

Creating Safe Schools in Zimbabwe: Strengthening Safeguarding Frameworks, Professional Ethics, and Child Protection in Basic Education

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how safe schools can be strengthened in Zimbabwean basic education through safeguarding frameworks, professional ethics and child protection mechanisms. It reports a systematic literature review guided by PRISMA 2020. Searches across academic databases, institutional repositories and legal/policy sources identified 25 evidence sources published between 2021 and 2026: 15 peer-reviewed studies, five Zimbabwean institutional or policy documents, one legal instrument and four global or regional evidence frameworks. From the synthesis, it can be seen that learner protection goes beyond disciplinary issues and infrastructure and includes prevention, disclosure of abuse in a child-friendly manner, referral and case management, professional boundaries, and inclusion and accountability within school governance. Fear, power imbalance, poor mechanisms for reporting and inadequate response by institutions remain some of the obstacles as highlighted by Zimbabwean literature. On the other hand, literature from the region and global perspectives emphasizes a whole school approach, multi-disciplinary involvement, and a disability-inclusive framework. The problem with the literature available is the lack of large-scale research and programmatic studies that easily show the extent of their reach but not their impact.

Keywords: safe schools; safeguarding; child protection; professional ethics; basic education; Zimbabwe; school governance.

INTRODUCTION

Background

School safety has become a central issue in basic education because schools must educate, protect and support children simultaneously. UNESCO (2024) estimates that approximately one billion children experience violence each year, making school safety both an educational concern and a children's rights obligation. In Zimbabwe, safer-school debates intersect with violence, neglect, bullying, harmful punishment and weak reporting systems. Mwapaura et al. (2022) argue that child protection services should be assessed through a human-rights lens because legal entitlements are meaningful only when children can access protection. The Children's Amendment Act (2023) strengthens the statutory basis for child protection. Safe schools should therefore be understood as organised systems of prevention, disclosure, response and support, rather than merely as places where teaching occurs.

The case study conducted in Zimbabwe shows that institutions of learning have the ability to either increase or reduce vulnerabilities depending on the protection system that exists. Lokot et al. (2025), for example, identified some of the child factors, adult factors, and institutional factors that can hinder reporting abuse among the ages 8-12 years in two Catholic primary schools in Harare. Eldred et al. (2025b) indicate that violence prevention can be part of religious and educational structure when the schools communities engage in interventions development. Madzore and Gasa (2025) indicate the link between child abuse and anxiety, absenteeism and poor academic performance of pupils in selected secondary schools in Harare. Notwithstanding the specific nature of these examples, they clearly show evidence of contextual connection of child safety to education.

Another important aspect in making sure that there is safety in schools is the professional ethics since of the great impact of the teachers and the administrators on their students. In his research on pre-service teachers' perceptions of the teachers' ethics, Tlali (2021) brings out the gaps existing in the perceptions of the teachers' ethics but he also shows that professional ethics contribute in safeguarding the learners, the school, and the profession. From the study carried out by Walsh et al. (2023), not all the teaching training programs prepare learners sufficiently to recognize, document, and report safeguarding concerns. Professional ethics should therefore function preventively through duty of care, boundaries, vigilance, reporting and supported decision-making, rather than only as a basis for sanctions after misconduct.

However, there have been cases whereby the policies have been effective in ensuring that schools become safer for children in Zimbabwe. One such policy is the Disaster Risk Management and Resilience Manual, which was set up by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and UNICEF Zimbabwe (2023). As indicated by UNICEF Zimbabwe (2024), 81,704 children (58 percent girls) benefitted from Integrated Case Management intervention while 56,090 benefitted from the Safe to Learn intervention. These figures demonstrate programme reach, not necessarily effectiveness or equitable coverage. The central challenge is therefore to ensure that preventive, reporting and referral mechanisms operate consistently across urban, rural, public, faith-based and resource-constrained schools.

Thus, school safety in Zimbabwe may be considered in terms of a learning environment that is inclusive, accountable, and based on child rights. In the definition given by GADRRRES (2022), "all risks, all hazards involve child rights, resilience and continuity of learning." In the discussion of Safe to Learn Coalition (2023), the themes of legislation, prevention of violence at schools, finance, data, and accountability are addressed, while for Mathews et al. (2021) the whole school approach in the Global South includes four pillars. The central argument of this article is therefore that isolated programmes are insufficient. Zimbabwe requires an integrated framework connecting policy, professional ethics, child-friendly reporting, referral and case management, inclusive learner support, professional accountability and school governance.

Research Problem

The research problem is that safe-school efforts in Zimbabwe remain weakened by a persistent implementation gap between national commitments and everyday school practice. As put forward by Eldred et al. (2023), prevention of violence in Catholic primary schools requires development of an intervention in relation to the institution itself and the Church, hence proving the impracticality of the application of general policy guidelines. According to Lokot et al. (2025), the disclosure process is dependent on the fear of the child, response from the adult, the knowledge of procedure and that the disclosure will lead to safety. Inability to access services as well as referral was reported by Mwapaura et al. (2022).

Moreover, professional ethics is considered in isolation from child protection although they are closely interrelated. For example, Mayisela et al. (2025) describe 474 cases of educator sexual misconduct referred to the South African Council of Educators in the period from 2019 to 2022 proving the necessity of regulation of professionals and standardisation of the procedure of dealing with such cases; yet, statistics cannot be interpreted as prevalence data. Finally, as it is stated by Muleya et al. (2026), stigmatisation, power dynamics, and weak institutional response might prevent reporting. South African evidence cannot be transferred uncritically to Zimbabwe, but it provides a relevant regional comparison because both systems confront adult authority, learner vulnerability and enforcement challenges. The unresolved issue is how Zimbabwe can integrate enforceable teacher ethics with accessible, child-centred protection mechanisms.

Research Questions

Main Research Question

How can safeguarding frameworks, professional ethics and child protection mechanisms be strengthened to create safer basic education schools in Zimbabwe?

Sub-Research Questions

- What safeguarding frameworks and child protection mechanisms are currently discussed in the literature on safe schools and basic education?
- How does professional ethics influence learner safety and child protection in basic education settings?
- What strategies can be recommended to strengthen safeguarding, professional ethics and child protection in Zimbabwean basic education?

Significance of the Study

This article is significant because it integrates safe schools, professional ethics and child protection, fields that are often discussed separately. It defines the necessary institutional structures that will ensure the conversion of the national commitments into action at the school level. The Partnership Compact between the Government of Zimbabwe 2022-2026 is about equality, quality, and learning (Government of Zimbabwe and MoPSE, 2023). In contrast, the UNICEF Country Programme emphasizes the need to protect children against exploitation, violence, and abuse in the larger context of the education and social protection system (UNICEF, 2021). For the school administrators, it will guide them in understanding the role they play in terms of leadership, documentation, referral, and reporting. On the other hand, for teachers, it will guide them in the duty of care and professional ethics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Safe Schools in Basic Education

A safe school is more than a school without visible conflict. UNESCO (2024) defines safe learning environments as settings in which learners are protected physically, psychologically and socially from violence in and through education. According to GADRRRES (2022), the definition can even be extended to incorporate children's rights, disaster risk reduction, resilience, and education continuity. In Zimbabwe, for example, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and UNICEF Zimbabwe (2023) use this concept of safe schools using school risk assessment, preparedness, and response. It is indeed true that the concept of safe schools is one that is endless as far as governance is concerned since it involves code of conduct, safe environment, adults that are trustworthy, complaints from children, emergency preparation, and proper referrals.

Safety is also relational and institutional, as the learner shares the information only if he/she anticipates that the adults will listen and take action in a fair manner. Lokot et al. (2025) highlight that the act of disclosing is influenced by trust and expected reaction from the adults. Madzore and Gasa (2025) prove that the occurrence of abuse negatively affects the attendance, participation and performance, thus making safety a precondition for the education quality. Khumalo et al. (2025a) analyze school violence through the interplay of several contexts. These studies caution against reducing safety to classroom discipline. It should instead be assessed through learner well-being, access to reporting, quality of institutional response and continuity of learning.

Safeguarding and Child Protection in Schools

Protection and child protection are two terms that are different but can be connected with each other. While protection refers to all legal frameworks, funding, information, and other aspects, child protection relates to measures that are taken once an incident of abuse or suspected one happens (Safe to Learn Coalition, 2023). According to Walsh et al. (2022), the aim of education is the provision of training for professionals to recognize abuse and report it while according to Mwapaura et al. (2022), Child Protection is a human rights-based and service delivery commitment. Hence, both preventive and responsive measures should be in place at Zimbabwean schools.

The role played by referral and reporting systems becomes quite apparent because silence always serves the institution and not the child. According to Lokot et al. (2025), barriers and enablers in protection are discussed

from the point of view of the child, adult, and the institution. Besides, UNICEF Zimbabwe (2024) has identified the importance of providing full protection services to the vulnerable child. It is essential to note that the Ministry of Finance and UNICEF Zimbabwe (2022) consider financing and coordination of referrals. The schools cannot handle all protection matters independently; they need some referral mechanism to link representatives of the school to social services, health services, and police.

Professional Ethics and Teacher Conduct

Teachers should possess ethics because of their powerful status and the continuous interaction with children. According to Tlali (2021), teacher ethics are required in order to ensure that the interests of stakeholders as well as teacher ethics are maintained. According to Walsh et al. (2023), the teacher training process should enable teachers to handle safeguarding issues alongside other professional issues. According to Mayisela et al. (2025), any violations of ethical norms are associated with the failure to protect the child from any possible risks because of the incompetence of the professional and organizations. Teacher ethics in Zimbabwe should comprise the following norms: respect, justice, confidentiality, appropriate behavior, harmless punishment, and referrals.

Moreover, ethicality is institutional as well due to the fact that school culture and its leadership contribute to the teacher's behaviour. According to Unger and Dreer-Göthe (2026), teachers face numerous pressures and stress when addressing the issue of child protection without any proper guidelines for that. Muleya et al. (2026) prove that stigma, power imbalances, and poor institutional response can cover up educator abuse. Eldred et al. (2025b) prove that prevention is easier when implemented into the existing educational and religious institutions. Thus, codes of conduct are important, yet not enough without proper supervision and other conditions.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by a rights-based approach and a whole-school safeguarding approach. The rights-based approach locates child protection in dignity, non-discrimination, participation, safety and the best interests of the child. The Children's Amendment Act (2023) reinforces the treatment of children as rights holders entitled to protection from harm, while Mwapaura et al. (2022) argue that Zimbabwean child-protection services should be evaluated through a human-rights framework. UNICEF's Zimbabwe country programme similarly integrates protection from exploitation, violence and abuse (UNICEF, 2021). The approach shifts attention from adult convenience to learner entitlement by asking whether all learners, including girls, children with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, can learn safely and obtain support after disclosure.

It is also consistent with the rights-based approach insofar as showing how protection is to be organized in reality. What needs to be emphasized is that "[t]he prevention model proposed for the Global South... [is] based on the interconnectedness of school climate, social norms, psychosocial support and physical environment," according to Mathews et al. (2021). Moreover, the definition of accountability from Safe to Learn Coalition (2023) includes such stakeholders as the government, schools, community, teachers, and students. This can be illustrated by the example provided by Eldred et al. (2023): it is about the intervention program implemented among Catholic primary schools and churches in Zimbabwe. However, the safety of the school will not be guaranteed through the work of only one guidance counsellor and one dedicated teacher but by the collective endeavor of everyone involved.

Therefore, these models cover both normative rights and institutional mechanisms. The issues connected with children's rights, risks, resilience, and educational planning can be addressed within the framework of GADRRRES (2022). According to Eldred et al. (2025a), the interventions developed to prevent the school violence do not pay much attention to the special needs of children with disabilities. Additionally, according to Eldred et al. (2026), the literature does not contain many reports about any interventions implemented to address the issue of school violence in minors or high-risk groups. The stronger global evidence base therefore remains incomplete on equity and transferability. A rights-based whole-school framework requires Zimbabwean schools to examine not only whether an intervention works overall, but also who is protected, who is excluded, who remains silent and whether the most vulnerable learners receive effective support.

METHODS

Search Strategy

This article used a systematic literature review to synthesise heterogeneous academic, legal, policy and institutional evidence on safe schools, safeguarding, child protection, professional ethics and school violence. Searches were conducted in Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, JSTOR, African Journals Online and relevant publisher platforms, supplemented by official sources from UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO, GADRRRES and Zimbabwean legal and policy repositories. The evidence window was 2021–2026, and the final search was completed in July 2026. Identification, screening, eligibility assessment and reporting were organised in accordance with PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021).

Search Terms

The core search string combined concepts and context: (“safe school*” OR safeguard* OR “school violence” OR “child protection”) AND (teacher* OR educator* OR “professional ethics”) AND (Zimbabwe OR “Southern Africa” OR SADC OR Africa). Database-specific variations and targeted searches were also used for “Safe to Learn”, “whole-school safeguarding”, “reporting child abuse in schools”, “teacher misconduct”, “school-based violence prevention” and “disability-inclusive safeguarding”. Searches were conducted in titles, abstracts and keywords where database functionality allowed. Only English-language sources were included because the review was designed around Zimbabwean, regional and international literature available for English-language analysis.

Inclusion Criteria

Sources were eligible when published between 2021 and 2026, available in full text and directly relevant to basic education, school safety, safeguarding, child protection, professional ethics, learner support, school violence or education governance. Eligible evidence comprised peer-reviewed empirical studies, systematic and scoping reviews, official institutional reports, legal instruments, policy frameworks and implementation manuals. Zimbabwe-specific evidence was prioritised; Southern African, Global South and global sources were included when they offered comparative, theoretical or implementation insights. The final evidence set comprised 25 sources: 15 peer-reviewed studies, five Zimbabwean institutional or policy documents, one legal instrument and four global or regional evidence frameworks.

Exclusion Criteria

Sources were excluded when they focused outside basic education, lacked substantive relevance to learner safety or teacher professionalism, were unavailable in full text, or could not be verified by author, institution, publication details or stable source. Blogs, commercial webpages, Wikipedia, unsupported opinion pieces and newspaper articles were excluded as evidentiary sources. Publications before 2021 were excluded from the final synthesis to preserve currency, except methodological guidance cited to explain the review process. Records with uncertain relevance were retained for full-text assessment rather than excluded at title stage.

Study Selection Process

The selection process followed four stages. Database searches identified 97 records and official institutional searching identified three additional records. Duplicate titles, authors and DOIs were removed, leaving 67 records. Titles and abstracts were screened against the eligibility criteria; 24 records were excluded because they did not address basic education or safeguarding directly. The full texts of 43 records were then assessed, and 18 were excluded because they fell outside the date range, lacked sufficient relevance or did not provide usable evidence. Twenty-five evidence sources were included in the final synthesis, as shown in Figure 3.1. Reasons for full-text exclusion were recorded in the screening matrix.

Quality Appraisal, Data Extraction and Synthesis

Peer-reviewed studies were appraised with design-appropriate JBI critical appraisal checklists, while legal, policy and institutional documents were assessed for authority, currency, transparency, relevance and clarity of implementation responsibility (Aromataris et al., 2024). Appraisal findings were used to weight interpretation rather than to exclude legally or contextually indispensable sources. Systematic and scoping reviews generally provided the strongest methodological breadth; Zimbabwean qualitative studies contributed high contextual relevance but limited national generalisability; institutional reports supplied current programme coverage but did not establish causal effectiveness. Data were extracted into a structured matrix covering author, jurisdiction, design, population, safeguarding focus, principal findings, limitations and implementation implications. A thematic synthesis combined deductive coding from the research questions with inductive coding from recurring evidence, producing three themes: institutional safeguarding, professional ethics and practical strategies for strengthening safe schools. Since screening and appraisal were conducted within a single-author secondary review, selection bias and the absence of contemporary school-level validation remain limitations.

Figure 3.1: PRISMA Flow Chart for the Identification and Selection of Sources

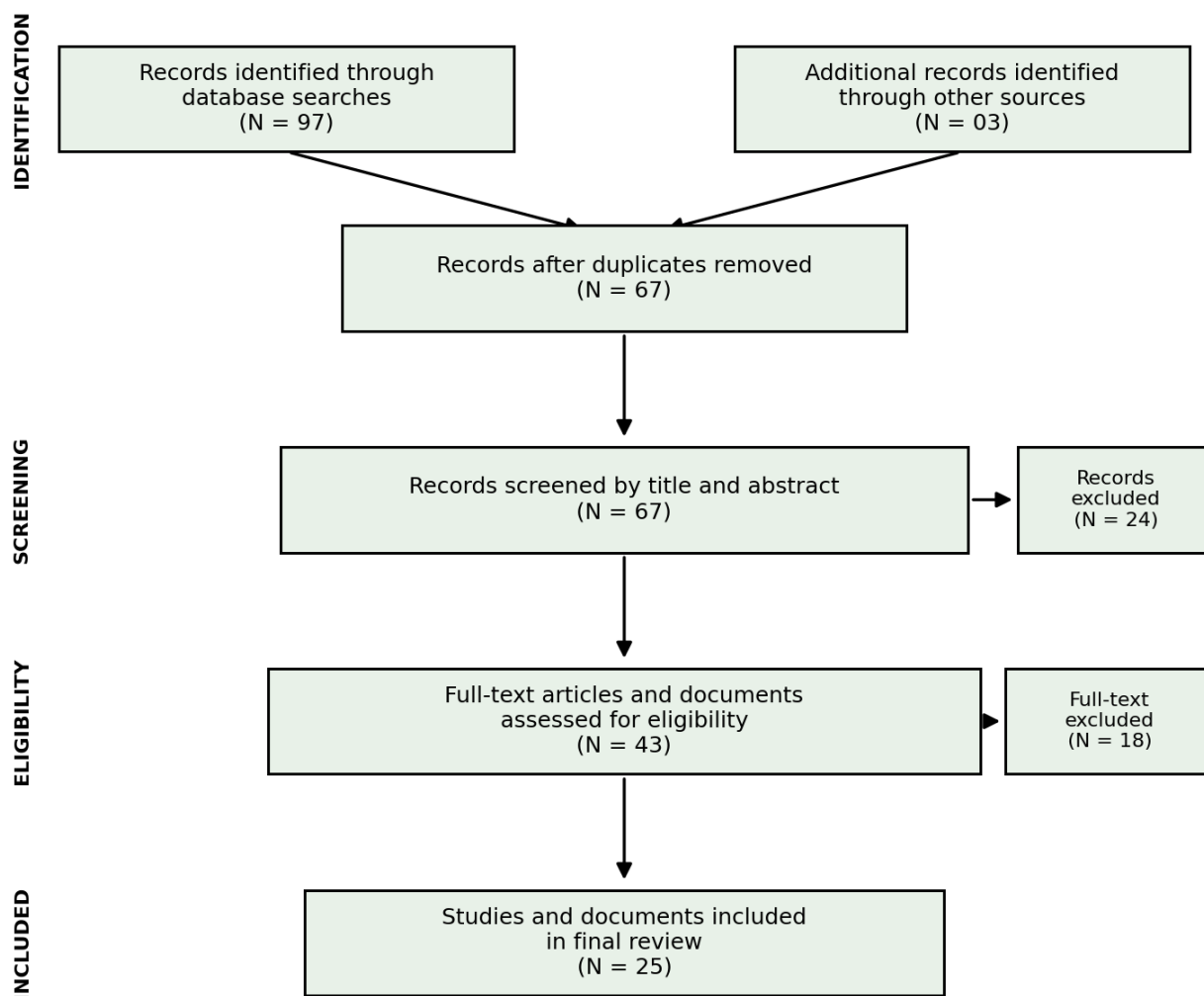


Table 3.1: Summary of Included Evidence Sources and Main Findings

Table 3.1 summarises the 25 evidence sources, their designs, populations and principal contribution to the three analytical themes. The matrix should be read alongside the quality appraisal because broad reviews and official frameworks provide greater coverage, whereas local qualitative studies provide stronger contextual detail but narrower transferability.

Authors	Article title / journal name	Study design	Target group	Main findings / appraisal relevance
Lokot et al. (2025)	Perspectives on factors affecting disclosure and reporting of school violence in Zimbabwe / Child Protection and Practice	Qualitative study	Children, parents, teachers and stakeholders in Zimbabwean primary schools	Shows barriers and enablers of disclosure and reporting; supports child-friendly reporting systems.
Eldred et al. (2025b)	Embedding violence prevention in religious and education systems / BMC Public Health	Formative research	Zimbabwean religious and education systems	Shows how school violence prevention can be embedded in existing institutional systems.
Eldred et al. (2023)	Development of an intervention in Catholic primary schools / Christian Journal for Global Health	Intervention development article	Catholic primary schools in Zimbabwe	Supports whole-school and faith-based safeguarding design.
Madzore and Gasa (2025)	Influence of child abuse on academic performance / Social Sciences & Humanities Open	Qualitative study	Secondary school learners in Harare	Links abuse to learning, anxiety, absenteeism and school disengagement.
Mwapaura et al. (2022)	Provision of child protection services in Zimbabwe / Cogent Social Sciences	Policy review	Zimbabwean child protection system	Frames child protection through human rights and service delivery.
Zimbabwe (2023)	Children's Amendment Act, 2023	Legal instrument	Children in Zimbabwe	Provides legal basis for child rights and protection duties.
UNICEF Zimbabwe (2024)	UNICEF Zimbabwe Annual Report 2023	Institutional report	Children and families in Zimbabwe	Provides recent child protection and Safe to Learn programme evidence.
Government of Zimbabwe and MoPSE (2023)	Zimbabwe 2022-2026 Partnership Compact	Education policy compact	Zimbabwean education system	Supports education governance, equity and learner support priorities.
UNICEF (2021)	Country Programme Document: Zimbabwe, 2022-2026	Country programme document	Zimbabwe	Places child protection, education and social protection in one strategic frame.
MoPSE and UNICEF Zimbabwe (2023)	Disaster Risk Management and Resilience in Schools Manual	School safety manual	Zimbabwean schools	Supports school-level risk planning and safe-school resilience.

Ministry of Finance and UNICEF Zimbabwe (2022)	Child Protection Financing in Zimbabwe	Institutional report	Zimbabwean child protection sector	Shows the importance of financing and accountability for child protection.
GADRRRES (2022)	Comprehensive School Safety Framework 2022-2030	Global framework	Education systems globally	Provides all-hazards and rights-based school safety framework.
UNESCO (2024)	Safe to Learn and Thrive	Global report	Global education systems	Provides evidence on ending violence in and through education.
Safe to Learn Coalition (2023)	Safe to Learn Call to Action	Global policy framework	Schools and governments globally	Outlines practical action areas for violence prevention and response.
Mathews et al. (2021)	Prevention of Violence Against Children in and through Schools in the Global South	Evidence review	Global South school systems	Supports whole-school prevention, psychosocial support and safe environments.
Walsh et al. (2022)	Child protection training for professionals / Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews	Systematic review	Professionals responsible for reporting	Shows value and limits of training to improve reporting of abuse and neglect.
Walsh et al. (2023)	Child protection and safeguarding in initial teacher education / Children and Youth Services Review	Scoping review	Teacher education programmes	Supports stronger safeguarding preparation for teachers.
Unger and Dreer-Göthe (2026)	Teacher well-being and child protection in schools	Systematic review	Teachers and school systems	Shows teacher demands, support needs and emotional strain in child protection work.
Eldred et al. (2025a)	School-based violence prevention and children with disabilities / eClinicalMedicine	Systematic review	Children with disabilities	Supports disability-inclusive safeguarding and intervention evaluation.
Eldred et al. (2026)	Equity analysis of school-based violence prevention trials / BMC Public Health	Systematic review and equity analysis	Marginalised learner groups	Shows limited reporting on equity effects in school violence prevention trials.
Khumalo et al. (2025a)	Contextual factors contributing to school violence in SADC / Youth	Scoping review	SADC schools	Places Zimbabwe within regional school violence risks.

Khumalo et al. (2025b)	Interventions and strategies to address school violence in SADC / EHASS	Scoping review	SADC region	Identifies regional interventions and strategies for school violence.
Tlali (2021)	Teacher professional ethics in contemporary Lesotho / African Journal of Teacher Education	Qualitative study	Pre-service teachers in Lesotho	Supports professional ethics as a foundation for safe learner relations.
Mayisela et al. (2025)	Curbing teacher sexual misconduct: An assessment of reported cases to the South African Council of Educators between 2019 and 2022 / EHASS	Quantitative case analysis	Reported educator misconduct cases in South Africa	Supports professional accountability and regulatory enforcement.
Muleya et al. (2026)	Breaking the silence / Frontiers in Education	Review article	South African schools	Supports discussion of silence, power relations and institutional response.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Safeguarding Frameworks and Institutional Child Protection in Schools

School-Based Safeguarding Policies

For the policies to become effective, they need to be known, efficient and integrated into everyday school activities. For instance, according to Eldred et al. (2023), the intervention which aims at preventing violence in Zimbabwean Catholic primary schools has attained contextual validity in terms of the intervention being developed by the schools and church, as opposed to the intervention being brought in from outside. There are some methods provided by MoPSE and UNICEF Zimbabwe (2023) for assessing risks and risk management. As cited by UNICEF Zimbabwe (2024), more than 56,090 children have benefitted from the Safe to Learn intervention; however, statistics alone do not demonstrate any behavioral or protective impacts. Therefore, the Safe to Learn Coalition (2023) is correct in associating policy development with funding, implementation and monitoring. What should be kept in mind is that policies have to be codified but cannot substitute practice.

It is imperative that there be efforts to translate the national commitment into a child protection policy in schools in Zimbabwe. According to GADRRRES (2022), an integrated approach where consideration is given to children's rights, resilience, and risk reduction is what is favored, although according to Mwapaura et al. (2022), rights without the services means nothing. UNESCO (2024) likewise emphasises prevention within accountable education systems. However, uniform templates should not assume equal institutional capacity: rural schools, schools serving learners with disabilities and schools distant from social services may require adapted referral arrangements and additional district support.

Reporting, Referral and Case Management Systems

Nevertheless, the understanding of the problem of reporting and disclosure was reached. According to Lokot et al. (2025), the significance of various issues, including the problem of trust, fear, knowledge about the process, and the reaction of an adult in the event of reporting become crucial in the matter of reporting child abuse. Training might be effective to improve the knowledge and competence of reporting as claimed by Walsh et al. (2022); however, the information that has been collected becomes extremely poor. The integrated case management service of UNICEF Zimbabwe (2024) is one of those services; the rights-based linkages of the family, education, social work, and justice have been mentioned by Mwapaura et al. (2022).

It is imperative for case management in order to ensure there is protection of the learners following any reporting process. According to Lokot et al. (2025), children tend to refrain from any reporting when there is insecurity of the process or lack of trust in adults. Walsh et al. (2023) show that teacher readiness involves the recognition, documentation, and response to safeguarding issues. While the Children's Amendment Act (2023) has enhanced the legal basis of the safeguarding process, it has not set the procedural process at school level. UNICEF (2021) promotes intersectoral collaboration within the education, child protection, and social protection sectors. Therefore, it is important for each school to have a safeguarding focal point, have confidential reporting mechanism, use standardized disclosure and referral forms, and document any referrals.

Institutional Accountability and Governance

This is what guarantees safeguarding because safeguarding depends on accountability in the organization and not the willingness of the organization to protect children. Partnership Compact between Government of Zimbabwe and MoPSE (2023) focuses on the issues of education equality and quality in relation to the capacity of the system with regard to Zimbabwe 2022-2026. Ministry of Finance and UNICEF Zimbabwe (2022) are extremely useful for the analysis of the relevance of the problem of financing for proper functioning of the child protection system.

The implementation of the safety protocols should become a part of good governance and not be left at the discretion of concerned teachers to address casually. Leadership, planning and accountability have been put under the school resilience category by the authors in GADRRRES (2022), and Mwapaura et al. (2022) have linked the success of service delivery to the realization of children's rights. While there is a model of risk management provided by MoPSE and UNICEF Zimbabwe (2023) that can be used practically, its implementation may be affected by factors such as workload, turnover, lack of competence and poor district-level supervision. School heads and development committees will need to maintain documentation on safety protocols, conduct risk assessments, and contact parents without compromising learners' privacy.

Theme 2: Professional Ethics and Learner Safety in Basic Education

Teacher Duty of Care and Professional Boundaries

The teacher's duty of care is an important element of learner protection. According to Tlali (2021), there were differences in the perception of professional ethics in the pre-service teachers from Lesotho, which means that ethical codes could be interpreted inconsistently without practical training. Walsh et al. (2023) revealed 31 studies described in 38 articles related to safeguarding in initial teacher education; however, the findings were scattered internationally and failed to suggest one effective model of curriculum. Eldred et al. (2025b) show that teachers are indispensable to violence prevention in Zimbabwean schools, while Unger and Dreer-Göthe (2026) demonstrate their need for organisational support. Duty of care should therefore combine appropriate boundaries, respectful discipline, vigilance, documentation, referral and supported professional judgement.

Professional ethics is not just a topic for theory. According to Walsh et al. (2023), the aim is to create a person that will safeguard his competence and responsibility, and according to Tlali (2021), teachers' actions relate to school culture and community trust. Unger and Dreer-Göthe (2026) warn that unassisted child protection can lead to emotional stress and role confusion. As for Zimbabwe, duty of care entails that a teacher refrains from abusive disciplinary methods, maintains professionalism, notices warning signs, ensures confidentiality, and reports problems using the appropriate channel. The safe school environment, in turn, depends both on individual professional ethics and appropriate systems for taking right actions.

Ethical Misconduct, Abuse Prevention and Disciplinary Enforcement

The challenges that emerge due to the protection of the students from misconduct on the part of the teachers in Southern Africa exist. The research by Mayisela et al. (2025) relies on 474 cases of misconduct of the teachers reported to the South African Council of Educators between 2019 and 2022. The information in the research is limited only to the regulation of the regulatory cases and does not provide the percentage of teacher misconduct

in the population of interest. Examples of the barriers to reporting such as silence, fear, and power among the children are presented by Muleya et al. (2026).

Stopping violations is dependent on the need for regulation, ease of reporting, adequate sanctions, protection from any form of reprisal and reference to the appropriate authority. The importance of coordination between the professional bodies and the educational institution in preventing violation is emphasized by Mayisela et al. (2025). The importance of fear, shame, and powerlessness as factors that affect reporting of violation by the students is discussed in detail by Muleya et al. (2026). Training could help with the identification and reporting according to Walsh et al. (2022), although the procedure in the institution is critical.

Ethical Leadership by School Heads and Education Authorities

In order for the institution to practice morality, it is important for there to be involvement of the school's administration and teachers. This can clearly be seen through the work done by Eldred et al. (2023), where leadership from both schools and sponsorships was integral in developing interventions. In addition, Eldred et al. (2025b) prove that the issue of violence prevention could be integrated into existing educational and religious organizations. Finally, MoPSE and UNICEF Zimbabwe (2023) give the responsibility of managing risk and safety to school administrators. UNESCO (2024) also claims that eliminating violence in education depends on leadership and accountability.

But it is important for the school administrators to be regarded as protectors and not merely managers. However, when The Safe to Learn Coalition (2023) proposes that there is need for consideration of both the preventive and reactive approaches, as per GADRRRES (2022), then there is need for considered. According to the Ministry of Finance and UNICEF Zimbabwe (2022), coordination of activities with well-funded external organizations is very important. Actually, it is crucial for school administrators to ensure training of teachers, monitoring of professional conduct, reporting complaints confidentially, protecting the child who filed the complaint and maintaining referral links with social services, health care services and the police force.

Theme 3: Strengthening Safe Schools in Zimbabwe

Child-Centred and Rights-Based School Safety Systems

Construction of safe schools in Zimbabwe is based on the principles of rights and respect for learners. The amendment of the Children's Act (2023) makes legal foundations firmer in safeguarding the interests of children. According to Mwapaura et al. (2022), child protection services must be based on rights and provision of access to the services. The above mentioned three approaches are related to each other in context of UNICEF (2021) and the topic of violence prevention and well-being and learning is supported by UNESCO (2024). The approach based on rights for guaranteeing safety at school has to encompass policy along with engagement, transparency, support and learning.

Physical security and discipline cannot be regarded as the measures of safety at school because as stated by GADRRRES (2022): "Safe Education is all about rights and resilience" and "Child-focused prevention and response". Madzore and Gasa (2025) managed to prove that anxiety, absence and disengagement due to abuse are the consequences of education of the learners. Thus, in Zimbabwe, it is essential to assess school safety based on child participation, dignity, access, reporting, response and learning continuity, especially with respect to learners with disabilities, girls, and poor and rural learners.

Training, Awareness and Community Participation

Although awareness and training can be used as the means of encouraging efficiency in the area of safeguarding, one should not overestimate the significance of those aspects. On the one hand, as is noted by Walsh et al. (2022), child protection training is sure to result in changes in the behavior of professionals concerned with this matter and in reports about it; however, no information on the effectiveness of the mentioned activity can be found. On the other hand, as is emphasized by Walsh et al. (2023), an increasing importance of safeguarding within initial

teacher education becomes evident. Besides, according to Mathews et al. (2021), there are four types of school violence prevention interventions in the Global South (effective, promising, emerging, and ineffective).

The lessons learned from the region must be taken cautiously. As is shown in Tlali (2021), for instance, some lessons learned from Lesotho indicate different opinions on professional ethics among the pre-service teachers. Consequently, scenarios training will be useful in such a case. South Africa regulatory lessons reveal the importance of formal process handling of the cases while taking into consideration the limitations of the policy framework because the latter fails to prevent misconduct (Mayisela et al., 2025). While the UNICEF Zimbabwe (2024) report presents the coverage of the national program, the sustainability of the program relies on school ownership, capacity of the staff and the funding of the program. Awareness program must include children, their parents, teachers, school administrators, and community leaders through provision of the reporting information specific to the age and training of the staff and parents.

Policy Implementation, Monitoring and Multi-Agency Collaboration

There must be a coordination of policy implementation at both educational level and child protection levels. System strengthening, equity, and quality have been prioritized within the partnership compact between Zimbabwe 2022-2026 (Government of Zimbabwe and MoPSE, 2023). Financing on the other hand is one of the conditions for provision of functional services, according to Ministry of Finance and UNICEF Zimbabwe (2022). In their study, Khumalo et al. (2025a) discovered that school violence within SADC region is affected by interactions at home, communities and schools. Moreover, interventions in the region have been identified to be collaborative and context specific (Khumalo et al., 2025b). Although the above reviews widen regional knowledge base, they encompass a number of countries and programs.

It is necessary for Zimbabwe to realize the necessity for a multi-disciplinary approach in ensuring school safety despite practical difficulties that come along with collaboration. As noted in UNICEF Zimbabwe (2024), insufficient funding, lack of capability and insufficient staff are some of the limitations which both institutions and individuals encounter. The existence of cultural barriers like fear and adult domination is likely to remain regardless of existing mechanisms as stated by Lokot et al. (2025). Moreover, as indicated by Eldred et al. (2025a) and Eldred et al. (2026), disability and other equity factors have not been adequately researched in intervention researches. Hence, the monitoring mechanism must focus on policy compliance, promptness in referral and follow-up, experiences of learners and outcomes of vulnerable learners. Referral directories, referrals among agencies, safeguarding audit, data management and assignment of responsibilities are crucial elements that will ensure there is no duplication and policy non-compliance.

CONCLUSIONS

This article concludes that safer schools in Zimbabwe require an operational connection between safeguarding frameworks, professional ethics and child-protection mechanisms. The evidence supports clear policies, trusted reporting, accountable adults, trained and supported teachers, case management and functioning referral links. It also shows that learner safety deteriorates when fear suppresses disclosure, adults respond inconsistently, misconduct is weakly enforced, services lack finance and vulnerable groups are not monitored. The evidence base nevertheless remains uneven: Zimbabwean studies provide strong contextual insight but limited national generalisability, while global reviews offer breadth without always reflecting low-resource African settings. Safe schools should therefore be treated as organised and measurable systems of prevention, response and support. Zimbabwe possesses important legal and policy foundations, but school-level implementation, funding, capacity, equity and accountability require sustained attention.

Recommendations

First, every basic education school should adopt a concise safeguarding policy defining prohibited conduct, reporting steps, referral contacts and the responsibilities of school leaders, staff, learners and parents. Second, pre-service and in-service teacher education should include compulsory, scenario-based training on duty of care, boundaries, disclosure, documentation and referral. Third, schools should appoint trained safeguarding focal persons or committees linked formally to social welfare, health, police and community services. Fourth,

confidential and child-friendly reporting options should allow learners to raise concerns without retaliation, shame or disciplinary consequences. Fifth, district and national authorities should conduct safeguarding audits covering policy use, staff training, referral timeliness, case follow-up, professional discipline and learner awareness. Finally, dedicated financing and differentiated support should prioritise rural, under-resourced and disability-inclusive settings because unfunded uniform requirements may widen implementation inequalities.

A phased implementation model is recommended. Phase one should map existing policies, records, referral contacts, conduct rules, reporting options and service gaps. Phase two should train staff, orient learners and parents, appoint focal persons and establish confidential documentation procedures. Phase three should require district officers to verify that cases are recorded, referred, followed up and reviewed without exposing learners. Phase four should use anonymised school-level evidence to improve training, financing, staffing and accountability. Minimum national standards should be compulsory, but implementation support should be proportionate to school capacity. This phased model would make reform manageable while avoiding the false choice between resource constraints and the non-negotiable duty to protect learners.

Suggestions for Future Studies

Future research should validate the proposed strategies in contemporary Zimbabwean basic-education settings. Multi-province studies should include learners, teachers, school heads, parents, education officials, social workers, health professionals and police, with explicit representation of rural schools, faith-based schools and learners with disabilities. Quantitative research could measure the availability and use of policies, reporting systems, committees, training and referral services, while qualitative research could examine disclosure, trust, cultural barriers, adult responses and implementation experience. Mixed-methods and implementation studies would be particularly useful for comparing formal policy availability with actual practice and outcomes. Research should also investigate digital safety, professional regulation, financing, staff workload and district-level capacity. Such evidence would enable Zimbabwe to move from policy commitment and programme reach to measurable, equitable learner-safety outcomes.

Future work should also trace what happens after a learner reports harm. Prospective referral-pathway studies could examine timeliness, documentation, confidentiality, inter-agency communication, service uptake and case closure from the school to social welfare, health, counselling, police and community structures. Urban-rural and provincial comparisons are needed because distance, staffing, transport and specialist support may shape whether referrals succeed. Participatory methods should enable learners to assess whether reporting channels are understandable, trusted and safe, while strict research safeguards protect confidentiality and minimise distress. This evidence would identify where cases are delayed or lost between institutions and which school-level and system-level changes produce reliable protection.

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