
Research article

Supporting teachers in safeguarding against harmful sexual behaviour: service providers' perspectives on transformative practices

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Abstract

Sexual abuse of children is a growing public health issue, with a substantial proportion of such abuse carried out by other children and young people. Schools and teachers are uniquely placed to prevent and intervene against harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) among children and young people. Yet, for schools to safeguard effectively, they are reliant on cooperation with a range of children's services. This study forms part of a wider research project exploring teachers' safeguarding role. It identifies two emerging issues critical in interpreting the data and developing sound safeguarding processes: recognition of the role of professionals' emotional reactions in addressing HSB and the impact of asymmetrical power relations. Building on Draugedalen and Osler's theorisation of teachers' safeguarding, this article examines front-line service providers' perspectives on how they can support schools' safeguarding, proposing a holistic structure of transformative practices that addresses emotions and asymmetrical power relations.

Keywords safeguarding; inter-agency cooperation; school responses; ethics of care; education professional roles; Norway

Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2017), sexual abuse against children is an increasing public health problem worldwide. Studies show that around 30–50 per cent of sexual abuse is committed by other children and young people (Shawler et al., 2019).

In Norway, the National Criminal Investigation Service (Kripos, 2017) and the Norwegian Ombudsperson for Children (2018) have warned of an increasing trend of problematic and harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) among children and young people. Young people frequently report HSB from their peers, and they urge schools to teach more about sexuality and sexual violations and to take a more active stance against sexual harm among peers (Norwegian Ombudsperson for Children, 2018; Bergrav, 2020; Hafstad and Augusti, 2019). Indeed, the revised primary and secondary school curriculum puts greater emphasis on teaching students about sexuality, consent and boundaries from first grade (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020). However, teachers report that they lack competence in differentiating between healthy, problematic and harmful sexual behaviours, and that inter-agency cooperation and support are inconsistent (Draugedalen, 2021; Vorland et al., 2018). In these circumstances, safeguarding becomes the overwhelming responsibility of the teachers (Draugedalen et al., 2021).

Definitions

The phrase ‘problematic or harmful sexual behaviour’ is derived from Hackett’s (2010) continuum of sexual behaviours whose model divides sexual behaviour into the following categories: normal, inappropriate, problematic, abusive and violent. The definition of HSB reflects this spectrum: ‘Sexual behaviours of children and young people under the age of 18 years old that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful toward self or others, or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult’ (Hackett et al., 2019: 13).

HSB and inter-agency cooperation in the Norwegian context

Safeguarding against HSB is often a complex process that involves several services. Various international studies have therefore highlighted the importance of schools cooperating closely with front-line services for successful prevention and intervention against HSB (Charnaud and Turner, 2015; Clements et al., 2017; Ey and McInnes, 2018; Firmin et al., 2019; Kor et al., 2022; McKibbin and Humphreys, 2021). In the UK, safeguarding in the school context has received a sharper focus through Firmin et al.’s (2019) theory of contextual safeguarding in recognising that schools can be sites of extra-familial risks and harms. Firmin et al. (2022: 43) also advocate for a paradigm shift in safeguarding through ‘development of intra- and inter-organisational structures and policies that are directed towards improving interagency working’.

In Norway, the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies (NKVTS) has contributed to significant developments in the HSB field through three research reports, which have influenced policy and practice regarding agencies’ responses and cooperation. The first report (Holt et al., 2016) found that professionals lack knowledge and competence about HSB. The report also revealed a lack of established procedures for mapping sexual behaviour, and for cooperation between various service providers in HSB cases.

The second report (Askeland et al., 2017) revealed that Norway, the UK and the Nordic countries had not succeeded in establishing public national structures to ensure equitable and comprehensive HSB treatment. The study also found that both the cooperation between service providers and their HSB competence varied to a high degree across Norway. It made various recommendations to ensure a more streamlined inter-agency approach to HSB.

Later on, NKVTS published a third report (Vorland et al., 2018), this time investigating municipalities’ front-line efforts on inter-agency cooperation in HSB cases. It found considerable variation in

cooperation between the various front-line service providers, with informants reporting confusion surrounding roles, guidelines and responsibility for coordination in HSB cases. The recommendations underlined the importance of shared HSB training in the municipalities, especially for front-line services such as school, health and care, which encounter children on a daily basis.

As a result of the 2018 NKVTS recommendations, a guide for teachers in primary and secondary schools on safeguarding against HSB was launched in March 2021 (Sandvik et al., 2021). The structure of the school guide draws on the categorisation of sexual behaviours from the Traffic Light Tool (Brook, 2013; in Norwegian by Hegge, 2016), and chapters on healthy, problematic and harmful sexual behaviours include guidance for teachers on how to respond. The guide and the e-learning tool that it includes aim to strengthen the cooperation between teachers and relevant services through introducing the various services' roles and procedures in HSB cases.

Framing the research

This article forms part of a wider mixed-methods study from Norway that explores the perspectives and understandings of teachers and children's service providers responsible for supporting school personnel in their safeguarding role. This qualitative element of the study scrutinises front-line service providers' perspectives on supporting teachers' safeguarding in schools, and explores transformative practices that can assist teachers in tackling the emotional role of safeguarding. The study also addresses power relations in inter-agency cooperation.

'Teachers as human rights defenders': a human rights education approach to safeguarding

This study subscribes to the transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2010) and seeks to explore *transformative practices* between schools and cooperating services that aim to empower children and heal trauma in line with human rights standards, specifically the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and social justice principles. It understands transformative practice as:

A synergistic relationship between the personal and political; a need for decolonized and democratic organizations and healing spaces; attention to means and process; an understanding that oppression has a negative impact on mind, body, spirit, and interpersonal relations; and attention to individual and collective practices for care and inquiry that are needed to heal oppression and trauma. (Pyles, 2018: 181)

Even though children and young people who display HSB are part of a highly heterogeneous group, research shows that a significant proportion have been exposed to adverse childhood experiences, such as violence and abuse (Dillard and Beaujolais, 2019). The potential existence of adverse childhood experiences among students in primary school places an explicit responsibility on professionals to protect 'the most vulnerable members of the society', as stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989: Articles 19 and 39).

Human rights education encompasses transformative practices in schools, emphasising children's right to freedom from abuse, oppression and trauma, and it specifically underlines teachers' responsibility to safeguard the most vulnerable children in their care (Osler, 2016). Human rights education is a key means through which teachers can address inequality and injustice in classroom settings, through educating *about*, *through* and *for* human rights in schools. This makes teachers powerful role models for students; their responses to children's attitudes and behaviours will affect students profoundly. As Levenson and Socia (2015: 1885–6) point out, human rights education complements a trauma-informed approach, for teacher responses have the potential to reinforce HSB, rather than to change problematic behaviours:

Negative or traumatic early childhood experiences can lead to behavioral problems which, when carried over into the school setting, can compromise academic and social competence. Children who elicit negative feedback from teachers and prosocial classmates may be at increased risk for association with delinquent peers, who provide a climate of social acceptance while reinforcing antisocial behavior.

In elaborating teachers' responsibility for safeguarding, Draugedalen and Osler (2022) have theorised a human rights education-informed approach to safeguarding against child sexual abuse, emphasising that teachers are, in terms of their professional duties, children's *human rights defenders*. In this approach, where human rights education and care-based ethics are aligned, the role of emotions and asymmetrical power relations in human rights education and safeguarding work are foregrounded, enabling a transformative human rights education, in turn, to play a central role in safeguarding.

Teachers' emotional responses may affect their ability to provide care for students in school. Nel Noddings (2013: 45) describes the process accordingly: 'If the demands of the cared-for become too great or if they are delivered ungraciously, the one-caring may become resentful and, pushed hard enough, may withdraw her caring.' Thus, safeguarding processes should take into account that teachers, and other adults, tend to have emotional responses related to children's sexuality, as well as to child sexual abuse and child-on-child harassment and abuse (Ey and McInnes, 2020).

Advancing safeguarding also means acknowledging the intrinsic asymmetrical power dimension to teachers' emotional reactions towards students, as they, *the one-caring*, as Noddings (2013) expresses it, are the more powerful partner in teacher–student relationships. Oberle et al. (2020: 1742) argued that 'Teachers' own social–emotional competence (SEC) and well-being are central to the social–emotional support they can provide to students.' If teachers become dysregulated and unable to manage their emotions, their responses influence students.

While teachers are the power-carrying partner in the teacher–student relationship, similar asymmetrical power relations simultaneously affect teachers as the weaker partner (*the cared-for*) in relations with school leaders and front-line services, where teachers are dependent on their support. Supportive practices must be sensitive to power differentials in the various safeguarding processes.

Derived from the above theory, two research questions guided the analysis of the data: 'How do professionals' emotions affect safeguarding processes?', and 'How do (asymmetrical) power relations affect those processes?'

Method

Research design and sample

The researcher conducted qualitative interviews with six front-line service providers between December 2020 and May 2021. Two interviews were carried out face to face as originally planned, with the remaining four conducted either on Skype or by phone due to Covid-19 restrictions. Each interview lasted about an hour, and a semi-structured interview guide directed the conversations. Key questions from the interview guide are highlighted in Box 1.

Box 1. Selected questions from the interview guide (Source: Author, 2023)

What is your service's (as well as your individual) role in cooperation with schools?
 What is your role if there is an HSB case in the municipality?
 What are the challenges in cooperating with schools?
 Why do you think teachers in the survey report that the inter-agency cooperation between schools and other services varies?
 How can enhanced inter-agency cooperation support teachers' safeguarding role?

The six informants were representatives of various front-line services in a municipality in south-eastern Norway, cooperating with the 16 schools that had earlier participated in a survey (Draugedalen, 2021). The front-line service providers were identified according to both their specific professional responsibilities in inter-agency cooperation with the municipality's schools and their known engagement in HSB prevention. Five informants worked for municipal agencies supporting schools: a specialised school nurse from the public health service; a school specialist from the pedagogical-psychological service (the equivalent role in the UK is school psychologist, while in the USA it is education psychologist); a social worker in child welfare; a municipal psychologist from front-line mental health services; and a coordinator of alternative education from the service for school and after-school activities for youth. A

sixth informant was a police officer from a preventive unit cooperating with the municipality schools, who had further training in children's development.

Data analysis

The interviews were recorded, and they were transcribed verbatim in Microsoft Word. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006; elaborated on by Nowell et al., 2017) six-phase method for conducting a trustworthy thematic analysis. In phase one, 'Familiarising yourself with your data', the process of transcription and the process of playing and replaying the recordings enabled the researcher to immerse herself in the data. All transcripts were read several times to categorise various themes and phenomena, and connections between themes were detected and described. The researcher's previous experiences with inter-agency cooperation in schools provided a prolonged engagement and familiarity with the topic. This was both a strength and a potential risk: it was important to approach the data, as far as possible, with an open mind. Phase two, 'Generating initial codes', involved applying thematic coding (Flick, 2009). Phase three, 'Searching for themes', meant that the relevant coded extracts were put into broad categories and themes. In phase four, 'Reviewing themes', the raw data were revisited for referential adequacy to check that the conclusions were indeed derived from the original data. In phase five, 'Defining and naming themes', peer debriefing from a fellow researcher ensured that the derived themes were sufficiently clear. Ultimately, analysis processes resulted in three initiatives of inter-agency cooperation with schools, presented as 'transformative practices'. These were *physical presence*, *cooperative practices around concern* and *shared HSB training and resources*. In the sixth and last phase, 'Producing the report', namely writing this article, relevant excerpts from informants were selected to illustrate the developed themes and the analytical narrative. By triangulating the findings with existing literature, the intention is to 'add to the knowledge of the subject through new theoretical or practical interpretations' (Nowell et al., 2017: 11). The interviews were conducted in Norwegian, and all quotations are the author's own translations.

Ethics and researcher positionality

All the informants received the interview guide and information about the project prior to the interviews, and they gave their written consent to participate. It was made clear to the informants that they could withdraw from the research at any time. The raw data were stored together with field notes in a secure database, and the research project was given ethical approval by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

The researcher is a primary school teacher by profession. This insider perspective provides a unique insight into teachers' practices, where the researcher also has a prolonged familiarity with inter-agency cooperation. All perspectives, whether insider or outsider, require a continuous self-reflexive attitude throughout the research process. In accordance with Attia and Edge's (2017) principles, the reflexive researcher's openness about context, and recognition of positionality, arguably strengthen the study's validity. The researcher is familiar with the research informants, as she is a former colleague of theirs and has shared work experiences with many of them. On the one hand, an insider position makes it easier to establish rapport with the informants in the interviews. On the other hand, there is the possibility that the interviewees were influenced by the researcher's presence (Flick, 2009), or failed to fully explain issues that they might elaborate with a stranger, less familiar with the context. Further, the transformative paradigm chosen for this study influences the choice of theoretical starting point, the methodology and the interpretation. It is also influenced by specific Norwegian geographical, political and cultural contexts.

Findings: transformative practices

Physical presence in schools

Agencies' physical presence in schools seems to strengthen teachers' trust, and this has been reported as a catalyst for engaging in difficult conversations at an early stage (Draugedalen et al., 2021). School nurses have a long tradition of statutory working hours in schools, and have been identified as the front-line service with which teachers cooperate the most (Draugedalen, 2021). The school nurse

confirmed the importance of being physically present in schools, and stressed the unique opportunity of becoming an active member of the school community: 'It's very important that school nurses are integrated into the school, and that they spend a lot of time to get to know the teachers. They need to be visible.' Being visible meant being available to students, parents and teachers for low-threshold concerns and discussions around students' health and health challenges.

Three other informants were actively seeking to have more physical presence in school. As part of a government-initiated reform in the child welfare service to increase inter-agency cooperation and enable earlier intervention, in recent years, the service has experimented with a new design to operationalise greater cooperation with schools. The informant from the child welfare service had a designated responsibility for preventive work and inter-agency cooperation, which meant weekly statutory working hours in most schools. The aim was for the child welfare service to be more accessible to students, parents and teachers, and to offer assistance and guidance at the earliest possible stage:

Teachers tell us that it's so much easier to approach us and chat informally about evolving concerns when we are already there, and that this helps them to know what to do further. We're also participating in meetings with parents and students so we can address the concern together and agree on a shared plan of action.

The service for school and after-school activities is responsible for following up students who struggle to attend school, in addition to hosting a range of after-school activities for young people. The informant pinpointed teachers' need for agencies to be accessible, and the service had initiated a school-based cooperative project, where an inter-agency resource team is piloting being physically present in a school on a weekly basis:

The idea is that it is supposed to be a resource team for teachers, children and their families. By intervening earlier, in cooperation with the student, it's possible to use the actual school as an arena for growth and mastering new skills. It is harder to do this if the student has dropped out of school.

The service reported that using the school as a site for intervention was often perceived as less invasive and stigmatising for the child in question, especially if they were actively included in exploring solutions. The preventive unit in the police shared the desire for a lower threshold physical presence in schools, and had introduced a new plan of participating annually at parent-teacher meetings in several schools. The unit also had plans to join existing resource teams when requested.

Cooperative practices around concerns

The pedagogical-psychological service assists schools in mapping individual students' learning difficulties and struggles with school or assisting and mentoring teachers to overcome negative group dynamics in class, among other tasks. The informant stressed the importance of exploring and cooperating with teachers as a concrete measure to strengthen the school's role in safeguarding:

We do indeed have children who display HSB involved in our service, so we believe that it is wise to explore the problem together with the school to find a solution. We will guide them and support them to contact the child welfare service and be a part of the process, but we do not take over.

Traditionally, the providers of child welfare, mental health services, school and after-school activities and the police have all agreed that they encounter children and young people when the concern about their behaviour has become so severe that it may be hard to change. The social worker from the child welfare service voiced this challenge: 'For years, we have seen that many of the concerns we receive from schools could have come to us at an earlier stage before it escalates to such a serious level, often a bit too late.' The informant from the police shared the same desire to intervene in the case of a child or a youth at an early stage, before it escalates to the level of criminality:

If I am to simplify reasons for crime to find points of interventions that can prevent and stop crime from happening, then you could say that violence, abuse and violations of children in their earliest years can explain a lot of the crime that happens. This is why the police's motivation for prevention is so significant.

Staff in the mental health service had recently started to participate in inter-agency meetings in schools, and they had been given designated schools to follow up regularly as a means of discussing concerns at an earlier stage. Although the service historically catered mostly to counselling children and youth (and their parents) struggling with mental health issues, it had recently developed concrete projects in schools. Thus, the informant wanted to extend the tutoring practice to teachers to support them in their concerns.

The informant from the school and after-school activities service saw that complex cases created insecurity among teachers that in turn affected students, and pointed out that teachers must be supported in discussing their concerns:

For teachers to dare to safeguard, they need to know that they are a part of something greater that will help them find the right solution for that particular child. We need to open schools up for more shared reflections on difficult topics, so teachers can be supported. There is so much shame surrounding this topic, and we need to get away from that.

Shared HSB training and resources

All informants were familiar with HSB work, and most of them had previously participated in HSB training in the municipality. Thus, many informants mentioned the Traffic Light Tool as a concrete means of bringing clarity to behaviours and enhancing inter-agency cooperation. The school nurse found that the tool was useful in dialoguing with teachers on exploring and agreeing on potential concerns, as well as in promoting further action and cooperation with other services:

We have had some focus on HSB in the municipality. I remember some years ago we learnt about the Traffic Light Tool. The knowledge was systemised into what to look for, when to respond and when to wait. The school I worked in also learnt about it and ordered the tool, so it gave us a shared understanding.

The representative from the child welfare service often used the Traffic Light Tool in schools, and reported that teachers tended to become more confident in defining and intervening on sexual behaviours when they could base their judgements on the Traffic Light Tool:

We are so happy that we have got more knowledge about HSB, and the Traffic Light is such a brilliant tool! Teachers have found it so useful, and they have access to the tool in their schools, and many use it often. We have many discussions with them about what type of behaviour they observe.

The mental health service had started cooperating with the public health service about increasing awareness of sexuality in the various services that work with children and adolescents, and wanted to bring that training to teachers and students in schools. The idea was that shared training for all services would create a system whereby services can assist and inform each other to promote healthy sexuality among children, and to understand when it becomes problematic and harmful. As a means of increasing a shared inter-agency HSB competence, the municipal psychologist also advocated for the transfer of knowledge between services in order to support each other:

I think it is very important that both the school and other services, like the child welfare service, have basic competence in psychology, so they are able to have informed discussions and evaluations about a child's behaviour and which interventions to put in place. Our service could help them do that.

At the same time, the informants emphasised that the municipal administration must prioritise training for systemic effect. The police officer elaborated on leaders prioritising this work: 'The top leaders of the administration need to be united in prevention and safeguarding efforts so that they can guide school leaders in the same efforts.' The informant suggested that the government's and municipality's action plans should include procedures and guidelines for enhancing systemic HSB competence.

Discussion

Transformative practices

The findings reveal that several front-line services had entered the school arena as a means to strengthen safeguarding and prevent concerns from escalating. The various services emphasised the presence of different professionals in schools who could explore behaviours together with teachers as operationalising a supportive network for teachers. As seen from the data, one concrete way of promoting resilience among professionals was through creating cooperative practices around concerns in schools. The informants' aim for cooperative practices around concern was to create a more united understanding of how to approach and intervene with children and young people who display challenging behaviours in school. Research has emphasised the need for shared knowledge promotion in schools and for front-line service providers for a more comprehensive approach to safeguarding (Firmin et al., 2019). Such an approach has also been underlined in literature reviews on teachers' responses to HSB. McKibbin and Humphreys (2021: 12) have introduced the 'building blocks model for promising practice' on holistic responses to HSB: 'The "Building blocks" model indicates that practice must span the entire public health spectrum, linking universal services with secondary and tertiary prevention measures.' Similarly, Kor et al. (2022: 13) have emphasised that 'a multi-sectoral approach bringing in different expertise and resources from child protection, paediatric professionals, and children, youth and families services is a key enabler for effective HSB prevention and response.' Front-line service providers can offer support through physical presence and cooperative practices. The services can also offer each other support through shared reflection and discussions. Studies have shown that inter-agency training in HSB has positive effects on participants' subjective competence and knowledge, as an outcome of shared training and reflection (Clements et al., 2017; Vorland et al., 2018). Shared inter-agency HSB training can facilitate a systemic approach and create a supportive network across services. The transformative practices presented in the study could form a sustainable foundation for implementing safeguarding in schools. However, in ensuring that practices are indeed transformative, in that they bring 'attention to individual and collective practices for care and inquiry that are needed to heal oppression and trauma' (Pyles, 2018: 181), the practices must address asymmetrical power relations between the various stakeholders.

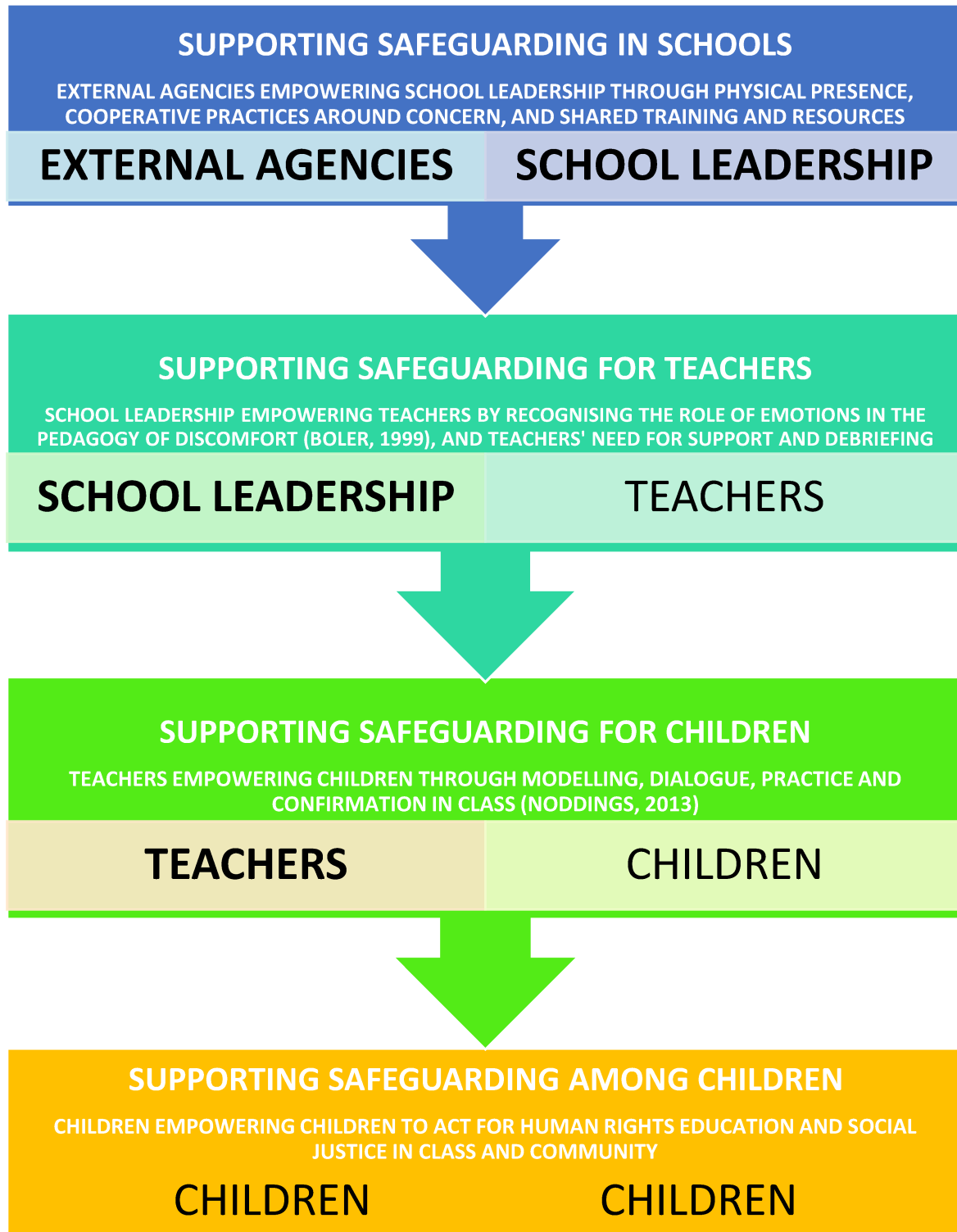
'A system of care': a proposed structure of transformative practices

Elaborating on McKibbin and Humphreys's (2021) building blocks model and Kor et al.'s (2022) implications for practice implementation, and drawing on empirical data and the existing literature on contextual safeguarding (Firmin et al., 2019, 2022), this article proposes a holistic approach to safeguarding through streamlining efforts, comprehensive training and statutory physical presence in schools for front-line service providers. Figure 1 illustrates how a holistic approach to safeguarding in schools requires a 'system of care' among professionals, which recognises the emotional role of safeguarding and addresses how asymmetrical power relations place a responsibility for caring with the various professionals.

In each tier, inequality in power relations is illustrated with the stronger partner marked in bold. The stronger partner (the *caring-for*) is responsible for the weaker partner (the *cared-for*), and for securing a sense of safety between the parts on each level. Figure 1 uses the term 'children' to point out that safeguarding is always the responsibility of an adult; hence, children do not carry the responsibility for safeguarding practices. However, children can be empowered to become important allies in acting for human rights education and social justice in class and in the school community.

In this model illustrating the various actors within a hierarchy, front-line services and school leadership represent equal powerful partners' relations, and they thus have a collective responsibility for securing teachers' sense of safety and well-being. However, services with expertise in children's behaviour must be sensitive to the asymmetrical power relations that inherently lie in 'representing the expertise'. Thus, when front-line services cooperate with schools, they should be the one-caring in this relationship.

Figure 1. Addressing asymmetrical power relations and emotions in safeguarding (Source: Author, 2023).



School leadership needs to be sensitive to the asymmetrical power relations that exist between leaders and teachers when supporting teachers' safeguarding, where the school leadership is the one-caring

and must secure a sense of safety for teachers. Ey and McInnes (2020) claim that re-traumatisation and burnout are dangerously high among teachers. Their findings show that educators reported distress, emotional exhaustion and stress in dealing with children with HSB, and that stress was higher where they felt unsupported by site-based leadership and external services. These findings corroborate Goldschmidt-Gjerløw's (2022) study on sexual violence in schools, which found that teacher characteristics as well as school culture and management influenced whether teachers addressed sexuality and sexual violations in school. Hence, school management is key in implementing the new curriculum and safeguarding against HSB, as well as in preventing burnout.

In safeguarding children, teachers must be sensitive to the asymmetrical power relation that exists between a teacher and a child, where the teacher is the one-caring in this relationship who must secure a sense of safety for children.

This article has drawn on empirical data from front-line services to show how these services can support schools in safeguarding at the top of the hierarchy (in blue in Figure 1). This level is a prerequisite for implementing transformative safeguarding practices at all other levels. However, in the proposed structure, these findings are complemented with existing literature and the theoretical framework concerning the levels of school leaders, teachers and children to enable transformative practices throughout.

Transformative practices in physical presence, cooperation, training and resources

The physical presence of front-line services makes it possible to have time for shared reflection, tutoring and discussions across service providers and school staff. Physical presence allows the services to become active members of the school community, and promotes trust and cooperation. As identified in this article, school nurses are important examples of external services that are already integrated in schools, and can offer teachers support.

The hierarchical structure indicates that there must be shared training for service providers in general, as well as specific training for teachers. The 2020 curriculum for primary and secondary school focuses more sharply on prevention of sexual harm (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020), but there is no planned training to support this new curriculum. As Øverlien and Moen (2016) have already documented, teacher students, preschool teacher students and social work students do not receive sufficient professional training in children's rights, violence and sexual abuse, or in learning how to communicate about sensitive topics with children. Due to their role in the classroom, and their extended time with students, teachers are crucial in enabling HSB interventions. They are also important mediators in inter-agency cooperation, since the concerning behaviour takes place at their professional site. Thus, there is a need for teachers' pre-service and in-service training in sexuality and children's sexual health, where the teacher's own role and its significance are emphasised.

It is also necessary to understand how trauma affects children's development, because of the high prevalence of trauma and adverse childhood experiences among children and youth who display HSB. Advances in related fields such as social work can support schools and front-line services in developing safe spaces and practices. Levenson (2017) advocates for social workers to implement a trauma-informed practice that emphasises safety, trust, choice, cooperation and empowerment between the social worker and the client, and that is applicable to teacher–student relations and inter-agency cooperation. According to Pyles (2018), it is the very principles of safety, trust, choice, cooperation and empowerment that promote the transformative practices that can address oppression and heal trauma.

Implications for practice and future research

The proposed structure for transformative practices indicates a possible way forward for the various services in a more comprehensive approach to safeguarding. However, implementation requires political will and government prioritisation. Additionally, physical presence would need to be made statutory, and these changes require allocation of further resources. Future research might explore inter-agency cooperation in schools more rigorously and 'evaluate effectiveness of prevention programs, particularly in HSB reductions' (Kor et al., 2022: 14). Finally, there is a need to further explore the child welfare service's new design of physical presence in schools.

The transfer value of the study to an international audience

Although this article has concentrated on inter-agency cooperation in Norway, it is hoped that it has transfer value to an international audience. Although there is considerable international variation in education systems and the services that cooperate with them, there may also be some common factors. Due to the amount of time children spend in school, schools remain unique arenas for prevention and intervention efforts. The main idea of the proposed structure for inter-agency cooperation is not to insist that such cooperation needs to be streamlined across borders, but rather to suggest that it would be beneficial for safeguarding practices if inter-agency cooperation occurs within the school arena more frequently.

Concluding remarks

This article has explored how enhanced inter-agency cooperation can strengthen schools' ability to safeguard against HSB through transformative practices. The findings point towards promising initiatives and comprehensive models for inter-agency cooperation in safeguarding. However, current models need to address both the emotional element of safeguarding and the asymmetrical power relations at play, if they are to be effective and sustainable for all parties.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) ethics board. The author conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with Norwegian Centre for Research Data standards.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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