



Development of an intervention to prevent violence in Catholic primary schools in Zimbabwe: Innovation from within the Church

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Abstract

Schools have enormous potential to prevent and respond to violence against children. In this paper, we describe a new intervention to protect children from violence in Zimbabwe's Catholic primary schools, initiated and developed by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC). ZCBC and academic institutions in Zimbabwe and the UK are partnering to conduct formative research to understand the school context, barriers, and facilitators to intervention implementation. Semi-structured qualitative interviews with teachers and other stakeholders [n=18] suggest that this intervention will be well received. Perceived facilitators include utilising existing structures within the Church, the intervention being viewed as in alignment with Catholic values, and the use of familiar structures within Catholic schools to deliver intervention activities. Challenges will include perceptions of "child protection" among parents and teachers. ZCBC is refining the intervention model, which will be evaluated for effectiveness in reducing violence against children in a randomised controlled trial.

Key words: prevention of violence against children, Zimbabwe, corporal punishment, Catholic schools



Introduction

Children spend more time in school than any place outside the home.¹ Schools occupy many roles in child development; in addition to education and skills training, part of the core mission of schools in most countries is to support children's socio-emotional development. Schools can actively promote children's pro-social behaviours, mental health, and resilience by promoting safe and respectful relationships, fostering feelings of belonging amongst students, and encouraging engaging and collaborative learning and teaching practices.²⁻⁵ Yet, schools are often sites where children experience violence—from peers, teachers, and other school staff.⁶ No comprehensive prevalence estimates exist about the levels of school violence, but across 96 countries, more than 60% of children report emotional and physical violence from peers, and 11% report sexual joking, teasing, and other harassment.^{6,7} Between 46 and 95% of primary school students report corporal punishment by teachers, including in countries where this is not legal.⁸ Violence, including physical discipline, has well known adverse health and social consequences.^{1,9-11} Reducing childhood violence thus features as targets across sustainable development goals 4 (quality education), 5 (gender equality), and 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions).

Although schools are a primary environment where violence against children can occur, they also have huge untapped potential to function as a safe space that protects children from violence. The Catholic Church is the single largest non-governmental provider of education globally, reaching over 62 million children through education institutions from pre-school through to secondary school. There has been a 112% enrolment increase globally since 1975, mainly in Africa, due to high rates of population growth and gains in educational attainment over time. In Africa, 19.3 million children are enrolled in Catholic primary schools and 5.4 million in Catholic secondary schools.

The Catholic Church in Africa has committed itself to the strengthening of safeguarding systems and child protection as a priority area, making Church-sponsored schools an ideal platform to reach children. Global leadership is also following suit—in the wake of sexual abuse scandals involving religious personnel (for example, in Ireland, France, and the United States), the Vatican is considering ways to strengthen safeguarding and violence prevention.¹²⁻¹⁴ In 2019, Pope Francis explicitly condemned child sexual abuse in his *Motu Proprio VOS ESTIS LUX* by affirming that these crimes offend “Our Lord, cause physical, psychological and spiritual damage to the victims and harm the community of the faithful.”¹⁵ In 2020, a year after the meeting on the protection of minors in the Church, Pope Francis further announced the creation of a Child Protection Task Force with the mandate of assisting Episcopal Conferences, as well as Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life, in preparing and updating guidelines for the protection of minors in accordance with the guidelines issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and current canonical legislation, especially the *Motu Proprio VOS ESTIS LUX MUNDI*.

No interventions to prevent violence within Catholic schools have yet been rigorously tested globally. Current interventions to prevent violence against children in government schools have mainly been tested in high-income countries, and they have focused on one form of violence (such as peer bullying or adolescent dating violence). Very few address violence from teachers, or the norms, power dynamics, and social learning that allow multiple forms of violence to co-occur.¹⁶ Only four school-based, violence prevention interventions which address both teacher and peer violence have been rigorously tested in cluster randomised trials in low- and middle-income countries.¹⁷⁻²⁰ Much more development and testing of interventions to reduce multiple forms of violence in schools in low- and middle-income countries is urgently needed.

In this paper, we describe the development of an intervention to prevent violence in Zimbabwe Catholic primary schools, by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference [ZCBC]. The intervention will be primarily based within schools but will also include a parental component. The results of the formative research focusing on the context of parents are presented elsewhere (forthcoming). The focus of this paper will be on schools and, in particular, on how the Catholic Church and religious systems have the potential to facilitate and constrain the intervention. Our specific objectives are to: 1) describe violence prevention in the context of Zimbabwe, including ZCBC's work to develop and embed child safeguarding in Church structures; 2) to explore stakeholders' views on how a safeguarding intervention could benefit from and be challenged by Catholic school structures in Zimbabwe; and 3) to outline the ZCBC intervention.

Context

Prior research has found that violence against children in Zimbabwe is widespread in communities and school settings.²¹ A national survey conducted in 2017 found that over a quarter of children experience some form of physical, sexual, or emotional violence before turning 18, with physical violence reported as the most common form of violence experienced by children, and 9% of girls and 1% of boys experiencing sexual violence in childhood.²¹ It found that schools were key sites of violence, highlighting that teachers are significant perpetrators of physical abuse of children.²¹ Social norms, such as a belief that corporal punishment is an effective child discipline method, perpetuate violence within schools.^{22,23} Sexual violence is also a concern in and around schools, including sexual violence perpetrated by male peers, older males, and teachers.²⁴⁻²⁷ In addition, studies have found that peer violence is pervasive, with peers found to be the most common perpetrators of physical violence against other teenage boys in Zimbabwe.²¹ There is little evidence, however, on the levels of

violence within Catholic schools compared with government schools.

Zimbabwe has ratified both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), protecting children from violence. In addition, in 2020 the Education Amendment Act [*Chapter 25:04*] was revised to prohibit any form of physical or emotional discipline or any other cruel or degrading treatment of children, clearly stating that teachers are prohibited from beating a child.²⁸ Prior to this revision, corporal punishment was legal in schools if conducted by the head teacher on male pupils. However, this Amendment does not mention bullying, all forms of emotional abuse or sexual violence, or all forms of corporal punishment. Further, the Criminal Law Act of 2004 has not been amended alongside this and currently authorises “moderate” punishment by parents, caregivers, and schoolteachers. Schools are not provided with specific guidance or opportunities for teachers' professional development and are, therefore, left to navigate their own safeguarding policies that fit within the complicated national policy.

In Zimbabwe, primary and secondary schools are either classified as government-run, making up 78% of schools, or non-governmental, making up 22% of schools, with the latter being run by the Church, mining companies, farms, trusts, private individuals, and other organisations. There are 226 Catholic schools in Zimbabwe that are managed by the Education Commission of the ZCBC. The Commission comprises the National Education Coordinator, the Education Secretaries of the eight Dioceses in Zimbabwe, and representatives of religious congregations that run Catholic schools. The ZCBC own and run the majority of these schools at the Diocesan level, and around one-fifth of the schools are run by a religious congregation. Although the school management is Catholic, the majority of staff are not, and in many Catholic schools, the teachers receive their salaries from the government.

Developing a school-based child protection intervention in Zimbabwe

ZCBC's child-safeguarding journey started in 2012 and included six years of formative research, learning collaborations, and pilot-testing. This focus on strengthening child protection structures within the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe long predates the Vatican's recent attention to issues of child abuse. Here, we describe the process that led to the development of a school-based, child-protection intervention.

Taking stock and learning from others about the importance of child-safeguarding (2014–2016)

In 2012, the Jesuit congregation in Zimbabwe initiated a childcare and protection project across their 18 schools—“Value Based Approach to Education and Safeguarding.” This work was implemented in three phases. The first phase mapped the current state of child protection mechanisms within the 18 Jesuit schools. The second phase involved training and capacity development for key stakeholders within these schools, with a specific focus on school counsellors. The final phase integrated the Jesuit child protection policy into school practice and established reporting mechanisms.

In 2014, ZCBC visited a child-protection intervention, the Watoto Watunzwe Programme in Kenya, which offered insights into developing capacity of actors and institutions in response to cases of violence against children and to promote the role and visibility of the Catholic Church within child protection referral systems. ZCBC sought to localise lessons from the Kenyan experience into the Zimbabwean context by adopting a holistic approach to building child protection capacities within the Church in Zimbabwe, which led to ZCBC approval of the first national Catholic Child Safeguarding Policy in 2015 and a national sensitisation campaign to familiarise religious and lay staff working across the Church with the safeguarding principles contained in the policy.

Schools as key platforms to promote child safeguarding among Catholic communities (2017–2018)

Feedback and reflections collected during the national sensitisation campaign led to a revision of the national Child Safeguarding Policy in 2017. During this revision, ZCBC recognised that of all of their public institutions, schools were the greatest site of risk and vulnerability for children. Thus, ensuring that schools had functioning standards and systems were prioritised, ZCBC sought to embed the policy within its Catholic schools with a light-touch programme; a child-friendly version of the policy was created to facilitate dissemination among children.

In 2017, this light-touch, school-based programme was piloted in the Archdiocese of Bulawayo. This iteration of the programme relied on the national policy to facilitate dialogue and reflection on child protection issues within schools, with additional support of ZCBC to create child-led safeguarding committees. These committees were intended to act as platforms to promote a Catholic ethos of respect, empathy, and dignity among students; facilitate training and workshops on communication and teamwork skills; and disseminate information among children on how to identify risks and symptoms of abuse. Children were provided with training by ZCBC and mentorship from an adult-led safeguarding committee to run the child-led committees. In 2018, in order to inform the development of a more complex school-based intervention around the Child Safeguarding Policy, ZCBC carried out a series of key informant interviews and focus group discussions with school stakeholders to explore the acceptability of corporal punishment and alternative disciplinary practices. Findings were then integrated into the refinement of the intervention.

The Child-friendly Catholic Schools Study—Zimbabwe [CCSS-Z]: Developing and testing the Child-friendly Catholic Schools intervention (2018–2022)

In 2018 and 2019, ZCBC held a number of workshops to review and discuss learnings from the national dissemination of the Child Safeguarding Policy, the Bulawayo pilot, and the formative research around disciplinary practices. These meetings brought together several stakeholders involved in child protection in Zimbabwe including the Catholic Church, civil society organisations, government institutions, and UN agencies to reflect on what would be the essential components of a school-based intervention to make schools safer places for children.

In order to finalise the development of the ZCBC intervention and to evaluate its effectiveness, the Child-friendly Catholic Schools Study Zimbabwe [CCSS-Z] was launched in 2019. The CCSS-Z involves a partnership between ZCBC, who led on the programme design and implemented the intervention; London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine [LSHTM], who will lead the intervention evaluation and provide oversight to the research activities; Academic Research Centre [ARC], the thematic lead advisors on child protection, education, and qualitative research; Q Partnership [Q] was responsible for research fieldwork and monitoring and evaluation; Childline Zimbabwe [CLZ] managed the child protection aspects of the research itself; and Porticus funded the project and provided programme management and coordination.

Methods

Study design

The CCSS-Z followed guidance from the UK Medical Research Council on the evaluation of complex interventions,³⁰ emphasising a phased approach to intervention development, and our study will include three core phases. The first phase of our project involved formative qualitative research to inform the intervention design, which we describe below, development of a Theory of Change, and cognitive testing of survey measures. The second phase ran alongside the ZCBC pilot of the intervention in 10 schools, which involved

further refinement of the Theory of Change and qualitative research following the pilot implementation. Phase three will involve a full impact evaluation.

Between 2019 and 2021, formative qualitative research was conducted to explore the views and experiences of key school stakeholders on child protection and violence against children, the role of the Catholic Church in child protection, potentially effective intervention approaches, and barriers to intervention implementation. We present qualitative findings on aspects of the Catholic school and religious context that may enable and constrain intervention acceptability, implementation, and effectiveness.

Interviews

Semi-structured, key informant interviews [N=18] were conducted with a range of stakeholders across two Catholic schools within the Harare Archdiocese, including teachers [N=4], parents [N=4], head teachers [N=2], priests [N=2] and higher-level stakeholders, including policy actors, NGO stakeholders, and Catholic education and child protection actors [N=6]. ZCBC identified high-level stakeholders, and school-level participants were selected for their relevance to the study and accessibility during the COVID-19 pandemic. Neither school had been involved in the ZCBC intervention pilot; however, the priests in both schools had received prior training on child safeguarding. This included an urban school in Harare and rural school 100km outside Harare to understand two different contexts. The urban school was selected specifically to offer insights into experiences of implementing a Jesuit safeguarding programme.

A detailed topic guide was developed collaboratively between LSHTM, Q, and ARC with the overall study research questions in mind. The semi-structured interviews included questions on understandings of child protection and safeguarding; forms of abuse and safeguarding concerns that children experience; areas of particular importance for a safeguarding intervention, including challenges it may face;

views on corporal punishment and potential approaches for alternative discipline; and additional questions for higher-level stakeholders relating to areas of expertise. Interviews with head teachers, priests, parents, and teachers were conducted in Shona and translated into English by Q's qualitative researchers. Q conducted interviews with higher-level stakeholders in English. All participants were approached by Q through ZCBC. We had initially aimed to engage pupils, but due to school closures and the COVID-19 pandemic, we postponed such engagement.

Analysis

LSHTM, in collaboration with Q and ARC, conducted analysis of the qualitative data. All data was transcribed, translated into English, anonymised, and transferred via a secure server to LSHTM. Data was checked by senior members of the research team for inconsistencies. All interview transcripts were inputted into NVivo data management software. An initial code-book was drawn up by two researchers prior to data collection, and the data was then coded by five researchers and shared with the full team for input. Employing thematic data analysis method, key themes were identified that were relevant to the aims of the study, and additional themes were discussed as these emerged with the wider team. The finalised themes were then shared with the wider research team and the ZCBC team.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from LSHTM and Medical Research Council of Zimbabwe. All participants offered informed consent for participation and a referral mechanism was in place for safeguarding concerns and participants were offered optional counselling following interview. LSHTM trained all researchers on sensitive approaches to conducting research into violence, identifying signs of distress of abuse, scripted responses for responding to disclosures of abuse, and outlined steps for follow-up action as per the referral protocol. Participants could stop the interviews at any time.

Results

Qualitative findings: How might the Catholic school system and religious context enable and constrain an intervention?

Overall, the findings from the formative qualitative research suggested that there are several aspects of the Catholic Church, Catholic schools, and the religious context that will likely enable and facilitate the intervention, but there will be several constraining factors that will need to be navigated within the intervention design and delivery. Enabling factors identified included: the influential role of priests in promoting child protection to schools and communities through mass and prayer; the influence of the Church within communities; the alignment of the intervention with Catholic values; and utilising existing structures within schools, such as student committees, policies, and workshops that are familiar to students and the wider community. Constraining factors identified included: the need for robust referral structures to identify abuse from religious actors and within schools; and the need for the intervention to create a clear narrative around "child protection" and "child rights." We focus on these aspects within three areas: Catholic roles, practices, and structures; Catholic values supporting child protection; and structures within Catholic schools.

Catholic Roles, Practices, and Structures

A number of stakeholders stressed the important role of the Church in a school-based, child protection intervention. This included both existing Church structures that could be key facilitators of the intervention, such as utilising the homilies to address the school and community on child protection and Church policies that could reinforce and align with those of the school, and the positioning of priests as child protection actors, including the tradition and practice of confiding in chaplains and priests. There was perceived to be strong emphasis from within the Catholic Church to support child safeguarding:

It is a requirement from the [Vatican] itself that each congregation, each

diocese (ZCBC in our case, the Conference of Bishops), not just in Zimbabwe, the world over... they take seriously child safeguarding issues and come up with policies. (Catholic stakeholder)

The research suggested that the current structures surrounding the school and Church could support and facilitate the intervention. For instance, one religious stakeholder spoke about the tradition of confiding in chaplains and priests:

If you want to talk to a chaplain, a priest, you can always go... those systems were already there basically in school 20 years ago. (Jesuit stakeholder)

Priests in this study were knowledgeable about child-friendly approaches, expressed their views on the importance of child safeguarding, and discussed the responsibility they felt in their role:

As priests, there is a lot of moral authority we have in shaping the narrative of our community, so it becomes very important to use that in furthering the idea of child safeguarding... I find it a very influential position which should be used freely to emphasise the issue of child safeguarding. (School priest)

While priests emerged as well-positioned actors in child protection, they can also be perpetrators of violence against children. As one priest discussed:

There have been a lot of abuse that have been perpetrated by the clergy, some of them reported in the media. My hope is there is a lot that has been learnt there, that we cannot take it for granted that since somebody is a priest therefore, they will not abuse... Anyone can be an abuser including the priest... I think it has happened and continued to happen because there was no structure whatsoever that could stop it. So now it is an issue of establishing those structural systems. (School priest)

The need for clear and functional structures in place to respond to abuse perpetrated by religious actors emerged as a finding of this research, as well as the expressed views among religious actors, such as the priest above, that this was important. However, as participants described, taking action against powerful or well-known actors within the community would unlikely be straightforward.

Other adult stakeholders also agreed that priests are important and well-positioned intervention actors as they have a good reach in the school and community and are viewed as an important voice. One NGO stakeholder, when asked about how to attempt social change in the community, noted that the Church “*plays a part in terms of influencing behaviour especially of adults*” (NGO leader). School staff also felt that the Church had an important role to play in supporting the child protection activities of the school. Some stakeholders, both school staff and parents, highlighted that Churches and priests could speak directly to children and families about child protection issues during mass:

The priests within schools they are involved really, in a Catholic school it can be said during homily and the children listen... so the priests have a role to play in child protection, a very big role, but that can be done through the mass. (Head teacher)

At churches if a person has gone to their church, they are taught about parenting... as parents most of the time we are encouraged to protect our children. (Parent)

A second head teacher, when speaking about prior education on child abuse within the community, commented on the role of the Church:

Parents are taught at church about these issues [a child being beaten] and the children are encouraged to join in the Holy Child Guild. That is why you see these little children doing church activities which help on behaviour modification. That is when you see a

parent trying by all means to support their child. (Head teacher)

While the Church could be seen as offering key structures and actors to support child protection, as shown here, we also note a tendency for school stakeholders to align the notion of child protection with discipline or “behaviour modification.” This will likely impact the ways in which school stakeholders understand, respond to, and enact the child protection messaging of the intervention.

These findings highlighted that the intervention would be delivered within schools as social and institutional contexts that employ their own interpretations of child protection and will need to take account of these contexts in order to be delivered in the ways it is intended. Further, while the language of “child protection” was supported by stakeholders, there was also some resistance to the notion of “child rights” among school staff and parents, who widely felt that promoting children’s rights could spoil them and lead to bad behaviour. If the intervention was interpreted in these ways by stakeholders, it could likely face some resistance.

Overall, delivery of the intervention in Catholic schools was seen as favourable. Religious and non-religious stakeholders underscored that the existing Church structures in the community and within schools, as well as the influence of the priests would be central to an effective intervention in this context. This is highly promising; however, some emphasis will also be needed with stakeholders in this context on perceptions of child protection, to align conceptualisations employed by the ZCBC intervention and school stakeholders.

Catholic Values Supporting Child Protection

In addition to the structures offered by the Church, school stakeholders also expressed that Catholic values were an important part of protecting and guiding children. This was promising in suggesting that there was existing support for the aims of the intervention within the framing offered by the Church and valued by

school stakeholders, such as parents and teachers, and that an intervention drawing on these values would be well-received by school stakeholders.

Some school staff stakeholders expressed their view that the Church promoted values that they appreciated in their schools:

They should also protect the children who legally fall under the state’s protection as they are minors. It should do something. The Bible even says ‘let the children come to me’. So we are saying we are lucky to be affiliated to the church and are not a council school. (Head teacher)

Catholic Schools, it does not take Catholics only but children from other religious backgrounds... we celebrate the activities together. (Head teacher)

As these two head teachers discussed, school staff and parents felt that being affiliated to the Catholic Church offered values and an emphasis on inclusiveness and protection of children, and that they supported this. In addition, stakeholders felt that the aims of both schools and the Church were aligned in supporting and morally guiding children:

Even those who are not religious, they want their children to do good so that is here we complement each other. (Head teacher)

I am happy that before lessons start, our children pray... that is very important because without a God, a child can easily go astray. (Parent)

The findings, therefore, suggested that the implementation of the intervention by the Catholic Church was viewed by school stakeholders as in alignment with moral teachings and guidance around child protection that stakeholders already value, and this had the potential to support its implementation and school staff and parent acceptance. However, as discussed above, the findings also suggested that these values may be interpreted as in line with behaviour management and discipline, and that promoting messages that support notions of children’s rights may face some

resistance among school stakeholders. The intervention will likely need to address this in order to be effective at preventing violence; however, the findings suggested the Church is well-positioned to do this, due to stakeholder support for its values and positioning.

Structures within Catholic Schools

The findings also suggested that there were existing and familiar structures within the school and wider context that could be drawn on in the intervention approach. Within the school, these structures included: school committees, which were noted as an existing and popular way of addressing problems in the schools; clear school policies; and trainings and workshops. It was expressed that an effective intervention would include committees for child safeguarding and discipline, as described by one priest:

*What should be done to improve child protection at the school/parish level?
...Functional child protection committees so that they identify, they follow cases, the children can report. They can also improve the environment, create safe environment, they can reflect on the existing environment to see where there is need for improvement so yeah, committees, functional committees are important. (School priest)*

Stakeholders also agreed that the intervention would need to include school-specific policies that linked with overarching policy frameworks. One stakeholder recognised that robust child protection policies and infrastructure were needed:

[Child protection policies] are very necessary, essential, and crucial. We can't do without them because for a good operation we need policy, we need guidelines, yes love might be natural but we need systems and guidelines to do that. (Priest)

As this priest expressed here, turning good intentions and feelings around child protection, or

“love” into action, was seen as requiring good structures and policies to be effective. At the same time, however, as discussed in more detail elsewhere (forthcoming), some stakeholders also discussed challenges they had faced with external referral child protection mechanisms and a lack of support in taking action for child protection. Working effectively with these external structures was, therefore, identified as a potential challenge for developing effective in-school policies.

Many stakeholders pointed towards the need for workshops for teachers, head teachers, and priests and the provision of resources including manuals, posters, and handouts in the intervention, exemplified by two stakeholders:

I think they need workshops. I think they should be educated. [Workshops] for all teachers and the community and the children as well, need to be educated on what is child protection and how to handle cases. (Teacher)
Are we equipped, are we ready, do we have the resources, are we trained, have we gone through workshops, are the parents informed, is the child informed? All the stakeholders, are they trained on how to live in the new normal...? (Head teacher)

The findings, therefore, showed that good structures and training within the school, such as policies, committees, and workshops, were well-recognised and familiar in this context and were seen as important aspects for the intervention in being successful. This suggests the intervention should shape to work with existing approaches, and that there are recognisable and widely accepted structures to do so. At the same time, however, participants suggested that effectiveness of these structures would be important, and some structures, for example the external child protection referral mechanisms, were discussed to be patchy and face challenges. While the research suggested there was potential for the intervention to be well-recognised and accepted if drawing on existing structures and approaches, further research would be needed to ascertain if this will

lead to the intervention being effective in its aims to prevent violence.

Discussion

In this paper, we have examined the development of a school-based intervention to prevent violence in Catholic schools, drawing on the results from semi-structured interviews which were conducted with key stakeholders to ascertain the potential effectiveness of the intervention relating to the school context, barriers, and facilitators for intervention implementation. Our initial qualitative findings suggest that the ZCBC intervention is well-suited to the context of Zimbabwean Catholic primary schools. Several key aspects were perceived by stakeholders as making Catholic schools a favourable site to deliver a child protection intervention, including: perceptions of priests as key child protection actors; religious support structures; the existing structures within Catholic schools; and a perception of child protection interventions as in alignment with Catholic values. Our research also suggests several challenges, including the need to establish functional referral structures that hold perpetrators of abuse accountable, including religious actors. Findings also suggest additional

work is needed to align ZCBC and higher-level education stakeholders' understandings of "child protection" with parent's and teacher's understanding of "child rights."

In addition to examining the Catholic school system and religious context surrounding the intervention, the formative qualitative research also identified a number of further aspects that will be important for the intervention in meeting its aims of preventing violence. We examine these in more detail elsewhere (forthcoming); however, we briefly touch on the aspects of intervention refinement here. ZCBC is currently refining the intervention, which at present will aim to promote Catholic values and ethos in schools, to reduce teacher and peer violence in schools, and to strengthen referral mechanisms within schools so that responses to violence are appropriate. The specific objectives include: 1) clarifying forms of violence to be captured through the intervention and how "child safeguarding" is defined; 2) developing a clear referral pathway for responding to abuse, including mapping existing external structures; and 3) further attention to training and support for teachers as key intervention actors, alongside other refinements. A description of the current intervention package is included in Box 1.

Box 1. The Child-friendly Catholic Schools pilot intervention package.

Aim: At present, the intervention has three key objectives: firstly, to promote Catholic values and ethos within schools; secondly, to reduce levels of teacher and peer violence in schools; and thirdly, to strengthen referral structures so that cases of abuse are reported, referred, and handled appropriately.

Approach and delivery: The intervention is seeking to stimulate a shift in mind-sets and practices that lead to the adoption of a culture of safety in Catholic primary schools in Zimbabwe, through the application of a holistic intervention model that encompasses both violence prevention and response. The intervention builds on the ZCBC child safeguarding policy, outlining codes for safe institutions and procedures and tools for responding to abuse. The intervention aims to connect and engage with stakeholders across the school system, from religious actors that manage and run the schools to head teachers and school management down to classroom teachers, students, and their parents. This is to ensure a consistent narrative relating to child rights and safeguarding is adopted across the whole school community, with key messages and actions of change being reinforced throughout the school system. Intervention delivery takes place at Diocesan level, led by Education Secretaries and supported by new posts designed to facilitate this intervention, the Child Safeguarding Officers (CSOs) who deliver training to schools and offer on-going support to schools throughout the whole intervention period.

Content and activities:

The **prevention arm** is addressed through a range of training and capacity building activities, which include:

- A whole-school self-assessment through a school-scorecard, which informs action plans for strengthening safety within the school.

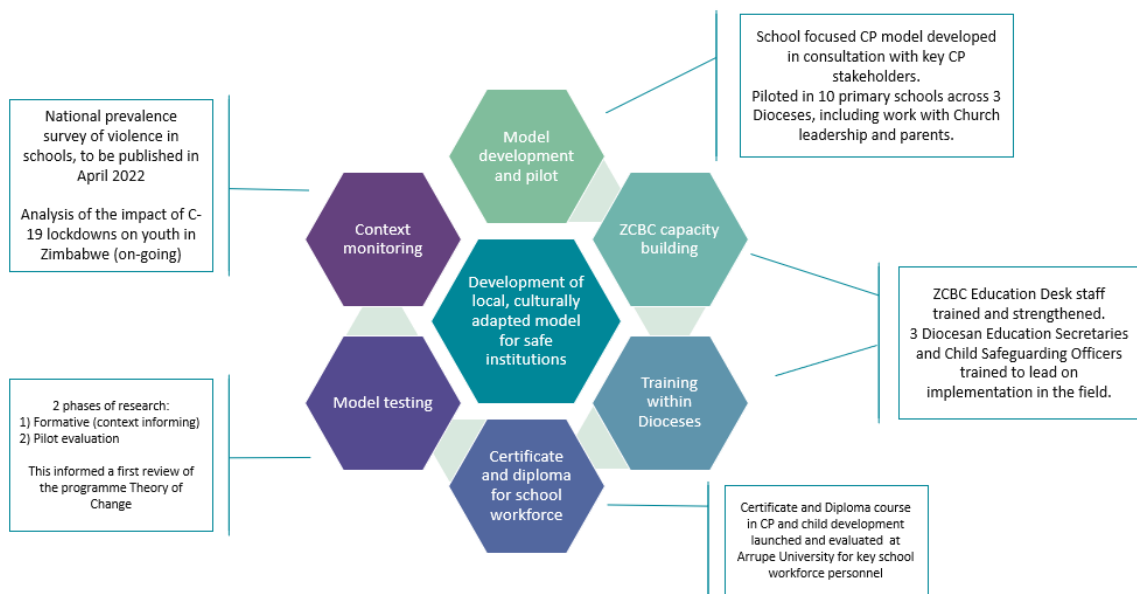
- Training of school management on recognising and referring abuse, positive communication, self-efficacy, and alternative discipline.
- Training of teachers from grades four, five, and six, who deliver a child protection and safeguarding curriculum to students in these grades over two terms. The student curriculum covers topics, such as recognising and referring abuse, self-awareness and self-confidence, effective communication, inclusivity, and diversity and gender.
- Training of prefects and of all schoolteachers on alternative forms of discipline.
- Training of religious actors working in the schools on alternative forms of discipline and on their roles and responsibilities as leaders to promote children’s safety.
- Training of parents of students in the school on positive parenting and recognising and referring abuse to ensure that home and school environments promote coherent disciplinary approaches.

Advanced training is also being provided for selected teachers, who demonstrate capacity to be “champions for change” within their schools. They have the opportunity to undertake a certificate course in safeguarding and child development and to have the right capacity to continue on to a diploma.

The response arm is addressed through enactment of school policies through the following actions:

- Appointment and capacity building of a School Child Safeguarding Officer.
- Appointment and training of adult-led and child-led Safeguarding Committees.
 - Committees also hold responsibility for sensitisation of all school members on the policy and on topics related to fostering a safe environment, i.e., anti-corporal punishment and bullying campaigns.
- External stakeholder mapping of actors around the school that form part of the case management and referral system.
- Development of guiding documents on reporting and referral management.
- Facilitation by ZCBC to support the appointment of Diocesan Safeguarding Committees, which specifically handle allegation of abuse related to religious actors.

This model has so far been piloted in 10 schools, across the three Dioceses of Harare, Mutare, and Gokwe and will be scaled up to other schools as part of a randomised controlled trial in 2024. The below diagram highlights the key components of the programme approach implemented to-date:



The findings from this research have provided rigorous evidence about the context of implementing a child protection intervention within Catholic Church structures. There is

research to suggest that while child protection interventions perceived to be external may face resistance, those that draw on religious beliefs and values and are tied to religious structures may more

meaningfully address what key stakeholders already value and see as important and, therefore, may also be more accepted and more meaningful to communities.³³⁻³⁵ In this way, as the findings have suggested, the intervention has excellent potential to be embedded with local value systems and beliefs. Efforts by the Catholic Church in such harmonisation in general practices and teachings have yielded notable success, such as incorporation of local songs, drums, and dances in church services which have drawn interest and wider participation by congregants.

Through continued partnership between ZCBC, LSHTM, ARC, Q, and Porticus, we plan to evaluate the finalised ZCBC intervention in a randomised controlled trial in Zimbabwe Catholic primary schools. This will make the ZCBC intervention the first Church-developed, school violence, prevention intervention to undergo a rigorous development and evaluation process in partnership with external academics. In addition, it will contribute to the small but growing global literature on how to prevent and respond to violence in schools outside of high income countries and in settings where teacher violence is prevalent.^{18-20,32} It will contain materials and techniques to foster a positive school climate in line with successful and effective school interventions in other settings.^{5,17,31} The intervention will also be the first intervention trialled with a clear focus on improving school responses to violence and referrals to appropriate mechanisms as existing comprehensive school violence interventions are focused more around prevention than response.

Our findings will support the Zimbabwean national strategy on violence prevention, inside and outside the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. Zimbabwe has a range of policy frameworks to address violence against children. It has ratified both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). In 2019, Zimbabwe joined the End Violence Against Children Global Partnership, and in 2020, it passed the Education Act Amendment (2020) which

prohibited corporal punishment in schools. At present, there are few formal tools available to teachers, schools, and others to enable adherence to these policies, and ZCBC's evidence-based approach would provide much-needed contextually appropriate guidance.

The evaluation has huge potential for learning within and beyond Zimbabwe. ZCBC is already actively engaged with other similar organisations in regional meetings in Sub-Saharan Africa, and there is clear potential for scale-up of an effective intervention.

Conclusion

The ZCBC intervention approach is a Church-led child protection strategy that shows potential to respond well to contextual challenges and is likely to be well-received by various stakeholders. A full impact evaluation is needed to test whether the intervention can effectively reduce violence against children.

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