

JEFF THOMPSON RESEARCH AWARD REPORT

How do IB World Schools safeguard students?

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Abstract

The term *safeguarding* encompasses the protection of children's health, well-being and human rights. International school safeguarding initially focused on the prevention of sexual abuse of children but, in recent years, has broadened to include other forms of harm such as harm between children, affluent neglect and online harm, as well as whole school approaches to prevention and response.

This comparative case study of three International Baccalaureate (IB) World Schools sought to elicit how international schools safeguard students. By conducting student focus groups and interviewing practitioners with responsibility for safeguarding (counsellors, safeguarding leads and principals), the study explored the forms of harm experienced by international school students, the challenges of safeguarding faced by the schools, and factors that practitioners and students consider to be supportive of safeguarding.

The study found that the inclusion of student perspectives in safeguarding may help schools to better understand, identify, prevent and respond to harm in international schools. Positive practices identified included a team approach to safeguarding, the professional role of the counsellor and the use of culturally responsive strategies. Practitioners reported an increase in suicidal ideation and self-harm and an increase in social issues, including online harm, between students since the pandemic. A gap emerged in practitioner and student perceptions of identity-based harm and the impact of global mobility, both of which would benefit from further exploration.

Considerations for the IB include a harmonisation of terminology to support schools' understanding of the connections between safeguarding and well-being, and greater integration of safeguarding within the IB programmes.

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1. Introduction

Safeguarding can be defined as the protection of children's health, well-being and human rights (Chambers, Cantrell & Booth, 2021). The term derives from the UK and Ireland, but the underlying concept is relevant to many education, health and care systems globally (Chambers, Cantrell & Booth, 2021). Increasingly used by organisations of global influence including the United Nations (2022), the European Commission (2020) and the United States Agency for International Development (2023), the term *safeguarding* was first and is still often used to describe organisational efforts directed toward recognising and preventing child abuse by adults. This includes policy and procedural actions, such as reporting and responding to disclosures, safer recruitment practices and staff training (Chambers et al., 2021). In the UK, the Contextual Safeguarding Network of the University of Durham expanded the traditional view of safeguarding to include harm between young people in their relationships, neighbourhoods and online (Firmin, 2020).

Over time, the term *safeguarding* has become used in a more wide-ranging way to cover all the actions taken to promote the well-being of children and protect them from harm (NSPCC, 2020). Through the increased inclusion of children's perspectives in academic research (l'Anson, 2013), it has become understood that feeling safe and secure is critical to children's classroom engagement (Côté-Lussier & Fitzpatrick, 2006) as well as their overall social and emotional well-being (Ibarra, 2022). This was spotlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic where increases in youth anxiety, depression, stress and eating disorders were observed (Cowie & Myers, 2021; Feinmann, 2021). In the UK, prejudice and discrimination, including racism (e.g. Child Q report by Gamble, McCallum and City and Hackney Safeguarding Children Partnership, 2022) and misogyny (Tackling Misogyny in Schools, 2023), have also been placed under the safeguarding umbrella, creating links between safeguarding and the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) field. The term *safeguarding* is also used to encompass the development of a sense of belonging (Shah et al., 2021), the fostering of respectful and trusting relationships in school communities (Subramaniam & Wuest, 2022), and strategies to support youth mental health and well-being (Sims-Schouten, 2020).

Online safety is also typically included as part of safeguarding. Exacerbated by the pandemic, there is increasing recognition of a disconnect between adult and student perceptions and experiences of online harm (Buglass et al., 2020; Phippen & Street, 2021). This is partly because the technological landscape changes so rapidly but also because the term *online harm* is so broad, ranging from exposure to upsetting content, abuse by peers, unsolicited sexual contact, non-consensual sharing of indecent images, being hacked and having identity data stolen, excessive use, gaming addiction and more (Phippen & Street, 2021). Schools can find themselves in a legal and moral quandary of wanting to protect students online without invading their privacy (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2018). Safeguarding has therefore become increasingly interlinked with data protection considerations, not just related to the filtering and monitoring of online activities, but more broadly in how schools process and share safeguarding data (e.g. UK's Department of Education, 2018).

The broadening of the term *safeguarding* has also been seen in the international school community. Beginning with a focus on the prevention of abuse by educators by implementing safer recruitment processes and criminal background checks (ITFCP, 2017), safeguarding has expanded to include topics such as harm between children (Lloyd & Rigg, 2021; Rigg, forthcoming), online safety (ECIS, 2023a), identity-based harm (Perreras & Meadows, 2022), student mental health and well-being (e.g. IB, 2020a), and the impact of transition on well-being (Millar, Wiggins & Feather, 2020; Ota, 2020; Crossman, 2021). Over the last decade, more resources, consultants and training opportunities have become available to support international school safeguarding.

Yet, there are over 5,600 IB World Schools across 159 countries (IB, 2023), representing a wide range of geographical and cultural diversity. Data collected by the International Task Force for Child Protection (ITFCP) in 2016 and 2022 suggested that cultural difference is one of the primary barriers to safeguarding children in international schools. This is supported by the United Nations (2020) and the KidsRights Index (2022), which report differing perceptions between countries around what constitutes child abuse, as well as variable social, health and law enforcement services to support children's rights around the world. Despite substantial efforts over the last decade to strengthen safeguarding practices to keep students safe and well in international schools (e.g. ITFCP, 2016; ITFCP, 2022), there has been no research to date that explores how international schools safeguard students in diverse cultural and geographical settings.

Part of a larger PhD research study into the safeguarding practices of international schools (Holmyard, forthcoming), this paper illuminates the current landscape of safeguarding in international schools. It explores the perspectives of students, counsellors, safeguarding leads and principals in three IB World Schools, to better understand the harms that children experience, the safeguarding challenges faced by schools, and what supportive factors help keep children safe and well. It also considers the role of the IB in international school safeguarding.

1.1 Aims and Objectives

This research explores how three IB World Schools located on different continents safeguard students, to share insights that could support practitioners and leaders in international schools, as well as international school organisations, such as the IB. The first objective of the study is to understand the forms of harm experienced by students in international schools. The second objective is to articulate the challenges of safeguarding in IB World Schools. To explore how schools engage with these challenges, the third objective of this study is to identify factors and practices in IB World Schools that students and practitioners consider to support effective safeguarding.

The three objectives of the study are therefore as follows:

1. To understand the forms of harm experienced by international school students.
2. To explore what principals, safeguarding leads, counsellors and students consider to be the challenges of safeguarding.
3. To identify factors and practices that principals, safeguarding leads, counsellors and students consider to be supportive of safeguarding.

1.2 Research Questions

This study is centred around the following research questions:

RQ1: What forms of harm occur in international schools?

RQ2: What are the challenges of safeguarding in international schools?

RQ3: What factors and practices support safeguarding in international schools?

RQ4: What are the implications of this research on shaping the role of the IB in safeguarding?

2. Literature Review

2.1 International schools

Bunnell (2019, pp. 1) defines international schools as being 'schools with a global outlook located mainly outside an English speaking country delivering a non-national curriculum at least partly in English'. Within this broad definition there is great diversity between the schools and the international school sector has experienced dramatic growth over the last 25 years. Hayden (2011) reports that there were 1000 international schools in 1995. According to ISC Research (2018), the number of international schools grew by 335% between 2000 and 2018, and reached 11,000 in 2019 (Bunnell, 2021).

Hayden and Thompson (2013) proposed the Type ABC model for articulating these differences. Set up as not-for-profit institutions, many early international schools can be categorised as Type A, serving globally mobile families, or Type B, promoting a particular philosophy. Type A and B schools have also been termed 'Traditional' given their institutional history, commitment to an idealistic, globally-focused mission, and emphasis on making the world 'better' (Bunnell, 2021, pp. 250). Tarc and Tarc (2015, pp. 121) offer a definition encompassing Type A and B schools as being 'relatively high-tuition, fairly well-established schools, most often offering the programs of the International Baccalaureate (IB).' Type C schools, meanwhile, tend to be operated for profit under private ownership and serve the wealthy local population and/or international students. These schools identify as international due to the international curriculum they deliver (Hayden & Thompson, 2013). Within Type C, there are a number of subgroups including corporate brands of schools, such as Nord Anglia and Cognita, and 'satellites' of elite private schools such as Wellington College and Dulwich College (Bunnell, 2019). As China becomes a more challenging market for international schools, India is emerging as a new epicentre for this growth (The Ken, 2023).

Other researchers have focused on values as a way of defining international schools. Walker (2002), for instance, proposed six dimensions of international education through which international schools could be identified, including being understanding of others across cultural groups. Similarly, James (2005) proposed that an international education can be defined through its preparation of students for life in an increasingly interconnected world, and its focus on issues of global significance (James, 2005). The IB, meanwhile, offers a framework for a school's vision and values through its own mission (IB, 2023b), the standards and practices every IB school must demonstrate (IB, 2020b), the IB Learner Profile (IB, 2013), a set of attributes that IB schools foster in their students, and the Approaches to Learning (IB, 2023c), a set of skills developed through the programmes. These are common to every IB school, irrespective of which 'Type' of school they are.

International schools are bound by the laws of their host country but retain considerable autonomy in many locations compared with state schools, often writing their own policies and selecting or developing their curriculum. The IB and accrediting bodies such as the Council of International schools (CIS), the Council of British International Schools (COBIS) and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) provide regulatory frameworks for international schools, but this is a voluntary endeavour for schools and there is no overarching regulation for international schools.

English remains the *lingua franca* of international schools. MacKenzie et al. (2010) found that learning English is a primary reason for choosing to attend an international school, with parents believing an international school education will provide a competitive edge to their children (James, 2005). Many schools identifying as 'international' recruit from the same transnational labour market (Hayden, 2011) with the resultant outcome that many international schools offer a Western-centric curricula delivered by a non-local and Northern-oriented teaching force (Rey, Bolay & Gez, 2020). Rey et al. (2020) describe 'adventurer' international teachers, who form part of a global 'precariat' (Bunnell, 2016), and

have agency in their ability to move schools within and between countries (Poole and Bunnell, 2020), facilitating a high level of turnover in international schools (Odland and Ruzicka, 2009).

These factors have resulted in international schools being staffed by predominantly English-speaking teachers and school leaders, often from a Western education background, supported by staff who speak the local language(s). They often serve a community of affluent, often globally mobile, families who may speak English, the local language(s), both, or neither, and may come from diverse cultural backgrounds. The implications of these features of international schools on safeguarding are discussed subsequently.

2.2 Safeguarding in international schools

In 2014, it was revealed that a serial child abuser had worked in multiple international schools in numerous countries over a 40-year period (Guardian, 2016). A Serious Case Review was undertaken to understand how the individual was able to perpetrate abuse in a UK international school (Local Safeguarding Children Board of Hammersmith & Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster, 2016). Although the report recognised its narrow focus on one international school, it also emphasised the need to view the school as part of the wider community of international schools in order to understand how to improve practice. The report identified the following factors that allowed the perpetrator to continue abusing children undetected:

1. The perpetrator's 1969 sexual offence conviction was not identified by any subsequent school;
2. The recruitment process of the international school was informal;
3. Criminal record checks were not sought for the countries in which he had previously taught;
4. The school did not understand the role of or seek advice from the local authority tasked with supporting schools in safeguarding matters;
5. The international school had a high staff turnover;
6. Safeguarding practices, including staff training and reporting, were insufficiently robust and concerns, when raised, were not acted upon;
7. There were differing understanding and expectations related to safeguarding by staff and families;
8. There was a lack of education/safeguarding expertise on the Board.

The International Task Force on Child Protection (ITFCP) was established in 2014 with the aim of addressing these and other child protection challenges in international schools (CIS, 2020). The ITFCP included international education organisations and school leaders, working collaboratively with law enforcement officials and medical professionals (CIS, 2020). In 2016, the ITFCP first published *Expectations for School Communities*, which have since been updated (ITFCP, 2021a). These set standards across dimensions of the school including leadership and governance, recruitment and personnel, and student education, for how to protect children from abuse by educators and other adults in the school community. The *Expectations* were integrated into the accreditation standards of international school accrediting bodies such as the Council of International Schools (CIS) and the New England Association of Independent Schools (NEASC). The *Expectations* were also recognised by the International Baccalaureate (IB) and all IB World Schools must confirm to the IB that they:

“operate in accordance with best practices as well as all applicable laws, regulations and policies in the area of child protection and maintain appropriate procedures in place (which may include components such as criminal background screening for recruiting, hiring and retaining staff)” (IB, 2020c).

The ITFCP also carried out a survey to better understand the key areas of concern and challenge regarding safeguarding in international schools (ITFCP, 2016). These were identified as:

1. Recruitment, including poor verification practices of references by school leaders and difficulties obtaining and validating criminal background checks.
2. A lack of teacher confidence in their own ability to detect abuse.
3. Cultural difference as a barrier for reporting abuse.

Work was then undertaken by the ITFCP to standardise and improve recruitment practices (ITFCP, 2017a), develop a protocol for how to respond to allegations of abuse by adults in international school communities (ITFCP, 2018; Larsson, Coles, Foster & Rigg, 2019), and to create a hub for resources and guidance, in collaboration with the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC, 2021). This included advice and guidance for schools about how to educate students to recognise and report abuse (ITFCP, 2017b).

In recent years, the international school community has begun to embrace a broader view of children's safety and well-being that goes beyond protecting children from abuse by adults. Student mental health and well-being became a focus during the pandemic (e.g. IB, 2020a), and the IB is now beginning a 3-year well-being research project (IB, 2023d). Recent publications have raised awareness of harm between children (Lloyd & Rigg, 2020; Rigg, forthcoming), identity-based harm including racism and homophobia (Perreras & Meadows, 2022; Obiko Pearson, 2022), the impact of transition on well-being (Millar, Wiggins & Feather, 2020; Ota, 2020; Crossman, 2021), disordered eating (Gerster, 2023), and self-harm and suicidal ideation (Holmyard, 2023). Efforts have also been made to engage students in safeguarding and well-being activities, to incorporate student perspectives into policy and practice (ITFCP, 2021b; ISC Research, 2023). The Council of International Schools (2023) has released a model for a whole school approach to safeguarding, which articulates how safeguarding can be implemented across dimensions of an international school, taking account of cultural and legal considerations, and the role of the Board (Holmyard, 2022).

Another emerging area of focus for the international school community has been *affluent neglect*. Research by Professor Claudia Bernard of Goldsmiths, University of London, in 2018 shone the spotlight for the first time on the challenges of safeguarding children from affluent families. Bernard (2018) found that affluent neglect (often in the form of emotional abuse) is difficult to identify, and the affluence of the families creates challenges for safeguarding where concerns are raised. The study found that efforts to engage with parents were often met with hostility and obstruction, for example in the form of the threat of legal action or the engagement of powerful social networks to resist, dilute and impede investigations. Although the study was carried out in the UK, the parallels in the socioeconomic backgrounds of the parents and the challenges identified have been recognised by the international school community (e.g. COBIS, 2023; TES, 2023).

The international school community has growing access to resources, consultants and training opportunities to support safeguarding in its broader sense. The term *safeguarding* is also appearing on the websites of international schools in a way that encompasses the overall safety and well-being of students (e.g. American School of Budapest, 2023; Tanglin Trust School, 2023). It should be recognised, however, that there remains a lack of consistency about how the term is used in practice, including how it relates to well-being. For example, the IB's well-being research (2023d) and statement on diversity, equity and inclusion (IB, 2022) do not use the term safeguarding, but both have connections to many of the aforementioned topics. It should also be noted that, while the breadth of understanding of safeguarding has evolved over time, the prevention of sexual abuse of students by educators remains a focus (e.g. Rigg & Holmyard, 2023; Larsson & O'Brien, 2023).

With these considerations in mind, the model below offers a conceptualisation for how international school safeguarding has evolved since 2014, beginning with a focus on protecting children from sexual abuse from educators and other adults and broadening over time. This model is based on the practitioner and academic literature cited in section 2.2 as well as the experiences of the researcher working in this sector.

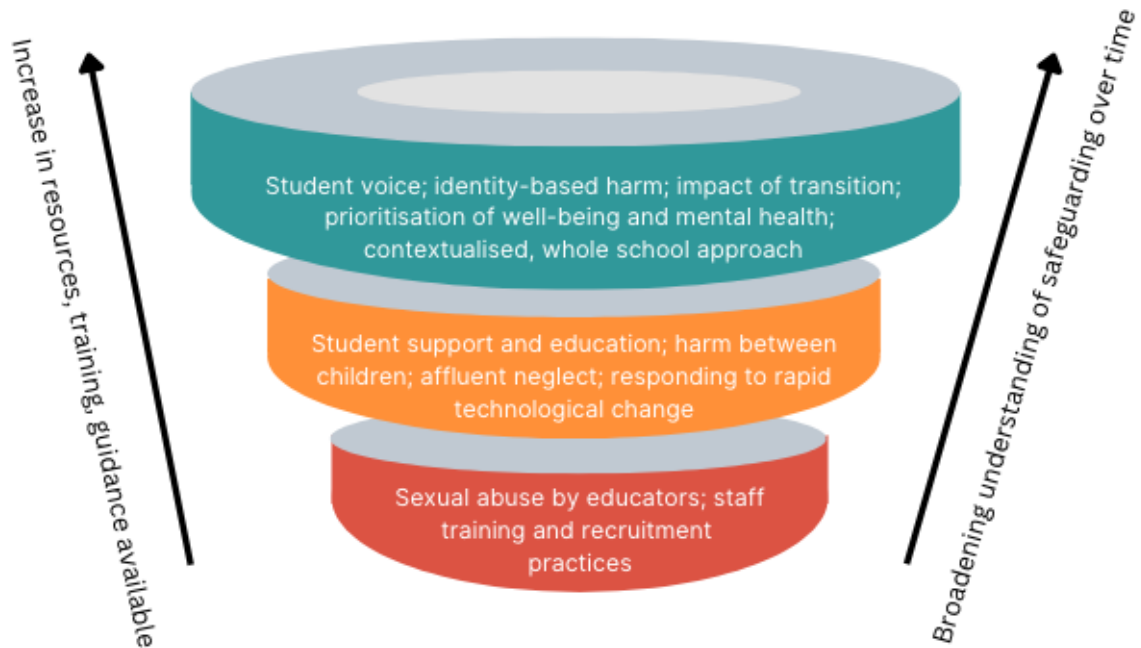


Figure 1: The researcher’s conceptualisation of how understanding of safeguarding in the international school community has developed since 2014.

The issues described in this section have been documented in sector publications such as the International School Magazine and The International Educator (e.g. Hayden & Thompson, 2016; Larsson et al., 2019; Brewer, 2017), and addressed by training providers such as the Council of International Schools (CIS, 2021) and Educational Collaborative for International Schools (ECIS, 2023b). There are few academic studies, however, exploring safeguarding challenges and practices across a range of international schools (e.g. Rigg, forthcoming; Dou et al, 2022). This study sought to provide insight and new knowledge around these issues from a research perspective.

3. Research Methodology

The research questions of this study were explored through a multiple case study involving three schools, and included interviews with principals, safeguarding leads and counsellors, as well as student focus groups. This chapter describes the epistemology and ontology which underpinned the study and the methods of data collection and analysis. The final section describes the ethical considerations of the study.

3.1 Epistemology and Ontology

Taking a realist approach in this study allowed for an exploration of how social structures that exist beyond the individual participants impact safeguarding, including the IB and the ITFCP, which exist beyond and independently of the participants in the study and their schools. The research questions required an investigation of safeguarding from multiple perspectives and taking a constructivist-interpretivist approach allowed an exploration of the participants' perspectives and experiences. To cultivate this understanding required a subjectivist approach; a recognition that knowledge and beliefs about safeguarding may vary from person to person, within and between schools, and that the implementation of safeguarding in practice may vary from context to context (geographical or otherwise), and for different reasons. Undertaking research in three schools on different continents allowed for an exploration of this variation.

A qualitative methodology, using interviews and student focus groups, was designed to identify the ways in which individuals and groups create, respond to and interpret issues (Cohen et al., 2017) related to safeguarding in international schools. The research was carried out in person due to the sensitive nature of the topics and because it was important to build trust with the students and adult participants, so they felt able to share honestly about their challenges, experiences and perspectives. Use of qualitative data also allowed for anecdotes and stories to be shared, which would be difficult to capture through quantitative methods such as surveys. It was also important to include student voice through the focus groups, as the students are the receivers and beneficiaries of the safeguarding practices being explored.

It is important to recognise, however, that the use of qualitative data does not allow for generalisations to be made (Cohen et al., 2017); however, the inclusion of multiple perspectives from three different schools may allow for some findings to be useful for guiding the safeguarding practice of other international schools and informative for organisations that support international schools, such as the IB, the ITFCP and accrediting bodies.

Finally, in using a constructivist-interpretivist approach, it has been important to take account of my own experiences as a teacher, a pastoral leader and a safeguarding consultant. I have also considered my relationship with international organisations such as the IB, as a workshop leader and recipient of the Jeff Thompson Research Award, and with CIS, as a safeguarding advisor and workshop presenter. I acknowledge that these experiences may impact the research process and, through PhD supervision with the University of Bath, I have engaged in reflection and peer review to reflect on and understand areas of potential bias.

3.2 Data Collection

Merriam (1998, pp.40) describes a multiple case study as one where, "researchers conduct a study using more than one case" with a view to conducting a cross-case analysis to increase the external

validity. Use of purposive sampling (Emmell, 2013; Merriam, 1998) further facilitates a comparative element to the study. This section explains the choice of case schools and the means of data collection through interviews and student focus groups.

3.2.1 Case schools

Table 1 provides an overview of the case schools, referred to as School A, School B and School C. The three schools in this study align with the definition of Bunnell (2019, pp. 1) of 'schools with a global outlook located mainly outside an English speaking country delivering a non-national curriculum at least partly in English'. The schools are similar in that they are all not-for-profit, have been established for over 50 years, offer the IB Diploma Programme and are accredited by the Council of International Schools. They serve a similar age range of students, although School B is larger with more diversity in nationalities and offers boarding in addition to day school.

As schools all deliver the IB Diploma Programme, they fit into the 'Traditional' model of international schools (Bunnell, 2021), serving globally mobile families and demonstrating commitment to the mission statement of the IB (2003b) to "develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect." In their delivery of the IB, the schools also meet the criteria of Tarc and Tarc (2015, pp. 121) as being 'relatively high-tuition, fairly well-established schools, most often offering the programs of the International Baccalaureate (IB).'

That the three schools deliver the IB Diploma programme means that the school leaders have confirmed to the IB that they "*operate in accordance with best practices as well as all applicable laws, regulations and policies in the area of child protection and maintain appropriate procedures in place (which may include components such as criminal background screening for recruiting, hiring and retaining staff)*" (IB, 2020c). Further, the three schools have been accredited by CIS, meaning that they meet accreditation standards related to safeguarding and have access to professional development, resources and guidance for safeguarding tailored to the international school context (CIS, 2021). This was important to the study because it was not intended that the study would uncover safeguarding concerns which may have required mandatory reporting by the researcher.

A key difference between the schools is their geographical context. Although Goodrick (2014) cautions that selecting cases for a comparative case study based on geographical location can lead to superficial descriptive data, in this case, the difference in cultural, legal and geographical context is important for identifying shared patterns that cut across cases, offering the potential to illuminate both the variation that exists between schools, and also the commonalities (Emmell, 2013).

Table 1: Overview of the case schools

School	Location by continent	Not-for-profit	Established over 50 years ago	Offers IB Diploma Programme	Accredited by CIS	Approx. number of students	Approx. number of student nationalities	Age of students	Boarding
A	Europe	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	1300	65	3-19	No
B	Asia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	3000	85	4-18	Yes
C	Africa	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	1000	65	4-18	No

3.2.2 Interviews

In each case school, I collaborated with the safeguarding lead to develop an interview schedule that included the principals, safeguarding leads and counsellors of the school. The interviews were semi-structured and recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams. An interview guide (Turner, 2010) was designed based on the topics explored in the literature review section 2.2 and, where the interview questions relate directly to the research questions, this is indicated in brackets in Table 2, e.g. (RQ1).

Table 2: Interview guide for adult participants (principals, safeguarding leads and counsellors)

General questions for all participants	
<p>What is your role in school and how does it relate to safeguarding and child protection? What forms of harm do students experience? (RQ1) How is safeguarding different here compared with other school settings you have experienced? (RQ2) How has safeguarding at the school changed since you've been working here? (RQ2,3) How successful do you believe the school is at safeguarding students? (RQ2) What safeguarding challenges does the school face? What are the reasons for these challenges? (RQ2) Can you share any examples of where your school is successfully overcoming safeguarding challenges? (RQ2,3) Does / how does accreditation/the IB impact your work in safeguarding? (RQ4) What do you believe to be the areas of greatest risk for students at your school? What helps / would help to strengthen safeguarding practices in these areas? (RQ1,2,4) What emerging risks or trends do you see in safeguarding students at your school? (RQ1) How has the pandemic impacted safeguarding at your school? (RQ1) How do you look after yourself with regard to your work in safeguarding? (RQ3)</p>	
Role-specific topics to explore	
Principals and Safeguarding Lead(s)	<p>Recruitment: References, background checks, code of conduct, orientation Safeguarding Lead role Safeguarding training (employees, volunteers, role-specific) Response to disclosure: decision making and recording processes, identifying patterns and trends Safeguarding policy and related policies Student education and empowerment Facilities / infrastructure, including online safety Safeguarding processes and diplomatic families Trips and safeguarding Identity-based harm Student voice, inclusion and participation Parental and/or community engagement</p>

Counsellors	Response to disclosure: Case management Safeguarding training (employees, volunteers, role-specific) Transition support (in and out of the school) Listening culture and response to disclosure Identity-based harm Student education and empowerment Student voice, inclusion and participation Parental and/or community engagement
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A semi-structured approach allowed for flexibility in the questions used and topics explored, the order of questions asked, and their follow-up (Cohen et al., 2007). Use of open-ended questions also allowed participants to use their own words and provide more in-depth information in areas they wished to focus on (Denscombe, 2007).

It was requested that the interviews were individual, but flexibility was necessarily incorporated in the methodology to allow for small group interviews due to limitations of the school schedules and the individuals' work commitments. For example, one school opted to group the counsellors and another school grouped the principals into one interview. However, the majority of interviews with adult participants were one-to-one.

3.2.3 Student focus groups

Students were included in this methodology to ensure that their views and perspectives are present in this research that involves issues and topics that impact them. This aligns with a larger movement to redress the historical marginalisation of children's voices in western academic research and to centralise "the child's voice" (l'Anson, 2013, pp 104). l'Anson offers guidance for how to effectively include student voice in academic research, including:

- being open to the idea that children may introduce new and previously unconsidered dimensions to the research;
- honouring the complexity and messiness of child's voice;
- taking a flexible approach unbound to a predetermined method;
- recognising the limits of child participation in research.

Taking account of this guidance, two middle school (age 12-14) and three high school (age 16-18) focus groups were held involving 18 students in total across the three schools. Student participants were identified by the safeguarding lead of the school within the following parameters:

- Students must not be identified by the school as students of concern with regard to safeguarding.
- The groups should be mixed gender with no more than two thirds the same gender.
- The groups should have sufficient diversity to offer a broad range of perspectives, for example students of differing nationalities, ethnicities, language and socio-economic backgrounds.
- The group should not comprise only members of a student leadership team.
- Students should be fluent in English.

The focus groups were recorded and automatically transcribed using Microsoft Teams. The focus groups were semi-structured using the protocol in Table 3 and are similar themes to those asked of the adults. The approach is adapted from the ITFCP's Student Engagement Protocol (2021b). Where questions relate directly to the research questions, this is indicated in brackets, e.g. (RQ1).

Table 3: Interview guide for student focus groups.

<p>Introduction</p> <p>Introduce myself and describe the study and why we are here</p> <p>Review content of the participant information form and consent (age 16-18) / assent (age 12-14) forms, including the right to withdraw at any time up to one month after the focus group</p> <p>Describe how students can exit the session if they wish and where to go (e.g. to a nearby counsellor's office)</p> <p>Remind students that our purpose is to talk generally about how their school keeps children safe and that students are not being asked about their personal experiences</p> <p>Remind students that if they share information about someone at risk of being harmed (including themselves) this will need to be reported to someone who can help</p> <p>Remind students they can talk to the counsellor or another trusted adult in the school at any time, including during the focus group (if they wish to leave at any point) or afterwards</p> <p>Remind students the session is audio recorded and transcribed</p>
<p>Questions</p> <p>When we talk about safeguarding and safety in school, what do you think we mean?</p> <p>What harmful or unsafe things might happen to students in an international school? (RQ1)</p> <p>In what ways do you think the school keeps you safe and protects you from harm? (RQ3)</p> <p>Which adults in school are responsible for the safety and well-being of students? (RQ3)</p> <p>If a student felt unsafe in school, what might they do? (RQ2,3)</p> <p>If a student was worried about the safety or well-being of another student, what might they do? (RQ2,3)</p> <p>What do you think influences whether a student tells a teacher/counsellor if they are worried about their own safety or the safety of another? (RQ2,3)</p> <p>In what ways do you think the pandemic impacted student well-being? (RQ1)</p> <p>If you were in charge of a school, what are the most important things you would do to keep students safe and protected from harm? (RQ3)</p> <p>How do you think student safeguarding or safety might be different in an international school compared with a national school? (RQ2)</p>
<p>Closing</p> <p>Thank students for their participation</p> <p>Ask if they have any questions</p> <p>Ask if they would like a copy of the study when complete</p> <p>Remind students they can talk to the counsellor or another trusted adult in the school at any time, including now if they would like to stay behind</p> <p>Remind students the counsellor will check-in with them in the next few days to ask them how the session went and if they have anything to add or would like to talk about</p>

3.3 Data Analysis

Interviews and focus groups were automatically transcribed and the responses were categorised. The topics identified in Figure 1 were first used as themes and then further categories were added or prioritised into themes as they arose as noteworthy. A gap analysis was then undertaken to compare the student and adult participants' data and to offer considerations for future development.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The research was carried out in accordance with the ethical framework of the University of Bath (2021) and the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2018). The sensitive nature of the study meant this research was approached and managed with care, taking into account the three key areas of informed consent, anonymity/confidentiality and protection from harm, with particular attention given to the student focus groups. The participating students were selected by the school and were identified as *not* known to be students of concern (i.e. the children are not identified by the school as having a child protection or mental health concern). Students were provided with multiple avenues for accessing support should it be needed, including the ability to leave the focus group at any time. No safeguarding concerns regarding individual students arose from the focus groups.

4. Research Findings

The research findings are presented in order of the research questions. The final section in this chapter outlines other notable findings.

4.1 Forms of harm occurring in international schools (RQ1)

This section presents the forms of harm described by the different participant groups as being most prevalent.

4.1.1 Student focus groups

4.1.1.1 Cliques, gossip and anti-snitching culture

Students in all focus groups talked about student friendship groups, or cliques. These were generally described as co-existing without conflict.

“There’s kind of a culture of tribalism and exclusivism...even though there may not be any direct conflict between two different groups, there’s this very strong idea of who belongs where, and if you do not belong within that clique or group or whatever, along with a bunch of other people who you share similar characteristics to in some way, then you just don’t really have a place to go.” (High School Student, School B)

“Yeah, if you just go and walk you can see that segregation.” (High School Student, School B)

“Well, there are some who are rude to others who are not they’re not really friends with, but I find that most people there’s like friend groups which in my experience like aren’t rude to each other.” (High School Student, School A)

However, students reflected that the segregation between friendship groups makes it difficult for new students to settle into the school. Two students described their experience of being new to their schools.

“Quite quickly I went through my like cliques and I found people I have similar characteristics with. Even though in the beginning I was quite disappointed and I was

really trying to engage with people from different groups. Eventually I thought that I wasn't having that much like, fun, and it wasn't really my zone. So I stepped back and went eventually with my people. With that, I share the same values and characteristics.” (High School Student, School B)

“I could see when I came it was a lot of grouping and that kind of made it hard for me too like actually become [unclear] When it's like when people are so close and they have been here. And since some people have been there since preschool, they know each other really well. And when it's like groupings, it's really hard to get into like the friend group and actually like, find friends. Yeah. I just think it's a lot of grouping. That was the hard part for me.” (Middle School Student, School A)

Students in all focus groups referred to gossip and rumours as causing friction and upset to students. Middle school students in particular felt like their every move was being observed by their peers in case they did something stupid or unusual, which would then be commented on and talked about. They also felt that in the group setting, students make inappropriate comments and jokes.

“Like there's a lot of gossip and like fake rumours, like ohh, this person did this or this person is just faking about all this, when it's so not true. And there's a lot of talking behind people's backs and like that when that happens it creates a lot of friction between friend groups and inside friend groups as well, because then you don't know who to trust.” (Middle School Student, School A)

“I don't know what it is about our grade that takes everything as a joke. But those jokes are sometimes not really jokes. And that's where the ambiguity is - is it is a joke, is it not?” (High School Student, School C)

“I think like things get made into a joke really easily like in a way that it shouldn't be.” (High School Student, School A)

Students said they were worried about talking to the school counsellors in case it would start gossip.

“Because, I mean, there's a lot of anxiety around going...like people seeing that you're going [to the counsellor] and saying things.” (High School Student, School C)

“But often they don't hear about what's actually happening in between friend groups. And so it's, since not a lot of people are actually brave enough to go to counsellors.” (Middle School Student, School A)

This was linked to an overall anti-snitching culture in which students report they/their peers are afraid or reluctant to report concerns or even visit the counsellor:

“Some people are just like scared if they tell the teacher they're not gonna care. More often, they think telling the teacher might generally make things worse” (High School Student, School A)

“Snitches get stitches like.” (High School Student, School A)

“Like, if you tell the teacher or if you actually wanna get help from the teacher or counsellor because like, that's the point that you got to, people will be like like oh my God you're being such a snitch or you like, like you're being weak kind of thing.” (Middle School Student, School A)

4.1.1.2 Identity-based harm

Forms of identity-based harm were brought up by students in all focus groups with longer anecdotes shared about racism and Islamophobia. Culture is described as having a role in preventing identity-based harm from being openly expressed.

“Any sort of like homophobia, transphobia is just not really tolerated in our grade, at all. If you're gonna be like that, then shut up.” (High School Student, School C)

“I think it's pretty undoubtable that quite a large part of the student body do hold misogynistic, and maybe racist ideas. But I think that they don't want to express that within the school openly because they feel that they may be judged or singled out for those for those ideas. But I think that they do still exist within the student body, even though they may not always come into this school.” (High School Student, School B)

However, there were numerous examples of microaggressions and incidents. In particular, Muslim students in two of the three schools described jokes about terrorism as being commonplace.

“Uh, like people at school say 'Allahu akbar' as a joke...Just in general. They kick a football or something and say it as a joke, which is not funny.” (High School Student, School C)

“Now they're just cause I'm Arab. They're like, ohh. bombs and stuff. Like terrorists. Just cause I'm Arab. And so I'm like, I don't do that stuff. Why do you think that? Just because I'm from this country, you know, I think it shouldn't be like that. I want to just be treated the same.” (Middle School Student, School A)

In one focus group, the students described a physical fight, which was videoed by other students and shared on social media with racist editing. This was described as an unusual occurrence at the school, particularly because it involved physical violence.

“I saw video personally, but I think like some of the things like that they added to the video it was kind of racist, like in my opinion, because like, I don't know, the [person] that was getting beat up...was Black and they put like monkey noises or something.” (High School Student, School A)

Other examples of identity-based harm included:

“A couple of weeks ago where one of my friends got called like a homophobic slur and then by the same guy who also was making fun of my friend. She's from Pakistan, but he was doing like an Indian accent” (High School Student, School A)

“I have seen examples of students posting things online and saying things online that could be deemed as very anti-Semitic or very racist.” (High School Student, School B)

“Yeah, like I've seen some people make fun of others like languages, and they try to like, like talk, like they make fun of their, ohh like they over exaggerate how it is just to make it like as a joke and it's like not funny because it's like where they're from, like their culture, their language.” (Middle School Student, School A)

“I've seen both students and actually also teachers and staff at the school refer to people from the working class like domestic helpers, stuff like that, in very degrading

and dehumanizing manners, like not even referring to them by name and stuff like that. And I think that in general that happens outside the school, but it actually also happens on campus at times.” (High School Student, School B)

Students also described incidents in which teachers and/or the school was perceived as being discriminatory towards students.

“...even teachers confused the names of black students just because they're black, even though you know, in terms of appearance, there may be really different.” (High School Student, School B)

“One of the things that a lot of the black students have complained about is that often whenever there's any kind of public event the school will always pull aside some of the black students to take pictures of them, and then they all put them on big posters outside of the school and in their marketing campaigns and stuff like that to create the idea that there is more diversity at the school than there actually is, even though the black student population makes up an extremely small part of the of the school's actual demographics.” (High School Student, School B)

Sexism, misogyny and sexual harassment were mentioned across all the focus groups in some form.

“It's kind of crazy. There's so much [sexism]...slut shaming, body shaming when it comes to, like women and females.” (High School Student, School C)

“None of the men or males were getting dress-coded and all of the women were for even the tiniest bit of extra skin showing...I even remember in middle school we went on a [school trip] and two like girls. One of them is a bit larger than the other. And they were wearing the exact same pair of shorts and only one got dress coded and...I still remember that and I will always remember that I think for as long as I live because it just hurt.” (High School Student, School C)

“I wouldn't be really specific, but we had a conversation about Andrew Tate and as part of this school and there was a huge part of students from the school, and especially from men, that they were shouting, they were quite ironic and humorous with that.” High School Student, School B

“I've heard a lot of things about it, you know, sexual harassment and rape. And not only in [our school] like, but really in international schools, schools in [European city] that I know, like [another European city], there's like I don't know. Like I think. I don't even know why it's like so common. But I mean, not [school] that much, but like in other international schools, not only in [country of the school] but like around the world, it happens a lot.” High School Student, School B

4.1.1.3 Online harm

Online harm of various kinds was shared by students, specifically social media and messaging apps. Two specific peer-on-peer abuse incidents involving the online space were discussed by High School students at length.

Incident 1, School A: Also mentioned above, in this case, a student who was new to the school was physically attacked off campus by another student, nearby to the school. This was seen and videoed

by students. The video was edited and then shared around the student body. The school was made aware of the video. It was talked about by students online and in school. The students were unsure of how the school handled the incident.

"I was thinking of a time when, in a different grade,...Just outside of school campuses...not a lot of this done about it....Didn't make me feel safe, especially being new. I was like ohh. Was this kind of stuff gonna happen at school."

"But I think the school did get involved and not sure about like, I don't know, I like that they kind of like you know. It was like a private thing that. Yeah, I mean, I don't know, like, if it was in my case, like, if I got beat up, I wouldn't want people to know, like, I think it was better that, like, the school handled it privately."

Incident 2, School C: Unknown student(s) set up a Google Form and an Instagram account. For weeks, students of the school were able to submit unkind comments about other students onto the form, which then were posted publicly on social media. The school tried to intervene but it was difficult to find out who was behind the account.

"I was terrified. I was checking if my name was dropped."

"everybody could see everything and things are going up there so harsh. And it was so horrible."

"And the worst part is that everyone, I mean, not everyone. But like a lot of people collaborated and did it - that I think that's just like horrendous."

"It wasn't the people that were running the Instagram account that was the main issue it was people feeding into it."

"Umm for me personally I knew some of the people that were in charge of that account. And like I think the main thing for them was they saw this a joke because they were the ones that weren't getting hurt if that make sense."

"I wanna say that I think school did take some measures to stop that - they were tracking who was liking the page. So I guess that was sort of the bystanders to that, the downstream, the people who were supporting that were held to account...even though they couldn't find out the main person."

"And then, like, so they tracked whoever was liking it. Then they got the parents involved and the police and like, it was a really huge deal because all the kids were panicking. Cuz I think most of them were only on the account to, like, see if their name was on it, which I think most of the people were on for seeing. Well, no, obviously not everyone was on it for that. People thought it was really funny until their name got put on it and then all of a sudden it wasn't funny anymore."

Students did not consider these two incidents to relate to topics of 'online safety' or 'online harm'. Instead, they talked about the incidents holistically, making no distinction between the aspects of the incident happening in person compared to online.

Middle School students described use of social media as more variable in their age group. Some students were allowed to use social media and have phones but others were not. Students that do use social media were on different platforms. However, students described peer pressure around social

media as being pervasive: they experience pressure to join social media in the first place, and then ongoing pressure regarding what they share online.

“Like for me, I didn't have TikTok for a long time. And then once I got TikTok a lot of people were like, ohh, you finally got TikTok and then like, I don't have Snapchat and Instagram and stuff and they'll come up and be like, why don't you have that, like, ohh, how can I text you? I'm like there are other medias, and if you don't have that, like if you don't have TikTok and then there's like TikTok sounds or TikTok dances and they'll be like looking at you weirdly because you don't know them and stuff like that. I feel it also really impacts the way people look at you.” (Middle School Student, School A)

“I feel like, when you tell about social media, I think it's also about like what you post, kind of thing. So it's like ohh, did you see that person's TikTok or did you see that person's story, why would she post that or he post that, that's like that's weird, you know, we kind of have to be cautious about that too.” (Middle School Student, School A)

4.1.2 Interviews

4.1.2.1 Suicidal ideation and suicide

Suicidal ideation and the risk of a completed suicide were of significant concern to the three schools. All schools had managed recent cases in which students expressed suicidal ideation and two of the schools had an attempted suicide in their student community. None of the schools had experienced a completed suicide by a student but suicides had occurred in their adult community and/or in nearby international schools. As such, this topic was front of mind for many of the participants.

“The number one concern is suicidal ideation, followed relatively closely by self harm....working with young people, we know depression, risk of suicide and self harm is massive.” Safeguarding Lead, School B

“A few years ago, a student, I don't know the exact details, but either had an attempt on campus or was self harming on campus and was found kind of hiding in [a secluded area] I think the building is so big and that there are many nooks and crannies so I think if a kid wants to, they definitely could on this campus.” Counsellor, School C

Since the pandemic, counsellors are seeing cases involving younger children and an increase in the overall number of cases.

“I haven't seen that before, especially from an earlier age, where parents also have told me too, you know, my child expresses, you know, suicidal thoughts at home. I feel with young children there expressing that you have to take it seriously and you have to involve the parents and always. The best advice for parents is to have a professional check it out.” Counsellor, School C

“I have seen more suicide ideation in the last two years than I have in my career.” Counsellor, School C

The schools are undertaking training and developing plans and strategies to manage these complex cases, involving external providers to support the students and their families.

“Students...get outside support for suicidal ideation and get risk assessments done and [we] put safety plans in place for some students at school.” Counsellor, School C

“Last year there was a student who was, you know, talking about ending their life...we put plans into place, collaborated with the family” Counsellor, School A

“We've sent several students home for psych evaluations because their ideations and plans and all of that has been high enough to warrant them being evaluated by an outside person.” Counsellor, School C

4.1.2.2 Self harm and disordered eating

Cases of self-harm and disordered eating are also seen to be rising since the pandemic.

“Post COVID, especially with younger kids, kindergarten up first graders, second graders, kids expressing self harm, using words like I feel depressed, you know.” Counsellor, School C

“Disordered eating is also very high at the moment, particularly with our female students.” Counsellor, School C

Counsellors in School A cautioned that it is difficult to make generalisations about the most prevalent forms of harm, given the wide age range of students in the school, as well as changes to trends each year.

“Some years it will be disordered eating, some years it will be self harm...It's not systematically all the time, and sometimes it's more a particular grade. Sometimes a particular gender. So it changes all the time...We can't say ohh every year for 8th graders this is what happens among the girls.” Counsellor, School A

4.1.2.3 Affluent neglect

Although the term ‘affluent neglect’ was rarely used in interviews, numerous examples were provided across schools which related to a lack of parental involvement or care. In some cases this was due to parents living abroad, travelling frequently or working long hours, or it was connected to the parents’ mobility and affluence.

“We have one student, for example, with sort of disordered eating and her parents weren't here and it was right before exams, so it was already a time when she was quite under a lot of pressure and we just knew through conversations with her that she was really finding it difficult to feed herself...we thought through, OK, how to be supportive...we had quite a lot of concern for her ...so eventually she ended up with just an account with [food delivery company]. She's getting food delivered and things like that. But at the start, we were talking about, like...could we have a rotation of teachers who were happy to cook with her and then package it up and she can have it for a couple nights and also, as part of it, like she then stays at school for a couple more hours, couple times a week.” Principal, School A

“Families that leave the parenting of their children to caregivers, and...families that work for NGO's or organizations that require travel and your kids are left with nannies or housekeepers for extended periods of time...with some of the missions here, where there's staff change every two years, I actually think that there are lots of safeguarding and and child protection concerns with these kids who move every two years as well, and how real, like documented concerns get lost” Counsellor, School C

“We are in a transient community of internationals...when we notice a student concern and we make a recommendation to a family, if they don't agree with us, they can just pull their child and leave. They can leave the country, they can leave our school, they can...always pull their child out of school and then we worry about the safety of that child or if they are gonna get the help that they need.” Principal, School C

Participants expressed concern about who is looking after the children in the absence of the parents and if the children are being appropriately cared for, or are at risk of harm.

“We have a lot of children that spend a lot of time with hired help rather than families, and we have had some disclosures of sexual abuse or touching in showers and things like that. But that tends to be rarer and we do a unit all about body parts. And that's when that tends to happen. That's when we start to get those kind of disclosures. But most of the work I deal with is physical.” Safeguarding Lead, School B

Lastly, the schools all made some efforts to ensure children were living with their families or that the school is informed if the parents are travelling, but it was difficult to always have up-to-date information.

“We also have guardianship forms when both parents are travelling out of the country, they have to submit a form that specifically says who's the temporary guardian, where they're travelling to and how long they'll be away for...We get surprises and usually we only find out if a child tells us or if they're sick and suddenly we call home and we realise nobody's home. But school policy is very clear on this. So if we do find out, we follow up with the family. And it's rare that it happens more than once.” Safeguarding Lead, School B

4.1.2.4 Physical discipline

Cultural differences in parenting, in particular around the use of physical discipline, were seen as a significant issue in two of the three schools (Schools B and C). This was primarily a concern for younger students.

“Hitting children with implements is still very much culturally accepted in [country] and many other cultures around the world. And we have a huge array of cultures and parenting practices at [school] so in primary school and middle school, concerns about children being physically abused at home is our number one concern. Because I guess there's such a stark difference between the way we approach managing behaviour within the school compared to how some children experience it at home. I think they pick up on that and they are happy or quick to tell us that if they're getting smacked or hit at home.” Safeguarding Lead, School B

“Elementary counsellors have certainly had child protection concerns connected to physical discipline where they're having challenging cultural conversations around our beliefs as a school versus cultural belief.” Counsellor, School C

In School B, it was particularly difficult because corporal punishment is not illegal in the country in which the school is located.

“It's not against the law, so legally there's nothing we can do, but equally it is against our school philosophy and ethos.” Safeguarding Lead, School B

Participants described ways in which they collaborate with families to reduce physical discipline at home, with the understanding that most of the children are otherwise in a safe and loving home.

“It's tricky because we don't believe the child's unsafe at home in most circumstances. It's just a form of, I say just it's not pleasant, but it's a form of discipline that is done out of love for the child and wanting the child to, you know, do homework or violin practice or whatever it is, and not knowing any different. And sometimes when we talk to parents they do say yes...but this is how we were raised and we don't know what else we can do when he says no, he's not doing his homework.” Safeguarding Lead, School B

Safeguarding Leads in schools B and C talked through the procedure the school takes to respond to such a disclosure.

“Obviously it's very difficult to have that conversation with the parents, say, by the way, your child just told us that you hit them. So we have got quite good at, you know, softening that blow and helping them with resources. We usually speak to the parents, get them in, we offer them resources. We sometimes actually ask them to come in and actually have a proper two or three hours with our counsellors talking about what the next steps are. We're also very lucky that we have a huge database [of] play therapists, family therapists, clinical psychologists and so on. So usually when parents do reveal truly that they're struggling, then we usually refer them to a play therapist or a family therapist. And this works really well. We ask them to sign off that they're going to let us see those notes or at least be able to talk with the counsellor that they're using or therapists that they're using. And we usually then start an ongoing conversation of what's working, what isn't working. And we can work with a family for like, three or four months. So that's usually the best scenario.” Safeguarding Lead, School C

“So the first thing I always establish is, is this child safe? So I will ask questions like tell me the kind of things you do at home. What do you like to do? How do you feel on a scale of 1-10 when you go home, and in all the cases that I've personally dealt with, I've always felt confident that they are happy and safe at home...And often chatting with the other [Safeguarding Leads] about what should the next step be, in 80% of the cases, parents come in and we talk to them and they have admitted straight away that that is something they use for a form of punishment. So often it's like piano, not doing the homework, not practising their Chinese language, and parents will be very open about how they choose to discipline at home. And so part of that work is also connecting them with our counselling department and offering parental support and offering that there's other ways of parenting, and so 80% of the cases that becomes a really positive experience hopefully for the families and the children.” Safeguarding Lead, School B

4.2 Challenges of safeguarding in international schools (RQ2)

4.2.1 Student focus groups

4.2.1.1 Reporting barriers

Students reported several barriers to reporting concerns to the counsellor or other staff. These were: stigma, concerns around confidentiality and the response of the school, and a desire to manage issues/problems themselves. These are challenges to safeguarding because often, according to the students, issues are not known to the school. However, students did believe that if the school knew about the harm that was occurring, the school would intervene, and believed that for more serious cases, it was a good thing that the school became involved.

“Sometimes it's better when adults are more involved in things and actually have a role in changing the way kids act or like educating them.” High School Student, School C

“Yes, [the school would take] really big action. And like, I think because they really care about students well-being. But often they don't hear about what's actually happening in between friend groups. And so it's, since not a lot of people are actually brave enough to go to counsellors.” Middle School Student, School A

As reported in 4.1.1.1, students talked about a reluctance to report to the counsellor because it could cause rumours and gossip about them, but also students expressed uncertainty about how the school would respond to a student coming forward. They were concerned about confidentiality and loss of control, as well as a fear that coming forward could make things worse for them. There was consistency among focus groups that they would not want to report a concern about a friend; however, they would encourage a friend to speak to a counsellor or another trusted adult.

“I mean, there's a lot of reason why we haven't, a lot of people at school, haven't connected with the counsellors. It's not because they're not, like, helping, but it's just all that, like, stigma around going from school.” High School Student, School C

“Some people are just like scared if they tell the teacher they're not gonna care. More often, they think telling the teacher might generally make things worse [unclear]” High School Student, School A

“...there's a lot of stigma around our counsellors at [school]...if you go to them with a problem and they're talking to other counsellors about what should we do...And then that sometimes has been fed back to parents, at least some some stories that I have heard about. And I feel like that's where a lot of the anxiety or, like, just worry comes from.” High School Student, School C

“I've even have conversations with people who've had, like, pretty big problems. And they've just said no, I'm not going to the counsellors at school because they don't know what the procedure after. That's like a really big gap for wanting a safe schools because like then people aren't going to get help because they're afraid of what will happen afterwards and they don't know what's gonna happen.” High School Student, School C

The students also mentioned that having a relationship with the counsellors to begin with was important for facilitating reporting, and that students were unlikely to seek help from a counsellor they didn't already have a relationship with.

"There's one counsellor that does A through J and then K through Z [surnames]...not every single person's gonna fit every personality, especially when it comes to counselling. So I think if [the school] put in more effort in getting the counsellors to connect with students on a day-to-day basis. That would solve, not really solve, but it would aid a lot of the issues that we're facing right now." High School Student, School C

"[Where] the counsellors can improve on all the school in general is having personal relationships with these students. Counsellors can't just expect for students to come with them for their problems when I don't even know the counsellors....when somebody doesn't know the counsellors, like they're not gonna go to you with their deepest, darkest secrets." High School Student, School C

Students in all three schools mentioned language as a factor in being able to express or share concerns.

"To be able to talk in my native language about the problem has a big effect on me because I feel like I could express myself better in [language], and then I feel better as well." High School Student, School C

"Language is a big barrier because for many of us English is not their first language. For some of us, its like the third one, some people may struggle for that" High School Student, School B

"When English might not be your first language, and then you might have harder time expressing yourself" Middle School Student, School A

4.2.1.2 Curriculum and teaching

While students appreciated the need and value of a safeguarding curriculum (see 4.3.1.1), they identified this as a barrier to safeguarding, because the curriculum focused on the wrong things, or there was not enough time, or that the teachers chose not to cover the material. They also felt that their peers did not always take them seriously.

"I think [the Personal, Social, Emotional curriculum] should be taught in all high schools throughout the whole ages and it is the biggest part of education, even more important and rather than the academics, but there are a lot of problems with this in the school. Firstly in terms of the content, it's extremely generic, not focused enough and things that most students are already aware of without really having real discussions... we have extremely limited amount of time like 20 to 25 minutes...also in the morning so a lot of people are not really able and mentally prepared to have conversations and a lot of [teachers] completely skip this part and they say, excuses, like its your wellness day, but let's do something else. You can draw, you can do whatever." High School Student, School B

"People who don't take things seriously mock this, like the workshops...it goes in one ear and out the other, and so I feel like the workshops are great, but you have to find a way to make them meaningful" High School Student, School C

Notably, and connected to the identity-based harm described in 4.1.1.2, one student felt strongly that the school should better prepare students for the discrimination they may face in the real-world.

“You cannot safeguard people when it comes to like the real world...In [country] racism is really bad. [unclear] My dad taught me that there's gonna be a lot of racism, like with the police or with shopkeepers and people – it's just like better to like know, and be prepared instead of like being in a school, where everyone's treated equal, and like, on the real world you get like, get a racist attack like, that's not normal. We were taught [at school] everyone's equal.” High School Student, School A

Students also felt there were contradictions in the way the school encourages well-being but then puts academic pressure on students. For example, in the context of athletics, a student shared how travelling at the weekends impacted them.

“With like sports, like, if you do a sport, that also piles up on you to do things because like you'll miss a day or two of school, which does affect things, and then like teachers expect me to do it over the weekend, but then you're like you still have that tournament over the weekend and then you get home and you're like exhausted and its like, we can't be like resting” Middle School Student, School A

Lastly, the students felt there was more the school could be doing to help break down cliques and support mixing of students, for example by teachers choosing student groups and using seating plans to mix students.

“Like, if you're a teacher, make a seating plan and like, you sit with new people, you meet them and like and you didn't know you have, like, things, the same interests...And you don't feel as shy because you have to sit there, you know, the teacher makes seating plan. They don't have a choice. So you, it's not like ohh I'm not gonna sit with them just because I have a choice. The teacher says you have to.” Middle School Student, School A

4.2.2 Interviews

4.2.2.1 Addressing online harm

The concerns about online harm were brought up in interviews in all the schools. The participants described complexities around privacy and ownership of data online, and the involvement of many more students than for in-person incidents.

“Hundreds of students were involved...everybody was sort of commenting on it and liking it” Principal, School A

Participants said that this form of harm has increased as a result of the pandemic, and is changing rapidly due to developments in technology. Together, these make it difficult for the school to support students.

“I think that the sort of social life switched even more so online [due to the pandemic]. And what is our role there? How do we support students? How do we investigate?” Principal, School A

“I just wanted to tell them if it's something that is not making you feel good. If these comments or these pictures or whatever just block the person and it seems like a very difficult thing for them to do to block someone.” Counsellor, School A

“How do you write a rule that's going to take into account like take into consideration all the ways that they're sharing content right now? It's very complex and changing, isn't it?” Principal, School A

School C was having challenges with younger students' interactions with the online space and this resulted in them reconsidering at which ages the school introduces students to, for example, their own school email address.

“We give kids emails in Elementary School. It's very locked down, but we've been reviewing like, is that even right? Are we giving kids tools, but not giving them the skills, and then they're having issues with communication and the online realm. And so we are considering, really thinking, about when and how we give children access to emails...maybe we're actually going against what we're telling the parents [because in] a lot of these parent sessions, we were saying don't give your kid a phone, don't give your kid device. Don't let them have social media. And then we're like, ohh, but here's an email.” Principal, School C

4.2.2.2 Harm occurring outside of school

Also applicable to 4.2.2.1, but extending more broadly to in-person issues, participants said that it is difficult for the school to navigate issues that occur outside of school, and to determine the school's responsibility in such issues.

“That's one of the bigger concerns that comes from parents, about substance use on the weekends...I think that again with social media, things like this, it's like you could get the impression very quickly that that's all that's happening, if that's what's being shared widely, right?” Principal, School A

“In our handbook we specifically state that while things that have happened outside of school can often be beyond our control, we are always responsive when we notice that it impacts our school culture. So we've you know, there's always things that happen in the online world social media. Or even face to face events that happen outside of school that we have dealt with in the implications and consequences that happen inside school...It is hard because a lot of those things, when they do happen outside of school on social media, which we have no purview of or we have no, you know, it's apparent that gives their child a phone and allows them to have a social media account. But definitely that can impact our school culture and climate until we do take action.” Principal, School C

“It's about, like, how do you care for each other, right? And what is the harm that you're causing and what are the sort of laws about that?” Principal, School A

This is compounded by a reluctance of students to come forward and inform the school about harmful events occurring online or in-person but outside of school.

“One of the things that we've seen recently that's challenging for this is like a hesitation to involve adults. While I think we had more open communication from students when

they were concerned about each other in the past, that's less the case. And so we're finding out about things quite a bit later, and not necessarily directly, so it makes it more challenging and it's hard to get more information about what's happening if there's a hesitation to share with adults.” Principal, School A

4.3 Factors that support safeguarding (RQ3)

4.3.1 Student focus groups

4.3.1.1 Curriculum and teaching

While students generally focused on areas for improvement, students did share some specific positive learning opportunities they had related to safeguarding.

“Consent. No in uncomfortable situations and also how to say no if you don't wanna do it directly. And like other excuses for leaving a situation, which I think like is really good.” Middle School Student, School A

“You have to be sure, you can't do something when you're not sure because then you might regret it. They taught us if someone pressuring you to do something, or if you're pressuring someone to do something and they're like, I don't really, if they seem on edge about it, then you shouldn't like force them to do it because it means they're not sure if they wanna do it or not.” Middle School Student, School A

“Sexual health or something that is taught in every physical education class, which it ends after 10th grade right before the IB. So I'd say I think everyone has taken here, at least a sex education class.” High School, School A

In School C, the students felt that learning about safeguarding happened most effectively in relation to athletics travel. They described having clear briefings and guidance before they travelled, including what to do if they had a concern or issue.

“I think because it's an international competition because we are leaving our country. They do have to be super diligent about what they're doing. And I think that has become [the school's] best like point.” High School Student, School C

4.3.1.2 Role of the counsellor

Students valued the role of the counsellor as a professional role, and said they would encourage their friends to seek help from a counsellor if they were worried about them.

“I would feel more comfortable talking to the counsellors because I know they are like, experienced professionals who know how to deal with these issues and then teachers.” High School Student, School C

“If I was worried about a friend, I would also encourage them to seek the counseling from the counseling office [because they] are more professionally qualified to handle those kinds of issues.” High School Student, School B

"I've taken friends to see [the counsellor] before as well. I think it really helped" High School Student, School B

The counsellor role was particularly valued when the student had a relationship with the counsellor already.

"One of our counsellors is my coach so I feel a close bond with them and I feel more comfortable going to going to them with an issue or something like that. Having that relationship in a different area of my life makes it easier." High School Student, School C

Students appreciated opportunities they had to have individual conversations with the counsellors, particularly where it was built into the structures of the school rather than initiated by them.

"[When] I was new, so the counsellor, like for all the new students they would like, take them out of the class and like, talk to them for like a minute. How's everything is going and stuff. But I feel like they should do that, like every few months or so because, like, maybe the students wouldn't be scared to say, because like the counsellor is coming to take them and talk to them. It's not like they're going. So maybe they would not feel scared to talk to the counsellor if they just came in, like Like, they have to talk because like they counsellor, the people, won't take them as a snitch, you know? They're just like, oh, they're just having a check in or something." Middle School Student, School A

Students also preferred having the counsellors' office in a more discreet location.

"So they they're used to have it that you walk into the high school office and you can see straight into the counsellor's room. They have swapped that that you can't, when you walk in it's on the wall behind you so you can't see into it, which I think was very smart as well." High School Student, School C

4.3.2 Interviews

4.3.2.1 Safeguarding structures and a team approach

In all three schools, participants said the counsellors were most often the first people to receive a concern or disclosure. However, a team approach was valued in all schools for ensuring that information was shared appropriately, and decision-making was done collaboratively.

"If there's anything that I'm really concerned about with somebody's well-being, then I always consult with others." Counsellor, School A

"So if a case comes in, then I would often run through with one of [the other Safeguarding Leads]. Look, this is the case that's coming in. This is the action I've taken. And this is what I'm thinking of doing next. Would you agree? Disagree. What questions? Sometimes we'll run the meeting together with families if we think that's helpful. So we kind of model to each other the kind of questions because that's a really powerful process." Safeguarding Lead, School B

In all schools, there was a dedicated Safeguarding Lead or Child Protection Officer who worked across the whole school. In some cases, there were divisional Safeguarding Leads who reported to a Whole School Safeguarding Lead. Additionally, the Principals and/or their Deputies were involved in serious cases in their divisions, and the Head of School/Director and other members of the leadership team were involved in cases which were high risk in terms of harm or liability to the school (legal or reputational).

Schools B and C had very clear leadership and reporting structures which were well articulated by all participants. School A was in a period of transition which created some uncertainty.

All the schools had regular multi-disciplinary meeting cycles set up to discuss concerns about students, with at least one Safeguarding Lead or equivalent person who crossed divisional meetings and was able to connect issues, for example siblings in different divisions.

“We don’t talk about the really, really high level things there because it’s too broad of a team. But it’s more about like, OK...let’s all come together and talk...that’s the all the counsellors, the school psychologist, the leadership, [learning support] representation.” Principal, School A

“Some people overlap...so if there was a family issue in [another division], the people that crossed the teams could then have that conversation about siblings.” Counsellor, School A

A counsellor in School C talked about how they balance their role as a trusted counsellor with having to pass on sensitive information.

“Confidentiality ends when we feel someone’s safety is at risk... I mean kids understand when they come and talk to us that that’s where, confidentiality ends....And that feels good for as counsellors, that feels good because you feel like you’re not holding information...I love the team approach...I never feel solely responsible for making any kind of decisions around anything, and I think because we have that team approach, I certainly feel safer.” Counsellor, School C

This sense of sharing the burden was also expressed by a Principal in School C, when asked about their role in safeguarding.

“We can help bring a team together to make sure that there’s no one individual holding that heaviness of any allegations or any reports, but also that we have a team of people together that are looking at those reports.” Principal, School C

4.3.2.2 Policies and procedures

The leadership structures described in 4.3.2.1 were supported in all schools by policies and written procedures/information, which were referred to during the participant interviews.

“We have quite defined clear protocols of what should happen and what kind of things should be reported...expectations are very clear. So teachers know where to go and what to do.” Safeguarding Lead, School B

These processes were shared with the community in various ways, such as in training, on the school website and on posters.

“We’ve also put up some posters around the school with...all of our faces on it. Our names and all of that. So the kids know very clearly who they can report to...And I think that’s helped that the kids identify [to whom they can] report and there’s a disclaimer statement that says this is not confidential reporting.” Counsellor, School C

In all schools, participants described annual training for all employees and volunteers, and a code of conduct to which they all had to abide.

“The training has become much more comprehensive for all employees in terms of understanding why rather than just signing and saying yes, I understand. But like really getting into what might it look like to be involved in safeguarding?” Principal, School A

4.3.2.3 Safeguarding software

Specifically designed safeguarding software was used in two of the three schools to document and track safeguarding concerns. Participants in these schools spoke positively about the software, particularly that it allows for concerns to be centralised.

“That’s all recorded then on Cpom so that we can keep a record...I can see very quickly who’s assigned to me and our active cases.” Safeguarding Lead, School B

“Our new [software]...this is the first year we’ve been doing it school-wide and I love [it]. [Previously] we’ve had issues where child protection cases got dropped or you know it’s just a paper file that we lost between divisions, so [this is a] consistent, you know, school-wide way of documenting our child protection concerns.” Counsellor, School C

“I think that it’s a one stop for our teachers, a very easy way to report instead of who do I talk to? Just put it in [software]. Also, having the electronic system allows you to have this greater breadth of expertise involved because [concerns] can’t get lost...So it doesn’t matter who you report to...it could go to me. It could go to [Safeguarding Lead]. It could go to the other two counsellors. Whoever it goes to, we can take action on it one way or the other.” Counsellor, School C

4.3.2.4 Responsive safeguarding curriculum

The curriculum in all the schools covers, albeit at different times and in different ways, key safeguarding topics such as boundaries and consent, healthy and unhealthy relationships, and how to report/share concerns. In all schools, there is an adaptive aspect to the curriculum which allows the school to be responsive to current events or emerging concerns.

“Our counsellor health curriculum was developed last year...because last year it was new, we realised ohh okay, some tweaks need to be made in order for it to work for that particular group...there’s a balance that you don’t just like throw in a new session or something when something happens. But you do look critically at your curriculum and make changes.” Counsellor, School A

“We do explicit [teaching] related to safeguarding, so talking about their online selves, talking about general interactions with different people. They might encounter adults, peers, strangers and so on. And alcohol and drugs, all all the different parts there and how that helps keep kids safe...how they keep themselves online safe online on, with intention....a few weeks ago, there were some anonymous online Instagram stuff happening that was very hurtful...we took an immediate, responsive approach, but it tied in with messaging that we previously then proactively. So it wasn't like this new ohh, we just saw this horrible thing happen and we've never talked about this before. We're able to connect back to those proactive lessons.” Principal, School C

The impact of Covid-19 was acknowledged as impeding curriculum delivery but all three schools said they are getting back to or revising pre-pandemic learning around safeguarding.

“During COVID, we stopped sort of doing such explicit instruction of that because it was there was such limited time to give instruction of anything. And so now we're sort of building it back in, but things have shifted a lot. And so we have to think about that” Principal, School A

Participants in two of the schools (Schools A and C) made specific reference to strategies for building healthy and positive relationships. For School C, this was a response to the pandemic affecting students' social development.

“We've seen a major increase in [peer-on-peer issues] since the pandemic...we start our day building community [through morning meetings] and we have quiet time after lunch. We were noticing that when kids were coming back from lunch, there were a lot of unresolved issues coming back with them. And then we are just sending them off to music or art. And then those teachers who didn't have that larger context of what's happened throughout the day, were having trouble navigating those challenges with the students. So [quiet time after lunch] allows kids to come back and calm down...before they continue the rest of their day.” Principal, School C

“We have a lot of things about sort of just positive relationships. But we're not talking about sexual relationships necessarily, right? We're talking more about, like, how to be a good friend, how to be a good family member and how to tell if you're not in a healthy relationship, right? But again, it's not necessarily about sexual relationship at that point.” Principal, School A

The participants talked about the impact of the safeguarding curriculum, particularly in empowering students to make disclosures.

“So when you deliver curriculum around body autonomy, you see a slight [increase] in peer on peer reporting. Often ‘they touched my private parts’ or ‘[someone] was asking me to do things’...speaking to children about what's safe touch and what's not, and what could/should be covered by your bathing suit, and what's a private part, and people need permission...That's when we tend to see an increase in disclosure. We're also doing work at the moment on trusted adults and who they are and what they look like. And I think that also often sees more talking.” Safeguarding Lead, School B

However, time and scheduling were factors which participants from all schools raised as a barrier to covering the safeguarding curriculum in the way they would like to.

“Everything else kind of gets in the way of it. So curriculum gets in the way of it. Scheduling gets in the way of it. IB hours get in the way of it. You know, all of these things get in the way of the one thing that everyone says, that kids need more support and guidance on. That's what we're currently grappling with now and I think lots of schools are. How do we create a clearly articulated, robust health, well-being, safeguarding program.” Safeguarding Lead, School C

4.3.2.5 Networks and external organisations

Safeguarding Leads in Schools B and C are active participants in local networks for safeguarding leads in international schools. Being part of these networks was considered valuable for learning about safeguarding in their specific context and for accessing local resources. Regional resources, for example the Association of International Schools in Africa, were also important for guiding practice.

“AISA has a safer school audit, which was really good...we have a cohort of from different schools around Africa where we're just focusing on child protection and we meet every other week for an hour and we just talked about different things and do case scenarios” Counsellor, School C

Participants in all schools mentioned the Council of International School safeguarding training as having had a positive impact on their school's safeguarding practice.

“I think all of our leadership team have done [Council of International Schools child protection training]...so that kind of shared experience of doing the training together...it's the common language, common trends, common expectations, steps on how to react, things like that.” Counsellor, School C

Participants had variable experiences with local child protection agencies and providers. There was little continuity between schools or even within schools regarding the experiences of the participants with child protection agencies. For example, two Safeguarding Leads from School B shared different perspectives.

“They've visited school within quite a quick time frame, and they've always allowed me to be part of the interview so that child feels comfortable. And actually I felt my last experience was particularly positive. The lady that ran it with the girl was really good, very thorough. Asked all the questions I would hope would be asked and was very good at responding to the little girl and to the family. And I felt like that actually was handled really well...I recently had a case where I had to call them and they acted very quickly. Within an hour, somebody would call me back.” Safeguarding Lead, School B

“[Child protection agency] can be quite hard to get hold of and then sometimes once you do disclose to see once you've told [them], they're not always the best at communicating what happens.” Safeguarding Lead, School B

Participants from all schools said they kept a list of external therapists, psychologists and other support providers to refer families to.

4.4 The role of the IB in safeguarding (RQ4)

4.4.1 Student focus groups

Students rarely mentioned the IB specifically in the focus groups, but they did refer to the role of culture, values and international mindedness in shaping how students interact with one another and perceive the world. In general, they expressed disappointment that the values they held and/or were expressed by the school are not borne out in the behaviours they see.

"...So much stuff about like LGBTQ+...People are more aware, but that doesn't change the fact that some people still discriminate against them. And not only that but like as a school we are like, you know, super open like we are mostly open minded and like. Umm, I think we're very updated on the current news, events and stuff so that we know what's going on in the world, but I think it's like certain people are still, like some people still don't get that what they say has an effect on others." High School Student, School A

"What I was thinking when watching that was why is the person filming this video and not helping. This [student] was getting ganged up on." High School Student, School A

Students from School B had a dialogue in which they discussed whether it was a good thing or a bad thing that students might hold discriminatory beliefs but not express them. They felt that the culture of the school suppresses students from expressing their true thoughts, and that it would be better if these were addressed more openly.

"I think the main problem is that rather than the school actually changing the the beliefs of those people, it's really just saying you can't say these things, but they're not actually addressing the fact that these beliefs exist....I don't think that the culture of essentially just censoring those views and then not addressing them is helpful."

"I highly agree...we see that there's so many people that have these views implicitly, it would be much better to focus on real education and not just academics, and really educate ourselves about these things, and have real discussions...we shouldn't just penalize students for what they're saying...maybe it's not their fault, it's because of like their environment and other factors...it can cause even more harm if they're not, if they don't have the skills by themselves to evaluate things. So even it just promotes not having critical thinking by ourselves."

"And I think it's actually especially important in the case of this school...because so many of the students come from extremely wealthy families and are probably going to hold very high power positions in the future. I think that it's even more important to address these ideas when when people are still young people...I don't think that just censoring it is, is gonna gonna achieve that."

Disappointment between a disconnect between values and actions was also expressed in relation to service and CAS.

"I feel like even if you look at all the things we do around the school, like for service...it seems like we're doing it not because we really care about the cause, but because we have to do it, I know that in a lot of services, people always say like, oh, I have to go to service and like, they don't even want to be there. But they have to because of CAS."

And that's really disheartening cuz they're not taking the values in...just feels very sad." High School Student, School B

4.4.2 Interviews

Few references were made to the IB during interviews, and no participants referred to the IB as a driver for safeguarding at their school. However, participants did talk about fostering healthy relationships through the way in which students interact with each other, and develop social and emotional skills, as being important for safeguarding.

"It's not only how you succeed academically, but it's how you problem solve, how you work as a team, how you communicate, how you respect and tolerate diversity, how you can function when you leave the school to become a relatively decent human being" Counsellor, School A

Accreditation more generally was mentioned by several participants as a valuable guide for safeguarding practice, particularly at the beginning of a school's safeguarding journey. However, participants talked about the moral responsibility to safeguard students as being their primary driver.

"So to be honest, I haven't looked at [the CIS accreditation standards] for a couple years. They were really helpful when I first started and we still had so many systems and things that we've checked tick boxes that we had to tick. So it helped me to stay focused on the priorities and to understand what we needed to have in place as a school. And now, I don't want to sound arrogant or complacent, but I feel like we do have the systems in place now, so I haven't referred to them as much. [Here] we just had our CIS audit or review and we had no problems passing that accreditation." Safeguarding Lead, School B

"Well, obviously when it comes to faculty and staffing, we have CIS and MSA standards for accreditation. Section F staffing holds an entire plethora of safeguarding standards. So of course we just make sure that they're all applied in terms of our recruitment policies and processes...so we use [the standards] to underpin other decisions or policymaking. I suppose they guide us. And we ensure that we support them. But that's not because of compliance. It's just because that is the right thing to do. So yeah, so I think we do make sure that we're doing whatever the expectation is, but it's not like we're not researching it ourselves." Safeguarding Lead, School C

4.5 Additional findings

4.5.1 The legal context of the school can be a support or a barrier to safeguarding

The legal context of the school can be supportive to safeguarding and a barrier to safeguarding, depending on the laws of the country in which the school is located.

The school's legal context was a factor when students talked about their personal decision-making around substance use.

“I think the fact that you can be punished by death even for possession of marijuana and stuff like that, that definitely changes how people act. Yeah, I think there's a big role...In my home country it's very common to smoke weed and but here that's a complete no. So yeah, I think that's a big difference.” High School Student, School B

“I also think like it's the kind of the context of vaping, like in my [previous] school in [country in Europe], you could just like walk into the bathroom and somebody would be on the floor vaping and you know, like here, it doesn't really happen, you know, because it's illegal. Like, I know people still do it, but it's not. I think people hesitate a lot more about it doing anything that.” High School Student, School B

In contrast, a student said that in their country, where drugs are more readily available and they perceive less law enforcement action against drug use, it is more common.

“I think I, I guess, like my classmates, everyone has, like, some experiences with drugs...I feel like even the police regulation is, like, there is not, like, as much, like it's very cheap to get drugs.” High School Student, School C

The law was also mentioned in relation to physical harm in the home and at school, as a student compared their home country to their current country.

“when I was in primary school...physical violation...was still used not only from student to student but even from teachers to students...in comparison to [country of school], it would be something that would be a huge issue. For example, if a teacher would touch someone without their consent or a student would violate by physically touching someone else. But so in terms of physical touch, it's much better in [country of school],” High School Student, School B

The student perceived the norms and laws of the school/country to prevent physical abuse compared to their home country, yet the lack of criminalisation of corporal punishment by parents was raised as a concern by a counsellor of the same school.

“It's not against the law, so legally we there's nothing we can do, but equally it is against our school philosophy and ethos.” Safeguarding Lead, School B

The legal context was mentioned by adult participants in relation to suicide as suicide is criminalised in one of the countries in which the research was conducted. This made it difficult for the school to respond to suicidal ideation and attempted suicide; however, participants from the same school also reported robust child protection laws which were supportive to safeguarding.

“[The law] is very robust, very clear. It's based around, you know, the rights of the child and the Geneva Convention” Safeguarding Lead, School C

5. Analysis

This chapter explores the above data. In section 5.1, a table is presented which identifies the key findings from the research, a summary of the data that supports the findings, analysis and suggestions for how gaps can be addressed. Section 5.2 considers how the findings connect with the model of safeguarding proposed in section 2.2 (Figure 2).

5.1 Findings

Table 3: The key findings of the research including a summary of the data, analysis and suggestions for how gaps can be addressed.

Finding	Student focus groups	Interviews with adults	Analysis	Addressing the Gap
<p>1. Harm perceptions differ between adults and students</p>	<p>Students shared personal experiences which were comparatively low level (cliques, transition), personal (identify-based harm), or were experienced by many students (online harm anecdotes - see Finding 2). However, for ethical reasons, students selected for the focus groups were not identified by the school as having a child protection or mental health concern, or as being part of a vulnerable group. Students who have experienced significant harm or trauma may have shared different perceptions of harm experienced in international schools. Students in the focus group expressed disappointment in how some of their peers interact with or treat one another.</p>	<p>Adults focused on high stakes risks such as suicide and self-harm, and physical harm in the home. Suicide, self-harm and disordered eating were seen to pose significant risk to students, with the prevalence of cases increasing since the pandemic. This was noted more in younger children than before the pandemic. The pandemic was also linked to increased use of technology by students to communicate with one another, resulting in more cases of cyberbullying and other forms of online harm, as well as a lack of general social skill development. New or emerging issues (Figure 1) such as identity-based harm and the impact of global mobility/transition were rarely mentioned during interviews, and neither was abuse by adults.</p>	<p>It may be a positive that students are not aware of the more extreme or serious issues faced by some students; however, adults may be focusing on issues that affect the few, and missing those that impact the many. Harm/trauma caused by transition and identity-based harm were overlooked by adults while student data suggests it may be more pervasive than we realise (Perreras & Meadows, 2022; Obiko Pearson, 2022). Allegations of abuse by school staff were not themes in either group, perhaps because these issues would be dealt with confidentially by the Head of School. The reported increase in self-harm and suicide aligns with global trends post-pandemic (e.g. Holmyard, 2023).</p>	<p>Guidance for student engagement in safeguarding has been issued by the ITFCP (2021b) but the data suggests student voice in safeguarding remains a gap, as evidenced by the differences in harm perceptions in this study. Schools could consider anonymous reporting tools and surveys as a way of building understanding around harm experiences, as well as carrying out focus groups (ITFCP, 2021b). Learning about student experiences of harm may help schools develop safeguarding practices to address them (Rigg, forthcoming), particularly in the case of harm within social interactions (e.g. cliques and rumours), identity-based harm, and the impact of living in a globally mobile community.</p>
<p>2. Online harm between students in</p>	<p>Technology played a significant role in two stories told by students</p>	<p>Participants explained how their schools are challenged by how to</p>	<p>There appears to be a disconnect between how students and adults</p>	<p>As per Finding 1, schools could explore student perceptions</p>

<p>the same school blurs traditional school boundaries of time and space</p>	<p>(video of the fight and social media posts). These were both events which involved both the online space and real-world, inside and outside of school. The students did not describe interactions with peers in the online space as separate to their real-life interactions. The terms 'online harm' or 'online safety' were not applied to online interactions between peers.</p>	<p>respond to issues which occur outside of school hours and outside of school premises, but which impact student safety and wellbeing in school. This includes harm between students in the online space. One school was reconsidering its approach to technology by removing email access of younger students, to better work in partnership with families.</p>	<p>view social media interactions between peers: the boundary between the online and real-world does not seem to exist for students in the way it does for adults (Buglass et al., 2020; Phippen & Street, 2021). It is also difficult for schools to determine what should be the school's response to cases of online harm outside of school.</p>	<p>around online harm, to inform their policies and practices. These should recognise that peer interactions in the online space are seen by students as part of their real-world experiences. Schools should have clear policies/procedures for how they respond to online harm, which are shared with students and families.</p>
<p>3. Schools have developed culturally-responsive strategies for addressing physical discipline</p>	<p>Students did not talk about physical harm in the home, except in one case where the student favourably compared the practices in their current school with their home country.</p>	<p>Strategies are in place for responding to harm in the home where it is culturally and legally acceptable as a form of parental discipline. These involve working in partnership with families to provide education and support to change practices.</p>	<p>Where physical discipline is legal or culturally accepted, the approach to managing this form of harm needs to be different from what might be usual practice in the countries where many of the participants came from (Rey et al., 2020). Practitioners needed to learn or develop strategies to work with/educate families about alternative forms of discipline.</p>	<p>The international school community may benefit from further guidance about how practitioners can respond to physical discipline in culturally-responsive ways, particularly when inducting new safeguarding staff who are coming from locations with more stringent child laws to support child's rights.</p>
<p>4. Safeguarding structures and a team approach support safeguarding, but students may not understand why a team approach is necessary</p>	<p>Students were concerned about their privacy when sharing concerns with the school, for example they expressed concern their private information would be shared with a safeguarding team, rather than just the individual counsellor they confided in, or their parents (see Finding 5).</p>	<p>Shared decision making, clear reporting protocols and a safeguarding leadership structure, including the appointment of a safeguarding lead for the school, was important to participants in all schools. A team approach was seen to strengthen safeguarding practices and avoid placing the decision-making burden on just one individual.</p>	<p>The difference in harm perceptions (Finding 1) indicates that students may not understand the scope of safeguarding. Safeguarding cases require a team approach but, from the student perspective, adults breaking their confidence erodes trust. An effort to take a whole school approach to safeguarding (CIS, 2023) was evident in the</p>	<p>Schools could inform students about the processes involved in responding to a safeguarding concern, and what are the boundaries around counsellor confidentiality, to build understanding of the systems in place and why these are necessary.</p>

			three schools.	
5. Counsellors play an important role in safeguarding, but there is a stigma around using them for support	Students recognise the value of counsellors as being trained specifically for their role. But, students are reluctant to go to the counsellor for fear of stigma (e.g. rumours about why they visited the counsellor), losing control of the issue, confidentiality/privacy concerns, or because they felt they didn't know them. Students prefer to manage issues in their own peer groups and are reluctant to break a friend's confidence even when they are worried about them.	Counsellors are valued for their support and expertise in managing safeguarding concerns in the schools, in particular their work supporting students and families during difficult circumstances. The schools share with students how they can access the counsellors for support and guidance, but it remains a concern for some that students try to manage issues within their peer groups when they would benefit from adult interventions or support.	The role of the counsellor is highly valued by the students and adults. Students wanted to engage with the counsellors but felt the school was not facilitating this, for example by building trusting relationships. The reluctance of students to seek help from counsellors for themselves and/or their friends may provide a reason for the disconnect in harm perception between students and adults (Finding 1). If students are not reporting harm, it is difficult for schools to notice and respond to it.	Schools could implement strategies to reduce stigma related to the counsellors. Student voice could be used to inform the school of strategies which may work from the perspective of students. However, the student preference for discreet interactions with the counsellor may be a 'symptom' of the stigma and the 'cure' may be a broader school strategy to increase reporting pathways and break down stigmas, and help students to understand when they need to seek adult support.
6. A safeguarding curriculum is vital for protecting students, but there is not enough time and the content and/or delivery may not meet student needs	Students valued the concept of learning related to safeguarding and well-being, including how to keep themselves and others safe and what to do if they have safety concerns. They identified issues with delivery: peers not taking it seriously, adults being underprepared to deliver it or avoiding teaching it altogether, or the content not being relevant.	Adult participants felt safeguarding and well-being education was important, but did not feel they had the time in the schedule to be able to deliver a curriculum that met the needs of the students. This was particularly the case for older students and the IB Diploma was specifically mentioned by one participant as a barrier to delivery. The delivery of a safeguarding curriculum was impeded by the pandemic.	Both students and adults agreed that teaching students about safeguarding and well-being in the curriculum was important. There was agreement that the current approach was inadequate, although for different reasons, with students feeling the content and delivery was not meeting their needs, and adults feeling they do not have the time to effectively deliver a safeguarding curriculum.	More dedicated curriculum time for safeguarding and well-being, as well as the incorporation of student voice in curriculum development (Rigg, forthcoming), may ensure the needs of students are being addressed. Teachers could be upskilled to be able to deliver the content, or specific roles may be created for this. Schools could be supported by external organisations to create time for delivering an effective safeguarding curriculum.

<p>7. Accrediting bodies, external agencies and networks are seen as important resources for safeguarding, but accreditation standards are not drivers for the work</p>	<p>n/a</p>	<p>Participants referenced international school accrediting bodies and training providers, as well as regional networks, as being useful sources of guidance and external validation for safeguarding. A group attending the same training was seen as valuable for fostering shared understanding. Experiences with external agencies such as child protective services were variable but building relationships with them, as well as other local networks, was seen as important to the schools.</p>	<p>The three schools had well-established safeguarding protocols and teams, and had already gone through compliance processes related to safeguarding during CIS accreditation and IB evaluation. This may be why the participants felt accreditation standards related to safeguarding were less relevant to their daily practice. Yet, this analysis suggests that even schools with well-established practices may benefit from further guidance and challenge in some areas.</p>	<p>Accrediting bodies and the IB could produce differentiated resources/guidance for schools to ensure schools with established safeguarding practices continue to improve. This may include support for schools to address the gaps identified in this research, in particular addressing identity-based harm and transition as forms of harm, reducing stigma related to counselling support, effective delivery of the safeguarding curriculum, and integrating student voice in safeguarding practices.</p>
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5.2 Making connections

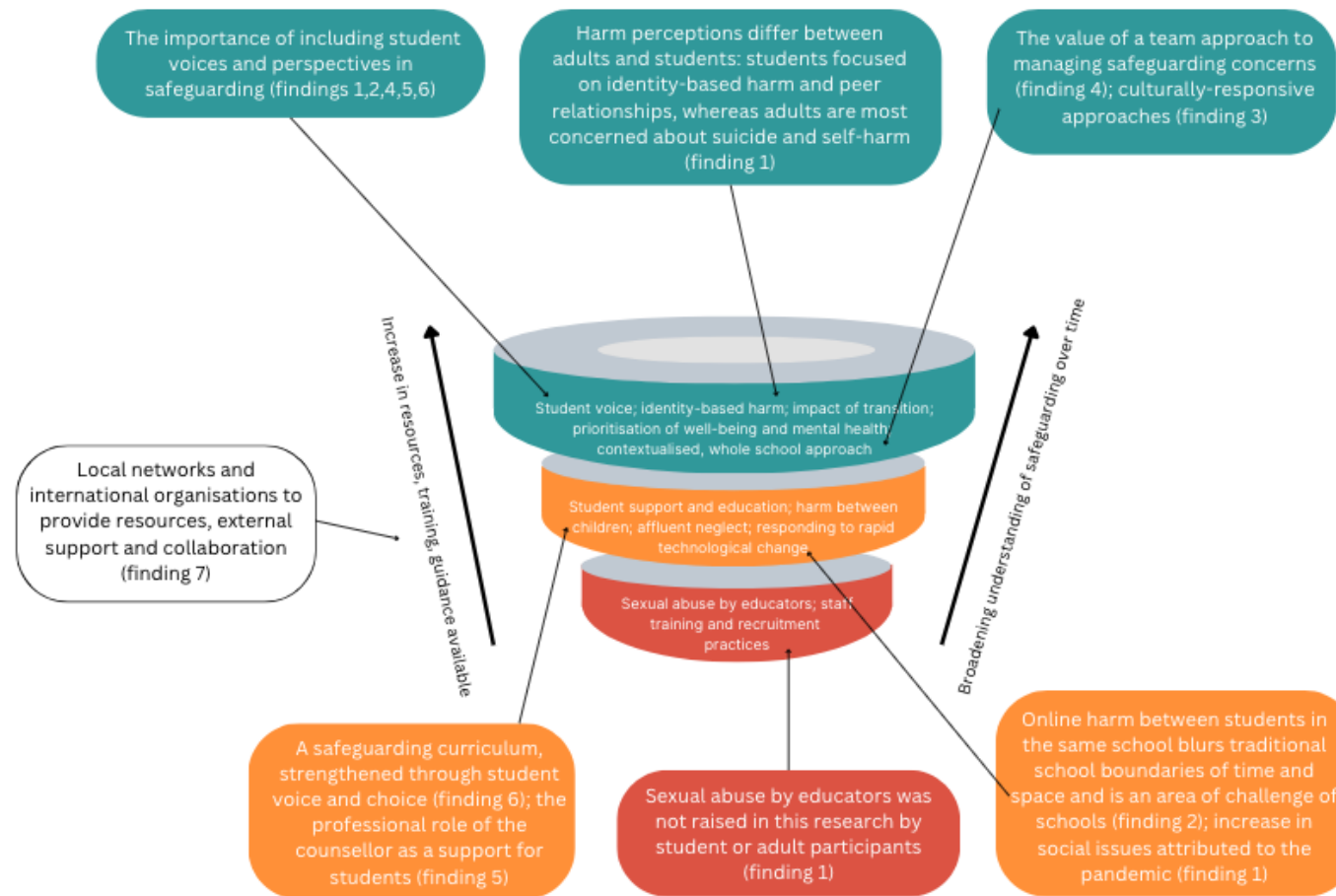


Figure 2: Connecting the findings to the researcher's conceptualisation of how understanding of safeguarding in the international school community has developed since 2014.

The findings of the study can be summarised as follows:

1. Harm perceptions differ between adults and students.
2. Online harm between students in the same school blurs traditional school boundaries of time and space.
3. Schools have developed culturally-responsive strategies for addressing physical discipline.
4. Safeguarding structures and a team approach support safeguarding, but students may not understand why a team approach is necessary.
5. Counsellors play an important role in safeguarding, but there is a stigma around using them for support.
6. A safeguarding curriculum is vital for protecting students, but there is not enough time and the content and/or delivery may not meet student needs.
7. Accrediting bodies, external agencies and networks are seen as important resources for safeguarding, but accreditation standards are not drivers for the work.

In this section, the findings are mapped to the researcher's conceptualisation of how understanding of safeguarding in the international school community has developed since 2014 (Figure 2).

Developments in international school safeguarding began with a focus on preventing abuse by educators, as indicated in the red donut. This resulted in the production guidance and resources tailored to the international school community to strengthen recruitment practices and to develop a consistent approach to managing allegations of abuse (ITFCP, 2016; ITFCP 2017a; ITFCP, 2017b; ITFCP 2018). Although this remains an issue of importance (e.g. Rigg & Holmyard, 2023; Larsson & O'Brien, 2023), the topic did not emerge as a theme in either students or adult participant data, perhaps because such issues would be dealt with confidentially by the Head of School.

Topics which have been prominent in the international school community for some years, such as affluent neglect (Bernard, 2018) and harm between children (Lloyd & Rigg, 2020), seen in the orange donut, were visible in the data as both strong practices, such as the role of the counsellor in supporting students, and areas of challenge, such as the delivery of a safeguarding curriculum and the multiple examples of harm between children. This suggests that, while these topics are well-known to the practitioners, further work may be needed to further strengthen and embed the safeguarding practices related to them.

The most marked gap in the study was in the adult and student perspectives of identity-based harm. This may be indicative of diversity, equity and inclusion being an emerging area of focus for many international schools (Perreras & Meadows, 2022; Obiko Pearson, 2022; IB, 2022). Another area that may warrant further attention is the impact of transition on student safety and well-being. Several students in this study talked about the difficulties of being a new student in an international school environment. This reflects a growing body of data and guidance related to the challenges of growing up in a globally mobile community (Millar, Wiggins & Feather, 2020; Ota, 2020; Crossman, 2021). However, this did not emerge as a theme in the adult data, pointing towards a potential area of opportunity for schools to strengthen their safeguarding practices.

A team approach to safeguarding with clear lines of responsibility and shared decision-making was considered important to all three schools. The data suggests that a whole school approach to safeguarding (CIS, 2023) could be strengthened by the inclusion of student voice across multiple dimensions of safeguarding, including how to reduce stigma around students seeking support from counsellors, and how the school communicates with students the process for responding to safeguarding concerns.

Participants valued external resources, consultancy, training and networks as avenues for strengthening their practice over time, although experiences with local agencies were variable (Rigg, forthcoming). Training in particular was seen as important for building knowledge over time, and a team approach was appreciated where multiple practitioners from the same school attended the same training, to facilitate a shared understanding of safeguarding in their school.

Finally, a growing focus on well-being and mental health was a strong theme in the data from adult participants, some of whom cited suicide and self-harm as their biggest concern. This aligns with global concerns related to increases in youth anxiety, depression, stress and eating disorders during and since the pandemic (Cowie & Myers, 2021; Feinmann, 2021). The lack of student data on this topic raises the question of whether the students were unaware of the serious mental health challenges of their peers, or perhaps they did not see mental health as a safeguarding issue. This gap between the adult and student data warrants further exploration.

6. Conclusions, Considerations and Future Research

6.1 Conclusions

The aim of this study was to better understand safeguarding in international schools, including the harms that children experience, the challenges faced by schools, and the supportive factors that keep children safe and well. It also sought to explore the current role of the IB in international school safeguarding and offer considerations for strengthening safeguarding practices. This research comes at a crucial time as the international school community continues to work towards making international schools safe spaces in which they can flourish as learners. It is hoped that through sharing the results of this study, there is potential to support international schools globally as they undertake this work.

The intent of this study was not to make generalisations across international schools but to explore the perspectives of students, counsellors, safeguarding leads and principals in three IB World Schools. As such, it is acknowledged that this study is limited in its applicability to international schools in general, which are themselves diverse and are located in different legal and cultural contexts. However, the study has elicited positive practices that schools may reflect on, including:

- A team approach to managing safeguarding concerns (finding 4)
- The professional role of the counsellor as a support for students (finding 5)
- A safeguarding curriculum, strengthened through student voice and choice (finding 6)
- Local networks and international organisations to provide resources, external support and collaboration (finding 7)
- Culturally-responsive strategies for working in partnership with families to address physical discipline in the home (finding 3)

This study was conducted towards the end of the Covid-19 pandemic and has highlighted the following concerns, which participants attributed (at least in part) to the pandemic:

- Overall increase in suicidal ideation, self-harm and disordered eating (finding 1)
- Increase in suicidal ideation and self-harm in younger children (finding 1)
- An increase in online harm, and the challenges schools face addressing it (findings 1 and 2)
- Gaps in student learning about safeguarding due to teaching constraints during the pandemic (finding 6)
- An increase in social issues between students, including harm between children (finding 1)

A significant gap emerged in relation to identity-based harm (finding 1). Students in the focus groups reported racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, homophobia, transphobia and misogyny as forms of harm experienced by them or their peers, but interview participants rarely referred to these. The impact of transition and global mobility on student safety and well-being would also benefit from further exploration.

Across multiple findings (1,2,4,5,6), the study highlights the importance of including student perspectives in safeguarding. By understanding the harm experiences of students, the barriers they perceive to reporting concerns, and what learning they consider to be most relevant and useful, schools may strengthen their safeguarding practices in contextualised ways.

6.2 Considerations for the IB

Both the adult and student participants felt safeguarding could be strengthened through the curriculum offering more time, greater expertise and more relevant content (finding 6). The IB could consider the integration of safeguarding into the IB programmes as a requirement, for example as part of *Standard: Students as lifelong learners (0402)* (IB, 2020b), to ensure all schools dedicate time to teach students how to keep themselves and others safe and what to do if they have safety concerns.

The IB could consider offering professional development related to safeguarding, to upskill teachers and share strong practices from the community. Further, the IB could provide resources to help schools connect the IB Learner Profile and ATLs to safeguarding, as there are already implicit connections, such as being *caring* (IB, 2013) and developing *communication skills* (IB, 2023c).

While the inclusion of student voice is an IB requirement as part of *Lifelong learners 3.3: Pedagogical leaders provide opportunities for student voice to be represented in the school. (0402-03-0300)* (IB, 2023b), it could be made more explicit that this should relate to student safety and well-being. Further, as part of its efforts to foster an inclusive and equitable approach to education (IB, 2022), the IB could support schools in defining, identifying and addressing identity-based harm.

Finally, while the IB's ongoing research related to well-being (IB, 2023d) has close alignment with safeguarding, the IB could consider how the concepts of safeguarding and well-being could be integrated and terminology harmonised to help schools make connections.

6.3 Future research

Safeguarding in international schools is an area ripe for further exploration and with the potential for significant positive impact. As such, this research could be replicated in a broader range of international schools, including schools located in different geographical and cultural contexts, and different types of school (Hayden & Thompson, 2013). The scope of the research could be extended to include the perspectives of more community members, including younger students, the Head of School and the Board, teachers and parents. Although ethically more challenging, an exploration of vulnerable students' experiences would further shed light on harm experiences in international schools. Each finding in the study could be explored in more depth to facilitate greater understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to them. In particular, students' experiences of identity-based harm and living in a globally mobile community require further attention.

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