

Keeping Children Safe? Advancing social care assessments to address harmful sexual behaviour in schools

International evidence suggests that schools are locations where systems, practices and cultures can enable harmful sexual behaviours. However, in England, welfare assessments primarily used by statutory social services largely target young people and their families, with limited capacity to assess environments beyond the home. Where young people display harmful sexual behaviours within educational settings, social care systems are yet to assess the factors within schools which may accelerate risks associated with harmful sexual behaviours.

This exploratory article presents evidence on the opportunities for school assessment using cumulative learning from two studies. The first investigated enablers and barriers to addressing harmful sexual behaviour in schools. The second employed the learning from the first through an action research study to develop school context assessments within a child protection system. Both studies employed a mixed-methods approach including observations, case review, focus groups, surveys and policy reviews to access data. Synthesised findings highlight: the value of exploring school contexts when assessing the nature of extra-familial abuse; the opportunities and challenges of utilising research methods for assessing school environments; and the role new assessment frameworks could play in supporting the inclusion of school contexts, and research methods, into welfare assessments of extra-familial abuse.

Keywords: assessment; harmful sexual behaviour; safeguarding; schools

Introduction

Internationally young people report encountering sexual abuse and violence at school from their peers (Turner et al., 2011; Girlguiding, 2017). For the purposes of this paper, Harmful sexual behaviours (HSB) are ‘sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 years old that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others, or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult’ (Hackett, 2014 online). Evidence suggests schools themselves are locations where systems, practices and cultures can enable HSB (Anon, 2017; Anon, 2019; Dobson and Ringrose 2016; Benton,

2014).

Child protection systems have developed to respond to the abuse of children. However the frameworks and methods used in such systems in England and elsewhere, primarily assess young people and their families – when ascertaining risk and developing a plan – regardless of the context in which the abuse occurred (Anon, 2017). This approach to assessment seldom supports social workers to elicit information about the nature of schools themselves and the relationship between a school context, the abuse occurring within it, and the young people affected. This article responds to both the necessity for effective interventions to address HSB within schools, and growing recognition for child protection systems to be able to identify and respond to extra-familial risks (Department for Education, 2018a). It presents: a range of methods with the potential to assess HSB within schools; the opportunities and challenges of taking this approach; and a child protection framework for assessing cases of HSB in schools as part of a broader Contextual Safeguarding approach to child protection (Department for Education, 2018b).

Family focused: Child protection assessment

In England systems have developed to protect children from abuse (Corby, Shemmings, & Wilkins, 2012; Patron, 2014). Often referred to as child protection, these structures are enshrined in legislation and provide states with the means of intervening if a child is at risk of abuse. Children experience abuse from parents, siblings, carers and adults connected to their families, as well as peers and adults within school, community and online contexts (Anon, 2017; Corby, Shemmings, & Wilkins, 2012; Finkelhor, Turner, & Hamby, 2012). Given that this is all abuse, and harmful to children, child protection systems should in theory be equipped to intervene on all occasions. However, the structural, procedural and practical interpretation of child protection in England, as in many other countries, is limited to abuse

that is connected with families (Anon, 2017; Corby, Shemmings, & Wilkins, 2012). One way this limitation is evident is in the focus of, and methods used during, an assessment of a child's needs. Assessments within child protection systems are almost exclusively focused on a child's family – the nature of that context and the capacity of parents/carers to keep a child safe (Department for Education, 2018a) – and in England this is displayed within statutory guidance via an assessment framework, depicted by a triangle (Figure One).

Insert figure one

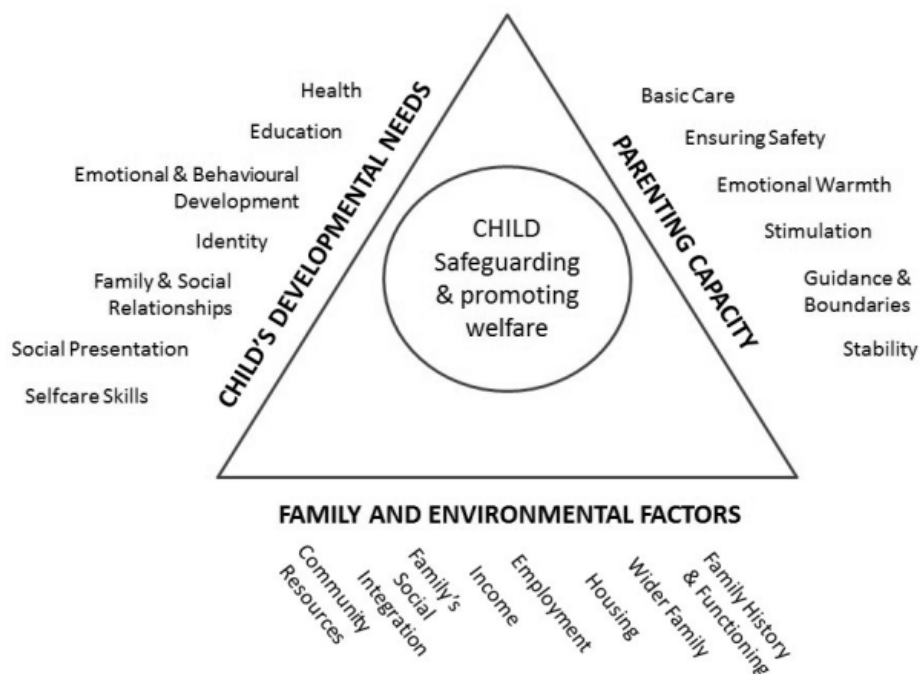


Figure One: 'Assessment Framework (Department for Education, 2018b:8)

As in Figure One, a child's individual needs are conceptually considered alongside parental capacity to care for the child, and other familial or environmental factors that are associated to this. The 'family and environmental factors' referenced are focused on the wider family and the family's interaction with its community – through employment and use of resources – as opposed to environmental factors beyond its control, such as the family's exposure to

crime in the community, the harm a child may be experiencing at school, or the influence of a young person's peer group (Anon, 2017; Losel & Bender, 2006).

To conduct assessment within this framework social workers need to employ certain methods to gather information. These will include talking to the child, their parents/carers and other siblings. They will need to visit the home environment and observe it –considering the dynamics between the individuals who live there and the care/safety that the context provides (such as whether it is clean). Other checks may also be carried out on the family – the social worker will contact their doctor, the child's school and services the family use to gain their views on the welfare of the child and the ability of their parents to keep them safe. The parents, and their ability to provide a safe environment for their child, will be under scrutiny throughout this process, with the aim of establishing whether they a) pose a risk of harm to that child, or b) have the capacity to safeguard that child from other risks they may face.

The focus of assessment, and the methods used therefore, provide examples of the family-focused interpretation of the child protection system. In many cases this approach is logical: if a child is being abused by a parent, or someone connected to their parent, then assessing the situation they are in and the extent to which this poses a risk of significant harm is important. But when a child is being abused by peers or adults who are not connected to their family, to what extent does this approach to assessment provide professionals with the information they require to draw conclusions about a child's safety and make recommendations for intervention? Research into young people's experiences of abuse and violence within schools suggest that this conceptual framework and set of assessment methods is insufficient to fully understand the levels of risk and protection faced by a young person who has been abused by peers at school.

Contextual Safeguarding – risk and protection in cases of extra-familial abuse

Critical examination of abuse within young people’s peer groups, schools and communities has evidenced the ways in which extra-familial abuse is often associated with the dynamics of extra-familial contexts (Anon, 2017; Barter, McCarry, Berridge, & Evans, 2009; Cowie, 2011; Hackett, 2014; Letourneau, & Borduin, 2008; Losel & Bender, 2006; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, & Harvey, 2011).

In recognition of these dynamics, in 2018 Contextual Safeguarding entered into England’s statutory guidance for safeguarding partners, *Working Together* (Department for Education 2018a). Contextual Safeguarding has been proposed as a conceptual, strategic and operational framework for assessing and intervening with extra-familial forms of abuse (Anon, 2017b). The approach is one that promotes the assessment of, and intervention with, peer group, school and community contexts in which young people experience abuse – with the intention of recognising the impact extra-familial risk can have on parental capacity (and child-parent relationships); reduce risk in these contexts; and limit the need to relocate children away from these contexts as a means of keeping them safe. The recognition of the contextual nature of extra-familial abuse by policy makers is welcomed (ADCS, 2017). However, at present statutory guidance solely states that plans to address these forms of harm need to consider ‘wider environmental factors’ associated to the abuse; but it does not indicate how to achieve this within existing structures. To adopt a Contextual Safeguarding approach professionals require an assessment framework and methods to gather information about extra-familial as well as familial environments. How does a professional gather information for an assessment of abuse that has occurred in schools as opposed to a family? And what analytical framework can they draw upon to organise the information gathered, make an assessment of need, and develop a plan? It is these questions, that the remainder of

this paper will explore and endeavour to assist the professionals and scholars who are grappling to put Contextual Safeguarding into practice.

Methodology

The findings presented in this article are based on cumulative evidence from two studies. The first aimed to explore enablers and barriers to addressing HSB in schools (Anon, *forthcoming*). Using the methods developed in the first study, researchers involved in the second study worked alongside social care practitioners to test an assessment of a school environment as part of a wider programme of work to build Contextual Safeguarding systems into children's services departments. Synthesised analysis of these two studies was undertaken to build an assessment framework for responding to abuse in schools for further testing in the future.

Dataset from Study One: HSB in schools

Study One was carried out in four local authorities in England and seven secondary and further education providers including: further education colleges (n=2), faith-based school (n=1), majority-male schools (where the gender breakdown was ≥ 75 per cent male) (n=3), secular schools (n=6), high-schools with sixth-form (n=2), special educational provisions (n=1), 16-18 provision (n=2) and pupil-referral units for young people excluded from mainstream education (n=2). A mixed-methods approach was used whereby complementary research methods were employed within the four local authority sites within multi-agency partnerships and education providers. These included: 17 focus groups with students (n=59), 12 focus groups with school staff (n=58) and four focus groups with multi-agency practitioners (n=25); observations carried out during the school day in nine school sites and observations of 16 multi-agency meetings related to HSB; reviews of eight behaviour

incident logs held by schools and three case reviews of incidents of HSB; and reviews of school and multi-agency policies and procedures. The methods employed during this study elicited information from young people about the scale and nature of HSB in their schools and enablers and barriers to addressing it – findings which have been published elsewhere (Anon, 2018, 2019, 2019).

Dataset from Study Two: school assessment pilot

Study Two was an action-research project carried out in one local authority in England who were embedding a Contextual Safeguarding approach to child protection within their statutory children and families service. Between December 2017 and March 2018 the project team, formed of social work practitioners and supported by the research team at ANON, piloted a school assessment within one high-school in the local authority using the methods developed by the research team in Study One. The assessment aimed to identify risk and protective factors within the school context (and associated neighbourhood, peer and family dynamics) in relation to a group of young women who they believed were being sexually exploited in their local community. As these young women came together at the school, and the school was a potential site of protection for them, it was important to understand the extent to which the school environment protected against, failed to challenge, or enabled the concerns raised – and, furthermore, whether these were matters experienced by other children at the school, or just the group in question.

To undertake the assessment the team developed a student (n=170) and parent (n=85) survey, alongside utilising methods from study one (school observations, behaviour log reviews, staff (n=2) and student (n=1) focus groups, and policy review) to assess the school environment. This information was gathered in a context assessment framework and organised to identify information about risks, strengths and vulnerabilities across contexts including: the children's families and home environments, schools in the area, the local

neighbourhood, online, and within peer groups. The information collected during the assessment, and the strengths, risks and vulnerabilities within contexts was then used to determine which context was most at risk and in need of protection: an assessment exercise defined as 'context weighting' (anon, 2019).

Analysis, ethics and limitation

For the purpose of this paper these two datasets have been drawn together and adapted. Through a framework that explores what they cumulatively suggest about: the value of investigating a school environment when assessing and responding to HSB between students; the methods that facilitate school assessment (and the opportunities and challenges that these present); and how an assessment framework guides the use of methods of social care assessment.

The analytical framework was used to organise the data into three sections. Section One explores what these methods reveal about the relationship between harm in schools, and the school context itself. Section Two considers the opportunities and challenges of using these methods, and Section Three considers what framework is required for a school assessment within a child protection system. Table one demonstrates how the data was organised across both studies.

	Study one	Study two	Findings
Purpose of study	Develop research methods for exploring the nature of HSB in schools and the information they yield	Test research methods to build a school assessment within a child protection system	Section one
Methods	Student focus groups, interviews, observations of schools, observations of multi-agency meetings and behaviour log and policy review	Methods from study on with the addition of surveys	Section two
Framework for analysis	Enablers and barriers to addressing HSB in school for use as a self-assessment audit tool	Risks, vulnerabilities and strengths within school and associated contexts as part of a social care assessment.	Section three

Table One: Overviews of both studies.

Ethical approval for both research projects was granted by [Anon] in addition to local authority research ethics boards where required. Ethics considered consent, anonymity, researcher and participant safety, and the analysis and dissemination of the data .

Opportunistic sampling was used in both studies with researchers working with schools who were keen to engage in, and learn from, the projects.

Cumulative findings highlight the value of assessing school contexts in response to HSB. However, there are a number of limitations associated with both studies. Firstly, in total, seven secondary education providers were engaged in Study One, and one school in Study Two. As such the results cannot be considered representative of other schools nationally or internationally or children within primary aged settings. Secondly, in both studies, engagement with the schools was not triggered as a result of particular concerns raised about HSB in those schools but based upon opportune sampling. While the school staff in Study Two raised concerns about a group of young people, and this informed the approach to assessment, this conversation happened during the process of their coming forward to

participate in the study, and the young people involved were already in receipt of some support from services. The assessment process would look different if the assessment was triggered by social workers or partners due to a concern that the school leadership did not recognise. Thirdly, the findings presented here report cumulative insights about the use of research methods for welfare assessments –the limits and benefits of this approach are explored in more detail in the discussion.

Findings, Section One: Relationship between school contexts and harm

Within social care settings, assessments are used to identify if and why harm is happening and what would need to change to increase safety. Both studies demonstrated that in order to understand harm in schools, practitioners need to examine the nature of the schools themselves and the relationship between the school context and harm occurring or facilitated, there. Both studies identified HSB occurring within schools – such as sexual harassment, bullying and abuse – and assessed the capacity of schools and multi-agency partners to prevent and respond to HSB. The methods used supported this in a number of ways.

Behaviour log assessment

To understand internal school referral processes and recording systems for HSB, both studies reviewed behaviour and safeguarding logs held by schools. Reviewing logs provided a means to understand, firstly, the types of harm staff identified and considered to reach a threshold for recording, and secondly, the perception of harm by staff within school.

How incidents were recorded illustrated how they were viewed and recognised by school staff. For example, while students in all schools suggested sexual harassment was a daily occurrence this was not quantified within behaviour/safeguarding reports in any of the schools, suggesting that many incidents go unreported or unrecorded. Instead in the school in Study Two behaviour and safeguarding logs predominantly focused on violations of school

uniform code, despite students discussing (in focus groups) daily incidents of online sexual bullying and harassment.

Secondly, the language used within logs evidenced approaches to harm, including victim blaming narratives. This was highlighted in the recording of the oral rape of a 12 year old student, recorded as follows:

[student] has put herself at risk and has experienced a situation that was unpleasant for her, and where she felt pushed (although not actually threatened) to give the boy oral sex (behaviour logs, Study One).

This tells us that victim blaming language may be normalised in the school environment.

Staff and student engagement

Direct engagement with students and staff through focus groups highlighted issues including prevalence, student and staff perception of HSB and specific trends arising within the school.

Across all schools, in both studies, students noted behaviours specific to the school context:

Every day you either get called a slut, a slag or a ho .

Int: What do you do? What would a student do?

It's normal, like the first time it happened to us, we told someone. Then we just got used to it. (young people's focus group, study one).

Like there was this thing that went round about boys slapping girls' bums. (young people's focus group, study one).

Young people experience unwanted sexual attention and harassment and displays of harmful gendered attitudes. For example, a WhatsApp group of young boys where they 'rate' girls' body parts. (Assessment notes from focus group, Study Two)

Direct engagement with students provided opportunities to identify types and prevalence of harm which may not be recorded in behaviour logs. Additionally, they highlighted how specific forms of harm were aggravated by the school. In the first extract, the girls discussed

how they challenged HSB when they initially joined the school, but that it quickly became normalised following inaction by staff. In the following two extracts, the behaviours appear to be linked to particular groups ('WhatsApp group') and trends within school ('this thing that went round') that were facilitated by the proximity of peers within the school environment.

Focus groups also provided an opportunity to identify protective factors within the schools:

No, but you [friend in group] don't normally tell teachers, you normally tell me first. Then I have to persuade you to go and tell the teacher. (Study One, student focus group)

Well my friend on the internet is like 11, I used to know him in real life, but now I don't see him anymore. Online he sent me his details yeah, because [he's] somebody who can't read, so he sent me his details to his account. I went on his account, I looked for his messages and these two guys were like grooming him, like saying sexual things to him. So, I texted the guys yeah and told them to like fuck off, leave my friend alone, he doesn't want to be raped by you. They said, "So we don't care, he's dumb." I said, "So if he's dumb or not it doesn't matter." So, I blocked him on his account yeah, reported him to the PlayStation, took a photo of it, reported it to the police and eventually they got arrested. (Study One, student focus group)

Interviewer: If you went to someone, who would you tell?

Student: Meg cos she's the only one we can talk to. She's the only teacher I can trust. (Study One, student focus group)

As these extracts reveal, focus groups provided a mechanism for students to highlight strengths within schools. For example the importance of peers supporting disclosure, highlighting the successful impact of safeguarding within the curriculum (the young person in the second extract stated this is where they learnt how to respond) or the importance of positive relationships between staff and students.

In addition to revealing the types of harm within schools, engagement with students and staff explored the perceived effectiveness of systems and structures used by schools to address HSB. In Study One a student explained the barriers to disclosure of HSB based on experience of staff responses:

F: if you do tell a teacher, the teachers should like not tell anyone. But the teachers end up just telling everyone, and then they're [the person that disclosed] called a snitch.

F: They tell the whole staff room. (young people's focus group, Study One).

Furthermore, direct engagement with staff revealed challenges they faced in addressing HSB.

In Study One, a staff member highlighted the absence of clear policies and procedures and knowledge about what appropriate responses should be:

It's quite hard to know, there are times when I've taken behaviour policy off of there, I've taken it into a room, I've sat down and I've read it because I just has felt like; what is the behaviour policy about any of these things?... But the fact that it's come so far as staff, we don't necessarily know what the behaviour policy is (Staff focus group, Study One).

In Study Two, school staff raised the challenge of getting students to raise concerns due to a persistent culture of non-disclosure:

A culture of 'snitches get stitches' is a barrier (to young people making disclosures to staff due to fear of repercussions). (Notes from school assessment, staff engagement, Study Two)

Combining methods can help identify if concerns are related to the nature of the school itself or are individual incidents. In a school in Study One, during a staff focus group with women, participants discussed how they felt male staff's assumptions about women undermined their ability to effectively address discussions about sexuality:

I've only really noticed here, about that sort of dividing the male, female a little bit more, the times I've walked into a room and a male member of staff has said to an all-male class, "stop talking, there's a lady in the room now" (staff focus group, Study One).

This was further evidenced in practice during observations when two female researchers observed a sex and relationships lesson on pornography. Upon entering the room, and throughout the lesson, the male staff warned the researchers that the boys might be "boisterous" as it was "boys discussing porn". Throughout the lesson the male staff repeatedly apologised on behalf of the boys about what was said in front of the female researchers - foreclosing the opportunity to engage in a varied narrative about boys and their sexuality.

In addition to focus groups, surveys distributed across year groups provided an opportunity to gain student opinions and experiences from a wider group. In Study Two, students reported varying levels of safety between girls and boys within school (62% boys and 56% of girls felt safe in school). And while students noted that there were not specific locations in school where they felt unsafe, several students noted locations outside of school including a local park, walkway on the way to school and area around a public house. Used together with surveys, focus groups in Study Two supported practitioners to verify and delve deeper into issues that surfaced within the survey. For example while survey results suggested low evidence of bullying (6% of students reported being bullied at school) within focus groups girls suggested that "sexual harassment happens every day". This provided an opportunity to consider how students and staff were understanding and defining types of harm.

Observations

Social work assessments of children and their family can involve a range of observations, including visiting the home and family, observing interactions between the child and parents

and checking the home is safe. When considering harm happening in schools, observations were used to identify any information about the relationship between students, staff and student interactions, the physical layout of the school, and any identifiable risk or protective factors. Observations of school environments included school meetings, classes, transfer between lessons, and break-time.

Observations built a picture of how HSB was responded to in practice in the school and illustrated the ways in which risk and protective factors were identified, understood and managed. In Study One an observation of a school staff meeting identified differing school leadership understanding of, and response to, an incident of racist behaviour compared with an incident of HSB. One staff member reported that a student had directed racist language at him and another member reported a student had directed sexist and harmful gendered language towards her:

the student made inappropriate sexual remarks about wanting to put his hand up the female member of staff's skirt and touching her 'female body parts' (researcher notes).

When dealing with the racist incident, the head teacher asked the teacher if they wished to take the matter further (which they did), instructed the Designated Safeguarding Lead to discuss the incident with the student's parents and to schedule a number of one-to-one sessions with the student on anti-racist education. In contrast, when dealing with the incident of sexist and harmful gendered language, the head teacher solely instructed that the student have some time-out and one-to-one sessions to address the student's "bad language". The differing responses to these incidents indicated that the school's responses to racism recognised the dynamics and racist underpinnings of the first incident but failed to recognise the harmful gendered underpinnings of the second.

In addition, observations enabled the researchers to map the physical environment. This contextualised concerns raised by students about the school's physical landscape and

how this facilitated or mitigated harm. For example, in Study One, students in one school discussed feeling unsafe in the science block and smoking area. Observations highlighted that these areas were both unsupervised and the science block was located on a dark corridor with no windows.

Policies and procedures

Reviews of relevant policies and procedures supported understanding of the strategic and operational guidelines in place to respond to HSB. School policies were reviewed relating to safeguarding, behaviour management, bullying and, where available, HSB. Reviewing policies elicited the school response to HSB on paper. The method demonstrated thresholds for response relating to different forms of HSB, definitional understandings and the positioning of the response to HSB within wider safeguarding, behavioural and criminal responses. In study one, for example, two schools considered all HSBs within the school's safeguarding policy. In these schools, the safeguarding policy provided a link to the HSB policy in the local authority safeguarding partnership, which outlined safeguarding procedures for responding to different forms of HSB and provided guidance and resource on how to recognise HSB across a continuum.

In a further three schools, only HSB incidents involving significant harm were considered in policies. In these schools, however, other forms of HSB that did not reach a threshold of abusive or violent behaviours were positioned within the school's bullying and behavioural policies rather than safeguarding policies. In relation to inappropriate and problematic sexual behaviours, the on paper response was through sanctions, exclusions and, when necessary criminal proceedings, without any guidance for welfare responses. In the two other schools in study one and in the school participating in study two reviewing the school's policies identified that all forms of HSB were situated within the behavioural rather

than safeguarding policy and that no guidelines were provided for safeguarding responses for those that displayed HSB.

The method also gave an indication of the extent to which the school strategically drew upon the relationship to inform its response. In study one, for example, five schools did not reference wider local authority procedures within their school policies- even when based in a local authority that had a dedicated HSB service.

Findings, Section Two: child protection approach to school assessment

When conducting child and family assessments social workers draw upon a range of methods to identify harm and protective factors and use these within a child protection system and policy framework. When harm happens in schools, methods used to assess families do not necessarily engage with, or identify, school-specific factors. As such, where possible, in utilising the research methods developed in study one to identify HSB in schools, study two sought to adapt and align these methods with those used within a child protection system. Table two outlines the methods used and how these aligned to traditional child and family assessments.

Child and Family Assessment methods (NSPCC 2015)	School Assessment Methods
- Interviewing children	- Focus groups with students - Student surveys
- Interviewing parents/carers	- Parent surveys
- Interviews/ checks with other agencies	- Focus groups with teachers and multi-agency staff
- Observations of children and parent-child interactions	- Observations of school environment - Observations of multi-agency meetings
- Review of previous social care involvement	- Review of policies and procedures - Review of behaviour/safeguarding logs

Table two: Child and family and school assessment methods

Assessments of families require social workers to meet with and speak to the child under assessment, and where possible, all members of the immediate family to gather their thoughts and experiences in relation to any concerns. As such the number of children involved when social workers assess families is comparatively much smaller than those that attend schools and would be subject to a school assessment. Therefore, the methods used to facilitate the school assessment needed to engage with a larger number of young people, balancing meaningful engagement against being easily replicated and resource efficient. The methods used in study two tested such an approach. Where interviews may seek child and family views, focus groups and surveys were used to reach a wider number of staff, students and parents. Instead of observations within families, observations focussed on the built environment, meetings and staff-student interactions.

In study two a school assessment framework was used to document findings and ultimately assess the level of harm within the school. The assessment summary noted the following in relation to HSB in the school:

Central issues emerging from the assessment are risks associated: to harmful sexual behaviours (across a continuum from problematic language and unwanted touching from peers through to CSE [child sexual exploitation] concerns in the community, and; substance misuse amongst students and associated mental health concerns

There is an interplay between factors in the neighbourhood (CSE risks, gang-association, street-based victimisation, older peers), peer group norms (associated to drug use and CSE); school-based norms (associated to sexual harassment, drug use and a lack of confidence in disclosing concerns); and limited parental influence (impacted by DV [domestic violence] in some cases, lack of engagement in others and parents feeling ill-equipped to effectively challenge drug use and online behaviours) As such there is a relationship between risks in the community and in some homes, being played out (and

in the case of sexual harassment being normalised to an extent) at school and in peer relationships. (extracts from school assessment framework, study two)

Aligning with the process used in the UK to assess levels of harm (and therefore statutory support required) by families, within study two the school was assessed as a '*School in Need*' which aligns to the Section 17 'Child in Need' status given to children and families.

Therefore the assessment determined that:

- (a) *The school and pupils* are unlikely to achieve or maintain, or to have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining, a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision for them of services by a local authority,
- (b) *the school and pupils*, health or development are likely to be significantly impaired, or further impaired, without the provision for them of such services (adapted section 17 from the Children Act, 1989, changes in italics)

The resulting plan, developed in partnership between the local authority children's social care, school senior leadership, local youth service and voluntary community services therefore offered *voluntary* support. While the assessment itself was broader than HSB and included issues such as violence and drug use, the plan in relation to HSB made recommendations of:

- Addressing harmful norms associated with sexual harassment amongst students, with complimentary activities to ensure that the policy framework in place to address this issue equates with that already in place, and seemingly affective, for other forms of bullying
- Increasing student confidence in disclosures and consistent staff responses (and improving the ability to identify where inconsistencies lie) – including in addressing a range of harmful behaviours (including sexual harassment) and developing consistent safeguarding responses to young people from different backgrounds (notes from school assessment framework, study two)

In drawing upon the methodological insights gleaned from study one, study two employed these research methods as part of a school assessment, resulting in a plan levelled at

supporting the school. This process highlighted opportunities for developing assessments into school contexts when there are concerns of abuse at school (as opposed to individual children and families) but also challenges of using primarily research methods as assessment methods.

Advantages

While researchers and practitioners promote situating children's experiences of harm within wider ecological systems through systemic practice (Broffebrenner, 1994) they do not necessarily engage with those contexts themselves. The findings presented here progress this by supporting practitioners to gather information about the different strata of those systems and develop plans which move beyond recognition to active engagement with changing harmful contexts. The findings presented here demonstrate that using a range of methods can capture young people's experiences of the *contexts* where harm occurs, not only the experiences of those affected.

Secondly, the methods presented here provide the opportunity to expand the diversity of views captured and included as part of assessment. In doing so the methods supported varying degrees of anonymity to those engaged within the assessment process. While this raised important considerations, for example how to manage anonymous disclosure, allowing for degrees of anonymity supported participants to provide different reflections on their experiences. The barriers to disclosing child sexual abuse and HSB in school are well documented (Allnock & Atkinson 2019), providing multiple avenues for reporting facilitated opportunities for those affected by HSB to speak out, including not only victims but those that instigate harm.

Finally, critiques of research have questioned how relationships, which are often built over time, may end abruptly when studies finish (Labaree, 2002). However, in study two, the assessment process aided the development of an on-going relationship between the school

and child protection service through creating a shared intervention plan and improving relationships and communication between partners.

Challenges

Using research methods as assessment methods also presents a number of challenges.

Adapting the methods employed in study one as assessment methods required the research team to work alongside and support the social work team to use these in practice. This included the design of surveys and focus group sessions, ethical considerations, confidentiality and reporting structures and analysis. Social work training does not currently include these methods, wider use would require training and support to assessors, not only in their use but the interpretation of findings.

Relatedly, the responsibility to respond to harm is different for researchers than for social workers. While everyone has a ubiquitous responsibility to report harm, social workers have a particular duty in relation to preventing harm. While both studies extensively considered ethics, the scope of confidentiality, and referral routes should any safeguarding concerns arise, varied. As such, varying expectations and accountability within organisational structures may elicit different information. Both studies informed participants of how the data would be used and recorded and what the process would be if the teams were alerted to any safeguarding concerns. Study two highlighted to participants that not only would they record their experiences but suggested that they would also act upon these if the assessment highlighted concerns. While we believe this is a strength of the assessment methods it is an important consideration.

Finally, while statutory guidance *Working Together* (Department for Education 2018a) suggests a move towards engagement with contexts there is not yet specific guidance that facilitates this. As such, by assessing in this way we are asking social workers to work outside the current statutory framework. Furthermore, while social workers and other multi-

agency partners may be well versed in the interventions available to families and children, interventions within schools are likely to be very different. In study two, this meant that there was no legal basis to task multi-agency partners to support interventions that an assessment suggest was required. In essence social workers relied on good faith and relationships to support the plan.

Creating a school assessment framework

Findings from both studies revealed student and staff experiences of HSB in schools, including prevalence, their own perceptions of the effectiveness of interventions, and strengths and gaps in relation to addressing HSB. Both studies applied analytical frameworks to support the capture and analysis of findings. In study one this involved considering the enablers and barriers to addressing HSB which formed a self-assessment audit tool for schools (Anon, 2019). In study two, a school assessment framework was used (Anon, 2018) which considered the risks, vulnerabilities and strengths within the school, and other contexts. Synthesised findings from both studies, and growing evidence about the challenges the child protection system encounters in responding to extra-familial harm, suggest that when young people experience harm in schools social workers and partners need to be able to assess and intervene in schools. To do this, we suggest moving from child and family assessment frameworks currently used in *Working Together* to a school assessment framework when abuse occurs in this context. While aligned to the child and family assessment, a school assessment framework (figure two) would support multi-agency practitioners to assess factors within the school, beyond individual children, associated to abuse, thereby identifying points for contextual intervention. Such factors would include examining guardians' capacity (those charged with a safeguarding role within schools), the environmental and family factors that inform the school itself, and broader student

safeguarding needs, associated to any incident that triggered the referral.

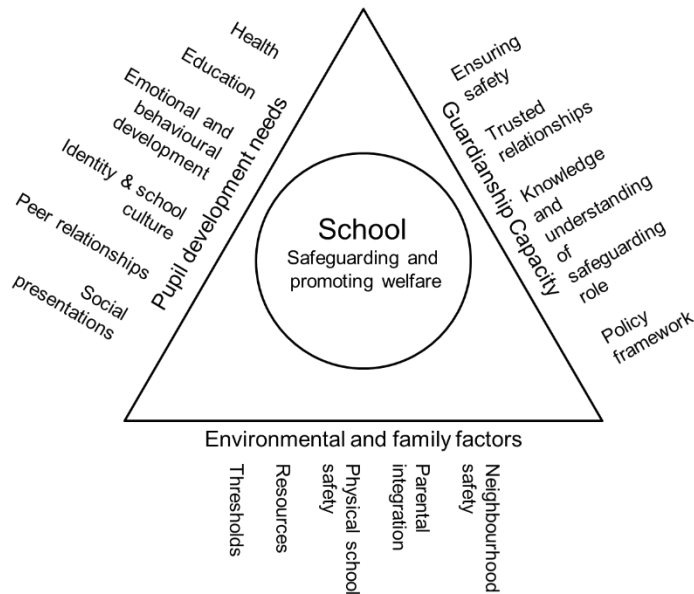


Figure Two: school assessment triangle

Assessing against a school assessment triangle – as opposed to a child and family framework (Figure One) - would require new methods of assessment. The findings analysed in both studies demonstrate how a range of school-based assessment methods could successfully identify needs and environmental circumstances across the three domains of a school assessment framework.

Conclusion

The findings of these studies demonstrate the value of assessing the nature of HSB between students in relation to the context in which it occurs, i.e. schools. Furthermore, it offers methods through which traditional pillars of the child and family assessment can be extended

to ask questions about the capacity of school professionals to safeguard young people from sexual abuse within an educational setting, and use this as the baseline against which to build intervention plans that address the behaviour displayed and the contexts which may have enabled, or failed to challenge, it. The methods used in the two studies upon which this paper has been built provide the foundations for an assessment triangle – which has conceptualised abuse within schools in the same way the existing triangle does within families. The inclusion of Contextual Safeguarding in statutory guidance *Keeping Children Safe in Education* (Department for Education, 2018a) and *Working Together* (Department for Education, 2018b) acknowledges that young people may experience harm beyond the home by other young people, and authorises schools to begin to work with multi-agency practitioners to respond. The creation of the school assessment framework offers a route by which schools, and local authorities, can work together and begin to test the inclusion of Contextual Safeguarding within statutory safeguarding guidance for schools and multi-agency partners. To date such guidance suggests that the environments in which abuse occurs should be the subject of assessment and intervention (Department for Education, 2018b), however it does not provide any sense of how this could be achieved. The schools assessment framework proposed in this article is one way to put such guidance to test, and consider the practical implications of creating child protection systems, processes and partnerships that are equipped to engage with extra-familial risk.

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