

Understandings of the Safety in School Concept among Secondary School Teachers

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Abstract

Safety at workplace is an issue that has been growing in the social context and is becoming an increasing concern of many parties that call for the need of actions to prevent injuries and other sort of dangerous situations. Safety in school, as a workplace for many, is not only the school's management responsibility but teachers, staff as well as the students have roles to play to ensure that schools are safe. Teachers need to have knowledge and awareness of safety in schools and embrace its related concepts as depicted by Occupational Safety and Health Act 1994 (OSHA 1994). This paper reports on a qualitative study, involving interviews with 20 experienced secondary school teachers from the Northern States of Peninsular Malaysia. It examines the concept of safety in school from their perspectives. The interview data were analysed thematically. Among the concepts that had emerged from the analysis are safety in school as undeniably an important aspect that warrants attention from the related parties; safety in school as a condition whereby the community in the schools feel safe; and safety in schools as the awareness of being free from danger from the physical and psychosocial aspects. The results of the study provided evidence of limited conceptions of safety in school among the teachers. Hence, it indicates the need to provide teachers with relevant knowledge about matters pertaining to safety in school as described by the ministry.

Keywords: Safety in School; Occupational Safety and health; Danger threat; Learning activity.



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1. Introduction

The basic reason why schools exist is because of the students and their education (Dwyer and Osher, 2004a). Schools are workplace for children, young people, teachers and other staff since they spend most of their daily time in schools. For instance, children spend the greater part of their days for at least ten months of each year in school (Nurul and Tengku, 2009). In addition, previous studies in Turkey reported that the amount of time students spend daily in their schools is about 180 days and 6 hours of a year (Tabanalia and Bektas, 2009).

Safety in school has been a topic of discussion, and has gain a great attention internationally as well as in Malaysia. Today, safety has become a central issue which has been growing in the social context that has increased concern among various parties to take steps towards prevention of the existence of danger situations in workplace (Anna Diaz Vicario, 2012). Certain safety conditions are being explored and identified because the scopes affected could be related to the quality of life and welfare or well-being of individuals. One of the scopes for ensuring safety in school derived from the educational activities (Tabanalia and Bektas, 2009).

"Safety in school means students and staff should themselves feel free physically, psychologically and emotionally" (Tabanalia and Bektas, 2009). Therefore, safety in school could provide a social and physical environment that effect appropriate behaviour among the students. The physical environment includes the ways in which the buildings and school's routines are managed to prevent problems from occurring (Dwyer and Osher, 2004b). Since students and other staffs spend most of their time in schools, hence it is deemed appropriate that teachers are responsible and accountable to ensure and monitor the safety of the students.

Mindfully, the school areas are not only meant for teachers, management and staffs for even parents also are those who should be protected when they are in the school area. Nevertheless, compared to older people, young people are more vulnerable to accidents when entering any of the workplace (Balany *et al.*, 2014). "In certain countries, 25 percent of childhood injuries occur within the school environment" (Nurul and Tengku, 2009). According to Japan Sport Council, a largest set of school injury data in Japan, approximately one million injuries occur in elementary, junior high and high schools each year and this remains relatively stable year by year. School accidents causing injuries have not been as widely examined as those occurring at home or in road traffic accidents (Flannery and Huff, 1990). This is due to the general belief that children are relatively safeguarded in school because of the safe environment and supervision" (Ahmad Rasdan Ismail, 2017).

Noteworthy, schools are also included in the list of industry, based on Part 1 subsection 1 (2) Occupational Safety and Health Act 1994 (known as "OSHA 1994"). Section 15, OSHA 1994 stated general duties of employers

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(e.g. school management) which is to ensure, so far as is practicable, the safety, health and welfare at work of all his employees (teachers and other staffs). In addition, Section 17, OSHA 1994 – to ensure, so far as practicable, that he and other persons, not being his employees, who may be affected thereby are not thereby exposed to risks to their safety or health (students and other people attend to school).

The Malaysia Department of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH) reported that in the past five years, there were 31 cases of accident in schools resulting in students' death caused by the fallen goal posts and ceiling fans. Hence, it can be seen that the probability of the risks and hazard occurring in schools is high, which consequently may negatively affect the health and behaviours of the students.

In order to prevent dangerous situations in schools, safety conditions of the schools must be considered and examined from all aspects, which is not only confined to the physical aspects but also the social aspects (Vicario, 2012). It is not solely the school management responsibility to ensure that schools are safe. Teachers too are responsible and they need to have awareness of safety in schools. Schools with teachers that practice school safety procedures could ensure the school safety are smoothly observed. The Malaysian Occupational Safety and Health Act 1994 (OSHA 1994) provides a legislative framework to promote, stimulate and encourage high standards of safety and health at workplace. It aims to promote safety and health awareness and create effective programmes to suit the industries needs and implementation of the law through self-regulation schemes is designed to suit particular organization. The long-term goal of the act is to create a healthy and safe working culture among all Malaysian employees and employers (Nurul and Tengku, 2009).

Communication is encouraged among the people in the school and it should flow in all direction to enable everyone to report the presence of risky environments or situations, for example, scaled walls of school fences, broken toilets, exposed sharp objects, poisoning, bites, stings, and unbarred windows, open ditches which might be of harm to students. Proper arrangements should be in place to either receive or be alerted about the risky conditions that could affect the school to legal, technical or health and safety management (Blum and Nelson, 2004). Effective internal communication is vital if safety procedures or policies are to be understood and consistently implemented. Formal consultative meetings can be further supplemented by team briefings or general management meetings with health and safety as a fixed meeting agenda. Concurrently, written health and safety policies are required to demonstrate that top management is concerned about the safety of the students. Therefore, a collaboratively managed process becomes an appropriate intervention means to control risks in schools (Sekiwu and Kabanda, 2014). There are many factors that put students at risk to injuries including insufficiently maintained equipment, lack of staff awareness of injury prevention, lack of conditioning especially in sports-related injuries and lack of knowledge regarding appropriate safety procedures (Nurul and Tengku, 2009).

An example of daily accidents statistics recorded on daily based on reports in local newspapers is shown in Table 1. It can be seen that, from January 2016 to May 2017, a total of 54 accidents that happened in schools was reported (Sekiwu and Kabanda, 2014).

Table-1. Example of accidents occurring in school (2016)

No	Hazards	No. of cases
1	Tuberculosis epidemic	1
2	Hit by goalpost	1
3	Sexual harassment	1
4	Fall from high place	3
5	Snake bite	3
6	Structural failure	3
7	Fire	7
8	Food poisoning	9
9	Accidents due to negligence	11
10	Mercury spill	15
	Total	54

2. Methodology

The current study, which is a part of a bigger study that examine matters related to safety in school, was carried out in 13 purposively selected secondary schools in the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia. The purpose of the current study is to discover the teachers' understanding and descriptions of the 'safety in school' concept and to see to what extent their understanding of this concept conform to the concepts indicated within the Ministry's Occupational Safety and Health Act 1994. In this qualitative study, interviews were carried out with 20 experienced secondary school teachers. The obtained data were fully transcribed and then thematically analysed.

3. Results and Discussion

Below are the responses given by selected secondary schools teachers, who were asked the question "What does safety in school means to you? during the face-to-face interview sessions.

3.1. Important Aspect

According to Research Respondent-1 (RES1) and RES 14, safety is an important aspect that schools must give appropriate attention:

Safety is very important in schools...especially for the school children (RES1, 2017).

RES 14 supported that school safety cannot be ignored, however it has not been given serious attention compared to safety at other institutions:

This safety in school is indeed important and it deserves significant attention. However, based on today's phenomena, this aspect is usually ignored by many parties. In fact, it is taken for granted... compared to the attentions given to safety in factories, hospitals and other areas (RES 14, 2017).

RES2 voiced out a similar view with RES1 and mentioned that everyone in the school, including the teachers, students and other school staff, should not be taking the school safety issue lightly. RES2 articulated:

What I understand is...safety in school has become a responsibility for everyone in school...to focus and take safety matters seriously. I said these...because it involves many people...including students, teachers, our school staff, and even the community around or nearby the school (RES2, 2017).

3.2. Awareness and Free from Danger

RES1 added that the awareness of safety in school among the school's community can safeguard their safety when they are presence within the school compound. All parties should be responsible and accountable in ensuring the children's safety when they arrive in schools or when they are within the school area as well as when they are leaving the school. RES1 was of the opinion that:

Everyone in the school must be aware of the school safety. They must practice this feeling of awareness by being sensitive and professionally responsible to guarantee that the learning situations can happen well. The students' safety...when they are coming to school...when they are in school and going home from school...is our collective responsibility...involving the school, the parents...and the students' environment (RES1, 2017).

RES2 further added that students need to always behave well when in they are in school, especially in workshop rooms and science laboratories, to avoid unwanted incidents from happening. RES2 explained:

As an example, when students enter the Science labs...or the Living Skills workshop rooms...students must behave and listen to the teacher...they must not simply touch dangerous objects in the rooms. So that unwanted things can be avoided from happening (RES2, 2017).

RES 12 understood the safety in school concept as something that is free from any sort of danger:

My understanding about safety in school is that students or teachers will feel safe from any sort of disaster or danger when they are in school (RES12, 2017).

Individual safety, especially among students, is what RES 6 relate to when asked the meaning of safety in school:

Safety in school means an individual...for example student...feel safe and fine when he or she is in the school compound. It is safe from various aspects of life, self-pride and dignity, and others...from peers, from teachers, from other school staff and even from other workers in the school (RES 6, 2017).

RES 9 viewed the concept of safety in school as related to the safety of all students and staff or workers in the school.

Safety in school encompasses all students' safety when they are in school for learning sessions, and also the safety of all its staff. For instance, students' safety when they are in the classrooms, the in-and-out records of school visitors to avoid kidnapping, safety audit that include electric wiring safety and buildings (RES 9, 2017).

RES 18 was of the opinion that safety in school refers to situations where schools are free from risks and as a result schools are able to function as a suitable place for teachings. RES 18 commented:

School as a place from various risky happenings, which are not wanted, and should not be happening...and it must be a conducive place for teaching and learning (RES 18, 2017).

3.3. Physical and Social Aspect

The third respondent, RES 3, understood safety in school from the physical aspect and students' comfort, RES 3 explained:

For me safety in school means being protected from physical problems that cause students to feel uncomfortable when they are in school. Safety in school also involves the safety of the buildings and electricity (RES3, 2017).

RES 10 considered safety in school as situations whereby the school is free from physical or mental threats:

Safety in school is about...where there exists peaceful situations in schools as a result of there are no physical or mental threats (RES 10, 2017).

RES 7 and RES 8 had raised similar understandings regarding safety in school concept. Safety in school could provide comfort for all students and to everybody else within the school compound (RES 7, 2017). Safety in school will result in conducive and comfortable environment in the school. Also safety in school will allow all conveniences present in the school compound to be collectively used by all in the school (RES 8, 2017).

It has an environment that give feelings of comfort and trust to every individuals who is in the school...the safety from the aspects of the buildings conditions, infrastructure availability or interactions among the individuals there (RES 7, 2017).

Safety in school refers to the environment, tools and physical facilities that are conducive to be used by the students, the teachers and other school staff (RES 8, 2017).

A different view was expounded by the fourth (RES 4) and fifth (RES 5) respondent. RES 4 stated that:

Safety in school includes various aspects...they are the school infrastructure safety itself...and also aspects of the school cleanliness and cheerfulness. We usually think of safety in school as related to school environment being not conducive and safe for us to be in, especially not conducive for the students. However other aspects are also important. We cannot ignore the school cleanliness and cheerfulness...because these things affect students' emotions. As an example, students will fill cheerful and happy when they are in school environments that are clean and full of many attractive things (RES4, 2017).

The safety in school concept encompasses the school environment aspects, a view that is rather different from the viewpoints of RES 1, RES 2 and RES 3. Besides environment, RES5 understood safety in school as referring to the maintenance of resources and materials to avoid unwanted accidents from happenings:

What I understand regarding the concept safety in school is that it includes aspects such as materials and resources in classrooms, around or near the school canteen, in the teachers' common rooms, science labs, school's playing fields, and many more. School resources and materials must always be in a safe situation and comfortable to use (RES5, 2017).

Safety in school allows students to efficiently and effectively carry out their everyday activities and there is less risk of experiencing accidents (RES 13, 2017). RES 13 further added:

Safety in school is a situation whereby the environment allows the students to perform their everyday learning activities and their other curricular and co-curricular activities that are organized by the schools...they do all these activities with feeling safe, harmony, less risks...without disturbances and accidents (RES 13, 2017).

The safety in school concept focuses more on prevention from accidents happening within the school compound (RES 16, 2017). RES 16 responded by saying that:

In my opinion, in the aspect of safety in school focuses more on the prevention aspects...prevent cases of any sort of accident or injuries from happening in places within the school, for example classrooms, sports store, canteen, computer room, hostels, shower rooms, toilets and school playing fields (RES 16, 2017).

RES 16 further commented on the need to increase safety procedures in schools to avoid injuries from happenings. RES 16 commented:

To avoid unwanted accidents and injuries happening in schools, appropriate steps and procedures must be well planned, prioritized and implemented in details for the benefit of everyone in the school (RES 16, 2017).

Understanding and awareness of safety in school concept can assure individuals' safety who are within the school area (RES 17, 2017). To RES 17:

Safety in school means to what extent the safety of everybody or everything that belongs to the school is guaranteed. in other words, the individual is within a physical or spiritual zone (RES 17, 2017).

On a similar note, RES 15 also viewed safety in school as referring to a school environment that is peaceful and sheltered from all dangers. To RES 15;

Safety in school is a form of environment that is peaceful, prosperous, conducive and sheltered from all forms of danger, damages, injuries and disasters (RES 15, 2017).

3.4. Psychosocial Aspects

RES 19 and RES 20's understandings of safety in school concept seemingly are related to psychosocial aspects. According to RES 19, a school is safe when it is free from dangerous situations:

Situations in the school area where students are seeking knowledge...they are safe from disasters such as floods, they are safe from all dangers, they can study peacefully and they are guarded from negative elements...for example bully (RES 19, 2017).

School is a place where it is free from safety threats...to all the school's citizens. For examples, free from psychological problems such as student discipline, bully cases, free from physical materials threats like buildings, teaching resources (RES 20, 2017).

RES 20 described safety in school as a situation when the school is free from dangerous threats that can be in the physical as well as mental and spiritual forms.

RES 11 mentioned about parents feeling safe to send their children to the schools, when asked what 'safety in school' means. RES 11 perceived:

School safety symbolizes safe learning environment place which is the main factor if the parents want to send their children to that school (RES 11, 2017).

RES 11 also mentioned that safety in school will cultivate healthy interactions among the students:

Schools that can guarantee physical, mental and interactions safety will definitely be the choice of every individual (RES 11, 2017).

In addition, the rules and procedures established in the schools allow every individual in the school to feel safe:

To teachers, they feel safe when there exists procedures and regulations that everyone must abide to. For the students, they feel safe because they know that they are teachers and school's authorities or older persons that looks after them and their safety when they are in the school (RES 12, 2017).

To RES 13, safety in school denotes a situation in school that is safe from threats that comes from the curricular as well as co-curricular activities. RES 13 expressed:

Safety in school is a where the environmental situation allows an individual to execute everyday learning activities, and as well as other curricular and non-curricular activities, safely, harmoniously, less risky and without any form of harassment, disturbances and accidents (RES 13, 2017).

The interviews' excerpts presented above apparently suggest that the understanding of safety in school among teachers is still low compared to other sector thus needs an improvement. Seemingly none of the research participants had referred to OSHA in their responses during the interview sessions. Safety for them include free from dangerous threats that can be in the physical as well as mental and spiritual forms. Safety conditions in schools can help avoid accidents from happenings.

Information or data on the level of hazards in schools can be used by the school, district education office, state education office, or even the Ministry of Education to ensure Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) becomes a culture in schools so that schools are ever ready to ensure their schools area always in a safety state with conducive environments to support the processes of teaching and learning. Additionally, information on the conditions of safety in schools could support the 'service learning' by involving volunteers from public universities students to help with the issues of school safety.

The school community needs to conduct safety related programmes to avoid unexpected situations from occurring at their workplace. Hence, awareness of safety in school is crucial so that knowledge sharing on safety in school matters continuously happen within the school community. The involvement of every member in the school community will help resolve safety in school matters as well as support any crisis intervention strategies. Effective strategies include (i) the formation and development of meaningful relationships or networks between the schools and their community within the school and the neighbouring communities; (ii) the development and inculcation of positive interactions and relationships between teachers, students and other staff in the schools; (iii) formal and informal discussions on the current state of school among the school community; (iv) sustaining efforts to inculcate and positive attitudes among the students.

3. Conclusion

Safety in school comprises of safety in classrooms, workshops and laboratories, school playing fields, school canteens, etc. Good safety management can avoid the happenings of accidents in the school compound – it can prevent fires, avoid crimes and control students' misbehaviour, and reduce the probable school liabilities towards summons and paying compensations. Teachers' awareness and knowledge on the concept of safety in school, as indicated within the qualitative data collected in this study, seemingly is limited, with majority of the teachers in the study clarifying understandings and perceptions on the concept of 'safety in school' without reference to OSHA 1994 despite teachers being deemed among those who are responsible, and accountable, in educating their students on matters pertaining to safety in school. Moreover, the teachers, as it should be, are role models to their students, including matters pertaining to safety in schools.

Noteworthy, there are many potential dangers and hazards that exist in the school compound, which could be the cause of accidents to the school's citizens. Various efforts and plans can be designed and implemented in schools to avoid, control or lessen unwanted happenings in schools. Teachers need to have the knowledge and the understanding of the potential threats and dangers that exist in schools – even into the details of them – since safety matters in schools are not only confined to physical aspects, but it also involve psychosocial aspects. Continuous in-house training for teachers, and other school staff, needs to be considered by the schools' management or administrators.

Knowledge about OSH is believed important for teachers, for instance for the science teachers all science subjects to progressively increase their understanding of best practices to ensure the safety of their students and themselves in the scientific learning experience. It is hoped that this knowledge and awareness will help teachers to nurture a culture of safety early in students' academic and professional careers. It is also hoped that they will prepare teachers to handle any incident or emergency situation that might arise in the school, for example in science classroom or laboratory.

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