



Learning Project 1:

Evidencing peer-on-peer abuse in educational settings

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Purpose: The purpose of this learning project was to understand how professionals capture, share and use information about peer-on-peer abuse that occurs within schools and alternative education settings. We highlight examples of promising practice and identify challenges professionals face in recording, sharing and/or using this information. Sixteen practitioners participated in this Learning Project, including professionals working within education, youth justice, children and young people's services and the voluntary sector.

Background: Educational settings are often viewed as protective environments in which children and young people can form healthy and safe relationships. However, research and case reviews indicate that young people can also instigate or experience bullying, sexual harassment, other harmful sexual behaviours within educational settings and on some occasions have been drawn into abusive peer networks via school associations. Young people who do not experience peer-abuse directly can still be exposed to wider practices of bullying or harassment and harmful gender norms and stereotypes within schools, which in turn create cultures conducive to peer-on-peer abuse.

Peer-on-peer abuse within educational settings may act as a push factor that results in young people going missing, or disengaging, from education. Moreover, sexual harassment within schools may escalate to other forms of offending (Firmin, 2015). Case reviews have evidenced that young people, particularly young men, may display harmful sexual behaviours within schools for years prior to more serious abusive incidents. Various studies have documented young women's experiences of sexual harassment and abuse within educational environments (Barter et al 2009; Ringrose et al 2011; EVAW 2010; GirlGuiding 2013, 2015) – stories that were echoed by young women who engaged in focus groups as part of our recent site work to develop local responses to peer-on-peer abuse (Firmin et al 2016). They

clearly articulated that patterns of sexism and sexual harassment make them feel unsafe in school (particularly outside of the classroom, in stairwells or corridors) and during their journeys to and from school. Practitioners have called for more support around how and when to respond to abusive incidents between peers in schools (Firmin et al 2016; Women and Equalities Committee, 2016).

Safeguarding young people in education is a multi-agency responsibility. Professionals from a range of sectors can help record and share information about peer-on-peer abuse within educational settings and support schools to provide a response. Capturing this information is necessary for understanding the prevalence and scope of the issue. Consistent recording of abusive incidents can help professionals understand whether abuse is happening in particular schools or whether abuse is an issue affecting young people in educational settings located in particular geographic localities. Similarly, robust evidencing can help identify and target interventions at particular school contexts, or issues that are impacting school cultures or environments, to change the conditions and norms that enable abuse within educational settings.

1. Capturing information of peer-on-peer abuse that occurs within educational settings.

Practitioners working within schools reported that information about peer-on-peer abuse largely comes from students or staff members who witness incidents. One practitioner mentioned the use of 'Toot Toot', an online mechanism through which students may report incidents directly to their place of learning. Information often comes from parents, members of the wider public/community, police and social care. Footage from schools' CCTV may also capture abusive incidents. Moreover student ambassadors may be in place for other young people to approach with their concerns.

In addition to reporting, all practitioners working within schools reported some mechanism for internally recording information on peer-on-peer abuse settings, including:

- Internal safeguarding emails that go directly to senior and safeguarding officers, and are also accessible to all members of staff;
- Safeguarding Awareness Maps that reflect information received from parents and students—one respondent referenced the use of these maps, but further detail was not provided on the software for this or how they work;
- Anti-bullying surveys completed by students every term; analysis of the survey is used to determine whether bullying is a current issue within the school and what kind of response is necessary;
- Safeguarding procedures that require information to be collated on a 'Cause for Concern' template and then stored in a folder in a locked and secure filing cabinet in the Designated Safeguarding Lead's office;
- Central confidential logging systems including behaviour incident logs.

However, many school-based professionals noted that they do not have a specific tool or template for recording peer-on-peer abuse incidents. Such incidents are identified and responded to in the same manner as other concern about behaviour and other forms of abuse.

Practitioners working outside of educational settings also report receiving information from young people and parents/carers about incidents that occur within schools. However, some practitioners noted the absence of a systematic approach for recording this information. According to one practitioner based in a Children and Young People's service, 'peer-on-peer abuse is yet to be recorded systematically as an item/type of incident to be quantified, monitored or analysed when the incident does not result in a police and youth offending outcome'.

Similarly, a practitioner within the voluntary sector who delivers group and one-to-

one support to young people within schools noted that '[although peer-on-peer abuse] makes up a large proportion of our work we do not have a set system or template for recording information [about it]'. A practitioner based in a youth justice service reported using a case management system to record instances of peer-on-peer abuse, which is accessible to all professionals across services working with the young person/people. Despite the availability and use of the case management system for safeguarding concerns across services, the practitioner reported that there is no way of using this system for *flagging* peer-on-peer abuse incidents.

2. Using information to respond to peer-on-peer abuse within educational settings.

Practitioners highlighted encouraging examples of using information on peer-on-peer abuse within educational settings to implement contextual responses, such as:

- Multi-agency professional strategy meetings to map how young people and peer groups are connected. The exercise is led by specific professionals who are skilled in collating and mapping information. Peer group mapping exercises help professionals see links between incidents that might appear isolated, and further help professionals identify young people that might be at risk of offending or being victimised.
- Linking Early Help teams to particular schools to promote better information sharing and support the development of partnership responses.
- Intervening with groups of students who engage in harmful behaviour towards their peers in order to identify and address the issues within school that are driving abusive behaviours.
- Running training sessions for staff and students in order to change the nature of the school environment. For example, schools have used PSHE classes, 'circle time' and school assemblies to raise issues with groups of

young people. These approaches offer students the opportunity to critically assess potentially harmful beliefs on sex, consent, gender and relationships with their peers that underpin some forms of peer-on-peer abuse.

Having access to information on incidents of peer-on-peer abuse may also help practitioners within educational settings improve the safety of young people. According to one practitioner, schools will 'tailor guidance and support [on peer-on-peer abuse] on an individual basis/ parental basis or cohort basis. We are mindful that blanket coverage can cause anxiety to the sufferers, and further isolate them'. Respondents to the Learning Project mentioned the following interventions focused on individual safety within the school environment:

- Liaising with and working alongside partner agencies that have experience challenging and supporting students who engage in unsafe and unhealthy behaviours.
- Creating bespoke timetables to minimise contact time between pupils involved in an incident. This approach does not in and of itself address the cause of abusive behaviours. A *contextual* approach to safeguarding within schools would seek to transform the school environment so that young people are safe from abuse throughout the school. However, creating bespoke timetables can improve individual students' safety and provide respite to young people harmed by peer-on-peer abuse in the absence wider school change or while processes for wider change are underway.
- Informal monitoring of the the young people affected by peer-on-peer abuse in situations where a lack of 'hard' evidence is assessed as precluding more formal interventions. Such a response focuses on individuals rather than contexts, but could help keep young people safer within a risky environment.

Multiple practitioners stated that information on peer-on-peer abuse is vital for commissioning, designing and improving services and interventions for young

people. Evidencing these incidents and any associated patterns can support requests for funding and highlight the need for appropriate responses within educational settings. A practitioner in a voluntary sector organisation working with children in schools remarked that information they collect is then fed into the Local Safeguarding Children's Board, the CSE network, the missing children network and sexual health forum (MAGS meetings), MARACS and other relevant groups that meet in the local area.

In one area, the Children and Young People's service aims to improve data collection on incidents in order to assess the efficacy of restorative approaches to peer conflict. The views of young people inform decision making around how and where services and professionals offer restorative interventions relating to victimisation in school and the community. Professionals aim to monitor the rate of incidents in schools after restorative interventions have been put in place. The hope is that data will help demonstrate that restorative interventions are practical and effective approaches to safeguarding young people within schools and other contexts.

3. Benefits of multi-agency information sharing

Multiple respondents to the Learning Project noted the link between robust information sharing and rapid responses to incidents within schools. A professional based in a school remarked that information sharing 'enables us to quickly identify current trends within the community/demographic and implement appropriate preventative measures'. Information sharing also supports proactive (rather than reactive) responses to escalating risk within learning environments. According to a school-based practitioner, by capturing and sharing information, professionals are more likely to take appropriate action at earlier stages, rather than reacting when incidents have already occurred.

A respondent to the Learning Project from a voluntary sector organisation that works with young people in schools explained that staff members within

educational settings are sometimes unaware of abuse or respond to abusive incidents in counterproductive ways. This practitioner reported that the language staff members use to describe those involved in incidents (e.g. 'she teases them,' she is a huge flirt,' comments about their appearance, etc.) can be particularly unhelpful and encourage victim-blaming cultures within school.

Information sharing across sectors may help school-based professionals better understand the nature and prevalence of peer-on-peer abuse occurring within educational settings. As one practitioner summarised, 'sharing collectively as a professional network, enables people to give [their] perspectives, specialist and [develop] a proportionate partnership response about how to tackle the problem/issue. Sharing also enables a better understanding of the presenting situation and how each agency can respond'.

4. Challenges and limitations of multi-agency information sharing

As one practitioner highlighted, information sharing for information sharing's sake is not effective. Having shared information about peer-on-peer abuse in schools, professionals need to identify collective responsibilities and actions associated with incidents (and the buildup to incidents). Respondents reported a number of challenges with taking action following information-sharing activity: Schools may fear that in sharing information with partners, young people may be labeled as posing risks to their peers. This may:

- Elicit panic from schools which feel ill-equipped to address the safeguarding concerns presented.
- Result in exclusions and managed moves of those involved in incidents (including those who have been abused), without recognising and addressing the wider social context in which the incident occurred.

Collective action, owned by a multi-agency partnership of which schools are a part, could create a space to recognise the wider contextual factors that have contributed to an incident within a school and provide a suite of contextual interventions to compliment any 1:1 support that is offered.

In addition to the challenges of taking action following information-sharing, practitioners identified the following barriers to information sharing:

- School cultures (amongst both staff and students) in which victim-blaming is normalized.
- Low reporting of incidents from young people; low willingness to write statements of incident.
- Incidents not being recognised by staff as peer-on-peer abuse, or staff members struggling to sufficiently assess the severity of an incident, both of which highlights the need for better staff training in many areas.
- Cases and interventions not progressing despite information sharing, due to the evidential thresholds not being reached. When action isn't taken as a result of initial attempts to share information it may reduce confidence in services and discourage future information sharing from staff and students.
- Confidentiality policies: Although a number of confidentiality policies would not necessarily prevent sharing information that relates to safeguarding young people, many professionals perceive confidentiality policies as barriers information sharing.

Concluding recommendations

Across submissions practitioners made recommendations in the following areas:

- Staff awareness Professionals in schools need more training and guidance on how to identify and respond to peer-on-peer abuse. One practitioner noted

that school professionals often feel pressure and are held accountable for responding, yet they lack the necessary guidance to do so. Another called specifically for training on how to identify harmful sexual behaviour.

- Robust recording and reporting systems. Robust recording and reporting systems need to be in place with the relevant designated professionals able to correlate and disseminate information confidentially to the appropriate agencies. Professionals within schools need more clarity on the remit and responsibilities of outside agencies and when it is appropriate to involve them in the response to peer-on-peer abuse incidents
- Trained counselors within schools. According to one practitioner, 'having trained counselors [for students] in the school environment [would be] a major plus point'.

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