



## Teaching and Learning Safely: Pupils and Teachers' Perspectives on Classroom Safety Management in Selected Schools of Southern Province of Zambia

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### ABSTRACT

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The management of safety in schools is essential for creating safe and healthy learning environments for pupils and staff. Using descriptive research design, which involved qualitative data collection and analysis, this study explored pupils and teachers' perspectives on classroom safety management in selected schools of Southern province of Zambia. The study used homogenous purposive sampling to select schools and participants for the study. A total of 4 schools were sampled. 8 teachers were sampled purposefully. More so, 16 pupils were sampled purposefully. The selection criteria included schools with a diverse range of pupil populations and teachers with varying levels of experience. Data was collected using in-depth interviews (teachers) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) for pupils. Classroom observations were used to collect data on classroom behavior and interactions between pupils and teachers. A checklist was used to take note of missing items in classrooms. Document analysis was used to review school policies and procedures related to classroom safety management and to identify areas where improvements may be needed. The qualitative data collected from the in-depth interviews and FGD were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes in the data. From research evidence, the benefits of classroom safety management include improved academic performance, reduced absenteeism, and better mental and physical health outcomes for learners. However, managing safety classrooms in schools presented numerous challenges, such as risk assessment, emergency preparedness, and ongoing training and education for pupils, teachers and other stakeholders. To overcome the challenges and realize the benefits of safety management in classrooms, there is need for effective collaboration and communication among all members of the school community, including pupils, staff, parents, and community partners, is essential.

### Keywords:

Classroom, safety, health, management

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Classroom safety management is a critical issue in education, as it directly impacts pupils' well-being and academic success. The term "classroom safety management" refers to the policies and practices that schools and teachers use to create a safe and supportive learning environment for pupils (Woods-Groves & O'Brien, 2020).

Effective classroom safety management is important for several reasons. First, it can help to prevent physical and emotional harm to pupils. This includes preventing bullying, violence, and other forms of aggressive behavior (Gage & Rivers, 2017). Second, classroom safety management can promote positive relationships between pupils and teachers. This can enhance pupils' engagement and motivation to learn (Roffey, 2012). Third, classroom safety management can create a positive school culture and climate, which can enhance pupils' overall well-being and academic achievement (Osher, Dwyer, & Jimerson, 2016).

There are several factors that contribute to effective classroom safety management. These include having clear expectations and rules for behavior, promoting positive relationships between pupils and teachers, providing support

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for pupils who are struggling, and creating a positive school culture and climate (Mubita et. al. 2016, Woods-Groves & O'Brien, 2020).

Despite the importance of classroom safety management, many schools struggle to implement effective policies and practices. This may be due to a lack of resources, inadequate training for teachers, or a lack of understanding about the importance of classroom safety management (Lammers & Bowers, 2020, Mubita et. al. 2016).

More so, fire presents a hazard in learning spaces, including classrooms. Fire safety management in classrooms is important for the simple reason that a large number of people are gathered at one place and a single fire can affect them all. Most of the furniture in a classroom such as chairs, desks and tables are made of wood and these can easily catch fire. School classrooms also keep a lot of flammable materials form of books, charts among others (Mubita et. al. 2020). A school gutted by fire bring so many losses. Buildings, including classrooms are destroyed, teaching materials are burnt, and everyone in school environment is disturbed because work is suspended. A lot of costs are incurred therein.

Furthermore, classroom safety management is a critical issue in education that has significant implications for pupils' well-being and academic success (Mubita et. al. 2016). Effective classroom safety management requires clear policies and practices, positive relationships between pupils and teachers, and a supportive school culture and climate. By understanding the factors that contribute to effective classroom safety management, schools and teachers can create a safe and supportive learning environment for all pupils.

Against this background, this study explored pupils and teachers' perspectives on classroom safety management, with selected schools of Southern province of Zambia in focus.

## **2. AIM**

The aim of this study was to explore pupils and teachers' perspectives on classroom safety management in selected schools of Southern province of Zambia.

## **3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study was informed by the following research questions:

- (a) What hazards were spotted in classrooms in selected schools?
- (b) What were the effects of unsafe classrooms on teaching and learning?
- (c) What measures could schools put in place to improve classroom safety to pupils and teachers?

## **4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

A study on classroom safety management can benefit a wide range of stakeholders, including:

*Pupils:* Classroom safety management directly impacts pupils' well-being and academic success. By understanding the factors that contribute to classroom safety and implementing effective management strategies, pupils can have a safer and more positive learning environment.

*Teachers:* Teachers are responsible for managing classroom safety and creating a positive learning environment. By studying classroom safety management, teachers can gain insights into effective strategies for managing disruptive behavior, promoting positive relationships with pupils, and creating a safe and supportive classroom environment.

*School administrators:* School administrators are responsible for ensuring that schools are safe and conducive to learning. By studying classroom safety management, administrators can identify areas for improvement and implement effective policies and practices to improve school safety.

*Parents:* Parents are concerned about the safety and well-being of their children in school. By studying classroom safety management, parents can gain insights into how schools are addressing safety issues and advocate for improvements where necessary.

*Researchers:* Researchers studying classroom safety management can contribute to the development of effective interventions and policies to improve school safety and promote positive learning environments.

Overall, a study of classroom safety management can benefit anyone who is invested in creating safe and supportive learning environments for pupils.

## **5. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **5.1 Importance of classroom safety management**

Classroom safety management is important for the following reasons:

*Protects the well-being of pupils and teachers:* A safe learning environment is essential to protect the well-being of pupils and teachers. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), an unsafe work environment can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and absenteeism among teachers, as well as decreased academic performance among pupils (NIOSH, 2018, Mubita et. al. 2016).

*Ensures compliance with legal and ethical requirements:* Schools and teachers have a legal and ethical obligation to provide a safe learning environment for pupils. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) mandates that all employers, including schools, must provide a safe work environment for their employees. Additionally, the National Education Association (NEA) Code of Ethics requires teachers to "make reasonable effort to protect the student from conditions harmful to learning and/or to the student's mental and physical health and/or safety".

*Minimizes disruptions to learning:* Classroom safety also minimizes disruptions to learning. According to a study

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published in the Journal of Educational Psychology, pupils who feel safe and secure in their classroom are more likely to be engaged in their learning and have higher academic achievement (Niehaus et al., 2012; Mubita et al. 2016).

*Promotes a positive learning environment:* A safe classroom fosters a positive learning environment where pupils can thrive, build relationships, and develop new skills. A study published in the Journal of School Violence found that a safe and positive school climate is associated with lower levels of bullying and greater academic achievement (Bradshaw et al., 2010, Mubita et al. 2016).

*Teaches life-long safety skills:* Teaching classroom safety skills prepares pupils with important life-long safety skills that they can apply in other areas of their lives. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), teaching pupils about safety in schools can help promote safe behavior outside of school, such as when playing sports or riding bicycles (CDC, 2020).

When it comes to teaching and learning, the subject of safety demands equal emphasis. 'School safety' strives to protect pupils, teachers, and support staff from vices like such as violence, harassment, bullying, and substance abuse (Mubita et al. 2016). The goal of safety in learning spaces is to safeguard pupils, teachers, and support staff from the detrimental consequences of such events. School environment is one place that is supposed to be every child's safe place.

The necessity of safety in learning environments is recognized by all stakeholders, including those in decision making positions. Therefore, safety of pupils and teachers in schools should be guaranteed as a top priority at all levels of government (Mubita, 2019). Schools should be having meetings with teachers and parents to listen to their problems and come up with mutually agreed-upon solutions. People are becoming more conscious of the importance of this issue, and as a result, the government and related agencies are taking appropriate efforts to address it (NeoSay Technologies and Solutions, 2022).

This paper also reviewed selected studies on classroom safety management as follows:

### **Selected studies on classroom safety management**

A study by Reinke et al. (2018) examined the effectiveness of the School-Wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (SW-PBIS) program in reducing bullying and improving classroom safety in middle schools. The results showed that schools implementing the SW-PBIS program had significantly lower rates of bullying and higher levels of school safety.

In a study by Vila et al. (2019), they evaluated the effectiveness of a school safety intervention program, which involved implementing safety measures such as security

cameras, metal detectors, and additional security personnel. The results showed that the intervention led to a significant reduction in violent incidents and improved perceptions of school safety among pupils and staff.

A study by Wang and colleagues (2020) examined the impact of classroom design on student well-being and safety in Chinese primary schools. They found that classrooms with more natural light and better air quality were associated with higher levels of student well-being and lower rates of absenteeism due to illness.

A study by Mubita et al. (2016) on safety and health issues in selected schools of Chibombo District in Central Province of Zambia revealed that pupils were more likely to concentrate on their studies if they felt safe and secure in their learning environments.

In a study by Spilt et al. (2019), they investigated the role of teacher-student relationships in promoting classroom safety and well-being. The results showed that positive teacher-student relationships were associated with lower levels of bullying and victimization, as well as higher levels of academic engagement and well-being among pupils.

Finally, a study by Karaman *et al.* (2021) examined the impact of a training program for teachers on their ability to manage disruptive behavior in the classroom. The results showed that the training program led to significant improvements in teachers' classroom management skills and reduced levels of disruptive behavior among pupils.

The foregoing studies concentrated on only one aspect of classroom safety. This study, however, looked at a range of hazards and other safety concerns spotted in selected school's classrooms.

## **6. METHODOLOGY**

Using descriptive research design, which involved qualitative data collection and analysis, this study explored pupils and teachers' perspectives on pupils and teachers' perspectives on classroom safety management in selected schools of Southern province of Zambia. The study used homogenous purposive sampling to select schools and participants for the study. A total of 4 schools were sampled. 8 teachers were sampled purposefully. More so, 16 pupils from different grades and classes were sampled purposefully. The selection criteria included schools with a diverse range of pupil populations and teachers with varying levels of experience. Data was collected using in-depth interviews (teachers) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) for pupils.

Interviews were conducted to collect more in-depth data on teachers' experiences with classroom safety and to gain insights into their perspectives on effective classroom safety management strategies. Classroom observations were used to collect data on classroom behavior and interactions between pupils and teachers. A checklist was used to take note of missing items in classrooms. This provided insights into the effectiveness of classroom safety management strategies in

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practice. Focus groups was used to collect data on pupils' experiences with classroom safety and to gain a broader understanding of their perspectives on classroom safety management. Document analysis was used to review school policies and procedures related to classroom safety management and to identify areas where improvements may be needed. The qualitative data collected from the in-depth interviews and FGD were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes in the data.

**7. DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION**

The study, first of all, identified hazards in classrooms of selected schools.

**7.1 Hazards spotted in classrooms**

A classroom is where learning takes place. It should have a friendly atmosphere, conducive, and safe. But due to some circumstances, there are instances or things that bring hazard to the classroom. Table 1 presents hazards spotted inside the classrooms of the 4 selected schools.

**Table 1: Hazards spotted in classrooms per schools**

s/n	SCHOOLS				
	Classroom hazards noted	A	B	C	D
1.	Slippery floors	√			√
2.	Poor ventilation	√	√	√	
3.	Broken pieces of furniture	√	√	√	√
4.	Uneven floors	√	√	√	√
5.	Poor house keeping	√	√	√	√
6.	Naked electric wires	√		√	
7.	Nails in some wooden chairs/tables	√	√	√	√
8.	Overcrowding		√		√
9.	Bullying	√	√	√	√
10.	Leaking roofs		√		√
11.	Moulds		√		√
12.	Fungi		√		√
13.	Improperly hang decorations	√	√	√	√
14.	Chemicals		√		
15.	Playing objects	√	√	√	√
16.	Dust	√			√
17.	Poor illumination	√			√
18.	Noise		√		√

Source: Field data, 2023

As presented in table 1, all the 4 schools sampled in this study had a considerable number of classroom hazards identified. Some hazards were common to all the 4 schools while others were only unique to certain schools. This variation was as a result of differences in classroom design and other environmental factors. This variation in hazards in school classrooms was also noted by Mubita (2018) who argued that hazards faced in one school may not be the same with other schools. Due to differences social settings, different schools face different environmental challenges and hence, different safety and health concerns (Mubita, 2021 & Mubita, 2018). This assertion is supported by Cheng (2003) who argue that, “to different local communities, the existing social context, cultural assets and historical backgrounds may be completely different and therefore the knowledge and wisdom they have found useful and valid and accumulated in the past years may be different.” This is in correlation with the U.S Department of Health and Human Services (2010: 2) which states that:

*Work place settings vary according to size, sector, design, location, work processes, workplace culture and resources. In addition, workers or people found in the workplace differ in terms of age, gender, training, education, cultural background, health and safety practices and access to preventive health care. This translates to great diversity in the safety and health risks for each workplace and therefore need for tailored interventions*

The foregoing mean that schools may not have same type of hazards. Therefore, hazard management should be a localised approach. Each school should identify hazards inherent in its environment and therefore institute measures to manage them.

Hazards in classrooms can pose a threat to the safety and wellbeing of pupils and teachers. It is important to be aware of these hazards to prevent accidents and injuries. The following is an outline and description of some common hazards found in classrooms in the 4 sampled schools:

*Chemical Hazards:* Some classrooms in sampled schools contained chemicals that were potentially hazardous if not handled properly. These included cleaning supplies, art supplies, and science lab chemicals. Exposure to those chemicals could cause irritation, burns, or respiratory problems. Proper labeling, storage, and handling of these chemicals are essential to minimize the risk of exposure. According to a study published in the Journal of Chemical Health and Safety, chemical hazards are a major cause of accidents in school science labs (Sherwood et al., 2016, Mubita, 2018).

*Electrical Hazards:* Electrical hazards were a common hazard in classrooms in sampled schools, especially those with electricity. Faulty electrical wiring, damaged outlets, and overloaded circuits could cause electrical shocks, fires, and explosions. Regular inspections of electrical equipment, proper use of extension cords, and safe use of electrical equipment are essential to minimize the risk of electrical hazards in classrooms and schools at large. A study published in the Journal of School Health found that electrical hazards are a leading cause of school-related injuries (Tinsworth et al., 2003, Mubita et. al. 2020).

*Physical Hazards:* In the sampled schools in this study, physical hazards in classrooms were spotted. These included include furniture that was not stable or is in disrepair, sharp objects, and tripping hazards. Those hazards could cause cuts, bruises, broken bones, and other injuries. Proper maintenance of classroom furniture, storage of sharp objects, and removal of tripping hazards are essential to minimize the risk of physical hazards. According to a study published in the Journal of School Health, physical hazards are a significant cause of injuries in schools (Schwebel et al., 2012, Mubita, 2018).

*Biological Hazards:* Biological hazards were also spotted in classrooms of the sampled schools. These included mold, fungi, bacteria, viruses, and other microorganisms that can cause illness. Poor ventilation, moisture, and lack of cleanliness contributed to the growth and spread of these hazards. Regular cleaning and disinfection of classrooms, proper ventilation, and maintenance of HVAC systems are essential to minimize the risk of biological hazards. According to a study published in the Journal of School Nursing, poor indoor air quality is a major health concern in schools (Mubita, 2018; Mendell et al., 2016, Mubita et. al. 2016)

## **7.2 Effects of classroom hazards on teaching and learning Pupils' voices about unsafe classrooms of their schools**

Pupils from the sampled schools had their own feelings about dangers posed by unsafe classrooms of their schools. Their concerns were as follows:

*"I feel nervous when I see chemicals or hazardous materials in the classroom. It makes me worry about my health and safety." (Pupil 2: FGD)*

*"I'm always worried about tripping on the uneven floor tiles in the classroom. I wish they would fix them so no one gets hurt." (Pupil 9: FGD)*

*"The classroom is really dark, and it's hard to see what we're doing sometimes. It would be helpful if we could get better lighting." (Pupil 6: FGD)*

*"I know we're supposed to wear goggles during lab experiments, but sometimes I forget. I wish the teacher would remind us more often to wear them." (Pupil 12: FGD)*

*"I feel uncomfortable with the classroom door closed because it makes me worry about what would happen if there was an emergency. It would be better if we could leave it open a crack." (Pupil 8: FGD)*

The foregoing perspectives highlight some of the potential safety concerns that pupils had in the classroom, and how these concerns could impact their overall sense of safety and wellbeing. It is important for teachers and administrators to listen to pupils' worries and take steps to address their safety concerns in order to promote a safe and healthy learning environment for all.

## **Teachers' voices about unsafe classrooms of their schools**

Teachers from the sampled schools also had their own feelings about unsafe classrooms of their schools. Their concerns were as follows:

*"Safety is our top priority in the classroom. We want to make sure that all of our pupils are safe and healthy while they are learning." (Teacher 3: Interview)*

*"We always follow safety protocols and procedures in the classroom to minimize the risk of accidents or injuries. It's important to take safety seriously and not take any unnecessary risks." (Teacher 8: Interview)*

*"If there is a safety concern in the classroom, we address it immediately. We don't want to wait until someone gets hurt to take action." (Teacher 6: Interview)*

*"It's important to make sure that pupils understand the importance of safety in the classroom. We teach them how to use equipment properly and remind them of safety rules and procedures regularly." (Teacher 1: Interview)*

*"We work closely with administrators and other staff members to ensure that the classroom is a safe and healthy environment for everyone. It's a team effort to promote safety and prevent accidents or injuries." (Teacher 7: Interview)*

These perspectives highlight the importance of safety in the classroom and how teachers prioritized safety in their day-to-day work. Teachers play a crucial role in promoting safety and creating a safe learning environment for all pupils.

### **7.3 Challenges presented by unsafe classrooms to teaching and learning**

*Teachers and Pupils' voices on challenges presented by unsafe classrooms to teaching and learning*

During interviews and focus group discussions, teachers and pupils made their voices heard about challenges presented by unsafe classrooms to teaching and learning as follows:

**Teacher:** *"One of the biggest challenges presented by unsafe classrooms is that it creates a distraction for students. If they feel like they're in a dangerous environment, it's hard for them to focus on the lesson at hand. And if they're constantly worried about their safety, they're not going to be able to learn effectively."*

**Pupil:** *"Yeah, it's really hard to concentrate when you're worried about something happening. And if the classroom isn't safe, it can be hard to relax and feel comfortable. I think it's important for us to feel safe so that we can learn properly."*

**Teacher:** *"Absolutely. Another challenge is that it can be difficult for teachers to teach effectively when they're worried about their own safety and the safety of their students. It's hard to focus on teaching when you're constantly scanning the room for potential dangers."*

**Pupil:** *"And if something does happen, it can be really traumatic for everyone*

*involved. That's not an environment where learning can take place."*

**Teacher:** *"Exactly. That's why it's so important for schools to prioritize safety measures and create a secure learning environment. When students and teachers feel safe, they can focus on learning and reaching their full potential."*

Unsafe classrooms pose significant challenges to teaching and learning as noted from the foregoing voices by teachers and pupils. Here are some of these challenges as noted by this study:

Unsafe classrooms can be physically and emotionally distracting, making it difficult for students to concentrate on their studies. According to a study by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 21 percent of students reported that noise or other distractions made it difficult to learn in their classrooms (NCES, 2018, Mubita, 2018).

Unsafe classrooms can expose pupils to health hazards such as poor air quality, mold, or lead exposure. These hazards can cause illnesses, and absences that can lead to a decline in academic performance. A study by the American Federation of Teachers found that 46 percent of schools had at least one major environmental problem (AFT, 2018).

Unsafe classrooms can cause teacher burnout and low job satisfaction. Teachers who work in unsafe classrooms often report feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and unsupported. A study by the American Psychological Association found that teachers who reported high levels of stress had lower levels of job satisfaction (APA, 2015, Mubita, 2021).

Unsafe classrooms can lead to disruptive behavior by pupils who feel unsafe or uncomfortable. According to the NCES study, 14 percent of students reported that they did not feel safe at school (NCES, 2018). This can lead to an increase in disciplinary problems, which can further disrupt the learning environment.

Unsafe classrooms can reduce pupils' engagement and participation. When students feel unsafe or uncomfortable in their classroom, they may be less likely to participate in class discussions or ask questions. This can lead to lower levels of engagement and academic performance. A study by the American Psychological Association found that pupils who reported feeling unsafe at school were less likely to participate in class (APA, 2015).

In conclusion, unsafe classrooms can present significant challenges to teaching and learning. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes ensuring safe and healthy learning environments for students and supporting teachers in their work.

#### **7.4 Proposed measures to improve classroom safety for pupils and teachers**

There are several measures that schools can put in place to improve classroom safety for both pupils and teachers. This study proposed the following measures:

*Develop clear policies and procedures for responding to emergencies:* Schools should have clear policies and procedures in place to respond to emergencies such as natural disasters, fires, and violent incidents. This includes having a plan for evacuation, lockdown, and communication with parents and emergency services.

*Implement bullying prevention programs:* Schools should implement bullying prevention programs to help prevent bullying and harassment. These programs can include educational materials, training for teachers, and counseling services for pupils who are victims of bullying.

*Provide training for teachers and staff:* Teachers and staff should receive regular training on how to respond to emergencies, how to recognize and respond to signs of abuse or neglect, and how to create a positive and inclusive learning environment.

*Increase supervision and monitoring:* Schools should increase the level of supervision and monitoring in classrooms and other areas of the school to deter unsafe behavior and respond quickly to incidents.

*Promote positive relationships between pupils and teachers:* Schools should promote positive relationships between pupils and teachers to enhance pupils' engagement and motivation to learn. This can include creating a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment, using positive reinforcement strategies, and providing opportunities for pupils to participate in extracurricular activities.

*Provide mental health support:* Schools should provide mental health support services for pupils who may be experiencing emotional or mental health challenges. This can include counseling services, peer support groups, and access to community resources.

By implementing these measures, schools can create a safe and supportive learning environment for all pupils and teachers.

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