

EXPLORING FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY: EVALUATING FEASIBILITY AND REFINING RESEARCH DESIGN

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BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

This pilot study evaluates the feasibility and suitability of online focus groups for further doctoral study exploring 'cultural competence in early years safeguarding practice in contemporary Wales'. Cultural competence is understood as practitioners' capacity to engage effectively, respectfully, and sensitively with children and families from diverse backgrounds to ensure equitable protection from harm (Laird and Tedam, 2019; Laird and Williams, 2023). The pilot tested recruitment and consent processes, discussion prompts, facilitation strategies, data collection and analysis methods. It also assessed practitioner engagement and ethical safeguards to ensure the methodology supports meaningful participation and participant wellbeing, providing a robust foundation for the main study going forward. The pilot study was valuable because it allowed testing of strategic processes and identify challenges that could impact the main study (Aziz and Khan, 2020; Wilson *et al.*, 2021; Baldeh *et al.*, 2020; and Renuse, 2024). Wilson *et al.* (2021) supports this further by stating that pilot studies can save time or resource wasting on poor or weak research designs. This further strengthens the rationale for a pilot study.

PILOT STUDY AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Aims

The aims of this pilot study are to assess the feasibility and appropriateness of using focus groups to explore cultural competence in early years safeguarding practice in Wales.

Objectives

To test key elements of the research design, including

- recruitment and consent processes
- discussion prompts
- facilitation
- data collection and data analysis methods
- reflexive note and field note taking

Figure 1. Methodology Infographic



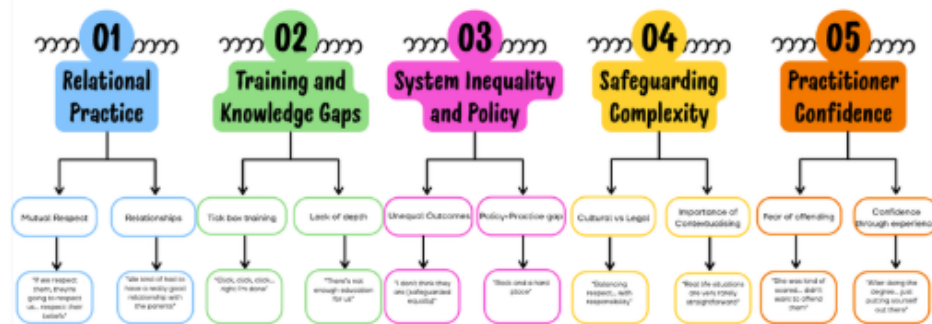
METHODOLOGY

The pilot study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist design using a single online focus group conducted via Microsoft Teams. This is identified as an effective paradigm for exploring social phenomena (Adil, Khan and Ahmad, 2024) such as safeguarding. Four qualified early years practitioners/educators from rural and urban areas of Wales were recruited through purposive (Tajik, Golzar and Noor, 2025), convenience sampling (Golzar, Noor and Tajik, 2022). The focus group was audio-recorded, transcribed, and supported by researcher field notes and reflexive journaling. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis at pilot-level (Ayre and McCaffery, 2022) to test the suitability of the approach for use in the main study. Ethical safeguards included informed consent, anonymity, withdrawal rights, and a clear safeguarding and support protocol to ensure participant wellbeing throughout. Testing and refinement of these elements is a concept that Soori (2024) highlights as a key indicator of the success of the main study.

DATA ANALYSIS AND PILOT STUDY RESULTS

This study used Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019) to explore practitioners' experiences of cultural competence in safeguarding. The approach was chosen for its flexibility and focus on meaning-making, enabling analysis of social, cultural, and relational complexities. Analysis was primarily inductive, grounded in participants' accounts, while also informed by theoretical concepts including cultural competence (Gallegos, 1982), contextual safeguarding (Firmin, 2020), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). A flexible codebook (Braun *et al.*, 2022) was compiled which supported early coding, during the main study this would likely evolve throughout the process. Coding was treated as an interpretive, reflexive activity, with themes developed through iterative analysis to capture deeper meanings, power dynamics, and structural influences (Braun and Clarke, 2021) shaping culturally situated safeguarding practice. An initial code book was created with the intention of identifying patterns. Coding initially revealed several themes, which were then analysed in more depth to establish more concrete, higher order themes (Wæraas, 2022). The overarching themes that emerged were **relational practice, training and knowledge gaps, systemic inequality and policy, complexity of safeguarding and practitioner confidence and fear**.

Cultural Safeguarding Practice - Emerging Themes



IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MAIN STUDY

Although the pilot was not designed to generate substantive findings, several important methodological insights emerged. The pilot study has identified several important considerations for the design, planning, refining and undertaking of the main study.

1. Methodological Design - the pilot has demonstrated that knowledge can emerge from collective and shared reflection using dialogic methods. Justifying the interpretivist approach to this research. Furthermore it demonstrates that combining focus groups with citizen's juries, it will enable co-construction of meaning in relation to cultural competence.
2. Demand for deliberative space around cultural complexity - the pilot has established that practitioners find cultural complexities within their safeguarding practice as challenging - therefore further exploration will support potential identification of professional development
3. Variability in knowledge - the sample in the pilot highlighted a spectrum of experience, confidence and knowledge. This strengthens the of the sample for the main study. To demonstrate that cultural competence is unevenly dispersed across Wales, the main study must include a diverse range of participants.
4. Identification of provocation for citizen's juries - the identification of themes such as 'training gaps' could stimulate rich discussion points for the participants of the citizen's juries, providing a structured opportunity to address their thoughts around specific themes.
5. Refinement of prompts - the pilot was an effective method to identify the efficacy of prompts and questions used, for example some themes arose that would be worth exploring further, therefore may influence more specific prompts to explore these themes in more depth.
6. Facilitation methods - the pilot was an opportunity to practice facilitation, including xxxxxxxxxx. Feedback (via an online Microsoft Forms questionnaire) highlighted no concerns and that facilitation led to participants being informed, feel supported, able to contribute equally and be comfortable in the knowledge that ethical considerations had been given due consideration by the researcher.

NEXT STEPS



CONCLUSION

The pilot successfully tested recruitment and consent processes, discussion prompts, facilitation strategies, data collection and analysis methods. It also assessed practitioner engagement and ethical safeguards to ensure the methodology supports meaningful participation and participant wellbeing, providing a robust foundation for the main study. The pilot study has validated that the research question has traction with clear potential to yield nuanced and insightful data which highlights the complex nature of cultural safeguarding in practice across Wales. This further justifies and supports the feasibility of extending the study into a full-scale study.

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