

**Safe Schools for Teaching and Learning:
Developing a School-wide, Self-study Process**

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(ABSTRACT)

This study examined public primary school teachers' perceptions of the factors contributing to safe school learning environments. Teachers' perceptions and behaviors were examined to assist task force members to develop and conduct a self-study process for enhancing a safe learning environment for pupils.

Twenty-eight primary school teachers from one public primary school in Malawi participated in the study. Data on teachers' perceptions and behaviors were collected through a survey. Frequencies and percentages were used to analyze the survey data on teachers' perceptions. The data from the self-study process generated the discussions in the task force meetings where teachers shared their perceptions of classroom practices that contributed to a safe learning environment.

The task force conducted a four-step self-study process. The steps of the process were building awareness and community, developing a group focus, implementing the ideas of the group focus, and reflecting on the practice. The participating teachers' experiences suggested that the process discouraged teachers from direct instruction and encouraged them to actively engage students more in their learning. As a result the teachers experienced fewer discipline problems in their classes.

The perceptions of teachers in the survey indicated that the school environment was generally positive for teaching and learning. However, there were some elements that could adversely affect school safety. For example, there were problems in maintaining some of the school facilities such as books and children's latrines. The finding of the self-study process indicated that the school could develop elements of school safety. For example, the teachers in the study developed positive attitudes toward their teaching and learning. They reported for school activities on time and involved learners in their learning.

The study had a number of implications for teaching and learning and teacher educators. The self-study process, for example, was able to change teachers' attitudes about their learners, thereby enhancing the learner-teacher classroom relationship. Suggestions for further research are also given. For example, further studies could focus on the replication of the study in other schools in order to examine the self-study process in different school contexts. And such replication could assist further understanding and refinement of the self-study process for addressing school safety as well as other identified school problems.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my wife and children who encouraged and supported me during the entire period I was at school and also when I was working on my dissertation. I sincerely cherish their encouragement and support.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In many countries of the world, including Malawi, there is a great regard for the role of school safety in creating environments conducive to learning. Such learning environments provide for children's needs so that they can perform to the best of their ability (Wortman and Loftus, 1988). On the contrary, an unsafe environment poses great threat and anxiety in both teachers and pupils and causes lots of damage to schools and education systems (Bushweller, 2001; Furlong and Morrison, 2000; Herrenkohl, Maguin, Hill, Hawkins, Abbott, and Catalano, 2000; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1995; Orpinas and Frankowski, 2001; Raviv, Raviv, Shimoni, and Leavitt, 1999; Warner, Weist and Krulak, 1999). In Malawi, primary schools face different problems every day. Many pupils lack basic needs such as food and clothing and encounter abuse in the school as well as in the home. There are instances when teachers are responsible for harassing, threatening, raping, and impregnating pupils. These pupils do not do well in school and consequently drop out of school (Malawi Institute of Education, 1997). There are also instances when teachers are threatened in and around the school, schools are looted, teaching and learning materials are no longer left in the classrooms, and teachers are disrupted in their teaching practice (Bushweller, 2001). Despite these consequences, little is known about the nature of these problems in Malawian schools. Instead, the schools have attributed these problems to disciplinary issues and, therefore, have used disciplinary actions to address them. Parents and religious organizations have attributed school problems to loss of cultural values, moral decay, multiparty democracy, and negligence of duty on the part of teachers (Fixler, 2000; Malawi Institute of Education, 1997).

Alexander M. Smith in his novel Tears of the Giraffe (2000) narrates some examples of loss of morals on the part of children today as compared to the past when teaching of morals was the responsibility of every elder. The character in this story, Mma Ramotswe, worries about Batswana youth when she reflects:

Nowadays, of course, there were plenty of people who appeared to be turning away from that morality. She saw it in the behavior of school children, who strutted about and pushed their way around with scant respect for older people. When she was at

