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Unseen Backyard Classrooms and Child Safeguarding in Zimbabwean Urban Areas

Edmore Chingwe [1*], Christopher Mutseekwa [2], Nyasha Cefas Zimuto [3], Enock Panganayi Mawuye [1]

[1] Rwanda Basic Education Board, RWANDA
[2] University of Rwanda College of Education Laboratory School, RWANDA
[3] University of Rwanda, Centre for Language Enhancement, RWANDA
* Correspondence: chingweedmore@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The mushrooming of non-formal home-based schools (NFHBSs), which people call extra lessons, operates as an unregulated yet significant educational system in Zimbabwean urban areas. Informal learning environments exist to help students who need extra academic support because people face economic difficulties and want better education results, and formal educational systems have their own limitations. While these services fulfil community educational needs, their informal nature and decentralised structure, together with a lack of government supervision, create a vacuum with significant safeguarding vulnerabilities for children. This study uses a qualitative grounded theory design to examine how NFHBSs operate in Masvingo, Rusape, and Plumtree. Results show that while Zimbabwe has robust non-formal education and safeguarding policies, these policies may fail to regulate NFHBSs, resulting in exposure of students to several vulnerabilities. To remedy this situation, the study proposes a tiered safeguarding framework.

Keywords: safeguarding, non-formal home-based schools, ubuntu, results-safety paradox, ecological systems theory

INTRODUCTION

Globally, educational systems now recognise non-formal education (NFE) and home-based learning as essential educational pathways which provide students with an alternative to formal schooling. In this context, NFE functions as an organised, continuous activity which extends beyond formal educational systems to serve multiple societal needs, which include vocational literacy and community development (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training [Cedefop], 2015; Covaciu, 2025). Furthermore, home-based education, described as home schooling in North America, home education in Europe and Commonwealth countries, provides various educational options, which include structured school-at-home programs and interest-driven unschooling methods that create customised learning environments for children based on their

individual educational requirements (Chinazzi, 2023; Gray & Riley, 2013). While they are not always centrally controlled or officially accredited, such home-based learning systems receive growing acknowledgement for their essential role in supporting continuous education, especially for marginalised groups and those who dropped out of school (Almeida & Morais, 2025).

Similarly, in Africa, NFE exists as a strategic method to help marginalised and vulnerable people whose socioeconomic realities prevent them from entering formal educational systems and staying in them (Fehrler & Michaelowa, 2009). For instance, Tanzanian COBET programs, together with Mali and Namibia community schools, provide young adults and dropouts with vocational training and literacy programs as their second chance educational opportunities (Hoppers, 2006). In addition, in Nigeria and Uganda, alternative learning has specifically targeted adolescent girls to foster livelihood development (Almeida & Morais, 2025). While these African home-based educational programs show flexibility as an essential element for achieving universal education, there is consequently a need for safeguarding systems that extend beyond standard classroom boundaries into the unseen community learning areas.

This tension between educational access and child safety is nowhere more evident than in Zimbabwe. Characterised by a public education system that has struggled to meet constitutional requirements, the nation has seen an unregulated, adaptive response to its educational needs. Zimbabwe's official NFE programs, which the government operates through Zimbabwe Adult-Based Education Course (ZABEC) and Part-Time and Continuing Education (PTCE), operate simultaneously with NFHBSs and backyard institutions. The latter are found mostly in high-density suburbs without official registration with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education MoPSE (Ndengo & Bukaliya, 2022; Malinganiza, 2025). Historically, the existing system of paid extra lessons developed from unpaid scaffolding support, which was initially meant for preparing secondary school students for public examinations. However, because of economic instability, teacher strikes, classroom overcrowding and brain drain, which resulted in qualified personnel leaving the formal education system, this support transitioned to widespread, paid, extra lessons conducted in homes and private centres (Katsinde, 2022).

Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened this transformation because extended school shutdowns forced teachers to deliver paid instruction at home, which became more common after the pandemic ended (Sibanda, 2022). Moreover, the government's prohibition on schools charging for additional lessons created a situation where these activities moved further underground to private tutoring centres and teachers' homes (Bukaliya, 2022). This rising shadow education system operates without any regulatory framework, thereby resulting in many serious safeguarding dangers that include possible physical, emotional and sexual abuse (Bray, 2024; Bukaliya, 2019). As a result, NFHBS operations require investigation because of their lack of standardised infrastructure, which includes fenced yards and recognised sanitation systems, to establish necessary regulations that will protect minor students who attend these programs.

Problem Statement

While the existing child protection and educational regulations in Zimbabwe function according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and national law requirements, they nevertheless fail to effectively and explicitly regulate the fast-expanding non-formal educational system, which includes private schools and home-based learning centres. Specifically, the absence of explicit and effective regulations for these learning centres enables operators in these environments to operate without background checks, child protection training or established reporting methods, thereby creating dangerous conditions for children. Since the existing top-down monitoring framework is detached from the survivalist socio-economic experiences motivating the shadow education sector, it produces an environment of child invisibility. Consequently, a need for the development of an effective safeguarding model, which intentionally bridges formal policies with informal practices, stands as an urgent requirement for implementation.

Research Question

The central research question guiding this study is:

- How can Zimbabwe's urban Non-Formal Home-Based Schools (NFHBS) be effectively regulated to protect children while maintaining educational access for disadvantaged families?

Research Objectives

To address this question, the study pursues the following specific objectives:

1. To critically evaluate current Zimbabwean child protection and education statutes to determine their practical relevance and regulatory scope over non-formal, home-based educational institutions.

2. To examine the operations and related child protection vulnerabilities and risks inherent in non-formal, home-based educational schools across diverse urban settings.

3. To analyse the key factors motivating the rapid growth and expansion of non-formal, home-based educational schools.

4. To propose an appropriate, practical, and resource-efficient model for the governance and monitoring of home-based informal schools within Zimbabwe.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory offers a framework for understanding the complex influences on child development across different settings. This theory suggests that children exist within a series of interconnected systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem that together shape their experiences and growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Barcelata Eguiarte, 2022). Global research shows that child outcomes result from both their individual characteristics and the long-term interactions with their current environment (Tong & An, 2024; Tudge, 2016). In the context of NFHBSs, this framework enables a detailed exploration of the vulnerabilities children face, thereby highlighting the dynamic interactions among individual, family, community, and societal factors that shape educational experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Globally, the microsystem of home-based education in high-income areas has often been explored through the angles of educational choice and pedagogical philosophy (Thomson, 2018; Yin, 2022). Although Global North educational systems are well-regulated, scholars have observed that their exosystemic measures often clash with the microsystemic freedom of home-based learning systems, creating discord that impedes safeguarding efforts (Hamilton, 2022; Lees, 2014). For instance, in the USA and Canada, NFHB education is a well-established microsystem, typified by a sound official emphasis on parental liberty. Studies have shown that while some states, like Pennsylvania, have high control over NFHBs, other states, like Texas, have low control over them (Bosetti & Pelt, 2017). Within this landscape have been debates over the lack of regulatory control of home schools, which some scholars have argued creates a safeguarding vacuum (Bartholet, 2020). Despite these debates, evidence shows that homeschooled students develop better social-emotional resilience because of stable and customised direct experiences (Zhang & Gibson, 2024; Seiver & Pope, 2022).

In contrast, studies in Europe show that education systems function as shared community resources that need strong government oversight (Liao et al., 2024). Research conducted in the United Kingdom reveals that ever since 2009, there has been increased mesosystemic cooperation between local authorities and families. This comes at a time when English and Welsh regulations now require compulsory registration of home schools to

keep track of children who might otherwise become invisible to social services (Badman, 2009; Myers, 2023). On the contrary, the macrosystems of Germany and France uphold stricter educational systems than those of other nations. On the one hand, Germany prohibits homeschooling to protect social unity and educational diversity (Donnelley, 2016), while on the other hand, France has implemented a new authorisation system since 2021 to prevent separatism and radicalisation in non-regulated home educational spaces (Machnikowski & Kosmynka, 2025).

In South and Southeast Asia, NFE takes the form of shadow education and slum schools that local communities establish to serve the urban poor. While the Shiksha Karmi bridge schools project in India has been praised for addressing literacy gaps between rural and marginalised communities (UNESCO, 2015), research shows that health and sanitation facilities still need improvement as they present major safety hazards. This is supported by Sharma and Pattanayak (2022), who aver that their existing buildings lack essential public health and fire safety measures. Correspondingly, while the implementation of the one-room school system, in Bangladesh's BRAC model, has received global recognition, researchers show that insufficient institutional exosystemic control results in weak child protection (Richardson, 2018). In these settings, safeguarding becomes secondary to teaching objectives, resulting in dangerous safety conditions where children remain hidden from official state assessments because these schools lack official property documentation (Mia et al., 2022).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the main method for educating marginalised groups is NFE, which gives access to pastoralist communities and street-involved youth. The flexible nature of NFE programs in these spaces operates as a double-edged sword, as it also entails risks. For instance, Quartey (2024) observes that while vocational NFE centres in Ghana function as pathways to economic independence, they lack standardised child protection systems. This lack of child protection systems exposes students to dangerous work conditions and physical punishment that people disguise as traditional mentoring. Similarly, studies in East Africa's low-cost private schools (LCPS) in Nairobi's informal settlements reveal that many parents chose to send their children to private unregistered schools with poor facilities by passing better-resourced government (Oketch et al., 2012). This shadow educational system creates a major mesosystemic gap, rendering a child's physical health entirely dependent on community organisers with limited resources, as they lack access to state-funded health screenings and school feeding programs.

Coming to the Zimbabwean landscape, NFE has evolved into a critical yet contested mesosystemic bridge necessitated by persistent socio-economic instability. The national macrosystem relies on both the Education Amendment Act (2020) and the National NFE Policy (UNESCO, 2020), which together establish inclusive educational rights for all students, especially those from marginalised groups. While these policies attempt to promote inclusive education, enactment shows a major disconnection between policy objectives and their actual application in specific areas. As the formal educational system collapses due to hyperinflation, teacher shortages, and infrastructural decay, the growth of unregistered, home-based schools reflects an organic community response to state failure (Amnesty International, 2024).

Quantifying these home-based shadow schools in Zimbabwean urban settings is a challenge because they operate outside official census and registration systems. This lack of statistical visibility may not be equated with non-existence. Instead, their acute existence is shown by a rise in media reports, and Non-Governmental Organizational observations (Amnesty International, 2024; Buwerimwe, 2019; Nkala, 2021). Moreover, the government's own reactive policies, such as the recent banning of extra lessons in private homes and unregulated centers, serve as a formal acknowledgement of a phenomenon that has gone out of hand to ignore (Matabvu, 2025). Furthermore, reports citing critical school shortages in high-density urban areas such as Harare and Cowdray Park in Bulawayo provide empirical evidence accounting for this mushrooming (Jaravazam, 2025). Scholars contend that this growth of home-based schools occurs in a regulatory vacuum, where educational flexibility creates risks for child protection. Goronga and Muchenje (2020) assert that while

the informal microsystems in high-density urban areas offer educational opportunities, they lack protective measures characteristic of formal institutions, such as mandatory staff vetting, safety inspections, and standardised reporting protocols.

A Relational-Ecosystemic Framework

While the existing safeguarding frameworks, which include Ecosystemic and Risk/Resilience and Three-Pillar models, depend on Western-centric bureaucratic systems, they frequently fail to reach the unregulated areas of Zimbabwe's NFHBSs. To address this gap, this study uses the Ubuntu indigenous philosophy, which means "I am because we are", to establish cultural authenticity while creating a strong research foundation (Mbiti, 1969). By integrating Ubuntu philosophy, safeguarding subsequently evolves from its nature as a set of externally imposed rules into a shared ethical duty when human connections and community relations become the focus. Furthermore, Ubuntu redefines a child as a communal asset, thereby enabling neighbours and elders, and local leaders, to function as informal supervisors who will compensate for the lack of formal institutional oversight.

This resultant hybrid conceptual model unites structured preventative methods with traditional communal responsibility methods and restorative justice principles. While the formal models establish the legal framework, Ubuntu serves as the cultural connection which builds the mesosystem by transforming community interactions into an active protective network. Within this framework, harm is viewed both as a legal violation and a damage to community ties, which needs relationship restoration and balance restoration, together with taking responsibility for the offence. Ultimately, this approach creates a protection system which combines technical excellence with strong connections to the urban Zimbabwean social and cultural traditions.

Child Protection and Regulatory Frameworks

Zimbabwe's child protection and education legislation has undergone a series of reforms aimed at strengthening children's rights, enhancing school safety, and addressing emerging vulnerabilities in the digital era, during public health crises, and within the shifting socio-economic landscape. For instance, the Education Amendment Act of 2020 introduced progressive reforms, including the prohibition of corporal punishment, the right of pregnant students to remain in school, and increased emphasis on inclusive education for children with disabilities (Ndoma & Moyo-Nyede, 2023). In effect, these reforms reflect broader international commitments, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

Similarly, the Children's Act, also amended in recent years, seeks to strengthen protection against abuse, neglect, exploitation, and harmful cultural practices (Moyo, 2019). To this end, amendments have attempted to align national legislation with modern child protection approaches, including improved reporting mechanisms, multi-sectoral collaboration, and community-based protection structures. However, despite this legal progress, enforcement remains inconsistent. Specifically, limited resources, staff shortages, bureaucratic fragmentation, and inadequate training for front-line workers undermine effective implementation. This paper argues that without adequate institutional capacity, even the best-designed protective frameworks may fail to reach children most at risk.

In tandem with these views, the regulatory landscape surrounding unregistered schools has become a matter of increasing urgency. Notably, government directives issued in 2025 ordering the closure of unregistered learning institutions underscore persistent governance challenges. Authorities have expressed concern that these schools may expose children to unsafe environments, unqualified educators, and exploitative practices. Nevertheless, closing such institutions without providing accessible alternatives risks exacerbating

educational exclusion, particularly for poor urban families who rely on these schools due to overcrowding and inadequate infrastructure in public schools.

A tension therefore emerges; while Zimbabwe's legal framework is progressive in recognising children's rights and promoting inclusive education, it is less equipped to respond to the realities of the home-based, informal education landscape, which does not fit neatly into existing categories of formal or non-formal programmes. Consequently, the resulting regulatory vacuum has significant implications for children's safety, learning outcomes, and long-term development.

METHOD

Research Design

The study uses an interpretive qualitative methodology, recognising the multifaceted nature of reality as shaped by social interactions and the subjective understandings of individuals (Putnam & Banghart, 2017). In line with the study's objectives, a grounded theory (GT) design was utilised. GT is a systematic approach that seeks to discover or construct theoretical frameworks derived from data, using rigorous comparative analysis (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

Study Setting

The study was conducted in three urban centres of Plumtree, Masvingo, and Rusape in Zimbabwe. These centres collectively reflect the ethnic diversity of the country's population. Plumtree, a border town in Matabeleland South with an estimated population of 14, 460, is the smallest, followed by Rusape, located in Manicaland with a population of 37, 907. In contrast, Masvingo, located in Masvingo province, is the largest with a population of 122,019 (ZimStat, 2022). Despite their varied geographical contexts, a notable characteristic shared among these centres is the significant population growth rate, which has arguably partly contributed to the emergence of both private schools and NFHBSs. The selection of these centres for the study was predicated on the researchers' personal connections: two researchers are originally from Rusape, one from Masvingo, and the other from Bulawayo. This geographical connection facilitated extended engagement and persistent observation, vital for GT to capture hidden operations that outsiders might not have been able to see.

Sampling Strategy and Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the study. Two types of purposive sampling were employed: intensity sampling and maximum variation sampling. Intensity sampling focuses on selecting information-rich cases that exemplify the phenomenon under investigation with a high degree of intensity. In contrast, maximum variation sampling prioritises the selection of participants who share common characteristics but possess diverse and unique experiences (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). Researchers endeavoured to include a range of stakeholders such as parents, students, operators of the NFHBSs, education officers, and law enforcement personnel. Consequently, intensity sampling was utilised for selecting stakeholders, while maximum variation sampling was applied to the selection of students. Most students were in public schools, in either Ordinary or Advanced Levels, and sought extra lessons in core subjects such as Mathematics, General Science, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, and English. **Table 1** shows the participant breakdown.

Forty percent of the participants were students, while stakeholders made up the remaining 60 percent. To ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned codenames, X 1-10 for those from Masvingo, Y 1-10 for participants from Rusape, and Z 1-10 for those from Plumtree.

Table 1. Participant Breakdown (N=30)

	Participant category	Number		%
		Male	Female	
1	Parents	3	3	20
2	NFHBS Students	6	6	40
3	NFHBS Tutors	3	3	20
4	Education Officers	2	1	10
5	Police Officers	1	2	10
6	Total	15	15	100

This diverse composition of participants facilitated the exchange of varied perspectives, authentic beliefs, and values through in-depth discussions, thereby illuminating the intricate legal, cultural, and communal factors that underpin Zimbabwe's non-formal education system (Hesse-Biber, 2010).

Data Collection

Data was collected from July to August 2025, when the researchers were on their vacation. To gather comprehensive data, the research team implemented strategies designed to ensure the incorporation of the four fundamental components of GT, namely constant comparison, theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, and memo writing. As outlined by Aldiabat and Le Navenec (2018), these components necessitate the continuous comparison of newly collected data with previously gathered information, the collection of data driven by concepts that emerge from ongoing analyses, the saturation of categories, and the diligent documentation of the researchers' thoughts, ideas, and analytical processes. To effectively sustain the GT methodology, a triangulated approach was employed, incorporating three primary techniques: semi-structured interviews with parents and tutors who operated the NFHBSs, focus group discussions with the students, and key informant interviews involving education officers and police officers. Furthermore, the researchers conducted observational assessments across three specific domains: the state of infrastructure, the availability of gender-sensitive facilities, and the various risks that girls encounter within their home environments.

Data Analysis

Researchers adhered to the stages of Grounded Theory (GT) for data analysis, drawing upon the framework proposed by Chun Tie et al. (2019). The process commenced with meticulous data collection and initial familiarisation, which are essential steps in establishing a robust foundation for subsequent analysis. Following this, the researchers engaged in open coding to generate preliminary codes, which served as the basis for the next analytical phase. Subsequently, researchers engaged in axial coding, where related codes were systematically organised to reveal significant connections and explore the relationships that surfaced. This analytical trajectory culminated in selective coding, emphasising theoretical integration. This stage proved particularly pivotal for the current inquiry, as it enabled the synthesis of all categories around a central core category. The outcome of this rigorous process was the formulation of a cohesive theory that illuminates the NFHBS phenomenon, augmented by an innovative three-tiered framework. This framework not only underscores the frequently neglected dimensions of the classroom environment but also cultivates a space for collective visibility and ethical accountability.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured through inter-coder checking, member-checking, peer debriefing, and an audit trail (Nowell et al., 2017). Inter-coder checking involved multiple researchers independently coding the data and subsequently comparing interpretations to ensure consistency and minimise subjective bias. Member-

checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to verify the accuracy and authenticity of the interpretations. Peer debriefing entailed engaging knowledgeable colleagues to critically interrogate the research process and emerging themes. In addition, an audit trail was maintained through systematic documentation of methodological decisions, data management procedures, and analytic steps, thereby enhancing transparency, dependability, and confirmability of the study. In the end, the emerging themes were linked to both the ecological model and Ubuntu philosophy to create a safeguarding framework represented by a three-tier triangle.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of safeguarding issues addressed in this study, rigorous ethical procedures were implemented. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with additional assent secured from minors alongside consent from their guardians (Cotrim et al., 2021). Participants were fully briefed on the purpose of the study, their voluntary involvement, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty (Sieber, 1992). Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information from transcripts and reports. Data were securely stored and accessible only to the research team. Care was taken to protect vulnerable participants by creating safe interview environments, avoiding potentially distressing questioning, and providing referral information for support services where necessary. Additionally, the study used relational ethics, which went beyond informed consent requirements through Ubuntu-based ethical standards that required local leaders to participate as study watchdogs who would validate the research as a community assessment rather than as a threat to illegal educational institutions.

Limitations of the Study

Despite a rigorous methodology and valuable insights provided by this study, there are some limitations to mention. To begin with, a small sample size (n=30) implies that the study findings may not be generalised to a wider population. Following GT practises, the sample was designed to obtain theoretical and conceptually-rich findings, not extensive demographic representation. Secondly, as a result of its narrow geographical focus, the study findings may only be applicable to urban areas within Zimbabwe. In addition, although its broader conceptual categories may be applicable throughout the Global South, the unique socio-economic challenges of the Zimbabwean environment are a determining factor influencing stakeholders' decisions. Thirdly, the results may have been affected by social desirability bias from parents who may have hidden some dangers in order to support the results-safety paradox assumption. Finally, the sensitive and legally grey nature of unofficial schools made it hard for the researchers to independently verify reported abuse cases and unorthodox pedagogical practices. To mitigate these limitations, the research team relied more on data triangulation, observational field notes, and relational ethics to maximise the trustworthiness and dependability of the generated framework.

FINDINGS

The qualitative data synthesised from urban areas X, Y, and Z reveal an intersection of economic necessity, indigenous communal values, and the underlying safeguarding risks inherent in unregulated domestic learning landscapes. By applying Grounded Theory, combining constant comparison and axial coding, various categories emerged. To ensure academic rigour, the presentation of findings differentiates between direct researcher observations, verified institutional data, and participant-reported perceptions.

Regulatory Invisibility and Operational Disconnect

A primary finding in this study is the disconnect between the policy and the operational reality of the shadow education sector. Using key informant interviews with education officers, the researchers identified an exosystemic paralysis. All three (100%) ministry officials acknowledged that the current policies are designed exclusively for brick-and-mortar institutions, leaving home-based schools in a vacuum of accountability.

> *"Our laws presuppose formal registration; home-based setups often operate in legal grey areas. While child protection principles exist, their implementation is nearly impossible without registration or monitoring." (Participant X1).*

Similarly, about 80% of tutors admitted to bypassing official channels, citing a lack of clarity and fear of bureaucratic shutdowns. Furthermore, in urban area Z, a constant comparison of participant narratives revealed that about 50% of participants intimated that reports of misconduct often resulted in no "visible action" (Participant Z9). This shows that the regulatory vacuum functions effectively, may offer informal operators a status of functional impunity, with potential to aggravate the safeguarding risks for learners in these unseen spaces.

Infrastructure and Physical Safety Vulnerabilities

In line with the GT approach of triangulating interviews with observational assessments, the researchers assessed the physical microsystems across three domains: make, gender-sensitive facilities, and environmental risks. Field observations in urban areas X, Y, and Z highlighted significant environmental risks. Precisely, about 71% of observed centres use garage-cum-classrooms or rented domestic spaces that were never designed for high-density occupancy.

In urban area X, researchers observed a makeshift car garage serving as a classroom, described as "congested with many benches but little space" (Observer X1). While some operators (Participant Y6), a tutor reported building external toilets for tenants, axial coding revealed a lack of gender-separated facilities.

In addition, observational field notes across the three sites confirmed about 80% absence of fenced boundaries and evacuation procedures, with about 50% of parents (X8, Y3, Y5) reporting that minor injuries from uneven surfaces and stray animals are common.

The Erosion of Microsystemic Boundaries

Focus group discussions with students and intensity sampling of parents underlined a breakdown of microsystemic boundaries. In urban area Z, axial coding linked intensive revision to the phenomenon of all-night lessons. Data shows that 60% of student participants consistently attended these night lessons, which operate with minimal public sight. Under these conditions, the traditional domestic boundary between a safe home and a commercialised, high-pressure educational facility disappears. Students stated that because these lessons usually take place in congested living areas, it left them susceptible to obscured relational boundaries, unmonitored peer-to-peer relations, and unrestrained adults in the camouflage of the night.

One parent (Participant Z9) reported allegations of domestic exploitation (cleaning and cooking for teachers) and student pregnancies. While these remain subjective participant reports, Grounded Theory treats these perceptions as the socially constructed reality of the community. In urban area X, 80% of participants cited a verified instance of a teacher's incarceration for sexual assault, as did all the police officers. This served as a negative case during coding to validate the gravity of existing risks.

Theoretical sampling revealed that while parents value academic results, they lack the tools for formal vetting. In urban area Z, about 60% of participants expressed concern over unverifiable teachers who came "from

elsewhere" (Participant Z7), yet about 40% of parents across the three sites admitted that "qualifications don't matter as long as children pass Maths" (Participant Y5).

The Results-Safety Paradox

A significant category that emerged from the data is the results-safety paradox. Using the "Ndinoshanda zvinoenderana nemari" (I work according to the pay) philosophy (Participant X7) as a starting point; it is postulated that parents knowingly sacrifice safety for individualised instruction. About 70% of parents reported that they sent their children for extra lessons, as they perceived the ineffectiveness of public schools, characterised by demoralised teachers and constant threats of strikes. Smaller class sizes in urban area X (Participants X3, X5) were identified by about 30% of parents as a reason for preferring unregistered home schools, which they described as superior to crowded public classrooms. This creates a dependency trap where about 50% of parents stated that, despite awareness of physical or moral risks, they hesitate to report misconduct for fear of losing the academic progress provided by informal school tutors "in difficult subjects like Mathematics", (Participant Z4).

The synthesis of these findings through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory reveals a mesosystemic rupture. Although the microsystem of the shadow education appears to be flourishing due to the need for academic support, this system continues to operate as a remote educational outpost. The exosystem of government regulatory bodies has little reach to monitor these private learning areas, while the macrosystem of national policy remains disconnected from the socio-economic survivalism driving this development. As a result, the safety of students rests on a results-safety paradox. To remedy this situation, a change from an overly bureaucratic safeguarding model to one that applies the Relational-Ecosystemic approach, changing the community from being passive observers to active safeguarding guardians.

DISCUSSION

From the foregoing, the findings illustrate a systemic failure within the Ecological Systems framework, especially when viewed through the lens of Ubuntu philosophy. At the Macrosystem level, Zimbabwe's economic instability has forced education into the informal hustle, where the Ubuntu principle of collective care is often sidelined by the immediate necessity of academic survival. Indeed, extra lessons carried out in these shadow schools have, for a while, been seen to be motivated more by the desire to raise extra cash for greedy teachers who felt that they were being underpaid by their employer (Nkala, 2021). While such views are debatable, what is clear is that the socio-economic situation in the country may be promoting the mushrooming of such schools, thereby creating a lot of safeguarding vulnerabilities for the children involved.

Furthermore, the vetting of teachers based on general demeanour rather than Ministry of Education and police clearance shows that communities are attempting to apply Ubuntu social vetting but lack the formal tools to do so effectively. When the exosystem (government policy) fails to provide a low-cost, simplified registration path, it subsequently drives the entire sector underground, making children invisible to social services and formal child protection officers. This phenomenon was echoed by Ndengo & Bukaliya (2022), who revealed that costly registration processes directly supported the rise of unregulated shadow centres, effectively stripping away the protective layers of the community in Marondera urban district.

In addition, the mesosystem is particularly fractured, representing a breakdown in the 'I am because you are' social contract. As Quartey (2024) suggests, a broken mesosystem creates safeguarding gaps, thereby exposing children to danger. In the case of urban area Z, a disturbing dilemma arises where parents are "grateful that their children pass" while at the same time expressing concern that their daughters "evade house chores" and return home late at night. This suggests that the "success narrative" has become a protective shield for predatory behaviour, thus distorting the Ubuntu value of respect for elders into a tool for exploitation. Moreover,

these findings mirror awful cases reported across the country where the 'village' failed to protect children in these shadow schools. For instance, in 2019, a teacher from Bulawayo was convicted of raping a high school student he was offering extra lessons for English in a home set up (Buwerimwe, 2019). Similarly, in 2022, a teacher in Filabusi appeared in court for allegedly sexually abusing primary school minors he was tutoring (Nkala, 2021).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Figure 1 presents the study's three-tier safeguarding model framework, which creates operational functions of the Ubuntu principle through the formation of community-based safeguarding clusters that function as decentralised management systems. The model transforms child protection into a community responsibility by bringing together parents, neighbours, and local leaders, shifting child protection from being a distant government matter to a collective communal duty. The community-based method provides the community with complete visibility while it eliminates the operational freedom that exists without consequences in urban NFHBSs. This system ensures that tutors follow shared ethical standards even when government officials are not present.

Tier 1: Community-Led Safeguarding Clusters (Ubuntu layer)

First, guided by intensity cases identified in the three urban areas, this model proposes the establishment of a community-based system of child monitoring. These would consist of trusted local leaders and caregivers who carry out systematic village inspections on home-based learning spaces, thereby ensuring that the private teachers never operate in complete isolation. Community organisations establish a communal covenant when they accept a tutor because they create an agreement that goes beyond standard business contracts. They also maintain a local tutor register. Instead of heavy-handed Ministry policing, local ward committees or combined School Development Committees (SDCs) should maintain a register of home-based tutors. Tutors should be required to show a Police and Ministry of Education clearance to the committee. In line with the Ubuntu concept, this shifts oversight from the distant Ministry to the local village community.

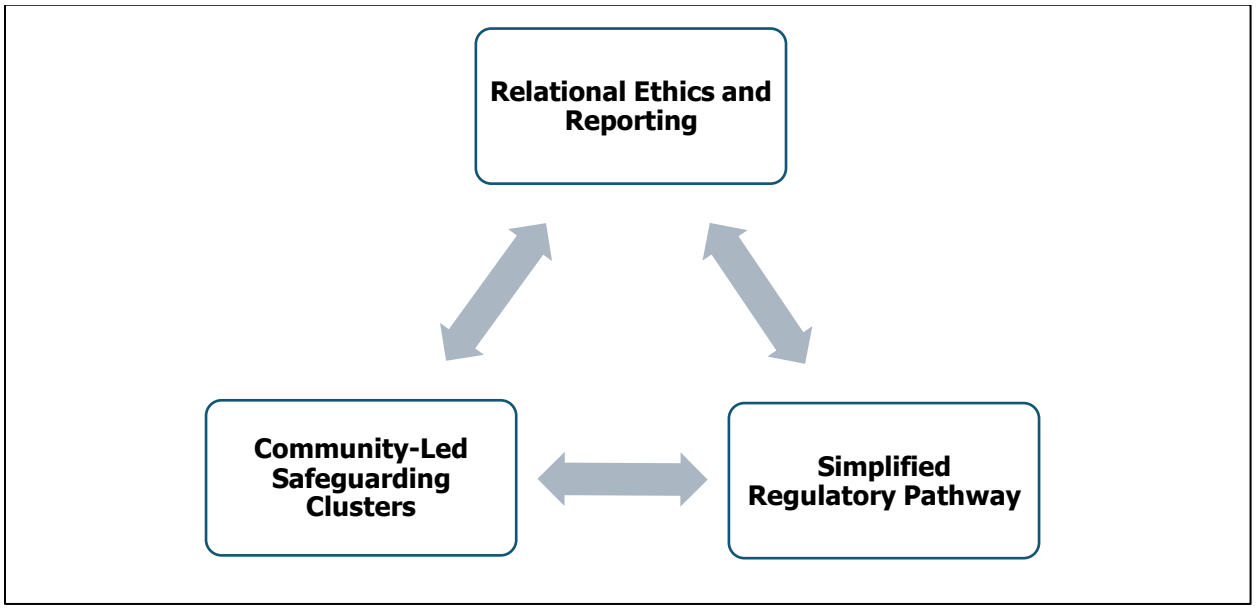

Figure 1. Proposed three-tier safeguarding model (Source: Authors)

Tier 2: The Simplified Regulatory Pathway (Exosystem Layer)

Second, to address the regulatory invisibility reported by education officers, the government must implement a low-cost registration process. This will be facilitated by the District Schools Inspectors (DSIs) in collaboration with Social Workers, who use a minimum safety checklist to facilitate regular vetting clinics where teachers register without travelling to major cities or paying a lot of registration fees. By eliminating high monetary and bureaucratic barriers reported by participants and literature, the state can subsequently establish basic safety vetting for these schools through their transition from the shadows to formal registration.

Tier 3: Relational Ethics and Reporting (Microsystem Layer)

Finally, the framework proposes establishing a mandatory code of conduct that derives its principles from relational ethics. This system enables community members to monitor teacher performance because teachers must account for both their local community obligations and their distant Ministry requirements, thereby transforming child protection into a communal ethical obligation rather than an external mandate. Here MoPSE is responsible for making sure that all policy matters in Tier 1 and Tier 2 align with the supreme national policy.

By combining these three layers, the proposed framework establishes a secure and transparent educational environment. As a result, students can achieve academic success without endangering their safety because educational requirements have been successfully matched with community security needs.

Implementation Roadmap and Responsibility

The proposed three-tier model is implemented through a bottom-up manner, where the community functions as the principal engine for oversight, backed up by the government (see **Table 2**). To operationalise this model and make it a legally binding requirement rather than just a voluntary framework, three adjustments need to be made. First, the government must officially recognise Non-Formal Home-Based Learning Centres from which local SDC authorities will derive the legal mandate to obtain credentials from home-based tutors. Second, Ward Committees must be given legal authority to conduct low-level inspections that assess safety without inspecting curriculum matters. Doing this retains the government's responsibility to ensure safety even inside private educational spaces. Lastly, policy should be adjusted to empower community safeguarding members in Tier 1 to safely report any suspected abuse.

Avoiding Surveillance and Privacy Concerns

It is imperative to observe that informal oversight could lead to unintended consequences such as surveillance, privacy concerns, and further exclusion of the poor. To address such eventualities, two key measures must be put in place. First, to address surveillance and privacy concerns, Tier 1 structures must adopt a relational ethics approach rather than a policing one. This can be achieved through mentorship and resource-sharing rather than instant closure. In addition, to address privacy concerns, minimal safety data like names, identity registration number, and police clearance should be collected and not data on, say, pedagogical processes or political affiliations, ensuring that the home remains a private domain of learning.

Table 2. Implementation Roadmap

Level		Responsible biActor	Legal Tool	Protective Mechanism
1	Local	Safeguarding Cluster	Local ward bylaws	Communal surveillance (Ubuntu)
2	District	DSI/ Social Welfare	Statutory instrument	Vetting & resource support
3	National	Ministry of Education	Policy directives	Legal recognition & data privacy

Second, to help prevent further exclusion of the poor, the model uses incentivisation over punishment. Here, tutors who register with the local Tier 1 structures receive free access to state-vetted teaching materials and invitations to government-led professional development workshops. Moreover, all local registration fees are waived. The only cost of entry is simply the commitment to the communal social contract, such as agreeing to no all-night lessons and allowing monthly peer visits.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that Zimbabwe's Non-Formal Home-Based Schools (NFHBS) operate within a dangerous safeguarding void. Through its analysis of educational laws and empirical evidence from three urban areas, it exhibits that the informal sector serves as an essential part of the education system, yet it operates with dangerous security risks. Moreover, results demonstrate a safety paradox because public sector decline forces parents to depend on a shadow system, which requires them to compromise their child's safety to guarantee academic achievement. The most severe consequences of this trade-off appear through the increased frequency of all-night lessons, coupled with the breakdown of professional boundaries that occur in residential environments.

It has been established that safeguarding systems presently in operation face a fundamental failure that extends beyond management problems toward core belief systems. The bureaucratic system, which seeks to control classroom activities, cannot function in its intended purpose because it lacks essential cultural elements to access private domestic environments. To address this gap, the study proposes a new governance system that combines bureaucratic and African traditional systems by implementing Ubuntu. This framework achieves cultural legitimacy and operational strength because it defines safeguarding as a community duty, which sees children as shared community resources and requires local communities to protect their children from external authorities. Ultimately, making the unseen classroom visible requires more than just punitive actions; rather, a restorative process, integrating community monitoring, open-access requirements, and registration reform.

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