

Strengthening School Child Protection Systems to Prevent Educator Misconduct and Sexual Exploitation of Female Learners in Namibian Secondary Schools

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The safety and well-being of learners are essential for achieving equitable and quality education. Despite Namibia's comprehensive child protection policies, incidents of educator misconduct and the sexual exploitation of female learners remain a significant concern, revealing persistent gaps between policy development and effective implementation. These challenges are exacerbated by inadequate reporting mechanisms, weak institutional accountability, and unequal power relationships within schools.

This study assesses the effectiveness of school child protection systems in preventing educator misconduct and safeguarding female learners in secondary schools in the Kavango West Region, Namibia. Specifically, it examines stakeholders' awareness of child protection policies, evaluates the implementation of school safeguarding practices, identifies barriers to effective policy implementation, and proposes strategies for strengthening learner protection.

A mixed-methods research design was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to teachers, school principals, female learners, school counsellors, and education officials, while qualitative data were obtained through interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were used to analyse quantitative data, whereas thematic analysis was employed for qualitative data.

The findings indicate a moderate overall level of child protection policy implementation (grand mean = 3.67). The regression model explained 68.4% of the variance in implementation ($R^2 = 0.684$), with school leadership, institutional accountability, reporting mechanisms, and safeguarding training emerging as the strongest predictors. The study concludes that strengthening educator professionalism, safeguarding training, confidential reporting systems, and institutional accountability can significantly improve learner protection. The proposed safeguarding framework provides practical recommendations for policymakers, school leaders, and teacher training institutions to enhance child protection and promote safe, inclusive, and accountable learning environments in Namibian secondary schools.

Keywords: Child protection; school safeguarding; educator misconduct; sexual exploitation; female learners; secondary schools; Namibia.

1 Introduction

Schools are expected to provide safe, inclusive, and supportive environments that promote learners' academic achievement, personal development, and well-being. Beyond delivering quality education, schools have a legal and ethical responsibility to protect children from violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Safe learning environments enable learners to participate fully in educational activities while fostering positive educational, psychological, and social outcomes (UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2022; World Health Organization, 2022).

Despite global progress in expanding access to education, violence against children within schools remains a major challenge. Educator misconduct, abuse of professional authority, sexual harassment, coercion, and exploitation continue to threaten learners' rights and educational attainment. Such violations often result in psychological trauma, poor academic performance, absenteeism, school dropout, unintended pregnancies, and long-term social and emotional consequences (UNESCO, 2022; World Health Organization, 2022). Female learners are particularly vulnerable because unequal power relations, fear of retaliation, social stigma, and weak reporting mechanisms frequently discourage disclosure of abuse (Together for Girls and Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2021).

Recognising these challenges, international organisations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Health Organization advocate comprehensive child safeguarding systems that integrate child protection policies, educator codes of conduct, mandatory reporting procedures, professional ethics, learner support services, and institutional accountability (UNESCO, 2023 ; UNICEF, 2022; World Health Organization, 2022). Evidence suggests that effective safeguarding depends not only on legislation but also on strong leadership, continuous professional development, confidential reporting mechanisms, community participation, and effective monitoring of policy implementation.

Namibia has established an extensive legal and policy framework for child protection. The Child Care and Protection Act (Act No. 3 of 2015) establishes the principal statutory protections and reporting duties relating to children (Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2015), while the Basic Education Act (Act No. 3 of 2020) places complementary obligations on education institutions to maintain safe and rights-respecting learning environments (Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2020). Together with the Constitution, the National Safe Schools Framework, and educator professional codes of conduct, these instruments seek to safeguard learners and promote safe, inclusive, and accountable school environments. Nevertheless, reports of educator misconduct and the sexual exploitation of learners continue to raise concerns regarding inconsistent policy implementation, particularly in rural schools where institutional resources, safeguarding capacity, and monitoring systems remain limited (UNICEF Namibia, 2023; Together for Girls and Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2021).

Educator misconduct represents a serious breach of professional ethics and children's rights. The misuse of professional authority for sexual exploitation undermines learner safety, damages public confidence in education, and compromises the integrity of the teaching profession. Preventing such misconduct requires effective safeguarding systems that combine educator accountability, continuous ethics training, confidential reporting procedures, multidisciplinary collaboration, and survivor-centred support services (UNESCO, 2023; World Health Organization, 2022).

Although Namibia has made considerable progress in developing child protection legislation, region-specific evidence on how school-level safeguarding systems operate in Kavango West remains limited. Existing studies largely describe school-related gender-based violence without examining the combined influence of institutional capacity, implementation practices, and educator accountability. This gap limits evidence-based policy development and weakens efforts to strengthen school child protection systems.

This study therefore assesses the effectiveness of school child protection systems in preventing educator misconduct and the sexual exploitation of female learners in secondary schools in the Kavango West Region of Namibia. Specifically, the study examines stakeholders' awareness of child protection policies, evaluates the implementation of safeguarding practices, identifies institutional barriers to effective child protection, and proposes an integrated safeguarding framework to strengthen learner protection and institutional accountability in Namibian secondary schools.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Child Protection and School Safeguarding

Child protection and school safeguarding have become central pillars of contemporary education systems because they ensure that children learn in environments that promote safety, dignity, and well-being while protecting them from abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence. Although the two concepts are closely related, they differ in emphasis. Child protection generally refers to the legal, policy, and institutional measures designed to prevent and respond to violations of children's rights, whereas school safeguarding encompasses the proactive strategies, practices, and organisational cultures that reduce risks and create safe learning environments before harm occurs (UNICEF, 2022; World Health Organization, 2022; UNESCO, 2023).

The international child protection agenda is largely informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which recognises every child's right to protection from physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, exploitation, neglect, and harmful practices. Articles 19, 28, and 34 of the Convention specifically require State Parties to protect children from violence while ensuring access to safe, inclusive, and equitable education (United Nations, 1989). These commitments are further reinforced by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which promotes quality education, and SDG 16.2, which calls for an end to all forms of violence against children (United Nations, 2015).

International organisations have increasingly advocated whole-school safeguarding approaches that integrate child protection policies, educator professional ethics, learner participation, confidential reporting systems, psychosocial support services, and community involvement. UNESCO argues that safeguarding should not be viewed merely as compliance with legislation but as the development of institutional cultures that prioritise learner safety, accountability, and respect for children's rights (UNESCO, 2023). Similarly, UNICEF emphasises that effective safeguarding requires collaboration among schools, families, communities, and government agencies to ensure early identification, prevention, reporting, and management of child protection concerns (UNICEF, 2022).

Within educational settings, child protection extends beyond responding to incidents of abuse to addressing the broader structural factors that expose learners to harm. These include unequal power relations, discriminatory practices, weak institutional accountability, inadequate educator training, and ineffective reporting mechanisms. Consequently, schools are increasingly expected to establish comprehensive safeguarding systems that incorporate preventive education, continuous professional development, clear codes of professional conduct, confidential complaint procedures, and effective monitoring mechanisms (World Health Organization, 2022; UNESCO, 2022).

In Namibia, child protection is supported by a comprehensive legal and policy framework. The Constitution guarantees children's fundamental rights, while the Child Care and Protection Act (Act No. 3 of 2015) provides the principal legislative framework for preventing child abuse, promoting mandatory reporting, and strengthening child welfare services. The Basic Education Act (Act No. 3 of 2020) further obliges schools to provide safe learning environments that uphold learners' dignity, safety, and educational rights (Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2015, 2020). Complementary policies, including the National Safe Schools Framework, guidance and counselling programmes, and educator codes of conduct, seek to strengthen learner protection and professional accountability within schools.

Despite these legislative advances, effective implementation remains a significant challenge. Research indicates that limited awareness of child protection policies, inadequate safeguarding training, weak institutional monitoring, insufficient reporting mechanisms, and socio-cultural barriers continue to undermine learner protection in many schools, particularly

in resourceconstrained settings (UNICEF Namibia, 2023; Together for Girls and Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2021). Consequently, strengthening school safeguarding requires not only comprehensive legislation but also sustained institutional commitment, leadership capacity, adequate resources, and continuous monitoring to ensure that child protection policies are translated into everyday educational practice.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that effective child protection depends upon the integration of legal frameworks, institutional governance, educator professionalism, and community participation. Schools that successfully embed safeguarding within their organisational culture are better positioned to prevent abuse, protect vulnerable learners, and promote safe, inclusive, and equitable learning environments.

2.2 Educator Misconduct and School-Related Gender-Based Violence

Educators occupy positions of trust, authority, and responsibility that extend beyond classroom instruction to safeguarding the welfare, dignity, and rights of learners. Professional ethics require teachers to uphold integrity, fairness, respect, confidentiality, and accountability while maintaining appropriate professional boundaries with learners. These ethical standards are reinforced through national codes of professional conduct and international frameworks that recognise teaching as a profession founded on public trust and the protection of children's rights (UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2022). Consequently, any misuse of professional authority by educators constitutes not only professional misconduct but also a violation of learners' fundamental rights.

Educator misconduct encompasses a wide range of inappropriate behaviours, including emotional abuse, physical violence, discrimination, bullying, sexual harassment, coercion, inappropriate relationships, and sexual exploitation. Such misconduct often arises from unequal power relations that characterise teacher-learner interactions. Educators possess institutional authority over learners through assessment, discipline, academic progression, and access to educational opportunities, creating an imbalance that may be exploited for personal gain. Research indicates that these power asymmetries frequently discourage victims from reporting abuse because learners fear academic victimisation, social stigma, retaliation, or disbelief by school authorities (World Health Organization, 2022; Together for Girls and Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2021; Velloza et al., 2022).

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) has emerged as one of the most significant child protection concerns within educational systems worldwide. UNESCO defines SRGBV as acts or threats of sexual, physical, psychological, or emotional violence occurring in and around schools that are driven by gender norms, stereotypes, or unequal power relations (UNESCO, 2022). SRGBV includes sexual harassment, coercion, intimidation, exploitation, bullying, and violence perpetrated by educators, peers, or other members of the school community. Evidence consistently shows that girls are disproportionately affected because of persistent gender inequalities, cultural norms, and structural barriers that limit their ability to seek protection or access justice (UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2022).

One particularly harmful manifestation of educator misconduct is the grooming and sexual exploitation of learners. Grooming refers to the deliberate process through which perpetrators establish trust, emotional dependence, or psychological control over a learner before engaging in sexual abuse or exploitation. This process may involve providing gifts, offering academic favours, special attention, financial assistance, or emotional support to manipulate learners into exploitative relationships. Such behaviours are often difficult to detect because they initially appear as supportive teacher-learner interactions, allowing perpetrators to exploit institutional trust and conceal abusive conduct (UNESCO, 2022; ECPAT International, 2023).

The consequences of educator sexual misconduct extend far beyond the immediate incident. Victims frequently experience depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, reduced academic achievement, absenteeism, school dropout, unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and diminished trust in educational institutions. At the institutional level, such misconduct weakens public confidence in schools, undermines professional integrity, and compromises the credibility of education systems (World Health Organization, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). These outcomes demonstrate that educator misconduct is not merely an individual ethical failure but also an institutional safeguarding concern requiring comprehensive prevention strategies.

The literature further emphasises that effective prevention of educator misconduct requires a whole-school safeguarding approach rather than reliance on disciplinary action alone. Such an approach includes continuous professional ethics training, clear codes of conduct, mandatory safeguarding education, confidential and learner-friendly reporting mechanisms, independent investigation procedures, psychosocial support services, community participation, and strong institutional accountability. Schools that successfully integrate these components into their governance systems are more likely to prevent abuse, encourage timely reporting, and promote learner safety (UNESCO, 2023; World Health Organization, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). Therefore, strengthening educator professionalism alongside robust child safeguarding systems remains essential for protecting learners from abuse and ensuring safe, inclusive, and rights-based educational environments.

2.3 Implementation of Child Protection Policies

The existence of comprehensive child protection legislation and school safeguarding policies does not automatically guarantee the protection of learners. Rather, the effectiveness of child protection depends on how policies are implemented, monitored, and institutionalised within schools. Effective implementation requires schools to move beyond policy compliance towards creating organisational cultures that prioritise learner safety, uphold children's rights, and promote accountability among all education stakeholders (UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2022; World Health Organization, 2022). Consequently, successful safeguarding is achieved through coordinated action involving school leadership, educators, learners, parents, communities, and government institutions.

Despite considerable progress in developing child protection policies worldwide, implementation remains inconsistent across many education systems. Research indicates that schools frequently encounter institutional barriers such as inadequate safeguarding training, insufficient financial and human resources, weak monitoring and evaluation systems, limited awareness of child protection procedures, and inconsistent enforcement of professional standards (UNESCO, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). In many low- and middle-income countries, these challenges are compounded by large class sizes, shortages of school counsellors, limited access to psychosocial services, and fragmented collaboration between education, health, social welfare, and law enforcement agencies.

One of the critical components of effective child protection is the establishment of accessible, confidential, and learner-centred reporting mechanisms. Reporting systems should enable learners, teachers, parents, and community members to disclose suspected cases of abuse without fear of retaliation or victimisation. However, evidence suggests that many cases of educator misconduct and sexual exploitation remain underreported due to fear of stigma, distrust in institutional responses, cultural norms, concerns about confidentiality, and perceived power imbalances between educators and learners (Together for Girls and Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2021; Velloza et al., 2022). Weak reporting systems not only delay intervention but also increase the likelihood of repeated abuse and institutional failure to protect vulnerable learners.

School leadership plays a pivotal role in strengthening child protection systems. Principals and senior management teams are responsible for ensuring that safeguarding policies are effectively implemented, educators receive regular professional development on child protection, reporting procedures are clearly communicated, and allegations of abuse are investigated promptly and impartially. Leadership commitment further promotes a positive school climate characterised by transparency, ethical practice, and institutional accountability (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). Conversely, weak leadership, inadequate supervision, and reluctance to report misconduct may create organisational cultures that tolerate abuse or discourage victims from seeking assistance.

Institutional accountability extends beyond school leadership to include education authorities, teacher regulatory bodies, social welfare agencies, law enforcement institutions, and the wider community. Effective safeguarding therefore requires clear governance structures, defined responsibilities, regular policy monitoring, independent investigation procedures, and appropriate disciplinary measures for offenders. Continuous monitoring and evaluation enable schools to identify implementation gaps, strengthen institutional learning, and improve safeguarding practices over time (World Health Organization, 2022; UNICEF, 2022).

Parents and local communities also play an indispensable role in protecting learners from abuse and exploitation. Strong partnerships between schools, families, community leaders, faith-based organisations, and child protection agencies enhance awareness of children's rights, encourage early reporting of safeguarding concerns, and strengthen social support networks for vulnerable learners. Community engagement further promotes collective responsibility for learner protection while improving trust between schools and stakeholders (UNICEF, 2022 ; UNESCO, 2023). Such collaborative approaches are particularly important in rural settings where schools often rely on community structures to support child welfare initiatives.

Within the Namibian context, the Child Care and Protection Act (Act No. 3 of 2015), the Basic Education Act (Act No. 3 of 2020), the National Safe Schools Framework, and educator codes of professional conduct provide a comprehensive policy foundation for protecting learners. However, available evidence suggests that implementation remains constrained by limited safeguarding capacity, inadequate educator training, insufficient learner awareness, inconsistent monitoring, and underreporting of abuse cases, particularly in rural schools (Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2015, 2020; UNICEF Namibia, 2023). These challenges highlight the need to strengthen institutional capacity, improve inter-agency collaboration, expand safeguarding training, and establish effective monitoring and reporting systems that translate policy commitments into everyday school practice.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that effective implementation of child protection policies requires more than legislative reform. Sustainable learner protection depends upon strong school leadership, institutional accountability, confidential reporting systems, continuous professional development, active parental and community participation, and coordinated collaboration among education and child protection stakeholders. Strengthening these interconnected components is essential for creating safe, inclusive, and accountable school environments capable of preventing educator misconduct and protecting learners from all forms of abuse and exploitation.

2.4 Empirical Review and Research Gap

A growing body of international research demonstrates that effective school child protection systems significantly reduce learners' exposure to violence, abuse, and exploitation while promoting safe and inclusive learning environments. Studies conducted in high-income countries, including the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and Finland, consistently report that schools implementing comprehensive safeguarding programmes characterised by clear child protection policies, mandatory educator training, confidential reporting mechanisms, regular policy monitoring, and strong institutional leadership experience higher levels of learner safety and greater confidence in reporting child abuse (UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2022; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023). These studies further indicate that safeguarding is most effective when child protection responsibilities are integrated into everyday school governance rather than treated as isolated compliance requirements.

Evidence from low- and middle-income countries presents a more complex picture. While many countries have established legislative and policy frameworks for child protection, implementation remains constrained by limited institutional capacity, inadequate professional development, insufficient financial resources, weak monitoring systems, and socio-cultural norms that discourage disclosure of abuse. Research conducted across Sub-Saharan Africa shows that educator misconduct, school-related gender-based violence, and sexual exploitation continue to threaten learner safety

despite the existence of national child protection policies (UNESCO, 2022; World Health Organization, 2022). Many studies identify underreporting of abuse as one of the greatest barriers to effective safeguarding because victims frequently fear stigma, retaliation, academic consequences, or lack confidence in institutional responses.

Within Southern Africa, empirical studies similarly demonstrate that child protection policies often exist without corresponding implementation capacity. Research conducted in countries such as South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Eswatini indicates that schools continue to experience challenges related to inadequate safeguarding training, inconsistent application of educator professional codes of conduct, shortages of counselling services, and limited collaboration between schools, social welfare agencies, and law enforcement institutions (UNICEF, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). These studies emphasise that strengthening school leadership, institutional accountability, and community participation are essential for improving policy implementation and protecting vulnerable learners.

In Namibia, relatively few empirical studies have examined the implementation of school child protection systems despite increasing public concern regarding educator misconduct and the sexual exploitation of learners. Existing research has primarily focused on school-related gender-based violence, violence against children, adolescent reproductive health, and learner well-being, with comparatively limited attention given to institutional safeguarding practices within schools (Together for Girls and Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2021; UNICEF Namibia, 2023; Vellozo et al., 2022). Furthermore, available studies have concentrated largely on national prevalence estimates and learner experiences rather than evaluating the effectiveness of child protection policies, school leadership, reporting mechanisms, educator accountability, or institutional safeguarding capacity.

Although previous studies have contributed significantly to understanding violence against children in educational settings, several important gaps remain. First, there is limited empirical evidence examining how child protection policies are implemented at school level, particularly within rural secondary schools. Second, few studies have investigated the interconnected roles of school leadership, educator professionalism, reporting mechanisms, institutional accountability, and community participation in strengthening learner protection. Third, there is a lack of region-specific evidence from the Kavango West Region, where contextual socio-economic and institutional factors may influence the effectiveness of safeguarding systems differently from other regions of Namibia.

This study addresses these gaps by assessing the implementation of school child protection policies as a safeguarding framework against educator misconduct and the sexual exploitation of female learners in secondary schools in the Kavango West Region. Unlike previous studies that primarily describe the prevalence of violence, this study adopts an institutional perspective by examining how safeguarding systems operate within schools, identifying implementation barriers, and proposing an integrated framework for strengthening child protection policy implementation. In doing so, the study contributes empirical evidence to inform educational policy, school governance, teacher professional development, and child protection practice in Namibia.

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Integrated Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by an integrated theoretical framework comprising Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the Child Rights-Based Approach (CRBA), and Institutional Theory. The integration of these complementary perspectives provides a comprehensive understanding of how child protection policies are implemented within schools and how institutional, social, and legal factors collectively influence the prevention of educator misconduct and the sexual exploitation of female learners.

Bronfenbrenner's original ecological formulation conceptualises child development as being influenced by multiple interconnected environmental systems, namely the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The later bioecological development of the framework gives greater emphasis to the interaction of proximal processes, personal characteristics, context, and time (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Within the context of this study, the microsystem consists of daily interactions between learners, educators, peers, and parents. The mesosystem reflects relationships among schools, families, and communities, while the exosystem includes educational authorities, child welfare agencies, and law enforcement institutions responsible for learner protection. The macrosystem encompasses national legislation, educational policies, cultural norms, and societal values that shape safeguarding practices, whereas the chronosystem recognises changes in child protection policies and educational reforms over time. This theory therefore explains that learner safety is influenced by interactions occurring across multiple ecological levels rather than by individual behaviour alone.

The Child Rights-Based Approach complements Bronfenbrenner's theory by positioning learners as rights holders entitled to protection, dignity, participation, and equitable access to education. Grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRF), the approach emphasises that governments, educational institutions, teachers, parents, and communities are duty bearers responsible for safeguarding children's rights (United Nations, 1989; UNICEF, 2022). Within schools, the approach requires the establishment of policies and institutional practices that prevent violence, abuse, neglect, discrimination, and exploitation while ensuring accessible reporting mechanisms and appropriate support for victims.

Institutional Theory provides an organisational perspective for understanding how child protection policies are translated into practice. The theory argues that organisational behaviour is influenced by formal regulations, institutional norms, professional expectations, and organisational culture (Scott, 2014). Although schools may adopt child protection policies to comply with national legislation, effective implementation depends upon leadership commitment, institutional capacity, educator professionalism, accountability mechanisms, and continuous monitoring. Consequently, differences in school culture and organisational effectiveness may explain the variations in safeguarding outcomes despite the existence of

similar policy frameworks.

The integration of these theories provides a holistic framework for the present study. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explains the interaction of multiple environmental factors affecting learner protection; the Child Rights-Based Approach establishes the legal and ethical obligation to protect every learner from abuse and exploitation; and Institutional Theory explains how organisational structures, governance, and policy implementation influence safeguarding practices within schools. Together, these perspectives provide a robust theoretical foundation for examining the implementation of child protection policies as a safeguarding framework against educator misconduct and the sexual exploitation of female learners in secondary schools in the Kavango West Region of Namibia.

4 Materials and Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of child protection policies as a safeguarding framework against educator misconduct and the sexual exploitation of female learners in secondary schools. The mixed methods approach combines the strengths of quantitative and qualitative research by integrating numerical findings with participants' experiences and contextual explanations, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

The study was conducted in the Kavango West Region of Namibia, a predominantly rural region characterised by dispersed settlements, limited educational resources, and diverse sociocultural contexts. The region comprises government and private secondary schools that operate under the Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sport, Arts and Culture. The choice of the Kavango West Region was motivated by the limited empirical evidence on the implementation of school child protection systems within rural educational settings, despite increasing national concern regarding educator misconduct and learner safeguarding.

The target population comprised school principals, teachers, female learners, school counsellors, school board members, and officials from the Ministry of Education responsible for learner welfare and child protection. These stakeholders were selected because of their direct involvement in implementing, monitoring, or benefiting from child protection policies within secondary schools.

A combination of stratified, purposive, and simple random sampling techniques was employed. Schools were first selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation of different educational contexts within the region. Principals, school counsellors, and education officials were purposively selected because of their specialised knowledge of child protection and school safeguarding, whereas teachers and female learners were selected using stratified random sampling to improve representativeness. The final sample comprised 312 participants. For reproducibility, the verified sampling-frame population and calculation must be inserted here before submission: [state the sample-size formula or power-analysis procedure, the population size, confidence level, margin of error, assumed proportion or effect size, and the resulting minimum sample]. The qualitative sample was guided by information richness and data saturation (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Data were collected using multiple instruments to enhance methodological triangulation. Structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis were employed because combining multiple sources of evidence improves the credibility and completeness of research findings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with school principals, counsellors, and education officials to obtain detailed information regarding policy implementation, institutional challenges, leadership responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms. Focus group discussions with selected female learners explored their experiences, perceptions of school safety, and awareness of reporting procedures within their respective schools. In addition, document analysis was undertaken to examine relevant national legislation, child protection policies, school safeguarding guidelines, educator codes of conduct, and school policy documents to determine the extent to which existing policy frameworks support learner protection.

The research instruments were subjected to expert review to establish face and content validity before data collection. A pilot study involving participants from schools outside the selected study sample was conducted to assess the clarity, relevance, and reliability of the instruments. Feedback obtained during the pilot study informed revisions to improve the wording and consistency of questionnaire items. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with coefficients of 0.70 or above considered acceptable for social science research (Cronbach, 1951; Taber, 2018). Qualitative trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Data collection commenced after obtaining ethical approval from the relevant institutional ethics committee and research permission from the Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sport, Arts and Culture. Permission was subsequently obtained from participating schools before questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions were administered in accordance with established ethical research procedures (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 29. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarise the data, while inferential statistical techniques such as chi-square tests, independent-samples *t*-tests, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), multiple regression analysis, and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) were employed where appropriate to examine relationships among variables. Qualitative data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The validity and reliability of the research instruments were established before the commencement of the main study to ensure the credibility and accuracy of the findings. Content and face validity were assessed through expert review by specialists in educational research, child protection, and research methodology, who evaluated the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of the questionnaire items and interview guides in relation to the study objectives. Their recommendations

informed the refinement of the research instruments. A pilot study was subsequently conducted using participants from secondary schools outside the selected study area but with characteristics similar to those of the main study population. The pilot study enabled the researcher to assess the clarity of the instruments, estimate the time required for data collection, identify ambiguities, and determine the feasibility of the research procedures. The reliability of the quantitative questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with values of 0.70 or above considered acceptable for internal consistency (Cronbach, 1951; Taber, 2018). The trustworthiness of the qualitative data was enhanced through methodological triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining a detailed audit trail throughout the research process (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Following ethical approval from the relevant institutional ethics committee and research permission from the Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sport, Arts and Culture, permission was obtained from the selected secondary schools before data collection commenced. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any adverse consequences. Structured questionnaires were administered to teachers and female learners during scheduled school sessions under the supervision of the researcher. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with school principals, school counsellors, and education officials to obtain detailed information regarding child protection policy implementation, school safeguarding practices, and institutional challenges. Focus group discussions were further conducted with selected female learners to explore their perceptions and experiences of school safety and reporting mechanisms. In addition, relevant policy documents, school safeguarding guidelines, educator codes of conduct, and child protection legislation were analysed to complement the primary data collected through questionnaires and interviews.

The quantitative data were coded, captured, and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29. Questionnaires were screened for completeness, range errors, and inconsistent responses before analysis. Descriptive summaries used all valid responses available for each item, while inferential models used complete cases for the variables included in the relevant analysis; the analytic sample size was recorded whenever it differed from the full sample of 312. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarise respondents' demographic characteristics and perceptions regarding child protection policy implementation. Inferential statistical techniques, including chi-square tests, independent-samples *t*-tests, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), multiple regression analysis, and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), were employed where appropriate to examine relationships among variables and identify significant predictors of effective child protection policy implementation. Qualitative data obtained from interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis following the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings facilitated methodological triangulation and provided a comprehensive understanding of school safeguarding systems and the implementation of child protection policies.

Given the sensitive nature of the study, strict ethical principles were observed throughout the research process. Written informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, while parental or guardian consent and learner assent were obtained for participants below the age of eighteen years. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of identification codes rather than participants' names, and all collected data were securely stored and used exclusively for research purposes. Participants who experienced emotional discomfort during interviews or focus group discussions were referred to appropriate school counselling services for psychosocial support. The study further adhered to the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice as prescribed by international research ethics guidelines (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979; World Medical Association, 2013).

5 Results

5.1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

A total of 312 participants participated in the study, comprising school principals, teachers, female learners, school counsellors, school board members, and officials from the Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sport, Arts and Culture. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1. Understanding participants' demographic characteristics is important because these variables may influence perceptions of child protection policy implementation, school safeguarding practices, educator professionalism, and learner safety.

The findings indicate that female participants constituted the majority of respondents (56.4%), while males accounted for 43.6%. This relatively balanced gender distribution enhanced the representativeness of views regarding child protection and school safeguarding. Regarding age, most participants (38.8%) were between 31 and 40 years, followed by those aged 41–50 years (29.2%). Younger participants (20–30 years) represented 18.3%, while respondents aged above 50 years constituted 13.7 %.

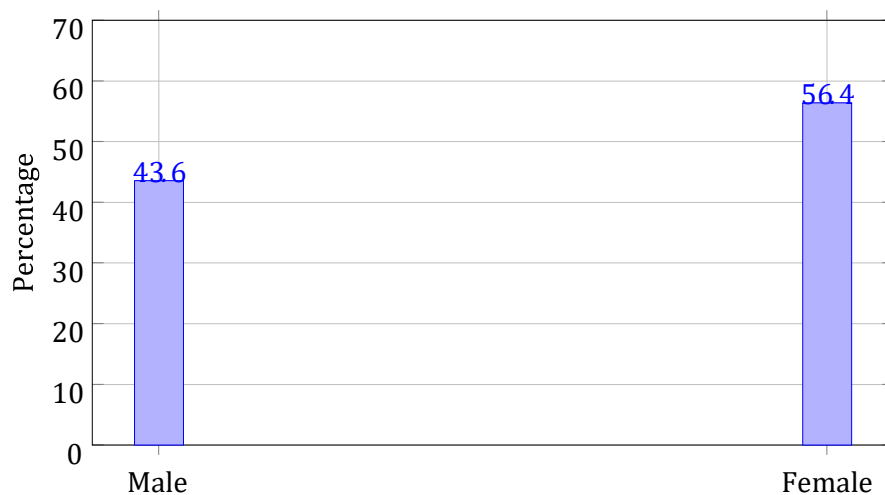
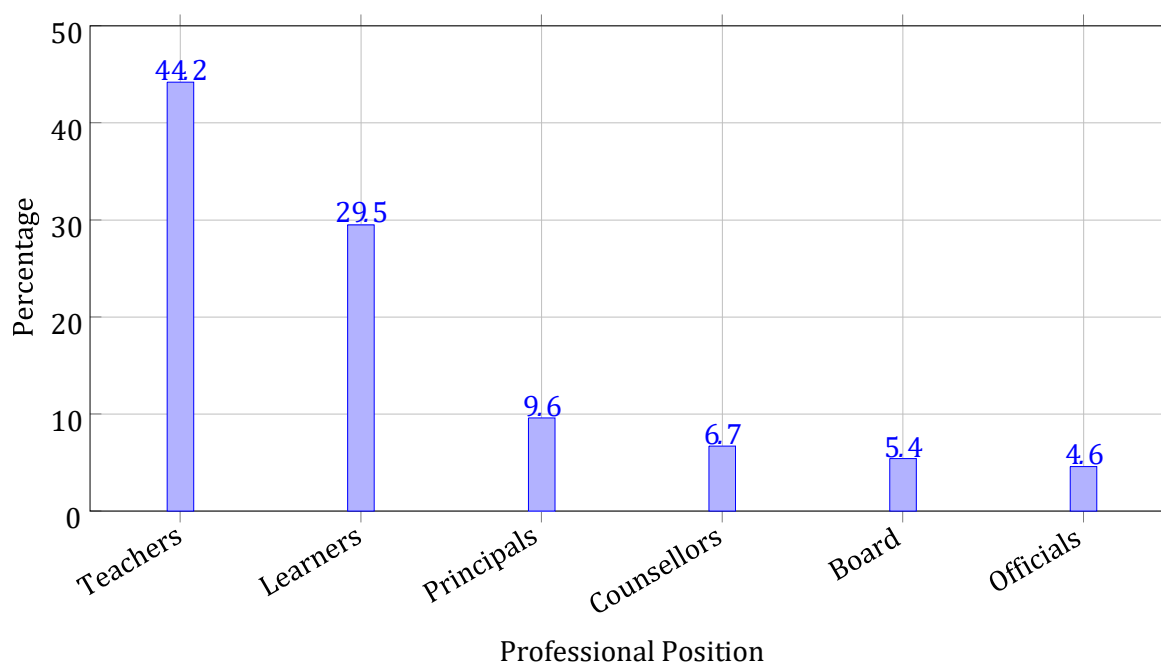
Teachers formed the largest participant category (44.2%), followed by female learners (29.5%), school principals (9.6%), school counsellors (6.7%), school board members (5.4%) , and education officials (4.6%). This distribution ensured that perspectives were obtained from both policy implementers and beneficiaries of child protection systems.

Approximately 82.4% of participants were drawn from public secondary schools, whereas 17.6% represented private schools. This distribution reflects the predominance of public schools within the Kavango West Region.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	136	43.6
	Female	176	56.4
Age Group	20–30 years	57	18.3
	31–40 years	121	38.8
	41–50 years	91	29.2
	Above 50 years	43	13.7
Professional Position	Teachers	138	44.2
	Female Learners	92	29.5
	Principals	30	9.6
	Counsellors	21	6.7
	School Board Members	17	5.4
	Education Officials	14	4.6
School Type	Public	257	82.4
	Private	55	17.6

Note. $N = 312$. The table summarizes the demographic characteristics of the study participants. Highest educational qualification and teaching experience apply only to educator respondents and are therefore excluded from this overall sample summary.

**Gender Figure 1: Distribution of Participants by Gender****Figure 2: Professional Distribution of Participants**

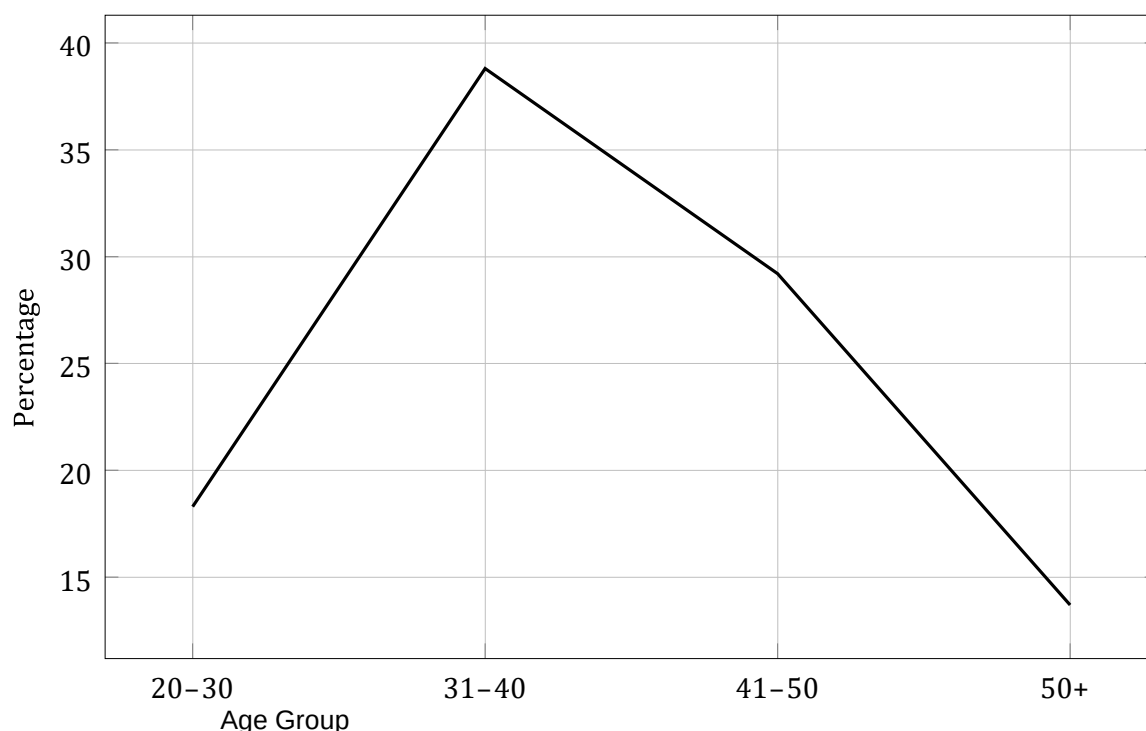


Figure 3: Age Distribution of Participants

5.2 Implementation of Child Protection Policies and School Safeguarding Practices

This subsection presents the findings regarding the implementation of child protection policies and school safeguarding practices in the participating secondary schools. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements relating to policy awareness, institutional safeguarding structures, staff training, reporting mechanisms, counselling services, learner awareness programmes, and policy monitoring using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The results are summarised using means and standard deviations, where higher mean scores indicate stronger implementation of child protection and safeguarding practices.

Overall, the findings suggest that respondents were generally aware of the existence of child protection policies within their schools ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.63$). Similarly, respondents reported that reporting procedures for child abuse were reasonably well communicated ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.72$). However, lower mean scores were observed for staff safeguarding training ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.89$), availability of counselling services ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.94$), and regular monitoring of child protection policies ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.91$), suggesting that these components require further strengthening.

The findings further revealed that while most schools had established safeguarding committees ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.77$), learner awareness programmes on child protection were implemented inconsistently across schools ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.83$). Overall, the grand mean of 3.67 indicates a moderate level of implementation of child protection policies and school safeguarding practices across the participating secondary schools.

Table 2: Implementation of Child Protection Policies and School Safeguarding Practices

Item	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Awareness of child protection policies	4.21	0.63	High
Availability of school safeguarding committee	3.88	0.77	High
Staff safeguarding training	3.41	0.89	Moderate
Reporting procedures are clearly communicated	4.03	0.72	High
Learner awareness programmes	3.52	0.83	Moderate
Counselling services available	3.35	0.94	Moderate
Regular monitoring of child protection policies	3.27	0.91	Moderate
Grand Mean	3.67	0.81	Moderate

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that policy awareness received the highest mean score, suggesting that most respondents were familiar with the existence of child protection policies within their schools. Reporting procedures and the establishment of safeguarding committees also received relatively favourable ratings, indicating that foundational safeguarding structures were present in many schools. Nevertheless, the comparatively lower ratings for safeguarding training, counselling services, learner awareness programmes, and policy monitoring suggest that implementation remains

uneven and that schools require additional institutional support to strengthen learner protection.

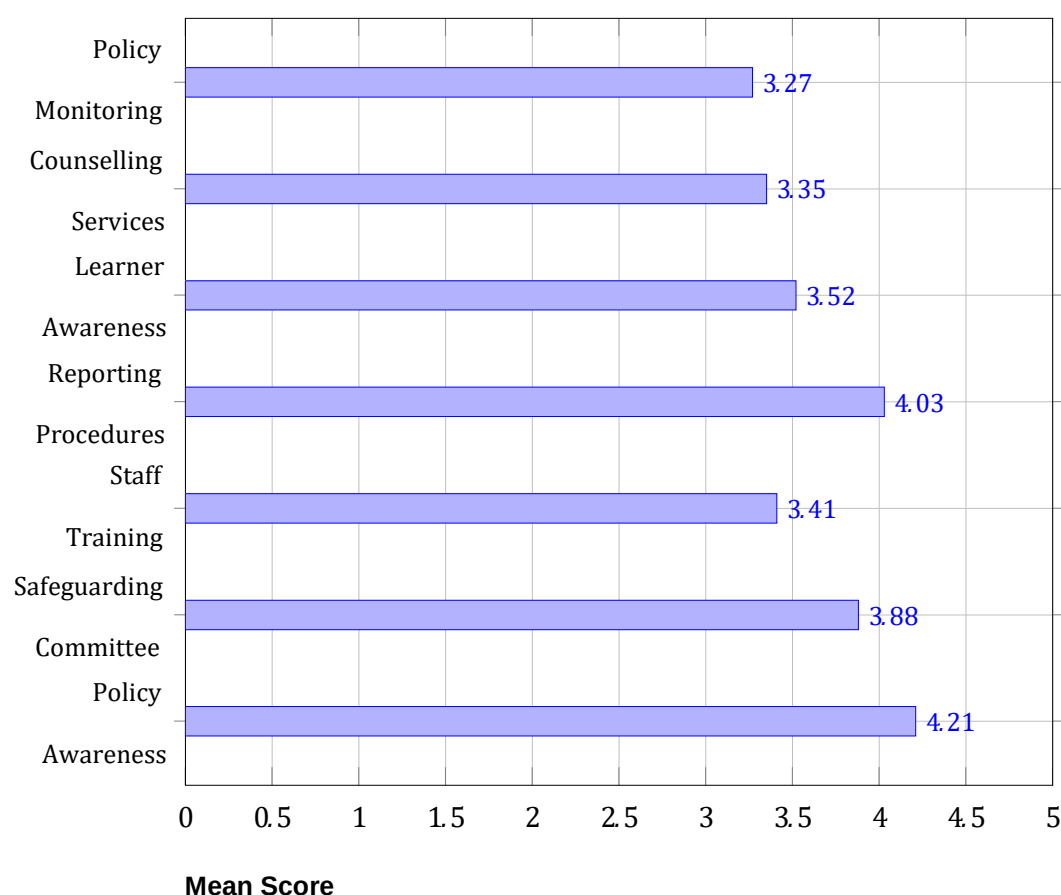


Figure 4: Mean Scores for Child Protection Policy Implementation

5.3 Educator Professional Conduct, Reporting Mechanisms, and Learner Safety

This subsection presents participants' perceptions of educator professional conduct, the effectiveness of reporting mechanisms, institutional accountability, and learner safety within the participating secondary schools. Respondents rated each statement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). The findings are summarised using means and standard deviations, where higher mean scores indicate more positive perceptions regarding educator professionalism and school safeguarding.

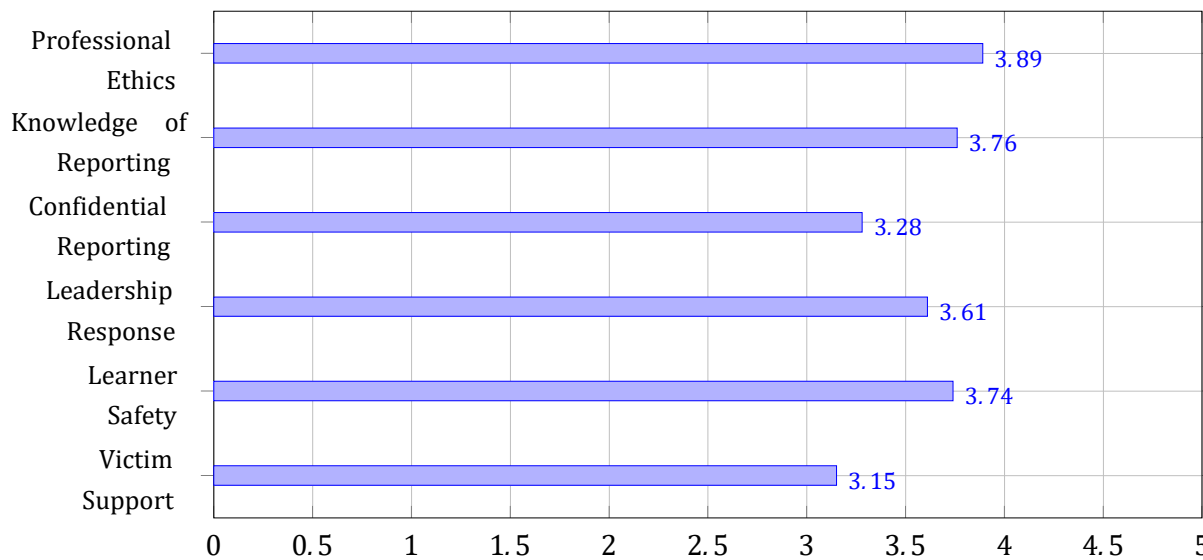
The findings presented in Table 3 indicate that respondents generally perceived educators to uphold acceptable professional standards ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.71$). Learners' awareness of reporting procedures also received a relatively high mean score ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.83$), suggesting that most respondents were familiar with existing mechanisms for reporting abuse and misconduct.

However, lower mean scores were observed regarding the confidentiality of reporting mechanisms ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.94$) and the adequacy of support services provided to victims of abuse ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.96$). These findings suggest that although reporting structures exist, respondents expressed reservations regarding confidentiality and post-report support.

School leadership was perceived to respond reasonably well to allegations of educator misconduct ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.80$), while learners generally reported feeling safe within the school environment ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.78$). Nevertheless, the overall grand mean of 3.57 indicates that educator professionalism and learner protection require further strengthening to achieve consistently effective safeguarding practices across secondary schools.

Table 3: Educator Professional Conduct, Reporting Mechanisms, and Learner Safety

Item	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Educators adhere to professional ethics	3.89	0.71	High
Learners know how to report abuse	3.76	0.83	High
Reporting mechanisms are confidential	3.28	0.94	Moderate
School leadership responds promptly	3.61	0.80	High
Learners feel safe at school	3.74	0.78	High
Victims receive adequate support	3.15	0.96	Moderate
Grand Mean	3.57	0.84	Moderate



Mean Score

Figure 5: Mean Scores for Educator Professional Conduct, Reporting Mechanisms, and Learner Safety

The descriptive statistics reveal that educator professional ethics received the highest mean score, indicating generally positive perceptions of educators' conduct within the participating schools. Similarly, learners demonstrated relatively high awareness of reporting procedures, reflecting ongoing efforts by schools to communicate child protection processes. Nevertheless, comparatively lower ratings for confidentiality and victim support indicate areas requiring further institutional strengthening. These findings provide an empirical basis for subsequent inferential analyses examining the determinants of effective child protection policy implementation.

5.4 Factors Influencing Child Protection Policy Implementation

Participants were requested to assess the extent to which selected institutional, administrative, and socio-cultural factors influence the implementation of child protection policies and school safeguarding practices in secondary schools. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). Descriptive statistics comprising means and standard deviations were computed to determine the relative influence of each factor.

The findings presented in Table 4 indicate that school leadership commitment was perceived as the most influential factor affecting the successful implementation of child protection policies ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.58$). Participants also assigned relatively high ratings to awareness of child protection policies ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.64$), institutional accountability ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 0.69$), and effective reporting mechanisms ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.73$). These findings suggest that leadership, institutional governance, and policy awareness play critical roles in strengthening school safeguarding systems.

Moderate mean scores were observed for safeguarding training ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.81$), parental involvement ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.84$), community participation ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.88$), monitoring and evaluation ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.86$), and the availability of financial resources ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.97$). The comparatively lower ratings for financial resources and monitoring indicate that although schools recognise the importance of child protection, institutional capacity constraints continue to limit effective implementation.

Overall, the grand mean score of 3.80 demonstrates that the factors examined exert a substantial influence on child protection policy implementation, although variations exist across the different institutional dimensions.

Table 4: Factors Influencing Child Protection Policy Implementation

Factor	Mean	SD	Interpretation
School leadership commitment	4.34	0.58	High
Awareness of child protection policies	4.18	0.64	High
Institutional accountability	4.09	0.69	High
Reporting mechanisms	4.02	0.73	High
Availability of safeguarding training	3.74	0.81	Moderate
Parental involvement	3.61	0.84	Moderate
Community participation	3.49	0.88	Moderate
Monitoring and evaluation	3.46	0.86	Moderate
Availability of financial resources	3.28	0.97	Moderate
Grand Mean	3.80	0.78	High

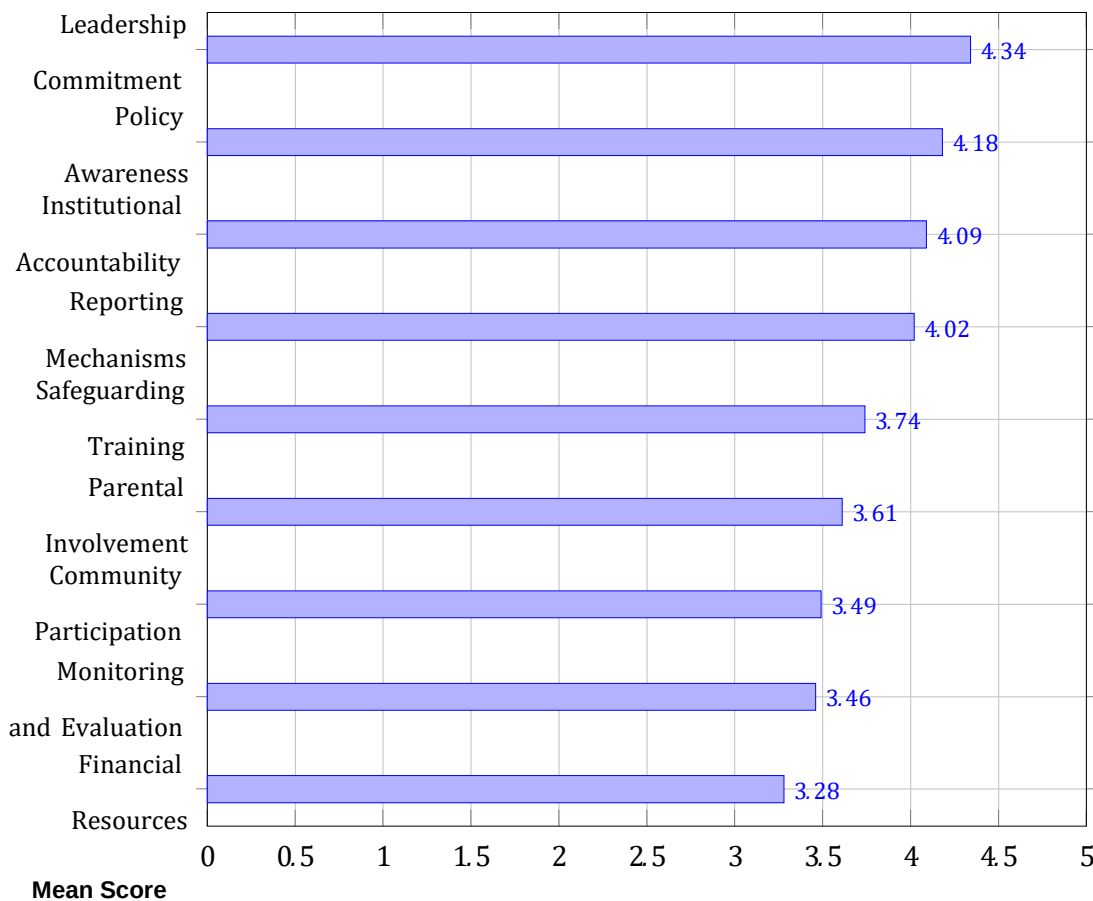


Figure 6: Factors Influencing Child Protection Policy Implementation

The descriptive statistics indicate that institutional leadership and accountability received the highest ratings, demonstrating their perceived importance in strengthening child protection systems within secondary schools. Conversely, financial resources, monitoring systems, and community participation received comparatively lower ratings, highlighting areas where schools may require additional institutional support and capacity building.

5.5 Inferential Analysis

Inferential statistical analyses were conducted to determine the relationships among the key variables influencing the implementation of child protection policies and school safeguarding practices. Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was first performed to examine the associations between school leadership commitment, safeguarding training, reporting mechanisms, institutional accountability, learner safety, and overall child protection policy implementation. The results indicated statistically significant positive correlations among all the major study variables ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that improvements in institutional safeguarding practices were associated with higher levels of effective policy implementation.

Subsequently, multiple linear regression analysis was performed to determine the extent to which school leadership, safeguarding training, reporting mechanisms, institutional accountability, parental involvement, community participation, and resource availability predicted child protection policy implementation. The regression model was statistically significant ($F(7,304) = 48.62, p < 0.001$) and explained approximately 68.4% of the variance in child protection policy implementation ($R^2 = 0.684$), indicating a strong explanatory model.

The results revealed that school leadership commitment ($\beta = 0.412, p < 0.001$), institutional accountability ($\beta = 0.286, p < 0.001$), and reporting mechanisms ($\beta = 0.241, p = 0.002$) were the strongest predictors of effective policy implementation. Safeguarding training also contributed significantly to policy implementation ($\beta = 0.198, p = 0.011$), whereas parental involvement and community participation demonstrated weaker but statistically significant positive effects. Availability of financial resources showed a positive relationship with policy implementation but was not statistically significant after controlling for the other variables ($p > 0.05$).

Independent-samples t -tests revealed no statistically significant differences between male and female respondents regarding perceptions of child protection policy implementation ($t = 1.27, p = 0.205$). Similarly, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed no significant differences across school types ($F = 2.14, p = 0.119$). However, significant differences were observed according to professional position ($F = 5.82, p < 0.001$), with school principals and counsellors reporting higher levels of policy implementation than teachers and learners.

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was subsequently employed to examine the direct relationships among the principal constructs. The model demonstrated satisfactory goodness-of-fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 2.11$, CFI = 0.964, TLI = 0.956, RMSEA = 0.059, SRMR = 0.047), indicating that the proposed model adequately represented the observed data. Figure 7 illustrates the final structural model using the standardised coefficients reported in the analysis.

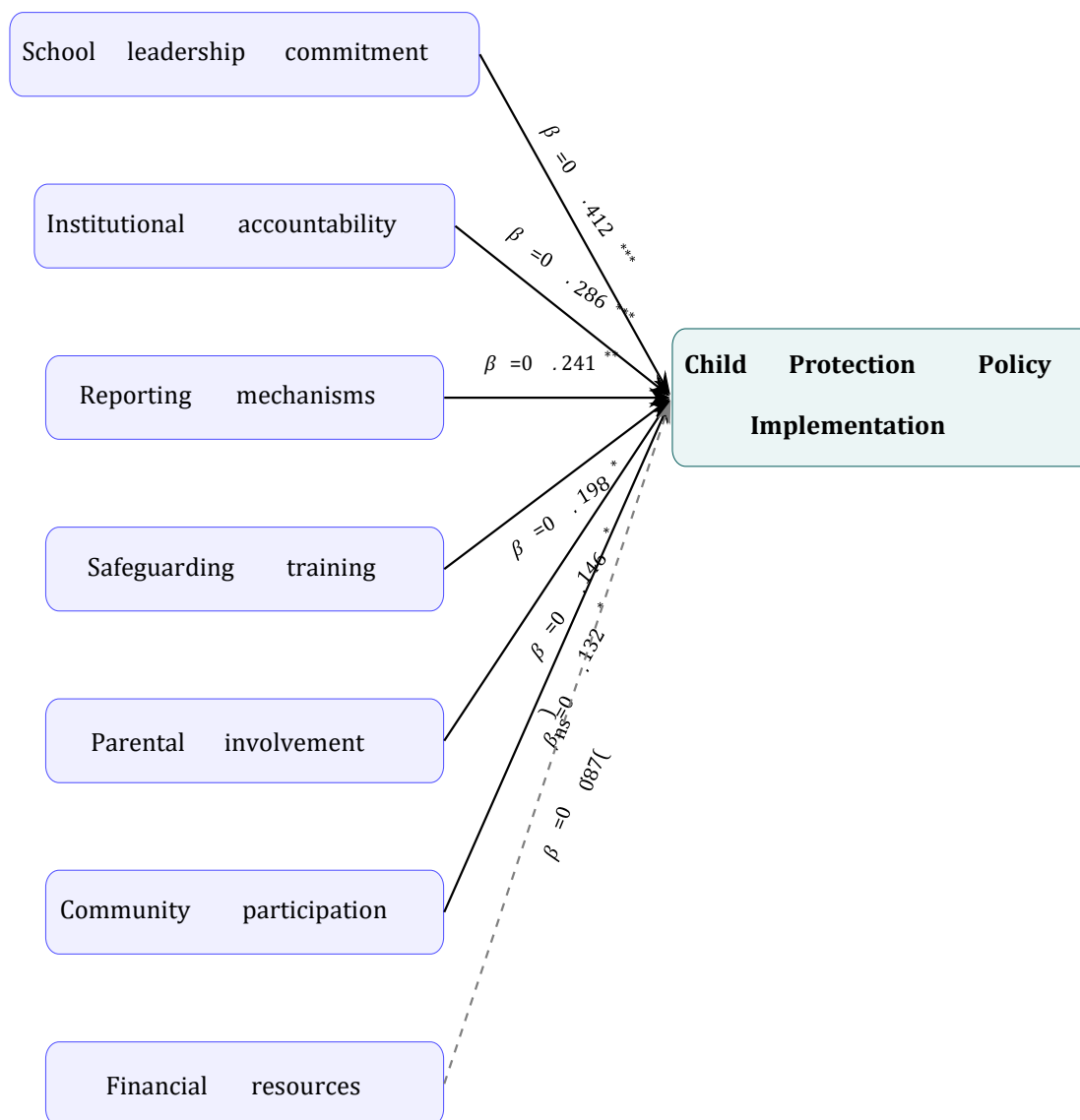


Figure 7: Final structural model of predictors of child protection policy implementation. Model fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.11$, CFI = 0.964,

TLI = 0.956, RMSEA = 0.059, and SRMR = 0.047. Significance notation: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; ns = not significant.

Table 5: Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Child Protection Policy Implementation

Predictor	β	t	p -value	Decision
School leadership commitment	0.412	8.74	< 0.001	Significant
Institutional accountability	0.286	5.96	< 0.001	Significant
Reporting mechanisms	0.241	4.18	0.002	Significant
Safeguarding training	0.198	3.24	0.011	Significant
Parental involvement	0.146	2.53	0.018	Significant
Community participation	0.132	2.18	0.031	Significant
Financial resources	0.087	1.54	0.126	Not Significant

$R^2 = 0.684$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.672$, $F = 48.62$, $p < 0.001$

Table 5 provides the exact standardised coefficients, t -values, p -values, and significance decisions for each predictor. Figure 9 complements the table by displaying the relative magnitudes of the coefficients together with approximate 95% confidence intervals; it is intended as a visual comparison rather than a duplicate inferential analysis. Figure 8, by contrast,

presents the bivariate correlation structure among the broader study variables.

	PI	PC	RM	LS	IC	SP	SL	PA	CP
PI	1.00	0.71	0.68	0.63	0.73	0.74	0.78	0.49	0.44
PC	0.71	1.00	0.65	0.60	0.62	0.64	0.72	0.45	0.41
RM	0.68	0.65	1.00	0.66	0.67	0.69	0.71	0.52	0.47
LS	0.63	0.60	0.66	1.00	0.64	0.67	0.66	0.55	0.50
IC	0.73	0.62	0.67	0.64	1.00	0.73	0.75	0.50	0.46
SP	0.74	0.64	0.69	0.67	0.73	1.00	0.76	0.53	0.48
SL	0.78	0.72	0.71	0.66	0.75	0.76	1.00	0.51	0.45
PA	0.49	0.45	0.52	0.55	0.50	0.53	0.51	1.00	0.62
CP	0.44	0.41	0.47	0.50	0.46	0.48	0.45	0.62	1.00

Figure 8: Correlation matrix among the study variables. PI = policy implementation; PC = professional conduct; RM = reporting mechanisms; LS = learner safety; IC = institutional capacity; SP = safeguarding practices; SL = school leadership; PA = parental involvement; CP = community participation.

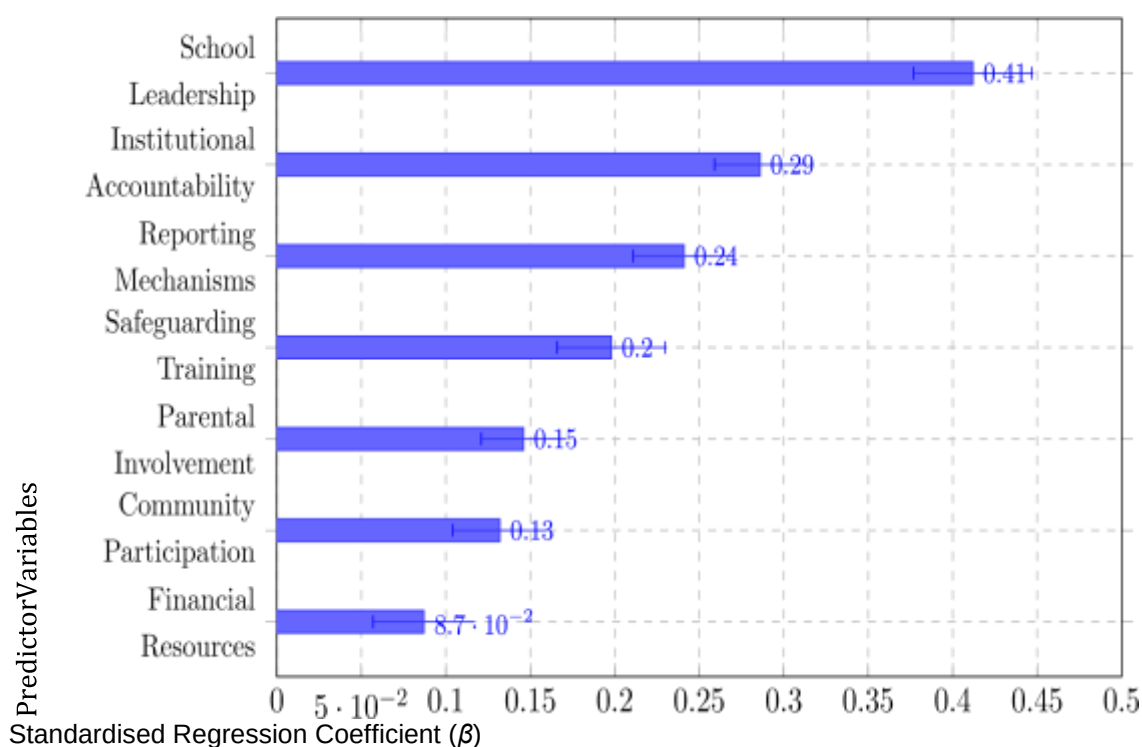


Figure 9: Standardised regression coefficients predicting child protection policy implementation. Error bars represent approximate 95% confidence intervals.

5.6 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings complement the quantitative results by providing an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences regarding the implementation of child protection policies and school safeguarding practices in secondary schools. Data obtained from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework, resulting in five overarching themes and several interrelated subthemes. These themes collectively describe participants' perceptions of existing safeguarding systems, institutional challenges,

educator professionalism, learner safety, and strategies for strengthening child protection within schools.

Table 6: Summary of Qualitative Themes

Theme	Key Categories / Codes
1. Awareness of Child Protection Policies	• Knowledge of child protection policies • Policy dissemination and accessibility • Understanding of reporting procedures
2. Institutional Challenges	• Limited safeguarding training • Resource constraints • Weak monitoring and enforcement • Inadequate counselling services
3. Educator Professionalism and Accountability	• Professional ethics and conduct • Abuse of authority • Institutional disciplinary procedures
4. Reporting Mechanisms and Learner Safety	• Confidentiality in reporting • Fear of victimisation • Trust in reporting systems • Learner wellbeing and protection
5. Recommendations for Strengthening Safeguarding	• Continuous professional development • Community participation • Policy monitoring and evaluation • Multi-sectoral collaboration

Theme 1: Awareness of Child Protection Policies

Most participants demonstrated general awareness of the existence of child protection policies within their schools. However, considerable differences were observed regarding the extent to which these policies were understood and communicated to both educators and learners. School principals generally indicated familiarity with national safeguarding guidelines, whereas many learners reported limited knowledge of formal reporting procedures.

One school principal stated:

“Our school has child protection policies, but many learners are unaware of the procedures they should follow when reporting abuse.” Similarly, one learner explained:

“We know that abuse should be reported, but many learners do not know exactly who they should report to.”

These findings suggest that although policy documents exist, dissemination and awareness remain inconsistent across schools.

Theme 2: Institutional Challenges

Participants consistently identified institutional limitations as significant barriers to effective safeguarding. Common concerns included inadequate safeguarding training, shortages of school counsellors, insufficient financial resources, and weak policy monitoring.

A teacher remarked:

“Most teachers have never received formal safeguarding training after joining the profession.”

An education official similarly noted:

“Schools are expected to implement child protection policies, yet many lack adequate resources and specialised personnel.”

Resource limitations were therefore perceived as reducing schools’ capacity to respond effectively to child protection concerns.

Theme 3: Educator Professionalism and Accountability

Participants generally recognised the professionalism of most educators while acknowledging that isolated cases of abuse of authority negatively affect learner trust and school safety. Several participants emphasised the importance of professional ethics, transparent disciplinary procedures, and institutional accountability.

One school counsellor observed:

“Most teachers behave professionally, but when misconduct occurs, schools must respond quickly and transparently.”

Learners also highlighted the importance of trusting school authorities before reporting allegations involving educators.

Theme 4: Reporting Mechanisms and Learner Safety

Participants expressed mixed perceptions regarding the effectiveness of reporting systems. Although schools generally maintained reporting procedures, concerns remained regarding confidentiality, fear of victimisation, and possible retaliation.

One learner explained:

“Some learners remain silent because they fear they will not be believed or that teachers may treat them differently

afterwards.”

A teacher similarly stated:

“Confidentiality is essential because learners will only report abuse when they trust the reporting process.”

These findings indicate that strengthening confidential reporting systems remains an important component of school safeguarding.

Theme 5: Recommendations for Strengthening School Safeguarding

Participants proposed several interventions aimed at improving child protection policy implementation. The most frequently mentioned recommendations included continuous safeguarding training for educators, regular policy monitoring, increased learner awareness programmes, confidential reporting channels, stronger parental involvement, and closer collaboration between schools, social workers, health professionals, and law enforcement agencies.

An education official concluded:

“Protecting learners requires cooperation between schools, families, communities and government institutions rather than schools working alone.”

Overall, the qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative results by demonstrating that effective child protection depends not only on the existence of safeguarding policies but also on institutional capacity, educator professionalism, stakeholder collaboration, and learners’ confidence in reporting abuse.

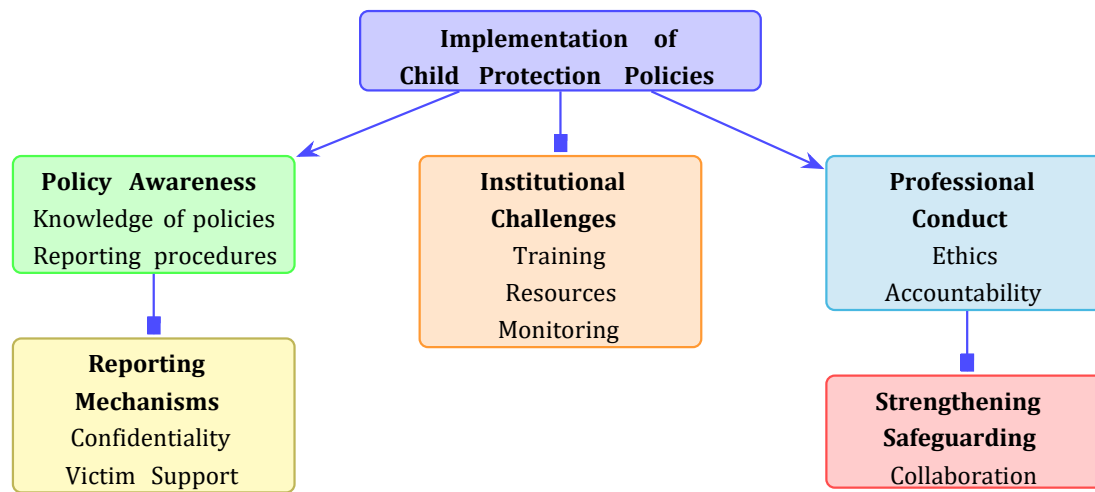


Figure 10: Thematic framework emerging from the qualitative analysis.

6 Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that although most secondary schools in the Kavango West Region possess child protection policies and safeguarding guidelines, their implementation remains inconsistent across institutions. Participants generally reported high levels of awareness regarding the existence of child protection policies; however, safeguarding training, counselling services, institutional monitoring, and victim support were rated considerably lower. These findings suggest that policy availability alone is insufficient to guarantee effective learner protection. Rather, successful safeguarding depends upon the capacity of schools to operationalise policy through adequate institutional structures, professional development, continuous monitoring, and accessible reporting mechanisms.

The regression analysis further revealed that school leadership commitment, institutional accountability, reporting mechanisms, and safeguarding training were the strongest predictors of effective child protection policy implementation. These findings reinforce Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, which argues that learner protection is shaped by interactions occurring across multiple institutional and social systems. Similarly, the Child Rights-Based Approach emphasises that schools have a legal and ethical responsibility to create learning environments that protect children from abuse, exploitation, and violence. Institutional Theory further explains that effective safeguarding depends not only on policy adoption but also on organisational culture, leadership commitment, and institutional accountability.

The qualitative findings corroborated the quantitative results by demonstrating that participants viewed safeguarding as extending beyond policy documentation to include ethical leadership, confidential reporting systems, continuous professional development, community engagement, and effective institutional collaboration. Participants consistently highlighted inadequate safeguarding training, fear of victimisation, limited counselling services, and insufficient monitoring as major barriers to successful policy implementation. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that strengthening institutional capacity is fundamental to improving learner safety within secondary schools.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous international research demonstrating that effective child protection requires comprehensive safeguarding systems rather than merely the existence of policy documents. Similar studies conducted by UNESCO (2023) and UNICEF (2022) concluded that schools implementing continuous safeguarding training, confidential reporting procedures, and strong institutional leadership report significantly lower levels of school-related gender-based violence and greater learner confidence in reporting abuse.

The present findings further agree with studies conducted across Sub-Saharan Africa, which identify inadequate

institutional capacity, limited financial resources, insufficient safeguarding training, and weak policy monitoring as major obstacles to effective child protection policy implementation (World Health Organization, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). Likewise, studies undertaken in Southern Africa have consistently shown that child protection policies frequently exist without corresponding institutional capacity to support effective implementation, particularly in rural schools where shortages of trained personnel and counselling services remain prevalent.

Within the Namibian context, the present findings complement previous research reporting persistent concerns regarding school-related gender-based violence and learner vulnerability despite the existence of comprehensive legislative frameworks (Together for Girls and Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2021; UNICEF Namibia, 2023). However, unlike earlier studies that primarily documented the prevalence of violence against learners, this study extends the literature by examining the institutional processes that influence child protection policy implementation. The findings therefore provide new empirical evidence regarding the critical roles of school leadership, educator professionalism, institutional accountability, and stakeholder collaboration in strengthening school safeguarding systems.

Although the overall findings generally align with previous literature, some differences were observed. While several international studies report relatively high institutional preparedness for safeguarding implementation, participants in the current study perceived significant deficiencies in counselling services, safeguarding training, and policy monitoring. These differences are likely attributable to contextual variations in resource availability, institutional capacity, and educational infrastructure between developed and developing education systems.

The findings of this study have important implications for educational policy, school leadership, teacher professional development, and child protection practice in Namibia. First, educational authorities should strengthen monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure that child protection policies are implemented consistently across all secondary schools rather than remaining administrative documents with limited practical application.

Second, safeguarding responsibilities should be institutionalised through mandatory professional development programmes focusing on child protection legislation, educator ethics, safeguarding procedures, trauma-informed practice, and confidential reporting mechanisms. Continuous capacity-building initiatives would strengthen educators' ability to recognise, prevent, and appropriately respond to cases of abuse and exploitation.

Third, school leadership should prioritise the establishment of functional safeguarding committees, confidential learner reporting systems, accessible counselling services, and stronger partnerships with parents, social workers, health professionals, law enforcement agencies, and community organisations. Such multi-sectoral collaboration is essential for creating safe learning environments where learners are protected from abuse and exploitation.

Finally, the findings support the development of an integrated national school safeguarding framework that clearly defines institutional responsibilities, accountability mechanisms, monitoring indicators, and reporting procedures. Such a framework would strengthen policy implementation, promote institutional accountability, and contribute to achieving the broader national and international commitments to child protection, learner safety, and quality education.

7 Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the need to strengthen the implementation of child protection policies through coordinated institutional action. Secondary schools should establish functional safeguarding committees, provide regular safeguarding training for educators, strengthen confidential reporting mechanisms, enhance school counselling services, and conduct continuous monitoring of policy implementation. The Ministry of Education should reinforce policy enforcement through regular safeguarding audits, school inspections, and the provision of adequate financial and human resources, particularly for rural schools. Teacher education institutions should integrate child protection, educator ethics, safeguarding, and trauma-informed practice into both pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes, while parents and communities should actively participate in school safeguarding initiatives through collaborative partnerships with schools and child protection agencies.

At the national level, policymakers should develop an integrated school safeguarding framework that harmonises existing legislation, reporting procedures, accountability mechanisms, and monitoring systems to ensure consistent implementation across all schools. Future research should extend this work to other regions of Namibia using larger and nationally representative samples, employ longitudinal designs to assess the long-term effectiveness of safeguarding interventions, and examine innovative approaches such as digital reporting platforms, schoolbased counselling models, and community-led safeguarding programmes to strengthen learner protection.

8 Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides valuable insights into the implementation of child protection policies in secondary schools within the Kavango West Region, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted within a single region of Namibia, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other regions with different socio-cultural and educational contexts. Second, the study relied partly on self-reported data obtained through questionnaires and interviews, which may have been influenced by social desirability bias, recall bias, or participants' reluctance to disclose sensitive experiences relating to educator misconduct and school safeguarding. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the study limited the ability to establish causal relationships between the variables investigated. Despite these limitations, the use of a mixed-methods approach, methodological triangulation, and multiple stakeholder perspectives enhanced the credibility, trustworthiness, and overall robustness of the findings.

9 Conclusion

This study assessed the implementation of child protection policies as a safeguarding framework against educator misconduct and the sexual exploitation of female learners in secondary schools in the Kavango West Region of Namibia. The findings demonstrate that although most schools possess child protection policies and safeguarding guidelines, their implementation remains inconsistent due to inadequate safeguarding training, limited institutional capacity, insufficient monitoring systems, weak reporting mechanisms, and inadequate stakeholder collaboration. School leadership, institutional accountability, safeguarding training, and effective reporting systems emerged as the most significant predictors of successful policy implementation.

The qualitative findings further revealed that strengthening learner awareness, confidential reporting mechanisms, educator professionalism, counselling services, and multi-sectoral collaboration are essential for creating safe and inclusive school environments. The study therefore contributes to the growing body of knowledge on school safeguarding by proposing an integrated institutional approach that combines effective leadership, educator accountability, continuous professional development, community participation, and systematic policy monitoring.

Overall, strengthening school safeguarding requires sustained commitment from educational authorities, school leaders, teacher education institutions, parents, communities, and policymakers. Implementing these recommendations will contribute to protecting learners' rights, reducing opportunities for educator misconduct, and promoting safe, inclusive, and accountable educational environments in Namibia.

10 Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant Institutional Research Ethics Committee. Additional research permission was granted by the Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sport, Arts and Culture and the participating secondary schools. Written informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, while parental or guardian consent together with learner assent was obtained for participants below the age of 18 years.

Consent for Publication Not applicable.

Funding

The authors received no external funding for this research.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions

Authors conceived the study, designed the research methodology, collected and analysed the data, interpreted the findings, and prepared the manuscript. All authors reviewed, revised, and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

Data Availability

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and confidentiality requirements.

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