

Adherence To School Safety And Its Relationship To Students' Performance In Machakos County, Kenya

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Abstract: *The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between school safety and the academic performance of secondary school students in Machakos County, Kenya. The objectives of the study were to: establish the status of school safety in public secondary schools in Machakos County, examine how safety in schools impinges on the learning process, and establish whether secondary school students' perception of safety in school correlates with their academic performance. The study used a mixed methods research approach. The targeted respondents were all the 84,800 students, 2,954 teachers, and 332 principals in the 332 public high schools in the County. The research utilized stratified random sampling method to select 400 students, 40 teachers and 20 principals, leading to 460 participants. Data was obtained using students' questionnaires, teachers' questionnaires, and principals' interview schedules. Quantitative data was analyzed using correlation analysis, frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviations. Qualitative data was analyzed thematically using content analysis. The study found that, while the respondents generally perceive certain aspects of school safety positively, there are notable areas of concern that warrant further attention and intervention to enhance overall safety and well-being in secondary schools, including inadequate toilet facilities, overcrowded dining halls, and the absence of comprehensive education on drug and alcohol abuse. Results indicated a moderate positive correlation between students' perception of school safety and their academic performance ($r = 0.136, p < 0.05$). Recommendations include enhancing safety protocols, increasing stakeholder involvement, and investing in technology to enhance school safety. The study findings could be useful to policymakers, principals and tutors by identifying measures that may be utilized to improve school safety for the wellbeing of students in schools.*

Keywords: *School safety, Academic performance*

I. INTRODUCTION

School safety is a critical factor influencing the well-being and academic success of students in educational institutions. Students who feel unsafe, whether physically or psychologically, struggle to learn effectively and achieve good grades. Ensuring a safe environment makes schools more attractive and engaging for students, fostering stronger connections between learners, teachers, and the educational process (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Conversely, when students' basic security needs are unmet, they may experience discomfort, leading to absenteeism or social withdrawal from school activities (Applebury, 2022).

School safety encompasses three primary elements: physical well-being, overall atmosphere, and student conduct

(Muhlhausen, 2020). The physical well-being aspect includes the structural integrity of school buildings, regulated access, and overall safety within the school premises. The school atmosphere involves the collective emotions and perceptions of the school environment, encompassing interpersonal relationships, teaching methods, and the organizational structure (Carlton et al., 2019). Student behavior covers mental health, behavioral health, and discipline, with unresolved issues leading to poor academic performance, behavioral problems, school dropouts, and delinquency (Muhlhausen, 2020).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory (1943) underlines the importance of safety as a fundamental requirement for achieving higher levels of fulfillment. According to Maslow, students must have their physiological and safety needs met

before they can experience a sense of belonging and self-actualization. This emphasizes the necessity of creating a secure and supportive school environment for effective learning (Llego, 2021). Research consistently shows that a safe educational setting enhances academic outcomes. Studies in the USA by Milam et al. (2010) found that improving perceptions of safety in schools led to significant increases in standardized test scores. Similarly, Hristova and Tosheva (2021) reported that high perceptions of safety correlated with better academic achievement in European countries. However, the safety concerns in Kenya differ, focusing more on student riots, school fires, and drug abuse rather than school shootings and gang violence seen in developed countries (PISA, 2019).

In Kenya, government policies such as the Children's Act of 2022, the Basic Education Act of 2013, and the School Health and Safety Policy of 2018 aim to ensure the safety and well-being of students. Despite these efforts, many schools still face significant safety challenges. Reports indicate widespread non-compliance with safety guidelines, insufficient safety infrastructure, and inadequate training for teachers and staff (Mutiso, 2019; Musyoka, 2023).

Machakos County, in particular, has witnessed numerous safety-related issues in its secondary schools. Studies by Mutiso and Maithya (2019) and Musyoka (2023) highlight overcrowded classrooms, inadequate maintenance, and lack of essential safety resources. Despite the presence of the Ministry of Education's Safety and Standards Manual, implementation remains inconsistent, primarily due to insufficient funding and lack of awareness among educators (Mutiso, 2019). The academic performance of students in Machakos County has been notably lower than the national average, with consistent underperformance in KCSE scores over recent years (Mutuku et al., 2021; Mulinge et al., 2021). While previous research has focused on factors such as strategic management, instructional leadership, and resource adequacy, the specific impact of school safety on academic performance has not been thoroughly investigated. This study aims to address this gap by examining the effects of school safety on the educational achievement of secondary school students in Machakos County, Kenya.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Kenya, the increasing frequency of student unrests, fires, and disasters in secondary schools has become a critical issue, resulting in substantial human and property losses. Despite the implementation of governmental directives, including the strict adherence to the Basic Education Regulations of 2015, these persistent problems suggest a gap in the effectiveness of current safety measures. In Machakos County, research has revealed widespread non-compliance with school safety guidelines in most secondary schools, indicating that students are often exposed to unsafe conditions, which pose risks of physical, emotional, and psychological harm.

Additionally, secondary schools in Machakos County have consistently shown poor academic performance in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examinations. Although academic performance is influenced by various factors, school safety is a crucial component that

has not been thoroughly explored in this context. The lack of studies examining the impact of inadequate school safety on academic outcomes in Machakos County highlights a significant gap in the existing research. This study aimed at filling this gap by investigating the relationship between school safety and the academic achievements of high school students in Machakos County. The study aimed at providing insights for developing informed interventions and policy improvements to enhance both the safety and academic performance of students in the region.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study had the aim to investigate the relationship between school safety and academic performance of secondary school students in Machakos County, Kenya.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- ✓ To establish the status of school safety in public secondary schools in Machakos County, Kenya.
- ✓ To examine how school safety influences the teaching/learning process in public secondary schools in Machakos County.
- ✓ To establish whether secondary school students' perception of safety in school correlates with their academic performance.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the impact of school safety on the academic performance of high school students in Machakos County. The quantitative component involved distributing structured questionnaires to a representative sample of high school students and teachers across the county. The qualitative phase consisted of in-depth interviews with selected participants to gain deeper insights into their experiences and perspectives regarding school safety and its impact on academic outcomes. This mixed-methods approach aimed to triangulate findings, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between school safety and academic achievement in the specific context of Machakos County.

B. TARGET POPULATION AND SAMPLE SIZE

The study was conducted in Machakos County, Kenya, targeting all 84,800 students, teaching staff, and principals in the 332 public secondary schools within the county. These schools included two National schools, 30 extra-County schools, 93 County schools, and 207 sub-County schools. A multi-phase sample selection approach, combining both probability and non-probability sampling methods, was employed. Stratified sampling was used to sample 20 schools from the eight sub-Counties in Machakos. Using the sample determination formula by Krejcie & Morgan (1970), a sample size of 400 students was determined. These 400 students were

randomly selected from 20 public secondary schools, with each school contributing 20 students. Additionally, purposive sampling was employed to select two teachers and the principal from each of the sampled schools. The final sample consisted of 400 students, 40 teachers, and 20 principals.

C. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS METHODS

The study employed questionnaires for both students and teachers, as well as interview schedules for principals to gather data. The questionnaires were designed to collect information from teachers and students regarding the impact of school safety on achievement in academics. The interview schedule was designed to help the interviewer in conducting face-to-face interviews with the school principals, focusing on the status of safety in the schools, the impact of safety on teaching/learning process. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, including calculating frequencies, percentages, and standard deviations. Additionally, statistical analysis was done through the application of the Pearson Product-Moment correlation coefficient, with a significance level set at 0.05.

III. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study explored several key areas regarding school safety in public secondary schools in Machakos County, Kenya. The findings are summarized according to the research objectives.

A. STATUS OF SCHOOL SAFETY

Analysis of student responses to a 24-item scale revealed both strengths and weaknesses in the safety measures of these schools. Students showed high levels of agreement regarding the presence of suitable desks, lockers, and tables in classrooms. They also perceived dining halls as clean and well-maintained and acknowledged the provision of adequate pastoral care. However, there was lower agreement concerning the adequacy of toilets and the maintenance of washrooms. Additionally, hazardous objects were not consistently removed from playgrounds. These results indicate that while certain aspects of school safety are well-managed, significant improvements are needed in other areas to ensure comprehensive safety and well-being.

B. INFLUENCE OF SCHOOL SAFETY ON THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

The analysis revealed that respondents believed safety guidelines positively affected students' learning experiences, contributing to a conducive learning environment and enhancing the quality of teaching. However, there was lower agreement regarding the effectiveness of safety measures in improving teaching quality. Some respondents felt that safety initiatives did not sufficiently contribute to an organized learning atmosphere, and there was a perceived lack of encouragement for open communication between teachers and students. These findings suggest that while safety measures

are generally recognized as important, there are opportunities to optimize their impact on teaching and learning.

C. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOL SAFETY AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

The study found a statistically significant positive correlation ($r = 0.136$, $p < 0.05$) between students' perceptions of school safety and their KCSE scores, indicating that students who felt safer in their school environment tended to perform better academically. However, no significant correlation was found between teachers' perceptions of school safety and students' KCSE scores. This highlights the importance of student perceptions of safety in relation to academic success. The findings underscore the critical role of school safety in promoting academic achievement and the need for targeted interventions to address existing safety concerns in Machakos County.

D. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the research results, the following suggestions are proposed for the principal stakeholders responsible for ensuring school safety:

- ✓ School principals should develop and implement comprehensive safety guidelines tailored to the specific needs of each school, addressing areas identified as lacking in the status of school safety.
- ✓ There is need for the government to allocate sufficient resources towards the maintenance and improvement of school infrastructure, including classrooms, dormitories, dining halls, and sanitation facilities.
- ✓ Stakeholders including the Ministry of Education, the TSC and school administrators should prioritize safety training and awareness programs for both staff and students to ensure a better understanding of safety protocols and emergency procedures.
- ✓ There is need for further research comparing the effectiveness of different safety interventions and strategies implemented in schools across various regions or countries.

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