Individual Paper

We are so lucky here; emotional labour and safeguarding in school

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This paper was first presented at the Psychology of Education Section conference in 2021. It has resulted from a collection of works under the moniker Family Stories, which investigates lived experiences of, and support for, families with complex social care and health needs. This specific piece of work looked at school responses to those families using reflexive thematic analysis to investigate the perspectives of school leaders and pastoral staff, through an inductive approach leading to the interpretation of data into themes. At focus here are the three themes which relate specifically to the emotional labour of school staff in engaging with safeguarding issues: We are so lucky here; School never closes a case; and Your life, consumed. Amid a very strong finding that participants reflected a strong, mutually supportive environment on which they indicated their co-dependence, there also appears to be a distinct lack of reflective support for headteachers, in particular, in managing safeguarding decisions and supporting staff with the emotional impact of that work.
Keywords: *Qualitative; Thematic Analysis; Multi-agency; Safeguarding.*

THIS ARTICLE reports on one part of the Family Stories project, carried out with schools during the Covid-19 pandemic with headteachers, senior teachers, and pastoral leads across schools and early years settings in England. The inquiry focused on the typical experience of senior teachers and school leaders in early years, primary, and secondary in managing safeguarding risks and expectations (see Cramphorn & Maynard, 2021) and, as a subsidiary question, how the Covid-19 pandemic had impacted schools, children, and families, as perceived by our participants (Maynard et al., 2022). This was first presented at the Psychology of Education Section conference in 2021, and here I report on three key themes regarding the emotional labour of participants in their roles beyond teaching. The consistency within and between cases represent these themes as a distinct narrative of school identity and practice, the nature of which have been explored in Maynard et al, (2022). These are: We are so lucky here;

School never closes a case; and Your life, consumed.

The data clearly reflects the place of schools within a multi-agency context (Maynard et al., 2016) and the increased expectations on schools regarding safeguarding since the Children Act 2004, positioning schools ever closer to an all-round hub of community support across the realm of safeguarding, from promoting wellbeing to child protection with partner agencies (Reid, 2005). The safeguarding agenda has become ever more complex in recent times, now encompassing peer on peer abuse, child sexual exploitation, county lines, female genital mutilation, extremism, and child trafficking in addition to more familiar signs of abuse or neglect (Acik et al, 2018; Keeping Children Safe in Education, 2022). This plays out in a context of mutual dependency, albeit with social services rationed via thresholds for intervention and severely compromised following a decade of austerity (Delvaney, 2019). The role of

Table 1: Details of participants in this study

	Early Years Leader	Primary HT/SLT	Primary TA	Primary Pastoral	Secondary HT/SLT	Secondary pastoral	Senior teacher	Secondary SENDCO
Interviews	2	6	1	1	1	1	4	1
Focus groups (participants per occasion)				5	1	2	2	1
Total	2	6	1	6	2	3	6	2
Sector Total	2	13			13			

schools and settings within this context is very particular. The teaching role extends beyond teaching the curriculum and developing skills in students, to care, sensitivity, and responsiveness to children, and to help those children develop prosocial responses to the school and social environments. However, definitions of care imply relational bonds and reciprocity, whereas the care given by a teacher requires purposeful work, or, *emotional labour* to understand and empathise with students (Isenbarger and Zembylas, 2006), which is seen as an important aspect of the professional role (Mikuska & Fairchild, 2020), and which may extend over many years with the same child and family. This typifies the specific and special daily contact between schools and families often only ending with the child's progression from early years to primary to secondary and beyond.

Method

The study adopted a qualitative, interpretative approach involving 15 semi structured interviews and 3 focus groups of 4–8 participants, totalling 28 participants from 14 schools in England (see Table 1). Extensive discussion about safeguarding decisions, were given by those is key safeguarding roles within schools, such as headteachers, senior pastoral and SENDCO staff who have a Designated Safeguarding Lead role (Keeping Children Safe in Education, 2022), or who work closely with those colleagues.

Data were collected over Zoom or face to face in participants' own school. Initial contact was made with the Headteacher who either volunteered themselves or shared the invitation to participate with the staff team and information and consent sheets were sent by email. Ethical approval was granted by the relevant University and all names have been changed to protect anonymity. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis to locate narratives (Adler et al., 2017) and narrative ecologies (Maynard et al., 2022) in how schools appear to co-construct their position in whole-family approaches. For note later on, this project had been proceeded by another *Family Stories* project, which investigated the lived experience of parents receiving social care support. A key finding from that study was repeated comments by parents that they had received up to twenty texts a day from their child's school regarding various misdemeanours. The parents commented that these texts led to overwhelming negative feelings and a reluctance to go to the school gates for fear of reprisal.

The data reflects a snapshot of participants' perspectives at a given moment in time. Data were analysed through a reflexive process which probed each case before bringing initial themes together and creating themes at a superordinate level to represent the whole set of findings (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The whole set of themes are illustrated in Table 2; those related to safeguarding (in bold) are those discussed here,

Table 2: Superordinate and sub themes

Superordinate themes	Sub themes
We are so lucky here	Support for decision making
	Team identity
School never closes a case	Longevity of relationship
	Lack of external support
	Representation of school as the constant during covid
	Emotional labour and investment in children
Your life, consumed	Unable to switch off
	Worry
Schools and Families in a Covid Community	Schools in the community
	Withdrawal of families from view
Impact of Covid on Children	Unexpected children struggling
	Academic Impact
	Missing building blocks
Things got worse, things got better	Things just got worse for families (services)
	Covid made things better (practice)

with others, related specifically to Covid-19, discussed in Maynard et al (2022).

Both interview and focus group participants frequently attended to their experience in connection and comparison with in-school/setting colleagues, and sector colleagues including social services and health. Our analysis resulted in themes which appeared like narratives; constructed stories by which given phenomena have come to be understood and reinforced by one another (Adler et al, 2017), denoting the position, importance and complexity of schools, and evidenced by the tight reinforcement of ideas between participants.

Analysis and discussion

We are so lucky here
Our data indicated a very firm belief among participants that they were *'lucky'* in their immediate teams and school ethos. In fact, every participant referred to 'luck', (see also Cramphorn & Maynard, 2021). This appeared to frame the rest of the data with repeated emphasis on the camaraderie of the team, a secure ethos and identity and refrain that *we always do the best for our students/ families*. However, this paints a remarkably perfect picture of a sector acknowledged as being under incredible strain and criticism (Kim & Asbury, 2020).

As mentioned above, a lead-in to this project was a previous study with parents whose children also had challenging behaviour, and many parents had reported receiving up to 20 texts a day from school reporting poor behaviour, leading to overwhelmingly negative feelings. Curious to understand more, a question about this was included in this study. Participants were told about the finding, reassured this did not regard their own school, and were asked what they thought about this. As with the repeated belief in their *luck*, our participants were remarkably consistent in their conclusions, *I can imagine that happens, but not here.*

However, despite this somewhat idealised picture, headteachers, as a specific subset within our participant group, acknowledged a distinct lack of support for managing safeguarding concerns. While they reported

to support them with social issues was seen as a conduit for engaging them with their children's learning and the school ethos overall.

Headteacher Sarah summed up the range of experience in supporting local families:

> *There never seem to be anything we haven't dealt with…. So, we've had to deal with ones dealing with FGM [female genital mutilation]. We've had trafficking. You know, obviously domestic violence, drug use, alcohol misuse and serious mental health issues, you know. We've had to speak to children when their parents have committed suicide and social care suddenly says, the best person to tell the child is school. Thank you very much [sarcastic inflection].*

> Sarah, Primary Headteacher

The longevity of school-home relationships was clearly evident in the data, with older siblings as previous students, or even parents themselves. This longevity is key when outside agencies cease casework, explained here:

> *Now the problem here is that, you can feel ..from outside agencies' point of view if they're in school, there's not a problem. And even though the school is trying to say, there's a problem, there's a problem, there isn't a problem as long as they're in school.*

> Sally, Secondary pastoral lead

> *So, where do we go next when you've got Early Help refusing, Social Care refusing, CAMHS ..refusing, it's just, we're literally on our own.*

> Anna, Pastoral support worker,
> Primary Focus group

Strikingly the comments above stand in contrast to the placement of schools as a vital part of the multi-agency system – they appear to represent themselves as isolated, frequently left to cope when others determine their role is over. In this context, school appears to be the agency unable to define, or ration their support (Delvaney, 2019), yet are also continuing in this role with limited or non-existing support, according to our sample.

Your life, consumed

The personal, emotional impact of supporting vulnerable children and families was striking, reflecting the professional love for children (Page, 2018; Ransom, 2019), and the weight of responsibility on their shoulders. Two senior teachers from a secondary focus group clearly conveyed a sense of the impact on her, stretching into her home life and reflecting the co-dependency on supportive colleagues, echoing *We are so lucky here*, above.

> *When you've got heavy teaching loads as well… you've got, you know, everything, bad behaviour to deal with perhaps and then you have incidents like that [suicide threat] your whole life becomes consumed. …My office buddy, the other head of year, she stayed with me. Thank goodness, because I couldn't have done that on my own. …And I had to keep going through have I done this, [have I] done that. Have I spoken to those people, you know, …And I think we do take the worry home, that's the biggest thing for me is, you know, worrying about what's going to happen at the weekend. Whereas it should be the parents [but] we are their parents at times, aren't we?*

> Samantha, Senior teacher,
> Secondary Focus group

> *We have so many issues and we care so much about our children…And so their issues become our issues, and I have to be really careful and make sure I detach but it's very difficult to do it, and you go home every day and you feel thankful…, because you know there's a child you look after who doesn't have what you have, and that sits really heavily on my shoulders.*

Yeah, very heavily, makes me very sad…it comes back to us being a very tight team.

Georgia, Senior Teacher,
Secondary focus group

Conclusions

These themes portray a narrative of schools in their work with families encountering deeply complex social needs, a amid a sector which rations higher level support (Delvaney, 2019). All three themes appear to come back to a shared belied in the centrality of the school itself in supporting children and families, from within their own walls. While this study has not attempted to locate fact, and a full exploration would require voices from other parts of the sector, there is a very tight reinforcement between cases about the essential role of schools beyond learning and teaching. It therefore seems ironic that they have not been considered as a fourth key service (Baginsky et al., 2019). Above all, the finding that our participants reflected a belief in *luck* seems important to explore further. While this is reported in overwhelmingly positive ways, denoting an authentic camaraderie and shared values, it is also concerning that headteachers in particular appear to have few places to call on for their own support. Further work is planned to scrutinise this further, and not least, investigate the presence of critical friends to support an evolution of practice in such a complex landscape.

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