

'Boys would obviously start more fights' - Using Personal Construct Psychology to Explore what Boys feel would make School Safe



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Background

Research has illustrated the widespread nature of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in UK secondary schools. For example, a survey of 400 girls from across the UK, aged 13 to 18, found that 67% reported having experienced VAWG from other pupils at school (Girl Guides, 2021). Boys have been found to consistently underestimate the prevalence of harmful sexual behaviours in schools (Ofsted, 2021). It is therefore important to gain a deeper understanding of how boys view safety in schools.

A recent study (scan QR code to read) explored girls' perceptions of safety in schools (Craik et al., 2024) and highlighted the importance of incorporating boys' views.

The current study explores male-identifying pupils' constructs of a safe and unsafe school and considers these findings in relation to VAWG.



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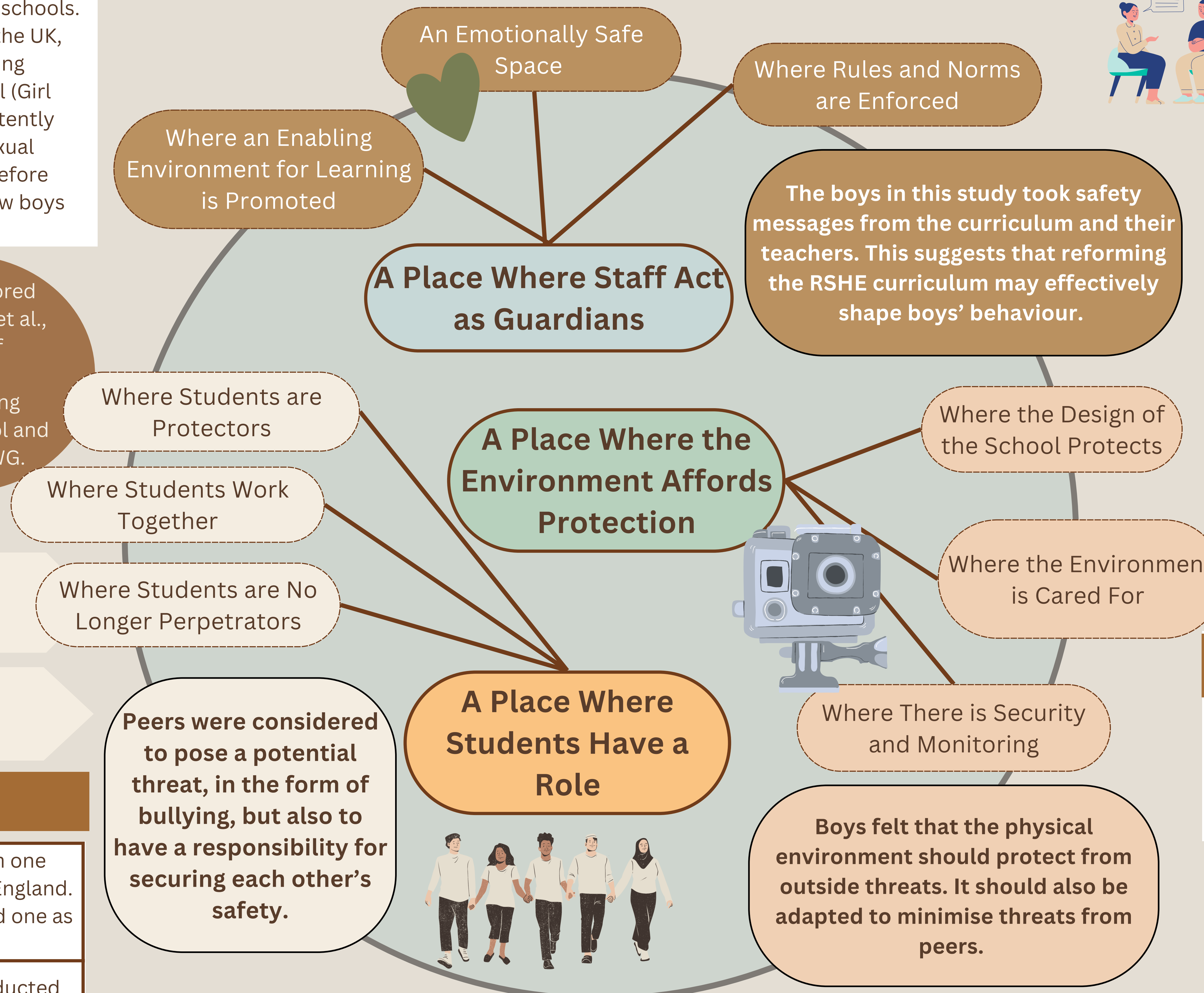
Research Questions

- 1 How do secondary school boys describe a safe and unsafe school?
- 2 How do secondary school boys, describe a safe and unsafe school for girls?

Methods

	Participants	Three participants, aged 14-15, from one secondary school in the southeast of England. Two self-identified as white-British and one as mixed-race British Caribbean.
	Data Collection	Semi-structured interviews were conducted based on William Hanks (2007) 'Drawing the Ideal School', a Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) approach (Moran, 2020). Participants were asked to describe and draw different aspects of a safe and an unsafe school. A final question was added to explore boys' perception of safety for girls.
	Data Analysis	An inductive reflexive analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six phase process was used to analyse data.

Themes and Results



In this study, boys did not mention VAWG as a safety concern that they considered. However, the findings suggest that with better education and a school ethos that actively encourages respect and equality, whilst challenging gender norms, they could become powerful allies to girls experiencing harmful sexual behaviours.

Hegemonic masculinity appeared to influence the boys' conceptualisation of violence. However, there was also a sense that the boys were going against gender norms by expressing their emotions.

Implications for Educational Psychologists (EPs)



EPs should address harmful gender norms when they arise in their work.
It is important to start the conversation about VAWG in schools and within EP services.
EPs should advocate for systemic changes to facilitate greater emphasis on girls' safety.

Implications for Teachers

Building positive, trusting relationships with students enables them to feel safe to share concerns about their safety.
Challenging gender norms within schools is important.
There should be a focus on healthy relationships, safety and challenging harmful gender norms in the RSHE curriculum, alongside embedding these topics in the wider curriculum.



Limitations

Transferability of findings is reduced by the limited number of participants.
It was not within the scope of the study to explore participants' understanding of girls' safety in school in depth.

Future Research

None of the boys identified HSB or VAWG as a concern which suggests that more research into boys' understanding of healthy relationships and girls' safety in school would be beneficial. Horeck et al. (2023) suggest that focus groups might be particularly helpful in this regard, providing boys with a safe and non-judgemental space in which to think critically about these issues. The lead author is currently conducting further research in this area using a focus group methodology.



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References: