

Understanding School Safety and Security: Conceptualization and Definitions

by

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Abstract

Educational environments must be safe and secure spaces for learners, teachers, non-teaching staff and the local community. Therefore, it is necessary to manage school safety and security properly in order to prevent accidents and incidents, creating an environment in which physical, emotional and social well-being is promoted. This study aimed at clarifying conceptual confusions and applications of terms such as; school safety and security through literature review and understanding of the author. This is because definition of these concepts enable stakeholders to have a common understanding of the subject and hence enhances meaningful conversations and better decision making. More so, how safety or security is defined among stakeholders affects its planning, application and implementation in the school environment.

Keywords: Comprehensive school safety, prevention, school management, school safety.

Introduction

Safety and Security are two words that are often confused by people. They get tossed around and together all the time, mentioning the other when one means the other one. They are often used interchangeably either correctly or wrongly. However, safety and security are of course strongly related, but two distinct concepts. To this effect, the author of this article attempts to illuminate the distinction between these concepts so that their application is also clear and most likely would be straight forward. Specifically, focus is on the application of safety and security in terms of school environments.

The questions at hand are, what is school safety and school security? Are these two terms similar in meaning and application? What is the importance of a safe and secure school? What characterises a safe and secure school environment? The foregoing questions are the ones that the author attempts to clarify. This is because definition of concepts enable people to have a common understanding of a word or subject, which enables meaningful conversations and better decision making. More so, how safety or security is defined affects its application in the school environment and provides an opportunity to influence positive outcomes for learners, teachers and other school staff. In order to exploit the concepts fully, it is important that we look at their meanings categorically.

Safety versus Security

The word "safety," comes from a Latin word *salvus* which means uninjured or in good health (Maddox, 2010). The first records of the word was noticed from around 1250. According to Safeopedia (2021) safety is a concept that includes all measures and practices taken to preserve the life, health, and bodily integrity of individuals. Safety is the condition of being protected from harm or other non-desirable outcomes. Safety can also refer to the control of recognized sources of danger (hazards) in order to achieve an acceptable level of risk.

Defining security is problematic, since the term has had many different meanings to different people in different places and different times over the course of human history. Actually, there has been a never-ending debate on its nature and dimension, since there is not a broad consensus on its meaning. According to the Online Etymology Dictionary (2017) the word 'secure' entered the English language in the 16th century. It was derived from a Latin word *securus*, meaning freedom from anxiety. The term security is related to the presence of peace, safety and the protection of people and their resources. It also relates to the absence threats to human life and dignity. According to Stone (2009) security is about freedom from threat and ability of states to maintain independent identity and their functional integrity against forces of change, which they see as hostile. Security is generally agreed to be about feeling of being safe from harm, fear, anxiety, oppression, danger, poverty, defence, protection and preservation of core values and threat to those values. William (2008) also

contributed to the definition of the word security. He stated that security is most commonly associated with the alleviation of threats to cherish values, especially those threats which threaten the survival of a particular reference object. From the foregoing definitions, security generally refers to the freedom from, or resilience against, potential harm or other unwanted coercive change caused by others.

Morgan (2021) provided a clear definitional distinction between safety and security. He contended that one of the primary difference between the two terms is their definition. Security refers to the protection of individuals, organizations, and properties against external threats that are likely to cause harm. It is clear that security is generally focused on ensuring that external factors do not cause trouble or unwelcome situation to the organization, individuals, and the properties within the premises (Morgan, 2021). On the other hand, safety is the feeling of being protected from the factors that causes harm.

School Safety and Security

Safe Schools

There are a variety of definitions of what constitutes a safe school. For example, Hernandez, Floden, and Bosworth (2010) suggested that a safe school is a place free from violence, and represented by an environment where there is no perceived fear with respect to the school or its disciplinary procedures. This in tells that in a safe school, learners, teachers, staff, and visitors are free to interact without fear or threats, and in a supportive way to support teaching and learning. Hull (2010) provided a more practical and management-oriented elucidation of school safety, stating that it includes the school's culture and the appropriate training and resources to respond to threats and hazards. Squelch (2001:138) also defined a safe school as one that is free from danger and possible harm, where non-educators, educators and learners can work, teach and learn without fear or ridicule, intimidation, harassment, humiliation or violence. Regulation of Head of National Agency for Disaster Management (BNPB) No. 4 in 2012 (Perka BNPB No. 4/2012 on Guidelines on Implementation of Safe School/Madrasa from Disaster in *A Practical Guideline to Making School Safer from Natural Disaster for School Principals and School Committees* (2014: 2) defined school safety as one in which a school recognizes and

protects child rights by provision of situation and environment guaranteeing process of learning-teaching, health, safety, and security of the students at any time. A Practical Guideline to Making School Safer from Natural Disaster for School Principals and School Committees (2014: 2) also explained the meaning of a safer school as follows:

Safer school creates the secure, safer, comfortable and healthy feeling to students and teachers both in normal and also in disaster situation. By implementing the standard of structures and infrastructures with resilience to disaster, and implanting the safer culture, schools are able to protect school community and surrounding environment from disaster risk.

Safe and Sound School (2014) looked at safety in terms of school communities and explains as follows: “safety” is a global term, used to describe our efforts to keep the school community and environment safe. Safety is an “umbrella term” for the many types of issues and/or crises a school community addresses in order to ensure the overall wellness of its members. Examples of such safety issues are health, mental wellness, school climate, fire safety, weather safety, building security, dangerous persons, bullying, environmental disaster, crime in the community, and bus and traffic safety (Safe and Sound School, 2014). "School Safety" also means creating safe environment for learners, starting from their homes to their schools and back. This includes safety from any kind of abuse, violence, psycho-social issue, disaster: natural and manmade, fire, transportation. In a safe school, learners, teachers and other staff are free to interact and go on with their teaching and learning activities without fear of the unknown. A safe school focusses more on internal threats, that is, threats from within the school environment. McGuire (2017) explained that if learners perceive danger and sense fear from other learners, teachers, administrators, or even the school infrastructure itself, this may indicate the school is unsafe. For example, let's say a school has experienced violence among learners and the teachers or the community, that school is considered unsafe. According to McGuire (2017) the primary indicator of a safe school is the existence of a plan in the school policy meant to address situations that may be a threat to learners and staff need a safe and supportive school environment in order to succeed.

California School Board Association (CSBA, 2018) explained that a safe school is one where teaching and learning are not distracted; disruptions are minimized; violence, drugs, bullying and fear are not present; learners are not discriminated against; expectations for behaviour are clearly communicated; and consequences for infractions are consistently and fairly applied. The most effective approach to creating safe and supportive school environments requires a comprehensive, coordinated effort including school wide, districtwide and communitywide strategies.

The foregoing definitions show that there are many ways of looking at a safe school and that the term is contextual and relative. Therefore, as we endeavour to clarify the concept of school safety, it should also be noted that what constitutes school safety may differ according to the geographical location. What constitutes school safety may differ from one school to the other depending on factors related to geography and setting. For example, a school located in a flood plain and a school located on the plateau may have different safety concerns. This is supported by Mayer & Cornell (2010) who noted that defining school safety is often challenging as the definition can encompass a wide remit of different themes, where the separation of rhetoric versus reality becomes problematic, and where a key difficulty is distinguishing between personal beliefs and evidence-based research.

Srichai *et al* (2013) noted that whether there are differences in defining, the most commonly noted aspects of school safety in literature are physical, psychological, environmental and social dimension. Figure 1 is an illustration of school safety dimensions.

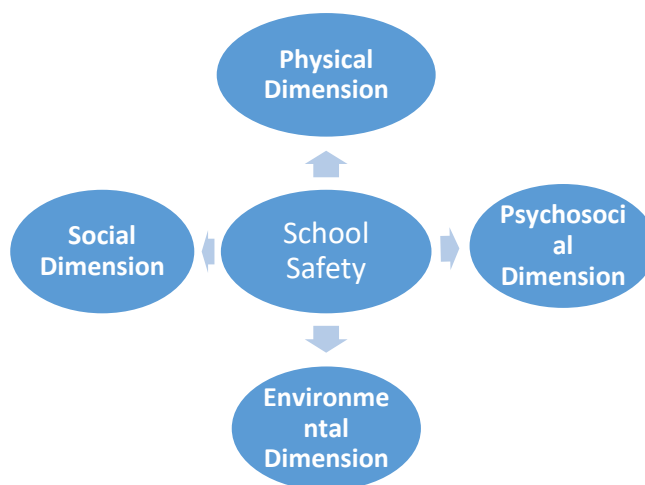


Figure 1: School safety dimensions

(a) *Physical dimension:* In terms of physical issues of school safety, physical violence, corporal punishment and bullying are commonly discussed by scholars. For example, when looking at school safety, Dunlap (2013) focused particularly on school violence as the central aspect of school safety. In relation to the foregoing, literature often takes school violence as the contextual basis for school safety research and aims to develop response mechanisms to crises (Kingshott & McKenzie, 2013 and Mubita, 2016).

(b) *Psychological dimension:* Psychologically, school safety is discussed in literature with reference to how safe learners and staff feel at their school (Mooij & Fettelaar, 2013). Researches related to the feeling of being safe at school have developed into debates about how safe individuals feel (Kutsyuruba, Klinger and Hussain, 2015; Mubita, 2016), talked about relationships among school climate, school safety, and student achievement and well-being (Fleming, 2012; Vega, Crawford, & Pelt, 2012), and disabilities (Boon et al., 2011 and Mubita, 2016).

(c) *Social dimension:* Social Safety Theory hypothesizes that developing and maintaining friendly social bonds is a fundamental organizing principle of human behaviour and that threats to social safety are a critical feature of psychological stressors that increase risk for disease. More so, Invitational Education Theory (Purkey & Novak, 1996) suggests that the school should be an inviting place across a set of five Ps which are considered as key areas. These 5 Ps are people, place, processes, policies, and programs. In relation to the foregoing two theories (Social Safety Theory and Invitational Education Theory), attention is on creating a safe school environment, including the school's building infrastructure, playgrounds and surroundings. This is in tandem with Mubita (2021) in his article on 'An assessment of the Provision, Quality and Adequacy of Welfare Facilities in Selected Schools of Lusaka' where it was noted that abundant and adequate welfare facilities are paramount to safety and health in learning environments.

(d) *Environmental dimension:* The other way to look at school safety is in relation to hazards and disasters that may happen in the school environment. Natural hazards and disasters and other emergencies can happen at any time in school environments. When they happen, stakeholders should be prepared to handle them safely and effectively. Learners, teachers, parents and other school staff can work together to

promote safety and minimize the effects of emergencies and other dangerous situations within their environments. Schools can be affected by natural hazards and disasters such as extreme temperatures, strong winds, fire outbreaks, floods, thunderstorms and lightning, landslides and debris flow among others. All these hazards and disasters can make a school unsafe for teaching and learning processes.

Secure Schools

A secure school encompasses all measures taken to combat threats to learners, teachers, support staff and property in education environments. The Independent Project Trust (IPT, 1999:3) confirmed this by stating that a secure school environment has a very low risk of physical, emotional and psychological injury to its occupants. McGuire (2017) also explained what he feels about secure schools. He noted that secure schools should have policies and procedures instituted to protect learners and staff from intruders. For example, when entering the school premises, a visitor should record details in a book and perhaps given an Identity Card to carry wherever they go within the school. Visitors could also be often required to show identification to pick up a child from school as a method of proving they are named on the child's approved pick up list (McGuire, 2017). Additionally, secure schools should be built in such a way that they have layouts or designs that minimize unauthorized entry. For example, a school may have a gate that controls in flows and out flows in school premises.

Importance of School Safety and Security

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, safety is a foundational need that must be met before ascending to higher levels of performance (Taormina and Gao, 2013). This is applicable to schools too. Learners and staff must feel safe before they can focus their energy on teaching and learning. As schools seek to improve the academic performance, there is need to create a physically and emotionally safe environment for everyone in school.

Safety in school allows learners and staff to look forward to being in an encouraging environment, promoting social and creative learning (Applebury, 2021 and Mubita, 2021). If by any chance, their safety is not met, learners and staff could

be at risk and this may increase truancy and drop out for learners in extreme cases. This is supported by Mubita (2021) in his article on 'An assessment of the Provision, Quality and Adequacy of Welfare Facilities in Selected Schools of Lusaka' as he noted that adequate facilities in school enhance school safety. A safe school creates an open space for learners to learn and explore many new things in their play grounds (Applebury, 2021).

Learners of all ages require a safe learning environment for their better education and development (Mubita, 2021). Research continues to illustrate that children who feel unsafe at school perform worse academically and are more at risk for getting indulged in drugs and delinquency (Concordia University, 2016)

Both government and private schools are faced with the major crisis of safety and security. School boards meet with teachers and parents to listen and suggest solutions about their children's issue. State and federal governments should take steps to improve school safety and law enforcement as the nation realizes the importance of the issue and how its impacting children's future.

Conclusion

Understanding the meaning of school safety and security enables meaningful conversations and better decision making among stakeholders. Additionally, how school safety and security is defined affects its application and priority setting in the school environment. As noted already, providing a safe and secure environment at school is imperative to helping learners succeed academically, socially and emotionally. School management has the responsibility and obligation to protect all occupants of a school environment at all times and at all events. No one should ever feel unsafe and insecure when going to school regardless of where the school is located. For parents and teachers, the security and safety of learners should be their number one priority. By installing a high-quality security system around the school, parents can be assured that their children are safe at all times. Learners can easily become distracted at school. However, if they feel safe and secure in their classrooms, dormitories and playgrounds, they are more likely to focus on their academic activities.

Recommendations for School Safety and Security

The author this paper emphasises that safety and security should be understood before implementation. This has to be done in the context of the school. Understanding the terms will ensure proper application and implementation. This discourse also lead to recommend that a safe and secure school should put certain things in place in order to help teaching and learning processes. The following and many others depending on the school geography can be put in place to secure the school: burglar proof windows and doors, build a wall fence in school perimeters to control inflows and outflows of the people, employ security personal, practice maintenance of facilities in school, visitors identified with ID cards, install Closed Circuit Television (CCTV), and security cameras, install good lighting system, install firefighting equipment and teach all stakeholders about safety and security.

School key stakeholders should ensure that their school is safe and secure for teaching and learning. The following is a summary of what can be done to enhance school safety and security:

- Draw a school safety and security policy
- Conduct school risk assessments regularly
- Enact a strong visitor management programme
- Teach learners and staff about school safety and security requirements
- Learn the school's emergency procedures
- Learners , staff and parents should know safe travel routes to and from the school
- Know and follow school security and safety measures
- Enforce a certain dress code, especially use of uniforms
- Learners and staff to use badges or picture IDs
- Create a good school climate
- Orient learners and staff about safety and security
- Inform school staff about health and emotional concerns.
- All stakeholders should be involved in safety and security planning and assessment for the school

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