SAFEGUARDING CHILDHOOD: A PARADIGM OF EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (ESD)

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ABSTRACT

Achieving sustainable development goals requires a comprehensive approach that includes providing education within a safe and nurturing environment and safeguarding childhood. This study focuses on the child protection procedures and policies for students in Federal Government schools located in Islamabad, covering both rural and urban areas. The primary objectives of the study were to explore teachers' perceptions regarding child protection issues and their awareness of prevention programs in Educational Institutions of Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), to identify the existing child protection mechanisms in these institutions, and to examine gender-based differences in teachers' perceptions and training related to child protection mechanisms. The study adopted a descriptive research design. Data were collected using a five-point Likert scale questionnaire designed to measure various aspects of teachers' perceptions and awareness. The study population included all teachers in public ICT schools, and a representative sample of 600 teachers was selected using stratified random sampling. The data was analyzed using SPSS version 20. Analysis shows there is high awareness and positive perceptions of child protection policies and procedures. Importantly, there were no significant differences between male and female teachers regarding child protection-related perceptions and training across all measures, suggesting a uniform approach to child protection training and awareness within the institutions surveyed. These findings have important implications for both policymakers and educators. It is recommended that educational institutions strengthen child protection training programs to ensure that all teachers receive consistent and comprehensive training. In addition, schools should regularly evaluate their child protection mechanisms to assess their effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. By maintaining high standards of child protection, educational institutions can contribute to wider sustainability goals by creating a safe learning environment that supports the well-being and development of all students. This research highlights the importance of a multifaceted approach to child protection in education settings, combining comprehensive training, consistent policy implementation and ongoing evaluation to safeguard children's well-being and promote safe educational environments.

Keywords: Child Protection, Sustainable Development, ICT schools, rural, urban.

INTRODUCTION

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has become a transformative approach to reshape current educational practices to meet the needs of present and future generations. The principles of ESD aim to integrate social, economic and environmental dimensions into education, enabling learners to analyze global challenges and develop sustainable solutions (UNESCO, 2017). Protecting children within the framework of ESD emphasizes promoting sustainable lifestyles from an early age and providing children with opportunities to be exposed to the concept of sustainable development, which is essential for cultivating responsible and informed global citizens (Davis, 2010). This approach enables children to contribute to the sustainability discourse through their unique perspectives and experiences, fostering a generation that is more informed and

proactive in addressing global environmental challenges.

Child protection in educational institutions is an important aspect of child protection. Ensuring children's physical, emotional, and psychological safety is fundamental to their development and learning. Educational institutions must implement strong child protection policies and practices that prevent abuse, neglect, and exploitation while promoting positive and inclusive learning environments (Boyd & Hirst, 2016). This is particularly important in the context of sustainability education, as a safe and supportive environment enables children to fully participate in sustainability education and develop the confidence to take responsible action in the future. Integrating sustainable development education into this framework requires that education systems not only address environmental and socio-economic sustainability issues, but also prioritize the well-being and protection of children as a core component of sustainable development.

Integrating ESD into early childhood education is in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4.7, which aims to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development. This includes education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and the contribution of culture to sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). This holistic approach emphasizes the importance of fostering a culture of sustainable development and conservation from an early age, ensuring that children grow up with a deep understanding of their role in creating a sustainable future.

Integrating ESD into early childhood education presents many opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, it provides a powerful way to instill a sense of responsibility and stewardship for the planet in young learners (Sterling, 2010). Programs that emphasize experiential learning, play, and interaction with nature help children develop a deep connection with the environment and develop a sense of care and responsibility (Pramling Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008). On the other hand, it requires a major paradigm shift in educational practice, curriculum, and policy to ensure that sustainability is integrated into all levels of learning (Tilbury, 2011). This

includes overcoming resistance to change, addressing the lack of resources and training for educators, and developing supportive policies and frameworks at national and institutional levels.

This paper explores the theoretical foundations of ESD, the importance of child protection in the context of sustainable development, and practical strategies for implementing ESD in early childhood settings, with a particular emphasis on child protection. By exploring best practices and case studies from around the world, this paper aims to provide educators and policymakers with practical insights to help them effectively integrate ESD with child protection to create a safe, inclusive and sustainable learning environment for all children. The goal is to ensure that children are not only protected and nurtured, but also equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to become proactive and responsible global citizens.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Social ecological theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, provides a valuable framework for understanding the multi-level factors that influence child development, including individual, interpersonal, community, and societal factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The theory emphasizes the importance of considering the complex interactions between children and their environment when designing and implementing educational programs. In the context of education for sustainable development, social ecological theory emphasizes the need for a holistic approach that incorporates influences from all levels, including family and peers, educational institutions, and broader social structures. Applying social ecological theory to education for sustainable development in early childhood education highlights the need for a comprehensive strategy that addresses all aspects of a child's environment. For example, educators and policymakers must consider not only teaching sustainable development concepts directly, but also creating a supportive learning environment that includes family involvement, community engagement, and institutional support. This approach ensures that children receive consistent information about sustainable development from multiple sources, thereby strengthening their learning and commitment to sustainable practices.

Child protection in educational settings involves ensuring the safety and well-being of children from

any form of harm, abuse or exploitation. Boyd and Hirst (2016) highlight the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment to promote children's physical, emotional and mental health. Effective child protection policies and practices are essential to protect childhood and enable children to thrive in their educational journey.

Integrating social ecological theory with child protection in the context of ESD further highlights the need for a multifaceted approach. Schools and educational institutions must not only implement strong child protection policies, but also strive to create an inclusive and nurturing environment that supports the overall well-being of children. This involves working with families, communities and other stakeholders to build a protective network around children, ensuring their safety and enabling them to fully participate in ESD programmes.

Literature Review

Education is an indispensable part of human development and a basic right of every citizen. It is closely related to a country's social and economic development. Without substantial investment in human capital, no country can achieve sustainable economic growth. Education enriches people's knowledge, enhances their technical abilities, and empowers them to explore new ideas. It improves their quality of life and brings wide-ranging social benefits to individuals and societies.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

ESD emphasizes meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland, 1987). UNESCO (2017) defines ESD as education that empowers learners to make informed decisions and take responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability, and a just society for present and future generations while respecting cultural diversity. This holistic approach integrates key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning, such as climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, poverty reduction and sustainable consumption. Integrating sustainable development education into early childhood education is essential to lay the foundation for sustainable thinking and behavior (Davis, 2010). Early childhood is a critical period for cognitive, social and emotional development, and introducing sustainable development concepts at this stage can

have a lasting impact. Pramling Samuelsson and Kaga (2008) argue that sustainable development education in early childhood education should focus on experiential learning, play and interaction with nature to help children understand their environment and their role in protecting it.

Child Protection in Educational Settings

Child protection in educational settings is an important area of concern as schools play a vital role in protecting children from abuse, neglect and exploitation. Effective child protection policies and practices are essential to ensuring the physical and mental well-being of students, allowing them to thrive academically and socially. Boyd and Hirst (2016) highlight the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment in schools to promote the overall well-being of children. Teachers play a key role in implementing child protection policies and ensuring that children are safe in educational settings. Their views and attitudes towards child protection can greatly influence the effectiveness of these measures. Research shows that while many teachers recognize the importance of child protection, they often feel that they have not received adequate training to take on such a responsibility (Baginsky and Macpherson, 2005).

Integrating ESD and Child Protection

Integrating ESD with child protection requires an integrated approach that addresses both the content and context of education. This means not only integrating sustainable development topics into the curriculum, but also ensuring that the educational environment is safe, inclusive, and supportive (Hedefalk, Almqvist, & Östman, 2015). Social ecological theory supports this integration by highlighting the interconnectedness between various environmental influences on child development. By addressing these multiple levels, teachers can develop a more cohesive and effective strategy to promote sustainable development and child protection. Recent research has highlighted the evolving nature of child protection in the educational context. For example, recent research by Edwards and Monks (2022) discusses the increasing integration of technology in child protection mechanisms, including digital reporting tools and online training modules for educators. Similarly, work by Johnson and Smith (2021) explores the impact of social media on child protection, noting the

potential for increased awareness and the risks associated with online interactions.

Systemic Changes for Effective Integration

Tilbury (2011) stressed that systemic changes are needed in education policy, practice and culture to fully reflect the principles of ESD and child protection. This includes training educators, developing an integrated curriculum and fostering a school culture that values sustainability and child well-being. Such systemic changes are essential to creating an environment where children can thrive and learn about sustainability in a safe and supportive environment. While there are many benefits to incorporating ESD and child protection into early childhood education, it also presents challenges. These challenges include resistance to change, lack of resources and training for educators, and the need to develop supportive policies and frameworks at national and institutional levels (Sterling, 2010).

Teachers' Roles and Training in Child Protection

Teachers' perceptions are influenced by their cultural and social background. In some cases, teachers may face challenges such as a lack of administrative support, fear of consequences or cultural norms that may conflict with child protection policies (Parton, 2014). These challenges may create feelings of uncertainty among teachers and make them reluctant to fully engage in child protection protocols. To address these issues, it is important to foster a supportive school culture where teachers feel empowered and supported by clear policies and administrative support. Research by Briggs and Hawkins (2021) showed that teachers' awareness and understanding of child protection policies directly impacted their ability to identify and respond to child abuse and neglect. Furthermore, teachers' perceptions of the adequacy of their child protection training are critical to the successful implementation of these policies.

Empirical Evidence and Best Practices

A study by Connolly and Houghton (2018) found that teachers who had received comprehensive child protection training were more confident in their ability to identify and respond to signs of abuse. This finding highlights the need for ongoing professional development in child protection to improve teacher effectiveness and ensure the safety and well-being of students. Similarly, Krason et al. (2020) highlighted

the positive impact of targeted training programs on teachers' ability to effectively implement child protection measures. Studying case studies and best practices from around the world can provide valuable insights into effective strategies for integrating ESD and child protection into early childhood education. Programs that emphasize outdoor learning and nature-based activities have been shown to enhance children's understanding of sustainability while promoting their well-being and safety (Siraj-Blatchford & Huda, 2019).

Overall, the effectiveness of child protection mechanisms in schools depends largely on teachers' perceptions and their readiness to take action. Addressing their concerns through targeted training, supportive policies, and a positive school culture is essential to creating a safe and nurturing environment for all children. A quantitative research approach was used to collect and analyze digital data to understand the extent and effectiveness of ESD integration and child protection measures. The study focuses on educational institutions that have implemented child protection measures within the ESD paradigm.

Objectives of the study

This objectives of the study tries to understand how teachers perceive child protection issues and their level of awareness of existing prevention programs. In this way, this study aims to reveal the current knowledge and attitudes of educators, thereby providing a broader understanding of child protection in educational settings. The study attempts to map the child protection mechanisms that exist within educational institutions. By identifying these mechanisms, this study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of current practices and policies implemented to protect children, thereby providing valuable insights into child protection in the education sector. Present study examines the differences in perceptions and practices regarding child protection between male and female educational institutions. By highlighting these gender-based differences, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how gender affects child protection in educational settings, adding to the existing body of knowledge on the subject.

The objectives of the study were:
1. To explore the perception of teachers regarding child protection issues and

awareness of prevention programs in Educational Institutions of ICT.
2. To identify the child protection mechanisms in place in educational institutions of ICT.
3. To identify the gender-wise difference in teachers' perceptions and child protection mechanisms in male and female institutions.

Hypotheses
1. Ho1   There is no significant difference in the perception of teachers regarding child protection issues and awareness of prevention programs between male and female teachers in educational institutions of ICT.
2. Ho2   There is no significant difference in the child protection mechanisms in place in male and female educational institutions of ICT.

Statement of the Problem
Even with global recognition that ESD is an important approach to addressing the challenges of sustainable development, its successful integration into educational institutions faces significant barriers. The main issue is the gap between ESD theory and its actual implementation, which hinders the ability to evaluate the true effectiveness of ESD initiatives and hinders the advancement of sustainable education. In addition, teachers' perceptions and readiness to implement child protection measures are crucial to the success of these initiatives. Many teachers believe that they do not receive adequate training and support as child protectors, which weakens the effectiveness of child protection mechanisms. This study aims to evaluate various aspects of ESD integration and its effectiveness, focusing on bridging the gap between ESD theory and practice, while addressing teachers' perceptions and the implementation of child protection measures in educational institutions.

Significance of the Study
This study is significant in several key areas. First, it enhances teacher capacity by identifying specific gaps in child protection training, thus highlighting the need for targeted professional development programs. Second, the study informs policy development by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of existing child protection mechanisms within educational institutions.

Policymakers can use these insights to refine and implement stronger child protection policies, with a focus on communication of policies and the establishment of child protection committees within schools. In terms of promoting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4.7, this study contributes to the broader agenda of inclusive and equitable quality education by integrating child protection into Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Overall, this study makes a significant contribution to the academic literature by filling the existing research gap on the integration of child protection into ESD and the role of teacher perceptions and training. It provides valuable empirical data that can guide future research and interventions, ultimately leading to safer and more supportive educational environments for all students.

Methodology
This study was descriptive in nature, a design often used in educational settings to understand responses or trends related to attitudes, behaviors, or characteristics of an entire population or a sample of a population.

Population and Sample
The population of this study included all teachers in public schools in rural and urban areas of Islamabad. Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, is a unique educational hub characterized by a diverse range of educational institutions, including public schools, private schools, and international schools. The city has a relatively high literacy rate compared to other parts of the country, and due to its status as an administrative center, it has become a focal point for educational policies and reform initiatives. This study focuses on public schools in Islamabad, which cater to students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. These schools are managed by the Federal Directorate of Education (FDE) and adhere to the national curriculum prescribed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Vocational Training. A representative sample of 679 teachers was selected from ICT schools in both urban and rural areas using a stratified random sampling method. The stratified random sampling method adopted in this study was designed to ensure a representative and reliable sample of 679 teachers in Islamabad public schools. By stratifying the population into urban and rural strata and randomly selecting teachers within each

stratum, this study achieved a balanced and comprehensive representation of different educational backgrounds within ICT. This approach not only increased the validity and reliability of the findings, but also provided valuable insights into the unique challenges and experiences of teachers in different geographical areas.

Instrument

A structured questionnaire consisting of 20 questions was administered to teachers to collect quantitative data on the integration and effectiveness of ESD initiatives and child protection measures.

Data collection

The data collection procedure for this study involved the administration of a 20-question structured questionnaire to collect quantitative data on the integration and effectiveness of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) initiatives and child protection measures. A representative sample of 679 teachers was selected from government schools in urban and rural areas of Islamabad using a stratified random sampling method after approval from the relevant education departments. The questionnaire was designed using a five-point Likert scale and was distributed in person to ensure clarity and understanding. The teachers were given detailed instructions and were assured of confidentiality of their answers. Assistance was available to resolve any queries during the completion process. The collected questionnaires were reviewed for completeness and the data were entered into SPSS version 20 for statistical analysis. This approach ensured systematic and comprehensive data collection, enabling the study to accurately assess the perceptions of teachers and the effectiveness of current ESD and child protection measures.

Data Analysis

To achieve the research objectives, we used SPSS version 20.0 to analyze the data. The following statistical tests were applied:

1. Mean and Standard Deviation: The mean provides a measure of central tendency and represents the average response of the sample. The standard deviation measures the dispersion or variability around the mean and represents the degree of dispersion of the responses. These descriptive statistics are used to summarize the overall trend and central pattern of the teachers' responses on child protection issues and prevention plans. The mean and standard deviation of each item on the questionnaire were calculated to give an overview of the central tendency and variability of the data.

2. t-test: The t-test is used to determine if there is a significant difference between the means of two groups. In this study, it was used to determine the gender differences in teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of child protection mechanisms in male and female institutions. An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of teachers' responses in male and female institutions. This test helps to understand whether the gender of the institution (male vs. female) has a significant impact on teachers' perceptions and perceptions of child protection measures.

The results are presented in the form of tables, which present the research results clearly and in an organized manner. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the data and helps identify significant trends and differences within the scope of the study.

Results of the study

Table 1

Perception of Teachers and Child Protection Mechanism in ICT Schools

Indicators	Male	Female	Overall
Perception and awareness of teachers	3.76	3.71	3.72
Child protection mechanism	3.63	3.59	3.60

The table shows that both male and female teachers in ICT schools have fairly positive perceptions and awareness of their roles, with mean value of 3.76 for males and 3.71 for females, resulting in an overall score of 3.72. Similarly, the child protection mechanism is perceived positively, with mean value of 3.63 for males and 3.59 for females, leading to an overall score of 3.60.
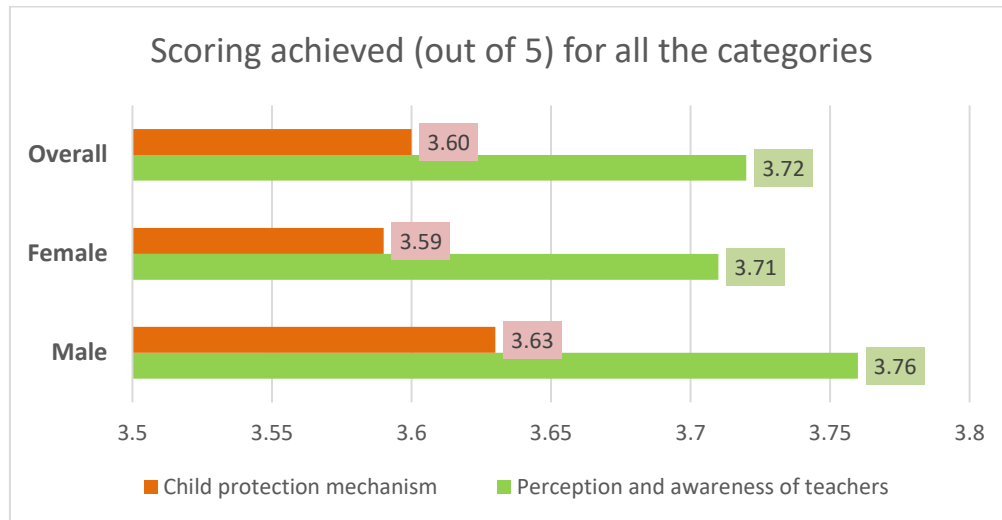
Fig.1: Representation of Teachers Perception and Child Protection Mechanism in ICT Schools

Table 2
Gender wise difference in Perception of Teachers in ICT Schools

Perception and awareness of teachers	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t Value	F Value	P Value
	Male	205	3.7571	.43093	**677**	**1.087**	**.606**	**.437**
	Female	474	3.7110	.48168				

*P<0.05**P<0.01

The mean scores indicate that the P value of 0.437 is greater than the significance level of 0.05, indicating that the difference in perception and awareness between male and female teachers is not statistically significant. This means that there is no strong evidence to suggest a meaningful difference in the perception and awareness of teachers based on gender in ICT schools.

Table 3
Difference in Child Protection Mechanism in Male and Female Institutions Perception   in ICT Schools

Child protection mechanism	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t Value	F Value	P Value
	Male	205	3.6254	.54686	**677**	**.720**	**.266**	**.606**
	Female	474	3.5909	.58315				

*P<0.05**P<0.01

The table 3 above shows that the P value of 0.606 is much greater than the significance level of 0.05, indicating that the difference in the child protection mechanism between male and female institutions is not statistically significant. This means there is no strong evidence to suggest a meaningful difference in the child protection mechanism based on gender in ICT schools.
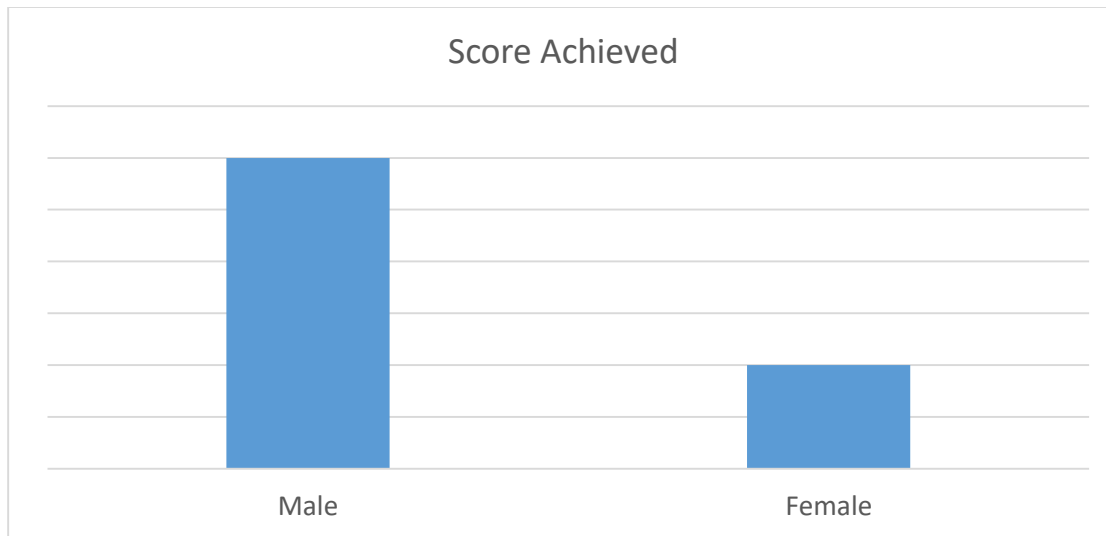
Fig. 2: Graphical representation of Child Protection Mechanism in Male and Female Institutions

Findings

The findings of the current study revealed that both male and female teachers in ICT schools have fairly positive perceptions and awareness of their roles in child protection. The mean value for male teachers' perceptions and awareness is 3.76, while for female teachers it is 3.71, resulting in an overall mean score of 3.72. These mean scores fall on a five-point Likert scale, where higher values indicate more positive perceptions and awareness. The close proximity of these mean values suggests that both male and female teachers generally have similar and positive views regarding their roles in child protection.

The statistical test to determine if there is a significant difference between the perceptions of male and female teachers yielded a P value of 0.437. This P value is greater than the commonly used significance level of 0.05. In hypothesis testing, if the P value is greater than the significance level, we fail to reject the null hypothesis. The null hypothesis in this context posits that there is no significant difference in perceptions and awareness between male and female teachers. Therefore, the results indicate that any observed difference in the mean values is likely due to random variation rather than a true difference between the genders. In other words, there is no strong evidence to suggest a meaningful difference in the perception and awareness of child protection roles between male and female teachers in ICT schools.

Similarly, the study examined teachers' perceptions of the child protection mechanisms in place within their schools. The mean value for male teachers'

perceptions of these mechanisms is 3.63, while for female teachers it is 3.59, leading to an overall mean score of 3.60. These mean scores, which are again based on a five-point Likert scale, indicate that teachers generally view the child protection mechanisms positively. The slight difference in mean values between male and female teachers is minimal, suggesting similar levels of satisfaction with the child protection mechanisms across genders. The statistical analysis to determine if there is a significant difference in perceptions of child protection mechanisms between male and female teachers produced a P value of 0.606. This P value is much greater than the significance level of 0.05. As with the previous test, a P value greater than 0.05 means we fail to reject the null hypothesis, which in this case suggests that there is no significant difference in perceptions of child protection mechanisms between male and female teachers. Therefore, the results suggest that any differences in the means are likely to be due to random chance rather than true perceived differences based on gender. This finding supports the conclusion that teachers have similar perceptions of the effectiveness of child protection mechanisms in schools, regardless of gender.

In summary, the findings suggest that both male and female teachers in ICT schools have positive perceptions and awareness of their role in child protection and have positive perceptions of the child protection mechanisms in place. Statistical analysis confirmed that there were no significant differences between male and female teachers in these areas,

with P values of 0.437 and 0.606, both greater than the significance level of 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted, reinforcing the conclusion that gender does not play a significant role in shaping teachers' perceptions and awareness of child protection in ICT schools.

Discussion

Analysis of teachers' perceptions of and training on child protection revealed several key insights. Overall, teachers reported being very familiar with child protection concepts and confident in ensuring the safety and well-being of their students. However, the adequacy of training on child protection policies and procedures was considered average, suggesting room for improvement. This finding is consistent with previous research highlighting the importance of comprehensive training programs for teachers to effectively identify and respond to child protection issues (McKee & Dillenburger, 2009; Baginsky & Macpherson, 2005).

Implications for Students' Sense of Safety and Well-being

The effectiveness of child protection mechanisms within educational institutions has an important impact on students' feelings of safety and well-being. When teachers are confident and familiar with child protection policies, they are more likely to create a safe and supportive environment for students. This environment is vital to students' psychological and emotional development, as a strong sense of safety enhances their ability to focus on learning and reduces anxiety related to potential harm.

In contrast, moderate perceptions of the adequacy of training suggest gaps that may undermine the effectiveness of these policies. Inadequate training may result in teachers being unable to respond to complex child protection issues, potentially jeopardizing student safety. Policymakers and educators should prioritize strengthening training programs to ensure teachers are able to implement child protection measures effectively.

Institutional Proactivity in Child Protection

The findings are encouraging, showing that child protection mechanisms within educational institutions are positively rated, with policy communication and the existence of child protection committees receiving high mean scores. This proactive attitude shows that institutions recognize the vital importance of child protection and are taking steps to protect students. Effective policy communication ensures that all staff understands their responsibilities, while child protection committees can provide ongoing support and oversight. These positive ratings are consistent with the findings of Wurtele and Kenny (2010), who emphasized the role of institutional policies in protecting children. By maintaining clear and well-communicated child protection policies, educational institutions can foster a culture of safety and vigilance, further enhancing the wellbeing of students.

Gender-based Analysis and Uniform Training Approaches

Gender-based analysis showed that there were no significant differences in the perceptions and training of child protection between male and female teachers. The two groups reported similar levels of familiarity, adequacy of training, and confidence in child protection measures, as indicated by the t-test results (p-value greater than 0.05). This consistency suggests that the existing training and awareness programs are fair and inclusive, ensuring that all teachers, regardless of gender, have the necessary knowledge and skills to protect students.

Finkelhor (2007) supports the view that effective training programs should be inclusive and fair, and emphasizes that all educators need to be equally prepared to deal with child protection issues. By ensuring that there are no significant differences in training programs between male and female teachers, institutions can provide consistent levels of protection for all students, thereby creating a safer and more supportive educational environment.

Integrating Social Ecological Theory into Child Protection

Integrating social ecological theory into the analysis of child protection in educational settings highlights the importance of a multifaceted approach that considers influences on all levels of child development. Teachers' perceptions and practices are influenced not only by their training and institutional policies, but also by the broader social and environmental context. For example, supportive communities and active family involvement can enhance the effectiveness of child protection measures implemented in schools. Conversely, societal attitudes towards child protection and

existing social norms can strengthen or weaken these efforts.

Applying social ecological theory to child protection emphasizes the need to develop comprehensive strategies that engage all stakeholders. Schools should work with families, community organizations, and policymakers to build a strong protection network for children. This includes regular communication with parents about child protection policies, community outreach programs to educate people about the importance of protecting children, and advocating for policies that support child protection at the societal level.

By integrating social ecological theory into research, we can better understand the complex interaction of factors that influence teachers' perceptions and practices of child protection. This theoretical framework not only enriches the analysis, but also provides a basis for developing more effective and comprehensive child protection strategies to ensure the safety and well-being of all students.

Conclusions

Based on the findings and discussion, it was concluded that teachers generally had a high level of familiarity with child protection concepts and were confident in their ability to ensure student safety. The adequacy of training on child protection policies and procedures was considered moderate, indicating room for improvement. Child protection mechanisms, including committees and policy communication, were considered effective in educational institutions. There were no significant differences in the perceptions and training of male and female teachers in terms of child protection.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Strengthen training programmes: Inadequate training could be addressed by developing more comprehensive and ongoing professional development programmes focused on child protection. This could include practical workshops, scenario-based training and regular updates on policy changes.
2. Strengthen communication channels: Make sure that child protection policies are effectively and regularly communicated to all staff. This could be achieved through regular meetings, accessible policy documents and dedicated child protection officers within the school.
3. Promote a culture of safety: Encourage a school-wide culture where child protection is a priority. This includes creating an environment where teachers feel supported in their roles and students feel safe to report any concerns.
4. Monitor and evaluate training effectiveness: Regularly evaluate training programmes to ensure they meet the needs of teachers and are effective in improving their child protection skills. Feedback from teachers should be used to continually improve these programmes.

Limitations of the study

While this study provides valuable insights into teachers' perceptions and training on child protection in educational institutions, some limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size of 679 teachers, while large, was limited to public schools in the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT). This regional focus may not fully capture the diversity of perceptions and practices across different geographical regions or school types (e.g., private institutions), limiting the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the stratified random sampling approach, while designed to achieve representativeness, may still have inherent biases. Certain groups of teachers, especially those who are more willing to participate, may be over-represented, which may affect the overall validity of the findings. In addition, the study relied on self-report data obtained through a structured questionnaire, which may be affected by social desirability bias. Respondents may provide answers that they believe to be expected or favorable, rather than their actual beliefs or experiences, which may affect the accuracy of the data and may bias the results towards more positive perceptions of child protection awareness and adequacy of training. The questionnaire itself contained 20 questions focused on the integration and effectiveness of ESD initiatives and child protection measures, and may not comprehensively cover all relevant aspects of child protection training and mechanisms. This limited scope may overlook important factors or nuances in teachers' perceptions and experiences.

Another limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the study, with data captured at only a single point in time. This design does not allow for examination of changes in perceptions or effectiveness of the training program over time. Longitudinal research is necessary to understand the long-term impact of training programs and policy implementation on child protection practices in educational institutions. In addition, external factors, such as recent child protection violations, media coverage, or policy changes during the study period, may have influenced teachers' responses and thus potentially affected the findings and their interpretation.

By acknowledging these limitations, the study provides a more balanced view of its findings and a clear understanding of the limitations of conducting the study. Future research could address these limitations by increasing sample size and geographic scope, incorporating longitudinal designs, and utilizing mixed methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of child protection practices in educational institutions.

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