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School Safety as a Key Factor in Facilitating Children's Smooth Transition from Pre-primary to Primary Education in Tanzania

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Abstract

This study explores teachers' perspectives on school safety as a factor for children's smooth transition from pre-primary to primary schooling. This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of educators in early childhood education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 18 participants—nine head teachers and nine pre-primary teachers—from public primary schools in the Chemba and Mpwapwa districts of the Dodoma Region, Tanzania. The qualitative data collected were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and key insights related to the participants' experiences and perspectives. The study revealed that teachers consider school infrastructure, social support, food provision, and effective school monitoring as crucial aspects of school safety that impact children's transition. The findings inform educational policymakers and practitioners about the need to devise strategies for establishing a safe learning space for the smooth transition of pre-primary children. Finally, the study recommends that teacher training programmes should focus on providing social-emotional support. Additionally, there should be strategic investment in pre-primary infrastructure and strong policy advocacy for the implementation and sustainability of school meal programmes for pre-primary and primary schools.

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Introduction

Transitioning from pre-primary to primary school marks a significant milestone in a child's development. It introduces them to a range of new educational and social experiences that can be exciting and daunting. This transition can provoke anxiety and uncertainty as children encounter unfamiliar routines, new classroom environments, and shifting peer dynamics, intensifying their fear of the unknown (Viskovic, 2018). Given the emotional and developmental challenges associated with

this transition, it becomes evident that this phase is critical not only for the children themselves but also for parents and teachers who play pivotal roles in supporting them (Viskovic, 2018). Therefore, establishing warm, supportive, caring, responsive relationships and a safe learning environment can significantly ease the transition process and help build a strong foundation for children's future academic and social success (Mabagala & Shukia, 2019).

Research indicates that school safety is a crucial factor in supporting and promoting children's engagement, academic success, and overall well-being, encompassing their health, social, emotional, and psychological development (Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2010). Evidence shows that feeling unsafe at school is linked to various negative academic outcomes, such as lower educational achievement (Nijs, *et al.*, 2014), decreased school engagement, and increased truancy (Janosz *et al.*, 2008). Additionally, feelings of insecurity may lead children to engage in risky and aggressive behaviour, which can be harmful to their adjustment to the school environment (Goldstein *et al.*, 2008). Consequently, unsafe school environments can impede children's ability to socialize effectively and adapt smoothly during the transition from pre-primary to primary school.

Mayer & Cornell (2010) note that defining school safety is often challenging, as the definition can encompass a wide range of different themes, where the separation of rhetoric versus reality becomes problematic, and where a key difficulty is distinguishing between personal beliefs and evidence-based research. As a result, scholars have diverse perspectives on the definition of school safety. For example, McGuire (2017) indicates that a key indicator of school safety is the presence of a plan within the school policy designed to address potential threats to students and staff. Mubita (2021) defines school safety as the state of being secure from various forms of abuse, violence, psychosocial issues, disasters (both natural and man-made), fire, and transportation hazards. With existing diverse perspectives among scholars in defining the term school safety, Srichai *et al.* (2013) highlight that the term school safety encompasses physical, psychological, environmental, and social dimensions. The physical aspect of school safety involves safeguarding children from risks that could cause bodily harm within the school environment or during their commutes to and from school (Zaidi & Manal, 2022). This includes incidents of physical violence, sexual abuse, and bullying. Additionally, it involves the adequacy of the school's physical infrastructure and health conditions, such as nutrition, sanitation, and hygiene services (Dunlap, 2013; Kingshott & McKenzie, 2013; Mubita, 2021; Srichai *et al.*, 2013; Zaidi *et al.*, 2022). The psychological dimension focuses on preventing stress, anxiety, depression, and negative thoughts, while protecting against psychological violence such as aggression, harassment, and emotionally harmful behaviour by students, teachers, or staff (Fleming, 2012; Mooij & Fettelaa, 2013; Mubita, 2016; Zaidi *et al.*, 2022).

The environmental aspect of school safety encompasses practices and environment in which learners, teachers, content, equipment, and technologies interact to enhance learning engagement and inclusion (Zaidi *et al.*, 2022). These include both physical and non-physical elements. Physical elements include classrooms, equipment, libraries, playgrounds, toilets, kitchens, and sports facilities and non-physical elements include teaching and learning practices, such as curriculum, pedagogical resources, learning materials, culture, and management (Zaidi *et al.*, 2022). Purkey & Novak (1996) suggest that the school should be an inviting place across a set of five Ps. The five Ps are people, place, processes, policies, and programs. This means that schools need to have appropriate supportive school culture, responsive educators, infrastructure, programmes, supportive policies, and processes for children's transition. Furthermore, evidence shows that the safety of a particular school cannot be considered in isolation and it is inseparable from the surrounding community

(Kitsantas *et al.*, 2004). Thus, school safety should be viewed holistically—encompassing not only the school environment but also broader community factors such as road safety and natural hazards. This comprehensive approach is essential, as schools are vulnerable to disasters like extreme temperatures, strong winds, fire outbreaks, floods, thunderstorms, lightning, landslides, and debris flows (Mubita, 2021). Such hazards and disasters can make a school unsafe for children's smooth transition from pre-primary to primary school.

The social dimension of school safety encompasses interactions that foster social and emotional learning (SEL) and inclusion, including student-teacher interactions, peer interactions (student-student, teacher-teacher, and teacher-school leader), and school-community engagement (Zaidi *et al.*, 2022). Mubita (2021) notes that developing and maintaining friendly social bonds is a fundamental organizing principle of human behaviour, and threats to social safety are a critical feature of psychological stressors that increase the risk for disease. This implies that the school environment must be free from all forms of social threats that could hinder children from making a smooth transition from pre-primary to primary education.

These dimensions highlight the multifaceted nature of school safety, which goes beyond merely preventing immediate threats. It involves creating a supportive and nurturing environment that fosters the holistic development of children. This includes addressing children's social, emotional, physical, and academic needs, crucial for their well-being. Ultimately, this study emphasizes that a comprehensive approach to school safety encompasses fostering a positive school environment where children feel safe, supported, and valued. This includes ensuring that school settings and systems are free from social, emotional, physical, physiological, psychological, and academic threats that may hinder a smooth and meaningful transition from pre-primary to primary education.

Globally, several initiatives have emerged to highlight the importance of school safety in enhancing the quality of learning. For instance, Wright *et al.* (2009) note that the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) launched several efforts, including the Safe Schools Initiative to address armed conflict in Nigeria and the Child-Friendly Schools Framework for increasing education quality for all children. Moreover, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) sought to strengthen global monitoring and reporting of attacks on educational facilities. As of 2018, a total of 95 governments had signed the Safe Schools Declaration, demonstrating their commitment to protecting schools and their occupants during times of armed conflict (GCPEA, 2018). Despite global initiatives, empirical evidence across various contexts highlights that ensuring school safety for early-grade pupils remains a significant challenge (Salim *et al.*, 2022; UNESCO, 2021).

Research evidence also confirms that a safe school learning environment is positively associated with enhanced learning, health, and well-being, and positive relationships among learners (Salim *et al.*, 2022; Zaidi *et al.*, 2022). With this recognition, Tanzania has demonstrated its commitment to fostering a safe educational environment through key initiatives such as the 2014 Education and Training Policy (ETP), revised in 2023, along with projects like the Boost Primary Student Learning Project and the Safe School Programme. These efforts aim to address and eliminate all forms of violence that learners may encounter within school settings (URT, 2018; World Bank, 2021a). As a demonstration of its commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 16.2, which advocates for peaceful and inclusive societies (United Nations, 2015), Tanzania has developed a National Plan of Action to eliminate all forms of violence against women and children (URT, 2016). This plan focuses on ensuring safety and protection in the delivery of social services, including access to and provision of education.

Despite these commitments against violence, there has been a persistent recurrence of child violence and abuse incidents in schools in Tanzania, which jeopardize the safety of school children.

Although the government has made significant commitments to fostering a safer educational environment, evidence indicates persistent challenges in implementing these efforts. Specifically, the Safe School Programme in Tanzania continues to face several challenges in addressing the various forms of violence children encounter in schools. Some of these challenges include inadequate funding, limited resources, staffing shortages, and lack of awareness among stakeholders (Haki Elimu, 2020). Additionally, challenges encompassing poor infrastructure, such as substandard school facilities and inadequate transportation, governance issues within schools, and declining teacher morale are notably reported (Haki Elimu, 2020).

Research evidence confirms the persistence of violence against children in schools. For instance, a study by Haki Elimu (2020) into the prevalence and nature of violence against children in Tanzanian schools revealed that 61% of children had experienced psychological violence, 88% had experienced physical violence, with 90% of them saying this took the form of caning, and 17% from public schools and 14% from private schools had experienced at least one incident of sexual violence. Furthermore, recent empirical evidence by Haki Elimu continued to reveal an increase in psychological, physical, and sexual violence against children and school remained the predominant setting where children experience violence (Haki Elimu, 2022, 2023). Additionally, a study conducted by Mweta & Otieno (2023) also indicates existence of sexual abuse in school settings, which disturb learners' academic performance.

School safety, which is positively associated with improved learning outcomes, better health and well-being, and stronger peer relationships has recently attracted growing interest among educators and researchers worldwide (Salim *et al.*, 2022; Zaidi *et al.*, 2022). In Tanzania, evidence indicates that numerous studies have been conducted on school safety, reflecting a growing national focus on creating secure and supportive learning environments. The available recent studies on school safety include a study by Tandika *et al.* (2024), which focuses on the role of training in helping teachers promote greater safety in schools. Also, a study by Salim *et al.* (2022) examines how to enhance preschool teachers' competence in managing pediatric injuries in Pemba Island, Zanzibar. Additionally, Haki Elimu (2022) investigated the state of violence against school children in Tanzania's mainland. The other studies include a study by Masath *et al.* (2022), which focused on factors contributing to school violence, and a study by Mweta & Otieno (2023), which focused on the academic impact of sexually abused learners.

Despite the existing studies, there remains a notable research gap regarding teachers' perspectives on school safety as a critical factor in facilitating children's smooth transition from pre-primary to primary education. A report by World Bank (2021) on gender and GBV assessment for Tanzania stresses the importance of ensuring safe school environments for quality learning. Safety in schools is increasingly becoming a critical issue that is of major concern to the government, parents, learners, and society in Tanzania and the world. Exploring teachers' perspectives on school safety is both crucial and timely. It offers valuable insights into the complex nature of school safety and its role in shaping practices and policies that support smooth transitions and holistic child development. Furthermore, the study contributes to the existing body of literature by framing school safety as a critical element in educational transitions, ultimately informing future strategies to improve school environments for all learners.

To achieve these goals, the study sought to answer the central question: What are teachers' understandings of school safety as a factor influencing children's transition from pre-primary to primary school?

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Comprehensive School Safety Framework (CSSF), which aims to protect learners, educators, and staff from death, injury, violence, and harm in schools and other learning environments (GADRRRES, 2022). The Comprehensive School Safety Framework (CSSF) comprises four key components: a cross-cutting foundation and three intersecting pillars—safer learning facilities, school safety and educational continuity management, and risk reduction and resilience education (GADRRRES, 2022). The foundation focuses on strengthening system-level resilience by establishing enabling systems and policies designed to protect the safety, health, and well-being of the entire school community, ensure educational continuity, safeguard investments in the education sector, and foster a culture of safety and resilience. This means a school is considered safe for its members when it has implemented school-wide systems and policies that promote and support safety practices for children or learners, teachers, and other school members.

Safer learning facilities focus on both new and existing school facilities, including building safer and quality facilities. For new facilities, it focuses on site selection, design, and construction to ensure safety from physical, biological, chemical, and social threats. This approach aims to enhance the quality of learning facilities while protecting the health and well-being of all users (GADRRRES, 2022). For existing facilities, it focuses on the identification and prioritization of facilities for repair, retrofit, replacement, or relocation, as well as on the maintenance of physical learning environments (GADRRRES, 2022). This implies that schools are perceived as safe for their users when their facilities are free from physical, biological, environmental, and social threats. Safe schools should feature facilities that are inclusive of physical disabilities and gender, provide adequate classrooms and washrooms, ensure effective evacuation procedures, proper ventilation, and include equipment and services that support safety and learning continuity, such as early warning systems.

School safety and educational continuity management focuses on equity-focused planning for children's health, safety, and well-being for educational continuity about all-hazards and risks to children and staff in the education sector (GADRRRES, 2022). The focus is on building preventive, absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities for resilience through meaningful participation and accountability to affected populations. This involves planning and implementing comprehensive measures for all hazard and risk assessments, risk prevention and reduction, response preparedness, and recovery (GADRRRES, 2022). This implies that a truly safe school is one that has comprehensive preventive measures against hazards and violence, along with well-structured strategies for risk and violence assessment, as well as recovery programs to support the school community in the aftermath of such events. The risk reduction and resilience education component emphasizes measures designed to create content, processes, and learning opportunities for children, staff, and school communities (including parents) to foster individual and community-level resilience against the risks they encounter (GADRRRES, 2022). This includes disaster risk management, climate change, health promotion and pandemic preparedness, child protection, violence and conflict prevention, conflict resolution, strengthening social cohesion, and promoting psychosocial well-being (GADRRRES, 2022).

Methodology

To gain a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions of school safety as a factor influencing children's smooth transition from pre-primary to primary school, the study employed a

qualitative research approach guided by a phenomenological research design. Cresswell (2014) holds that qualitative research enables researchers to collect data on participants' natural settings, facilitating a deeper understanding of their experiences and attitudes toward the phenomenon under investigation. Johnson & Christensen (2017) add that qualitative approach helps to obtain rich, in-depth, and holistic insights into the phenomena under investigation. Studies support that phenomenological studies examine human experiences through the descriptions provided by the people involved (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Furthermore, Cresswell (2014) adds that a phenomenological research design effectively captures the viewpoints and experiences of the participants involved in the study and its goal is to describe the meaning that experiences aim to describe the meaning these experiences hold for each individual. Thus, a phenomenological research design was suitable for exploring teachers' perceptions of school safety as it enables participants to describe their experiences as they perceive them.

This study was carried out in Mpwapwa and Chemba Districts in Dodoma Region, Tanzania, the two districts that make up Dodoma Region. The selection of the two districts was mainly informed by the findings by (Education International & Tanzania Teachers' Union, 2017). According to Education International and Tanzania Teachers' Union (2017), the two districts, Chemba and Mpwapwa, have recorded low enrollment rates in pre-primary education (PPE), with Chemba at 44% and Mpwapwa at 32%. Additionally, these districts face a high dropout rate in PPE due to factors such as poor learning environments, social issues, economic activities, poverty, lack of food, and long distances from home to school (Education International & Tanzania Teachers' Union, 2017). Furthermore, the 2022 population and housing census indicate that among the eight (8) administrative councils of the Dodoma Region, Mpwapwa District was the council that recorded the highest percent (13.0%) of school dropout. This was followed by Bahi District with 12.4%, Chamwino District with 11.8%, Kongwa District with 10.7%, Chemba District with 9.8%, Kondoa DC with 9.6%, Dodoma City with 8.4%, and Kondoa TC with 7.8% (URT, 2024). Given this empirical evidence, the two districts were identified as relevant locations to explore insights for the research question.

Head teachers and pre-primary teachers from public primary schools were purposively selected to share their perspectives and understanding of school safety as a factor influencing children's smooth transition from pre-primary to primary school. Cresswell (2012) supports that in purposive sampling, the researcher selects a subject based on their formal training, experience, and unique knowledge on the research topic. In this regard, a total sample of 18 participants with 9 head teachers and 9 pre-primary teachers was selected to take part in the current study. Head teachers with at least one year of leadership experience and pre-primary teachers with a minimum of one year of teaching experience in pre-primary classes were considered to have adequate knowledge of the research topic and were thus eligible to participate in the study. Schools were purposively selected based on specific criteria, including their location (rural or urban), the presence of a pre-primary class, and performance level (both high- and low-performing schools). The schools were accessed with the support of the office of the District Education Office in the two districts.

The study employed semi-structured interviews to gather data from head teachers and pre-primary teachers about their perspectives on school safety as a factor influencing children's smooth transition from pre-primary to primary school. In practice, in-depth, person-to-person interviews were conducted, with all sessions taking place on school premises. The interview sessions lasted for 50 minutes to 60 minutes for both head teachers and pre-primary class teachers. The participants were encouraged to freely express their views, feelings, and beliefs regarding their perspectives on

school safety as a factor for children's smooth transition from pre-primary to primary school. The key question asked to the participants was: what do you understand about school safety as a factor for children's transition from pre-primary to primary school? With the participants' consent, audio recordings were used during the interview sessions to preserve the information for further analysis. To facilitate active participation and meaningful engagement with the research topic, the interviews were conducted in Swahili, the language most familiar to the participants. During the interview sessions, the researcher acted as facilitator and moderator, asking questions and ensuring that the conversation remained focused on the research topic.

Practically, the overall analysis was data-driven, with themes emerging from participants' perspectives. The analysis was guided by the six stages of qualitative thematic analysis proposed by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These stages include data familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report. Before the data analysis process began, all qualitative data, including handwriting field notes, and audio-recorded interviews were organized and transcribed by the researcher and later translated into English by the language specialists from the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at the University of Dodoma. The language specialists were used to maintain the original meaning of the interview transcripts.

The process of data familiarization then began, involving intensive reading and re-reading of transcripts and field notes, as well as repeated listening to audiotapes. During this phase, the researcher selected quotes that vividly represented varied perspectives and patterns relevant to the research question. Initial codes, expressed as short phrases, were assigned to segments of data that captured core messages. These codes were noted in the margins of the transcripts to highlight key ideas. As the analysis advanced, the codes were refined and adjusted to better reflect emerging patterns and insights. In ensuring the credibility of the findings, the researcher employed a multiple-coder system whereby two coders used the same coding scheme (codebook) to code independently (Li & Yu, 2022). The Cohen-kappa reliability coefficient formula was employed to compute inter-coder reliability. The calculated value was 0.877 for head teachers and 0.842 for teachers which indicate that there is almost perfect agreement between coders.

After the initial codes were developed, the researcher was involved in re-reading the original text alongside the developed initial codes. This process was undertaken to ensure that all components of the data set were thoroughly examined in relation to the research question. The researcher then grouped similar codes into content areas to form categories aligned with the study's focus. These categories were further merged to develop overarching themes. Throughout the process, coding, categorization, and theme development were consistently reviewed and refined across each dataset or transcript to maintain accuracy and coherence. Once categorization and coding were completed, the researcher kept on looking at the original transcripts to confirm if each code fit into the respective categories. Upon completing data analysis and developing themes, the researcher undertook sense-making of the findings by repeatedly reading the field notes and listening to the recorded audiotapes multiple times.

Addressing potential biases during data collection and analysis, a researcher maintained a neutral position and was attentive to the emotional responses of participants throughout the data collection and analysis phases. To accomplish this neutral stance, the researcher employed objective language during interviews, carefully crafted questions that were structured to elicit candid and genuine responses. This approach was vital to avoid leading participants in a particular direction

regarding their perspectives on school safety as a factor for children's smooth transition from pre-primary to primary school. By prioritizing open-ended and clear inquiries, the researcher fostered an environment where participants felt comfortable sharing their thoughts without the pressure of aligning with a specific viewpoint.

To maintain standards in qualitative research, this study ensured credibility by employing environmental triangulation. This involved collecting data on the same phenomenon from multiple contexts, specifically Mpwapwa and Chemba Districts. Prolonged engagement was achieved by asking follow-up questions and encouraging participants to support their arguments with examples. Additionally, providing detailed descriptions of the study's phenomenon, along with quotes reflecting participants' viewpoints enhanced the transferability of the findings. Furthermore, an in-depth methodological account of the study's procedures reinforced its dependability. The study's confirmability was reinforced by grounding the data collection, analysis, and interpretation in the participants' perspectives.

To uphold ethical standards, the researcher adhered to all necessary guidelines. This included obtaining research clearance from the Directorate of Research, Publication, and Consultancy at the University of Dodoma, which was subsequently submitted to the relevant local authorities to secure research permits. The researcher also received research permits from Chemba district with reference number CDC/E10/43VOLII/51 and Mpwapwa district with reference number HW/MPW/S10/6/48 for conducting the study. The informed consent from the participants was obtained by signing the consent agreement forms between the researcher and participants. Moreover, the researcher adhered to confidentiality requirements by providing confidentiality forms which were signed by the researcher and participants. Anonymity for head teachers, pre-primary teachers and schools was ensured by using letters to represent head teachers and pre-primary teachers, while numbers were used to identify schools.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the current study were presented and discussed based on the themes established in relation to the research question. The data analysis process identified four major themes: school infrastructure, social support, provision of food, and effective school monitoring as depicted in the table below.

Table 1: Major themes emerged from data analysis

School safety aspects	Head Teachers	Teachers
School infrastructure	7 (14.8%)	10 (27.7%)
Social support	9 (19.1%)	13 (36.1%)
Food provision	21 (44.6%)	10 (27.7%)
Effective school monitoring	10 (21.2%)	3 (8.3%)
Total	47 (99.7%)	36 (99.8%)

Source: Fieldwork (2023)

Availability of School Infrastructure

Findings from in-depth interviews with head teachers and pre-primary teachers revealed that the availability of sufficient school infrastructure is a critical pillar of school safety, facilitating children's smooth transition from pre-primary to primary school. Although teachers and head teachers agreed that school infrastructure is a crucial pillar of school safety for children's transition, data analysis revealed that facilities such as classrooms, toilets, and playgrounds are scarce and inadequate. This poses significant challenges to children's smooth transition from pre-primary to primary school. Teachers and head teachers specifically pointed out that inadequate funding system by the government and lack of parents' contributions limits schools from having sufficient quality

facilities to support children's smooth transition. Supporting their views, one of the participants elaborated that:

To me, a safe school that enhances smooth transition to children is the one with sufficient resources and infrastructure for quality learning. However, in most schools, pre-primary learning conditions are not supportive for children to experience a smooth transition. We don't have sufficient funds from the government to have sufficient resources and improve our infrastructures to support children's transition. For instance, in our school here, a pre-primary classroom is also used to store building materials. This is very dangerous for children's safety. (Interview with a pre-primary teacher from school 3, June 2023)

Another participant added that:

Our school is along the main road but we don't have a school fence. Two years ago, we had a very bad experience, one of our children died due to a road accident. This incident has lowered even parents' confidence in our school. (Interview with head teacher from school 1, May 2023)

The participants' assertions above indicate that schools are facing a challenge of adequate infrastructure and safe facilities that could make the school environment more safe and an inviting place for children's learning and development. Additionally, participants' statements revealed that schools lack sufficient funding to establish safer learning facilities, including classrooms, fences, toilets, and playgrounds specifically designed for pre-primary children. The findings of the current study are also supported by the findings by Kahraman *et al.* (2022) who revealed that teachers, students, and parents link unsafe schools to poor hygiene, inadequate equipment, unsound buildings, lack of infirmaries, and absence of security cameras. Additionally, the current findings are supported by Cankaya (2010), who emphasized that a safe school environment should include multi-purpose classrooms, security cameras, and first-aid rooms to effectively support student safety. Furthermore, the findings of the current study are in line with the findings by Enos & Francis (2016), which also revealed that head teachers faced multiple challenges in managing pre-primary education, including shortage of classrooms. Again, the current study's findings agree with the findings by Education International and Tanzania Teachers' Union (2017), which confirmed a high shortage of pre-school infrastructure such as classrooms, toilets, and playgrounds in the studied schools in Mpwapwa and Chemba districts. These findings underscore the importance of school infrastructure and facilities in ensuring a safe learning environment for children's smooth transition from pre-primary to primary school.

Evidence from research shows that a learning environment with quality and sufficient infrastructure and resources enables children to adapt more easily to a structured setting (Barrett et al., 2019). For this reason, the absence of adequate physical facilities and infrastructure in the studied schools raises concerns about the overall safety of the learning environment. This lack of essential resources may hinder children's learning, development, and smooth transition from pre-primary to primary education. The CSSF supports that schools are perceived to be safe for its population when its facilities are safe from any form of physical, biological, environmental and social threats for its users (GADRRRES, 2022). A safe school that supports children's transition from pre-primary to primary education is one that provides gender-sensitive and inclusive facilities, such as suitable classrooms, toilets, and playgrounds. To ensure children experience a smooth transition, the

government must strengthen the school funding system by investing in infrastructure improvements and supplying essential materials and equipment that enhance school safety.

Availability of Social Support

Findings from in-depth interviews revealed that both pre-primary teachers and head teachers perceive school safety as encompassing the social support provided to children during their transition from pre-primary to primary school. Participants noted that, love, care, and assistance given for children for the hygiene services constitute the social support offered to children during this critical period. For example, in one of the interview sessions, a participant shared that:

In my opinion, school safety for pre-primary children is seen in terms of love and care that teachers and other school members provide. For instance, many pre-primary children are not yet able to use the washroom independently, so their teachers always assist them. (Interview with the head teacher from School 1, May 2023).

From the participant's sentiments, it can be concluded that when children receive social support in school settings, they tend to feel secure, valued, and accepted by the school community. This support enhances children's trust to the school community members and develops the sense of being safe and secure in the school settings. The findings of the current study align with those of Tian *et al.* (2015), who found that both social contextual factors, such as school-related social support, and self-system factors, such as scholastic competence and social acceptance, are crucial for children's well-being in school. Additionally, the current study's findings are consistent with those of Kozan *et al.* (2014), which emphasize that high levels of social support, particularly from teachers, are significant predictors of school engagement among children. Furthermore, Novitasari *et al.* (2021) found that social support factors, including supervisor support, peer support, and family support, positively and significantly affect children's school performance.

Moreover, the current findings align with those by Jia & Cheng (2024) who found that students who feel socially supported by their teachers tend to experience positive emotions and exhibit greater engagement in the learning process. These findings underscore the importance of creating a supportive social atmosphere within school environments to facilitate a smooth transition for pre-primary children. The CSSF suggests that safe schools are those with enabling systems and policies that aim at protecting the safety, health, and well-being of the entire school community. This implies that schools with social support practices strongly create a system for managing psychological stress and foster resilience among learners (Taylor, 2011). This in turn helps to enhance children's smooth transition from pre-primary to primary school.

Although social support is emphasized and recognized as essential for school safety, some participants reported a lack of adequate social support for pre-primary children. This is due to lack of awareness on the importance of teachers' social support to pre-primary children among teachers. Supporting this claim, one of the participants had these to share:

I have been teaching pre-primary classes for almost four years now. One of the challenges I face is the lack of support from other teachers in helping pre-primary children when they have challenges, especially toilet cases. It is common to hear fellow teachers calling 'Madam, come and see your children.' And if I am not around they do ask pupils of upper classes to help these children. But I think most teachers are not aware that this class needs all

teachers to be friendly, socially, and emotionally responsive. (Interview with a pre-primary teacher from School 7, June 2023)

The participant's narrative above highlights several challenges. One being a lack of responsiveness among teachers. Second being the absence of a comprehensive school-wide system and policies supporting children's transition, and third being a lack of awareness among teachers of their roles in the pre-primary class. Such findings align with Jia & Cheng (2024), who also found that teachers who lack social support skills tend to exhibit more negative reactions when addressing children's emotions or challenging behaviors. Additionally, the study's current findings are in agreement with the findings by Tandika *et al.* (2024), which confirmed that teachers were inadequately prepared in terms of autonomy and supportive communication to help their pupils develop crucial skills for creating a safe learning environment. Generally, these findings suggest that inadequate social support among teachers negatively impacts children. It also makes the school environment an unsafe setting for children to experience a smooth transition from pre-primary to primary school. To foster environments that are free from social, emotional, and psychological threats and to ensure a smooth transition from pre-primary to primary education, schools must prioritize safety and well-being. All teachers need to be responsive and actively participate in creating a comprehensive, school-wide system for implementing school safety policies. This includes training in risk management, child protection, violence and conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and fostering social cohesion. Additionally, implementing measures that support psychosocial well-being is essential, as proposed in the Comprehensive School Safety Framework (CSSF).

Provision of Food

The findings from the data analysis indicate that teachers relate school safety with the provision of food. To support this claim, pre-primary class teachers and head teachers emphasized that the provision of food at school plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of safety and security among children. Participants highlighted that school meal programmes not only reassure parents that their children's basic needs are being met in a safe environment but also contribute to improved attendance, increased retention, and enhanced learning outcomes for pre-primary children. However, the participants explained that poverty and low level of awareness among parents, and lack of government financed food programmes were the challenges limiting schools having effective food programmes. Justifying their arguments, one of the participants had these to explain:

Though the programme is not very effective due to poverty and ignorance among parents, after the introduction of the food programme, we have witnessed a high rate of registration, attendance, improved learning outcomes, and children's retention at school. I believe the availability of porridge in our school attracts parents to register their children. (Interview with a head teacher from school 9, June 2023)

Another participant added that:

The common challenges here are the parents' low level of awareness on the importance of their children to have meals at school and lack of government support on food programme. For example, some parents are saying their children have not experienced breakfast, they just take lunch. So they don't see the need of contributing maize for their children to have porridge at school. (Interview with a pre-primary class teacher from school 6, June 2023)

The statements above suggest that the provision of food at school increases children's registration and retention at school. Also, it lowers truancy rates among children and reduces drop-out rates among learners. However, the assertions also inform that poverty, parents' low level of understanding on the importance of their children having meals at school, and lack of government financed food programmes are the challenges limiting schools to have effective nutrition services to children.

These findings are supported by Misinde (2020) who also confirmed that school meal programmes significantly decreased truancy rates in the studied schools. Additionally, Gelli *et al.* (2007) support that the Food for Education (FFE) programme led to a 28% increase in girls' enrollment and a 22% increase for boys in World Food Programme-assisted schools during the first year. Furthermore, the findings by Daftari & Umeodum (2022) indicated that offering school meals reduced absenteeism and tardiness, decreased drop-out rates, and enhanced students' concentration, engagement in classroom activities, and overall classroom management. However, the findings by Athumani *et al.* (2024) noted that despite the significant impact of food programmes on students' academic engagement and nutritional well-being, many parents and community members exhibited a lack of understanding regarding the significance of their contributions.

The CSSF suggests that health promotion for children, and school staff is essential for enhancing risk reduction and resilience education (GADRRRES, 2022). Both past and current research highlight the critical role of food provision in creating a safe and appealing school environment. Access to nutritious meals reduces truancy and dropout rates, enhances children's engagement in learning activities, and supports their overall health and well-being—especially during the transition from pre-primary to primary education. Therefore, providing food is essential for facilitating an effective and smooth transition programme for pre-primary children. This makes the school environment more inviting and secure settings for children's holistic development.

Effective School Monitoring

During interviews with head teachers and pre-primary teachers, they highlighted effective school monitoring as another critical aspect of school safety. Data analysis revealed that vigilant supervision of children—both inside and outside the classroom support in using washroom facilities, and protective measures against potential dangers or peer harassment are essential practices. According to participants, these strategies contribute to creating a safe and supportive school environment, which in turn promotes a smooth transition from pre-primary to primary education. In support of this assertion, one head teacher provided the following insights:

As you may have observed, a pre-primary teacher is constantly working with children both inside and outside the classroom. Even when the children require assistance in the washroom facilities, the teacher is always present to provide help. (Interview with the head teacher from School 5, June 2023)

The other participant added that:

Our emphasis has been on protecting children from any danger and harassment of their peers. For example, we have clubs that educate and fight against children violence, posters with message fighting child abuse and violence, a suggestion box where children have told to report their violence cases, and pupils are encouraged to report to their teachers or in my office when they sense or experience any form violence or abuse. (Interview with head teacher from school 8, June 2023)

Based on participants' statements, it can be concluded that teachers implement a range of monitoring and supervision strategies to enhance school safety for both pre-primary children and upper-class pupils. These include attentive oversight within and outside the classroom, assistance with washroom use, and protective measures against potential dangers or peer harassment. However, the findings of the current study are opposed with the findings by Haki Elimu (2022) which confirmed a significant rise in psychological, physical, and sexual violence against children, with schools remaining the primary setting where such violence occurs. The findings by Haki Elimu revealed a total of 912 cases of violence against children, as reported in my voice boxes which primarily addressed issues such as gender-based violence, physical abuse, and bullying in school settings. Additionally, a study by Haki Elimu (2023) also indicates a significant increase of child violence cases from 912 cases in 2022 to 2,374 cases in 2023. These findings suggest that, despite ongoing efforts to improve school safety, school environments continue to face numerous challenges that make them unsafe settings for children to experience a smooth transition from pre-primary to primary school.

The CSSF suggests that schools with risk-informed policy and planning approaches improve equity, prevent and reduce risks, and increase capacities (GADRRRES, 2022). Therefore, to effectively support a smooth transition for children from pre-primary to primary education, schools must implement comprehensive safety measures and policies. These measures should be inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of all children. This entails not only physical safety but also creating an emotionally supportive atmosphere that fosters a sense of belonging and security, thereby enabling every child to thrive both academically and personally (Mayer *et al.*, 2021).

Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings from this study aim to inform educational policymakers and practitioners about the need to devise strategies for establishing a safe learning space for the smooth transition of pre-primary children from pre-primary to primary school. In light of the study's findings, it is recommended that teacher training programmes should focus on providing social-emotional support. Additionally, there should be strategic investment in pre-primary infrastructure and strong policy advocacy for the implementation and sustainability of school meal programmes. By taking a collaborative approach between the government, non-government organizations (NGOs), and the community, these proactive strategies will directly contribute to enhancing school safety for children's smooth transition from pre-primary to primary school.

The primary limitation of this study is related to both the size and the characteristics of the sample used. With a relatively small sample, it becomes challenging to draw definitive conclusions that can be generalized to a broader population. Furthermore, the findings are based exclusively on the experiences of head teachers and pre-primary class teachers from public primary schools. As a result, they may not capture the perspectives or challenges encountered in private or alternative educational settings. This narrow scope limits the broader applicability and generalizability of the results. It suggests that further research involving a more diverse and larger sample would be necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand.

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