



## The Study on Operationalizing Child Protection in Sri Lankan Schools: Awareness and Practices

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### ABSTRACT

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Child protection and well-being are central priorities within education systems worldwide, including Sri Lanka. Although national safeguarding policies exist, implementation remains uneven, revealing a gap between policy intent and everyday practice. This study examines how Sri Lankan schools interpret and operationalize child-protection awareness within their institutional, sociocultural, and community contexts. A stratified sample of schools and a purposive sample of stakeholders were drawn from the Piliyandala Educational Zone in Western Province. Using a mixed-methods exploratory sequential design, surveys were administered to teachers (n = 120) and students (n = 300) across twelve urban, semi-urban, and rural schools, alongside semi-structured interviews with principals and child-protection officials (n = 25). Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics and chi-square tests, and qualitative data were examined thematically. Findings show that schools adopt varied approaches to safeguarding shaped by resources, staff capacity, and community influences. Student awareness of protection concepts was high, yet teacher preparedness was limited, with only 12 percent receiving formal training in trauma support. Institutional mechanisms also varied: Child Protection Committees existed in 42 percent of schools, with only 23 percent functioning effectively, and urban schools showing stronger compliance. Schools relied on internal programmes, government-led initiatives, and NGO-supported activities, although these efforts were fragmented and reactive rather than coordinated. Sociocultural factors, including stigma, hierarchical communication norms, parental instability, and community-level risks—restricted disclosure and weakened prevention. Concerns about confidentiality reduced the use of formal reporting structures, while emerging digital pathways appeared promising within ongoing education reforms. Overall, the study highlights a structural and cultural misalignment between national child-protection commitments and their enactment in schools. Strengthening teacher training, building institutional capacity, expanding community partnerships, and developing secure reporting systems are essential for protective and responsive learning environments. The study provides evidence to guide policy refinement, curriculum development, and targeted safeguarding interventions within Sri Lanka's education sector.

### KEYWORDS:

Child protection, Protection literacy, Teacher capacity, Reporting mechanisms, Sociocultural barriers

### INTRODUCTION

Child protection has become a global development priority, recognized not only as an ethical obligation but also as a condition for achieving sustainable social and economic progress. International consensus positions child protection

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as a cornerstone of national development, a view reinforced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 16, which call for safe, inclusive, and equitable learning environments. Schools, therefore, occupy a dual role: they are centers for academic learning and frontline institutions responsible for safeguarding student well-being. Evidence shows that schools reduce children's exposure to harm by building resilience, teaching safety skills, and identifying early signs of abuse or neglect. The protective capacity of education systems is critical particularly when

teachers are trained to recognize risk factors and respond appropriately. Yet in Sri Lanka, despite longstanding commitments to the UNCRC, systemic gaps continue to affect the protection of children within school settings.

The Child Protection Policy Framework for Schools introduced by the Ministry of Education in 2018 provides a foundational structure for school-based safeguarding. However, implementation across the country remains uneven. Studies and practitioner reports point to challenges such as limited teacher training in child protection, resource constraints, weak monitoring mechanisms, and sociocultural norms that discourage disclosure of abuse (Save the Children, 2020; National Child Protection Authority, 2023). These structural and cultural barriers undermine the potential of schools to act as protective environments.

International experience offers valuable insights. Countries with mature child-protection systems, including Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, have developed comprehensive school-based safeguarding frameworks. These feature explicit safety curricula, systematic teacher professional development, clear reporting protocols, and coordinated partnerships with child-protection agencies (OECD, 2021). Comparative studies show that the effectiveness of school-based safeguarding depends on three core elements: coherent policy design, institutional capacity, and cultural readiness to recognize and address child maltreatment.

In Sri Lanka, the question of school readiness is especially salient. Children's developmental limitations mean they often struggle to recognize unsafe situations or articulate concerns without structured guidance (Piaget, 1952). Schools, as microcosms of society, must therefore cultivate child protection literacy—the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that help students understand risks, seek help, and participate in protective practices. Building such literacy requires not only strong pedagogical strategies but also a supportive system that includes trained staff, clear reporting pathways, community engagement, and culturally sensitive communication.

This study examined how schools in Sri Lanka conceptualize and operationalize child-protection awareness initiatives, identifying both strengths and persistent gaps. The focus is timely given ongoing national efforts to reform education governance and strengthen safeguarding structures. Findings from the study contribute to improving teacher-student relationships by enhancing teachers' understanding of their protective responsibilities. The research also helps assess the effectiveness of existing school-based programs and provide guidance for revitalizing them where needed.

Furthermore, the insights generated can inform planning and decision-making at divisional, zonal, provincial, and national levels. They can also support curriculum formulation, reform, and development at the National Institute of Education, while contributing to broader policy dialogue on safeguarding

within Sri Lanka's education sector. By situating school-based protection within national and global frameworks, this study aims to strengthen the role of schools as safe, responsive, and empowering spaces for all children.

### **Research Problem**

Schools are globally recognized as key institutions in safeguarding children and promoting environments conducive to their well-being (UNESCO, 2021), Sri Lanka continues to experience a persistent divide between child-protection policy frameworks and their enactment in school practice. National guidelines such as the Child Protection Policy Framework for Schools (Ministry of Education, 2018) articulate clear expectations for prevention, early identification, and response. Yet, many schools struggle to establish the systems, structures, and trained personnel necessary to translate these expectations into day-to-day protective practices (NCPA, 2022).

This challenge is embedded within an education system that prioritizes high-stakes academic performance, often at the expense of life skills and holistic competencies. As a result, protection literacy—the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable children to recognize risks, seek help, and build personal resilience—receives limited emphasis in school curricula and culture. While awareness programs may be present, they often remain superficial or event-based, lacking continuity, pedagogical grounding, or alignment with formal reporting mechanisms.

A further concern is the limited body of empirical research examining how Sri Lankan schools interpret their safeguarding responsibilities, how teachers and students internalize protection awareness, and how institutional and sociocultural factors shape implementation. Existing studies highlight barriers such as hierarchical school cultures, insufficient training, fragmented institutional coordination, and limited monitoring structures, yet comprehensive evidence on school-level operationalization remains scarce (Samarasinghe & Chandrakumara, 2021).

Consequently, policymakers and practitioners lack grounded insights needed to strengthen school-based child-protection systems. The absence of such evidence limits the effective design of interventions, teacher development programs, and safeguarding frameworks that respond to local realities.

The central research problem addressed in this study is the mismatch between Sri Lanka's stated child-protection commitments and the practical operationalization of child-protection awareness within school environments, along with the systemic constraints that hinder effective and sustained implementation.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To assess the levels of child-protection awareness among teachers and students, including their understanding of safety, rights, reporting procedures, and preventive practices.

2. To Explore the effectiveness of school-based child-protection programs in promoting protection awareness.
3. To identify systemic, institutional, and sociocultural factors that constrain the consistent implementation of child-protection policies and programs in schools.
4. To recommend evidence-based strategies and best practices for strengthening school-level safeguarding systems and enhancing protection literacy across stakeholders.

### **Research Questions**

1. To what extent are key stakeholders—teachers, students, administrators, and community actors—equipped to facilitate and participate in child-protection education?
2. How do schools interpret and operationalize child-protection awareness within their everyday practices and routines?
3. What systemic, institutional, and sociocultural barriers hinder the effective implementation of child-protection initiatives in schools?
4. What models, practices, or program elements can be integrated to strengthen school-based child-protection systems and improve protection literacy?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Education today is widely understood as both a protective mechanism and an engine of social transformation. Global scholarship shows that schooling plays a critical role in safeguarding children in contexts marked by conflict, instability, or social inequality, functioning as a protective space that supports safety, resilience, and psychosocial well-being (UNICEF, 2020). In post-conflict and economically uneven settings such as Sri Lanka, schools are expected to assume responsibilities that extend well beyond academic instruction. They operate as central environments where children's emotional health, social development, and protection needs must be actively supported, a role reinforced by evidence showing the importance of school-based psychosocial interventions and resilience-building in Sri Lankan communities recovering from war and displacement (Kovinthan Levi, 2019; Vithana et al., 2023; Begum, 2020). This expanded mandate aligns with the transformative education agenda embedded in Sustainable Development Goal 4, which positions education as a catalyst for inclusive, peaceful, and just societies and a foundation for achieving the broader 2030 Agenda (UNESCO, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). Within this global vision, schools carry a dual responsibility: to nurture learning and to function as primary environments for safeguarding children, equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and socio-emotional foundations necessary to thrive in challenging contexts.

In this role, schools contribute to early identification of harm, development of safety competencies, and promotion of protective behaviors. Sri Lanka's policy architecture reflects this shift. Ministry of Education Circular 25/2019 reinforces child protection as an institutional obligation, requiring schools to cultivate intellectually, physically, emotionally, and socially supportive learning environments (Ministry of Education, 2019). The circular formalizes a safeguarding agenda that aligns national priorities with global norms.

Research in educational settings shows that while child protection policies are often in place, teacher awareness of reporting procedures and school responsiveness remain inconsistent and limited. A systematic review found significant variability in teacher awareness and practical implementation of child protection policies in schools, influenced by training gaps, resource constraints, and uneven policy communication (Asio et al., 2020). Other studies highlight ongoing gaps in teachers' knowledge about recognizing and reporting abuse, which undermines the effectiveness of policy frameworks in educational settings. However, research suggests that policy intentions have not yet produced deep structural change. Samarasinghe and Chandrakumara (2021) report that fewer than a quarter of teachers can describe formal child-abuse reporting procedures, and only 11% of schools maintain functioning child protection committees. These gaps highlight a persistent problem in many low- and middle-income countries where policy adoption does not guarantee operational readiness or behavioral change.

The UNICEF National Education Vulnerability Assessment (2022) identifies three systemic barriers constraining protection initiatives in Sri Lankan schools. Academic priorities tend to overshadow protection education; sociocultural hierarchies discourage open communication about abuse; and teachers lack adequate training despite being the first line of detection and referral. These findings illustrate the tension schools face between performance-driven expectations and their safeguarding commitments.

The concept of "protection literacy," the competencies required to recognize, prevent, and respond to threats, emerges as particularly relevant in this study. In the Sri Lankan context, protection literacy remains unevenly developed due to curricular orientations that prioritize rote learning over critical thinking and life skills (Jayaweera, 2020); hierarchical teacher-student relationships that restrict children's ability to disclose concerns or question authority (Perera, 2021); and limited community participation in school-based safety initiatives (NCPA, 2023). These contextual factors inhibit the creation of protective, responsive learning environments where children feel empowered to seek help.

Although global literature discusses children's self-protection capacities, safety competencies, and safeguarding knowledge, there is no unified construct that brings together

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the knowledge, attitudes, and skills children require to navigate risks in school environments. Building on established frameworks (Save the Children, 2016; Alliance & INEE, 2022), this study proposes the term child protection literacy to describe these integrated competencies.

Positioning child protection literacy as an essential educational outcome highlights the need for coordinated school policies, trained personnel, culturally sensitive pedagogical practices, and curricular integration. This conceptualization also strengthens the analytical lens through which school-based safeguarding systems can be examined and improved.

The concept of protection literacy is central to understanding these challenges. Protection literacy comprises the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to identify risks, respond to unsafe situations, and seek appropriate help. In Sri Lanka, the development of such competencies remains limited. The curriculum continues to emphasize rote learning at the expense of critical thinking and life skills (Jayaweera, 2020). Teacher–student relationships often reflect hierarchical norms that inhibit children’s willingness to disclose concerns (Perera, 2021). Community engagement in school-level safety initiatives also remains inconsistent (NCPA, 2023). These contextual dynamics restrict children’s agency and the responsiveness of the education system.

Despite these constraints, emerging evidence shows that well-designed school-based protection programs can produce meaningful change. A recent National Child Protection Authority (2023) longitudinal study found that schools implementing comprehensive safeguarding interventions recorded a 42% reduction in bullying, a 35% increase in help-seeking behavior, and a 28% improvement in emotional well-being indicators. These findings underscore the potential of coordinated, multi-component approaches when they are adequately supported and monitored.

Broader international research echoes these observations. Studies from low- and middle-income settings consistently point to institutional fragmentation, weak inter-agency collaboration, and limited evaluation capacity as major obstacles to effective school safeguarding (Pundir et al., 2020). Sri Lanka is also posed with similar challenges, identifying poor coordination between schools, social services, and child-protection agencies as a core structural weakness.

National analyses of NCPA case records likewise recommend strengthening school-level awareness programs and sexuality education as part of a broader strategy to prevent child abuse (De Silva et al., 2022).

Taken together, this body of scholarship reveals a critical gap. Although Sri Lanka possesses a well-articulated policy framework and draws on established global models of child protection, there is limited empirical understanding of how schools interpret and operationalize these frameworks in everyday practice. Without such insights, safeguarding

reforms risk remaining aspirational rather than actionable. This study seeks to address this gap by examining school-level understandings, practices, and constraints related to child-protection awareness, with the aim of informing stronger, context-sensitive safeguarding strategies.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a mixed-methods exploratory sequential design to develop a comprehensive understanding of how schools operationalize child-protection awareness and the systemic factors that influence implementation. An exploratory design was appropriate because school-based safeguarding is a multidimensional, context-dependent phenomenon that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative indicators alone. The qualitative findings thus informed the scope, focus, and refinement of the subsequent quantitative phase, consistent with mixed-methods principles outlined by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018).

#### **Quantitative Phase**

The quantitative phase consisted of a survey of 120 teachers and 300 students drawn from 12 schools selected through stratified sampling to ensure representation across urban, semi-urban, and rural categories. Teacher surveys assessed knowledge of child-protection policies, recognition of risk indicators, perceived institutional capacity, and confidence in responding to incidents. Student surveys measured awareness of personal safety strategies, help-seeking behaviors, and perceptions of school climate.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize awareness levels and institutional practices. Group differences by demographic characteristics and school type were examined using chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) tests. Internal reliability of multi-item scales was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha, with acceptable thresholds set at  $\alpha \geq .70$  in line with established psychometric standards.

#### **Qualitative Phase**

The Qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with 25 purposively selected stakeholders, including school principals ( $n = 12$ ), senior teachers assigned child-protection responsibilities, and officials from the National Child Protection Authority and Sri Lanka Police. Purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of participants with direct experience in school-level safeguarding practices. Schools were selected from urban and rural settings to capture variation in contextual constraints, institutional resources, and cultural norms.

Interviews explored protection-awareness practices, institutional capacities, reporting mechanisms, inter-agency collaboration, and perceived barriers. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase analytic approach: familiarization, initial coding, theme

construction, review, refinement, and reporting. This method supported a systematic and rigorous interpretation of participants’ perspectives and contributed to the development of the quantitative instruments.

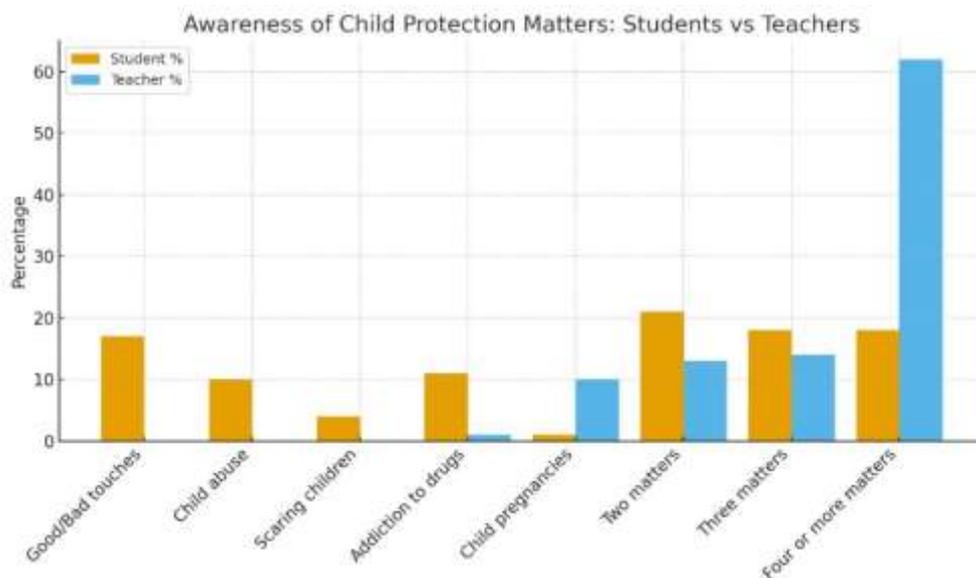
**Ethical Approval**

Ethical approval and clearance to conduct research in schools were obtained from the relevant Zonal Education Offices. The study adhered to national and international child-protection and research-ethics guidelines, including those articulated in the UNCRC. Written informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, and parental consent plus child assent were secured for all students below 18 years of age. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality was ensured, and all data were anonymized during analysis and reporting.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Stakeholder Capacity and Protection Literacy**

Approximately 80 percent of schools had teachers assigned counselling responsibilities, though many were informally appointed senior female teachers without formal training. Their guidance to students was based largely on personal experience rather than structured professional preparation. Survey data highlighted clear contrasts between student and teacher awareness. As shown in Figure 1, students demonstrated higher recognition of specific protection themes such as good/bad touches, child abuse, and drug-related risks. Teachers, however, identified fewer individual topics but showed much higher rates of recognizing multiple protection matters, with 62 percent reporting awareness of four or more themes. This pattern suggests that students possess broader surface-level awareness, whereas teachers rely on consolidated, generalized conceptions of child protection.



**Figure 1. Comparison of student and teacher awareness across key child-protection topics.**

Among students, 19 percent relied solely on the school curriculum for information, while 54 percent learned from multiple sources, including parents, school programmes, and media. Among teachers, 16 percent gained awareness only from media, while 76 percent engaged with multiple institutional sources such as the National Institute of

Education, Ministry of Education, NCPA, and Sri Lanka Police.

Chi-square results showed statistically significant associations between awareness and demographic characteristics, including school type, division, residential area, sex, and age ( $p < .05$ ).

Demographic Information	Respondents	Pearson's Chi-square Value	P - Value
Types of School	Students	137.807a	0.000
	Teachers	121.589a	0.000
Division	Students	186.690a	0.000
	Teachers	86.037a	0.002
Residential area	Students	135.843a	0.000
	Teachers	105.287a	0.002
Sex (students)	Students	56.609a	0.001
Age Groups (teachers)	Teachers	140.429a	0.004

These associations suggest that awareness is strongly shaped by contextual and institutional factors, which influence both knowledge distribution and access to protection resources.

### **Interpretation and Operationalization of Child-Protection Awareness in Schools**

Schools carried out protection-related practices through three key channels: internally organized programs, initiatives from government institutions, and contributions from non-governmental or civil-society organizations. Almost all schools educated students on basic safety during morning assemblies and checked students' belongings when concerns arose. Students flagged in these checks were referred to Discipline Committees or Child Protection Committees (CPCs), with follow-up actions including parental notification and referrals to agencies such as the Sri Lanka Police or probationary and child-protection units.

Only 33 percent of schools conduct structured, annual safety-awareness programs. Principals explained that they depended on a wide range of state actors, including the Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka Police Children and Women's Bureau, Community Police Units, Divisional Secretariats, the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA), the Department of Probation and Child Care Services, and Public Health Inspectors. These programs were delivered according to institutional mandates and varied across schools.

Although parent awareness sessions were held during monthly meetings and year-end reviews, the overall functioning of institutional structures remained uneven. Only 42 percent of schools had established CPCs and just 23 percent were fully functional, compared with 75 percent maintaining Discipline Committees that partly supported safeguarding responsibilities. Urban schools showed higher levels of compliance than rural schools, suggesting that national child-protection policy is still more conceptual than procedural.

### **Systemic and Sociocultural Barriers Hindering Implementation**

Significant sociocultural and environmental barriers shaped the ability of schools to deliver protection programs. Coastal and economically marginalized communities experienced drug use, organized crime, parental substance misuse, and family instability linked to remarriage or parental absence due to overseas employment. Elderly guardians often lacked the capacity to provide consistent care. Behavioral and linguistic patterns associated with drug-related subcultures were reported inside some schools. A minority of parents concealed or facilitated unsafe behaviors such as substance possession.

These patterns align with national evidence that parental migration heightens children's exposure to harm (De Silva et al., 2022). Deeply rooted cultural norms restrict open dialogue about sexual abuse, domestic violence, or emotional wellbeing. Teachers avoided such discussions, reinforcing hierarchical norms and limiting disclosure. Moral instruction is often substituted for open conversations in provincial schools.

Household dynamics emerged as a central determinant of vulnerability. Some parents used social or financial influence to suppress reporting of exploitative behavior. In families where alcohol misuse was normalized, unsafe behaviors were more likely to be tolerated. Many parents resisted legal processes due to fear of stigma affecting their daughters' futures. Nationally, fathers, caregivers, and close relatives account for most abuse cases (De Silva et al., 2022), which reinforces how unstable family structures and marital disruption amplify vulnerability.

Reporting systems reflected these sociocultural constraints. Students underutilized formal reporting channels due to fear of retaliation or exposure. Principals instead relied on informal networks of trusted students, peer informants, and parent-community channels. In high-risk schools, WhatsApp groups were used to relay confidential information about threats or harmful behaviors.

### **Strengthening School-Based Child-Protection Systems**

Evidence from this study highlights several program elements that could strengthen school-based protection systems.

First, more structured teacher training is needed to address gaps in trauma support, early intervention, and handling disclosures. Second, schools would benefit from stable and functional committees, especially CPCs, given their low establishment and operational rates.

Third, digital tools emerged as a promising support mechanism. Principals expressed concern about students' exposure to online risks and called for stronger laws governing mobile-phone and social-media use. They also recommended embedding digital-safety content into the curriculum.

The study's findings support the development of secure digital reporting systems similar to Norway's Child Whisperer model. Such systems could improve confidentiality, encourage early reporting, and complement traditional safeguarding practices. In schools where principals had strong community networks, digital tools and community-based channels worked together to enhance student participation in monitoring harmful behaviors.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study set out to examine how Sri Lankan schools understand, operationalize, and sustain child-protection awareness within their institutional and sociocultural contexts. The findings reveal that Teacher capacity is a decisive factor shaping the effectiveness of school-based safeguarding. Despite high levels of awareness among teachers and students, the absence of formal training, limited exposure to trauma-informed pedagogy, and overcrowded classrooms significantly hinder responsive intervention. This imbalance between awareness and capability reinforces the need for sustained professional development, targeted training, and enhanced institutional support.

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The complex picture in which schools demonstrate commitment to safeguarding yet remain constrained by significant structural and contextual limitations. While child-protection activities are implemented through school-based initiatives and multi-agency partnerships, these efforts are largely fragmented, reactive, and unevenly distributed across school types and geographic settings.

Institutional preparedness emerged as a central challenge. Although many schools have established Discipline Committees and a substantial proportion have formed Child Protection Committees, only a small percentage function effectively with clear procedures and regular monitoring. Awareness programs, though present, tend to be event-driven rather than embedded within routine teaching and learning. These gaps underscore the wider concern that Sri Lanka's policy frameworks—despite being comprehensive on paper—remain only partially translated into practice.

The study also highlights the profound influence of sociocultural and environmental conditions. Factors such as parental substance misuse, family instability, labor migration, and exposure to community-level crime create layered vulnerabilities that schools alone cannot mitigate. Cultural norms surrounding silence, stigma, and hierarchical communication further restrict students' willingness to disclose concerns. These findings confirm that safeguarding cannot be isolated within schools but must be addressed as part of a wider ecosystem involving families, communities, and state agencies.

Reporting mechanisms remains an area of particular concern. Formal channels are underutilized due to fears about confidentiality and potential retaliation, leading schools to rely on informal networks for information. While such practices may be pragmatic, they highlight the urgent need for secure, child-friendly reporting systems that protect anonymity and empower students to seek help safely. Digital platforms, if implemented with adequate safeguards, offer promising opportunities for strengthening this dimension.

Taken together, the findings illustrate a persistent gap between Sri Lanka's child-protection policy commitments and their operational realization in schools. Strengthening school-based safeguarding requires a coordinated, multi-level approach: institutional structures must be reinforced, teacher training must be expanded, sociocultural barriers must be addressed, and reporting pathways must be redesigned to reflect the realities of children's lived experiences. By documenting both the strengths and limitations of current practices, this study contributes empirical evidence that can inform policy refinement, professional development, curriculum design, and community engagement. Ultimately, building protective school environments is not only an educational imperative but also a national responsibility—central to ensuring that every child learns within a safe, supportive, and dignified space.

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