focused on involving professionals who are qualified and experienced to deal with AVTP. These recommendations included: specialist staff in schools specifically trained to deal with AVTP; relationships between schools and external service providers to aid referrals; support from professionals who are an appropriate fit for a given family’s situation; and limited referrals to avoid families feeling ‘passed around’. Three participants recommended that schools employ specialist staff experienced with AVTP issues. For example, Pamela commented:

I think it’s important just that you’ve got someone working in the schools that has experience in this area and that if you don’t, you’ve got good you know, external relationships with other services in the area to help with that.

Pamela also suggested that it would be beneficial for schools to have relationships with external agencies that are trained to deal with AVTP, particularly when schools do not have staff members that are qualified to address the issue. In addition, Sally suggested that schools could benefit from employing youth workers who can work with young people on AVTP issues: “If they had a youth worker in a main stream system, so you’ve always got your counsellor, but your youth worker, that could deal with sort of stuff, then yes, definitely it could work.” Similarly, Tina believed that education professionals who encounter AVTP would benefit from
being able to call upon the expertise of someone employed within the school in a welfare-focussed role:

There needs to be someone that’s head of welfare or whatever that role is, where generally I think you’d have that protocol, that process like “well, someone has to be in charge of child protection” or if you suspect that there is like some violence or abuse going on in the home, regardless of where or which way it’s going between the child and the parent then you speak to that person.

Tina also recommended that schools have access to more family workers, specifically those who can work with families in the home. She asserted that many families have problems accessing services due to transport and other logistical issues and that having the option of support services that can visit their homes may ensure that these families do not fall through the cracks:

I think just more family workers that work with the families, in the home as well because getting them off site to come to an appointment is much more difficult. Some of our parents don’t drive, and if someone can go into the home and actually work within improving that relationship that’s what I would like to see.

These recommendations of the availability of more specific support staff in schools that can work with AVTP families is consistent with previous findings that both victimised parents and professionals have expressed desires to see specific services established that are well-equipped to respond to AVTP (Haw, 2010; Holt, 2009). Furthermore, two participants believed that getting the right fit for a given family and building trust and rapport with the young person involved was essential. For instance, Sally emphasised:

Kids don’t trust anybody and it takes them a long time to build trust with a young person, so by just saying “go to a counsellor, you need to go to a speak to a counsellor”, it’s passing them around, so we need to make sure they can actually find where they want to go, talk to someone they’re actually comfortable with and that the respect barrier is there.
Although being able to make referrals to specialised service providers was a key recommendation by some, others believed that the number of referrals in a given case should be limited and that all referrals need to be exercised with care. For instance, Sam highlighted the potential for families to feel ‘passed around’ if they are referred from one agency to another and saw multiple referrals as counterproductive. He suggested continuity of contact was central to success:

I think there is a danger in the referral process because I think that’s been a situation where a lot of agencies do just look to refer, whoever is the key person that has built the rapport relationship with this family, so if it happens to be teacher or if it happens to be a GP or a youth worker, that they’re actually able to follow through with it and not just refer or tick a box and pass it onto someone else, because I think that’s a thing that the families get used to, is that they get passed around and it’s not effective.

Sam also recommended that a professional who initially engages with a family, but is not the best-equipped person to provide longer-term support, should remain connected with both the family and the agency/agencies that they refer the case to in order to ensure that the transition between the services is smooth:

If we’re not the right agency or person to be supporting, I’d be making sure it’s a smooth transition and handover and that the family’s informed of how they will be supported, not just “I’m sorry I can’t help you”. I’d see it more as a connection rather than a referral or a handover.

Sam’s recognition of the problems with inappropriate referrals reflects findings of the parents’ frustration with having to repeat their stories to multiple agencies before receiving support (Haw, 2010; Howard & Rottem, 2008; Stewart, et al, 2006). Education professionals’ effectiveness in this process appears to rest on the ability to negotiate the complexities of the referral process.
4.7.7 Early Intervention

Three participants recommended early intervention in AVTP situations and suggested that education professionals can support adolescents at a young age to ensure that their behaviours do not escalate further. Sally stated: “Early intervention, I’m a firm believer of it.” Similarly, Tina believed that the behaviours of AVTP children can be identified when the adolescent is still at a young age: “I think the behaviours of students that are abusive to their parents, I think you can usually flag at a younger age, anger issues or exploding.” When discussing the vignette, Sally proposed that Sarah’s behaviour can be changed if one were to intervene straight away: “We can change it at this point, this is easy to change at this point. It’s when it’s a lot further down the track when it’s hard to change.” Sally also recognised that AVTP can become entrenched over time, and therefore early intervention is crucial to ensuring that these behaviours are targeted at a stage where the young person is more receptive to change. Christine agreed and suggested that as a young person progresses into adulthood, their behaviour can escalate to the point where they are behaving abusively towards intimate partners. She recommended working with young people to combat abusive tendencies during the early stages of their secondary schooling:

It’s when it gets older and they start to do it to girlfriends, or they’ve done it to mum and it’s been hidden for so long, and then the abuse goes onto the girlfriend after the mother, that’s when it’s really tedious, but this sort of stuff we can change in grade seven, grade eight, year nine.

These recommendations align with previous research where early intervention has been highlighted as critical to preventing further violence from young people who have started behaving abusively or may be at-risk of doing so
Improving Resources in Schools

A common recommendation across all participants was for resources and information about AVTP to be more readily available in schools. For example, two participants suggested that a written resource accessible to parents would be beneficial for schools to have at their disposal. Christine commented: “I remember reading, I think in one of the parenting easy guides or something there is an actual fact sheet on parent abuse, which is what they call it, which is really good.”

Similarly, Tom suggested:

Something like ‘is this happening at home? Then this might be the sort of service that could assist you, if there is this sort of problem then call the police, you know but this might help support you.’ Yeah, that might be helpful.

Tom also recommended that this type of resource be accessible to young people: “The young person, or someone like the young person, might be able to access it as well.” Furthermore, Pamela, a school psychologist, recommended a checklist and/or service directory in schools to help staff with their responses and referrals when AVTP is encountered.

Even like a simple check list somewhere, like one copy in every office, to kind of say ‘look if this were to happen, these are the kinds of questions you need to ask’, and having always, depending on what school you’re at, a referral process or kind of service directory so you know what kind of services are available in those areas. So I think every office should have one.

In addition to recommending improved resources and information in schools, four participants also noted that professional development (PD) for education professionals around AVTP is either non-existent or scarce. For example, Sam
noted: “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a program mentioning adolescent violence towards parents so I’m not aware of a program out there that targets that.” Three participants said they have seen PD in schools that focus on other forms of family violence, but they have never been exposed to any training or awareness-raising specifically addressing AVTP. For instance, Pamela commented:

There has been some focus on domestic violence in terms of a child protection issue. When I train the staff here on child protection, domestic violence is part of it but it’s usually the adults, not the young people, being the perpetrators of the violence.

In light of the deficiencies identified by these participants concerning resources and PD focussed on AVTP, increased efforts to raise awareness of AVTP in schools (including PD around these issues) was also emphasised. For example, Tom stated:

I think maybe it could be good to do some professional development within our school, just about understanding the services that are out there and understanding good ways to communicate with the family and reach out when we suspect, especially when they don’t reach out to us, when we suspect something.

These recommendations are consistent with previous literature that has emphasised the importance of education and PD for agencies that are likely to encounter AVTP (Bailey, 2002; Edenborough, et al, 2008; Gallagher, 2008; Haw, 2010) and other forms of family violence such as DV (Bacchus, Mezey & Bewley, 2003; Cann, Withnell, Shakespeare, Doll & Thomas, 2001; Harris, Kutob, Surprenant, Maiuro & Delate, 2002) and child abuse (Abrahams, Casey & Daro, 2004; Kenny, 2004). The fact that all participants believed that improving resources in schools is important for enhancing education professionals’ responses to AVTP suggests that they have considered the shortcomings of the education sector’s capacity to deal with these issues. Such consideration also suggests that these participants not only recognise their potential to assist families affected by AVTP,
but they would like to see improvements in how the sector supports their staff through the process of providing support. Additionally, some participants noted that training programs they have participated in surrounding child protection issues have improved their confidence to respond to matters such as child abuse and neglect suggesting that other PD in similar programs would support their work in AVTP.

4.8 Other Key Findings

It is important to note the emergence of some additional themes that emerged relating to the types of responses participants provided during these interviews. Some interesting trends were uncovered regarding how participants constructed gender when discussing AVTP, and their tendencies to go into ‘solution mode’ when talking about the issue. These findings are discussed in the following sections.

4.8.1 Assumptions Regarding Gender

There was a tendency for participants to view AVTP as predominantly being perpetrated by males against mothers. For example, Sally commented: “She’s the carer, she’s the parent, she’s the legal guardian, we can’t do anything unless he was physically beating her then we would call the police.” Similarly, Christine stated:

They have seen their father or usually the father, be violent towards the mother or using controlling measures and stuff and then when the kids have grown up, by the time they get to us being about 13, he is starting to use those same behaviours towards his mum.

These descriptions of hypothetical AVTP situations as being between males and their mothers may reflect common perceptions of family violence identified in the literature: that women are the victims and men are perpetrators (DeKeseredy, 2011; Kimmel, 2002; Tjaden & Thoemnes, 2000). Although the majority of
anecdotal and empirical data on AVTP indicates that males are predominantly the perpetrators and mothers are usually targeted (Kethineni, 2004; Routt & Anderson, 2011; Stewart, et al, 2006), there are reported cases of fathers being victimised (Gallagher, 2004a; Paulson, et al, 1990) and daughters perpetrating abuse (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Cottrell, 2001; Haw, 2010; Paterson, et al, 2002; Walsh & Kreinert, 2007). Therefore, one may argue that it is important for service providers to recognise that AVTP can happen to any person in a parent/guardian role and be perpetrated by females as well as males.

One participant, Sally, made a point of stating that fathers can experience AVTP: “This abuse just doesn’t happen with mothers, it happens with fathers as well.” None of the remaining five participants made any mention of fathers as victims or potential victims of AVTP. However, Sally recognised that females can perpetrate AVTP and made a point of noting the differences between abuse from daughters and abuse from sons: “We watch the girls, and the girls are very different, they manipulate more so than hit, they do mental, it’s very different with boys to girls I think.” These findings suggest that while some participants of this study recognised that AVTP can affect either parent and be perpetrated by males and females, there is a risk that if professionals more readily define abuse between male adolescents and female caregivers as AVTP, they may dismiss or trivialise cases that involve victimisation of fathers or abuse perpetrated by daughters. It has been argued in the family violence literature that failing to recognise that males can be abused and females can be perpetrators can exacerbate the problem for victims causing them to experience diminished self-esteem, increased feelings of loneliness and marginalisation, and severe psychological distress (Henning & Feder, 2004).
4.8.2 Solution-Focused Responses

There was a tendency for participants to focus on solutions and suggestions for improving means of supporting families as opposed to merely discussing their views on AVTP. For instance, before being asked to provide recommendations, the majority of participants provided responses reflecting how they would act on the situation or what they think needs to be done. For example, Sam commented: “It’s just a matter of looking at the whole picture and providing them with some light at the end of the tunnel.” Christine also mentioned how her and her colleagues respond in an AVTP case, even before being asked to provide recommendations: “We try and work with the parents as much as possible or at least refer them to other services.” This ‘solution-focused’ attitude may suggest that this sample of education professionals has a proactive attitude to dealing with AVTP as they would any other DV situation. This may result from the type of work that these participants do within their agency (i.e. they work with at-risk youth in an educational setting specifically for behaviourally challenged students). To ascertain whether education professionals in mainstream settings would have the same solution-focused responses to dealing with AVTP, further research in this area is required. Comparing the perspectives of mainstream professionals to staff employed in behavioural schools could provide a clearer picture of the views and responses of the education sector as a whole, thus providing more generalisable empirical knowledge.
5.0 Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This research makes a significant contribution to the existing body of literature into adolescent violence towards parents (AVTP). As outlined in the Methodology chapter, the objectives of this study were to uncover education professionals’ perspectives including their recommendations for best practice to ensure that responses to the issue in schools are appropriate and well-informed. To achieve this aim, the research questions were concerned with: how participants conceptualise AVTP; their experiences with the issue and how these experiences have shaped their views; and participants’ identified challenges and subsequent recommendations for resources that may address the issues identified.

This research has generated important findings on educational professionals’ perspectives on AVTP. Participants regarded AVTP as a serious issue and conceptualised the problem as predominantly resulting from family dysfunction. Participants demonstrated particular concern for the impact of AVTP on adolescents, especially in the context of academic achievement. These findings are summarised in this chapter with reference to the implications for research and practice. Recommendations for how future studies can shed further light on AVTP in an educational context are discussed as the results have provided a compelling rationale for further examination of the key themes that emerged. This chapter concludes by identifying the limitations of this research followed by a discussion of its valuable contribution to the education and social work literature focused on AVTP.


5.2 Summary of Findings

As the previous chapter has highlighted, this research has generated various themes that add to the body of knowledge about AVTP in the education context. Firstly, with regard to conceptualisations of AVTP, the issue was regarded as a serious problem by all participants and the majority recognised Sarah’s behaviours towards Jean in the vignette as abusive, indicating that these participants take similar cases seriously in the school environment. This was evidenced by comments defining these behaviours as abuse and likening the situation to other cases of family violence that participant had encountered previously. Furthermore, participants’ background knowledge and/or experiences with AVTP appeared to shape the links they made between AVTP and DV when applying their own meanings.

It is important to consider that one participant saw the situation in the vignette as normal parent-teen conflict, which has been identified in previous literature as a common belief amongst service providers inside and outside the education sector (Haw, 2010; Stewart, et al, 2007). As noted in the previous chapter, the assertion that the behaviours in the vignette were “very mild” coupled with use of language such as “whoopy doo” implies that this participant does not define some forms of AVTP as abusive and in turn, would be unlikely to recognise the seriousness of said behaviours.

Consistent with prior literature, participants tended to suggest that males are predominantly the perpetrators and mothers are usually victimised in AVTP cases. This was made apparent through hypothetical statements about AVTP that almost exclusively involved male perpetrators and female victims. It could be surmised that these participants may inherently harbour stereotypical notions of mothers as victims and sons as abusers in the context of AVTP. Findings also suggested that all
participants saw histories of domestic violence (DV) and/or parental separation as key factors. This supports previous research on risk-factors for AVTP (Boxer, et al, 2009; Haw, 2010; Howard & Rottem, 2008) and indicates further opportunities for examination, in particular, how children’s exposure to DV and/or experiences of parental separation might predict AVTP. Results also indicated that there were some views in the sample consistent with parent-blaming, which can have serious consequences for victims’ future help-seeking in AVTP situations (Bobic, 2004; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Cottrell, 2005; Eckstein, 2004; Haw, 2010). As discussed in the previous chapter, there was some language used by participants suggesting that they allocated responsibility for Sarah’s behaviours in the vignette to the actions of her mother (e.g. suggestions that Jean may be using drugs despite no mention of drug use in the vignette). An inherent tendency to blame mothers for their own victimisation can be inferred from these comments. There was also a tendency for participants to express greater concern about adolescents’ academic outcomes than their mental health and safety, which may impact on how these participants respond in AVTP cases.

All participants had encountered AVTP at some stage during their careers and based on their experiences, participants highlighted a number of challenges associated with responding to families. Some participants believed that parents are not always willing to participate in intervention efforts and the majority talked about the reluctance of young people to engage when support is offered. There were also some participants who suggested that they would prioritise working with adolescents over parents in AVTP cases. Some participants’ comments discussed in the previous chapter indicate that they view the needs of adolescents as more important than the needs of the victimised parents, and one could argue that their responses to families
are likely to be reflective of a desire to prioritise the needs of the abuser over the victim. Despite this finding, the majority of participants recommended supporting both parties in AVTP situations. Cultural factors were also noted as a challenge for participants with regard to assisting families and one participant stated that she is reluctant to support culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families. This reluctance to deal with AVTP cases involving migrant families was evidenced by comments indicating that this participant would respond differently to these families or simply refer them to a “cultural program”. These statements suggested a belief that such cases are too complex to be managed in the same manner as an AVTP situation involving a non-CALD family.

In terms of their recommendations for best practice, all participants viewed schools as common first points of contact in AVTP situations and believed that educational professionals have a role in supporting families. When asked to make comments regarding what they would like to see implemented to facilitate education professionals’ responses, participants recommended: the implementation of professional development (PD) focused on AVTP in secondary schools; and the availability of more specialised support staff who trained to deal with the issue. Additionally, most participants recommended a holistic approach to dealing with AVTP, focused on supporting the entire family unit, which aligns previous literature (Bobic, 2002; Gallagher, 2004b; Richards, 2011; Sheehan, 1997; Tomison, 2000). Early intervention was recommended by all participants who emphasised the importance of supporting families affected by AVTP before the abuse becomes entrenched and/or repeated in an adolescent’s other relationships. Participants also demonstrated a tendency to offer ‘solution-focused’ responses when voicing their
perspectives of AVTP, even before being asked to provide their own recommendations.

5.3 Implications & Recommendations

The results of this study have important implications for research, policy and practice within the education, social work and academic sectors. In turn, a number of recommendations are identified. Firstly, whilst the majority of participants regarded AVTP as a serious issue and saw Sarah’s behaviour in the vignette as abusive, one participant perceived the behaviours in the vignette as typical teenage behaviour. This finding suggests that more training is required concerning the differences between healthy parent-teen conflict and abusive relationships. From an academic standpoint, future research is recommended to ascertain the efficacy of such training efforts to provide appropriate responses to victimised parents.

The finding that most participants saw previous DV and/or parental separation as key factors for AVTP has implications as it suggests that schools that work with families affected by issues such as DV and separation could benefit from implementing strategies for responding to these issues with a preventative focus. In terms of existing initiatives addressing the intergenerational transmission of violence for young people, there are numerous programs and services across Australia within the DV, justice and child protection sphere. For instance, legislative provisions have been developed in all states and territories, which are designed to address childhood exposure to DV - for example, the *NSW Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Act 2007* (Powell & Murray, 2008). Australia also has mandatory child protection reporting requirements, requiring professionals in particular fields (i.e. health, welfare and education) to report suspected child abuse matters to child protection
authorities (Richards, 2011). However, there are no mandatory reporting requirements for DV cases unless the child is a target of the violence as child abuse definitions typically do not cover exposure to DV (Richards, 2011).

There are also no known policies or programs within the education sector specifically focused on preventing issues such as AVTP in children deemed to be at-risk of becoming violent after exposure to DV. This research therefore recommends that strategies be implemented that address the risks associated with childhood exposure to DV before the onset of their own abusive behaviour, especially given that prior research has identified DV as a key risk factor AVTP (Boxer, et al, 2009; Haw, 2010; Howard & Rottem, 2008; Kethineni, 2004; Sheehan, 1997). It is also recommended that all agencies that may encounter AVTP receive training around the various ways in which the problem can manifest itself (including DV and parental separation).

Participants’ tendencies to discuss AVTP in the context of males perpetrating abuse against mothers also have important implications. Although prior research suggests that males are typically the perpetrators of AVTP and mothers are usually targeted (Kethineni, 2004; Routt & Anderson, 2011; Stewart, et al, 2006), assuming that AVTP is a problem that only affects mothers and sons presents a number of potential problems, including: failure to hold daughters who perpetrate AVTP accountable as a result of minimising or dismissing their behaviours on the basis of gender; and the risk of narrowing applied definitions of AVTP to only account for cases involving mothers and sons, increasing societal misconceptions (Henning & Feder, 2004). In light of these risks, it is recommended that future research explore the extent to which AVTP is perceived as being perpetrated by males against mothers. If future research finds that AVTP is predominantly viewed as occurring
between mothers and sons, this will highlight a need for further education emphasising that all family members can experience and/or perpetrate abuse (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Cottrell, 2001; Gallagher, 2004a; Haw, 2010; Paterson, et al, 2002; Paulson, et al, 1990; Walsh & Kreinert, 2007).

This research also wishes to highlight the finding that some participants voiced perspectives attributing AVTP to parenting problems, suggesting that victimised parents are responsible for their experiences of abuse. If parent-blaming attitudes are commonly shared in the education sector, this could have adverse consequences as victimised parents may not wish to seek help if they feel that they will be blamed for the abuse. Additional research could therefore benefit from examining the ways in which this belief is perpetuated by professionals in more depth, allowing for further understanding of what circumstances invoke parent-blaming attitudes. This finding also highlights the need for focused training/professional development (PD) in schools around the dynamics of AVTP.

The need for AVTP-specific PD in educational settings has arisen as a key implication of a number of the findings discussed in this research, notably participants’ identification of challenges they have faced resulting from limited knowledge and resources in schools. Consistent with prior research (Bailey, 2002; Edenborough, et al, 2008; Gallagher, 2008; Haw, 2010), improved resources in schools, including PD programs, were widely recommended by participants in this study. It is reasonable to propose that further exploration of the effectiveness of AVTP resources in schools has the potential to improve education professionals’ ability to provide effective responses to families. In turn, the following initiatives are recommended: further research into the feasibility and efficacy of implementing PD programs about AVTP in educational settings; the piloting of specialised AVTP
information in schools; and more intensive training for professionals in schools who are employed in support roles such as psychologists, social workers and counsellors.

The finding that schools were seen as common first points of contact in AVTP situations represents another example of the importance of the current results from an educational perspective. Prior literature has pointed to a need for additional support for education professionals to equip schools and personnel with the skills to respond when families seek help (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation, 2001; Haw, 2010). The current findings add further empirical support to the notion of education professionals being an important component of understanding and responding to AVTP, and it is strongly recommended that future studies build on the current results by examining perspectives within schools in more depth.

In light of the finding that participants recognised that mainstream schools may differ in their knowledge, experiences and recommendations regarding AVTP, future studies comparing the perspectives of education professionals from mainstream schools with staff from independent, behavioural schools is warranted. Such a comparison could help establish whether significant differences exist between the two types, with the aim of establishing generalisable empirical knowledge relevant to the education sector as a whole. Furthermore, research comparing the perspectives of education professionals with service providers from disciplines such as justice, humanities, and welfare could also provide an invaluable contribution to the literature by enabling the identification of differences in knowledge about AVTP across various agencies.

Participants’ perspectives concerning cultural considerations in AVTP cases also require further attention. For instance, the reluctance of one participant to support families from different ethnic backgrounds who are experiencing AVTP suggests that culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families may be treated
differently to non-CALD families when this issue arises. Further research into the prevalence of such views and their consequences is therefore warranted, particularly as it could not be ascertained whether this view is shared by other professionals in the sector. Increased empirical focus could also highlight the specific needs of CALD families experiencing AVTP and improve professionals’ ability to understand and respond to these cases. Furthermore, including material in training programs focused on responding to CALD families could benefit many families.

The tendency for participants to place more emphasis on their concerns about educational outcomes than the safety and mental well-being of adolescents also has important implications for future research and practice. It was noted that this finding may result from the fact that service provision in schools is focused predominantly around education and therefore, education professionals are primarily concerned with academic achievement. Future research may benefit from examining whether this tendency is common in schools and the possible implications of such beliefs. There is no research to date that compares the perspectives of education professionals with other service providers in this context, and as such, research in this area would provide opportunities for widening understandings and implanting effective practice.

Another key implication arising from this research is that although offering support to both parents and adolescents affected by AVTP were recommended, some participants demonstrated a tendency to favour the needs of abusive adolescents over their victimised parents. When coupled with the finding that some participants perceived adolescents to be more difficult to engage in support efforts than parents, this finding potentially poses a risk to families. favouring the needs of a young person who does not want to participate in intervention for their abusive behaviour may cause
AVTP to escalate further (Gallagher, 2004b). For this reason, it is encouraging that most participants recognised the need to support both parties. However, the finding that some participants would base their decisions on the wishes of the young person requires further attention from both an academic and practice perspective. It is recommended that further research be conducted into education professionals’ views on working with families affected by AVTP with emphasis on how they feel about supporting both parties. Further training for education professionals based around effective support strategies for both adolescents and parents in AVTP situations is also recommended.

The widespread recommendation for holistic approaches in this research provides further incentive for more focus on education professionals’ responses to AVTP given that prior research has strongly advocated such approaches (Bobic, 2002; Gallagher, 2004b; Richards, 2011; Sheehan, 1997; Tomison, 2000). It is recommended that educational institutions consider a holistic approach to supporting families affected by AVTP. The finding that all participants recommended early intervention in AVTP cases is also important as it points to the importance of supporting families at the first sign of trouble to minimise the opportunities for abuse to escalate to more severe levels. The efficacy of early intervention in AVTP cases within the school environment would therefore require evaluation.

The tendency for educational professionals to offer ‘solution-focused’ responses when discussing AVTP may be indicative of their experience in working with at-risk youth in educational settings specifically for behaviourally-challenged students. In future, it may be valuable to extend this research to include staff employed in mainstream schools to ascertain whether they share this ‘solution-focused’ attitude. Further research into the perspectives of staff from both independent and public
schools, with emphasis on their beliefs about effective responses to AVTP, is recommended in light of these findings.

5.4 Limitations

It is important to interpret and apply the results of this research with careful consideration of its limitations. All participants were employed at the same type of institution – independent schools for students with behavioural difficulties. These schools were targeted for this study due to the propensity of the staff to provide meaningful dialogue about AVTP on the basis of their experiences, which is an aim of social constructionist research. However, given that participants talked about the differences between their organisation and mainstream schools, this research could have benefited from speaking to education staff from mainstream institutions in addition to the sample utilised. Whilst comparing the perspectives of mainstream education professionals with staff from independent schools was not a focus of this study, it is recommended that future research add to the body of knowledge generated by this study by focusing on the perspectives of professionals from mainstream education services.

Another possible limitation of this research is that all participants were employees of schools working with a demographic from the same region of NSW – Sydney’s western suburbs. This means that the sample may not be diverse in terms of participants’ experiences. It is important to note that generalisability of results is not an aim of interpretative phenomenological research (Smith, 2008), however, if the study had included professionals who work with young people from other geographical regions of New South Wales (NSW), participants’ experiences and perspectives may have generated different themes. Future research may benefit from
looking at the perspectives and experiences of professionals from schools located across a range of areas, who therefore work with a more diverse demographic of students and their families. Furthermore, given the findings regarding cultural considerations in AVTP cases, this study could have benefited from a more culturally diverse sample and/or some questions focused on responses to families from ethnic backgrounds.

It is also important to note that this research did not attempt to draw comparisons between the different types of education professionals interviewed. For instance, the perspectives of counsellors were not compared to those of teachers, as varied types of education professionals were included in the study merely to ensure some diversity within the sample. Whilst ascertaining differences between the experiences and perspectives of staff employed in differing roles was not an objective of this study, future research could benefit from highlighting any distinctions or similarities that may emerge.

Despite the noted limitations, there were aspects of participants’ discussions that reflect the effectiveness of the methodology applied to this research which regard to answering the research questions and generating meaningful dialogue with participants. Firstly, approximately two-thirds of discussion with each participant took place after they were presented with the vignette. This occurred despite an almost even spread of questions both before and after the vignette, suggesting that the vignette helped to prompt more in-depth discussion. Participants were able to go into more detail and give more analytical responses after they had been provided with an example of an AVTP case with specific elements they could discuss. This finding compliments recommendations in the literature on phenomenology, which
argue that vignettes are useful for generating discussions about complex topics (Hughes, 1998).

It is also worth acknowledging that most participants linked histories of family dysfunction to AVTP before being presented with the vignette, suggesting that participants’ own experiences and constructions of AVTP led them to link these issues. Given the type of school that participants work for (a behaviour school) and that all had encountered AVTP at some stage of their careers, this finding is not surprising. A social constructionist approach was selected for this study to enable data to be generated via participants’ lived experiences. The finding, therefore, that participants based their views on their professional experiences with AVTP suggests that social constructionism was effectively applied to this study.

5.5 Conclusion

As stated, this research sought to uncover how participants conceptualise AVTP with emphasis on their perspectives about impacted families. A key aim was to shed light on participants’ experiences including the challenges they have faced when dealing with AVTP, whilst highlighting their recommendations for best practice. As discussed in the previous chapter, a number of key findings were generated that addressed these objectives. This research has produced a strong rationale for the importance of utilising empirical evidence to establish: the availability of information specific to AVTP in schools; the implementation of PD in schools focused on AVTP; and the specialised training of support staff in schools to ensure that all institutions have professionals on hand who are appropriately qualified to offer in-depth support.

Whilst the results and implications of this research indicate that there is still a considerable amount of work to be conducted on this topic, this study built on the
existing body of research by beginning to address a significant gap in the literature - the limited focus on the relationship between AVTP and the education sector. This research provides sound evidence for the importance of further research on education professionals’ views and practices concerning AVTP. Providing secondary school staff with a voice concerning AVTP is an important first step in facilitating awareness-raising and in turn, ensuring that families receive informed and meaningful responses during their encounters with education professionals.
6.0 References


Frizzell, A. (1998). Biting the hand that feeds? The social construction of adolescent violence toward parents as a social problem. *University of New Brunswick (Master’s Thesis).*


7.0 Appendices

7.1 Appendix A – Participant Information Statement

Adolescent Violence Towards Parents in NSW: The Challenges and Perspectives of Secondary Education Professionals

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT

(1) What is the study about?

You are invited to participate in a study of the perspectives of professionals in the education sector employed as nurses, social workers and teachers concerning the issue of adolescent violence towards parents in NSW. The key aim of the study is to uncover how professionals like you feel about the issue and what recommendations you might have with regard to resources and strategies to assist secondary school staff to support affected families.

(2) Who is carrying out the study?

The study is being conducted by Ashleigh Haw and will form the basis for the degree of Master of Education by Research at The University of Sydney under the supervision of Dr. Kate Russell (Senior Lecturer, Human Movement and Health Education) and Dr Dorothy Bottrell (Senior Lecturer, Teaching and Learning).

(3) What does the study involve?

Should you volunteer your time to this research, you will take part in one interview that will be audio-recorded. During this interview, you will be asked a series of questions and your responses will form the basis of the study’s results and implications. The interview may be conducted at the University of Sydney in the researcher’s office, or at your school of employment, whichever is most convenient to you. The types of
questions asked will centre upon your beliefs and perspectives about the issue of adolescent violence towards parents. You will also be asked to comment on a scenario involving a situation of adolescent violence towards a parent. You are encouraged to draw upon your own experiences in the education sector to inform your responses, however no specific cases and/or individuals should be discussed. The focus of this study is on your own views and recommendations as opposed to the specifics of any real-life incidents.

In the event that you experience any psychological distress as a result of taking part in this research, the interview will be stopped, appropriate immediate support offered, and specialist support arranged immediately. Furthermore, a list of contacts for local counselling services (including those that specialise in abuse and family-related matters) has been devised should you require any support following your participation.

(4) **How much time will the study take?**

Your interview will last approximately 30-40 minutes.

(5) **Can I withdraw from the study?**

Being in this study is completely voluntary - you are not under any obligation to consent and - if you do consent - you can withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with The University of Sydney.

You may stop the interview at any time if you do not wish to continue, the audio recording will be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study.

(6) **Will anyone else know the results?**

All aspects of the study, including results, will be strictly confidential and only the researchers will have access to information on participants.

A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

(7) **Will the study benefit me?**

We cannot guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from the study. However, the indirect benefit of taking part is that you will be contributing to important research that has never been conducted in Australia. Results may assist future researchers and practitioners to better understand this issue from the perspective of education professionals. This can lead to increased awareness and improved resources for secondary schools.

(8) **Can I tell other people about the study?**

Yes.

(9) **What if I require further information about the study or my involvement in it?**
When you have read this information, Ashleigh will discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact Dr. Kate Russell on 9351 7506 or kate.russell@sydney.edu.au or Ashleigh Haw on 0433431250 or ashleigh.haw@sydney.edu.au.

(10) **What if I have a complaint or any concerns?**

Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact The Manager, Human Ethics Administration, University of Sydney on +61 2 8627 8176 (Telephone); +61 2 8627 8177 (Facsimile) or ro.humanethics@sydney.edu.au (Email).

*This information sheet is for you to keep*
7.2 Appendix B – Participant Consent Form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I, ..........................................................[PRINT NAME], give consent to my participation in the research project

TITLE: Adolescent Violence Towards Parents in NSW: The Challenges and Perspectives of Secondary Education Professionals

In giving my consent I acknowledge that:

1. The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

2. I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher/s.

3. I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary – I am not under any obligation to consent.

4. I understand that my involvement is strictly confidential. I understand that any research data gathered from the results of the study may be published however no information about me will be used in any way that is identifiable.

5. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without affecting my relationship with the researcher(s) or the University of Sydney now or in the future.
6. I understand that I can stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, the audio recording will be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study.

7. I consent to:

• Audio-recording       YES □       NO □
• Receiving Feedback    YES □       NO □

If you answered YES to the “Receiving Feedback” question, please provide your details i.e. mailing address, email address.

Feedback Option

Address: ________________________________

____________________________________

Email: ________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Signature

________________________________________________________________________

Please PRINT name

________________________________________________________________________

Date
7.3 Appendix C – Interview Schedule & Vignette

Q1: What is your understanding of adolescent violence towards parents? How would you define it?

Define Adolescent Violence Towards Parents to the participant.

Q2: Is adolescent violence towards parents an issue that is on your radar as a (school nurse/teacher/counsellor)?

Q3: Do you have any thoughts/ideas as to how an adolescent comes to behave abusively toward a parent? (If necessary probe by asking the participant how they think such abuse starts and what the key factors in these situations are likely to be)

Q4: Do you believe that school professionals could have a role in assisting families experiencing adolescent violence towards parents? If yes, can you talk a little bit more about this role?

Q5: How confident would you feel with regard to your ability to assist a parent who confided that they were experiencing abuse from an adolescent son or daughter? (Probe by asking for the reasons for their response)

Q6: What resources/knowledge would you like to see made available in schools to help staff respond to these situations?

Vignette depicting AVTP to be presented to participants:

Sarah is fifteen and lives with her mother, Jean, and two younger brothers. Jean separated from Sarah’s father when Sarah was six years old as a result of prolonged domestic violence. Sarah is attending high school, however she regularly skips classes and has been caught on numerous occasions smoking cannabis with friends on school grounds.

Despite her above-average intelligence, Sarah has failed her last five assessments and seldom submits assigned homework. She is also defiant in the school and home environment, often refusing to complete set tasks and chores. She frequently demands money from Jean and often steals her mother’s prized possessions as a result of being denied money and then either pawns them or destroys them. Jean has reported that when she does give Sarah money (for food, public transport to school etc) she often spends the money on alcohol and cigarettes that an older male friend purchases for her.

Sarah often sneaks out of her bedroom after Jean has gone to sleep and stays out for most of the night (returning as late as 3am on several occasions). When Jean says no to Sarah’s demands, Sarah calls her names such as ‘bitch’ and ‘useless slut’, and sometimes makes threats to harm Jean, her brothers or herself. On one occasion, Sarah threatened to commit suicide after Jean refused to let her go to a party in the country.
Sarah frequently swears both at home and at school and has been suspended from school for bullying a classmate. During the latest altercation with her mother, Sarah shoved Jean against a wall in front of her three-year-old brother and then slashed her tyres before leaving the house and failing to return for several hours. Jean has disclosed to close friends and family members that she is afraid for her family’s wellbeing and that she does not feel that she has any control over her daughter. She has not yet sought professional guidance.

Questions to Follow Vignette:

Q1: In this scenario, what are your thoughts on Sarah’s behaviour in the school environment?

Q2: What are your thoughts on Sarah’s behaviour at home?

Q3: What are your thoughts about Jean in this scenario?

Q4: What do you think may have caused Sarah’s behaviour?

Q5: Explain what concerns you have (if any) about this scenario. What is your main concern, i.e. what issue(s) require the most attention here?

Q6: Do you believe that this family requires some professional guidance/intervention? Why/why not? What kind of intervention do you think is required?

Q7: If you were to encounter a situation like this during your work as a (nurse/counsellor/teacher), how would you respond?

(If necessary, probe by asking about whether there is protocol/system in place in their school for referring such situations to external services and ask for comments about the effectiveness of these processes plus recommendations for improvements)
7.4 Appendix D – List of Master Themes Generated

1. Definitions Applied to AVTP
2. Complexities of Defining/Understanding AVTP
3. The Stigma of AVTP
4. Recognition of AVTP as Cyclic
5. Tendency to Conceptualise AVTP as being Perpetrated by Males
6. Recognition of Gender Differences in AVTP Children
7. Violence as a Means for Adolescents to Express Themselves/Have their Needs Met
8. Acknowledgement of AVTP Children Having a lack of Respect for their Parents
9. Viewing AVTP as Only Happening to Mothers
10. Recognition that Fathers can Experience AVTP as well as Mothers
11. Experience Dealing with AVTP
12. AVTP’s Co-morbidity with Other Issues
13. Excessive Discipline or Domestic Violence as Factors in AVTP
14. Bullying as a Causal Factor
15. Adolescents’ Use of Drugs and/or Alcohol as Causal Factors
16. The Role of Mental Health in AVTP
17. Responsibility of the Young Person for AVTP
18. Parental Responsibility for AVTP
19. Family Dysfunction/Past Trauma in AVTP Situations
20. Absentee Fathers/Parental Separation/Marital Difficulties as Causal Factors
21. Resentment of Parents as a Causal Factor
22. Limited/Ineffective Boundaries or Discipline as Causal Factors
23. Self-Esteem Issues as Casual Factors
24. Coping Strategies/Relationship Skills of Young People as Factors for AVTP
25. Low SES/Financial Pressures as Causal Factors
27. Concerns about AVTP Children Sneaking out of the House/Running Away
28. Concerns Regarding AVTP Children’s Drug and Alcohol Use
29. Cultural Factors & Considerations in AVTP Cases
30. Help-Seeking Efforts of Parents
31. The Role of Education Professionals in Assisting AVTP Families
32. How Participants Would Respond to AVTP
33. Conceptualising the Vignette as Mild/Normal Parent-Teen Conflict
34. Likeness of the Vignette to Cases Encountered by Participants
35. Recognition/Concern Regarding the Young Person’s Education
36. Understanding & Sympathetic Views towards AVTP Parents
37. Understanding & Sympathetic Views towards AVTP Children
38. Prioritising the Needs/Wishes of the AVTP Child
39. Consideration of AVTP Siblings
40. Risk of Escalation of AVTP
41. Challenges of Working with AVTP Children
42. Challenges of Working with AVTP Parents
43. The Differences between a Behaviour School and Mainstream Schools in the Context of AVTP
44. Safety as the Number One Priority
45. Barriers to Helping Families/Limited Resources
46. Recommendations for Exploring Causal Factors and Underlying Issues
47. Emphasis on Building Rapport with AVTP Families
48. Recommendations for Focusing Interventions on the Wishes/Goals of the Family

49. Recommends Involving Both Parties in Ventures focused on Self-Esteem and Empowerment

50. Recommendations for Specialist Staff in Schools Trained to Deal with AVTP

51. Recommendations for Support from Professionals Experienced with AVTP

52. Recommendations for Limiting the Number of Referrals in AVTP Cases

53. Recommendations for Relationships between Schools and Services that can Assist AVTP Families

54. Recommendations for Written Resources in Schools for Staff Members and Families

55. Recommendations for Awareness Raising/Professional Development/Training Specific to AVTP in All Schools

56. Recommendations of a Holistic Approach for Dealing with AVTP (Focused on the Whole Family)

57. Recommendations of Counselling for AVTP Children

58. Recommendations of Counselling for AVTP Parents

59. Recommendations for Early Intervention

60. Recommendations for the Establishment of Specific AVTP Services

61. Recommendations for Removing AVTP Children from the Family Home

62. Recommendations for Further AVTP Research