



'It's a big ask when your job is to teach children to read, write and to count': the experiences of school staff in early help and child protection

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ABSTRACT

Considers the experiences of designated *safeguarding* staff in primary aged schools (4–11 years). The study used semi-structured interviews to explore with professionals their experiences of *multi-agency* working to safeguard *children*, of factors in making decisions around *reporting* concerns to statutory *social work* services and their role in delivering *early help* services in one region of the U.K. Professionals raised concerns about their understanding of decisions made by *social workers*, but nevertheless said that these decisions affected their future reporting of *safeguarding* concerns. Professionals raised concern about how current *safeguarding* processes triage concerns around *neglect*, and as the effect was cumulative, felt that it could be minimised or overlooked.

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Introduction

There has been increasing emphasis on multi-agency working in child protection in the U.K., partly as a result of it featuring as a problem in many serious case reviews (Brandon et al., 2009; Reder & Duncan, 2004). However, while research has focused on the work of multiple agencies in protecting children from harm and maltreatment, little attention has been paid to the specific and crucial role schools play in safeguarding children. This is surprising considering the significant role schools play in shaping and monitoring the well-being of children. Research regarding the role of schools has generally focused on their ability to meet the education needs of looked after children, with little attention given to their role in identifying and reporting safeguarding concerns about children and supporting them and their families.

This study explored the experiences of school staff in dealing with child protection concerns. Six semi-structured interviews were undertaken with school staff who took a lead role in child protection work within their school. Multi-agency

working was discussed within the study, but also interviews focused on the role of the safeguarding lead professional within the school, the challenges of identifying and reporting possible abuse or neglect of children, and their role in delivering Common Assessment Framework (CAF) or early help services. This study examines the capacity of different schools to deliver early help work, the impact of the referral process on future staff reporting decisions, and raises continuing concerns about the availability of appropriate and sufficient resources to deal adequately with neglect.

A note on language: while frequently described as 'designated teachers' for safeguarding, one participant was not a teacher; therefore during this article they will be described as safeguarding professionals. However, it should be noted that all participants worked exclusively within schools.

Policy and literature

While everyone working with children has a role to play in safeguarding them from harm (Department for Education [DfE], 2015a), schools have particular duties in both policy and legislation (Department for Education [DfE], 2011a, 2015b; Education Act, 2002). Schools must appoint and train a safeguarding professional to take the lead in identifying and reporting possible maltreatment. However, since the development of the CAF in 2008, schools have also been identified as a key player in delivering targeted early help to families; schools are described as 'particularly important' for delivering early intervention 'as they are in a position to identify concerns early and provide help for children to prevent concerns from escalating' (Department for Education [DfE], 2015b, p. 3).

During the trial stages of the CAF, Dagley et al. (2007) found that schools provided more CAFs than any other agency, and this was found to still be the case in later studies (Holmes, McDermid, Padley, & Soper, 2012; Norgate, Traill, & Osborne, 2009). These studies also raised questions about whether staff felt sufficiently skilled and trained to deliver this work, and the extent to which this conflicted with the primary education requirements of their roles.

In England, school professionals have been found to make fewer referrals regarding child maltreatment than police or health staff (Cleaver & Walker, 2004) and a smaller proportion than school staff in Canada (Trocmé et al., 2005) or the U.S.A. where educational professionals make the most referrals of all agencies (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration on Children Youth & Families, 2007). Despite increased awareness of abuse and the need for safeguarding training, child abuse and neglect are found to be under-reported consistently throughout the western world (Cerezo & Pons-Salvador, 2004; Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008; Van Haeringen, Dadds, & Armstrong, 1998), including in the U.K. (Radford, Corral, Bradley, & Fisher, 2013). Research has found that as much as 25% (Jutte et al., 2015) of children suffer maltreatment, but only 3.4% receive a social work service (DfE, Statistical Release, 2011b); similarly Radford et al. completed a

prevalence study which found maltreatments rates to be between 7 and 17 times greater than the official statistical prevalence (Radford et al., 2013).

International studies have found teaching staff across the Western world to be insufficiently trained in safeguarding children (Buckley & McGarry, 2011; Goldman, 2007; Kenny, 2004; Walsh & Farrell, 2007; Yanowitz, Monte, & Tribble, 2003). More subtly, research has also highlighted the instabilities and difficulties for school staff in ascribing meaning to specific concerns about children (Thompson, 2012) and the difficulties in decision-making where there is not clear evidence (Bunting, Lazenbatt, & Wallace, 2010). The majority of decisions about what individual problems are sufficiently concerning to be viewed as neglect or harm in a child are often complex. This highlights a crucial difficulty for school staff; while little research has been undertaken in this country, in the most comprehensive U.K. study of safeguarding in schools, 65% of participants described uncertainty regarding whether to make referrals to children's social care (Baginsky, 2000).

This literature review and study highlight the lack of research into safeguarding practice in schools, and that the literature that does exist is now relatively dated. The only published study since those by Baginsky (2000) and Webb and Vulliamy (2001) is Rossato and Brackenridge's (2009) study of P.E. teachers; this found that teachers received limited training in safeguarding. As schools are increasingly delivering Early Help support to vulnerable families through the CAF, the lack of research in this area and training for school staff becomes of increased concern. School staff increasingly need to deliver early intervention for families with difficulties to prevent these from escalating, as well as referring concerns and participating in child protection planning. Teaching staff are likely to require significantly more resources and training to undertake this work, and previous research has indicated staff were not adequately trained previously for the lower level role they were taking.

Methodology

The aims of this study were to investigate the experiences of safeguarding professionals in primary schools, primarily in three key areas; their experience of reporting child protection concerns, their experiences of multi-agency working in child protection and their views and experiences of delivering early help measures and services under the CAF. While little research has been undertaken into the role of designated teachers, much of the existing research has been in the form of structured surveys, providing quantitative data. However, many issues around parenting, child safety and well-being are highly subjective, and cannot be answered fully in a quantitative manner. Researchers have drawn attention to the socially constructed nature of parenting (Ambert, 1994), child abuse (Gelles, 1975) and child maltreatment (D'cruz, 2004). Patton (1999) has suggested qualitative approaches are particularly appropriate for both explorative enquiry and for adding depth

and substance to standardised findings from quantitative enquiry, therefore a qualitative approach was used in the form of semi structured interviews.

A type of purposive sampling, criterion sampling (Patton, 1999) was used; three participants were originally identified and selected using their links to several children's social work teams. This meant that participants were predominantly from one geographical area, but also that they all had recent relevant safeguarding experience. However, this sampling method produced insufficient participants; the remaining participants were recruited using convenience sampling. The Virtual School assisted by seeking participants through its network of teachers. As this method was not purposive, selection criteria were used to explicitly make sure that participants were safeguarding lead practitioners in their schools with appropriate experience in child protection and safeguarding. Three additional participants were recruited in this way.

This was a qualitative study which consisted of semi-structured interviews with a six safeguarding professionals from Primary Schools (for children aged 4–11) in one southern county of the U.K. A Topic Guide was used to provide consistency, although individuals own thoughts and values created some variety between interview order. Interviews were audio recorded and were transcribed manually by the only researcher. Data were then coded and thematically analysed, using Spencer, Ritchie, O'Connor, Morrell, and Ormston's (2014) thematic framework. Discussion was focused around the role of safeguarding professionals in child protection, identifying and reporting child maltreatment, and multi-agency working.

Ethical Guidance was taken from the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) six main principles of research ethics; transparency and integrity, informed participation, confidentiality, free consent, consideration and avoidance of harm and independence (Economic & Social Research Council [ESRC], 2012). Participants were provided with full written information regarding the study and consent was given in writing. Confidentiality was robustly protected and data stored securely and destroyed on completion of the project. Any emotional harm was minimised by finishing interviews on a more positive question, and a pilot interview supported the 'technical competence' of the interviewer to carry out the interviews and research (Butler, 2002). The study was free of dependency or conflict of interest, being unfunded. The study was overseen and ethical permission was granted by the School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol.

Findings

Findings: participants' experience and training

Considering that all six interviewees were undertaking the same role in terms of safeguarding, it was surprising that there was a great variety in the amount of teaching hours they were expected to do alongside this (ranging from a full timetable to no teaching at all). Two of the six interviewees were headteachers,

with a further two holding a deputy or assistant head position. One school had employed a non-teaching staff member with a background in family intervention work to undertake this role.

It is interesting to note that none of those interviewed had received any specific training other than statutory safeguarding training and CAF training. None reported receiving training in key topics such as neglect, domestic violence or abuse, sexual abuse, substance misuse, family support work or mental health to help them undertake this role. Those who were using training received in other roles identified training on working with parents as most helpful in this current role.

Findings: decision-making about reporting suspected child abuse and maltreatment

Previous research has shown professionals in the U.K. and Ireland are consistent when reporting concerns when there is clear evidence, but reporting becomes more variable when the evidence was ambiguous or uncertain (Bunting et al., 2010). In this study, professionals talked about weighing a variety of social and historical factors including using school records, the statement of the child and the reaction of the parent to make reporting decisions, as well as using formal assessment documents for example a 'threshold tool' issued by the local safeguarding children board (LSCB) in line with statutory policy (Department for Education [DfE], 2015b). This tool presents a spectrum of possible concerns about children with a suggestion about whether this requires an early help response, or a social work response. This county also had a telephone advice line attached to the reporting hub, which was particularly valued by interviewees for making those more difficult reporting decisions:

'one good thing... is you can have a sort of off the record conversation, you can ring them for advice about whether you need to put in a referral' – Safeguarding lead professional four

'it's the smaller stuff I find, you know because it's whether you do a... referral or not. So rather than think to myself should I shouldn't I, I phone the consultation line, and ask their advice. So that's good. That's really useful!' – Safeguarding lead professional three

This service was really important to staff in the study as it allowed them to have a verbal discussion with a social worker who was perceived as offering expert opinion and advice, and allowed interviewees to present their concern to someone who could also check for additional background information and context held on social work records. It helped school staff who were worried about damaging relationships with parents by reporting when it was not necessary, or when it would not benefit the children or family.

Findings: neglect and working with children who fall between 'thresholds'

Safeguarding professionals in this study generally had specific concerns about neglect of children within their schools. Interviewees described feelings that they were experiencing a rise in 'thresholds', which meant a higher level of evidence or concern was required in order for a social worker to visit or work with a child they were concerned about. However, they also identified neglect as something which is not well assessed or understood using the existing tools and resources to assess the level of concern and risk posed to a child:

'It's very difficult when you're trying to convey this family history... what about all the bits that were possibly were low level and didn't need to go to social care but when they've built up together they produce what's happened now?' Safeguarding lead professional three

'It seems that nothing gets done unless, and you don't meet the threshold unless the child is in immediate danger. And neglect isn't like that. And most – as I said, most of the work I've done is around neglect. And neglect –it's a long slow slide into neglect, it doesn't suddenly happen. So, to me the threshold tool isn't really useful for that' – Safeguarding lead professional four

Interviewees felt that the chronic and increasing nature of neglect meant the harm was not recognised. They felt that children were unlikely to receive a service purely for neglect, and were often left waiting for a single 'incident' of higher severity in order to do so. Additionally, neglected children were not only likely to be deemed not sufficiently at risk, but were also likely to move between different services and 'threshold' levels, with children moving in and out of child protection, child in need and early help over many years with little real progress:

'We've had years of niggles, of clothing, food, unsuitable housing... safety of the children... They have been niggled for years and years and years, and it only has been taken now to child in need when the family were about to be evicted.' – Safeguarding lead professional two

'She was constantly full of nits, constantly hungry, always unwashed, her shoes, the soles of her shoes would be hanging off, and you think, you're going to grow up constantly in and out of child protection, depending on who Mum's boyfriends going to be but no one's ever going to take the fact that you are dirty and hungry and really unloved seriously, that's never going to be enough of a concern, to anybody.' Safeguarding lead professional one

Even children receiving a social work service sometimes remained lacking in basic care for long periods of time. The lack of progress, and the impact of seeing neglected children every day, meant some interviewees described school staff feeling forced into providing some basic care for pupils themselves:

'I think we manage it internally. I mean a lot of schools do breakfast clubs, you know we have a supply of fruit... We have a stack of jumpers that don't go home... I think the education policy now is that if you can't get any external help you've just got to get on with it really, and either do nothing or you do something and I think most of us tend to do something, however small' – Safeguarding lead professional one

'...we went and bought the child shoes, because his shoes had holes. And they said but actually we were masking the problem to some extent... but also we recorded it. It's very difficult because you are ultimately... you don't want a child to come in with holey shoes getting wet feet. And I think that we reviewed it afterwards and said we wouldn't change our actions because it was recorded and every time we had to do something and intervene.' Safeguarding lead professional five

Safeguarding professionals knew this was not a long-term solution, and would report the fact that they felt the need to do this, but felt emotionally compromised when facing the reality of children without adequate clothing or shoes, or food. Staff felt uncomfortable leaving children in a state of neglect, and sometimes felt the need to intervene when they could not see any progress occurring.

Findings: responses to rising thresholds

The perception that social work 'thresholds' were rising and required a more immediate risk of harm to children, seemed to cause changes to the ways in which staff approached reporting of concerns. Some staff were responding using different reporting strategies, and other staff were reducing their reporting of concerns based on their experiences of referrals not going forward for assessment:

'...in your training it was – if in doubt put in a... [referral], so many come back saying they're not going to be put forward that I tend now to phone the consultation line and ask them' – Safeguarding lead professional three

'I think reporting has definitely changed, and I think whereas before, you know, if you had a child who was consistently coming in with no breakfast, always tired, because you could tell they weren't sleeping properly, full of nits, grubby, unwashed, I think before you would have phoned that through and you would have said look this child is clearly being neglected. Whereas I think experience now tells you... that doesn't count for anything really anymore.' Safeguarding lead professional one

In smaller schools interviewees identified that there would not be the resources to either push for a service, or to intervene on an early help basis, and that these neglected children would be unlikely to receive any kind of intervention:

'I can't even tell you the number of hours I've spent phoning people and logging stuff... I think it's sad because I think people – say if you were a class teacher and you didn't have the time, you would just have to let it go, and that's not a good situation at all. But that's the situation we're in really.' Safeguarding lead professional five

Larger schools were sometimes in a position to employ people with a family support background or who were not teaching full time and therefore more resourced to deal with safeguarding or early help concerns. However, small schools were reported to be often struggling to meet their basic curriculum requirements and premises costs, and therefore have little additional time to spend either following up referrals or running early help interventions.

Findings: early help and multi-agency working

There was variety in the experiences of interviewees in terms of the success of multi-agency working; all had both positive and negative experiences based on a variety of situations and reasons. Despite much research literature that multi-agency work faces multiple challenges (Sloper, 2004) participants in this study were generally positive about their working relationships with other services, and ascribed problems they did experience to stretched budgets and resources. There was no sense that relationships were fraught with personal or professional hostility, and participants recognised that other services faced limitations similar to their own.

Interviewees did report that choosing a lead professional for CAFs was a barrier to inter-agency working and delivering early help services. Different interviewees had different ideas about how a lead professional should be chosen; some felt it was whichever agency had the most contact with the family, others felt it was whoever was raising the concern, or whether the concern was health, or education based. Some felt it was whichever agency had capacity. Interestingly, local guidance states that the family should choose the lead professional; this option was not suggested by any of the interviewees. Differences in views about how to identify lead professionals appeared to cause some tension between agencies at the point where this was discussed and no interviewee appeared aware of the guidance for this issue.

Safeguarding professionals in smaller schools were in a position where they felt they did not have the resources to deliver the early help and intervention that was proposed in the CAF as well as focusing on delivering their curriculum requirements:

'You know a lot of the work I do is social care... which takes us away from our core business of teaching children to read, write and add up... We're not qualified to do all of that social care at a lower level, and I don't have the contacts, and we don't have the budget to do it' – Safeguarding lead professional four

'I mean there just wasn't the capacity, and the expectation was that the school was lead on all the CAFs and they're liaising with housing and the CAF-the CAMHS team and it's a big ask when your job is to teach children to read, write and to count, I think.' – Safeguarding lead professional 1

Safeguarding professionals felt that they were responsible for overseeing the implementation of the majority of CAFs simply because reduced resources meant there was not any other option. The increasing pressure to take on CAF and early intervention work with children and their wider families created capacity issues in many schools.

Findings: feedback from social workers to schools

Interviewees' experience of feedback from social workers was variable, with a mixture of good and bad experiences. Feedback regarding referrals was often limited in quality and detail. This left interviewees confused about how or why decisions had been made, and feeling confused about how to move forward if they continued to have concerns about the child:

'I had a call through... about it, and the next thing I got was a letter through saying the case had been closed. And that just makes no sense to me whatsoever' – Safeguarding lead professional four

'Normally, a letter just saying that there's no further action... Or – if you get a letter back. You don't always get a letter back... So that to me is a hurdle' – Safeguarding lead professional three

The lack of detailed, explanatory feedback about why referrals were taken forward or not actioned left school staff unsure about how and why decisions had been made. This impacted on their ability to provide relevant information in future referrals and some interviewees felt this made them more likely to re-refer a child as they did not feel any less concerned. Other interviewees felt less likely to re-refer, as they had already referred and received a message that the situation was not of sufficient concern to require a local authority response. In most cases they spoke of, participants had very little understanding of why decisions had been made, sometimes believing decisions were based on resourcing, individual judgements, or their own credibility as reporters. It is unsurprising that this did little to reassure safeguarding professionals that the children they had concerns for were safe although their responses to this varied.

Conclusion

Findings from this study have been similar to findings in wider research and study; that schools appear to be providing more of the early help work under the CAF than any other agency (Dagley et al., 2007; Norgate et al., 2009). Interestingly, participants in this study from both large and small schools highlighted the great differences in capacity to deliver early intervention work between schools of different sizes. For schools where the safeguarding professional was also teaching a full timetable, it is easy to see how even recording and reporting maltreatment concerns during the school day raises serious capacity challenges. This is clearly a pivotal issue, and one that needs to be given consideration in terms of policy and the implementation of the CAF and Early Help, as does the lack of specific training interviewees had received.

In reporting concerns to children's social work, where clear evidence was absent, decisions were complex and involved meaning making and interpretation of children's words or presentation (Bunting et al., 2010). Neglect seems to provide particular issues in this regard; the lack of one tangible 'serious' incident to report

causes difficulty for school staff, as did the difficulty of working out how to intervene appropriately while watching the impact of chronic neglect upon the children they taught. The 'neglect of neglect' has also been identified within research into child maltreatment (McSherry, 2007; Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van IJzendoorn, 2013; Wolock & Horowitz, 1984), and the lack of assessment tools for chronic harm to children over a long period should be considered. Neglect has been increasingly identified as a feature of serious case reviews (Brandon et al., 2009, 2012). However, the professionals in this study highlighted the difficulties they faced in representing harm that is *cumulative* to be therefore *significant*, and the challenges for practitioners in identifying how to intervene when observing children to be uncared for, on a day to day basis. Further research could raise the profile of neglect and help identify the resources required to intervene to protect and help children and families, and could inform increased training for schools and social work professionals in assessing and challenging neglect of children in an effective and timely manner.

Although participants felt agencies often worked well together, where there was disagreement between agencies this was frequently around CAF leadership and early help delivery. Some more comprehensive guidance about how CAF leaders should be identified could help reduce some of this confusion and disagreement. It is also likely that safeguarding professionals may require more than CAF training in order to take on a role advising families on parenting issues and when social workers or other agencies recommend schools open CAFs, consideration should perhaps be given to the level of support, capacity and resources they may need in order to do this. Support to schools in providing early help services could also provide more resources to intervene with neglect issues earlier and a more effective response would reduce pressure on other areas of staff and school resources where children were being fed and clothed by schools.

Participants used a variety of strategies and resources to make reporting decisions, both written (such as policy, publications and guidance) and reflective (such as telephone helplines and colleague supervision). Participants identified reflective guidance as the more helpful of these resources, and it should be noted by Local Authorities that written tools, while helpful, cannot replace opportunities for supported reflection and guidance. Staff reported that they sometimes change their approach to referring in response to the outcome of previous referrals; this is similar to a finding by Horwath (2007) that professionals use the result of a previous referral to make decisions about a current one. Lack of specific and high quality feedback following referrals to children's social work lead to uncertainty and confusion for professionals, and possibly could contribute to re-reporting rates, although whether it would increase or decrease them varied between practitioners. While often not understanding the reasons for decisions made by children's social workers, nevertheless, those decisions strongly influence workers in deciding whether to report future concerns. The power of children's services in reframing thresholds through their responses should be acknowledged, and consideration

given to further research by and within authorities as this is potentially a risky position for effective safeguarding practice.

This was a modest study, providing a limited but nevertheless interesting qualitative insight into safeguarding professionals in schools. While these findings are not generalisable, they provide an interesting starting point into considering essential themes in research in safeguarding practice in education and a vital voice from practitioners who see children at risk of harm and maltreatment on a daily basis. While there has been an increase in the emphasis on Universal Services to deliver early help, many schools find it difficult or impossible to deliver early help to families, and at times struggle to have the time to advocate for children who are not deemed to meet a social work threshold. The significance of neglect for the lived experience of a child is highlighted, alongside the difficulty of identifying the cumulative severity of this using the current available tools. Additionally, the fact that incomplete feedback from reports to children's social work is informing future reporting decisions creates a concerning rationale for these decisions and could be leaving children at risk of significant harm.

Disclosure statement

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