Navigating Ethical Challenges in Safeguarding Practice within International Educational Settings

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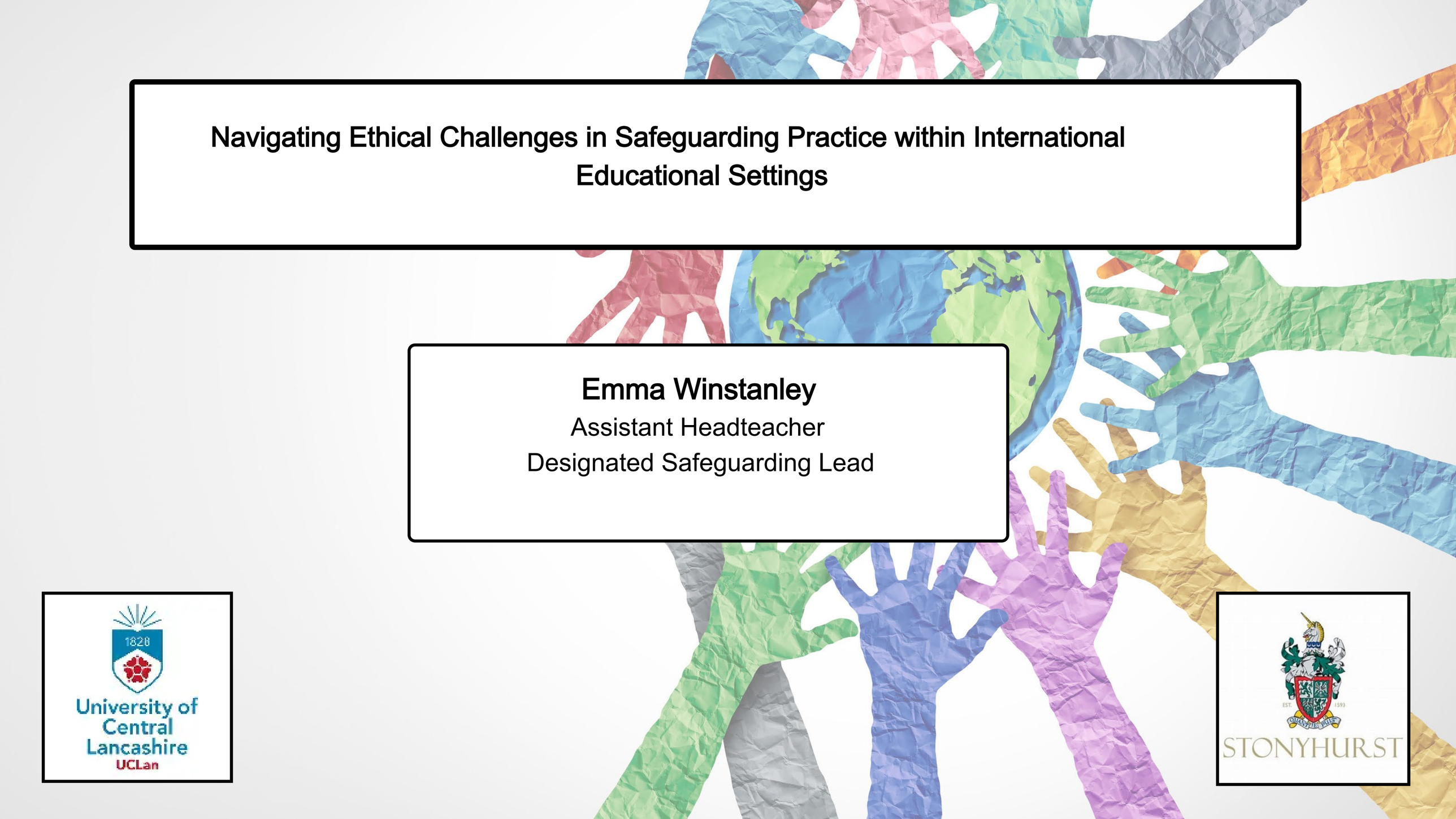


Introduction and Rationale for the Study

Safeguarding practice in international schools requires professionals to navigate the complex intersection of child protection responsibilities and culturally diverse contexts.

Educators and safeguarding leads frequently confront concerns about children's welfare that intersect with culturally rooted practices, beliefs, and family expectations, raising ethical questions about how harm is defined, whose values inform decision-making, and how duty of care is enacted within international education settings.

Core Principles of KCSIE (Keeping Children Safe in Education) (England)

- Everyone's responsibility: Every staff member, volunteer, and governor must play an active role in safeguarding.
- Child-centered approach: All decisions and actions must always prioritize the best interests of the child.
- "It could happen here": Staff must maintain an open, proactive mindset regarding potential risks.
- Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL): Every institution must appoint a trained DSL to oversee child protection and manage external agency referrals

Aims and Objectives

This qualitative study explores how safeguarding leads and senior staff in independent international schools make sense of these challenges in practice.

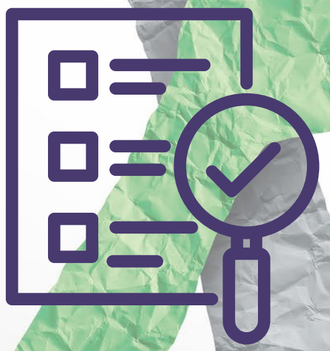
Drawing on interviews across multiple international school contexts, the research examines how professionals balance cultural sensitivity with child -centred safeguarding obligations, and how organisational policies, training, leadership, and personal assumptions shape decision -making.

- The "Gatekeeper" of Disclosures: They are the sole internal destination for staff to report a vulnerability or worry.
- Referral Authority: They hold the formal authority to escalate cases to external statutory bodies like the police, healthcare, or social services.
- Case Management: They maintain highly confidential, chronological records of student vulnerabilities.
- Staff Training: They ensure that all local staff understand how to recognize grooming, neglect, and modern online abuse.

Methodology

- The study used a purposive sample of safeguarding leads, pastoral staff, and senior leaders working in independent international schools.
- All participants were formally safeguarding -trained
- Participation was consent based.
- Data was collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews designed to explore participants' experiences, decision -making processes, and understandings of key concepts such as culture, risk, and child -centred practice.
- Participants were invited to take part in one -to-one interviews. Interviews were recorded with informed consent and included discussion of hypothetical safeguarding scenarios.
- Interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.
- An inductive approach was initially used to identify patterns across the data, followed by a more interpretive phase informed by safeguarding ethics and intercultural theory.
- Themes were refined to reflect how participants construct and justify safeguarding decisions within complex, culturally diverse contexts.

- Professional Challenge
- Retention and Recruitment
- Continuum of Need
- Child -Centred vs Hierachical -Centred
- Whistleblowing
- Pupil Voice
- Local Arrangements
- Statutory Reporting
- Defensive Decision Making



Findings and Results

Findings indicate that safeguarding decision -making in international schools is shaped by a complex interplay of policy, professional judgement, and contextual factors. Participants described navigating ongoing tensions between cultural sensitivity and their duty to protect children, often working within ambiguous thresholds of risk.

Decisions were influenced by individual confidence, prior experience, and school leadership, as well as differing assumptions about childhood and family life. While procedural approaches sometimes resulted in culturally insensitive practice, an over -reliance on cultural relativism could lead to hesitation or inaction.

Safeguarding was understood as a negotiated and context -dependent process, with practitioners balancing ethical uncertainty to prioritise a child -centred response. When professionals hesitate to challenge practices perceived as cultural, there is a risk of accepting abuse as legitimate posing the risk that children's rights become secondary to cultural sensitivity.

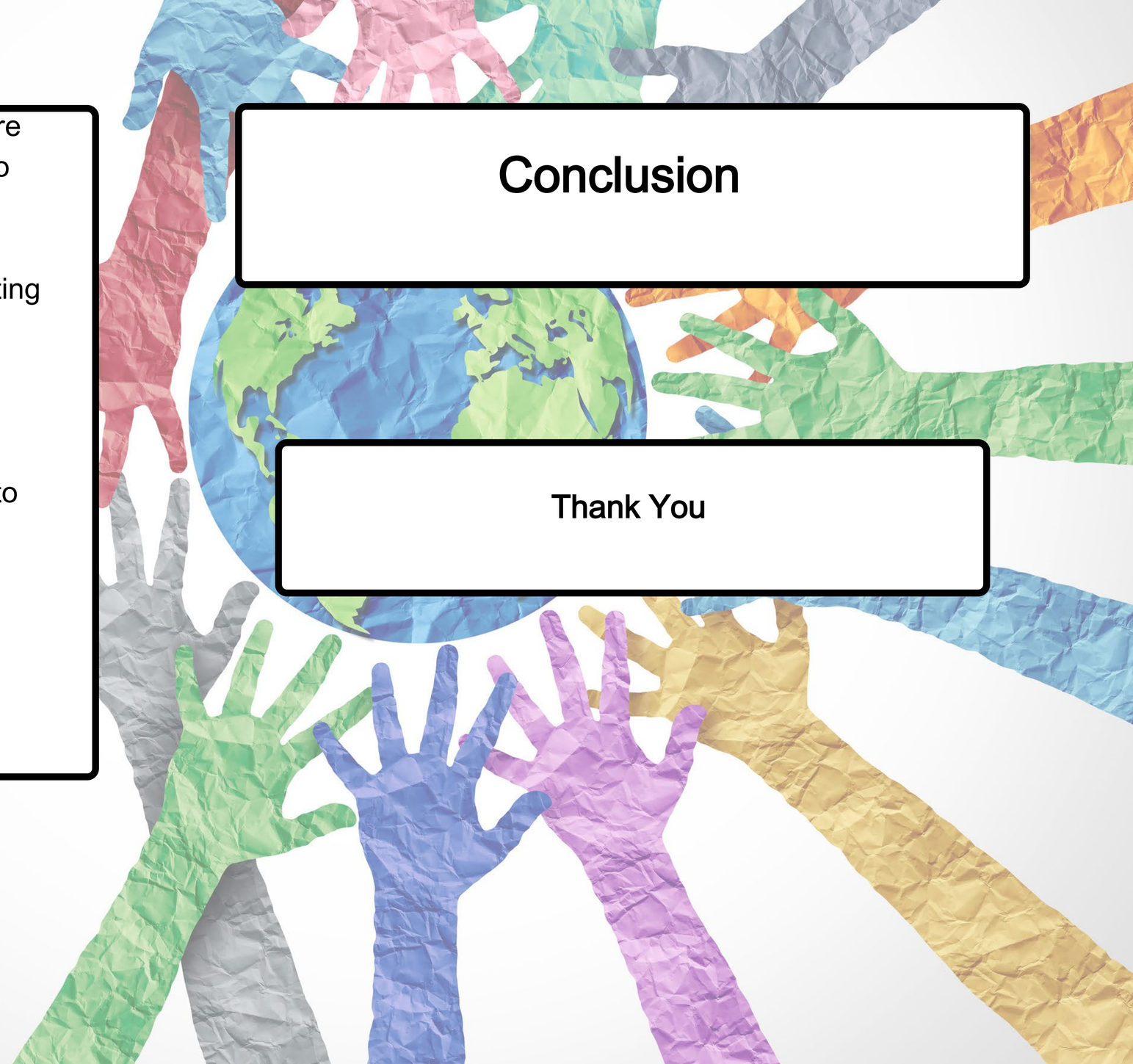
"Fee Paying Parents"
"We've always done it this way"
"You don't have children"
"When I was at school"

Conclusion

Findings suggest that safeguarding responses are influenced not only by formal procedures but also by relational dynamics, professional confidence, and underlying assumptions about childhood, family life and socio -economis status, highlighting the need for more reflective, ethically informed safeguarding practice.

There can be confusion between cultural understanding and cultural acceptance, leading to inconsistent safeguarding decisions and weaker professional curiosity.

Culture is never a defence for abuse or neglect.



Thank You