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Child Sexual Exploitation – Changing the Narrative: A Critical Review of Practice in Aotearoa New Zealand

Reflective Narrative

Charlotte Chisnell, Sarah Elliott

Affiliation: Eastern Institute of Technology, Te Aho a Māui
290 Palmerston Road, Gisborne 4010

Corresponding author: Sarah Elliott

selliott@eit.ac.nz

Abstract

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a hidden form of abuse, which is often misunderstood by professionals and responses often fail to protect children and young people. The authors will argue that practice and policy guidelines in Aotearoa need to recognise and protect children and young people who are victims of CSE and acknowledge that CSE is a specific form of child abuse. We recommend that clear, multi-agency protocols are developed: to recognise and respond to CSE; to provide education to raise awareness of the issue; to change the narrative and move away from assigning blame to victims; and to acknowledge that CSE is a form of child sexual abuse (CSA).

Keywords: *Child sexual exploitation; Vulnerability; Victims and needs*

Background

We are both social work lecturers in Aotearoa who share similar experiences of children and young people facing child sexual exploitation (CSE) in two different countries (Aotearoa and the UK) and over two different time periods. We have both seen victims of CSE who have been failed by the system.

The common themes we have seen in practice were the lack of awareness of agencies to recognise CSE, inconsistencies in responses to CSE, victim blaming and minimising risk – both authors were present in meetings where victims were effectively blamed for their situation and seen as themselves responsible for their exploitation and abuse: "I don't see what the problem is, she was happy to prostitute herself." These kinds of response seemed to exacerbate the victim's feeling of shame and powerlessness.

This reflective narrative aims to provide an overview of CSE, and social work practice within Aotearoa. Putting a spotlight on this hidden and complex type of abuse will ensure that victims become more visible.

What is child sexual exploitation (CSE) and how does it differ from child sexual abuse (CSA)?

There is no universally agreed upon definition of CSE; however, Melrose and Pearce (2013) define it as the abuse of a child or young person which often involves a grooming process – this leads to emotional and sexual abuse. This grooming process involves the development of inappropriate relationships, which place the perpetrator in a position of power and control (Shephard & Lewis, 2017). CSE is typified by the use of coercion, fear and control from the perpetrator, and a transactional exchange with the victim (Beckett & Walker, 2017).

Palmer and Foley (2017) suggested that many young people who have experienced CSE have experienced trauma and childhood adversity. Thorburn (2019) also discussed the cognitive-emotional processes which are impacted by trauma for victims of CSE, and further intensified by a lack of freedom, autonomy and/or basic safety.

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is recognised as acts or behaviours where an adult or more powerful person uses a child/young person for a sexual purpose. While it may involve a stranger, most sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone the child knows and trusts (Child Matters, n.d.).

The main difference between CSA and CSE is that the relationship in CSE is perceived to be a transaction in which the young person agrees to the abuse for 'something' in return for sexual activity as a form of exchange (Beckett & Walker, 2017). Beckett and Walker (2017) suggested that tangible gains, which might include money or goods, and intangible gains, which may be protection, affection or status, might be reasons why the young person agrees to the abuse.

This exchange creates the sense of what is described as the 'willing victim', whereby the young person appears to be making a choice and consenting to the sexual activity. Unfortunately, this perception fails to recognise manipulation, or the imbalance of power between the young person and the adult.

Risk factors and barriers to disclosure

Any child can be at risk of CSE; however, most victims are targeted from the age of 12 (Jay, 2014). Research has highlighted a number of risk factors which exacerbate the vulnerability of a young person; these factors include low self-esteem, a lack of a stable home environment, homelessness and being in state care (Shephard & Lewis, 2017).

There are many reasons why young people who experience CSE are reluctant to report the abuse and access the support they need. Perpetrators of CSE are often boyfriends, family friends or family members (Reed et al., 2019), therefore seeking help can be complicated and they may have developed emotional ties to the perpetrator. A young person may feel guilt and shame, often believing that they were complicit in the exploitative relationship. Other young people may feel trapped and/or threatened, which can lead to social and emotional isolation (Parents Against Child Exploitation [PACE], 2020).

CSE in Aotearoa

There is no national data-collection system for CSE in Aotearoa and therefore no formal statistics regarding the prevalence of it. Aotearoa has very low conviction rates for CSE, and cases rarely meet the threshold for prosecution. However, there have been many instances of informal, largely disorganised trafficking situations that were perpetrated by friends, relatives, and men posing as 'boyfriends' (Thorburn, 2019).

In Aotearoa, government agencies have expressed commitment to inter-agency working in the area of CSE; however, there has been little action and slow responses to a range of initiatives to tackle CSE at a political level (Tan, 2018). There is a lack of specific legislation and policies created to specifically address CSE and, what does exist, is under-utilised and not focussed on prevention. Although child prostitution is prohibited by the Prostitution Reform Act (2003), exploitation of young people continues to exist without recognition of the social and emotional impact on young people. There is a clear gap in legislation which we feel perpetuates the vulnerability of victims. On this basis, we believe that CSE should be firmly situated within the child care legislation to enable CSE to be recognised as a specific form of child abuse. Our views are consistent with Mooney (2021), who suggested that, to help protect victims, CSE should be recognised as a specific type of child abuse.

We recognise that there has been some progress, for example, in 2021, Oranga Tamariki produced practice guidelines around CSE which highlighted the issue of adults who may access, exchange, or produce recordings of the sexual abuse of tamariki/rangatahi (children and young people). This guidance is a start, but needs to be further embedded and developed within existing child protection policies and practices.

Lack of professional responses to the victims of CSE

In the UK government inquiries into Rochdale and Rotherham (Jay, 2014), it was highlighted that a number of different professionals made value judgments about the young people who sought support in relation to the CSE. The Report by the Office of the Child Commissioner

also highlighted examples where the children and young people who were being sexually exploited were frequently described by professionals as being "promiscuous", putting themselves at risk and "asking for it". Victims were being effectively blamed for their exploitation (Berelowitz et al., 2013).

Research in Aotearoa also identified that victims found services were overwhelmingly negative and emotionally harmful. Shame and stigma were regular themes that emerged, and the young people felt there was a lack of empathy – as if they were a nuisance. Victims felt professionals were unwilling to hear disclosures about sensitive topics, normalised the experiences of victims of CSE or do not see it as their work (Thorburn, 2015).

There appears to be a lack of awareness of what constitutes power or bargaining in a sexual relationship. It is not free and equal consent if the transactional sex is the young person's means to secure a survival need. For the young person, their *seemingly* consensual exchange is often a reflection of what they deem to be their "least worst option" (Lefevre et al., 2019).

Melrose and Pearce (2013) advised that negative professional attitudes can develop if professionals view victims as consenting agents. As such, they were seen to carry responsibility for what happened to them, and consequently felt blamed for the abuse that they suffered. Victims may feel further blame when preventative initiatives focus on educating young people about 'keeping safe', rather than on the people who perpetrated the exploitation, or on the adults whose role it was to keep children safe (Eaton & Holmes, 2017).

Laird et al. (2022) found most existing CSE definitions explicitly incorporate 'children' and 'young people' (anyone under 18); however, it is noted that this language can cause ambiguity for practitioners (Hallett et al., 2019). While most practitioners are clear about the danger and harm for child victims of CSE, young people (aged 15 years and older) are often not viewed as vulnerable children but as autonomous individuals making considered decisions and choices. Therefore, there is often less urgency for professionals to respond to CSE of young people in their mid/late teens. Despite this, research shows us that teenagers are some of the most vulnerable people in society, particularly those living independently with minimal support (Radcliffe et al., 2020).

CSE and effective social work practice

Social workers have special obligations to protect vulnerable young people; where the risk increases, so do these obligations.

Despite the aforementioned negative professional attitudes which exist, Jay (2014) explained that professionals (including social workers) often have a lack of training and knowledge about CSE, which can result in a failure to recognise the abuse and respond to victims. This confirms our view that professionals need appropriate training and education to conduct more thorough analysis to distinguish risky and dangerous situations (exploitation), from normative adolescent sexual and relational experimentation. Beckett and Walker (2017) talk of the benefit of "detached

youth workers" in CSE; people who can work in young people's spaces, can observe, have flexibility, and the ability to build authentic, trusting relationships. This view is consistent with Williams (2019) who suggested that developing a "safe and nurturing" relationship with an adult helps to protect victims of CSE.

Frost (2019) agreed that professionals need this flexibility and that they need to understand the therapeutic and support needs of victims. He noted early intervention can help minimise the longer-term challenges that young people can face. However, he sees that one of the main challenges is the shortfall in ongoing mental health provision for victims of CSE, and a lack of coherence between child and adult services.

Conclusions

CSE is a serious and persistent form of abuse and is a global issue affecting up to 5% of the population of young people worldwide; yet despite this, in 2022, there is still no universally accepted definition (Laird et al., 2022) and this can lead to a dangerous inconsistency in language, values and understanding of this complex type of abuse. We need to gain a shared understanding of the concept of CSE across the sectors of research, policy, law, prevention, health and to advance social norms (Laird et al., 2022).

The lack of awareness about CSE is a prominent theme throughout literature and something we have experienced in practice. Deeper research and exploration is required to review social workers' experiences and understandings about CSE in Aotearoa, so we can ultimately address any barriers to effective practice and move towards greater professional understanding and accountability. This awareness should lead to the development of policies which recognise CSE and respond more effectively to victims; better data-collection systems, more coordination and information sharing between different agencies.

Organisations must develop and implement clear, multi-agency protocols. Specifically, there needs to be a coordinated response between Oranga Tamariki, police, health and education. Weston and Mythen (2019) also highlight the importance of providing education around CSE to help raise awareness to protect young people; for social workers, this education should help to conduct more thorough analysis to distinguish risky and dangerous situations (exploitation).

Practitioner experiences of CSE and subsequent research have led us to argue that social workers need to change the narrative, to take responsibility for raising awareness of CSE, advocating for victims and ensuring that we both recognise and respond to the needs of young people. It is important to recognise that, despite the fact that the young person may enter into a transactional arrangement, they are not making informed choices with equal bargaining power; they are children and therefore, the victims in this abuse.

Ultimately, we argue that to protect victims there is a need for policy and practice that recognises CSE as a very specific type of child abuse.

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