

Research Article

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Primary school children's experiences of school-based violence and perceptions of child-led child protection committees in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: Globally, children experience multiple forms of violence, including school violence, which includes bullying and corporal punishment. However, schools also hold potential to tackle violence, including through child-led child protection committees (CPCs). This study explored children's perspectives on school violence, safety and their attitudes towards CPCs in Zimbabwe. We conducted 2 FGDs with 6 boys and 6 girls who were CPC members and 4 participatory 'round robin' workshops with 27 boys and 20 girls. Children cited various forms of school violence, holding mixed views on the acceptability of corporal punishment. For children, bullying appears to be the overarching concern. CPCs give some students a sense of authority, but the role and scope of CPC members is not well understood among children. Our study finds that despite legislative changes, acceptability of corporal punishment is still present among children in Zimbabwean primary schools. Bullying remains a key concern of children. We contribute new insights on the potential of CPCs to address forms of school violence such as bullying, however suggest there is a need to clarify the role of CPCs in intervening in violence.

Keywords: Child protection, Interventions, Qualitative, School violence, Violence against children, Zimbabwe

1. INTRODUCTION

Violence against children is a significant global issue. It can take multiple forms, including physical, sexual, and emotional/psychological violence, and may include bullying, maltreatment and neglect, impacting the health, well-being and development of children (WHO, 2022). The most comprehensive estimates suggest that half of all

children aged between 2 and 17 years experienced one or more forms of violence in the past year (Hillis et al., 2016).

Children's experiences of violence may be shaped by their relationship with the perpetrator, the location of the violence and their own age – all of which have gendered implications (Turner et al., 2024). While violence against children may occur in many spaces, such as domestic/family settings, and in public areas such as streets, schools also represent spaces where children may experience violence. UNICEF (2018) reports that half of children aged 13-15 experience peer-to-peer violence in and around school and that many countries do not have suitable protections against corporal punishment. However, schools also hold unique potential for generating an environment where attitudes condoning violence can be changed and non-violent behaviour can be learned (Huitsing et al., 2020; Coker et al., 2017). From children's early years, schools are well-placed to break patterns of violence, provide skills to communicate, negotiate and support peaceful solutions to conflicts, and offer children the possibility of learning and internalising values of solidarity, tolerance and respect, with potential spillover to the wider community (WHO, 2019). However, evidence on interventions that address school violence is limited in low-income settings like Zimbabwe (Devries et al., 2022).

Child participation in school violence interventions

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC) (1989), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990), the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2005) and various statutes (including the Children's Act [Chapter 5:06] of 1989 and the Education Amendment Act [Chapter 25:04] of 2019) promote the concepts of children's rights and of children as active citizens who can make decisions not only about their best interests but also participate and contribute to interventions for their own protection in all spheres of their lives, particularly in schools where they spend most of their childhood. Article 12 of the CRC (1989) states that every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This principle recognises children and young people as actors in their own lives and applies at all times throughout a child's life. General Comment No. 12 of the CRC lists requirements for the rights of the child to be realised and indicates that child participation must be:

- *transparent ensuring there is clear and complete information available.*
- *free (voluntary) so that it happens out of the child's free will.*
- *respectful such that everyone gives due consideration to what is expressed.*
- *relevant to make sense for the child why he or she is participating.*
- *child friendly to ensure that experience is adapted to the needs and interests of each child.*
- *inclusive for every child to feel they can participate in their own way.*
- *safe such that the child feels protected from any harm.*
- *supported to ensure that every child involved feels they are prepared.*
- *responsive (accountable) so that children know what is done with their views.*

Globally, child participation in school settings is often operationalised through boys' and girls' clubs and committees. A study in Canada, for instance, found that boys and girls clubs in schools in low-income neighbourhoods had positive impacts on academic achievement and improving health (Enns et al., 2022). In Malawi, a girls-only club, Go Girl Club, supported participants learning on sexual health, gender norms, and child abuse, as well as fostering social networking and influencing positive health behaviours (Manda et al., 2021). The Good Schools Toolkit, a school-based violence prevention intervention, included a 'student court' led by children to hold other students to account against the school rules that had been developed by the student body (Kyegombe, 2017).

In Zimbabwe, one of the main ways that 'child participation' is operationalised in child protection practice is through child-led groups within schools. In 1999, the Government of Zimbabwe launched the National Orphan

Care Policy, which recognises the role of the community, traditional leadership, non-governmental organisations and government institutions in the care and protection of children. Initially, this resulted in Child Welfare Forums being formed, with responsibilities for monitoring, coordination, advocacy, networking, research and training. From 2004, under the National Action Plan, Child Welfare Forums evolved to become Child Protection Committees (CPCs), and in 2011, have continued to become the key local bodies for developing, implementing and improving child protection strategy across and between agencies, bodies and the local community. A CPC is expected to perform a number of crucial functions in order to jointly identify and manage risk to children and young people, monitor and improve performance and promote the ethos that “*It is everyone’s job to make sure every child’s rights are fulfilled and they are protected*” (Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops’ Conference, 2022). CPCs must ensure all of these functions are carried out to a high standard and are aligned to the national laws on policies on child protection and child welfare.

This paper explores children’s experiences of school violence and their attitudes towards child-led child protection committees, which were established as part of a school-based pilot intervention strategy to address school violence in Zimbabwe Catholic schools. It offers suggestions for consideration for the enhancement of the efficacy of child-led child protection committees in schools as an intervention for safeguarding children against violence in schools.

School-based violence in Zimbabwe

National data from 2017 shows that over a quarter of children in Zimbabwe experienced some form of physical, sexual or emotional violence before the age of 18 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2017). Although there is limited empirical data showing the prevalence of school violence in Zimbabwe, print and electronic media and judicial court reports document incidents of school violence, including bullying and school-related kidnapping (Moyondizyo, 2022; Razemba & Freddy, 2024; Harris, 2023). The government has also instituted several measures such as the Education Amendment Act Number 15 of 2020 that prohibits all forms of child abuse in school settings and the Children’s Act in 2023 that introduces new reporting requirements on suspected cases of violence for professionals working with children. In Zimbabwe, children may experience multiple forms of violence, including bullying (including cyber-bullying), corporal punishment, and sexual gender-based violence. Each of these forms of violence are discussed in the paragraphs below.

Bullying is a serious problem in schools in Zimbabwe. Violent behaviour among primary and secondary school students appears to be a serious problem in both urban and rural schools. As Gudyanga, & Matamba, (2015), observe, learners seem to be the main perpetrators as well as victims of violence. Basch (2011) suggests that the forms of violence amongst school-age children in Zimbabwe seem to mirror students’ stages of development. He notes that the most prevalent types of violence in lower grade students included bullying (physical and emotional assault namely; beating, spitting, kicking and name calling).

Corporal punishment is a significant form of school violence in Zimbabwe. Corporal punishment in schools is outlawed under section 68A of the Education Amendment Act, which describes the prohibition of any physical or psychological torture, or cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment. The Act specifically bars teachers from beating children. However, corporal punishment in schools in Zimbabwe has continued to prevail, with ongoing debates about the clash between child rights and the biblical adage – “*spare the rod and spoil the child*”. VACs survey data in Zimbabwe indicates that 4% female students and 5% of male students experienced physical violence from a male teacher, while 4% female students and 2% male students experienced physical violence from a female teacher (Together for Girls, 2021). Another study documents teachers as primary perpetrators of physical violence among those aged 13-24 (Chigiji et al., 2018). . In another study, Kudenga (2017) concluded that most parents felt that corporal punishment should be used in schools because it improves discipline. Our recent analysis also indicates that parents and teachers have mixed views on the ban (Eldred et al., 2024).

School violence has gendered dimensions. VACs data in Zimbabwe indicates that 8 percent of female students and 11 percent of male students experience sexual or physical violence from teachers and/or classmates in schools (Together for Girls, 2021). Adults may sometimes blame children for gendered school violence (Turner et al., 2022). Previous research indicates that male sexual advances in school seemed to be institutionalised and regarded as 'normal', resulting in girls responding with hopeless resignation and passivity. Schools did not discipline perpetrators, whether pupils or teachers, denying that abuse existed and instead fostered an authoritarian culture where the behaviour of teachers could not be questioned (Leach et al., 2003). The gender dimensions of school violence in Zimbabwe have been long-established. As Chikwiri and Lemmer (2014) highlighted, "the powerful role of school culture in socialising patriarchal gender roles using violence as a tool ... through norms of teacher-child interaction, explicit and implicit rules and codes of behaviour enacted and reinforced in the everyday life of the classroom and playground" (p. 106). They concurred with Leach et al (2003) that there is a harsh 'gender regime' that is constructed daily through unquestioned routine practices in many Zimbabwean schools. Chireshe and Chireshe (2009) revealed in their research on sexual harassment of female students in three High Schools in Masvingo, that 77 percent of the student respondents indicated that sexual harassment against girls was rampant, yet only a minority of teachers (33 percent) indicated the same. It also emerged that often, sexually harassed female students did not report the abuse, mainly due to social norms and related factors.

Survey data indicates that boys may be more likely to know where to seek formal help when experiencing physical or sexual violence, but girls are more likely to actually seek help (Devries et al., 2023).

The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference: establishing child-led committees in schools as part of the Safe Schools intervention

In 2012, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishop's Conference (ZCBC) started to develop child safeguarding structures within Catholic schools, which involved formative research and learning from other programmes. ZCBC initiated a national safeguarding sensitisation campaign in 2015 for staff working in the Church and following feedback, revised their Child Safeguarding Policy. In 2017, the updated policy was piloted in schools, and sought to prevent all forms of violence against children, outlining codes for safe institutions and procedures and tools for responding to abuse. Between 2018 and 2019, the ZCBC education desk further developed a school-based intervention to effectively implement the policy to prevent violence in its schools. This intervention was designed to reduce bullying and other forms of student-perpetrated violence as well as teacher violence against students through a whole-school approach to reducing violence and improving the school environment.

The intervention was piloted between June 2021 and May 2022 in 10 primary schools across 3 dioceses (Harare, Gokwe and Mutare) to test the intervention mechanisms and content. Activities included: training of trainers to implement the intervention; training at school level for management and teachers; lessons for students through the 'learner's manual'; community level awareness activities; alternative discipline training for selected teachers; and the establishment of safeguarding committees. A mixed-methods research project was conducted alongside the pilot intervention, in order to feed into intervention refinements.

The ZCBC Child Safeguarding Policy (2022) makes provision for the establishment of both Adult- and Child-led CPCs. Child-led CPCs were aimed at providing students with a platform to discuss their rights and responsibilities, different forms of abuse, and how to act if one encounters abuses. The policy states that the child-led CPC constitutes 4 children, 1 teacher, and 2 parents from the School Development Committee (SDC). The CPC meets monthly.

- sensitise other children, including raising awareness on children's rights, forms of abuse, prevention and response.
- report suspected cases of abuse immediately to the School Child Safeguarding Officer (SCSO); children get access to other children more than adults.
- train their peers on child safeguarding issues.
- Identify children in need of support and provide their names to SCSO and make suggestions on how these needs can be addressed.
- empower children with leadership skills, through training to be confident, speak in front of groups, listen and understand others so that they can take the children's views to the Adult-led CSC and SCSO.
- bridge the gap between the adults and the young people on the topic of child safeguarding, by making children's voices heard.
- develop the school's Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) register as they have direct contact with children (their peers); they come from the same community and know their backgrounds.

Source: ZCBZ Child Safeguarding Policy

Figure 1: Purpose of the Child-Led CPC

The adults in the child-led committees are members in an advisory role. They also have a critical role of training the learners. The Child Safeguarding Policy (2022) provides that school management should support these committees, ensuring they create time for the committee to meet and implement activities. During the pilot of the intervention, records were not kept about how many cases were brought to the CPC or how these were handled.

2. METHODS

This research was conducted as part of an ongoing study into the feasibility, acceptability and effectiveness of the Safe Schools Programme designed and implemented by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC). The study is a collaboration between ZCBC, Academic Research Centre (ARC, with the University of Zimbabwe as the Local Institution of Affiliation), London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), Q Partnership (Q), Childline Zimbabwe (CLZ) and Porticus. This paper draws on qualitative research which was conducted alongside the pilot of the Safe Schools intervention in primary schools across Harare, Gokwe and Mutare dioceses in Zimbabwe. The broader aims of this research were to examine how the pilot intervention was received by school staff, pupils and stakeholders, and to identify barriers and facilitators for wider implementation and intervention effectiveness. This paper seeks to outline children's perceptions of school violence and safety in two schools in Zimbabwe, and to explore their views on child-led CPCs.

Study setting

The study was conducted in May 2022 in two Catholic primary schools within the Harare Archdiocese: School 1 in an urban setting and School 2 in a rural setting. Both schools had received the ZCBC pilot intervention over a 12-month period, although some aspects of the intervention had not yet been completed due to delays related to COVID-19 restrictions. School 1 is located in a high-density, low-income suburban area. The community is supported by mining, and commercial and subsistence farming. School 2 is set on a Catholic mission, with boarding facilities. The community surrounding the school depends on subsistence and commercial farming. There was a total pupil enrolment of 766 in school 1 and 791 in school 2.

Methods and participants

We used qualitative data to explore perceptions of children. This paper draws on data collected from children aged 8-12 after the pilot interventions in two schools, specifically: 2 mixed-sex FGDs with children involved in child-led protection committees (one FGD per school, with a total of 6 boys and 6 girls), and 4 participatory 'round robin' workshops with children (2 single-sex workshops per school, with a total of 27 boys and 20 girls). Participants were identified using purposive sampling based on their engagement in various intervention activities, including their role in CPCs, ensuring representation by age and gender.

FGDs covered topics such as children's views on the intervention manuals, including what they had learned and aspects they liked and disliked; advice for teachers who would be teaching the learner curriculum; and experiences with participating in the child-led committee and views on its usefulness. The round robin method was designed and piloted by the lead author elsewhere in Zimbabwe (Fry et al., 2022). It involves an interactive process designed to facilitate participation from all children in the group, as children move around the room and engage in separate activities that build on each other. Girls and boys were not asked the same questions in round robin workshops, which makes comparison by gender challenging. Round robin workshops covered topics such as problems that children face in school; how children deal with their problems in school; and what children think would be good ways to prevent children encountering these problems. Workshops were conducted in a mixture of Shona and English, as per children's wishes.

Data analysis

The FGDs and workshop data were collected based on open-ended topic guides. Sessions were audio-recorded, then translated into English during transcription. Written transcripts were coded inductively using Nvivo software after being read carefully. Thematic analysis was conducted, to help explore richness of the qualitative data and analyse similarities and differences across groups. Transcripts were read "horizontally" by the first author, which involved grouping segments of text by theme and analysing based on gender and location. Initial themes were written up in 2023. The second author reviewed transcripts and added further analysis in 2024.

Ethical considerations

School management were approached by the research team, with the support of ZCBC, and offered written informed consent for their school to participate in the research. Consent processes for children involved caregivers offering informed written consent, and children subsequently offering informed assent to participation. Ethical approval was obtained from the Medical Research Council of Zimbabwe (ref: MRCZ/A/2552, amendment approved in February 2022) and LSHTM (ref: 26304, December 2021). Researchers received training on child-friendly and violence-specific research methods, focusing on conducting sensitive research with children, handling disclosures of abuse, and implementing a child protection referral mechanism. The referral mechanism was designed and implemented in collaboration with Childline Zimbabwe, and involved response actions for disclosures of abuse. Four disclosures were made that warranted referral, and follow-up services were provided by Childline Zimbabwe.

3. FINDINGS

The findings below outline children's perceptions of school violence, perceptions of safety at school, and explore perceptions of the CPCs among child members themselves as well as children more generally.

Children's perceptions of school violence

Students in both schools showed an acute awareness of different forms of school violence including corporal punishment, bullying (physical and emotional) and sexual violence still occurring, despite the intervention being in place.

Some students understood that corporal punishment was a form of violence that was not allowed: *"It shouldn't be done because it's not allowed by the law"* (school 1, boys, round robin); *"beating is a form of abuse"* (school 2, boys, round robin). However, others felt punishment was acceptable but should not involve physical violence: *"You should not be beaten but you can just get a punishment"* (school 2, boys, round robin). In both girls and boys round robin workshops, children indicated beating could be helpful: *"I think it helps because if you do wrong and you are beaten next time you will do the right thing"* (school 2, boys, round robin); *"Children continue to do bad things and misbehaving if they are not beaten"* (school 1, girls, round robin).

Examples of punishments included being made to stand or sit until school dismissal as punishments, being required to sweep or pick up papers in the school grounds, or fetching water: *"They punish you by asking you to water the garden or fetch water"* (school 2, girls, round robin). Children also shared examples of potential punishments teachers might issue: *"They can say at break time I want you dig a deep hole at break time"* (school 2, girls, round robin). Boys provided more examples of bullying than girls, especially bullying involving physical violence. This included throwing stones, fighting and demanding someone's lunch:

"Bullying occurs when boys get into the toilets and start fighting. They start insulting each other and then one of them says let's go and fight in the toilet. This happens to Grade 3, 4 and 5 pupils" (school 1, boys, round robin).

"Bullying usually happens at the school grounds. I was also beaten... I was just playing with my friends and he [another student] came to me and just started beating me" (school 1, boys, round robin).

"There is a boy in our class who can provoke you and if you tell him to stop that he will say that he will send his gang at the gate" (school 1, boys, round robin).

"Secondary school students especially boys bully us primary school pupils when we are going home" (school 2, boys, round robin).

"So sometimes they [secondary school students] will beat you up if you refuse to give them let's say water you will be drinking and this is something that happens frequently" (school 2, boys, round robin).

Boys in one group discussed how older children might respond to incidents of bullying that they witness by getting involved in increasing the bullying:

"If some Grade 7's approach someone who is being bullied they will suddenly shout, 'We have come to increase the salt'".

"If you are being bullied by a Grade 7 pupil then there may be one or two Grade 7's who will come to increase the bullying".

(school 1, boys, round robin)

Boys also mentioned examples of emotional/verbal bullying involving use of *"vulgar words"* and referring to the *"deceased mothers"* of other children (school 1, boys, round robin). Examples of bullying involving physical violence among girls were limited and less detailed than boys' accounts. Girls mentioned examples like stealing and emotional/verbal bullying, including being scolded and being teased/laughed at:

"During breaktime, the grade sixes and sevens could go to the grade twos and they can start taking your food and hit you" (school 2, girls, round robin).

"They may laugh at you" (school 1, girls, round robin).

Girls mentioned that rape was a possibility in places like toilets or on the road, but the boys were more direct in describing abuse of girls in one school:

"Some boys touch other girls and this usually happens under that tree. This usually happens on Mondays and Fridays because usually on Fridays the headmaster is absent from the school and on Mondays the prefects will be busy with other things so students will be doing whatever they want at the school grounds" (school 1, boys, round robin).

Children's perceptions of safety

Children at both schools were asked about places where they felt safe and unsafe. Many children said they felt safe in different open spaces of the school such as the assembly area, playground and classrooms – all spaces that were supervised by teachers whom children regarded as their safety net:

"I feel safe in the classrooms because the teachers are always available. If anything happens you can easily go and report to the teachers" (school 1, boys, round robin).

"Where there are teachers, we are safe and at the same time we will be writing and not making noise" (school 2, girls, round robin).

However, one girl mentioned that classrooms are not safe because of gossip: *"In the classroom because there is a lot of gossip... When someone says something about you may feel hurt"* (school 2, girls, round robin). Another girl in the same school mentioned feeling safer at home than at school: *"I feel safe when I am at home because when my parents are there, I will be getting what I want. I am safe towards end of day"* (school 2, girls, round robin).

Children also discussed feeling unsafe during the journey to/from school, discussing experiences of bullying and fighting on the route home, as well as general lack of safety related to busy roads and vehicles. Girls and boys also mentioned the risk of "kidnapping" outside school grounds:

"The Korokoza (illegal artisanal miners) or the drunkard may kidnap you" (school 1, girls, round robin).

"Children between ages of 14-15 girls can be kidnapped and taken to other countries" (school 2, girls, round robin).

"A case involving mabhinya (thugs) did happen this past Friday. Some children from my neighbourhood were chased by mabhinya but nothing happened to them. They ran away" (school 1, boys, round robin).

Child CPC member perspectives on CPCs

Children who were members of child-led CPCs in each school were asked to share their perspectives on the CPCs. They reflected on the value of learning new things and being able to help other children and share information through their involvement in the CPC:

"I am happy because I can get to learn about things that I don't know..." (school 1, CPC FGD).

"I like being in this committee because I am protecting people who can't protect themselves and me as well" (school 1, CPC FGD).

"I like being in this committee, because helping others makes me feel happy" (school 1, CPC FGD).

"I enjoy telling, sharing information about the committee" (school 2, CPC FGD).

"[I]f you are in the committee, you are able to safeguard children. And for us to safeguard children, we should spread awareness about abuses..." (school 2, CPC FGD).

When asked about what is most useful about the CPC, children reflected on the "power" they held as members to intervene: *"If you hear that a child is being abused somewhere, you can just protest... [Y]ou must do it in with vigour. If it means going there and protesting, you protest or whatever you do, you must do something"* (school 2, CPC FGD). Another reflected: *"We are the eyes and the ears of the teachers"* (school 1, CPC FGD). One child also reflected on the status they have as members of the CPC: *"I just like the way we are treated in the committee, we are treated with some respect, they also ask us for our opinion, what are we saying about this and that..."* (school 2, CPC FGD).

However, there were also indications that more work might be needed to clarify how members see their role, particularly in one school. For example, one child reflected that their role is protecting other children by *"advising them to wear decent clothes so that they do not attract abusers"* (school 1, CPC FGD). In the same school, another reflected their role was about *"Keeping them [children] away from dangerous people"*. The idea of intervening in fights also emerged in this school – despite the role of CPC members being more about reporting fights: *"If some people are fighting and you can't handle the fight you will call others"*. However, another member of the group noted that they

should call a teacher or prefect if fights occur. In this school, CPC members also mentioned the risk of family members of perpetrators getting involved and potentially retaliating against CPC members:

R4: *The brother will bully you and beat you*

R3: *They may call their brothers and they will beat you*

R6: *The brother will call his friends from other schools*

(school 1, CPC FGD)

There was some recognition that the CPC is reducing the level of bullying, in one school in particular: “[M]any learners have changed, they were bullies and always fighting, but now they are not fighting, and they are not bullying others” (school 1, CPC FGD). One child noted the impacts of the CPC but also reflected on its limits because of abuse that happens outside school: “It is good, but we must go and educate the parents, maybe it is a case of neglect, we should not just [reach] school children only, we must talk to the parents” (school 2, CPC FGD).

Children’s perceptions of CPCs (non-members)

Only girls in round robin workshops were directly asked about their perceptions of CPCs. Girls in both schools indicated they would share their problems with the CPCs: “We can share our problems with them because they are a safeguarding committee” (school 1, girls, round robin); “I would tell them because they are the ones that are responsible for child protection” (school 2, girls, round robin). This included problems related to sexual or emotional abuse.

In one school, round robin discussions with girls seemed to focus on the adults in the CPCs. For example, when asked about negative consequences of sharing problems with the CPC, girls mentioned committee members might shout at them or not take their complaints seriously due to disputes with their parents – both examples seeming to refer to adults. Reflections on the positive role of CPCs in this school also revealed lack of understanding about CPCs, with one girl suggesting committee members could “invite you to their homes” and another saying members would “pay school fees for you and also provide for your basic necessities” (school 1, girls, round robin). In contrast, in the other school, girls referred to children in the CPC who would “take our issues to the teachers” (school 2, girls, round robin). In this school, when discussing negative consequences of sharing problems with the CPC, girls were more concerned about the possibility that CPC members may not keep confidences:

R3: *There are some of them whom if you tell them, by the end of the day the whole school will know about it*

R2: *If you tell some of them, they will start laughing at you and will not even take up to the issue*

(school 2, girls, round robin)

Although boys were not asked about CPCs during round robin workshops, boys did mention the need for “outsiders who can go to report on your behalf” that children could speak to about their problems (school 1, boys, round robin), which suggests the suitability of a group like the CPC.

4. DISCUSSION

This paper was designed to explore children’s perspectives on school violence, safety and CPCs in Zimbabwe. It contributes helpful insights into children’s perceptions of school violence and safety, as well as their understandings of the child-led CPCs operating in their schools. We found that children are aware of forms of school violence, but may hold differing views on corporal punishment. Despite the intervention exploring the dangers of corporal punishment and despite policy changes in Zimbabwe designed to prevent corporal punishment, it is evident that some students still feel that being beaten by teachers is necessary to stop bad behaviour, similar to forthcoming research in Zimbabwe (Nhenga et al., forthcoming).

We also found that children seemed more concerned about bullying than corporal punishment. This trend is not unique to this setting, but represents the growing rise of bullying (Mayeza & Bhana, 2021). Rather than being allies, older children increased bullying. More research may be needed to understand how older-age children influence bullying among younger-age groups. While comparison by gender was not always possible due to girls and boys

in round robin workshops being asked different questions, it is evident that experiences of bullying are gendered, with boys tending to experience and observe physical forms of bullying compared to girls who mentioned emotional forms. This is similar to research in other settings (Turner et al., 2024; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020; Bhana, 2008; Parkes, 2007), with the implication that interventions tackling school violence should potentially be tailored for girls and boys to engage with the different modalities bullying can take. Interestingly, that both girls and boys mentioned examples of food being stolen by other children could point to broader issues related to food insecurity in the setting, which others have documented (Mayeza & Bhana, 2021). More work may be needed to understand the link between access to food and school violence, specifically bullying.

The findings indicate that children's perceptions of safety were also mixed, with some areas in the school where children are supervised by teachers tending to be viewed as safer, alongside a few examples where children felt unsafe in the classroom due to gossip. Other studies already document how children's perceptions of violence is tied to specific physical spaces and may be gendered (Turner et al., 2024; Mayeza & Bhana, 2021). As found in our study, whether a space is visible and surveilled also plays a role in perceptions about safety (Sikhakhane et al., 2018). Fear of the outside-the-school space and fear of kidnapping by strangers were key concerns for children, and reflect events occurring around the time of data collection (Moyondizvo, 2022), however more work might be needed to understand the level of this risk.

Our study findings highlight the importance of community and child-led responses to violence, demonstrating the need for bottom-up approaches (Mateos-Blanco et al., 2022; Wessells, 2015). The function of the CPCs was one aspect explored in this study, however more work might be needed to fully understand the role of CPCs. While data from CPC members is helpful in understanding the perceptions members had of the CPCs and their role, lack of record-keeping during the running of the pilot has meant that we are unable to reflect more deeply about how cases were handled. CPC members were not directly asked about cases. Future intervention roll-out with CPCs should build in strong monitoring and evaluation practices to ensure this data is collected in future.

CPC member perspectives on CPCs indicate child members are experiencing positive benefits from participating, including obtaining new knowledge, feeling like they can help other students, and increased respect and status. That CPC members felt they had power to take action is positive, however, there is a need to understand how this influence is used, to ensure CPC members are exercising their power appropriately. The CPC member comments about warning children about dangerous people, and advising children to dress differently to prevent violence may be influenced by cultural/religious values, and suggests that more work may be needed for CPC members to understand their role, to ensure CPC members grasp key concepts from training, and that members are also trained to ensure they don't engage in victim-blaming. This latter point aligns with other research in Zimbabwe that found the expectation that some adults may position children as responsible for protecting themselves from violence (Turner et al., 2022).

CPC members' reflections on their role in intervening suggests clarity is needed on whether children who are CPC members should be applying 'bystander' approaches and actively intervening in fights among other children, or if their role is limited to being a go-between. If children in the CPCs are expected to intervene when situations arise at school, more training and support may be needed to ensure their safety (especially if family members become involved in peer conflicts) and safety of children experiencing school violence (WHO, 2019). More broadly, better communication is needed about the role of CPCs, to emphasise that children are part of this group and make clear how CPC members respond to reports of school violence. The limits of CPCs also need to be communicated so that children understand what the group is not able to help with, i.e. financial support. The limits and scope of children's agency within the CPC needs to be clearly defined, recognising child agency is vital (Mateos-Blanco et al., 2022).

It is commendable for the ZCBC's establishment of CPCs that are 'child-led' as this is in keeping with the child rights principle of involving children in matters that affect them. However, the 'child-led' nature of the CPCs needs to be understood more. This research did not explore power hierarchies between child and adult members in the

CPC nor the extent to which the CPC is 'led' by children in practice, which we suggest is an area that requires more consideration and future research, particularly to understand how to strengthen the autonomy and leadership of child members. Whether children's participation was actually meaningful is important (Wessells, 2015).

This study has some limitations. Firstly, there were some challenges during data collection including that not all questions were asked across round robin workshops, sometimes children were asked more generally about their 'problems' rather than violence specifically – limiting the data that we could use. Errors in the transcripts and challenges in translating from Shona also affected the quality of data. Secondly, since the research was conducted at one specific timepoint, we are unable to capture lessons over time as the CPCs developed and evolved. Thirdly, since the examples about how children would respond in situations of violence were hypothetical, there remains a gap in understanding the extent to which children would actually use the CPCs in situations of violence. Lastly, the small sample size for the round robins means that the views captured may not fully represent the complexity of issues of violence facing children in these schools.

5. CONCLUSION

School violence is a key issue in Zimbabwe, with primary school children being affected by various forms of school violence, especially corporal punishment and bullying. Our study finds that children hold mixed views on whether corporal punishment is acceptable, despite interventions and policy changes designed to prevent corporal punishment. Children's personal experiences of bullying suggests more work needs to be done to understand how older children bully younger children and the role of food insecurity in bullying practices. However, this paper suggests schools also represent key sites for interventions on violence against children. We contribute qualitative reflections on children's perceptions of CPCs as an intervention in two primary schools in Harare. We find that children in CPCs experience benefits due to being CPC members, but there is a need to clarify the extent to which CPCs intervene directly in violence. As Zimbabwe Catholic Bishop's Conference continues to implement school-based interventions, more work may be needed to unpack and clarify the role of CPCs.

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