Youth victimisation, school and family support: schools’ strategies to handle abused children

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Abstract

This article explores and investigates school officials’ narratives about how schools involve and collaborate with families, social services, the police, and other agencies to support students who are suspected of being exposed to domestic violence. School officials’ describe their work as positioned within legal restrictions and official policies, and they express a strong wish to create good relationships with families and other authorities to support vulnerable students. The narratives also indicate that school officials construct different explanations for child abuse according to the family's background. Abuse and neglect of children by Swedish parents are understood and explained in terms of social, psychological, and psychiatric problems, whereas the same behavior in immigrant parent is framed and explained in terms of culture or ethnicity.

Keywords: youth victimization, child abuse, honor crimes, school, family, students

Victimisation often has negative effects on youth and children, increasing their risks of adverse outcomes such as school drop-out, drug use, and likelihood of criminality (Koo, Pegueron and Shekarkhar 2012). Since the 1990s, Sweden has witnessed a radical change in school approaches towards youth. Increasingly, schools tend to treat violence as criminal, to view more students as victims of crime, and to file more police reports (BRÅ 2009, 2013; Larsson Löfdahl and Pérez Prieto 2010). Schools in Sweden are not only instructed to report violence and crime within the school, but are also required by the Social Services Act (Socialtjänstlagen) to report any suspicion of students being exposed to domestic violence, maltreatment, or lack of parental care (Socialstyrelsen 2014). Furthermore, the national curriculum states that it is the principal's responsibility to ensure that students’ health develops in line with their needs and that they get all support they need (Skolverket 2011). Moreover, if a student has any problems or difficulties, it is the school’s responsibility to establish parental involvement.

Although Sweden was the first country in the world to ban child abuse in 1979 (Save the Children 2014), research shows that approximately one-fifth of Swedish children still experience child abuse (Annerbäck et al. 2010). Research literature on
child abuse and domestic violence against children is found mainly in the fields of psychiatry, psychology and law. These studies are often based on representative survey studies on parental alcoholism, dysfunctional families, and adult symptoms of distress (Harter Lewis and Taylor 2000; Ohannessian McCauley and Hesselbrock 2008; Scharff et al. 2004). In the field of law, the main focus has been on children’s reports of witnessing homicidal violence (Christianson et al. 2012; Leander, Granhag and Christianson 2009; Leander, Christianson and Granhag 2011). This research emphasises the richness and accuracy of children’s reports and the importance of police officers’ interviewing style (Leander et al. 2009).

Empirical research focusing on the school context within the wider institutional context of domestic violence and youth victimisation is lacking. As part of an ongoing research project into how Swedish schools strategise to support students who are victims of violence or abuse, the present study investigated how a number of Swedish schools define and classify students exposed to violence or abuse. The study extends the literature about youth victimisation by examining school officials’ narratives about how schools involve and collaborate with families, social services, or the police to support students who are suspected of having been exposed to domestic violence. In the study, we apply a discourse analytical perspective when analysing the officials’ narratives (Foucault 2000; Laclau and Mouffe 2001). The following research questions guided the investigation:

- On which grounds do key school professionals classify students as suffering domestic violence and in need of support?
- How do school officials describe their collaboration with other agents such as families, social services, or the police in support of the students?

**Student victimisation**

Research focusing on school violence and student victimisation has focused mainly on bullying, which tends to occur in peer groups (Nekvasil and Cornell 2012). Research also indicates that certain groups experience more bullying by their peers than other groups (Peguero and Williams 2011; Toomey and Russell 2013), and cyberbullying is emerging as a growing research field (Randa and Reyns 2014). Randa and Reyn show that students exposed to cyberbullying feel personally victimised and develop avoidance behaviour and a fear of school. Other research also shows that parents who report bullying often find that the only way to stop the bullying is to remove their child from the school (Brown, Aalsma and Ott 2013). Even when school officials take bullying seriously, most parents report that the bullying continues.

Maltreated children often have more academic and behavioural problems in school than other children (Jonson-Reid et al. 2007), and teachers have a unique opportunity
to identify problems in children’s lives. However, a Canadian study indicated that cases of abuse reported by teachers were considerably less likely to be substantiated than reports from other professionals (King and Scott 2013). Cases reported by teachers also differed in focus from those reported by other professionals. Teachers tended to report the physical, emotional and behavioural problems of the child, while other professionals reported risk factors associated with the performance of the family and the primary caregiver. However, in serious cases concerning child abuse in families with documented problemsteachers were as likely as other professionals to report risk factors associated with the family.

Research on parental involvement in schools suggests that trust is the key to engaging parents and building good relationships among students, parents, teachers and other school authorities (Halgunseth 2009; Jeynes 2012). Frequent opportunities to interact and meet are necessary to build this trust and to provide parents with some influence in the school (Adams, Forsyth and Mitchell 2009). Research also indicates that parental involvement is essential for children’s learning and familial well-being (Halgunseth 2009), and schools’ support of and positive relations with parents have positive outcomes for the future and well-being of vulnerable student (Weitz Spånberger 2011).

These results can be contrasted with those from a Swedish study of abused children in preschool that found children living in a single-parent families and multilingual children to be overrepresented (Svensson 2013). In this study, the teachers felt concerned about the children’s home situation in relation to several aspects of the children’s development and health, problematic relations with parents, and lower parental socioeconomic status. However, the parents were informed about the teacher’s worries of maltreatment in less than half of the situations and reports to social services were made in approximately one-third of these cases. Reports were more likely to be made when there had been a concern for the children’s situation at home for a longer period of time. The reason for not reporting was that teachers felt they had sufficient resources to help the child in the preschool (Svensson 2013).

Research also shows a lower level of tolerance in schools of crime committed by foreign-born people. Parents born outside of Sweden were reported with less visible evidence, such as skin wounds or other physical damage to the child, than parents born in Sweden (BRÅ 2011). Several factors can intervene in the collaboration between schools and parents and there are different mechanisms that can disturb and threaten the trust relationship between parents and the school. The relationship between ethnic minority parents and schools reveals a complex and ambivalent picture. Studies show how minority parents are marginalised and ignored when trying to discuss their children’s situation in school. For example, it is common that parents with immigrant backgrounds and their family problems are framed in relation to culture and ethnicity, whereas the Swedish parents are discussed in terms of social problems (Lunneblad and Johansson 2012; Mattsson 2010).
More research is needed into how school officials categorise and label situations in which students have experienced child abuse in their home environment. There is also a need for more research into how children at risk of suffering in their home environment are identified and supported in schools and how school officials involve and collaborate with parents and other professionals to support these students.

**Data and methodology**

This study was designed and constructed as a case study of three Swedish secondary schools. Data were drawn from official documents, such as equality and other types of action plans; interviews with principals, school nurses, counsellors, and other key school officials; and observations of student health team meetings. The interview questions are based on an interview guide including four main sections: 1) questions focused on the schools’ historical background and present situation; 2) questions on the schools’ work to support victimised students; 3) questions on the schools’ collaboration with other officials and families; and 4) questions on equality plans and other types of action plans. All interviews were carried out at the schools and lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour and were audio-recorded and transcribed. The student welfare meetings lasted for approximately 2 hours. During these meetings, the key officials discuss students’ well-being and try to find solutions for students who need some kind of extra support. The observations of these meetings were recorded in hand-written field notes that later were transcribed into a computer. The data presented in the present article are drawn from the interviews with the school officials.

**Ethical considerations.** All participants in the study were informed about the purpose of the study and gave their written consent to participate (Vetenskapsrådet 2011). To protect confidentiality, all names of respondents and schools in the study are pseudonyms. The schools are labelled School A, School B and School C. The three schools selected for the study are located in different geographical and socio-economic areas. These schools were selected to allow us to examine how narratives emerge in different urban contexts of social, ethnic and economic inequalities, as well to achieve variation in the school officials’ responses and strategies (cf. Bunar 2011). In the present article, however, we will not elaborate and draw on the comparative perspective of the research project. The differences found between the schools will only be highlighted when they help us further develop our analysis of the empirical material.

School A is located in a smaller town with a population of 20,000. Nearly 250 students attend School A, which is located in a relatively mixed neighbourhood of families with different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Schools B and C are both located in a metropolitan area of 550,000 inhabitants. About 600 students attend School B, which is an inner-city school located in a white middle-class area. This population has the highest educational level in the city and the average income
is higher than the average income in the municipality. School C is located in a suburb 15 minutes from the city centre and around 500 pupils attend this school. The majority of the people in this neighbourhood were born in the Middle East (Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria), Far East (Afghanistan and Pakistan), East Africa (Ethiopia and Somalia) and the Balkan states. The unemployment rate is higher than in other parts of the city, and the average income is among the lowest in the municipality.

Methodologically, we start by taking a discourse analytical perspective on the different stories and narratives (Foucault 2000; Laclau and Mouffe 2001). The study is influenced by discourse theory in a broader sense, but we are also seek to place the different narratives and discourses within a sociological framework (Wodak and Krzyzanowski 2008). We are interested in theoretically exploring how the professionals’ narratives connect to general societal and cultural discourses on violence, victimisation and social welfare, and how the key professionals categorise situations related to domestic violence. We also want to explore how the key professionals describe their collaboration with families, social services, or the police.

In order to contextualise and place the narratives into an institutional framework, and to analyse and explain policy enactment in the investigated schools, we use the contextual dimensions proposed by Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012): situated context, professional culture, material context and external context. Situated context refers to contextual aspects such as school setting and intake. Professional culture refers to teachers’ shared values and commitments within the school and how they shape policy enactments. The professional culture also refers to norms, values and school climate, and to what kind of ‘problems’ the school has to face. Material context refers to place, space and segregation, and it also relates to aspects such as school buildings, budgets, levels of staffing, and infrastructure. The external context includes aspects such as legal requirements and responsibilities, and the degree and quality of support from local authorities. These four dimensions sometimes overlap and interconnect. In this article, we focus on three of the contextual dimensions: professional culture, external context and material context.

Dealing with violence entails involving other professionals from different agencies. We are especially interested in how these different systems collide and form the ground for how school officials talk about child abuse. We also want to explore how key professionals describe their collaboration with families, social services or the police. We are also interested in which kinds of explanations are given for parents’ neglect or violent behaviour. Our analysis of the professionals’ narratives showed that two themes related to domestic violence emerged: the abused and neglected child and the controlled child. In our analysis, we discuss how these discourses appear in the key officials’ narratives, and how different categories are related to more general societal discourses.
The abused and neglected child

School officials’ narratives of children beaten by their parents were often related to an external context and a more general societal discourse about child abuse, which includes both physical and psychological abuse (Harter Lewis and Taylor 2000). The participants talked about the different forms of child abuse that students were exposed to and the various ways child abuse came to the schools’ attention. Sometimes, the pupils told the school counsellor or a teacher what had happened to them and asked for help; in other cases, an adult (whether at the school or not) reported that a child had been abused. The counsellor at School B told about an incident when a girl had asked him for help after she had been beaten by her mother with a broomstick and had bruises on her legs and the soles of her feet. The school immediately contacted social services, who contacted the parent:

They [social services] talked to the mum and they agreed that she was going to get in touch with the social services and get family support (Counsellor, School B).

The nurse at the same school said that another girl had been hit by her father, and again the school had decided to contact social services and file a report:

There was another child who told us and she was removed from her family. Her teacher or some assistant took care of her during the weekend. And after that she was removed to her grandparents in another town. ... The dad had beaten her and she had to clean the house, she was more or less a maid. But, it was mainly because of the child abuse that we filed a report. The girl lives at home today, but we have this family ‘under the microscope’, so to speak (School nurse, School B).

In these cases, the children told someone at school about their home situation, but the school officials said social services also sometimes make home visits to families such as single parents, lonely parents, families in financial difficulties, or newly arrived refugees to check on how they are doing and offer them support. At School B, families can also get extra support through a family worker, who also does home visits and works with a special programme called Family Check-up. Based on research from the USA, this programme offers families the opportunity to be video-recorded in their homes, and then watch the video recordings together with the family worker and discuss how they can solve any problems in the family. Consequently, the external context, i.e. local authorities such as social services, are related to and interconnect with the professional culture in school, offering support to certain families in order to prevent domestic maltreatment (Ball et al. 2012).

The narratives about children who were physically hurt often overlapped with those about parental neglect. Some schools in Sweden have a school host who meets and socialises informally with the students in the school cafeteria, in the corridors, and in the canteen. At School A, the school host and school nurse both mentioned
one boy who had been beaten, and though social services had been involved in the case several times nothing happened. Both participants expressed general resignation with social services and the lack of support for abused children.

He was beaten with wooden handles at home. This was what happened. Sometimes it feels hopeless. /.../. Then we had a boy who slept in a cellar /.../ and in staircases and on park benches (School host, School A).

He was living with his foster dad who had thrown him out. /.../. And then we drove to the social services office and brought this boy there, but nothing really happened. /.../ (School nurse, School A).

We filed a big new report because I had been in touch with him during the weekend, and he had said that he was going to throw himself in front of a truck on the expressway. This really set things going (School host, School A).

He was removed from the foster home and stayed somewhere else for a short period of time (School nurse, School A).

The narratives also contain situations where the school discovers alcoholism or drug problems in the children’s home. In most cases, the teachers discover that something is wrong, for instance, when a parent arrives at the school smelling of alcohol, but in some cases the children tell the teacher themselves. Sometimes, parents of other children discover that something is wrong in the children’s home environment:

There was actually a mother who went to social services and filed a report on another family. Her child was at this family’s house and when she went there to pick up her child there was a fight...yes it was noisy, there was almost fighting, and there was a lot of alcohol on the tables and the mother and father were pretty wasted, so she filed a report, no, she phoned the head teacher there, who filed a report. They brought this friend to their home. /.../ She couldn’t stay there [with the parents], so this mother took the responsibility. /.../. After that they filed a report with social services and after that they made an investigation. I don’t know what happened after that, but the mother who filed the report is not very popular with the other family, although it was the school that made the official report (Counsellor, School B).

In the example above the parents noticed that something was wrong in another family, which induced the school to make a report. This resulted in an investigation by social services. The girl stayed at home and was not removed from her home, but the family is now monitored by social services. These results correspond with those of Weitz Spånberger (2011). According to Weitz Spånberger’s study, only a few children are removed from their homes because of a lack of adequate parental care or domestic violence. The majority of children who are placed in foster homes are removed for their own psychosocial health or due to conflicts with the parents.

In line with the law and the Social Services Act, schools must contact social services as soon as they suspect that something is wrong in the home. Respondents
at School A say they always contact social services before they contact the police in these cases. However, the kind of support individual students and families receive varied. At School B, the families were given family support or were introduced to the Family Check-up programme, but at School A cooperation with social services does not work very well, and the individual child’s right to support from social services seemed more or less absent.

In our material, hardly any of the professionals expresses uncertainty about whether they should file a report with social services. Nor do the professionals talk explicitly about what they have done to help children exposed to maltreatment, besides trying to develop good relations with the parents. One possible explanation is that school professionals conceptualise domestic child maltreatment as an issue for social services and consider that the school’s responsibility is fulfilled when a report is made. This is interesting in the light of research into preschool settings. Professionals working in Swedish preschool seem to take action on their own before reporting to social services. One explanation for this may be that they have closer and daily contact with parents. Their close relationship with the parents may explain why the preschool professional might hesitate before reporting, but also feel a greater responsibility to the families (Svensson 2013). Our results suggest that there is a clearer boundary in secondary school between the school’s responsibility and the social service’s responsibility. However, the secondary school professionals also wanted more information about what had happened with the report they made.

Swedish researcher Blomqvist (2012), who investigated the collaboration processes between school, family, social services, and child and youth psychiatric care (BUP), showed similar findings. Both school and social services professionals report that BUP seems to engage in endless investigations and mappings of problems and planned action plans. They feel that everyone is constantly waiting for something to happen. Professionals at BUP, on the other hand, are satisfied with their collaboration with the school and social services. According to Blomqvist (2012), these results must be understood in the light of schools’ and social services’ limited opportunities to influence BUP. Moreover, BUP has a form of veto over whether or not to offer psychiatric care to a particular child. This means that children are sometimes on a waiting list to get medical help.

The collaboration between the school and social services in the present study should also be understood in the light of the social service’s requirement to protect confidentiality. When social services take over a case, the school has no access to information about the progress of the case. Several respondents in the study expressed frustration with this lack of information and said they sometimes file another report in an effort to ensure that something would actually happen, even when social services were still working on the case. Hence, the narratives indicate that the external context sometimes obstructs and counteracts an effective professional culture in school (Ball et al. 2012).
Thus, domestic abuse and child neglect are seen to be framed within a discourse on school control and/or support of the family. Focus is mostly directed towards the parents and their ‘problematic’ behaviour. In one way, this contributes to an externalisation of the ‘problem’. Consequently, the problem has to be solved in collaboration with the social services, and sometimes also with the police. The next section focuses on how one particular category of violence, honour violence, is framed and dealt with.

**The controlled child**

At School C and School A the informants talked about pupils with parents who have origins in the Middle East, the Far East, and Eastern Africa being exposed to honour violence. Common to these narratives of honour violence was the impression that these students were more controlled by their families than their peers. These narratives were often related to a common discourse on violence and crimes committed to protect or re-establish so-called honour of a family and/or a community (Elakkary et al. 2014). These narratives were also connected to the professional culture and the material context as they refer to problems the schools have to face: pupils positioned within discourses on honour crime cultures and general urban segregation (Ball et al. 2012).

In 2011 the Swedish government assigned the county administration in Östergötland to contribute with information and education about honour violence among young people. This assignment extended over 2 years. The aim was to inform and educate youth as well as school teachers about these issues (Länsstyrelsen Östergötland 2012, 2013). Today, several schools in Sweden send their professionals to attend courses and programmes that focus on honour-related violence. At Schools A and C staff members have participated in similar courses and programmes, putting the issue of honour violence on the agenda, framing certain types of violence as a specific social problem important to counteract and influencing the professional culture at school (Ball et al. 2012).

School C has been part of a similar programme. One part of this programme aims to engage immigrant parents through the use pictures of families. Intended to be quite neutral, the pictures illustrate aspects of family such as the family tree, the three-generation perspective, and the nuclear family versus a larger or extended family and are meant to symbolise the norms, beliefs and expectations of the family in the new society. This method generates different discussions on families, norms and values, often leading to questions around the control of girls and how to maintain family honour in the new country.

Quite a few are controlled in their life, the girls. It’s considered to be so normal that there is a certain openness about it. Even I, as staff, get questions like, ‘but what kind of parents wouldn’t arrange a marriage, what parents let their daughter go out with anyone and someone you don’t know, what kind of parents would accept their children to live...
in a homosexual relationship and what kind of parents would let their daughters to be out after school without keeping track of where she is?" (Counsellor, School C).

Respondents said that younger siblings expressed concern when their older siblings were dating and had secret boyfriends and girlfriends. The siblings gained considerable insights about their older sibling’s secrets lives through Facebook and Instagram, which created an ethical dilemma for them: “Am I going to keep it a secret, or do I have to tell Mom and Dad?”.

When pupils have contacted the teacher or me and tell me about it, it is often at a stage when they can’t keep it to themselves anymore. There have been occasions when pupils have come here with a packed suitcase, because they can’t go home. Quite often there has been a secret boyfriend involved, and they have been living a double life /.../. Then you end up in a situation where the relationship is shaky or there is jealousy or there has been a break up, where you end up in a double bind. That is, the family requires that you shouldn’t have any relationship, but the angry and jealous boyfriend threatens to expose this to an uncle or the father and you end up in a situation that you can’t solve by yourself because it’s controlled from two sides (Counsellor, School C).

According to the respondents, in situations such as this the school immediately contacts social services. When a girl is considered to be in danger, social services sometimes remove her from her home. Often this is very unexpected for the classmates and the teachers, and no one knows where the girl is located after that, which makes it difficult to talk about what actually happened. There is a silence about these girls. However, the counsellor told us that social pressure often leads these girls to return home and to deny what they had earlier told the school and social services.

Although young people can be very spontaneous and impulsive, I’ve never experienced that a girl has taken this step impulsively. When we’ve seen it coming it is well thought out. Then, it is quite common that the girls take everything back shortly afterwards, that you become very ashamed and feel guilty that you have broken the loyalty to the family. So, when you are sitting there with the social workers they just say ‘no, no, no, I don’t know where you got this from’ (Counsellor, School C).

At School A the narratives of honour crimes were not as frequent, but the school host described a similar incident when the school had to call the police.

We had a father who stepped in here and beat his daughter. /.../. This is the only time we have had this kind of crime, honour crime, that we know of. /.../. She was taken into custody and lived in a protected accommodation somewhere, but then she decided to move back home. She was most certainly attracted to both the one and the other. She was allowed to go to the prom and graduation together with her Swedish boyfriend. After that the Swedish boyfriend was threatened and she was sent to her home country and got a boyfriend from that country. /.../. It was really important that she had this, a boyfriend from Lebanon, it was put on Facebook and everything, and it was declared to everyone that she had a boyfriend from there (School host, School A).
The school host described how this girl went to Lebanon with her mother during the summer break and returned to Sweden after that. She continued her studies in upper secondary school, but had to break up with the Swedish boyfriend. Moreover, the Swedish boyfriend was threatened several times by her brothers and had to cut off all contact with his ex-girlfriend. The school host was also threatened, but she never made a police report. Despite several witnesses stating that this girl had been beaten by her father at the school cafeteria, on the stairs at the school’s main entrance, and in their car, both the father and the girl denied everything when the case went to court.

According to some researchers, families from honour-based social networks – afraid of jeopardising their membership in a specific group and in relation to the material context that is marginalised in the new country – sometimes feel that they have to continue with or even strengthen the cultural practices situated in their former homeland (Meetoo and Mirza 2007). In honour-based social networks, women are considered to be a man’s property and are therefore the symbol of the family’s honour. In most cases, honour-based violence is committed against a female by her male relatives (Elakkary et al. 2014). Contemporary research, however, is critical of the one-sided assumptions that honour violence is based on Islamic values and/or is distinguishable from other forms of domestic violence against women (de los Reyes, Eduards and Sundevall 2013). Honour crimes and killings have no religious basis and have been condemned by several Islamic leaders. This kind of violence has been committed in Druze, Christian and Muslim communities, and sometimes also in Jewish communities (Elakkary et al. 2014). Honour crimes have been documented in several countries around the world: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brazil, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Norway, Pakistan, Peru, Sweden, Turkey, Uganda, the UK and the USA (Elakkary et al. 2014; Meetoo and Mirza 2007).

As Meetoo and Mirza argue, domestic violence cuts across ethnicity, class, religion and age, and violence against women expresses a system of power. Psychological dimensions also have to been taken into consideration to understand the relationship between values, family, masculinity and violence. Of course, not all fathers and families within a specific cultural environment support and defend these kinds of criminal acts (Johansson 2009). In our data, there are also examples of what the respondents frame as issues around honour that also can be understood as parents simply asking for advice.

Sometimes families make a compromise [about the secret relationship] /⋯/. I thought it was pretty good, but long after the girl had finished primary school, there was trouble again about how they should solve this. It came to my attention, because the girl’s father came to the school and said ‘I know that my daughter is no longer a student here, but now I do not know how to handle this, can you advise me? After all you know my daughters.’ This shows, in a way, that you somehow want to make a change (Counsellor, School C).
This parent’s wish to receive advice and support his daughter can be understood in the light of institutional parental involvement in which the relationship between the parent and school is formalised. This marks new modes of governing the child, the family and education.

In this section, we have looked more closely at cases understood in terms of the category of honour violence. Although this category also includes different forms of violence against children, such as abuse and severe neglect, it clearly stands out as a distinct explanation for some parents’ violent behaviour. This violence, however, is understood and framed in terms of cultural explanations developed outside of Sweden. When Swedish parents abuse and neglect their children it is understood and explained in terms of social problems, or psychological and psychiatric problems, whereas immigrant parents’ behaviours are framed and explained in terms of culture or ethnicity. This is thus constructed into a specific category of honour violence.

**Conclusion and discussion**

This article examined school officials’ narratives about how they involve and collaborate with families, social services, or the police to support students who are suspected of having been exposed to domestic violence. How key school professionals classify students as suffering from domestic violence and being in need of support and how they describe their collaboration with other officials guided the investigation and our analysis of the empirical data. In our analysis of the narratives, two dominating themes emerged: the abused and neglected child and the controlled child. What also emerged from the analysis is that the school officials talked about child abuse on two different levels: a more general level, which included lack of adequate parental care, physical violence, child labour, or expulsion from the home, and a more specific level centred on honour violence.

In order to contextualise and place the narratives into an institutional framework, three of the proposed contextual dimensions explored by Ball et al. (2012) framed the analysis. The present article focused on the professional culture, external context and material context because these dimensions are the most applicable to the present study. Yet these dimensions are not completely separate. Our analysis shows that they quite often overlap and interconnect.

Regardless of the form of child abuse, the professional culture and the external context dominated the informants’ narratives. The schools’ professional culture, i.e. the school official’s values and commitments to the students’ well-being, shape and frame their policy enactments. The results reveal how schools work with various authorities to support pupils who are victims. But the collaboration with other authorities, such as social services, also meant that officials at school lost insight into the situation and they lost the initiative to act. This was something that
was perceived as a disadvantage by the officials at school and that made collaboration with other authorities difficult.

The professional culture overlaps with the dimension of the *external context* by including parents, social services, the police, and the justice system. Laws and policy constitute the documents of the professional culture. The Social Service Act, the national curriculum, and the *Convention of the Rights of the Child* (United Nations 1990) clearly influence the content of the narratives.

The key officials’ talk about controlled children had a clearly gendered focus. Only girls were mentioned as being at risk of honour violence, although boys are also sometimes subject to this kind of violence. In line with Laclau’s and Mouffe’s (2001) understanding of discourses in society, our results indicate that general societal understandings of violence against women and women’s vulnerability are strengthened in the narratives about honour violence. This discourse connects to the *material context* and relates to aspects such as place, space and segregation. Moreover, this discourse also connects to the *professional culture*, as it refers to problems the schools have to face. Both Schools A and C have students who are positioned within discourses on honour crime cultures, which might explain why the participants in those schools stress this form of child abuse.

This also shows the importance of considering how the material context influences the relation between parents and school. Previous research has revealed that the relationship between ethnic minority parents and schools in Sweden is complex. There are indications that minority parents have specific difficulties in relation to their children’s schooling. The situation these parents face is, however, better understood in light of their socio-economic position, their social status and limited knowledge and use of the majority language than in relation to ethnicity as a single factor. Research also shows that minority parents feel marginalised and ignored in their communication with school (Lunneblad and Johansson 2012).

Without wishing to diminish the seriousness of the oppression of the individual in the name of honour, we would, however, point out that the discourse in Sweden on honour-related violence, which school officials add fuel to through their professional culture, might risk situating patriarchy outside Sweden and make violence between Swedes invisible. Violence and control in a Swedish context among people identified as Swedes could therefore be normalised as an exception to a general rule, while violence among immigrants is connected to and constructed as an aspect of their culture. There is a risk that the discourse on honour-related violence “puts the gaze on ‘the Other’” (Meetoo and Mirza 2007, 194) and thus locates gender oppression in specific cultural places, where it is said to constitute a legitimate practice (de los Reyes, Molina and Mulinari 2002). Employing discourse analysis we understood this as a contradictory discourse (cf. Laclau and Mouffe 2001) in regard to schools’ obligation to prevent ethinical and cultural stereotypes.
All three schools related to the external culture, involving for example families in one way or another when children had been exposed to child abuse. School B and School C worked with family support or family involvement programmes to collaborate with and to involve the families. At School B, narratives about families were articulated through discourses about the vulnerable family. What we can see here is how the discourse of the vulnerable family is articulated through concepts such as the single parent, the lonely parent and the refugee family (cf. Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Surprisingly, the picture material that is used in School C’s family involvement programme portrays the nuclear family as the only family form, presenting what could be understood as normative aspects of how a family should be constructed and understood. Family researchers are critical of this one-sided picture of family since many children grow up in different family constellations (Johansson 2009).

To conclude, the present article provides an important contribution to the research on victimisation in schools. It shows how school officials label and categorise students in need of support and protection. It also provides important knowledge on the processes and problems involved in the collaborative work accomplished between school officials and other professionals, such as the police and social workers. There is obviously a need for more research on how school officials collaborate with parents and other professionals in order to support victimised students. Further research is also necessary on how schools prevent and support youth who have been exposed to domestic violence, not least to gain a broader view of how schools can handle these kinds of situation. Well-developed collaboration between schools, families, social services and other social organisations has a positive outcome not only for the individual youth, but also for society as a whole. We argue that this is something that school professionals need to develop further.

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