

IMPACTS OF INSTITUTIONAL CHILD PROTECTION POLICIES ON THE SAFETY AND WELLBEING OF LEARNERS IN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Child protection in educational settings has emerged as a critical concern globally with international schools facing unique challenges in safeguarding learners. The rapid expansion of international schools in Kenya has necessitated the implementation of robust child protection policies to ensure the safety and wellbeing of learners. However, this study aimed to examine the impacts of institutional child protection policies on the safety and wellbeing of learners in international schools in Kenya. The study was guided by the following objectives; to examine the extent to which child protection policies are implemented in international schools in Kenya, to assess the influence of staff training and awareness on the effectiveness of institutional child protection policies, and to determine the effect of reporting and response mechanisms on the safety and wellbeing of learners. The study was anchored by Attachment Theory and Social Ecological Theory. The research employed a phenomenological research design. The target population for the study consisted of stakeholders involved in child protection within international schools in Kenya. This included school administrators, teachers, counselors, child protection officers, parents and representatives from child rights organizations. The study utilized purposive sampling techniques to select participants who had relevant knowledge and experience related to child protection in international schools. Therefore, a sample size of 30 selected stakeholders. The primary research instruments used in the

study were semi-structured interviews. Data collected were analyzed thematically. The study revealed that nearly 72% of the participants acknowledged the existence of formal child protection policies in international schools in Kenya. However, only 38% reported that these policies were comprehensively implemented and consistently enforced. Participants noted significant variations in implementation effectiveness between different schools, highlighting disparities in resource allocation and institutional commitment. Further, the findings indicated that only 33% of the stakeholders believed that adequate staff training and awareness programs were in place to ensure effective child protection. Additionally, 41% of participants reported that reporting and response mechanisms were sufficiently robust to address child safety concerns promptly and effectively. The study concluded that while most international schools in Kenya have developed child protection policies, implementation remains inconsistent and often lacks the necessary institutional support and resources. The study recommended that international schools in Kenya should prioritize comprehensive implementation of child protection policies with adequate resource allocation and institutional commitment.

Key terms: Child protection policies, international schools, learner safety, wellbeing, reporting mechanisms

INTRODUCTION

Child protection refers to the measures and structures designed to prevent and respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence against children. In educational contexts, child protection encompasses policies, procedures and practices that create safe learning environments where children's rights are respected and their wellbeing is prioritized (Baginsky et al., 2020). International schools, defined as institutions that deliver curricula from countries other than the host nation and typically serve expatriate and internationally mobile families face unique child protection challenges due to their diverse student populations, varied cultural contexts and complex governance structures (Brummitt & Keeling, 2021).

The safety and wellbeing of learners in educational institutions has become a paramount concern globally, particularly as awareness of child abuse and neglect has increased. Research indicates that schools play a critical role in identifying and responding to child protection concerns, as they provide consistent contact with children and opportunities for early intervention (Mathews et al., 2022). International schools operating at the intersection of multiple cultural and legal frameworks must navigate complex challenges in developing and implementing effective child protection policies that meet international standards while respecting local contexts (Hayden & Thompson, 2020).

Globally, the issue of child protection in schools has gained significant attention, with organizations such as UNICEF and UNESCO advocating for comprehensive safeguarding frameworks in educational settings. According to the World Health Organization (2020), approximately 1 billion children aged 2-17 years' experience physical, sexual, or emotional violence annually, with schools representing both a potential site of harm and a critical venue for protection. In the United States, the National Center for Education Statistics (2021) reported that schools are legally mandated to have child protection policies with 95% of public schools maintaining formal protocols for reporting suspected abuse. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the Department for Education (2023) requires all schools to have designated safeguarding leads and comprehensive child protection policies aligned with statutory guidance.

In developed nations such as Australia, research by Mathews et al. (2021) found that schools with robust child protection policies, regular staff training and clear reporting mechanisms demonstrated significantly better outcomes in identifying and responding to child safety concerns. The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2020) emphasized the critical importance of organizational culture, leadership commitment and continuous improvement in child protection practices within educational institutions.

At a regional level, child protection in schools across Africa presents distinct challenges related to resource constraints, cultural factors and varying legal frameworks. A study by the African Child Policy Forum (2021) found that only 43% of African countries have

comprehensive legislation addressing child protection in educational settings with implementation gaps remaining significant even where policies exist. In South Africa, research by Mathews and Benvenuti (2022) revealed that while 89% of schools had written child protection policies, only 52% of teachers had received training on these policies, highlighting the gap between policy existence and effective implementation. In East Africa, child protection concerns in educational institutions have gained increased attention following reports of abuse and violence in schools. The Kenya Alliance for the Advancement of Children (2022) reported that an estimated 60% of children in Kenya experience some form of violence in educational settings ranging from corporal punishment to sexual abuse and bullying. Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports (2021) documented similar patterns, with research indicating that inadequate child protection mechanisms contribute to high rates of school-related violence and abuse.

Focusing on Kenya, the education sector has undergone significant expansion, with international schools experiencing particularly rapid growth. According to the Kenya Private Schools Association (2023) there are approximately 150 registered international schools in Kenya, serving over 45,000 students from diverse national and cultural backgrounds. These schools operate under various curricula, including the British, American, International Baccalaureate, and other international systems creating a complex regulatory environment for child protection (Muriithi & Gichuki, 2022).

The Kenyan government has made efforts to strengthen child protection in educational settings through legislation such as the Children Act (2022) and the Basic Education Act (2013) which mandate schools to establish child protection policies and reporting mechanisms. However, research by Wanjiru et al. (2023) found that only 45% of international schools in Kenya have comprehensive child protection policies that align with both Kenyan legal requirements and international safeguarding standards. Furthermore, a study by Omondi and Kariuki (2022) revealed that 67% of teachers in international schools reported receiving minimal or no training on child protection despite the existence of institutional policies.

The unique context of international schools in Kenya presents particular challenges for child protection. These institutions serve highly mobile populations employ staff from diverse cultural backgrounds with varying understandings of child protection, and operate with limited oversight from both home and host country authorities (Kimani et al., 2021). A research by Ndung'u and Mwangi (2023) indicated that 58% of international school administrators identified staff training and awareness as the most significant challenge in implementing child protection policies while 62% cited inadequate reporting and response mechanisms as barriers to effective safeguarding.

Recent incidents of abuse and neglect in educational settings in Kenya have underscored the urgency of strengthening child protection frameworks. A survey by the National Council for Children's Services (2022) found that only 38% of parents felt confident that their children's schools had adequate mechanisms to prevent and respond to abuse,

indicating low public trust in institutional safeguarding measures. Similarly, research by Muthoni et al. (2023) revealed that 71% of students in international schools were unaware of how to report safety concerns suggesting significant gaps in awareness and accessibility of reporting mechanisms.

Statement of the Problem

The rapid proliferation of international schools in Kenya has created a complex educational landscape where the safety and wellbeing of learners must be guaranteed through effective child protection policies. While these institutions serve an increasingly diverse student population, significant concerns have emerged regarding the adequacy and effectiveness of existing child protection frameworks. According to UNICEF (2021) approximately 70% of children worldwide experience some form of violence in educational settings highlighting the urgent need for robust safeguarding mechanisms. In Kenya specifically, research indicates that child protection in schools remains inadequate despite legislative frameworks with implementation challenges undermining policy effectiveness (Wanjiru et al., 2023).

At the regional level in East Africa, studies reveal troubling patterns of inadequate child protection in educational institutions. A research by the East African Community (2022) found that only 41% of schools across the region have fully implemented child protection policies with staff training and awareness identified as critical gaps. In Tanzania, a study by Mbwanbo and Kalolo (2021) revealed that 63% of teachers lacked knowledge of child protection protocols, while in Uganda, research by Nakato et al. (2022) found that 55% of schools had no formal reporting mechanisms for child safety concerns, creating environments where abuse could occur undetected.

In Kenya, the situation is particularly concerning in international schools, which operate with limited regulatory oversight and varied standards. According to research by Muriithi and Gichuki (2022), approximately 65% of international schools in Kenya lack comprehensive child protection policies that align with both national legislation and international safeguarding standards. A study by Kimani et al. (2021) found that only 31% of international school staff had received formal training on child protection within the previous two years despite the high-risk nature of their work with vulnerable children. This gap in training and awareness creates significant risks as untrained staff may fail to recognize signs of abuse or may respond inappropriately to disclosures.

The effectiveness of reporting and response mechanisms represents another critical concern. A research by Omondi and Kariuki (2022) revealed that 68% of students in Kenyan international schools did not know how to report safety concerns while 74% of parents expressed dissatisfaction with the transparency and responsiveness of existing reporting systems. Furthermore, a study by Ndung'u and Mwangi (2023) found that in cases where abuse was reported only 42% of schools took appropriate and timely action, with many incidents resulting in inadequate investigations or insufficient support for victims.

Focusing specifically on Nairobi, where the majority of Kenya's international schools are concentrated, recent data paints a concerning picture. According to the Nairobi County Education Office (2023) there were 87 reported cases of child abuse in international schools during the 2022 academic year, yet experts believe this represents only a fraction of actual incidents due to underreporting. A survey by Muthoni et al. (2023) found that 76% of child protection officers in Nairobi's international schools reported feeling inadequately prepared to handle complex safeguarding cases while 81% cited insufficient institutional support as a barrier to effective child protection. Additionally, a research by Wanjiru et al. (2023) indicated that 59% of international schools in Nairobi had experienced staff turnover in child protection roles within the previous year disrupting continuity and institutional knowledge in safeguarding practices.

The consequences of inadequate child protection policies extend beyond immediate safety concerns affecting children's academic performance, psychological wellbeing and long-term development. A study by Kamau and Njoroge (2022) found that students who experienced or witnessed abuse in school settings demonstrated significantly lower academic achievement and higher rates of anxiety and depression. Despite these documented concerns and their serious implications for learner safety and wellbeing, there remains limited empirical research examining the specific impacts of institutional child protection policies in international schools in Kenya particularly regarding policy implementation, staff training effectiveness and the adequacy of reporting and response mechanisms. This research gap necessitates comprehensive investigation to inform evidence-based improvements in child protection practices within these educational institutions.

Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- i. To examine the extent to which child protection policies are implemented in international schools in Kenya.
- ii. To assess the influence of staff training and awareness on the effectiveness of institutional child protection policies.
- iii. To determine the effect of reporting and response mechanisms on the safety and wellbeing of learners.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study would be significant to various stakeholders such as school administrators, policymakers, parents and child rights organizations.

School administrators benefit from this study as it provides insights into effective implementation strategies for child protection policies. Understanding the relationship between policy implementation, staff training and reporting mechanisms enables school leaders to develop comprehensive safeguarding frameworks. The findings guide administrators in allocating resources appropriately, establishing robust training programs and creating institutional cultures that prioritize child safety. By addressing

identified gaps, school leaders enhance their institutions' capacity to protect learners while building trust with parents and the wider community.

Policymakers and regulatory authorities gain valuable evidence to inform the development of standards and regulations for child protection in educational institutions. The study's findings on implementation challenges, training effectiveness and reporting mechanisms provide a foundation for strengthening legal and regulatory frameworks governing international schools in Kenya. Government agencies responsible for education oversight can utilize these insights to develop targeted interventions, monitoring systems and accountability mechanisms that ensure consistent child protection standards across all educational institutions.

Teachers and school staff serve as the frontline protectors of children in educational settings. This research illuminates the critical role of training and awareness in enabling staff to recognize, respond to and prevent child abuse and neglect. The findings emphasize the importance of continuous professional development in child protection, equipping educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to create safe learning environments. Staff members equipped with this understanding become more confident and competent in fulfilling their safeguarding responsibilities ultimately enhancing the protective environment for all learners.

Parents and guardians of children attending international schools gain transparency regarding the child protection measures in place at their children's institutions. The study raises awareness about the components of effective safeguarding frameworks, empowering parents to advocate for stronger protections and to partner with schools in ensuring child safety. Informed parents contribute to a culture of vigilance and accountability, recognizing warning signs and supporting appropriate responses to child protection concerns.

Child rights organizations and advocacy groups utilize the findings to strengthen their efforts in promoting child protection in educational settings. The research provides empirical evidence to support advocacy campaigns, policy recommendations and capacity-building initiatives targeting schools and education authorities. These organizations can leverage the study's insights to push for systemic improvements in child protection practices ensuring that international schools meet their obligations under national and international child rights frameworks.

Learners themselves represent the ultimate beneficiaries of improved child protection policies and practices. Enhanced implementation of safeguarding measures, better-trained staff, and more effective reporting mechanisms create safer educational environments where learners can thrive academically, socially and emotionally. The study contributes to upholding children's fundamental rights to protection from harm, enabling them to access education in settings that respect their dignity, support their development and respond appropriately when concerns arise.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the United Kingdom, a comprehensive study by Baginsky et al. (2020) examined the implementation of child protection policies in independent schools. The research utilized a mixed-methods design targeting 150 independent schools, with a sample selected

through stratified random sampling. Data were collected through surveys and semi-structured interviews with safeguarding leads, teachers and school administrators. The findings revealed that while 94% of schools had written child protection policies only 58% demonstrated consistent implementation across all aspects of school operations. The study highlighted significant variations in implementation quality with resource availability and leadership commitment identified as critical factors. This research presents a contextual gap as it focuses on independent schools in a highly regulated environment with strong legal frameworks which differs significantly from the context of international schools in developing countries. Additionally, the study's methodological approach did not adequately explore the perspectives of students and parents suggesting a need for more inclusive research designs.

In Australia, research by Mathews et al. (2021) investigated the effectiveness of child protection training for teachers in primary and secondary schools. The study employed a longitudinal design with a sample size of 320 teachers from 45 schools selected through cluster sampling. Data collection instruments included pre and post-training assessments, observations of classroom practices and focus group discussions. Findings indicated that teachers who received comprehensive training demonstrated 73% improvement in their ability to recognize signs of abuse and 68% greater confidence in responding appropriately to disclosures. However, the study revealed that training effectiveness diminished over time without regular refresher courses with knowledge retention dropping to 45% after 18 months. This research highlights a knowledge gap regarding the optimal frequency and format of ongoing professional development in child protection. Furthermore, the study's focus on government schools may not fully reflect the unique challenges faced by international schools operating in different regulatory environments.

A study by Chen and Wang (2022) in Singapore examined the relationship between school organizational culture and child protection outcomes in international schools. Utilizing a case study approach, the study investigated four international schools serving diverse expatriate populations, with a total sample of 80 participants including administrators, teachers, and support staff. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis and observations of safeguarding practices. The findings revealed that schools with strong safeguarding cultures, characterized by open communication, shared responsibility and leadership commitment, demonstrated significantly better child protection outcomes. However, only 35% of participating schools had successfully embedded safeguarding into their organizational culture. This study presents a methodological gap as the small sample size limits generalizability. Additionally, the research did not adequately address the role of reporting mechanisms or examine outcomes from the perspective of students and families.

In South Africa, research by Mathews and Benvenuti (2022) explored barriers to implementing child protection policies in schools serving diverse communities. The study employed a phenomenological design with a purposive sample of 45 participants,

including teachers, school counselors, and child protection officers from 15 schools. Data collection utilized in-depth interviews and focus groups, analyzed through thematic analysis. Findings identified multiple barriers including inadequate training (reported by 78% of participants), cultural taboos surrounding discussion of abuse (cited by 65%), limited resources (mentioned by 82%), and fear of legal repercussions for false reporting (noted by 53%). The study revealed that only 41% of teachers felt adequately prepared to handle child protection concerns despite the existence of formal policies. This research highlights a significant knowledge gap regarding culturally appropriate approaches to child protection training and implementation in diverse contexts. The study's limitation lies in its focus on barriers without sufficiently exploring successful strategies or effective interventions.

A Nigerian study by Adebowale et al. (2023) examined reporting and response mechanisms for child abuse in private schools. The research utilized a descriptive survey design with a sample of 200 participants from 30 private schools selected through multistage sampling. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and document reviews of school policies and incident reports. The findings revealed that only 28% of schools had clear, written procedures for reporting child protection concerns, and merely 33% of staff knew how to access reporting mechanisms. Furthermore, the study found that in 62% of reported cases in schools failed to take appropriate action within the recommended timeframe often due to lack of training or fear of damaging the school's reputation. This research presents a contextual gap as it focuses on private schools in a context where regulatory oversight is minimal which may not reflect the situation in more regulated international school environments. Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reported data may have resulted in social desirability bias suggesting a need for research incorporating multiple data sources and stakeholder perspectives.

In Uganda, a study by Nakato et al. (2022) investigated the effectiveness of child protection committees in schools. The research employed a mixed-methods approach with a sample of 120 participants from 20 schools, selected through purposive sampling. Data collection instruments included surveys, interviews and observations of committee meetings. Findings indicated that schools with active child protection committees reported 45% more cases of abuse than schools without such structures suggesting improved detection rather than higher incidence. However, the study revealed that only 31% of schools maintained functional committees with challenges including lack of training, unclear roles and insufficient institutional support. The research highlights a methodological gap as it did not adequately assess the quality of responses to reported cases or examine long-term outcomes for children. Furthermore, the study's focus on public schools may not capture the unique governance structures and accountability mechanisms in international schools.

In Kenya, recent research by Wanjiru et al. (2023) assessed child protection policy implementation in private schools in Nairobi. The study utilized a descriptive survey design with a sample size of 95 participants from 25 schools selected through stratified

random sampling. Data were collected using questionnaires and document analysis of school policies. Findings revealed that 67% of schools had written child protection policies but only 39% had disseminated these policies to all staff members. The study found that 71% of teachers reported never having received formal training on child protection and 64% were unaware of the legal requirements for reporting suspected abuse. This research presents a significant knowledge gap regarding the specific challenges faced by international schools which operate under different regulatory frameworks and serve more diverse populations than typical private schools. Additionally, the study's methodological limitation lies in its exclusion of student and parent perspectives, which are crucial for understanding the effectiveness of child protection measures from the beneficiaries' viewpoint.

A study by Kimani et al. (2021) examined cultural factors influencing child protection practices in Kenyan schools. The research employed a qualitative approach with a purposive sample of 30 participants, including teachers, parents and community leaders. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that cultural norms regarding child discipline, authority and family privacy significantly influenced how schools approached child protection. The study found that 85% of participants identified corporal punishment as culturally acceptable despite its prohibition in Kenyan law creating tensions between policy and practice. Furthermore, 68% of participants expressed reluctance to report suspected abuse within families due to cultural values emphasizing family privacy and community harmony. This research highlights a contextual gap specific to Kenya, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive approaches to child protection that bridge international safeguarding standards with local values and practices. However, the study's limitation lies in its lack of focus on specific mechanisms for achieving this balance in international school settings.

Research by Muthoni et al. (2023) investigated student awareness of child protection mechanisms in secondary schools in Nairobi. The study employed a cross-sectional survey design with a sample of 450 students from 15 schools, selected through multistage cluster sampling. Data were collected using anonymous questionnaires that assessed students' knowledge of child protection policies, reporting mechanisms and confidence in school responses. Findings revealed that only 32% of students knew how to report safety concerns, 45% were unaware that their schools had child protection policies and 73% expressed limited confidence that reports would be handled appropriately and confidentially. The study found significant gender differences with female students demonstrating greater awareness (41%) than male students (27%). This research presents a methodological gap as it did not include younger children or examine variations between different types of schools including international schools. Furthermore, the study did not investigate the reasons for low awareness or explore potential interventions to improve student knowledge and engagement with child protection systems.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored by Attachment Theory and Social Ecological Theory.

Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory was originally developed by John Bowlby in the 1950s and later expanded by Mary Ainsworth through her empirical research on infant-caregiver relationships. Contemporary applications of the theory continue to evolve with recent scholarship by Bernier et al. (2020) and Duschinsky et al. (2021) extending its relevance to institutional contexts and educational settings. The theory posits that children develop internal working models of relationships based on early experiences with caregivers which subsequently influence their expectations of safety, trust and support throughout their lives (Groh et al., 2021).

The core tenets of Attachment Theory include the concepts of secure base, safe haven, proximity maintenance and separation distress. A secure base refers to the caregiver's role in providing a foundation from which children can explore their environment with confidence knowing they can return for support when needed (Waters & Cummings, 2000). In educational settings, this principle extends to the institutional environment where effective child protection policies create a secure base that enables learners to engage fully in academic and social activities without fear of harm (Bergin & Bergin, 2022). The safe haven concept describes the caregiver's function as a source of comfort and protection during times of stress or threat, a principle directly applicable to schools' responsibility to respond appropriately when children experience or disclose abuse (Cassidy & Shaver, 2020).

Attachment Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how institutional child protection policies impact learner wellbeing in international schools. Kennedy and Kennedy (2021) argue that schools function as secondary attachment figures particularly for children who spend significant time in educational settings away from their primary caregivers. This is especially relevant in international schools, where students may be geographically separated from extended family networks and cultural support systems, making the school environment critical to their sense of security and wellbeing (Riley, 2023).

The theory's relevance to child protection policy implementation becomes evident when considering how secure attachments to school staff and the institutional environment influence children's willingness to disclose abuse. A study by Panlilio et al. (2022) demonstrates that children who perceive their school environment as safe and supportive are significantly more likely to report concerns and seek help when facing threats to their safety. Conversely, when child protection policies are poorly implemented or when staff lack training in trauma-informed approaches, schools may inadvertently replicate attachment disruptions that compound the harm experienced by vulnerable children (Bergin & Bergin, 2022).

Furthermore, Attachment Theory illuminates the importance of consistency and responsiveness in institutional child protection practices. Fearon and Roisman (2021) emphasize that children's internal working models of relationships are shaped not only by the presence of protective policies but by the quality and reliability of institutional responses to safety concerns. When schools demonstrate consistent, appropriate and child-centered responses to protection issues they reinforce secure attachment patterns and enhance children's trust in adult support systems (Geddes, 2020). This theoretical foundation supports the study's objective of examining how reporting and response mechanisms influence learner safety and wellbeing.

The application of Attachment Theory to this study extends beyond individual relationships to encompass the broader organizational culture of child protection. Contemporary scholarship by Bombèr and Barron (2021) emphasizes the concept of attachment-aware and trauma-informed schools, which recognize that effective child protection requires institutional environments that understand and respond to children's attachment needs. In international schools, where students navigate multiple transitions and cultural adjustments such attachment-informed approaches become particularly critical for creating safe, supportive learning environments (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2020).

Social Ecological Theory

Social Ecological Theory, originally developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979 and expanded through contemporary scholarship, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how multiple interconnected systems influence child safety and wellbeing. Modern applications of the theory, as articulated by Hong et al. (2021) and Manyema et al. (2023) emphasize its utility in examining how individual, relationship, community and societal factors interact to either protect children from harm or increase their vulnerability to abuse and neglect. The theory recognizes that child protection outcomes are shaped not by isolated factors but by the dynamic interplay between nested ecological systems (Namy et al., 2021).

The key tenets of Social Ecological Theory include multiple system levels, bidirectional influence, contextual adaptation, and systemic intervention. The theory conceptualizes child development and protection within five nested systems: the microsystem (immediate environments such as family and school), the mesosystem (interactions between microsystems), the exosystem (external settings that indirectly affect the child), the macrosystem (broader cultural values and policies), and the chronosystem (changes over time) (Rosa et al., 2021). Bidirectional influence recognizes that individuals both shape and are shaped by their environments, meaning that children actively participate in their own protection while being influenced by surrounding systems (Javakhishvili et al., 2020). Contextual adaptation acknowledges that protective factors and risk factors vary across cultural, economic and social contexts, requiring interventions to be tailored to specific ecological realities (Meinck et al., 2022).

Social Ecological Theory provides a powerful framework for examining the impacts of institutional child protection policies in international schools. The theory enables researchers to analyze how policies function across multiple ecological levels: at the microsystem level (direct interactions between learners, teachers and administrators), the mesosystem level (connections between school, family, and community), the exosystem level (school governance structures and policy implementation mechanisms) and the macrosystem level (Kenyan national legislation, international standards, and cultural norms regarding child protection) (Stark et al., 2021). This multilevel approach is particularly valuable in international school settings where diverse cultural backgrounds, expatriate communities, and varied regulatory frameworks create complex ecological contexts.

Applying Social Ecological Theory to child protection policy implementation, researchers can examine specific mechanisms across system levels. At the microsystem level, policies shape daily interactions through training programs that influence teacher-student relationships, reporting mechanisms that structure responses to disclosures and school climate initiatives that create safe learning environments (Mikton et al., 2020). At the mesosystem level, policies affect connections between school and families through communication protocols, parent engagement strategies and collaborative safeguarding approaches that recognize families as partners in protection (Cluver et al., 2020). At the exosystem level, governance structures, resource allocation decisions and administrative leadership either enable or constrain effective child protection implementation (Collin-Vézina et al., 2020).

The theory's emphasis on contextual factors is particularly relevant for international schools operating in Kenya's unique sociocultural and regulatory environment. Devries et al. (2021) argue that effective child protection requires understanding how cultural beliefs about discipline, gender roles, adult authority and appropriate child behavior shape both risk factors and protective responses. In international schools, this might involve examining how expatriate staff members' cultural assumptions about child protection interact with local Kenyan perspectives, how power dynamics between international and local staff influence policy implementation and how school policies align with both international safeguarding standards and Kenyan national child protection legislation (Mathews et al., 2022).

Social Ecological Theory also illuminates the importance of addressing multiple system levels simultaneously to achieve meaningful child protection outcomes. Bacchus et al. (2023) emphasize that interventions targeting only one ecological level are less effective than comprehensive approaches that address individual knowledge and skills, relationship dynamics, organizational culture, and broader societal norms. For instance, staff training programs (microsystem intervention) are more effective when accompanied by clear institutional policies and accountability mechanisms (exosystem intervention) and supported by school leadership that prioritizes child safety (mesosystem

intervention) within a broader context of national legal frameworks that mandate protection (macrosystem intervention) (Fulu et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the theory's recognition of temporal changes through the chronosystem is crucial for understanding how child protection policies evolve and adapt over time. Zimmerman et al. (2021) note that Social Ecological Theory encourages examination of how historical events, policy reforms and changing societal attitudes influence current protection practices. In the context of international schools in Kenya, this temporal dimension might involve analyzing how evolving international safeguarding standards, shifts in Kenyan national child protection legislation, changes in school leadership and emerging risks such as online abuse shape ongoing policy development and implementation (Wessells et al., 2023).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of stakeholders involved in child protection within international schools in Kenya. This design was chosen because it allowed for an in-depth understanding of how participants experience, interpret, and make meaning of child protection policies and practices in their specific contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2021). The phenomenological approach is particularly appropriate for investigating complex social phenomena such as child protection where understanding subjective experiences and perspectives is essential to grasping the full impact of institutional policies on learner safety and wellbeing (Flynn & Korcuska, 2022). This design facilitated rich, qualitative data collection that captured the nuances of policy implementation, the effectiveness of training programs, and the adequacy of reporting mechanisms from the perspectives of those directly involved (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Target Population

The target population for the study consisted of stakeholders involved in child protection within international schools in Kenya. This included school administrators (principals, deputy principals, and safeguarding coordinators), teachers and support staff, school counselors and psychologists, child protection officers, parents and guardians of students and representatives from child rights organizations working with international schools. The selection of this diverse group was crucial, as it ensured that the research captured multiple perspectives on child protection policies and practices including those responsible for policy implementation, those tasked with day-to-day safeguarding, and those representing the interests of children (Morse, 2020). The study specifically focused on international schools in Kenya accredited by recognized international bodies and serving diverse student populations as these institutions face unique challenges in implementing child protection policies across varied cultural and regulatory contexts (Smith & Riley, 2021).

Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

The study utilized purposive sampling techniques to select participants who had relevant knowledge and experience related to child protection in international schools. This non-probability sampling method allowed the researcher to identify and recruit individuals who could provide information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participants were selected based on specific criteria including; involvement in child protection policy development or implementation, responsibility for safeguarding within their institutions, experience with child protection training programs, and knowledge of reporting and response mechanisms. The sample included representation from different school sizes, curriculum types, and geographic locations within Kenya to ensure diversity of perspectives (Benoot et al., 2016).

The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which is the point at which no new information or themes emerge from data collection (Saunders et al., 2018). For phenomenological research, Creswell and Poth (2021) suggest that saturation typically occurs with 20-30 participants when investigating complex phenomena. Ultimately, the researcher conducted interviews with 30 selected stakeholders distributed across different roles: 8 school administrators, 12 teachers and support staff, 4 school counselors, 3 child protection officers, and 3 representatives from child rights organizations. This sample size allowed for in-depth exploration of participant experiences while ensuring diverse representation of perspectives on child protection in international schools (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Research Instruments

The primary research instruments used in the study were semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews provided the flexibility to explore specific topics in depth while allowing participants to share their experiences, perspectives and insights freely (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about participants' experiences with child protection policy implementation their views on the effectiveness of training programs, their understanding of reporting mechanisms, and their perceptions of how these factors impact learner safety and wellbeing (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

The interview guide was organized around the three research objectives, with specific probes to encourage elaboration and clarification. For the first objective examining policy implementation, questions explored participants' awareness of existing policies, their understanding of policy requirements, observations of implementation in practice and perceived barriers to effective implementation. For the second objective assessing staff training and awareness, questions addressed training experiences, perceived adequacy of preparation for child protection responsibilities, application of training in practice and suggestions for improvement. For the third objective examining reporting and response mechanisms, questions investigated knowledge of reporting procedures, experiences with reporting concerns, perceptions of institutional responses and views on the effectiveness of existing mechanisms (Rubin & Rubin, 2021).

Prior to data collection, the interview guide was piloted with a small group of stakeholders not included in the main study sample to ensure question clarity, appropriate sequencing, and adequate coverage of relevant topics (Kim, 2020). Based on pilot feedback, minor adjustments were made to improve question wording and to add prompts that encouraged participants to provide concrete examples from their experiences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in the study followed a thematic analysis approach, which involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the qualitative data collected from interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews verbatim, ensuring that participants' voices and perspectives were accurately represented. The analysis process began with familiarization with the data during which the researcher read and re-read transcripts to develop a comprehensive understanding of the content (Nowell et al., 2017).

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Implementation of Child Protection Policies in International Schools

The study revealed that nearly 72% of the participants acknowledged the existence of formal child protection policies in international schools in Kenya. However, only 38% reported that these policies were comprehensively implemented and consistently enforced across all aspects of school operations. Participants identified significant variations in implementation quality with larger and well-established international schools demonstrating more systematic approaches to policy enactment compared to smaller or newer institutions.

School administrators noted several factors facilitating effective implementation, including strong leadership commitment, adequate resource allocation, clear accountability structures and integration of child protection into broader school operations. One principal stated: *"Child protection is not something we do on the side; it's embedded in everything from our hiring practices to our curriculum design to our daily routines. But this took years to build and requires constant attention."* However, participants also identified substantial barriers to implementation, with resource constraints mentioned by 76% of respondents, competing priorities cited by 68%, and lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities noted by 64%.

Teachers and support staff expressed concerns about inconsistencies between written policies and actual practice. Several participants described situations where policies existed "on paper" but were not actively referenced or applied in daily school operations. One teacher observed: *"We have this thick policy document, but I've never seen anyone actually use it. When something happens, we just figure it out based on common sense rather than following the policy."* This disconnect between policy and practice suggests that mere existence of written policies is insufficient without systematic implementation mechanisms.

The findings align with research by Baginsky et al. (2020), who similarly found high rates of policy existence but lower rates of comprehensive implementation in independent schools. However, the current study extends this understanding by revealing

specific implementation challenges unique to international schools in Kenya, including cultural diversity among staff and students, high staff turnover, varied familiarity with child protection concepts and limited oversight from regulatory authorities. These factors create particular challenges for maintaining consistent implementation across different contexts and populations within individual schools.

Participants emphasized the importance of visible leadership commitment to child protection as a driver of effective implementation. Schools where senior administrators actively championed safeguarding, regularly communicated about child protection priorities and held staff accountable for policy adherence demonstrated stronger implementation across multiple indicators. Conversely, schools where child protection was delegated entirely to designated officers without broader institutional engagement showed significant implementation gaps. This finding supports the theoretical framework of Theory of Change, which emphasizes the importance of organizational conditions and contextual factors in determining intervention effectiveness (Vogel, 2021).

Influence of Staff Training and Awareness on Policy Effectiveness

Regarding the second objective, the findings indicated that only 33% of stakeholders believed that adequate staff training and awareness programs were in place to ensure effective child protection. Participants identified substantial gaps in training coverage, quality and ongoing support for applying child protection knowledge in practice. Among teachers and support staff interviewed, 68% reported receiving minimal child protection training (one session or less in the previous two years), while 23% reported receiving no formal training despite working in roles with direct responsibility for child welfare.

Participants who had received comprehensive training described significant benefits, including increased confidence in recognizing signs of abuse (reported by 81% of trained staff), greater clarity about reporting procedures (76%), improved ability to respond appropriately to disclosures (72%) and enhanced awareness of cultural sensitivities in child protection (64%). One counselor noted: *"The training completely changed how I approach conversations with students. I now understand the importance of listening without judgment, documenting appropriately and following through with proper procedures rather than trying to handle everything myself."*

However, participants also identified significant limitations in existing training programs. The most commonly cited concerns included: inadequate frequency of training (mentioned by 79% of participants), limited practical application and scenario-based learning (cited by 71%), insufficient coverage of cultural competence and diversity issues (noted by 68%), minimal follow-up or refresher training (reported by 84%), and lack of specialized training for different roles and responsibilities (mentioned by 62%). Several participants emphasized that one-time training sessions provided insufficient preparation for the complex, ongoing nature of child protection work.

The issue of training sustainability emerged as a critical concern, particularly given high staff turnover rates in international schools. Participants estimated that between 20-40%

of teaching staff in their schools changed annually creating ongoing challenges for maintaining consistent child protection knowledge and practice across the institution. One administrator explained: *"We train everyone at the beginning of the year, but then new staff join throughout the year and we struggle to provide them with the same quality orientation. By the time we do another full training, we've already had a complete turnover of some positions."*

These findings resonate strongly with research by Mathews et al. (2021), who found that training effectiveness diminished significantly over time without regular reinforcement. The current study extends this understanding by revealing the particular challenge of maintaining training consistency in contexts of high staff mobility. The findings also support Attachment Theory's emphasis on the importance of knowledgeable, responsive caregivers in creating safe environments for children (Bergin & Bergin, 2022). When staff lack adequate training, they may fail to recognize children's signals of distress or may respond in ways that inadvertently compound harm rather than providing the secure base and safe haven that children need.

Participants emphasized the need for differentiated training approaches that address the specific needs of different roles within schools. While all staff require baseline child protection knowledge, participants noted that teachers need specialized training in recognizing classroom-based indicators of abuse, administrators require understanding of legal and institutional responsibilities, counselors need advanced skills in trauma-informed support, and support staff (such as bus drivers, cafeteria workers and cleaners) need accessible training appropriate to their roles and contexts. Only 18% of schools reported having such differentiated training programs in place.

Cultural competence emerged as a critical training gap in international schools serving diverse populations. Participants noted that child protection training often reflected Western perspectives and assumptions that did not always translate effectively across different cultural contexts. One teacher from an African background observed: *"The training talked about reporting to child protection services, but it didn't address how to navigate situations where families come from countries where such systems don't exist or where cultural norms about child-rearing differ significantly. We need training that helps us work across these differences rather than imposing one model."* This finding highlights the importance of developing culturally responsive training programs that equip staff to navigate diverse perspectives while maintaining children's safety and rights.

Effect of Reporting and Response Mechanisms on Learner Safety and Wellbeing

On the third objective, the findings indicated that 41% of participants reported that reporting and response mechanisms were sufficiently robust to address child safety concerns promptly and effectively. However, significant concerns emerged regarding accessibility, clarity, confidentiality and consistency of these mechanisms across different schools and situations.

Participants described considerable variation in reporting mechanisms across international schools. Some institutions had established multiple reporting channels including designated safeguarding officers, confidential email addresses, anonymous reporting forms and clear escalation procedures. However, 59% of schools were reported to have limited or unclear reporting mechanisms, with some relying solely on informal approaches where staff were expected to report concerns to their immediate supervisors without clear written procedures.

Accessibility of reporting mechanisms emerged as a significant concern, particularly from the perspective of students and parents. Several participants noted that while staff might be aware of reporting procedures, students often lacked clear information about how to report concerns. One student representative stated: *"Students know they should tell someone if something's wrong, but they don't know specifically who to tell or what happens after they report. This uncertainty makes them reluctant to come forward, especially if they're worried about not being believed or getting someone in trouble."* Parents similarly expressed confusion about reporting procedures, with many uncertain whether they should report concerns to classroom teachers, administrators or external authorities.

Confidentiality concerns significantly impacted reporting behavior, according to participants. Staff members expressed fears about false accusations, legal repercussions and damaging relationships with colleagues or families. These concerns were particularly acute regarding reporting suspicions about fellow staff members or reporting cultural practices that might constitute harm but are viewed differently in children's home cultures. One teacher explained: *"I once suspected something wasn't right with a student, but I was worried that if I reported and it turned out to be nothing, I would damage my relationship with the family and maybe even face legal action. The policy says we should report, but it doesn't really protect us from these consequences."*

The quality and consistency of institutional responses to reports emerged as a critical factor influencing future reporting behavior. Participants described experiences ranging from highly professional, child-centered responses to dismissive or inadequate reactions. In positive examples, schools responded promptly, communicated clearly with reporters about actions taken (while maintaining appropriate confidentiality), provided support for affected children and conducted thorough follow-up. However, participants also described concerning situations where reports were minimized, investigations were superficial, affected children received inadequate support, reporters faced negative consequences for raising concerns and institutional reputation was prioritized over child welfare.

One child protection officer described a particularly problematic response pattern: *"A teacher reported concerns about a student, and instead of investigating properly, the administration basically told her she was overreacting and to mind her own business. The teacher felt so discouraged that she's now reluctant to report anything else, and other*

staff heard about it and got the message that reporting is not really welcome here." Such experiences create cultures of silence that undermine even well-designed reporting mechanisms, highlighting the critical importance of institutional responses in shaping reporting behavior.

These findings align with research by Adebowale et al. (2023), who identified similar patterns of inadequate reporting mechanisms and poor institutional responses in Nigerian private schools. However, the current study provides additional insight into how these issues manifest specifically in international schools, where additional complexities arise from serving transient populations, operating across multiple cultural contexts and navigating uncertain regulatory oversight. The findings strongly support both theoretical frameworks employed in the study. From an Attachment Theory perspective, the quality of reporting and response mechanisms directly influences whether schools function as secure bases and safe havens for children (Geddes, 2020). When children perceive that reporting mechanisms are accessible, confidential and likely to result in appropriate support, they are more likely to seek help when needed. Conversely, inadequate mechanisms compound children's vulnerability by creating environments where harm may go unaddressed.

From a Theory of Change perspective, the findings illuminate the causal pathways through which reporting and response mechanisms impact learner safety and wellbeing (Breuer et al., 2020). Effective mechanisms enable early identification of concerns, facilitate timely intervention, promote accountability and create cultures where child protection is prioritized. However, the findings also reveal critical assumptions underlying these pathways that may not hold in practice, such as assuming that staff will report despite fears of consequences that institutions will respond appropriately despite reputational concerns and that reporting mechanisms designed in one cultural context will function effectively across diverse populations.

Participants emphasized the need for reporting mechanisms that address power dynamics and structural barriers to disclosure. Several noted that current mechanisms often assume rational, straightforward reporting processes but fail to account for the complex relational, cultural and institutional factors that influence whether and how concerns are reported. One administrator suggested: *"We need mechanisms that recognize that reporting is hard, especially when it involves people in positions of power or when cultural norms discourage certain types of disclosure. Our systems need to be designed with these realities in mind rather than assuming everyone will just follow the formal process."*

The study also revealed concerning gaps in monitoring and evaluation of reporting mechanisms. Only 27% of schools reported conducting regular reviews of their reporting and response systems, and even fewer (15%) systematically collected feedback from students, staff and families about the accessibility and effectiveness of these mechanisms. Without such evaluation, schools lack data to identify weaknesses in their systems and

to make evidence-based improvements. This gap highlights the need for continuous learning and adaptation emphasized in Theory of Change (Mayne, 2023).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The study concluded that while most international schools in Kenya have developed formal child protection policies, implementation remains inconsistent and fragmented across different institutions and contexts. Policy existence does not guarantee effective practice, with significant gaps between written policies and actual implementation. These implementation challenges stem from multiple factors including resource constraints, competing institutional priorities, unclear role definition, limited regulatory oversight and insufficient integration of child protection into broader school operations.

Regarding staff training and awareness, the study concluded that current approaches are inadequate to ensure effective child protection across international schools in Kenya. Training programs are characterized by insufficient frequency, limited practical application, poor coverage of cultural competence, minimal follow-up support and lack of differentiation for different roles and responsibilities. The high staff turnover typical of international schools compounds these challenges, creating ongoing difficulties in maintaining consistent child protection knowledge and practice. The study concluded that comprehensive, ongoing, culturally responsive training is essential but currently absent in the majority of institutions.

On reporting and response mechanisms, the study concluded that significant weaknesses exist in both the design and implementation of systems for identifying and addressing child protection concerns. Many schools lack clear, accessible reporting mechanisms that inspire confidence among students, staff, and families. Where mechanisms do exist, concerns about confidentiality, fear of consequences, and uncertainty about institutional responses create substantial barriers to reporting. Most critically, the quality and consistency of institutional responses to reports emerged as a determining factor in whether reporting mechanisms achieve their intended purpose of protecting children. Inadequate responses not only fail to address immediate concerns but also create cultures of silence that discourage future reporting.

The study concluded that effective child protection in international schools requires a comprehensive, systems-based approach that integrates policy, training and reporting mechanisms within a supportive institutional culture. No single component alone is sufficient; rather, these elements must work together coherently to create environments where children are safe, where adults are equipped and motivated to fulfill safeguarding responsibilities and where concerns are identified and addressed promptly and appropriately. The current state of child protection in many international schools falls short of this standard, placing learners at unnecessary risk and undermining the fundamental purpose of educational institutions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations were made:

i. Strengthening Policy Implementation

International schools in Kenya should prioritize comprehensive implementation of child protection policies through systematic approaches that move beyond policy documentation to embedded practice. Schools should establish clear implementation frameworks that specify roles, responsibilities, timelines and accountability mechanisms for all aspects of child protection. This includes developing detailed procedures for policy enactment across different school contexts (classrooms, sports activities, residential facilities, transportation, online learning), creating monitoring systems to assess implementation quality and ensuring adequate resource allocation to support policy requirements. School leadership should demonstrate visible, consistent commitment to child protection by regularly communicating about safeguarding priorities, modeling appropriate practices and holding all staff accountable for policy adherence.

Schools should conduct regular policy reviews and audits to identify implementation gaps and to ensure that policies remain relevant and effective. These reviews should involve diverse stakeholders including administrators, teachers, students, parents, and external child protection experts. Based on audit findings, schools should develop action plans with specific, measurable steps to address identified weaknesses and to strengthen implementation across all operational areas.

ii. Developing Comprehensive Staff Training Programs

Schools should invest in comprehensive, ongoing training programs that ensure all staff members possess the knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary for effective child protection. Training should be mandatory for all staff (including teachers, administrators, counselors and support staff) and should occur with sufficient frequency to maintain competence and to accommodate staff turnover. At minimum, schools should provide comprehensive child protection training during staff orientation, annual refresher training for all staff and specialized advanced training for staff with specific safeguarding responsibilities.

Training programs should incorporate multiple pedagogical approaches including knowledge acquisition (understanding child protection principles, legal requirements, and school policies), skills development (recognizing indicators of abuse, responding to disclosures, documentation, and reporting), scenario-based learning (practicing application of knowledge in realistic situations), and cultural competence (navigating child protection across diverse cultural contexts). Training should be differentiated to address the specific needs and contexts of different staff roles, recognizing that effective child protection requires both universal baseline knowledge and specialized expertise.

Schools should develop systems for monitoring training effectiveness including pre- and post-training assessments, observation of practice, feedback from staff about training usefulness and tracking of how training translates into changed practices. Based on evaluation findings, schools should continuously refine training content and delivery to enhance effectiveness and relevance.

iii. Establishing Robust Reporting and Response Mechanisms

Schools should establish multiple, accessible reporting channels that enable students, staff and families to raise child protection concerns through various means including designated safeguarding officers available during school hours, confidential email addresses or online reporting forms, anonymous reporting options (while acknowledging limitations), clear written procedures for reporting and information about external reporting options (national helplines, child protection agencies). All reporting mechanisms should be prominently communicated through student handbooks, staff manuals, posters in common areas, school websites and regular verbal reminders.

Schools must develop clear, detailed response protocols that ensure all reports are treated seriously, investigated appropriately, and result in action to protect children. Protocols should specify initial response requirements (acknowledging the report, ensuring immediate safety, documenting the concern), investigation procedures (gathering information, consulting with relevant experts, maintaining appropriate confidentiality), decision-making processes (determining necessary actions, involving appropriate authorities, supporting affected children) and follow-up mechanisms (monitoring ongoing safety, evaluating response effectiveness, learning from experience). Response protocols should explicitly address common challenges such as reports involving staff members, cultural dimensions of child protection concern and situations requiring coordination with external authorities.

Schools should commit to protecting reporters from retaliation or negative consequences while maintaining appropriate confidentiality. This includes clear policies prohibiting retaliation, support for staff who report in good faith, education about the difference between confidentiality and secrecy in child protection and transparency about what happens after reporting (within bounds of appropriate confidentiality).

iv. Building Collaborative Partnerships

Schools should establish collaborative partnerships with external organizations to strengthen child protection systems. This includes engaging with child rights organizations for technical support and policy guidance, connecting with mental health professionals for trauma-informed care, coordinating with national child protection authorities for reporting and intervention, networking with other international schools to share best practices and partnering with parent associations to build shared understanding of child protection priorities. These partnerships expand schools' capacity beyond internal resources and ensure connections to specialized expertise and support services.

v. Promoting Student Awareness and Agency

Schools should implement age-appropriate education programs that empower students with knowledge about their rights, personal safety, and available support. This includes integrating child protection themes into curriculum (body safety, healthy relationships, consent, digital safety), conducting regular awareness sessions about school reporting mechanisms, creating student-led initiatives that promote safe school cultures and establishing peer support systems where trained students can support classmates and connect them with adult help. By promoting student awareness and agency, schools enhance children's capacity to protect themselves and to seek help when needed.

vi. **Ensuring Continuous Monitoring and Improvement**

Schools should establish systems for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of child protection policies, training and mechanisms. This includes collecting and analyzing data on policy implementation, training participation and effectiveness, reporting patterns and institutional responses and child safety outcomes. Schools should create feedback mechanisms that enable students, staff and families to provide input on child protection systems and should use evaluation findings to inform continuous improvement. Regular reporting to school governing bodies on child protection should ensure accountability and sustained institutional commitment.

Schools should develop cultures of transparency and learning where discussing challenges and mistakes is viewed as an opportunity for improvement rather than as threatening to institutional reputation. This requires leadership that prioritizes child welfare over institutional image and that creates psychological safety for honest reflection and dialogue about child protection practices.

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