THE ROLE OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS IN THE PROVISION AND MANAGEMENT OF A SAFE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

A safe and healthy school environment is considered critical to education. Therefore, this paper examines the role of educational administrators in the provision and maintenance of a safe schools' environment. The paper discussed the concept of a safe school environment and its components, the role of educational administrators in the provision and maintenance of a safe school environment as well as the nexus between safe school environment and educational development. The paper submits that; a safe school environment is a requisite in the process of actualizing a rapid educational development in the societies. Therefore, the paper recommends that, all the stakeholders should work together to ensure that, the school environment is safe and secured for teaching and learning instructions.

Keywords: *Educational Administrators, Safe School Environment*

Introduction

Educational institutions need to provide quality education to prepare the students for the future generation. As such, schools offer an environment where students can learn the required skills and knowledge (Ismail et al, 2021). The school is generally known as an environment or place that promotes students' learning. It is an educational institution designed to provide learning spaces and learning environments for the teaching of students under the direction of teachers. It is a place or institution which is meant for training, discipline, instruction and education in some special fields, skill, among others (Umeozor & Onuh, 2023). Educational administrators according to Aderounmu (1985), are regarded as servants who minister to the needs of the pupils and teachers to promote the highest possible standard of instructional efficiency. According to Peretomode (1995), an educational administrator is that person who is concerned with implementation of education plans, policies or programmes in a school. Mege (2014) viewed school environment as factors within the school that influence the teaching and learning process. The school environment includes classrooms, library, technical workshops, teachers' quality, teaching methods, peers, among others that can affect the teaching and learning process. Korir and Kipkemboi (2014) postulate that school environmental factors include school structure, school composition and school climate. In addition, school environmental factors may also include safety and order, teacher relationships and collaboration, academic expectations, leadership and teachers' professional development factors.

On the other hand, safety is the state of being safe, the condition of being protected against physical, social, spiritual, financial, political, emotional, occupational, psychological, educational failure, damage, error, accidents,

harm or any other events which could be considered non-desirable (Awodiji et al., 2016). By providing staff with a safe working environment, school management is to ensure that their staff are taken care of and also show concern for their staff welfare. Not only is the work environment a safe one physically, but it ought to be a safe emotional and mental place as well, mental health is just as important as physical health (Nicole, 2014). A safe school environment is crucial to the healthy academic and social development of students, and the safety of a school environment affects a range of factors, from staff retention to parent satisfaction. Perhaps most important, student perceptions of safety affect their academic achievement. When students feel safe, they are better able to focus on learning, which in turn leads to increased academic achievement. Therefore, stakeholders in school emergency preparedness should strive to determine whether their students and staff are comfortable in their school environment, both physically and emotionally, and whether students' families are comfortable with the school environment in which their children learn. Threats to student and staff safety within their school environment present a challenge to school emergency planning teams as they work to ensure that the instructional environment for students is safe (Godstein, et al.,2008).

This paper delves into the various roles of school administrators in providing and managing a safe school environment, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive strategies and collaborative practices. Statement of the Problem Schools are unique environments in many ways. No other category of building can claim environmental qualities of a school building and characteristics (Frumkin et al., 2006). Due to such significance ascribed to school environment school safety has been included as a dimension of educational quality in several school climate models (United States Agency for International Development, 2013). Thus, a safe school environment is seen critical to education. In the recent times, Nigeria has been experiencing, high rate of violence against schools which include; Armed banditry, kidnapping of school teachers, learners, and schoolbased local communities and destruction of school infrastructural facilities among others. Thus, there is an increasing need for security systems and law enforcement/ emergency responders tailored to preventing or responding to school and educational institution based violence or emergency.

The absence of particular attention to this not only puts the students and teachers at great risk, it is a threat to national unity and economic growth, as funds to be invested in other aspects of the economy get redirected to education. Also, the fear of getting sexually exploited at school or getting kidnapped on the way to school stands as a hindrance to some getting an education, particularly in the rural areas (Hogan, 2020). Bakari (2022) observed in his study that Zamfara state is also one of the states in Nigeria that have been experiencing a number of problems related to unsafe school environment that threatens the sustainability of the schools and heavily caused the downfall of the standards of education in the state. Such problems include inadequate school infrastructural facilities, lack of teachers' motivation which may lead lack of commitment among the teachers, as well as insecurity resulting in of banditry and violent attacks of public school's environment which threatens the lives and well-being of students and school personnel. As a result of such scenarios, following the rampant attacks and abduction of hundreds of students in Zamfara State, on September 1, 2021 the Zamfara state government alongside the Nigeria Police Force jointly shutdown all public schools across the fourteen local government areas of the state for a prolonged period of time (Channels, 2021).

Subsequently, after a partial reopening of some schools in the state, as at August 2022, a total of 75 public secondary schools shut since 2021 over unsafe environment reasons (TheCable, 2022). Unfortunately, the number of the government-owned public schools closed in Zamfara state between 2021 and December 2023 rose from 75 to 168 schools (Wiki Times, 2023). A recent revelation by the Zamfara State Ministry of education alerted that the problems of unsafe school environment persists and requires timely maximum efforts to rescue the public schools

and all educational institutions from total destruction (Madawaki, 2023; as cited in Daily Post, 2023). On this ground, it was found that, very little prior research investigations were conducted on the assessment of safe school environment and the roles of stakeholders in education in providing and managing safe school environment. To fill this literature gap, this study seeks to examine the role of educational administrators in the provision and management of a safe school environment in Nigeria.

Conceptual Perspectives

Concept of Safe School Environment
A safe school is one in which the total school climate allows students, teachers, administrators, staff, and visitors to interact in a positive, non-threatening manner that reflects the educational mission of the school while fostering positive relationships and personal growth (Bucher & Manning, 2005). In other words, a safe school is one that fosters peaceful, positive or cordial relationships among students, teachers and administrators (Chinedu, 2019).

One of the identified factors in an effective school program is that effective schools maintain a safe and orderly environment. The basic question is: What is safe and orderly environment? It is possible to define a safe and orderly school environment as an environment in which students and teachers do not have to fear both physical and psychological violence(s). The writer interprets a safe and orderly environment as one which provides much more than freedom from fear of physical violence. It is an environment in which the business of education is conducted in an organized and efficient manner. Each professional in the educational sector knows his/her role and is given the means and methods whereby to complete tasks which are assigned according to that role (Wilson, 1988). Based on this overview of safe school environment, it is then necessary to identify practices which can be implemented to accomplish the creation or enhancement of a safe and orderly environment.

School safety is the job of the entire school community. This effort requires leadership and coordination by school administration, and involvement and participation from all sectors of the school community. Planning, conducting drills, and participating in exercises with law enforcement, fire, emergency officials and other members of the school community ensures a comprehensive, unified approach to school emergency response planning (Wilson, 1988). Furthermore, building relationships and community engagement are vital to building a safer school community (New York Codes, Rules and Regulation, 2023). Furthermore, a safe environment also considers other threats to the school environment including violence, accidents, disease outbreaks, and other emergencies. Therefore, an essential component to the school physical environment is establishing a comprehensive school safety plan which includes physical and psychological safety measures, crisis plans, and school safety response teams (Brock et al., 2010). The development of school safety teams requires collaboration between school personnel, emergency responders, and community resources. Crisis plans include protocols and procedures for the school crisis team and delineated roles and responsibilities of how to respond effectively (Reeves, 2010).

The Major Components of Safe School Environment The United States Department of Justice (2020) identified three components that must be considered and treated concurrently in order to actualise the proper provision of a safe school environment, these components are: 1. Physical safety; 2. School climate; and 3. Student behaviour. The three components are interconnected. However, school climate and physical safety are central to preventing school violence. Managing student behaviour contributes to a positive school climate, which can prevent threats to students' physical safety.

1. Physical Safety

At the broadest level, school safety is about ensuring that students are physically safe in school. Physical safety pertains to the architecture of the school building; control of who enters and exits the building; and keeping students and staff from bodily harm once they are inside the school. A comprehensive school safety framework requires a range of strategies, interventions, and effective threat assessment policies to ensure physical safety. The goal for schools is to develop an integrated approach that spans the ranges of possible dangers, from minor misbehaviour to life-threatening situations, and at the same time focuses on maintaining safety and order (United States Department of Justice, 2020).

2. School Climate

School climate refers to the school milieu, or to the feelings people have about the school setting. Though definitions vary, one that captures the principal issues is how members of the school community experience the school, including interpersonal relationships, teacher and other staff practices, and organizational arrangements. School climate includes factors that serve as conditions for learning and that support physical and emotional safety, connection and support, and engagement (Yoder et al., 2017). A positive school climate is important for school safety. There is strong evidence that a positive school climate helps keep students safe and promotes other desirable student and school outcomes. The environment of the school influences student behaviour, may affect students' mental health and help- seeking behaviour, improves school attendance, and creates an atmosphere where students are willing to report threats of violence or other negative behaviour to authority figures in school. Research shows that school climate affects a variety of issues, but questions concerning why and how remain (United States Department of Justice, 2020).

3. Student Behaviour

Actively addressing student behaviour is also central to school safety. Student behaviour is conceptualized as encompassing mental health, behavioural health, trauma, and discipline. Mental health problems and adverse childhood experiences that are not addressed are linked to negative outcomes for students, such as poor academic achievement, behaviour problems, dropping out of school, and delinquency (Dwyer et al., 2000). Often these negative outcomes manifest themselves in disruptions to the school climate. In order to manage student behaviour, it is important to have a clearly defined, fair, and widely known discipline policy. Schools have the right and the responsibility to respond to students' misbehaviour or violent behaviour (Osher et al., 2010). Various approaches may help with preventing the onset of negative behaviour, or responding to and resolving negative behaviour once it has occurred. Schools should use a range of disciplinary practices tailored to the situation of the student and the problem behaviour. The goals of these practices should be to keep students safe, correct misbehaviour, and keep the problematic behaviour from interrupting other students' learning. Encouraging positive behaviour is a preventive approach that starts with creating a school climate where students know the expectations and consequences, and with teaching students how to handle emotions and how to self-regulate their behaviour (United States Department of Justice, 2020).

Problems Affecting Safe School Environment in Nigeria

School safety is a critical issue that affects not only the students, but also the teachers, staff, and the entire community. In Nigeria, the issue of poor school safety has become increasingly prevalent. On this basis, Adebayo and Ileuma (2023) identified such problems as thus:

1. Overcrowding: Overcrowding in schools can lead to poor school safety, as students are packed into classrooms, creating a challenging and potentially dangerous environment. Overcrowded schools are also more susceptible to the spread of disease, making students and staff more vulnerable to illness.

2. Inadequate Security Measures: Schools in Nigeria often lack proper security measures, such as metal detectors, cameras, and trained security personnel. This lack of security makes it easier for criminals to enter the school and commit acts of violence or theft.

3. Poverty: Poverty is a major contributor to poor school safety in Nigeria. Many students come from families that are struggling to make ends meet, which can result in them engaging in criminal activities to earn money. These students may also be more likely to be involved in gang-related activities, which can further contribute to school safety issues.

4. Drug and Substance Abuse: Substance abuse, including the use of drugs and alcohol, is a growing problem among students in Nigeria. Substance abuse can lead to violence and other criminal activities, putting other students and staff at risk.

5. Inadequate Teacher Training: Teachers play a critical role in maintaining school safety, but many teachers in Nigeria are not trained on how to handle school safety issues. This lack of training can result in teachers being unable to respond effectively when safety incidents occur.

6. Corruption: Corruption is a major problem in Nigeria, and it can contribute to poor school safety by making it easier for criminals to access schools and engage in criminal activities. Corruption can also make it more difficult to enforce school safety regulations, as officials may be more concerned with personal gain than with ensuring school safety.

7. Political instability: Political instability can also contribute to poor school safety, as it can create an environment of uncertainty and fear. This instability can result in increased criminal activities, as well as a general lack of security in schools.

Nexus between Safe School Environment and Educational Development

A school is a place for students to learn and be educated as well as the place they spend most of their days. Omoteso, (2010), asserted that it is expected to be a place for lifelong learning and the base of community which can be used as a temporary evacuation site in case of disasters, crises and a place for an important community gathering. Recently, it has been required to take further measure to properly manage the security of the students and their educators considering the occurrences of intrusion cases at schools such as crises in and around the school, terrorist's attacks, invasion of gunmen (Crises Control Manual against Invaders, 2014).

Conversely, insecurity is concerned with feelings of uncertainty, dangers or threats to life. Insecurity is a negative feeling involving fear, anxiety, uncertainty and injustice, among others. When an individual does not have control over a situation but has to rely on the cooperation of others that cannot be guaranteed, the result may be frustration or insecurity. Insecurity is a threat to learning. Prevailing conflict within communities around the schools often has ripple effects on the teaching and learning activities of such schools (Shuaibu, 2015; in Chinedu, et al., 2019).

In recent times, Nigeria school system has come under violent attacks that range from kidnapping of both the faculties and students to outright suicide bombing which usually claim lives and destroys properties. The effect of these attacks has further exacerbated the fragile school system which is antithetical to sustainable and national development. Several measures have been implemented to tackle this menace but there are still frequent attacks being experienced in the school environs. If these incessant attacks are not proactively dealt with, it will portend a

longer term danger to quality of labour force and human capital needed to drive a sustainable economy (Chinedu, Joseph, Chukwuka & Ukwunna, 2019). Furthermore, teachers are less likely to be effective leaders of students if they themselves do not receive support during a crisis. Teachers serve as a support system for children, families, and community (Brown, 2008).

Furthermore, Maslow (1970) opined that, a safe school environment is a prerequisite for productive learning. Students feeling unsafe in schools likely to skip classes or may even stop attending school this may decrease students overall performance. Transforming how students consider regarding security during school is unlikely to be a straightforward task. This adjustment requires sensible groundwork regarding how all staff members reacts to infelicitous student physical and verbal conduct whereas emphasizing on school-wide framework of favorable conduct that supports and aligns with every dimension of school operations. Byoung-suk (2012) and Zais (2011) indicated that safe schools streamline administration, learning, school-wide framework, and overall development with elevated expectancies for everyone. Furthermore, schools build a sound intellect of society, improve interaction among staff, function in collaboration with parents and the society, and use research to guide findings to create a circle of constant improvement.

Roles of Educational Administrators in the Provision of Safe School Environment Educational administrators are responsible for creating and maintaining a conducive learning environment, leading and managing teachers and staff, and ensuring that students receive a high-quality education (Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

According to Ozmena et al (2010) in order to maintain the safety and security at public schools, the school administrators should observe the following activities:

a. School Safety Policy Implementation and Enforcement
One of the primary roles of school administrators is the implementation and enforcement of safety policies. These policies often originate from federal, state, or district guidelines and require careful adaptation to fit the specific needs of individual schools (Trump, 2011). Effective policy implementation involves clear communication of rules, regular training for staff, and consistent enforcement of disciplinary measures (Gastic, 2017). Administrators must ensure that all stakeholders, including students, parents, and staff, are aware of safety protocols and their roles in maintaining them.

b. Community Engagement and Collaboration
School safety extends beyond the school premises and involves the broader community. Administrators must engage with parents, community organizations, and law enforcement to create a network of support for school safety initiatives (Epstein, 2010). Community engagement includes organizing safety workshops, participating in community policing efforts, and fostering open lines of communication between the school and the community (Cowan et al., 2013). Thus, the school safety and security committee, which should comprise representatives of teachers, prefects/learners, Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), community members and so on, are to be responsible for taking on the safety agenda at the community and school level.

c. Mental Health and Well-Being Initiatives
The mental health and well-being of students are critical components of a safe school environment. Administrators play a key role in providing access to mental health resources,implementing programs that promote emotional resilience, and fostering a supportive school culture (Greenberg et al., 2014). This includes facilitating the work of

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school counselors, social workers, and psychologists, and integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) into the curriculum (Weist, 2013).

d. Development of an Emergency Action Plan through Proactive Leadership Effective school safety requires proactive leadership from administrators. This involves anticipating potential threats, staying informed about best practices in school safety, and continuously assessing and improving safety measures (Reeves, Kanan, & Plog, 2010). Administrators must also foster a culture of safety where every member of the school community feels responsible for maintaining a safe environment (Osher et al., 2010). Thus, all the schools should develop an emergency action plan taking into consideration the school environment, threatening conditions, and problem sources; and every personnel in the school should know what to do in destructive situations.

e. Emergency Preparedness and Crisis Management
Educational administrators must be adept at emergency preparedness and crisis management. This involves developing comprehensive emergency response plans, conducting regular drills, and coordinating with local law enforcement and emergency services (Dorn, 2014). Effective crisis management also requires administrators to be trained in risk assessment and to create communication plans that ensure timely dissemination of information during emergencies (Gainey, 2010). An emergency communication line should be built to communicate with the necessary units and organizations to receive timely support and help in threatening situations.

f. Continuous Improvement of Safety Measures
School safety is an ongoing process that requires continuous improvement. Administrators must regularly review and update safety policies, conduct training sessions, and evaluate the \effectiveness of safety measures (Johnson, 2013).
g. Training and Professional Development
Educational administrators must ensure that staff members are adequately trained to implement safety policies and respond to emergencies. Professional development programs should include training on conflict resolution, crisis intervention, and cultural competency (Cowan et al., 2013). Ongoing training helps staff stay informed about best practices and new safety protocols. This process helps schools stay prepared for new challenges and ensures that safety protocols remain relevant and effective. Thus, all staff and personnel should be trained about security issues.

h. Physical Infrastructure and Safety Measures
The physical infrastructure of a school significantly impacts its safety. Administrators are responsible for assessing and improving the physical aspects of school safety, which include securing entrances, monitoring school grounds, and ensuring that emergency equipment is functional (Bosworth, 2011). Modern safety measures, such as surveillance cameras and access control systems, are integral to preventing unauthorized entry and ensuring rapid responses to emergencies (Cornell & Mayer, 2010). In addition, the physical conditions of the schools should be renewed. Cameras with night vision should be placed outside and inside of the school buildings. The school garden wall should be heightened enough for preventing dangerous attacks and infiltration of unwanted persons.

i. Partnerships with Law Enforcement
Collaboration with local law enforcement agencies is essential for effective emergency preparedness and response. School resource officers (SROs) can provide valuable support in maintaining a safe environment. However, administrators must ensure that the presence of law enforcement does not create a climate of fear or mistrust among students (Theriot, 2009).

Conclusion

This paper examined the the role of school administrators in the provision and management of a safe school environment in Nigeria. The paper observed that, educational administrators play a pivotal role in ensuring a safe school environment. Through effective leadership, policy implementation, fostering a positive school climate, and collaborating with community stakeholders, administrators can create a secure and supportive learning environment. Addressing the challenges they face with innovative solutions and a commitment to continuous improvement is essential for sustaining school safety. By prioritizing safety, administrators help create an environment where students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Recommendations

Based on findings of the paper, it is therefore recommended that:

1. All the stakeholders should work together to ensure that, the school environment is safe and secured for teaching and learning instructions.

2. The educational administrators and school staff shall take all necessary steps to ensure that a clean, safe and hygienic environment is provided to learners at all times.

3. The school administrators shall always maintain proper communication with relevant authorities when a learner is threatened in any form and in need of protection. In pursuit of a violence-free school environment, efforts shall be made by the school management to ensure that no form of violence or abuse is tolerated in the school, either among staff or learners.

4. To ensure safe and secure environment, the schools should develop school-wide prevention, intervention and response strategies to deal effectively with the destructive behaviours; and to prevent the hazardous effects of natural disasters.

5. Finally, government should offer all necessary supports for educational administrators to possess full recognition and authority of taking all possible measures in providing and maintaining safe school environments at their respective schools.

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