School safety and academic performance of pupils in public primary schools in Bakassi Local Government Area, Cross River State, Nigeria

Samuel Eburu Odey, Ph.D
samueleodey@gmail.com
Department of Curriculum and Teaching
University of Calabar, Calabar

Joyce Ekpo Egim, Ph.D
Joyceegim1978@gmail.com
Department of Educational Foundations and Childhood Education
University of Cross River State

Julius Eneji Ogah
Ogahjulius86@gmail.com
Department of Environmental Education
University of Calabar, Calabar

Augustine Adaje Odey
Augustineaodeyaodey@gmail.com
Department of Public Health
University of Calabar, Calabar

Abstract

The study examined the relationship between school safety and academic performance of pupils in public primary schools in Bakassi Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. Three research questions were posed and converted to three null hypotheses. Literature review was carried out based on the variables under study. Survey research design was used for the study. Simple random sampling technique was used in selecting 200 primary school pupils from public primary schools. A validated 20 items four-point modified Likert scale response option questionnaire was used for data collection. Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The results revealed that there is a significant relationship between emotional, social and physical safety and academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi. It is recommended, among others, that Government should implement

programmes that focus on creating emotionally safe environments, such as anti-bullying campaigns, peer support groups, or teacher training on emotional intelligence. Also, Headteachers of schools should make efforts to ensure that standard architectural design of schools is adhered to and ensure that all the required resources are available in schools to promote excellent students' academic performance.

Keywords: safety, academic, performance, emotional, social

Introduction

School safety is a pressing issue in both rural and urban public schools because some sociological factors such as crime and poverty play a strong role in shaping the climate of schools. School safety initiatives often include policies related to emergency preparedness, crisis management, threat assessment, bullying prevention, mental health support services, physical security enhancements, and community partnerships. School safety is a critical factor that can significantly impact the academic performance of pupils in public primary schools in Bakassi Local Government Area. The influence of school safety on academic performance is a topic of interest that requires thorough investigation. School safety includes physical infrastructure, security measures, emergency preparedness, social-emotional support for pupils, and community involvement.

The United Nations Study on Violence against Children (2022) reveals that children worldwide are at risk of violence in and around the school. The threats range from rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and physical beatings to verbal abuse, bullying, taunting, stereotyping and other forms of humiliation. At times, teachers, school authorities and peers are the perpetrators of such abuse (United Nations cited in UNICEF, 2024). School safety is a pressing concern in Nigeria, and there is a need for more information about the nature of the problem and the factors that mitigate or exacerbate the problem (Donmez & Guven, 2002). Little is known about the nature of the problem across schools, the reasons safety varies in different sites, or the features of schools that lead them to have better climates. This report provides new evidence on these issues.

Children are exposed to many physical and physiological threats that jeopardize their health and safety in school, besides poor nutrition. Malaria, waterborne diseases, parasitic infestations (worms are a major cause of under nutrition in school-age children), diarrhoea, cholera, dehydration and HIV and AIDS are just some of the physiological risks to children. There are also physical risks that threaten health and safety, such as traffic injuries incurred enroute to and from school, lacerations, fractures and other

injuries during play, drowning, physical violence (corporal punishment, assaults, among others) and sexual violence (UNICEF, 2019).

The safety of pupils in Bakassi Local Government Area has been a matter of concern due to incidents of violence, including shootings and homicides involving school-aged children. The September 2018 beating to death of pupils, which led to the charging of four teenagers with first-degree murder, brought national attention to the issue. However, it is important to note that physical attacks against public primary school pupils often occur without receiving significant media coverage. The peace and tranquility of educational institutions are essential for effective learning and academic success.

However, in some parts of the world, including Bakassi Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria, primary school pupils have been experiencing various forms of violence that hinder their academic progress and overall development. According to a study conducted by the Cross River State Universal Basic Education Board (CRSUBEB, 2024), bullying is a significant problem that affects approximately 30% of primary school pupils in the area. Bullying can take various forms, including physical violence, verbal abuse, and social exclusion. Physical violence involves hitting, pushing, or kicking, while verbal abuse includes name-calling and using threatening language. Social exclusion refers to intentionally isolating a child from social activities or groups. Bullying can lead to emotional distress, anxiety, depression, and even suicide in extreme cases (Ighaede-Edwards et al., 2023). There is the issue of sexual violence against primary school girls in Bakassi Local Government Area of Cross River State; girls as young as six years old have been subjected to sexual violence while on their way to or from school. The perpetrators are often older boys or men who use threats or force to coerce the girls into submission. Sexual violence can lead to physical injuries, emotional trauma, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases (WHO, 2021).

Moreso, there have been incidents of communal clashes between different ethnic groups within the Bakassi Local Government Area that have disrupted the education of primary school pupils. These clashes often result from long-standing disputes over land ownership or political power. When such conflicts occur, schools are often closed down for an extended period due to safety concerns or damage to infrastructure. Prolonged closure of schools can lead to academic setbacks for the affected pupils and hinder their future academic progress (UNICEF, 2023). The government of Nigeria has initiated several programmes and strategies to improve academic performance of students in schools. Some of the efforts range from the implementation of universal education programmes,

Parent Teachers Associations (PTA), increased budgetary allocation to the educational sector, prompt release of teacher's promotion, stable welfare scheme, among others.

Social learning theory by Miller and Dollard (1941) is the theory in which this study is anchored. Miller and Dollard's (1941) work focused on social reinforcement as a critical factor in behaviour change. They argued that a safe learning environment can positively impact students' academic performance by reducing stress levels, enhancing focus and attention, and fostering better relationships with teachers and peers. Conversely, an unsafe school environment can negatively affect students' academic performance due to increased anxiety, distraction from learning, absenteeism, and other related issues.

According to social learning theory by Miller and Dollard (1941), pupils in public primary schools in Bakassi Local Government Area learn from observing their peers' academic performance within a safe or unsafe school environment. When pupils see their classmates excelling academically due to a secure learning environment, they are more likely to be motivated to engage in similar behaviours themselves. Conversely, if they observe their peers struggling due to a lack of safety at school, they may become discouraged or distracted from their studies. Moreover, teachers play a significant role as models within this context. When teachers create a positive classroom climate characterized by safety and orderliness, they serve as effective role models for their students. This positive influence can lead to improved academic performance among pupils as they learn through observation and imitation of their teachers' behaviours. Therefore, ensuring a safe learning environment is crucial for promoting optimal academic performance among pupils in these schools.

This study was also anchored on the Environmental theory by Florence Nightingale (1910-1920). Florence Nightingale developed the Environmental Theory between 1910 and 1920. This theory emphasizes the significance of the environment in relation to health and well-being. Nightingale believed that the environment plays a crucial role in influencing an individual's health outcomes. Nightingale's Environmental Theory focuses on creating a conducive and healthy environment to facilitate healing and recovery. She emphasized the need for proper ventilation, cleanliness, and access to natural light in healthcare settings to support patients' well-being.

Nightingale's theory also underscores the impact of noise levels, comfort, and aesthetics on individuals' health experiences. When applying Nightingale's Environmental Theory to the context of school safety and academic performance in public primary schools in

Bakassi Local Government Area, it is essential to consider how the physical environment can affect students' learning outcomes. School safety encompasses various aspects such as building infrastructure, security measures, hygiene standards, and overall environmental conditions. Factors such as well-maintained facilities, adequate lighting, proper ventilation, clean water supply, and hygienic sanitation facilities can contribute to a positive learning atmosphere.

It has been revealed by several studies that the subsisting climate in a school relates with academic achievements (Hattie, 2009; Johnson & Stevens, 2006; Papanastasiou, 2008; Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2008). However, factors that have been found to correlate with students' achievement are 'a calm classroom climate', teachers' management of disruptive behaviour, and students' feeling about safety in school (Ma &Willms, 2004). Donmez and Guven (2002) found in a study conducted in Malatya, Turkey with high school teachers and students that the most serious safety problems in school stemmed from a lack of control in school corridors and the playground.

Isik (2014) conducted a study in Istanbul, Turkey and concluded that the most commonly valued sub-dimension of school safety was physical place. Emotional safety reduces stress and anxiety, which are known to impair cognitive functions such as memory, attention, and problem-solving. When pupils feel safe, their cognitive resources are freed up to focus on learning tasks, leading to improved academic outcomes (Osher et al., 2018). Pupils who feel emotionally safe are more likely to engage in classroom activities, participate in discussions, and take intellectual risks. This active participation is linked to deeper learning and better academic performance (Zins & Maurice, 2007).

Lukumon et al. (2018) analyzed the effect of school safety on students' academic performance in Amuwo-Odofin Local Government Area of Lagos State. A total of one hundred (100) teachers including school administrators were randomly selected from public schools. A structured self-developed questionnaire was designed in line with a 5-point likert scale and administered to the respondents in order to ascertain the effect of school safety on students' academic performance. The data was analyzed with simple percentage and non-parametric statistics of chi-square using Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS). Finding shows that public schools do not have effective safety facilities and equipment to take prompt remedial action, and that security and discipline rules perceived by teachers and students were not strictly enforced in most public schools in Lagos State.

Baafi (2020) examined and compared the effect of social safety on academic achievement of senior high school students in Ghana. The study sought to investigate the contribution of a number of school social safety on the performance of students in schools. Participants for the study were selected using multi-stage sampling technique. A regression model was used to determine the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. The findings of the study confirmed that the students in senior high schools with a pleasant social safety performed better than those where the learning environment was not conducive. The researchers, on the basis of the empirical evidence, established that adequate school facilities provide a positive educational climate suitable for students' learning. Socially safe environments significantly reduce the anxiety and stress associated with the fear of bullying, social rejection, or exclusion. Lower levels of anxiety allow students to focus better on their studies, leading to better concentration, memory retention, and overall academic achievement (Juvonen, 2016).

Social safety promotes the development of positive peer relationships, which are essential for academic success. Students who have strong, supportive friendships are more likely to excel academically, as these relationships provide emotional support and encourage cooperative learning (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). When students feel socially safe, their self-esteem and academic confidence tend to increase. This confidence enables them to take on challenging tasks and persist through difficulties, which are key factors in academic success (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

According to Cornell and Mayer (2020), the relationship between school physical safety and students' academic performance is well-established in educational research. Schools that prioritize physical safety, such as secure facilities, effective emergency protocols, and a positive school climate, tend to create environments where students feel secure and are more likely to excel academically. Safe schools provide a conducive learning environment. When students feel safe, they can focus on learning rather than being preoccupied with concerns about their safety. This leads to better engagement in classroom activities, higher concentration, and improved academic outcomes. Students in safer schools tend to have better attendance rates. Regular attendance is critical for academic success as it ensures consistent learning and participation in school activities (Borman, & Overman, 2024).

According to O'Brennan et al. (2019), the psychological impact of feeling unsafe can lead to stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues, which negatively affect academic performance. A secure school environment supports students' mental well-being, which

is directly linked to their ability to perform academically (Egim & Odey, 2024). A positive school climate, which includes physical safety, is associated with higher academic achievement. Schools that emphasize safety typically also promote respect, inclusion, and support, which are essential for fostering an environment where students can thrive academically (Thapa et al., 2013).

Purpose of the study
The main purpose of this study is to ascertain the relationship between school safety and academic performance of pupils in public primary schools in Bakassi LGA. Specifically, the study sought to investigate the relationship between:
1) Emotional safety and academic performance of pupils.
2) Social safety and academic performance of pupils.
3) Physical safety and academic performance of pupils.

Research questions
The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:
1) How does emotional safety relate to the academic performance of pupils in public primary schools in Bakassi LGA?
2) How does social safety relate to the academic performance of pupils in public primary schools in Bakassi LGA?
3) How does school physical safety relate to the academic performance of pupils in public primary schools in Bakassi LGA?

Hypotheses
The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested:
Ho1: There is no significant relationship between emotional safety and the academic performance of pupils in public primary schools in Bakassi LGA.
Ho2: There is no significant relationship between social safety and the academic performance of pupils in public primary schools in Bakassi LGA.
Ho2: There is no significant relationship between school physical safety and the academic performance of pupils in public primary schools in Bakassi LGA.

Methodology
This study utilized a survey research design, because it gives the researchers an opportunity to make generalization of the study to the entire population. The area of the study was Bakassi Local Government Area (LGA), Cross River State, Nigeria. The population of the study consists of 903 pupils in three public primary schools of Bakassi

LGA of Cross River State. The sample for the study was made up of 200 pupils selected using a simple random sampling technique.

Two instruments were used for data collection. The first instrument is a four-point Likert scale questionnaire tagged: School Safety Questionnaire (SSQ). It has two sections (section A & B). Section A handled the respondents' demographic and personal data while section B elicited responses based on all the three sub-variables. The second instrument is a 20 items achievement test containing questions from all subjects of primary six. It is measured on a continuous interval scale and each question contained one point. The content validity of the instrument was considered by making sure that the instrument is developed to reflect the content of the variables under study. Three experts and professionals scrutinized the items to certify that the instrument has face validity and could be used for the study. Copies of the validated questionnaire were administered by the researchers and one research assistant. For each positive item, the response options in the questionnaire were scored thus: Strongly Agree (SA), 4 points; Agree (A), 3 points; Disagree (D), 2 points; and Strongly Disagree (SD), 1point. For the negative items, Strongly Agree (SA) was assigned 1 point, Agree (A) 2 points, Disagree (D) 3 points, and Strongly Disagree (SA) 4 points. All hypotheses were subjected to testing at 0.05 level of significance with critical values and degree of freedom. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Statistical tool was used for data analysis.

Presentation of results

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between emotional safety and academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi.

The independent variable is emotional safety while the dependent variable is academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi. Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was employed in testing the hypothesis for this study. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient analysis of the relationship between emotional safety and academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi

Variables	$\bar{x}$	S.D	r	P-value
Emotional safety (x)	19.22	5.92		
Academic performance (y)	27.14	4.92	.055	.001

*Significant at 0.05 level; df= 198; N=200

The result of the analysis revealed that emotional safety produced a mean score of 19.22 with a standard deviation of 5.92 while academic performance of public-school pupils produced a mean score of 27.14 with a standard deviation of 4.92. The result further revealed that the calculated r-ratio of .055 obtained with a p-value of .001 at 198 degree of freedom met the condition required for significance at .05 level. Based on this, the null hypothesis which stated that there is no significant relationship between emotional safety and academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi was rejected indicating that there is a significant relationship between emotional safety and academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi.

Ho2: There is no significant relationship between social safety and academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi.

The independent variable is social safety while the dependent variable is academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi. Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was employed in testing the hypothesis for this study. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient analysis of the relationship between social safety and academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi

Variables	$\bar{x}$	SD	r	P-value
Social safety (x)	17.93	4.33		
Academic performance (y)	27.14	4.92	.040	.000

*Significant at 0.05 level; df= 198; N=200

The result of the analysis revealed that social safety produced a mean score of 17.93 with a standard deviation of 4.33 while academic performance of public school pupils produced a mean score of 27.14 with a standard deviation of 4.92. The result further revealed that the calculated r-ratio of .040 obtained with a p-value of .000 at 198 degree of freedom met the condition required for significance at .05 level. Based on this, the null hypothesis which stated that there is no significant relationship between social safety and academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi was rejected indicating that there is a significant relationship between social safety and academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi.

Ho3: There is no significant relationship between school physical safety and academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi.

The independent variable is school physical safety while the dependent variable is academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi. Pearson's Product Moment Correlation test statistic was employed in testing the hypothesis for this study. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient analysis of the relationship between school physical safety and academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi

Variables	$\bar{x}$	S.D	r	P-value
School Physical safety (x)	18.01	4.67		
Academic performance (y)	27.14	4.92	.057	.000

*Significant at 0.05 level; df= 198; N=200

The result of the analysis revealed that school physical safety produced a mean score of 18.01 with a standard deviation of 4.67 while academic performance of public-school pupils produced a mean score of 27.14 with a standard deviation of 4.92. The result further revealed that the calculated r-ratio of .057 obtained with a p-value of .000 at 198 degree of freedom met the condition required for significance at .05 level. Based on this, the null hypothesis which stated that there is no significant relationship between school physical safety and academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi was rejected indicating that there is a significant relationship between school physical safety and academic performance of public school pupils in Bakassi.

Discussion of the findings
The result of hypothesis one showed that there is a significant relationship between emotional safety and academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi. This result is true because when pupils feel emotionally safe, they are more likely to participate actively in class, take intellectual risks, and engage in learning. A sense of security allows them to focus better, ask questions, and express their thoughts without fear of ridicule or rejection. The finding of the study supports Osher et al., (2018) who posited that emotional safety reduces stress and anxiety, which are known to impair cognitive functions such as memory, attention, and problem-solving. When pupils feel safe, their cognitive resources are freed up to focus on learning tasks, leading to improved academic outcomes. Pupils who feel emotionally safe are more likely to engage in classroom activities, participate in discussions, and take intellectual risks. This active participation is linked to deeper learning and better academic performance (Zins & Maurice, 2007).

The result of hypothesis two showed that there is a significant relationship between social safety and academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi. This result is trustworthy as social safety ensures that all pupils, regardless of their background, feel accepted and valued. When students feel socially safe, they are more likely to engage fully in the learning process, participate in class, and collaborate with peers. This inclusivity supports academic achievement across diverse student populations. The finding of the study is in line with Juvonen (2016) that socially safe environments significantly reduce the anxiety and stress associated with the fear of bullying, social rejection, or exclusion. Lower levels of anxiety allow students to focus better on their studies, leading to better concentration, memory retention, and overall academic achievement. Social safety promotes the development of positive peer relationships, which are essential for academic success. Students who have strong, supportive friendships are more likely to excel academically, as these relationships provide emotional support and encourage cooperative learning (Hamm & Faircloth, 2015). When students feel socially safe, their self-esteem and academic confidence tend to increase. This confidence enables them to take on challenging tasks and persist through difficulties, which are key factors in academic success (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

The result of hypothesis three showed that there is a significant relationship between school physical safety and academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi. This result is so as a well-designed and maintained physical environment, including comfortable seating, adequate lighting, and proper ventilation, can significantly improve students' ability to concentrate and stay focused on their academic tasks. Studies have shown that good lighting and air quality positively influence students' cognitive function and overall academic performance. The finding of the study is in consonance with Cornell and Mayer (2020), who reported a relationship between school physical safety and students' academic performance. Students in safer schools tend to have better attendance rates. Regular attendance is critical for academic success as it ensures consistent learning and participation in school activities (Borman & Overman, 2024). According to O'Brennan et al. (2019), the psychological impact of feeling unsafe can lead to stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues, which negatively affect academic performance. A secure school environment supports students' mental well-being, which is directly linked to their ability to perform academically. A positive school climate, which includes physical safety, is associated with higher academic achievement. Schools that emphasize safety, typically, also promote respect, inclusion, and support, which are essential for fostering an environment where students can thrive academically (Thapa et al., 2013).

Conclusion

Based on the results, it was concluded that there is a significant relationship between emotional safety, social safety and school physical safety and academic performance of public-school pupils in Bakassi.

Recommendations

From the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Government should implement programmes that focus on creating emotionally safe environments, such as anti-bullying campaigns, peer support groups, or teacher training on emotional intelligence.

2. Headteachers of schools should make efforts to ensure that the standard design of schools is adhered to and ensure that all the required resources are available in schools to promote excellent students' performance in class.

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