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INFLUENCE OF SAFETY ON SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS LEARNING IN LOIMA SUB-COUNTY, KENYA

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract:

The study investigated on the influence of safety on secondary schools' students' attitude towards learning in Loima Sub – County, Kenya. This was in light of concern that safety was not given the attention it deserved in expediting the learning process. The study was guided by Cohen's School Environment Theory. Concurrent mixed methods research design was applied in this study. The target population was 10 principals, 142 teachers and 878 students. Purposive, stratified and simple random sampling techniques were used to obtain a sample size of 8 principals, 104 teachers and 264 students. Data was collected by use of questionnaire, interview guide, and observation schedule. Content validity of the research instrument was established using expert judgment, and the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) was calculated, yielding a value of 1 in three out of four items, indicating strong agreement among experts. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used to determine the internal reliability of instruments' results. Trustworthiness of the study was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics such as means, frequencies and percentages. Qualitative data was analyzed using themes and presented in form of narratives and direct quotations. The hypotheses were tested using Chi-square test of independence. The study findings revealed that school safety, influenced learners' attitude towards learning. The study also concluded that majority of schools in Loima Sub-County were insecure and inadequately equipped in terms of physical infrastructure. The study recommended that School Boards of Management should prioritize on enhancing safety in their schools by utilizing the Repair, Maintenance and Improvement vote head of the capitation sent to schools by the government.

Keywords: *School safety, Learning attitude, Secondary education, Cohen's school environment theory, Loima Sub-County.*

Background to the Study

Safety issues in schools are broadly categorized as internal threats, external threats, and environmental threats (USAID, 2016). Acts of violence and bias such as discrimination, racism, bullying of students, and homophobia create negative school environment and ultimately undermine students' learning experiences (Kull, Greytak, Kosciw & Villenas, 2016). All these threats have the potential to significantly decrease students' academic performance. External threats to school safety can include, attacks on the way to/from school, ideological attacks on learning environments, armed/violent attacks on learning environments, and occupation of learning environment infrastructure by armed groups (USAID, 2016). The UN World Report on Violence

against Children noted that verbal abuse, bullying and sexual violence in schools were commonly reported as reasons for lack of motivation, absenteeism and dropout (Pinheiro, 2016).

A safe school can be considered as an environment in which students, teachers, school managers, administrators and anyone else employed in the school, experience no violence nor fear of violence (Phillips, Linney & Pack, 2008). Safety, whether physical or emotional, is a fundamental human need and as such, any incidents of school violence that reduce safety, will negatively impact stakeholders in one way or another (Perry, 2022). Establishing safety in a school environment starts with discussion of issues such as levels of crime and weaknesses within the school system that give rise to these levels with a view to

identification of perpetrators, victims and eradication strategies (Celik. 2007).

Perceptions of school safety can be affected by a myriad of factors. The presence of gangs and drug problems can negatively affect students' perceptions about school safety (Schreck & Miller, 2023). Security, surveillance, and other preventative measures can lead to an increase or decrease of students' feelings of safety within their schools depending on how they are implemented (Schreck & Miller, 2023). Schools that have smaller student populations are more likely to foster feelings of safeness than schools with bigger school populations (Bowen et al., 2020). Where the school is located also has profound implications on perceptions of school safety. Bosworth et al. (2019), found in their study that neighborhood surroundings have a very influential effect on students' perceptions of safety. Schools that are located in neighborhoods with high poverty and high crime rates have been shown to have a negative influence on perceptions of school safety (Laub & Lauritsen, 2018).

Creating school safe zones does not only mean ensuring an accident-free school environment. Rather, it is the responsibility taken by learners, staff, parents and other stakeholders to foster all-round safe living (Safety Standards Manual for Schools in Kenya, 2008). In many developing and developed countries, school safety has increasingly gained the attention of policymakers and academicians. For instance, In the United States of America, a series of school shootings, drug related violence, proliferation of firearms and natural disasters prompted the US government to formulate a framework for schools to use to reduce cases of insecurity. International Association of Chiefs of Police 2nd edition (2019), explained the mitigation

measures that were put in place by department of education in the US. These included, training school personnel on how to detect; prevent and respond to violent individuals within a school environment; security controls such as access controls; security procedures such as lock down and evacuation as well as rapid response to an incident in schools (Marquet, 2023).

Marzano and Miller (2017) contended that students with a positive attitude towards school were likely to excel in school activities. On the contrary, students with a negative attitude cannot trust the school environment, and as a result, effective learning may not be realized. They also argued that experiences form the attitudes of students in their daily school life environment are developed by interaction of students with different components of the school system, like environment, curriculum and programme needs. Oblinger (2010) opined that commitment toward learning goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but it includes the ability to think critically and solve complex problems, work collaboratively, communicate effectively and pursue self-directed learning or meta-cognition. Attitude towards learning therefore focuses more on the behavior of the students in the whole process of leaning.

In Nigeria the issue of negative attitude of students has been of much concern to the government, parents, teachers and even students themselves (Ajao, 2021). While several factors can determine the attitude of the learners, bullying is believed to be a possible factor that can bring about a negative attitude toward learning. This was established by Jan & Husain (2019), who contended that "bullying among students not only decreases academic performance but also causes mental health problems and physical injury. If the learning environment

is characterized by bullying, learners may feel unfriendly to learning, and they may resort to be truants. To teachers, a good student is the one who is eager to learn and has positive attitudes towards learning. The indicators of such a student include class attendance, completion of assignments, participation in co-curricular activities and level of discipline.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by school environment Theory by Cohen (2009). The theory refers to the overall atmosphere or "feel" of a school, encompassing the physical, social, and emotional environment that affects students, teachers, and staff. It is an important framework in education because it has a significant impact on student outcomes, including academic performance, emotional well-being, and attitudes toward learning. The theory emphasizes that the climate of a school is shaped by a variety of factors, including how safe the environment feels, how supportive relationships are within the school, the teaching and learning approaches adopted by teachers and the quality of the physical infrastructure.

According to this theory, a positive school environment promotes safety, supportive relationships, high academic expectations, and a well-maintained physical environment. Students feel valued, respected, and motivated to learn. In a negative school environment, students feel unsafe, unsupported, or disconnected from the learning process. This might involve issues like bullying, poor relationships with teachers, inadequate facilities, or a lack of clear policies to support student well-being. A positive school environment encourages student engagement, academic success, and personal growth, while a negative one can lead to disengagement, anxiety, and other

negative outcomes. According to the theory safety includes both physical safety (protection from harm, bullying, or violence) and emotional safety (a supportive environment where students feel respected and valued). Physical Safety involves measures like security policies, building maintenance, and protection from threats or dangers. Emotional Safety refers to a school culture where students feel secure in expressing themselves without fear of being ridiculed or harassed. It includes anti-bullying policies, positive peer relationships, and a general sense of belonging.

Research Design and Methodology

Design

This study used concurrent mixed methods research design. According to Okendo, Atoni & Kitula (2020), concurrent design means that quantitative and qualitative data will be collected simultaneously but analyzed separately, and then results will be merged or integrated and then interpreted. The reason why the researcher chose this design was because it allowed for the collection of rich, detailed data and provides an in-depth comprehension of the research problem. The design also increased the validity of the research findings because the limitations of the quantitative data were triangulated by the in-depth qualitative data.

Target Population

The study targeted all the 10 public secondary schools in Loima Sub County. Since 2 schools were used for pilot testing, then the actual number of schools where the participants were drawn from were 8. The reason why the public secondary schools were targeted was because their management systems and funding models are similar. All the 8 principals managing

the schools were included in the study because they were the direct custodians of the government funds such as free day secondary funds; County Education Bursary Fund, and the National Government Constituency Development Bursary Fund.

Sample and Sampling Procedures

The researcher adopted both probability and non-probability sampling methods to get a representative sample from the population. The researcher employed simple random, stratified and purposive sampling methods to get the sample size from targeted population whom data was collected.

Data Collection Instruments

Data collection was done using a questionnaire, interview guide, and an observation schedule. A questionnaire was used to collect large amount of data regarding school safety.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument's Results

Validity should be examined based on a careful analysis of each item by several expert judges. Research and evaluation experts, consisting of research lecturers, examined the face and content validity of the research instruments with focus on the appropriateness of the questions and the

language used. They improved the sequencing and wording of items, their complexity levels and clarity. Reliability of quantitative items in the questionnaire were established by computing Cronbach's alpha coefficient which is an estimate of internal consistency. This type of reliability method is suitable for items that do not have right or wrong answers such as in a Likert scale.

Data Analysis Procedures

Upon completion of the data collection, the data collection instruments were checked for completeness and numbered as a form of identity during the data entry. Responses in all the questions were assigned numeric values to be used when entering the data. Data was then entered in the International Business Machines Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS). The data was cleaned so as to correct any error that might have occurred during the data entry. Data was analyzed in two stages. In stage one both qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed separately. First, the data in the interview scripts was entered into the NVivo14 software. This software facilitated the systematic coding and thematic analysis of qualitative data gathered from participants. Second, descriptive statistics such as percentages and frequencies were used to analyze the quantitative data. All the hypotheses were tested by the use of Chi-square test of independence.

Findings

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of School Safety's influence on Students' Attitude towards Learning.

			students' attitude towards learning			Total
			positive	Neutral	negative	
school safety	secure	Count	65	6	8	79 (29.92%)
		Expected Count	48.5	12.9	17.7	79.0
	not secure	Count	97	37	51	185 (70.08%)
		Expected Count	113.5	30.1	41.3	185.0
Total		Count	162	43	59	264 (100%)
		Expected Count	162.0	43.0	59.0	264.0

Source: Researcher 2024

According to the data presented in Table 1, 185 (70.08%) students reported that their schools were insecure while 79 (29.92%) reported that their schools were secure. 34 (32.69%) of teachers also reported that their schools were secure while 70 (67.31%) of them reported to being in schools that were not secure. This finding is in agreement with students' responses that had insecure schools at 185 (70.08%) as it was shown in Table 1. However, the percentage of insecurity expressed by students is slightly higher than that of teachers. This could be attributed to the fact that some of the safety risks experienced by learners such as administration of corporal punishment are caused by teachers. The other meaning of the finding was that some of the insecurity would be issues experienced by students

alone like bullying. Teachers, being adults, can easily adapt to challenging situations than minors (students). Due to the difference in age and training, teachers and students often perceive school safety differently, with students generally reporting worse perceptions of safety and connectedness compared to teachers as established by (Martinez et al., 2017; Perez-Smith et al., 2001).

The data in Table 1 show that majority of students in Loima Sub-County schools' study in unconducive learning environment. The finding was also supported with a report of an interviewed principals'(P2) who said that:

The challenges are enormous. This area is a war zone. We are mostly caught in a cross fire during bandit attack from neighboring communities. During such attacks, our fate is just in the hands of the maker. This vulnerability has led to many students leaving this school. The animals and herdsmen also trespass when classes are on session because we have no fence. (7th August, 2024).

This finding supports the finding by Ejore, Gakunga and Nungu (2020) which showed that insecurity around schools in Turkana County was rampant. According to a majority of the interviewed principals, theft, lack of a reliable source of electricity and water, porous fences were the major contributors to uncondusive learning environment.

Principal P6 from a Sub-County school said that:

The main challenges we face as a school are: lack of fence, reliable source lighting sources and occasional conflict with the community over the source of water to the school. (11th September, 2024).

Principal P7 added:

The most rampant safety challenge we experience here is theft. This is majorly caused by lack of school fence. During school holidays, students' properties such as mattresses are stolen. Sometimes, the store is broken into and food is stolen. Teachers' houses have also been vandalized on more than two occasions. (18th September, 2024).

This finding implies that name calling, fighting, vandalism of school property, abuse of alcohol and other drugs, administration of corporal punishment is rampant in schools within Loima Sub-County. This is likely to negatively impact

on their attitude towards learning. Some of these lapses in adherence to the safety standards and guidelines such as administration of corporal punishment are considered as a form of child abuse and hence criminal according to the Children's Act (2001) and the UN Convention's Right of the Child (1989) which advocates for protection from violence, abuse and neglect. It further shows that majority of schools are not well fenced (or not fenced at all), are poorly lit at night, do not have reliable security personnel and have buildings that are not user friendly to learners as guided by the Safety Standards Manual for Schools in Kenya (2008). According to Turanovic and Siennick (2022), a secure and supportive school environment not only enhances students' sense of well-being but also positively influences their engagement and academic performance. Acts of violence, such as bullying, negatively impact students' enthusiasm and engagement in their educational activities, erode students' **sense of safety, belonging and motivation**, all of which are critical to fostering positive attitudes toward learning (Ngusa & Mwema, 2021).

According to the data presented in Table 4, the observed counts are different from the expected counts. It was also noted that the observed and the expected counts for both 'secure' and the 'not secure' schools were different. This suggests that there may be a **real relationship or effect** happening- implying the pattern in the data **does not perfectly match** what would be expected by random chance alone. Therefore, the researcher further, generated a bar graph for comparison of students' attitude towards learning in schools with distinct levels of safety. The results were presented in Figure 1.

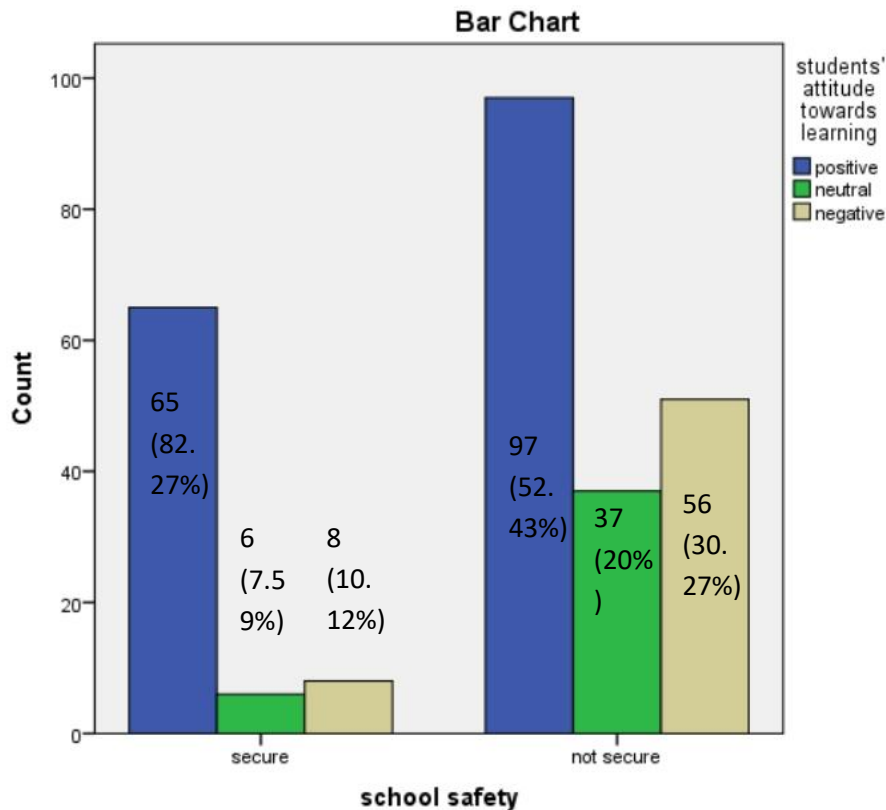


Figure 1: *School Safety's Influence on Students' Attitude towards Learning* (Source: Researcher 2024)

The information displayed in Figure 1 show majority of students, 65 (82.27%), develop a positive attitude towards learning when their schools are secure compared to 97 (52.43%) when their schools are not secure. This shows that, when students perceive their school environment as safe, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated learners (Konold et al., 2018). Similarly, only 8 (10.12%) of the students developed a negative attitude towards learning when their schools were secure compared to 56 (30.27%) when their schools were not secure. According to Mohammed and Mohammed (2017), insecure school environments are associated with **absenteeism, poor concentration, loss of interest in school activities and increased**

dropout rates. Students in such environments often develop negative attitudes toward learning. This finding supports the interview report of principal P7, who said that:

A safe school is conducive for learning and therefore can have a positive impact on learners' attitude towards learning. On the contrary, an insecure school leads to disturbed or distressed learners. This in turn leads to poor concentration or at worst, dropping out of school (18th September, 2024).

According to the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, students who feel safe are more likely to attend school regularly, participate in class, and achieve higher academic success. Schools

should therefore implement thorough security policies to create an environment where students feel safer and more secure. This sense of security positively influences their attitudes toward learning and overall academic engagement (Mwangi & S. Kamau, 2023).

Null Hypothesis: There is no relationship between school safety and secondary school students' attitude towards learning in Loima Sub-County.

Research objective had the hypothesis there is no relationship between school safety and

secondary school students' attitude towards learning in Loima Sub-County. Chi-square test of independence was used to test the hypotheses. The assumptions made while using Chi-square test were that: students were randomly selected and the expected counts were at least 5. The decision rule was that, if the p-value is less than or equal to the significance level $\alpha = 0.05$, the null hypothesis was rejected. If the p-value was greater than the significance value $\alpha = 0.05$, do not reject the null hypothesis. The Chi-value and the p-value calculated are displayed in the subsequent Tables.

Table 2: Chi-Square Test of Significance for Significant Relationship between School Safety and Students' Attitude towards Learning

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	20.802 ^a	2	.000
Likelihood Ratio	22.393	2	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	18.005	1	.000
N	264		

Source: Researcher 2024

Chi-square was used to test for relationship between school safety and secondary school students' attitude towards learning in Loima Sub-County. The null hypothesis was: there is no relationship between school safety and secondary school students' attitude towards learning in Loima Sub-County. The p-value obtained was 0.00 which is less than the set significance level of 0.05. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between school safety and secondary school students'

attitude towards learning. The meaning of the finding is that students' attitude towards learning is influenced by whether the schools are secure or not. The finding illustrates that a more secure and conducive learning environment promotes access, equity, participation, retention, completion, and provision of quality education.

Since the chi-square test of independence only determines whether an association between the variables is significant, but not its strength, it was therefore important to

determine the magnitude of the influence by either using Phi or Cramer’s V, depending on the size of the table. In this study case, Cramer’s V was used since the Table was a 2 x 3 tabulation. The basis of interpreting

the strength for Cramer’s V is: 0.10 to 0.29, the strength is Weak; 0.30 to 0.49, the strength is Moderate; 0.50 to 1.0, the strength is Strong.

Table 3: Interpretation of Cramer’s V for the Strength of Association between School Safety and Students’ Attitude towards Learning

Symmetric Measures		
	Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal		.000
Cramer's V	.281	.000
N	264	

Source: Researcher 2024

The Cramer’s V value obtained in Table 3 is 0.281. This value indicates the existence of a weak association between school safety and secondary school students’ attitude towards learning. This implies that school safety minimally influences secondary school students’ attitude towards learning in Loima Sub-County.

Conclusion

The findings on the status of the school environment of schools in Loima sub-County revealed that majority of the schools were insecure. The most notable causes of insecurity mentioned were: theft, lack of reliable source of lighting, some schools lacking fences or having porous fences, administration of corporal punishment and proximity to banditry prone areas. Majority of learners were found to have a positive attitude towards learning. However, it was also noted that students’ attitude towards learning differed depending on the category of school the learner belonged. The study

showed that majority of students in well-equipped and better performing schools, in this case the county schools, had a positive attitude towards learning compared to their counterparts in sub-county schools.

Recommendation

The ministry of interior and national co-ordination through the County Commissioner should consider deploying the National Police Reservists to guard schools that are in banditry prone areas to safeguard the lives and properties of students and teachers.

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