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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A qualitative study of the perspectives of designated safeguarding leads responding to child protection concerns in fee-paying schools

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Email: c.bernard@gold.ac.uk**Abstract**

This article explores the experiences and perspectives of designated safeguarding leads (DSL) in fee-paying schools to better understand how they engage affluent parents when there are safeguarding and child protection concerns. The research employed a roundtable data gathering methodology, with 33 DSLs from a range of fee-paying schools in southern England participating in the study. A primary objective of the research was to understand the factors that influence how DSLs in fee-paying schools engage parents from affluent backgrounds. The findings showed that a major concern is that affluent parents are adept at using their power and privilege to avoid statutory interventions, which meant that the DSLs' safeguarding role was often fraught with difficulties. This article addresses factors that enable or hinder DSLs' conversations with affluent parents and offers some critical reflections on the challenges posed for their duty to safeguard the children in their care. For the purpose of this article, three key themes will be addressed: the interpretation of harm thresholds; communication issues; and mental health issues. Overall, the analysis contributes to a greater understanding of how DSLs in fee-paying schools navigate their engagement with parents when familial risks are identified.

KEYWORDS

designated safeguarding leads, fee-paying schools, safeguarding

Key practitioner messages

- DSLs highlighted that emotional neglect was the most common category of abuse they had to respond to whilst at the same time, it is the most challenging to detect and assess for the threshold of intervention for child protection.
- The inherent power dynamics at play mean that fee-paying schools find it particularly challenging to hold affluent parents to account and to not lose focus on the child when concerns are raised about intrafamilial abuse and neglect.
- More collaborative working with safeguarding partners is required to improve interventions with children from affluent backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the experiences and perspectives of designated safeguarding leads (DSLs) in fee-paying schools regarding how they engage affluent parents when there are safeguarding and child protection concerns. It is based on

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qualitative research using a roundtable methodology, whose primary objective was to understand the factors that impact how DSLs in fee-paying schools engage parents from affluent backgrounds when there are safeguarding concerns. This research builds on the *Neglect in Affluent Families* study that investigated how safeguarding practitioners engaged parents from affluent backgrounds in the child protection system when concerns are raised (Bernard, 2018; Bernard & Greenwood, 2019a). Findings from the *Neglect in Affluent Families* study indicated a number of challenges for social workers in their efforts to engage DSLs in private schools in the context of child protection interventions, including differences of information-sharing, risk assessment and partnership working. In this article, we draw on additional data generated through roundtable discussions with DSLs to explore the factors that influence their engagement of affluent parents when addressing concerns of familial risks and harm. The article focuses specifically on the issues arising for DSLs as they navigate their encounters, both with affluent parents and children's services to respond to child protection concerns.

BACKGROUND

Interventions with affluent families when abuse and neglect are suspected form a particular challenge for child protection workers because of the largely hidden nature of maltreatment. It is therefore difficult to ascertain the scale and nature of child abuse and neglect in affluent families, as to date, the common misconception is that neglect wholly results from material poverty (Bernard & Greenwood, 2019a). Existing research on child neglect has primarily focused on children from economically deprived backgrounds (Brandon et al., 2014; Burgess et al., 2014; Daniel et al., 2011; Morris et al., 2018) and very little is said about the experiences of children in affluent households. As such, research has tended to focus on the relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect (Bywaters et al., 2015; Howarth, 2007; Morris et al., 2018; Sidebotham et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 2012); what has been missing is a discussion that specifically centres on children from affluent backgrounds (Bernard & Greenwood, 2019b).

Most of the available studies looking at children from high socio-economic backgrounds tend to focus on the emotional neglect of children in affluent families (Felitti et al., 1998; Luthar et al., 2013; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Latendresse, 2006; Luthar & Sexton, 2004; Turner, 2019). Emotional neglect is defined as carers who are unresponsive to a child's basic emotional needs, including failing to interact or give affection, and failing to nurture a child's self-esteem and sense of identity (Howarth, 2007). Existing research highlights that children in affluent families may be subject to excessive pressures to achieve academically and to participate in a broad range of extracurricular activities, as well as experiencing isolation from their parents (Duffell & Basset, 2016; Schaverien, 2015; Sullivan et al., 2021), which puts them at increased risk of emotional and psychological distress, including anxiety disorders and depression, self-harming behaviours, eating disorders and substance misuse problems (Luthar et al., 2013; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Latendresse, 2006; Shermann, 2006). Further, two serious case reviews (SCRs) involving children from affluent backgrounds who have died (Carmi & Walker-Hall, 2015) or suffered serious harm in their families (Brabbs, 2011) make evident that the safeguarding professionals were intimidated by the parents' social position, which significantly impacted how they interacted with the families and affected their ability to successfully intervene to secure the children's safety. As the SCRs emphasised, the common thread running through both cases is that the parents were able to use class privileges to avoid scrutiny by safeguarding professionals (Brabbs, 2011; Carmi & Walker-Hall, 2015).

The *Neglect in Affluent Families* study examined how social workers intervene in families from affluent backgrounds when there are child protection concerns of neglect. The study employed a qualitative approach including focus groups and interviews with 30 expert stakeholders from across children's social care and included frontline social workers, team managers, principal social workers, designated safeguarding leads, service managers, a Head of Service for Safeguarding Standards and a Local Authority Designated Officer, across 12 of the wealthiest local authority areas in England (see Bernard, 2018; Bernard & Greenwood, 2019a, 2019b for the detailed methodology employed in this study). The results identified that the safeguarding thresholds for emotional neglect were not well understood by some staff in private schools, who faced difficulty recognising and addressing emotional neglect. It is crucial to note that safeguarding professionals can also miss this neglect or fail to properly hold affluent parents accountable for it. Social workers highlighted some schools' hesitancy in engaging with the child protection system, which meant they overlooked neglectful behaviour of parents and poor standards of care. Social workers linked this to the parents' socio-economic status and associated power imbalances. Social workers also highlighted the schools' transactional relationship with parents as a factor that may constrain DSLs in their responses to safeguarding concerns, since the transactional relationship is threatened when child welfare concerns are raised. Consequently, the social workers concluded that there were some shortcomings in the arrangements for safeguarding in some of the fee-paying schools which presented specific challenges in interagency communication and collaboration. Most notably, they queried whether the DSLs shared information appropriately within their locally agreed procedures (DfE, 2022a), and questioned how they involved themselves in multiagency work with the safeguarding partners in their areas.

Bernard and Greenwood's (2019a) research revealed some of the ways that neglect manifested for children in affluent families and highlighted the need to understand more about fee-paying schools' efforts to address this problem. Whilst there has been a body of research that has looked at safeguarding practices in schools, these studies have mainly focused on children from lower social class backgrounds in education settings in the state sector (Baginsky et al., 2015; Baginsky et al., 2019). Less attention has been paid to the issues arising in fee-paying schools and the challenges faced by DSLs in responding to safeguarding concerns. Considering the absence of research on this topic, the current study examines how DSLs in fee-paying schools managed their roles and responsibilities regarding safeguarding risks, and explored which issues arose for schools when engaging affluent parents. A central goal of the research is to understand the factors that influence how DSLs in fee-paying schools engage parents from affluent backgrounds.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Methods

This study sought to explore how DSLs in fee-paying schools managed their roles and responsibilities around safeguarding risks. A qualitative methodology guided by a roundtable approach was employed. Our rationale for choosing this technique was to generate discussion about the topic that requires collective views. As this is a topic that is not well-covered by research, we wanted to initiate an open and free-flowing discussion. Whilst there are similarities between a roundtable and focus group method, a roundtable facilitates collaborative exchange and exploration of a problem across groups of participants who have a shared interest in the topic under investigation (Pennel et al., 2008). Therefore, a roundtable methodology was considered a good technique to capture multiple perspectives. One of the main aims of the roundtable was to begin a dialogue between DSLs in these domains and contexts. Specifically, we were interested in understanding the key issues arising for DSLs when engaging affluent parents to address child protection concerns. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee from the University where all the researchers were based. Using purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) we recruited participating schools in Southern England through contacts from the Independent Schools Association and the Boarding Schools Association. In all, three roundtables were conducted involving 33 DSLs from fee-paying schools, taking children aged 8–18. Table 1 provides a summary of the schools.

Prior to consenting to take part in the roundtables, participants were provided with full information about the aims of the research, explaining what their participation would involve. They were also sent summaries of the key messages from the *Neglect in Affluent Families* study to stimulate conversations about the relevance to their schools. A series of questions guided the roundtable discussions: (1) What are the biggest challenges you face in your work as a DSL? (2) Is child neglect something that affects children in your schools? (3) What issues arise for DSLs in raising concerns about abuse and neglect with parents? (4) Which factors encourage and enable partnership in working with children's social services? (5) What are the challenges for DSLs in working with international students? The roundtables were conducted during 2019 in rooms provided by the participating schools. Two of the authors acted as moderators and led the discussions, whilst the third author took detailed field notes of the interactions between the roundtable participants.

For the data analysis, a thematic analysis was used since it was the most appropriate method for analysing, organising, categorising and explaining themes emerging from the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2022). The discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and uploaded into NVivo for data management to facilitate the qualitative analysis. The research team conducted the data analysis collaboratively and the five research questions were used as a starting point for an initial coding of the data. Transcripts were read and reread to gain familiarity with the data and a line-by-line open coding, recoding and merging of dominant themes was undertaken (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Our analytic framework was iterative (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009), and codes were clustered into themes which were then analysed to enable the recurring themes to be refined. The final stage of analysis involved more refinement of the coding and breaking down of the codes into several subthemes, which were then organised into thematic categories, to explore the relationships between them (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

TABLE 1 Summary table of study participants.

Method	No of participants	Day schools	Boarding schools
Roundtable 1	8	8	
Roundtable 2	13	6	7
Roundtable 3	12	7	5

FINDINGS

In the following section, three main themes generated from the data analysis will be discussed: (1) interpretation of thresholds; (2) communication issues; and (3) psychological distress.

Interpretations of harm thresholds

Our results identified numerous factors that are interrelated and influenced the DSLs interpretations of harm threshold. The DSLs expressed various concerns about the welfare of pupils, including mental health-related stressors, lack of school attendance, self-harming, pastoral concerns, neglect, problematic cultural attitudes to physical chastisement, substance misuse, domestic violence, bullying or being bullied, parental anger management, family discord, as well as children being removed from the school or even the country. A significant concern expressed by many of the DSLs is that firstly the safeguarding thresholds for emotional neglect were not well understood by some staff in private schools. Secondly, that the DSLs believed that their local children's services did not always see children from affluent families as a priority for state intervention. They perceived that the children of affluent families were seen as less eligible to receive statutory input from children's services as the nature of the concerns were difficult to define and the families had the resources to rectify the issues without the requirement for local authority intervention. Some DSLs speculated that local authority services are more likely to prioritise children from economically deprived backgrounds due to the demands of their budgets. Whilst the longstanding concern that emotional abuse and neglect is more nebulous and difficult to identify and define than physical or sexual abuse, the problems, according to the DSLs, are exacerbated by family wealth and resources. For many of the DSLs, a perception that the bar is raised regarding thresholds for assessment and intervention when families have access to wealth and resources is deep-seated. Another concern of the DSLs regarding the difficulty of referring to children's social care was the perception about the nature of the concerns that the school staff identified as minor. Yet it was often a combination of a number of concerns about a child or family which raised participants' apprehensions about the needs of the child. DSLs articulated that when referring to children's social care the focus was often on these minor concerns and not the broader holistic awareness of the overall state of the child's welfare.

The DSLs explained that if the local authority assessed that the child or the family received an intervention, it often took the form of Early Help services. It was clear for DSLs that the experience of families receiving early help support rather than a child protection investigation fed into their sense that referrals of children from affluent families are not taken as seriously as other referrals. A number of DSLs asserted that affluent children receive a less-than-adequate service from children services. The perception that early help intervention was less than optimal was a consistent view expressed by DSLs. A primary suggestion was that early help is less rigorous than provisions under Section 17 and Section 47 (Children Act 1989). Furthermore, DSLs felt that parents from affluent families are more able to be openly resistant to children's services interventions. Their perceptions were that if children's services became involved with an affluent family, the parents have the skills and resources to downplay the impact and severity of the concerns (Brabbs, 2011; Carmi & Walker-Hall, 2015).

Additionally, many of the DSLs recounted the challenges to making successful referrals to local authority children's services. There is, according to the DSLs, a disparity between what the DSLs consider sufficient evidence of welfare concerns and what will be considered as sufficient evidence for assessment and intervention by child protection services.

Furthermore, the DSLs recognised that a key factor which enabled a good understanding of meeting the threshold for a Section 47 investigation was having a good relationship with the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO). The role of the LADO is to manage allegations against people who work with children (HM Government, 2018). The DSLs underscored the importance of partnership working for enabling greater interagency understanding of thresholds and referral processes to respond effectively to any concerns. In sum, the data suggests that rather than using the formal procedure of contacting the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub, with their stated aim to 'join the dots' between professionals (Baker, 2014), the DSLs preferred a more personal relationship with a named officer of the local authority to support them with both the referral process and working with children and families more generally.

Communication issues

The DSLs shared examples of a range of issues regarding communication specific to working with affluent families including concerns about how such parents communicated with social workers, how childcare professionals communicated with affluent families, and how staff from fee-paying schools and social workers communicate with each other.

Notably, the data exposes two distinct ways in which affluent parents are seen to communicate with school staff and childcare professionals, to either downplay or minimise concerns or erect barriers to responding to concerns. Firstly, DSLs described situations where parents are seen as able to communicate in ways that might give the appearance of working with professionals whilst at the same time participating in tactics to deflect the professional intervention. Secondly, DSLs referred to situations where parents will only communicate by email (and not take phone calls), copying their communications to lawyers or family friends in positions of power. Such tactics slow the assessment of the child's needs because capacity is taken up with responding to parents' emails and other written communication. The suggestion from the DSLs is that due to their privileged position, affluent families have access to a range of tools and resources that they use effectively to limit or undermine the assessment and intervention of the school or child protection services. Such privileges, in turn, enable not least the use of professional language and legal representation (Bernard & Greenwood, 2019a).

The DSLs expressed concerns about the tactical barriers employed by affluent parents and stressed that there are specific methods for communicating with affluent parents that are needed to enable open dialogue. This is due, in part, to the fact that affluent parents often have the gravitas and resources to downplay or minimise concerns. The DSLs also noted that the key to meaningful communication with affluent families is in relationship building. As identified in previous research (Bernard & Greenwood, 2019a), affluent parents often involve lawyers in their communication with the local authority to resist the intervention of child protection services. This resonated with many of the DSLs in this research who acknowledged that some parents would mediate their communication with the school through lawyers once concerns were raised. They felt that highly educated affluent families have the confidence, language and ability to gloss over concerns about risk and harm. The issue of how some parents are able to use their knowledge of professional language and their use of legal advocates to resist revelations was a sticking point for some DSLs. Thus, the DSLs claimed that as they work in fee-paying schools and have regular contact with affluent families, they have the skills, experience and knowledge to communicate with parents in a way that will enable greater openness and that this skill set is often lost or not considered by other agencies, including children's services. It was frequently suggested by DSLs that they have a greater understanding of the tactics used by affluent parents, to minimise, downplay or obscure concerns, than social workers who may not have regular contact with affluent parents who are able to use their privileged position in their dealings with childcare professionals. Their point was that this lack of knowledge or understanding may shift the focus away from the child. The DSLs discussed their attempts to make sense of parents' reticence to engage with concerns about child welfare. There was a consensus among the DSLs that reputation played a crucial role in understanding parents' response to the involvement of child protection services.

A key area of discussion for the DSLs was the difficulties they encountered when responding to safeguarding concerns within the context of culture-specific parenting behaviour. Here, the DSLs were referring to some of the barriers they must navigate when responding to safeguarding issues that arise for international students from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. The DSLs spoke of the tensions they experienced when dealing with parenting practices that brought parents into conflict with the school and child protection services. The DSLs described having to come to grips with two sets of issues: firstly, what it means to parents who were not present to have child protection services from another jurisdiction involved in family life, and secondly, the cultural expectations around parenting practice that put children at risk of significant harm (Bernard & Greenwood, 2019b).

A crucial challenge DSLs face is when parents use corporal punishment to discipline their children for misbehaviour or when they were not meeting parents' academic expectations. The discussions brought to the forefront for DSLs the need for nuanced insights into the ways different beliefs and attitudes towards child rearing might influence how they interpret and respond to the safeguarding needs of the Black and minority ethnic children from affluent backgrounds in their schools. Thus, with regards to communicating with parents from different cultures, an added layer of complexity that the DSLs had to unpick was the intersection of privilege and cultural defence arguments to justify parental behaviour.

Mental health issues

There was a high level of agreement between the DSLs about the increased levels of mental health problems in the form of anxiety and depression suffered by children in their schools. They discussed ways that parental expectations of children to achieve and perform were having adverse consequences on children's mental health. According to the DSLs the children were put under pressure by parents to participate in a broad range of extra-curricular activities and to achieve certain academic results so that they may obtain access to elite universities. A number of DSLs likened this undue stress to emotional neglect.

The DSLs' focus on child mental distress appears to be manifest in a number of interrelated concerns and issues. The stress-related childhood illnesses described by the DSLs were seen to be a symptom of particular parenting

practices. The nature of the concerns was also, for the DSLs, symptomatic of the challenges of referring to, and working with, children's services. There was an agreement between the DSLs that stress-related child mental distress was either seen as a low priority for children's services or that the family had the resources to pay for private provision and therefore did not warrant local authority involvement. Generally, the DSLs observed that as the parents can put in place private therapy, any referral that they make to an overwhelmed children's service would be viewed as less serious and get no further action because the perception is that the child is receiving support. DSLs reported that they therefore found it much harder to keep a focus on the child to ensure that their basic needs are met, as the parents have retained a huge amount of control because they are the ones paying the private therapist. For instance, an example was given where the school felt that a child's mental distress was attributable to parental behaviour and expectations. The school had raised concerns with the parents and children's services, resulting in the family arranging private therapy for the child to address the distress and to keep the response outside of child protection services. This in turn further enabled the parents to maintain, if not intensify, the impact of their needs over the child (Luthar & Sexton, 2004). Whilst one could argue that any child therapist would have a duty to the needs of the child over the needs of the fee-paying parents, there is a perceived conflict of interest inherent in a multidirectional relationship between the child, the parent and the practitioner, which has also been highlighted by social workers in relation to staff at fee-paying schools (Bernard & Greenwood, 2019b).

It is important to note that the DSLs in the boarding schools were unconvinced by prevalent claims that the boarding school experience caused psychological harm to some children (Sullivan et al., 2021; Turner, 2019). They were particularly resistant to the accusation that boarding school environments constitute a form of child abuse, sometimes referred to as 'normalised parental neglect' or 'privileged abandonment' (Duffell & Basset, 2016; Schaverien, 2004; Schaverien, 2015), and that for some pupils boarding schools increase psychological distress (Sullivan et al., 2021; Turner, 2019). Conversely, they suggested that where children were exposed to abuse and neglect in their home environment or had emotionally absent parents, boarding school can be a place of safety and stability, and indeed may protect such children from neglectful parental behaviours.

DISCUSSION

This study has brought to light experiences of DSLs in their interaction with affluent parents when safeguarding issues arise. The findings suggest that there are complex and dynamic relationships between the DSLs and parents, and several issues stand out. In their encounters with affluent parents, DSLs navigate unique challenges when children are at familial risk. Consistent with findings of two significant SCRs involving children from affluent backgrounds, when children at risk reach the threshold for child protection investigation, the parents use their power and privilege to deflect attention (Brabbs, 2011; Carmi & Walker-Hall, 2015). Moreover, the issue of interpretation of thresholds and problems of communication intersect with each other to reinforce and support narratives of nonengagement with statutory services. The DSLs were critical of children's services who they perceived as seeing affluent children as less eligible for social work intervention by dint of their access to material resources. The DSLs said it is often difficult to get a referral accepted by children's services. Some DSLs expressed that the threshold criteria for intervention with affluent families seems exceedingly high. They felt that emotional neglect was particularly difficult for staff in private schools to recognise; therefore, children at risk of suffering significant harm were not referred to Section 47 investigations. Moreover, several DSLs assumed that where children needing early help support were less eligible for children's services support as their parents had the material resources to address support needs.

A further challenge involves parents undermining the severity of the concerns, potentially nullifying the intervention of the local authority. What these dual dimensions of our data demonstrate is that there is a sense that high socio-economic status enables exclusion from state intervention and therefore contributes to the potential underreporting and lack of understanding of child abuse and neglect in affluent families (Luthar & Latendresse, 2006). Thus, in contexts of privilege and power, the relationship between the public and private realm in child safeguarding practice is multi-layered and nuanced.

Perhaps more worryingly, many of the DSLs believed that social workers can inadvertently fail to act with affluent families, therefore limiting state supervision or intervention. As noted earlier, DSLs' viewpoints were that social services are likely to have limited involvement with families who can pay for private services. As a result, they speculated that cash-strapped children's services may wish to prioritise their resources for low-income families who do not have the economic means to access private therapeutic services and that affluent families may have the legal or political clout to deflect concerns. We may reasonably conclude that the outcome is potentially the same, that child welfare concerns remain private, often outside of the safeguarding partnerships within their locality.

In sum, one of the most significant risks of the maintenance of privacy is that it potentially shifts the locus of responsibility from the family to the child. The DSLs acknowledged that when concerns were raised with affluent parents, they

have the economic means to purchase private therapeutic services for the child. Whilst therapeutic interventions may benefit the child, this may mask the problem and thus reinforce the notion that the problem is with the child (Shermann, 2006). Thus, the responsibility is placed on the child to change the situation, rather than on the parents to address problems that may be to do with their parenting behaviour. Important to note, there have been significant improvements in the statutory guidance provided to schools about their safeguarding arrangements (DfE, 2022a, 2022b). At the same time, there is a need to look deeply at the ways that class privilege holds back scrutiny of the quality of parenting in affluent families and impacts safeguarding children from maltreatment.

LIMITATIONS

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study exploring how DSLs in fee-paying schools navigate their relationship with parents when there are concerns about child abuse and neglect. Whilst the study has shed light on some of the issues that influence the DSLs interaction with parents when there are concerns about abuse and neglect, we should, however, note that the findings should be interpreted with several limitations in mind. Notably, the sample is small and self-selecting so therefore cannot be considered as representative of all fee-paying schools, making the findings tentative and we cannot generalise to all fee-paying schools. One of the key ethical issues that we had to be mindful of was ensuring that the schools and settings were not identified. It is important to highlight that careful consideration was given to issues of confidentiality, which can be sensitive in roundtable discussions of this kind. With regards to group discussion methods, one limitation is that they did not provide as much time for the DSLs' individual perspectives as they would have in a one-to-one interview. A further limitation is the possibility that group dynamics may mean that the more dominant individuals in the group may silence some DSLs from expressing their true views for fear of being criticised (Krueger & Casey, 2014). It is possible, too, that factors such as the 'competitive' nature of the fee-paying school market in the UK, and especially among schools near each other, may have caused a degree of reticence among DSLs to openly discuss challenges they face in their school. For example, there may have been instances where some DSLs may have withheld from speaking about difficulties so as not to publicly portray their schools in a negative light by sharing experiences that indicate problems with their safeguarding practices. It is also possible that moderator interaction could significantly affect participation in the roundtable. Careful consideration was therefore given to how these matters present potential for bias and affect participant responses (Smithson, 2000; Tausch & Menold, 2016). Because there were two trained and experienced moderators, one had the role of making sure all the topics were covered and the other paid close attention to the group interaction to alleviate any potential problems and ensure the roundtable progressed smoothly. Despite these limitations, it became clear during the discussions that there were common themes and challenges among the schools and that they gave each other advice; the roundtable opened a dialogic space for DSLs who valued the opportunity to reflect on the extents of their responsibilities and for sharing knowledge and learning to inform practice.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored the perceptions and experiences of DSLs in fee-paying schools in their engagement with parents from affluent backgrounds when children are exposed to abuse and neglect. Our findings offer valuable insight into the delicate balance that DSLs must navigate between managing the complex tensions arising from the schools' transactional relationships with parents and maintaining engagement in a context of power hierarchies whilst addressing neglectful parenting. Within this dynamic, there are tensions for schools to hold affluent parents to account and to keep the needs of the children as the central focus. Arguably, DSLs are well-situated to identify the signs of neglect in the children in their care and have a key role to play, alongside social workers and child protection services, in the care and protection of the children in fee-paying schools. Crucially, this study allows us to recognise some of the constraints they must confront in their endeavours to get the best outcomes for children at risk of harm in their care. Further research could usefully be undertaken into this understudied area to deepen understandings of the challenges faced by DSLs when there are safeguarding or child protection concerns involving children from affluent backgrounds.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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