

Safety and hygiene interventions to protect learners in the school environment: PPE considerations for primary school learners in Zimbabwe.

Betty Shoko and Lois Mberengwa

Abstract

Many children in developing countries learn in unsanitary conditions, exposing them to diseases that threaten their educational performance and progress. As the world continues to evolve, and new challenges emerge, there is a need to review measures taken to mitigate the spread of disease and injury of learners as they clean the school environment. This study discussed potential hazards learners encounter and measures that are being implemented to safeguard the health and safety of learners during school cleaning activities. It also focused on generating prototype designs for personal protective equipment (PPE) that are appropriately sized, provide enhanced protection for learners, and are better suited for the specific activities involved. The study was underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model as well as Dunlap's Protection Theory. A multiple-site case study, mixed methods approach was used to study four rural and four urban primary schools in two districts in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling was employed to select a sample of eight schools based on the extent to which learners are involved in cleaning activities as well as 16 teachers and 96 learners. Potential hazards identified during the study include respiratory infections, dysentery, cholera, diarrhea, bilharzia, soil-transmitted worms, and injuries as potential hazards in primary schools. The results indicated a lack of PPE usage in most schools. Observations showed that during cleaning the majority of learners either wore school uniforms or substituted them with old clothes. For the schools that had any, the PPE was adult-sized and not suitable for primary school learners. The study recommends that the government puts in place legislation that would guide schools in safeguarding the health and safety of learners in schools.

Keywords: Health and safety hazards, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), Intervention, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), Learners