

**Future Focused: Impacting change and leading
improvement through research
ECCP7005**

AI Declaration

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment. I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Contextual Safeguarding: An exploration of cultural sensitivity in early years safeguarding practices within contemporary Wales.

Abstract

Safeguarding children and families in the early years sector is a multifaceted and complex process (Buckler, 2023; Cronin, 2026), further intensified due to increasingly diverse cultural, religious and socio-economic families attending early years settings (Keddell, 2023). Such diversity requires a nuanced, contextual and critically informed approach to practice. Central to this, is the development and application of cultural competence; practitioner's ability to recognise, understand and respond appropriately to differences, consequently ensuring that all children and safeguarded equitably (Laird and Williams, 2023; Balogun *et al.*, 2025).

This pilot study aimed to evaluate focus group methodology for a subsequent main study titled *Contextual Safeguarding: An exploration of cultural sensitivity in early years safeguarding practices within contemporary Wales*. The main study will use a combination of focus groups and citizens juries. The pilot study aimed to test the key features including aspects such as recruitment and consent processes, facilitation strategies, data collection and analysis, emerging themes and practitioners understanding of cultural competence.

Key findings included methodological validation, validation of the need for deliberative discussion, variation in practitioner understanding and experiences of cultural competence, potential for informing citizens jury discussions and opportunities for methodological refinement.

In addition, several key themes emerged that are promising and may function as further provocations for exploration within the main study. These included relational practice, training gaps, system inequalities, the complexity of safeguarding and practitioner confidence.

Introduction

Safeguarding is a collective responsibility concerned with promoting the welfare and positive outcomes of children and protecting them from abuse, neglect, exploitation and other forms of harm (Ball and McManus, 2023). According to Care Quality Commission (2026) effective safeguarding seeks not only to respond to concerns when they arise, but also to identify risk factors early and create conditions that enable children to thrive safely. The importance of safeguarding is reflected in legislation and policy across the United Kingdom and Wales, all of which place children's rights, welfare and protection at the centre of professional practice (NSPCC Learning, 2026). While safeguarding legislation in England and Wales share several common foundations, Wales has developed a distinct policy and legislative framework following devolution (Ann Craft Trust, 2026). Safeguarding practice in Wales is primarily underpinned by the *Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014*, which places wellbeing, prevention, partnership working and voice at the centre of service delivery. Both Wales and England are strongly influenced by the *Children Act 1989* and *Children Act 2004*. Wales, however, operates within a more integrated framework that brings together children's and adults' safeguarding under a single national system of procedures and regional safeguarding boards (Ball and McManus, 2023). Furthermore, Welsh policy places particular emphasis on rights-based, person-centred and preventative approaches, reflecting broader commitments to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and wellbeing principles (Murphy, 2024).

Contemporary safeguarding practice increasingly recognises that children's experiences cannot be understood solely through the circumstances within their family home. Children's lives are shaped by a complex range of social, environmental and cultural influences, including schools, peer groups, online spaces, neighbourhoods and wider communities (Firmin, 2020; Featherstone *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, safeguarding has evolved towards more contextual approaches seeking to understand the broader environments in which children live and experience harm.

Contextual safeguarding provides a framework for understanding how extra-familial contexts influence children's safety and wellbeing (Owens *et al.*, 2020). Rather than viewing risk as located solely within individual children or families, contextual approaches acknowledge that vulnerability and protection are shaped by multiple

interacting systems and experiences. This perspective aligns with ecological understandings of child development, recognising that children's lives are influenced by relationships, communities, social structures and cultural environments (Wroe, 2021). Understanding context therefore becomes essential for practitioners seeking to accurately assess risk and provide equitable and effective safeguarding responses.

Among the many contextual factors that shape children's lives, culture is particularly significant. Culture influences beliefs, values, behaviours, expectations, communication and experiences, affecting both how children experience the world and how professionals interpret safeguarding concerns (Bicchieri *et al.*, 2023; Lloyd *et al.*, 2024). As societies become increasingly diverse, professionals must engage with a broad range of cultural identities, experiences and perspectives. This has led to growing interest in the concept of cultural competence and its role in ensuring safeguarding practice is responsive, equitable and capable of meeting the needs of all children and families.

Literature Review

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence refers to practitioners' ability to recognise, understand and respond appropriately to the diverse cultural identities, experiences and needs of children and families whilst reflecting critically on their own assumptions and positionality (Laird and Tedam, 2019; Laird and Williams, 2023; Khazbak *et al.*, 2025). Furthermore, it is the process of being respectful and responsive to the beliefs, the practices, the culture and the linguistic needs of diverse individuals (Newcastle Safeguarding Adults Board, 2024; Oldham Safeguarding Adults Board, 2025) and considering one's own positionality and cultural biases and work actively towards mitigating for these (London Borough of Redbridge Safeguarding Adults Board, 2025).

Referring to contextual safeguarding, culture can be one of the most powerful contextual layers. Having a good understanding of factors that influence an individual's vulnerability can help practitioners map risk in context, looking beyond

the family home. However, Lau and Rodgers (2021) claim that a limitation of cultural competence can sometimes result in practitioners treating culture as something static or constant rather than a dynamic and ever-changing state. Furthermore, Harrison and Turner (2011) claim that when considering factors including race, religion, nationality, ethnicity and language as one distinct group, then our understanding of culture can become foggy and misconstrued. Another challenge that can limit effective execution of cultural competence is whether the practitioner believes that this is something achievable or whether they see it as unrealistic (London Borough of Redbridge Safeguarding Adults Board, 2025). This is since cultural competence, whilst something that may be strived for, due to its subjective and complex nature, successful achievement is unachievable and unrealistic.

Cultural norms influence factors including communication, behaviour, roles, discipline and expectations (Bicchieri *et al.*, 2023). This underscores the need for practitioners to develop cultural competence, recognising that cultural norms are deeply embedded within children's lived experiences and influence how they understand, navigate and interact with the world around them. Cultural competence can ensure that practitioners interpret behaviours and indicators accurately (Lloyd *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, it ensures that practitioners do not rely on a single, cultural lens to view the safeguarding picture. Cultural competence can support an equitable, rights-based approach to safeguarding practice in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This links to both UK and Welsh frameworks which emphasize anti-discriminatory practice, respect for identity, equality and human rights, included in the *Equality Act 2010* (UK), *Equality Act 2010* (Statutory Duties (Wales) Regulation (2011), *Keeping Learners Safe* (2021) (Wales), *Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014*, *Wales Safeguarding procedures* (2019), *Working Together to Safeguard People (Wales) Children Act's* (1989) and (2004) (UK) *Education Act 2002* (UK) and the Human Rights Act 1998.

Contextual Safeguarding

Contextual safeguarding is defined as an approach to safeguarding individuals through considering broader, extra-familial contexts (EFC) (Owens *et al.*, 2020). Featherstone *et al.* (2020) builds on this and adds that combining the social model of

child protection with contextual safeguarding, approaches can better consider the conditions and contexts in which abuse and harms occur.

The fast paced and ever-changing nature of safeguarding demands contextual approaches and deeper exploration into lived experiences in order to protect children effectively (Firmin, 2020; Orr, 2021 and Holmes, 2022).

Practitioners must understand that safeguarding is contextual in order to ensure that the processes to protect children are effective. According to Buckler (2023) practitioners must be able to understand a child's lived experiences to be able to fulfil their protection needs. Harm cannot be considered without understanding the cultural ecosystem in which the child resides (Draper *et al.*, 2023). Asking the question, what does this mean in 'this' child's world should illicit deeper considerations of that child within their unique and individual situations. Wroe (2021) highlights Bronfenbrenner's 1979 ecological systems theory as an effective lens with which to explore the diverse systems that can impact the lives of children. This will be explored in more depth at thesis stage. To be able to apply a contextual approach, practitioners must possess professional curiosity. Manchester Safeguarding Partnership (2022) define professional curiosity (within the safeguarding context) as the exploration, reflection and testing of information about the individuals involved in safeguarding concerns.

Professional curiosity is a combination of looking, listening, asking direct questions, checking out and reflecting on information received and not accepting it at face value (Smith, 2024). North Yorkshire Safeguarding Partnership (2021) believes that professional curiosity is fundamental to understanding children's complex lives and ensure positive outcomes. Muirden and Appleton (2022) outline that a lack of professional curiosity has been identified in several historical Serious Case Reviews (SCR's). Additionally, Burton and Revell (2018) highlight that several Serious Case Reviews including those for Hamzah Kahn, Daniel Pelka and Oxfordshire's Serious Case Review into child sexual exploitation highlighted a lack of professional curiosity as a contributing factor. All of these cases had an element of culture to them, not to mention those of Jasmine Beckford, Victoria Climbié and Kyra Ishaq (Akilapa and Simkiss, 2012).

Culture can shape a child's life, their peers, the expectations placed on them, their behaviours, attitudes and their experiences. LeVine and New (2008), key researchers in cultural anthropology, highlight this concept as a result of their in-depth studies. Lamb and Lerner (2015) support this, outlining how renowned theorists and psychologists such as Eriksson, Piaget and Gesell have long since recognised the complex and multifaceted role of culture and its ability to influence children's lives. Ang (2025) further highlights how cultural beliefs and experiences, values and norms come together to play a significant role in how children experience life. A contextual approach can influence safeguarding beyond the family, showing how culture shapes neighbourhoods, schools, beliefs and more (Buckler, 2023) and reinforces Bronfenbrenner's theory (Wroe, 2021).

In addition to how culture can impact those directly affected by harm/abuse, culture can also shape professional perceptions and behaviours (Oldham Safeguarding Adults Board, 2025). According to Lee (2024) professionals should possess the ability and skills to look inside themselves and reflectively explore their own bias, limitations and assumptions. Furthermore, Lloyd *et al.* (2024) state that by employing contextual approaches, practitioners are more aware of their own assumptions, responses, biases and this consequently strengthens equitable safeguarding for all children and families regardless of culture. Aynsley-Green (2019), agrees with the concept of analysing children's contexts and lived experiences, and moreover, calls for a new Children Act that considers more contemporaneous and contextual approaches that places children and their lived experience at the centre.

Intersectionality

Steinmetz (2020) refers to Crenshaw's 1989 work that coined the concept of intersectionality, a method by which to evaluate the complexities that impact individual's lives. Intersectionality is an effective paradigm to investigate the life of an individual and perhaps more importantly, how that life is impacted by factors such as poverty, race or religion, which regularly shape injustice and inequality (Bauer *et al.*, 2021).

Intersectionality is an important consideration in any safeguarding process because harm is always shaped by a child's family, community, identity and lived experiences (Nadin and Korbin, 2019). Furthermore Rice, Harrison and Friedman (2019) and

Manister (2021) believe that intersectionality must be considered in order to improve responses, decisions and subsequent outcomes. By doing this, practitioners can move beyond surface level, standardised approaches. Davies (2022) believes that by considering intersectionality, practitioners can move beyond a generic, universal approach to implementing safeguarding policy. However, according to BASW (2025), intersectional approaches are often not exercised when considering safeguarding cases. Furthermore, according to Welsh Government (2025), failure to apply intersectional approaches can significantly impact outcomes or result in inadequate protection protocols being implemented.

Intersectionality not only emphasizes how children's identities such as race, class and gender interact but also how these identities are shaped by power (Azmitia, Garcia Peraza and Casanova, 2023; Romero, 2025). According to Pease (2022), consideration must be paid to how historic, systemic and cultural factors privileges some groups of individuals whilst marginalising others.

Children's experiences are shaped by forces beyond individual behaviours, they may hold more or less power depending on the context they are in (Osher *et al.*, 2020). Practitioners must avoid making assumptions that a child's experience is uniform across contexts or that all children's experiences are equitable in the same context (Solvason, 2022). For example, a 10-year-old Somali Muslim female may be confident, outspoken, independent and socially influential in her mosque youth group, where she is surrounded by familiar friends, peers, family and community members who treat her as competent, capable and mature. However, in contrast, in school she may be quiet, hesitant, shy and avoidant of eye contact. Practitioners must avoid interpreting her classroom behaviour incorrectly based on her navigation of a space (the classroom) where she feels she holds less social power and is therefore less culturally anchored. Her identity markers, gender, ethnicity, religion, migration history all interact with structural power in different ways depending on the context. This supports the need for intersectional approaches to consider individual identities, structural power and contextual power shifts.

Intersectional practice can ensure that support mechanisms are tailored, equitable and culturally capable. This is supported by Hull *et al.* (2023) who state that a structural and systemic approach to intersectional policy making can support more

equitable outcomes for all. This aligns with the principles of Welsh policy such as Welsh Government's (2022) Working Together to Safeguard People guidance, the *Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014)* and the Welsh Safeguarding Procedures (Social Care Wales, 2026) which demand that practitioners understand the needs of the diverse children and families both at a strategic level but more importantly, at a practical level.

Child protection in the United Kingdom and Wales – Policy Context

Safeguarding and child protection in Wales and the UK continues to be a complex and multifaceted process (Wilson *et al.*, 2025; Gillen and Canavan, 2023). A consistent finding across analyses of Serious Case Reviews (SCR's), Child Practice Reviews (CPR's) and national review reports is that culture remains under-recognised, poorly defined and inconsistently examined within safeguarding investigations (Brandon *et al.*, 2020; Dickens *et al.*, 2022a; Dickens *et al.*, 2022b; Bernard and Harris, 2018; DfE, 2025).

Continuous failure to identify culture as a contributing factor in SCR's and CPRs may prevent identification of the need for professional development in this area (Bernard and Harris, 2018). Recent research exploring this concept supports the notion that culture is under reported in systemic reviews into safeguarding failures.

Dickens *et al.* (2022b) in their 2017-2019 Triennial Review of SCR's does highlight culture as a recurring issue in safeguarding cases, however, it fails to identify culture as a specific theme. Neither is it clearly defined or explicitly quantifiable, indicating that, whilst culture is acknowledged, insufficient significance is placed on it as a contributing factor within safeguarding review frameworks. This review analysed 235 SCRs in England between 2017-2019, a considerable number of cases, strengthening these claims. This is supported further by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) (2026), who state that children from minority backgrounds are frequently overlooked or inadequately understood in systematic reviews of practice. Department of Education's (2025) report into cultural issues in safeguarding practice outlines that there is an imperative need for systemic change in how race and culture are addressed within safeguarding practice. Amin and Khan (2025) report that the 2025 DofE report, authored by an independent Child Safeguarding Practice Review panel, was commissioned with the specific aim of

exploring, to what extent culture informs safeguarding practice. BASW (2025) in response to the findings of the 2025 report, articulates a possible limitation of systemic review processes, highlighting the possibility that those instigating, setting the terms of reference and conducting safeguarding reviews may not themselves understand the significance of culture and its impact on decision making. In agreement with Dickens *et al.* (2022b), the Department of Education (2025), whilst acknowledging that some progress has been made, concludes that there is a persistent and concerning silence around elements of culture, with these issues often being under-explored, inadequately named and/or entirely absent in safeguarding reviews. Davies (2025) highlights that the Department of Education's (2025) report findings overlook children and families from diverse backgrounds, not only in the immediate responses to harm, but also in systematic approaches to improve and learn from failings. Brandon *et al.* (2020) further support this in their 2014-2017 Triennial Review of SCR's, stating that use of ambiguous and unclear language in reference to culture could have resulted in diluted or weakened approaches to safeguarding. Laird and Tadam (2019) further highlight the need to understand and explore how cultural misunderstandings and lack of cultural competence has historically resulted in significant harm or deaths of children. Furthermore, BASW (2025) state that too little progress has been made in this specific area since the 2003 inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié.

Whilst these findings highlight significant omissions regarding the recognition of culture within safeguarding systems, the majority of available evidence originates from England-based Serious Case Reviews and national review processes.

Research Gap

Despite increasing recognition of culture within safeguarding literature and policy, limited research has examined how early years practitioners understand and operationalise cultural competence within safeguarding practice in Wales. Furthermore, little is known about whether practitioners feel equipped to apply culturally competent approaches when safeguarding children from diverse backgrounds. This study therefore seeks to explore practitioners' understandings of cultural competence, their capacity to utilise cultural competence and its role within safeguarding decision-making in Wales.

Methodology

This research combines an interpretivist approach with a participatory element to gather rich, authentic and meaningful data. The choice of research paradigms plays a crucial role in shaping not just the methodologies but also the outcomes of studies (William, 2024).

Interpretivism can be categorised as a way of progressing a more in depth understanding of human behaviour and social phenomena by analysing data subjectively to construct theoretical and social meaning (Pulla and Carter, 2018; Walt, 2020). Adil *et al.* (2022) believe that interpretivism can be a valuable tool to investigate and explore social problems such as the one in this project. Interpretive approaches require human interpretation of data, this means that interpretivism contains a human element which is considered by scholars to be the only way to socially construct reality (Ikram and Kenayathulla, 2022). Furthermore, the pilot findings demonstrated that understandings of cultural competence emerged through dialogue and collective reflection amongst participants. An interpretivist approach therefore provides an appropriate framework for exploring how practitioners construct, negotiate and refine their understanding of cultural competence within safeguarding contexts.

Participatory Research (PR) is a method or framework that involves and values stakeholders as active and dynamic partners in the research process (Duesa *et al.*, 2022). According to Vaughn and Jacquez (2020) the use of organised explorations in collaboration with individuals directly impacted and involved with the subject being explored falls under the PR paradigm, especially if the results can instigate change or action, which is one of the desired outcomes for the main study. This is a notion supported by Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) who articulate that PR focuses on participant's direct contributions based on their experiences, perspectives and knowledge and is a '*research-to-action*' method. The hope is that this research, as a direct result of empowering practitioners to share their lived experiences, will promote and instigate progress and development in the field of safeguarding (Opara, 2025) in addition to addressing societal needs. The participants in the research were positioned as co-producers of knowledge, acknowledging and promoting their

capacity to drive change based on authentic and meaningful engagement (Duea *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, according to Weddle and Oliveira (2024), PR methods are more effectively aligned to societies needs and addressing urgent failures, which the safeguarding literature has consistently identified. Practitioners within the early years sector are directly responsible for implementing safeguarding policies and making decisions that affect children and families; therefore, their experiences and perspectives are central to understanding how cultural competence is conceptualised and enacted in practice, making the PR paradigm an effective choice in this research.

The research used a qualitative approach using online focus groups with early years practitioners from both rural and urban locations in Wales. Qualitative methods were chosen because it is an effective method for acquiring deep insights which can support understanding of complex phenomena (Lim, 2025). Data was collected through recorded discussions using the Microsoft Teams platform due to its convenience, functionality and usefulness. The recording and transcription functionality was used and the participants all contributed with their cameras and microphones on which aided the smooth facilitation.

Focus groups are a 'carefully planned series of discussions, designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment (Chand, 2025). Focus groups are an effective qualitative method to gather data on specific and nuanced topics and are undertaken across a broad set of disciplines to explore a variety of phenomena to generate theories, investigate opinions and perceptions and develop new thinking (Gundumogula, 2020; Bachtiar, Fariz and Sholikhan, 2024; Lobe and Morgan, 2021 and Morgan and Hoffman, 2018). This is particularly relevant to both the pilot and main study, which adopt an interpretivist perspective and seek to understand how early years practitioners construct meaning around cultural competence in safeguarding practice. Through discussion and shared reflection, the focus group provided a valuable means of exploring the diverse experiences, assumptions and understandings that may not have emerged through individual methods of data collection such as interviews or questionnaires.

Furthermore, Estrada-Jaramillo, Michael and Farrimond (2022) believe that focus groups are beneficial in collecting rich qualitative data by allowing participants to respond not only to the researcher but to each other's thoughts and opinions. For this study, such interaction was important as it enabled exploration of how early years practitioners collectively construct meaning around cultural competence and safeguarding. In addition, according to Gundumogila (2020), focus groups are exceptionally useful in complementing additional methods of data collection.

Traditionally, focus groups were conducted in person, however, due to technological advances and the development of videoconferencing software, online platforms are now a common way to conduct qualitative focus groups (Falter *et al.*, 2022). Cheng, Krumwiede and Sheu (2009) and Jones *et al.* (2022) found that online focus groups yielded superior results, elicited more data and that participants were more open with improved interaction, empathy and harmony. Which, for the sensitivity of the topic in this research, is important. These factors were evident in the pilot. The research sought to recruit practitioners from different geographical locations across Wales, online facilitation made this easily possible.

The pilot invited six early years participants from the researchers existing networks, although, due to unforeseen circumstances, only four attended. They included a mixture of genders, ages, levels of experience, settings and geographic locations according to the pre-determined criteria. This equates to a non-probability, convenience sample. A non-probability sample can be defined as a sample where there is no equal chance of selection for the research (Rahman, 2023), effective because it can typically be obtained quickly and without cost implications (Rahman, 2023), as was the case in this research. Furthermore, Ahmed (2024) believes that non-probability sampling can be particularly useful in exploratory research, such as this. A convenience sample can be defined as individuals who are accessible to the researcher for one reason or another (Stratton, 2023). However, in using participants known to the researcher, it is important to recognise an element of bias, which can lead to limitations with generalizability (Ahmed, 2024). Whilst convenience sampling can be criticised for its limited representativeness, the use of well-defined and purposeful selection criteria, as in this research, can strengthen sample quality and increase the extent to which findings may be transferable to similar populations (Sarker and Al-Muaalemi, 2022 and Kunselman, 2024). In addition, there is an

element of purposive sampling to this research. Makwana *et al.* (2023) define this as participants being chosen due to their relevance to the subject matter, as in this research.

According to Pope and Mays (2020), the optimum number for a focus group is somewhere between seven and twelve participants. However, Creswell and Creswell (2018) believe that smaller groups can yield better results. This justifies the number of participants chosen and validates the number that took part. Ellis (2023) claim that rather than the number of participants, it is the topic, the facilitation the heterogeneity the skill of the researcher and the format that influences the quality of data collected.

Ethical consideration

A range of ethical considerations were addressed to ensure the safety, wellbeing and rights of participants throughout the research process.

Comprehensive research information was emailed to participants in the initial invite and again, with the consent form. This was undertaken at least fourteen days before the focus group took place. All consent was informed, voluntary and clearly communicated, a key requirement (Jenkins, Calvert and Draper, 2020) and can only be achieved if the participants fully understand the purpose and process of the research (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2021). Obtaining and reiterating consent and information at different opportunities, aligns to a 'process based' model of consent rather than an 'event based' model of consent (Jenkins, Calvert and Draper, 2020).

A feedback form completed by participants confirmed that they felt the information provided was clear, concise and detailed, minimising the risk of any ethical breaches or withdrawal at later stages. Failure to establish effective ethical processes could negatively impact the ethical foundations on which this research was designed (Xu *et al.*, 2020). Using a combination of both verbal and written information during consent procedures ensures that information is fully retained by participants (Jenkins, Calvert and Draper, 2020). Testing consent and information sharing during the pilot has resulted in confirmation that processes are robust and effective. Ensuring that the research is ethically informed (Blom *et al.*, 2025), aligns to institutional and legal requirements (UK Data Service, 2025) whilst instilling trust, improving engagement and ethical participation (Kelly, 2024).

The pilot study allowed for the testing of strategies to reduce risks to participant's well-being and to practice escalating any safeguarding concerns or disclosures should this become necessary. During the pilot however, there were no such incidents. A full briefing and emotional warning were provided before commencement in addition to a debriefing session after completion.

Given the interpretivist nature of this study, the aim was not to establish objective truth but rather to explore participant's subjective understandings of cultural competence within safeguarding practice. The credibility of this research was enhanced through the use of deliberative discussions, which enabled participants to reflect on, challenge and build upon one another's perspectives, resulting in rich and nuanced data. Furthermore, the pilot study provided an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of discussion prompts and facilitation methods, helping to ensure that questions elicited meaningful and relevant responses. In addition, the use of reflexive journalling and field notes enabled ongoing reflection on the researcher's role, assumptions, positionality, bias and overall potential influence on the research process.

Although the pilot employed a convenience sample, clear inclusion criteria were established to ensure participants possessed relevant safeguarding experience and knowledge. This enhanced the relevance of the sample and contributed to the credibility of the findings.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis (TA), allowing emerging themes to develop (Naeem *et al.*, 2023). This was a flexible method allowing for both inductive and deductive coding and further refinement of the emerging themes (Richards and Hemphill, 2018). Although, for the pilot study, analysis was primarily inductive, grounded in the accounts of the practitioners, but underpinned by theoretical frameworks including cultural competence (Gallegos, 1982), contextual safeguarding (Firmin, 2020), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Ahmed *et al.* (2025) believe that TA is an effective, structured and methodical method for data analysis.

A flexible codebook (Braun, Clarke and Hayfield, 2022) was created, supporting early coding. Coding was considered an interpretive, reflexive activity, with themes

developing through iterative analysis to capture deeper meanings (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

The pilot confirmed that this method does have the ability to produce the type of data necessary for successful coding, which Maher *et al.* (2018) believe is key for TA.

This data clearly demonstrates the complexity of cultural competence in safeguarding practices across Wales.

Analysis followed an inductive, thematic approach, whereby patterns of shared meaning were identified across the dataset and grouped into higher-order themes (Braun *et al.*, 2018; Wæraas, 2022). Initial coding generated a number of recurring concepts relating to participant's experiences of cultural competence and safeguarding practice.

Findings

Participants frequently referred to the importance of respect, trust and relationship building when engaging with children and families. Comments such as, *"If we respect them, they're going to respect us"* and *"we kind of had to have a really good relationship with the parents"* reflected concepts of mutual respect and relational engagement, which were subsequently grouped into the theme **Relational Practice**.

A second theme, **Training and Knowledge Gaps**, emerged from participant's repeated concerns regarding the adequacy of current safeguarding training. References to training as a *"tick-box exercise"*, alongside statements such as *"there's not enough education for us"*, highlighted perceived deficiencies in professional development and limited opportunities to develop cultural safeguarding knowledge.

Discussions relating to inequalities within safeguarding systems generated the theme **System Inequality and Policy**. Participants, when asked about whether all children were safeguarded equally, statements such as *"I don't think they are"* and descriptions of practitioners being *"between a rock and a hard place"*, reflected concerns regarding unequal outcomes and tensions between policy expectations and practice realities.

The theme **Safeguarding Complexity** captured participant's recognition of the challenges associated with navigating diverse cultural contexts whilst maintaining

safeguarding responsibilities. Expressions such as *“balancing respect... with responsibility”* and *“real life situations are very rarely straightforward”* demonstrated how practitioners negotiate competing demands, including cultural sensitivity, legal responsibilities and child protection concerns.

Finally, the theme **Practitioner Confidence** reflected participant's varying levels of confidence in engaging with cultural issues. Comments such as *“She was kind of scared... didn't want to offend them”* highlighted anxieties around causing offence or making mistakes, whereas statements including *“just putting yourself out there”* suggested that confidence often developed through experience, exposure and reflective practice.

Collectively, these themes illustrate practitioners' attempts to navigate the complexities of culturally informed safeguarding whilst identifying significant challenges relating to confidence, training, policy implementation and equitable practice.

Discussion

The emergence of relational practice as a theme is no surprise and supports the literature available. The participants viewed elements such as respect, trust and relationships as fundamental to culturally competent safeguarding practice. This links to Laird and Williams (2023) and Balogun *et al.* (2025) whose work identified practitioner's ability to build relationships with families is fundamental in recognising, understanding and responding appropriately to differences to ensure equity. Additionally, this is consistent with the work of Lloyd *et al.* (2023) who state that relational factors can strengthen and improve equitable approaches to safeguarding. Furthermore, it reinforces the literature that outlines the importance of a rights-based approach to safeguarding. These findings suggest that practitioners conceptualise cultural competence primarily as a relational process, grounded in trust, communication, and mutual respect. This aligns to Laird and Tadam's (2019) conceptualisation that cultural competence comes from responsive and respectful engagement with diverse families.

Participants consistently identified failures or insufficient training, resulting in gaps in knowledge. The participant's perceptions of inadequate training reflect wider concerns in the literature which demonstrates there is a limited attention given to culture within safeguarding systems and professional development. This will be explored further at thesis stage.

The data demonstrated participant's perceptions that not all children are safeguarded equally, reflecting findings from the SCR reviews. In addition, it reflects the ideas around intersectionality and its impact on individual's experiences. It is clear from practice that structural inequalities continue to affect safeguarding outcomes. This could be a potential area of further research in future.

Safeguarding complexity came through as a theme. Practitioners consistently highlighted the challenges with balancing culture, law, and safeguarding practicalities. Reinforcing the work of Firmin (2020), who identified that safeguarding is complex and success depends on understanding children's lived experiences.

These ideas strengthen the need for professional curiosity, as demonstrated in the literature.

Within the focus group, it was clear that confidence varied and this was attributed to experience and exposure to safeguarding encounters. This is associated with cultural competence literature. Furthermore, it reinforces experiential learning and professional development, all to be explored further.

Confidence in the field of cultural competence develops through exposure, reflection, and dialogue rather than through compliance-based training and qualifications alone.

Limitations

Sample Number

The pilot study involved a small sample number, limiting the breadth and depth of data collected. Whilst the participants represented a broad criterion, it cannot be assumed that this reflects early years practice across Wales. However, the purpose of the pilot was exploratory and methodological in nature, with a clear focus on testing research procedures rather than generating generalisable findings.

Practitioner Homogeneity

Although participants were chosen because they represented early years practice in different settings, all the participants were early years practitioners. The pilot, therefore, did not capture broader perspectives from other stakeholders. This is where using the focus group method alongside the citizens juries as part of the main study, should elicit a much richer, comprehensive and broader data set which will contribute to depth.

Online Data Collection

Microsoft Teams was chosen as a platform due to it improving accessibility and enabling participation from individuals from across Wales. However, it is important to note that using online techniques such as Microsoft Teams, can reduce the opportunities to observe elements such as non-verbal communication. Therefore, it could be possible that some nuances of participant's responses were not fully captured in the 'virtual' environment. However, as Thematic Analysis was being used rather than other methods such as Conversation Analysis, this did not impact the data significantly.

Social Desirability Bias

Safeguarding is a professionally, personally and morally sensitive topic. Despite attempts during facilitation reassure them, participants may have been reluctant to show uncertainty, bias, examples of poor practice, and instead, may have chosen to present responses perceived as acceptable. The group dynamics may have contributed to this. Nevertheless, effective facilitation techniques, analysis of the reflexive journal, field notes and participant feedback indicated that this risk was minimised within the pilot study.

Researcher Bias

There is potential for researcher influence during data collection and interpretation due to their vested interest. While reflexive journalling and field notes were used to help mitigate this, complete removal of researcher subjectivity is not possible within an interpretivist study.

Limited Exploration of Emergent Themes

The pilot generated several areas of discussion. Due to time constraints, these topics were not explored in greater depth, highlighting potential areas for more focused investigation within the main study.

Whilst the pilot generated rich discussion regarding cultural competence, the findings suggest considerable variation in participant's understanding of the concept itself. Consequently, further research involving a larger and more diverse sample is required to explore how cultural competence is understood and enacted across different professional contexts within Wales. This justifies progression to the main study which will include further focus group activity alongside the citizens juries.

Conclusion

The study demonstrated that findings align with existing, underpinning theoretical frameworks within safeguarding.

Furthermore, the emerging themes are promising and, perhaps more importantly, have the potential for impacting professional development, legislation, policy and, at a more grassroots level, practice.

In conclusion, current safeguarding literature identifies the absence of qualitative and systematic evidence regarding the role of culture in safeguarding in Wales. Whilst policy documents and review reports increasingly acknowledge the importance of culture, there remains a broader tendency for cultural factors to be under-recognised, under-recorded and subsumed within more general categories of risk. Furthermore, there is limited Welsh-specific evidence exploring practitioner's understandings of cultural competence and its application to safeguarding practice. This gap is particularly significant given Wales's commitment to equitable, rights-based approaches to safeguarding and suggests a need for research that explores how practitioners conceptualise cultural competence and navigate cultural complexity in practice. Such evidence has the potential to inform professional development, policy development and implementation and future safeguarding practice across Wales.

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