

National School Safety Policy Alignment with Risk Management Practices in School Environment in Secondary Schools in Kericho County, Kenya

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Abstract

Ensuring the safety of schools is crucial for fostering an effective learning environment. Governments globally have introduced various policies and initiatives to enhance school safety. This study investigated the adherence of safety practices in secondary schools in Bureti Sub-County, Kericho County, Kenya, to national school safety policy. Employing a descriptive survey design, the research sampled seven secondary schools, seven principals, twenty teachers, an education officer and two hundred students, using a questionnaire, interviews, and observation checklists for data collection. Data revealed that many risk management practices did not align with established safety standards, indicating significant gaps in both physical and social environments. Most stakeholders have not gotten training on school safety practices. The study emphasizes the need for schools to enhance their infrastructure to meet required safety standards and suggests exploring resource generation to improve safety measures. A safe and secure school environment is vital for increasing learner enrolment, retention, and completion rates, ultimately contributing to higher achievement and quality education. In conclusion, prioritizing the safety of learners and staff is essential for fostering a comfortable learning atmosphere.

Keywords: Safety Practices, National School Safety Policy, Safe and Secure Learning Environment, Risk Management

Introduction

A nation cannot fully grow when some of the population is excluded from education (Chepkoech, 2022). Schools cannot expect children to learn if they do not feel safe; this is because unsafe environments and uncomfortable schools, significantly affect learner's concentration levels and achievement (Ackah-Jnr & Danso, 2019). Education for All policy cannot be achieved if teaching and learning environment safety is not established. SDG number 4 deals with Education; Target 4a calls for the building and remodelling of educational facilities that take into account the needs of children, adults and people with disabilities and provide a safe, peaceful, inclusive and fruitful learning environment for all. Over the past thirty years, the comprehensive school safety (CSS) policy has become the benchmark for reducing catastrophe risks (Varchetta, 2019). However, there is limited information about the national-level CSS policies developed and implemented worldwide. In 2017, a survey on CSS policy was conducted in 68 countries. The findings indicated that most of these nations have emergency management laws that encompass the education sector (Paci-Green et al., 2020). Interestingly, despite the presence of these safety regulations, student and school safety is not guaranteed.

In Spain, Diaz-Vicario and Sallán (2017) examined how institutions perceive safety and evaluated schools' commitment to creating safe and healthy teaching and learning environments. They identified organizational and management strategies that enhance the safety of staff and all school users. The study revealed that promoting a safe and healthy environment was a publicly stated goal of schools. While various organizational activities and measures were implemented to ensure physical, emotional, and social safety, it was noted that all stakeholders played a role in achieving acceptable levels of school safety, which ultimately influenced the teaching and learning processes. In South Africa, the high rate of gun-related deaths involves school-age children (Makanga, Schuurman & Randall, 2017). To tackle this problem, the South African Schools Act of 1996 and the Firearm Control Act of 2000 were enacted, granting the Minister of Safety and Security the authority to designate schools as gun-free zones. However, issues such as gender-based violence (GBV), violence, and sexual harassment continue to be significant challenges in many South African schools (Singha & Kanna, 2022). This indicates that, despite various measures implemented to enhance safety, school and learner safety remains a pressing concern.

In Kenya, the Children's Act (Chapter 586-2001), emphasizes that all children should be protected. In their study, Francisco et.al., (2021) reiterate that schools and educational institutions must ensure that their environments are accommodating for all children, including those with special needs. Additionally, it is essential to raise awareness among all relevant stakeholders about these rights to ensure they are upheld and protected. In 2008, the Ministry of Education partnered with Church World Service (CWS) to develop the Safety Standards Manual (SSM), which is now utilized in all Kenyan schools. The manual is designed to ensure a safe social environment for students, addressing numerous reports of insecurity. According to the Ministry of Education's Safety Standards Manual (2008), the Government of Kenya (GOK) has been committed to enhancing educational standards at all levels since independence by promoting the widespread adoption of school safety concepts. Furthermore, the National School Health Policy (NSHP) of 2009 was developed by the government in collaboration with the Ministries of Public Health and Education. Theme 4 of the NSHP outlines strategies for improving school sanitation to create a safer learning environment. The policy addresses various safety measures within schools, including the provision of first aid services to manage emergencies effectively. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of health education,

promoting hygiene practices, and fostering an overall culture of safety and well-being among students and staff, thereby supporting a holistic approach to health and safety in educational settings.

Risk management practices in schools include preventing overcrowding and ensuring multiple exits for safety. School administrators should collaborate with licensed contractors for building maintenance and conduct regular inspections of facilities and student health (Jackline 2022). Emergency response training is essential for educators, students, and staff to enhance preparedness. Educators should teach students about natural disaster risks and encourage them to report violent incidents. Additionally, school administrators should be accessible and approachable to support the needs of students and staff. Unsafe schools can have serious consequences for learners, teachers, and the entire educational system. These effects include property damage, injuries, fatalities from fires, and other health risks. Additionally, unsafe environments can lead to disruptions, increased absenteeism, emotional and psychological distress, as well as teacher dissatisfaction and turnover. Safe environments in schools fosters quality teaching and learning and improves levels of interactions amongst peers and between a learner and a teacher (Maxwell et al, 2017). Previous research in Kenya revealed that many schools failed to adopt safety norms and guidelines for various reasons, particularly highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures in 2020. Indicators of misalignment with safety policy requirements included poorly maintained facilities, inconsistent safety supervision, lack of safety training, inadequate measures against bullying and harassment, a high incidence of accidents, and unclear protocols for addressing safety concerns. In light of these issues, this study aimed to assess whether risk management practices in the teaching and learning environment align with the national school safety policy in Kericho County, Kenya. The goal is to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy in promoting a safe learning environment, identify areas for improvement in risk management practices, and develop effective protocols to mitigate potential risks.

Objectives

The study sought to:

- i. To assess the training levels of stakeholders on safety practices and distribution of school safety policy in order to raise their awareness in secondary schools in Bureti Sub County, Kericho County, Kenya.
- ii. To analyze the psychosocial safety practices in school environment and alignment with national school safety policies requirements in secondary schools in Bureti Sub County, Kericho County, Kenya.
- iii. To analyze challenges that schools face in their quest to implement the school safety policy in teaching and learning environment in Bureti Sub County, Kericho County, Kenya.

Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survey design and utilized various sampling techniques, including stratified random sampling, simple random sampling and purposive sampling. These methods were applied to select schools, students and teachers, respectively. The sample size consisted of 215 participants, which included 7 secondary schools, 7 principals, 20 teachers, 1 education officer and 180 learners. Questionnaires for students and teachers, interview schedules for principals and education officer and an observation checklist are the research instruments that were used to collect data. Data was analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively then presented in tables, graphs, frequencies, percentages and verbatim.

Discussion of Findings

Stakeholders' Training Levels on Safety Practices and Distribution of School Safety Policy to Raise Awareness

The study sought to examine training levels of school stakeholders on school safety policies. In private schools, 6 (55%) teachers said they have been trained while 5 (45%) said they have not received any training on risk management practices. In public schools, 5 (56%) teachers said they have been trained while 4 (44%) said they have not gotten any form of training to improve safety in schools. The teachers were also asked the nature of training they have received from the MOE and 100% said the focus was on first aid training, 66% said mental health awareness training, 87% fire drills and 42% said on emergency response training. Majority of learners in the study 153 (89%) accepted that they have gotten first aid training in school, 98 (57%) said they have been trained on evacuation procedures and 81 (47%) on fire drills. These findings contrast with Udali's (2020) study, which revealed that most learners had not participated in security drills or other safety training to prepare for security threats and crises. Consequently, it can be inferred that learners' training responses were average, indicating neither full compliance nor alignment with the requirements of the safety standards manual. On the importance of enhancing training on safety practices, one of the principals yielded this response:

Training on school safety procedures is crucial because it contributes to ensuring that all teaching and non-teaching staff members are aware of the measures and protocols to be implemented in order to keep the school environment a safe place to learn. (Principal School C)

Regarding the distribution of the school safety policy to learners and teachers, responses were as follows: all teachers (100%) indicated that they did not possess or had not read the Safety Standards Manual due to reasons such as negligence and lack of commitment. Similarly, all learners (n=172) reported that they had not read the document because it had not been provided to them. This lack of access may help explain the significant increase in safety-related incidents reported in the inspection reports (2023). However, learners reported receiving training on risk management practices as part of Life Skills Education. This program in Kenya covers various school safety measures, including fire safety, basic first aid, disaster preparedness, personal safety (such as stranger danger and online safety), road safety (traffic rules and pedestrian safety), hygiene and sanitation practices, and fostering a safe and inclusive school environment (KICD, 2017).

One principal from a private school made the following remarks regarding distribution of Safety Standards Manual of schools to school stakeholders:

It is important to make sure everyone has access to this important information. However, I haven't issued any safety manuals to the school stakeholders. We have just had training sessions to ensure child friendly learning environment. In the coming week, there is an NGO coming to our school to train club members, teachers, learners and non-teaching staff on how to manage risks in school environment. (Principal, school B)

The researcher confirmed that the statement made by the principal was true, as the finding showed that many teachers and learners had not accessed the manual.

Psychosocial Safety Practices in School Environment and Alignment with the School Safety Policy Requirements

The researcher used teachers' and learners' questionnaire and principals' interview guide to sought information in regard to conflict resolution and impact of CCTV cameras. All 20 teachers (100%) agreed that learners participate in resolving conflicts when they occur within the school environment. From the 172 learners who responded, 168 who account for the majority (98%) indicated that they get involved in conflict resolution in school while only 4 students who are the minority (2%) disagreed that they are involved. The SSM 2008 guidelines recommend that school administrators set up mechanisms, such as committees, and provide training for learners on how to handle conflicts if they arise. The results indicate that involving learners in conflict resolution aligns closely with safety guidelines in both types of schools, with private schools at 51% and public schools at 49%. Table 1 summarizes the findings:

Table 1: Learners' and Teachers' responses on whether students are involved in conflict resolution

Respondents	Yes		No	
	f	%	f	%
Teachers	20	100	-	-
Students	168	98	4	2

Source: Researcher, (2024)

To assess the availability and importance of CCTV cameras, teachers were surveyed, and 6 (30%) reported that their schools had installed and functioning CCTV systems: 2 (10%) from public secondary schools and 4 (20%) from private secondary schools. The findings of this study align with those from a study conducted in the United States by Galligan et al. (2020), which highlighted the significance of utilizing CCTV cameras. In contrast, 14 (70%) indicated that their schools lacked these essential devices, with 5 (25%) from private and 9 (45%) from public secondary schools stating the same. This suggests that most schools have not installed CCTV to monitor common areas, which is crucial for ensuring that learners and other stakeholders feel socially, physically, and psychologically secure, enabling them to thrive.

Challenges and Suggestions on Ways That Safety Standards in Schools Can Be Improved

The researcher used the following themes to assist in the analysis of the challenges which were noted: inadequate funds, lack of training on safety measures and poor administrative support in implementation.

From the responses, the researcher noted that the major problem is lack of enough funds. The education officer had this to say that "the amount allocated for ensuring school safety needs are met is not enough and therefore cannot cover all safety projects in schools" (Education Officer A). From the teachers' responses in the questionnaire, all (n=20) wrote financial constraints as one of the challenges that hinder schools not to fully implement safety policies, which is similar to Kikuvi's (2016) study. By seeking aid externally and exploring other avenues of how to generate funds, schools can work towards implementing effective safety policies despite financial limitations.

Most of the teachers (90%), 24% comprised female and 66% male, stated that they were unable to help with the implementation process because they were not trained in safety procedures and measures. One of the teachers noted that "lack of the guidelines from the ministry to be used as reference has made it difficult to achieve complete implementation. I know some safety measures while I do not know others." When the

principals were interviewed, one of them made the following remarks concerning the lack of training on safety measures as a hindrance:

...without proper training on safety measures, students and staff may lack knowledge and skills needed to navigate potential risks, they may not know how to respond to emergencies and take necessary precautions. Training should be made interactive by engaging staff and students which will make them retain information better. (Principal School C)

From the findings, 11(55%) of the 20 sampled teachers said that poor support from the administration contributed to the challenge of successfully implementing safety policies. A teacher from one public school made the following statement:

... without strong support from administrators, it has been difficult to get allocation of funds, training personnel and time for matters concerning safety and protocols to be observed. (Teacher School A)

One from a private school also said:

There is much ignorance of safety concerns raised by students, staff members and parents by the administration. We lack the motivation and commitment to practice the safety initiatives because of insufficient involvement of all relevant stakeholders (Teacher, school D)

Suggestions on ways that safety standards in schools can be improved were sought and the following are the findings. There was an equal response of 50% and 50 % from teachers who agreed and strongly agreed that an increase in budget allocated to improve school safety will make the school environment safe for learning. In another measure to involve safety experts as a way to help reduce risk occurrence in schools, 60% and 40% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed respectively. Further on extensive and intensive education on safety as a means to improve safety in schools, 60% agreed while 40% strongly agreed to it. The researcher went further to know whether the specification of roles on school safety will help improve safety status in schools, 35% of the teachers agreed while 65% strongly agreed. Lastly, on finding out whether the formation and strengthening of safety clubs and committees will help improve the safety status of the school, 45% and 55% agreed and strongly agreed respectively to the suggested measure. The results suggest that even though most respondents indicated that the school environments were safe, there was need to come up with more measures that might assist schools to achieve better safety status.

To learners, a response on how safety status of the school affects their participation in co-curriculum activities and during learning was sought and some made these statements:

When I feel safer, I am able to attend classes regularly and participate actively in school events but when the environment is insecure, I feel anxious and fearful (Student school D).

I am able to focus more on my studies and take part in extracurricular activities when I know I am in safe space and when safety is a concern it will affect my ability to concentrate in class and outside class (Student school D).

The two statements from the students indicate that they also prioritize their safety and that they would freely want to get involved in school activities without fear of being harmed or injured. The education officer made a remark and suggested that the current policy fails to address all the safety needs in schools,

indicating a need to address these gaps. This finding aligns with a study by Wanderi (2018), which concluded that the 2008 safety manual lacks sufficient content and should be updated to cover all relevant safety issues.

Conclusion

Findings reveal significant gaps in training and awareness among stakeholders, with many teachers and students lacking access to the Safety Standards Manual. Psychosocial safety practices, such as conflict resolution involvement, align moderately with safety guidelines, but most schools lack essential monitoring tools like CCTV. Challenges identified include inadequate funding, insufficient training, and poor administrative support for safety initiatives. The study also concludes that there is need for increased budget allocations, training programs, and enhanced collaboration among all stakeholders to improve school safety.

Recommendations

To improve school safety in Bureti Sub-County, it is recommended that schools increase their budget allocations specifically for safety measures and infrastructure enhancements. Regular training programs should be implemented for teachers and students to raise awareness and knowledge of safety practices, including emergency response. Schools should prioritize the distribution and accessibility of the Safety Standards Manual to all stakeholders to ensure comprehensive understanding of safety protocols. Establishing strong administrative support is crucial for effective implementation of safety policies, fostering a culture of safety within the school environment. Finally, collaboration with local NGOs and safety experts can help generate additional resources and provide targeted training to enhance overall safety standards.

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