



New Trends
in Psychology

Child Online Safety and Parental Intervention: A Study of Zimbabwean Internet Users

Maxwell Sandada¹, Gift Kalisto Machengete², Rumbidzai Panavanhu³,
Lameck Chinodya⁴, Makawonesu Mandipezano⁵

Abstract: Objectives: Ensuring child online safety is a shared responsibility among parents, children, and educators. This article underscores the collaborative nature of the solution, exploring how parents and teachers can intervene in children's online safety to ensure responsible digital citizenship among children. **Prior work:** Despite extensive research (Wright, 2011; Tapscott, 2009), there remains a gap in understanding the effectiveness of parental and teacher involvement across different contexts, particularly in Zimbabwe. **Approach:** A quantitative research approach was adopted. Two thousand seven hundred eighty children aged 8 to 18 were interviewed, constituting 55% girls and 45% boys

¹ Research and Development Unit, Postal & Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe, Address: 1110 Performance Close Mt Pleasant Business Park, Harare, Zimbabwe, Corresponding author: sandada@potraz.zw.

² Director General, Postal & Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe, Address: 1110 Performance Close Mt Pleasant Business Park, Harare, Zimbabwe, E-mail: machengete@potraz.zw.

³ Research and Development Unit, Postal & Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe, Address: 1110 Performance Close Mt Pleasant Business Park, Harare, Zimbabwe, E-mail: panavanhu@potraz.zw.

⁴ Research and Development Unit, Postal & Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe, Address: 1110 Performance Close Mt Pleasant Business Park, Harare, Zimbabwe, E-mail: chinodya@potraz.zw.

⁵ Research and Development Unit, Postal & Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe, Address: 1110 Performance Close Mt Pleasant Business Park, Harare, Zimbabwe, E-mail: mandipezano@potraz.zw.



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across all ten provinces in Zimbabwe. Data was collected using questionnaires. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse data. **Results:** The main finding from the study was that children are more likely to receive help from parents than teachers when faced with online difficulties, explaining good versus bad websites, suggesting safe internet use, guiding online behaviour, and dealing with past online issues. **Implications:** The results underscore the important role parents play in ensuring children's online safety in internet use. **Value:** The findings of this study will be used to develop educational programs and policies that will empower parents and teachers to create a safe digital environment for the younger generation.

Keywords: child; online safety; parents; teachers; digital citizenship

1. Introduction

In the ever-evolving digital landscape, the safety of children online has become a paramount concern. While the internet offers a vast array of educational and social opportunities, it harbours potential dangers, and it also poses significant risks that may have adverse impacts on the psychosocial and sexual development of children, (Dzoro, Chikereni & Gwenzi, 2019) including cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate content, and privacy breaches. This issue is particularly pertinent in Zimbabwe, where many children access the internet through mobile phones, tablets, and other devices at home, school and Community Information Centres. Therefore, parents are responsible for protecting and safeguarding children from hazardous information (Abd Rahman, Jaafar, Ismail & Mohamad, 2022).

The pivotal role of parental intervention in safeguarding children online cannot be overstated. Parents, armed with practical strategies, have the power to foster responsible digital citizenship among their children. This empowerment ensures that children use digital technology ethically, safely, and responsibly. Responsible digital citizenship enables children to participate, cooperate, and safely become lifelong learners and active members of today's digital society. By taking an active role in their children's online activities, parents can make a significant difference in creating a safer digital environment for their children (Richardson & Samara, 2022).

The recent Child Online Safety study revealed that 89% of children in Zimbabwe access the Internet at home, with a significant number using the Internet at school. The role played by teachers cannot, therefore, be underestimated, as cemented by recent studies that detail that schools have an essential role to play in teaching young children and adults safe and effective ways of using communication technologies. (Govender & Skea, 2015).

This study explores the current practices and strategies parents in Zimbabwe employ to protect their children online. By examining these practices and drawing on insights from the National Child Online Safety in Zimbabwe 2024 study, we aim to identify practical approaches parents can adopt. These approaches include guidance, monitoring, and control measures that help mitigate online risks while promoting positive digital experiences. Through this research, we hope to contribute to a safer online environment for Zimbabwean children by empowering parents with the knowledge and tools necessary to navigate the digital world alongside their children. Ultimately, this study seeks to promote a collaborative approach involving parents, educators, and policymakers in creating a more secure and positive online experience for the next generation.

1.1. Problem Statement

The internet offers children a vast array of educational and social opportunities, but it also exposes them to a range of online risks like cyberbullying, inappropriate content, and privacy breaches. While parents and educators recognise these dangers, a significant gap exists in understanding how to effectively protect children while fostering responsible digital citizenship.

Parents often lack the knowledge and skills to navigate the online world with their children, struggling to set appropriate boundaries, monitor activity, and have open conversations about online safety. Similarly, educators may need more resources or training to integrate digital literacy and online safety education into their curriculum, leaving children ill-equipped to make informed decisions and protect themselves online.

This lack of clear guidance and effective interventions can seriously affect children's online safety and development. They become more vulnerable to online predators and harmful content, develop unhealthy online habits, and lack the critical thinking skills to navigate the digital world responsibly. Ultimately, this hinders their ability to become responsible digital citizens and participate positively online. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring successful parental involvement strategies like guidance, monitoring, and control while emphasising collaboration between parents, children, and educators.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

The objective is to investigate parents' and teachers' interventions in developing children who are responsible digital citizens.

- To evaluate the role of parents in children's online safety in Zimbabwe.
- To assess the role of teachers in children's online safety in Zimbabwe.
- To investigate the effectiveness of parents' and teachers' interventions in influencing children's online behaviour.
- To examine the statistical differences that exist between parents' and teachers' influences on children's online safety across age categories.

1.3. Significance of the Study

In this digital age, children are seen as digital natives. This study aims to determine whether parents or teachers are more crucial in guiding children to be responsible, ethical, and safe online. Understanding which group has a more significant influence will help develop more effective strategies for promoting online safety awareness among children. The findings will inform targeted educational programs and policies, enhancing the roles of both parents and teachers in creating a secure digital environment for the younger generation.

2. Literature Review

The digital landscape has fundamentally reshaped how children interact with technology. While this generation, often referred to as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001), possesses inherent comfort with digital devices and the internet, their proficiency raises critical concerns about online safety and ethical behaviour (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Nikken & Jansz, 2014). Consequently, parents and teachers, who have emerged as crucial figures in guiding children through this complex digital terrain (Ribble et al., 2009), play a vital and valued role in their children's online safety and ethical behaviour.

The research underscores the significant role of parental involvement in shaping children's online behaviour and ensuring their safety (Livingstone et al., 2014). Parental practices, encompassing open communication about online safety and

establishing clear rules, have significantly reduced children's exposure to harmful content and risky behaviour (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). Building on this concept, Gardner and Davis (2013) explore how the "Net Generation's" inherent digital skills require parental guidance to translate into responsible online behaviour. Studies by Nikken and Jansz (2014) further suggest that co-using digital media with children and actively mediating their online experiences can enhance their digital literacy and resilience against online threats. However, a recent e-safety framework study in Zimbabwe by Moyo et al. (2021) reveals limitations to parental involvement. The study highlights the need for strategies that address challenges like limited access or software children use to conceal content. Practical tools and strategies, such as those outlined in the NetSmartz Workshop resource (National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, n.d.), can empower parents to fulfil their crucial role. Additionally, comprehensive resources like "The Parent Guide to Internet Safety" by Milovidov and Wright (2021) can equip parents with an in-depth understanding of the online world and strategies for establishing healthy digital habits for their children.

Teachers also play a pivotal role in fostering digital literacy and responsible online behaviour among children (Hohlfeld et al., 2010). Studies by Kalmus et al. (2015) demonstrate that schools integrating comprehensive digital literacy programs into their curriculum can significantly improve students' understanding of safe online practices. Through structured lessons and discussions, teachers can equip students with critical skills to evaluate online information, navigate ethical dilemmas, and respond to cyberbullying (Smahel & Blinka, 2012). Furthermore, Ribble's (2015) framework for digital citizenship education provides a valuable guide for teachers to integrate these essential skills into the curriculum. The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) Standards for Students (2023) offer another valuable resource for educators, outlining the essential skills and knowledge students should develop for responsible and safe technology use. Additionally, Hinduja and Patchin's (2016) work on cyberbullying equips educators with knowledge and strategies to identify, prevent, and address cyberbullying within the school environment.

The relative influence of parents and teachers on children's online behaviour has been explored in various studies. Mesch (2009) highlights that while both groups exert influence, the nature and extent differ. Due to their continuous presence in the home environment, parents have a more direct and sustained impact. Conversely, teachers may have a less frequent but potentially profound influence due to their

structured educational interventions and authority in the learning context (Livingstone et al., 2011; Epstein, 2001). Despite extensive research, there remains a gap in understanding the effectiveness of parental and teacher involvement across different contexts, particularly in Zimbabwe. Research is limited regarding the relative impact of each group and the potential for a synergistic effect from their combined efforts. Investigating these nuances, particularly in rural versus urban settings and across socio-economic demographics, is crucial to optimise the roles of both parents and teachers in safeguarding children in the digital age.

The existing literature underscores the critical role of both parents and teachers in shaping responsible, ethical, and safe digital citizens. However, further research is needed to understand the relative impact of each group and the potential for collaborative strategies. This study aims to address these knowledge gaps, offering a beacon of hope for the future, by comparing the influence of parents and teachers on children's online behaviour. The findings will inform the development of more targeted and effective online safety awareness programs.

The focus on child safety cannot solely rely on individual efforts from parents and teachers. Wright and Wright (2011) propose a framework for home-school collaboration, emphasising the importance of shared responsibility and communication. Motivated by the need to bridge the "Digital Disconnect" highlighted by Tapscott (2009), which is experienced especially in developing countries like Zimbabwe, the study sought to contribute to closing the gap by addressing the above objectives and testing the following hypothesis.

3. Hypothesis Development

Building on the existing research on Child online safety, this study investigates the relative impacts of teacher and parental interventions on child online safety. The following hypothesis was tested:

H_1 : The roles of teachers and parents in children's online safety have a similar effect on children.

4. Methodology

The study used a quantitative approach to examine the correlation between parental and teacher interventions in children's online safety. The study used data collected from a child online survey conducted in Zimbabwe. For this paper, participants' awareness of online safety practices, online risks, and online behavioural attitudes were measured using categorical dummy codes: 1=Yes and 0=No.

4.1. Population and Sampling Technique

The survey targeted children aged 8 to 18 across all 10 provinces, including urban and rural areas. It included 55% girls and 45% boys, with 3,311 interviews conducted involving 2,780 children and 531 parents. Respondents were selected using a four-stage multiple-sampling technique for the interviews. The following categories developed by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe were used to define schools in this study:

- P1 and S1 Schools: Primary and secondary schools are mainly associated with high-income social class. They are mainly located in urban low-density areas. This category also includes some elite boarding schools, regardless of their location.
- P2 and S2 Schools: This category is comprised of primary and secondary schools in urban high-density areas, including government schools, as well as church-based boarding schools situated in rural areas. Schools in this category mainly serve the medium to low-income groups of society.
- P3 and S3 Schools: This category mainly comprises schools in rural areas and those serving low-income groups, regardless of location.

Income status was the main variable used to classify these schools and it resulted in three distinct classifications of schools. These categories were used in this paper to analyse the internet behaviours of children in each category.

4.2. Research Instrument

The primary tool used for the survey was a questionnaire. Data was collected through paper-aided personal interviews (PAPI); later, the Kobo digital application was used to convert the data into a digital format. For this study, children were asked if they had engaged in activities to improve their ability to use technology responsibly,

safely, and respectfully with their parents and teachers. Specifically, participants were asked if their parents and teachers had:

- Helped them when something was difficult to find on the internet,
- Explained why some websites are good or bad,
- Suggested ways to use the internet safely,
- Suggested ways to behave towards others online,
- Helped them in the past when something bothered them on the internet, and
- Discussed what to do if something on the internet bothered them.

As a measure of the impact of these co-activities, participants were also asked if they:

- Were aware of their rights on the internet,
- Were aware of the risks they are exposed to online,
- Know what to do if they encounter inappropriate content or receive messages from strangers online.

All variables in the study were evaluated using a dichotomous scale. The variables were represented as dummy variables and coded as 1 if the respondents answered yes and 0 if they answered no.

4.3. Data Analysis

SPSS version 23 was primarily used for data analysis. Both inferential and descriptive statistics were employed to analyse the data collected for the study. Association, independence, difference, and regression tests were utilised to analyse the data.

5. Results

The average age of the surveyed children/learners was 13.15 years (SD 2.84). Of the respondents, 55% were girls and 45% were boys. Overall, 73.9% of the surveyed children reported being aware of their rights on the Internet, with 66.47% indicating their awareness of the risks they are exposed to. Furthermore, 70.6% of the children

reported awareness of online safety practices, while 54.4% knew what to do if they encountered inappropriate content or received messages from strangers online. The study's results on selected risks showed that 43.5% were exposed to sexual content, 43.46% had virtual friends, and 29.7% met virtual friends in person. Regarding online behaviour, 11.4% had treated someone else in a hurtful or nasty way online.

5.1. Reliability Statistics

The Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20) was used to evaluate a test's internal consistency reliability since the data for the study is dichotomous (Ntumi et al., 2023). The KR-20 value was 0.76, indicating that the individual items in the test consistently measure the same underlying concept and are acceptably reliable. The scale will likely produce consistent and dependable results when assessing the intended dimensions.

5.2. McNemar Tests

To compare teacher and parental interventions on internet safety, we conducted a series of McNemar tests. These tests compared the proportions of children who received assistance from parents to those who received assistance from teachers in six key areas: help with online difficulties, explanations of good versus bad websites, suggestions for safe internet use, guidance on online behaviour, help with past online issues, and general discussions about potential online problems. The results of these tests provide valuable insights into the relative influence of parents and teachers in promoting children's online safety practices as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. McNemar tests

Form of guardianship: Parents vs teachers	McNemar test
Helped when something is difficult to do or find on the internet	338.05*
Explained why some websites are good or bad	20.63*
Suggested ways to use the Internet safely	22.66*
Suggested ways to behave towards other people online	61.89*
Helped you in the past when something bothered you on the Internet	208.55*
In general, talked to you about what you would do if something on the Internet ever bothered you	71.59*

* $p < 0.001$

The results in Table 1 suggest that a far greater proportion of children receive help from parents rather than teachers when facing difficulties online, as the first category has a significant McNemar statistic of 338.05 ($p < 0.001$). There was also a significant difference in the second category, with parents being more active in explaining the quality and safety of websites to their children McNemar 20.63 ($p < 0.001$). In summary, the table above displays the test statistics and p-values for each area, indicating significant differences in the types of guardianship (Parents vs. Teachers) across all aspects of digital guidance and support. This underscores the critical role of parents compared to teachers in helping children navigate the complexities of the digital world.

5.3. Chi-Square Test

The study sought to gauge the effectiveness of parents' and teachers' interventions in influencing children's online behaviour. It was found that both parents and teachers had a positive influence on children's online behaviour. There were significant associations between both sources and children's awareness of their online rights: parents ($\chi^2 = 68.08$, $p < 0.001$) and teachers ($\chi^2 = 110.44$, $p < 0.001$). A further investigation was done to check if there was an association between parents or teachers who had helped them in the past when something had bothered them on the internet and knowing what to do if they encountered inappropriate content or received messages from strangers. A significant association was found on the parents' side using the Chi-Square test with ($\chi^2 = 9.72.44$, $p = 0.002$), and teachers' efforts were again found to be not associated with children's digital empowerment in this context with ($\chi^2 = 2.38$, $p = 0.123$).

A Chi-Square association test was also conducted to examine the relationship between children's online safety practices and whether parents/guardians or teachers provided suggestions for safe Internet use. A significant association was found between children's awareness of online safety practices and parental advice on ways to use the internet safely ($\chi^2 = 118.42$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, teacher advice was significantly associated with children's knowledge of online safety practices ($\chi^2 = 86.93$, $p < 0.001$). Further examination revealed that advice from parents was significantly associated

with the frequency of exposure to sexual content ($\chi^2 = 20.55$, $p = 0.001$). In contrast, advice on good or bad websites from teachers did not show a significant association with children's frequent exposure to sexual content ($\chi^2 = 10.44$, $p = 0.064$). Additionally, both parental and teacher advice on good or bad websites were found to be significantly associated with children's awareness of the risks they are exposed to on the internet ($\chi^2 = 74.9$, $p < 0.001$) and ($\chi^2 = 110.44$, $p < 0.001$) respectively. The Chi-Square test results further revealed an association between a child treating someone in a hurtful or nasty way online and receiving advice on ways to behave towards other people online from Parents at ($\chi^2=65.33$, $p=0.006$). No significant association was found between teachers' guidance on ways to behave towards other people online and children treating other people respectfully online at ($\chi^2=0.1296$, $p=0.719$).

5.4. Logistic Regression

A multivariate analysis was conducted using logistic regression, with the dependent variable being children's online awareness. The analysis included multiple independent variables highlighted in table 2 below and necessary demographic information of the children.

Table 2. Logistic Regression Predicting children's online practices

	Model: Parents			Model: Teachers		
	Parameter Estimate	SE	Odds	Parameter Estimate	SE	Odds
11-13 years	0.703	0.24	2.02*	0.804	0.24	2.23*
14-16 years	0.639	0.337	1.895	0.819	0.335	2.27*
17-18 years	0.551	0.361	1.735	0.662	0.359	1.94
Gender (male =1)	-0.11	0.094	0.896	-0.414	0.928	0.66
School Category						
P2	-0.676	0.177	0.51**	-0.589	0.176	0.55*
P3	-1.141	0.183	0.32**	-1.091	0.183	0.34**
S1	-0.155	0.298	0.86	-0.323	0.294	0.73
S2	-0.429	0.294	0.65	-0.557	0.292	0.572
S3	-0.605	0.297	0.55*	-0.765	0.294	0.47*

Explained why some websites are good or bad	0.137	0.11	1.15	0.334	0.118	1.4
Suggested ways to use the Internet safely	0.725	0.123	2.06**	0.504	0.122	1.66**
Suggested ways to behave towards other people online	0.416	0.11	1.52**	0.25	0.110	1.28
Helped you in the past when something has bothered you on the internet	0.197	0.11	1.21	0.342	0.114	1.4*
In general, talked to you about what you would do if something on the internet ever bothered you	0.422	0.109	1.53**	0.101	0.111	1.1*
Constant	-0.5052	0.267	0.61	-0.088	0.253	0.92
-2 LL	1388.11			-1410		
R ²	0.0756			0.053		

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$

The results from the logistic regression provide clear evidence that children in Zimbabwe aged 11-13 years are significantly more likely to be aware of online safety issues when guided by parents, with an odds ratio of 2.02 and a p-value of 0.003. This suggests that these children are more than twice as likely to understand online safety as younger children aged 8-10 when they receive parental guidance. This may be attributed to the younger group's developing comprehension of online safety issues. For children older than 13, this influence decreases and becomes non-significant, indicating that as children grow older, the impact of parental guidance on their awareness of online safety diminishes. When children grow mature, they tend to be influenced by teachers and hence their online practices are more influenced by teachers than parents.

Similarly, younger children aged 11-13 and 14-16 years are significantly more likely to be aware of online safety issues when guided by teachers, with odds ratios of 2.23 ($p=0.001$) and 2.27 ($p=0.014$), respectively. This means these children are more than twice as likely to be aware of online safety issues compared to the reference category of 7-10 years when guided by teachers. However, this influence also diminishes for children aged 17-18, becoming less significant. These findings underscore the pivotal role of parental and teacher guidance during early adolescence, aligning with social learning and cognitive development theories that emphasise the heightened

receptivity of younger children to external guidance. As children mature and gain autonomy, their reliance on such guidance decreases, reflecting broader developmental trends. This research highlights the need for targeted, age-appropriate strategies to enhance online safety awareness effectively among children and adolescents.

Based on the analysis, being male does not really matter as it emerged that being a male student does not significantly impact the likelihood of being aware of online safety issues. The odds ratios are 0.896 in the parents' model and 0.66 in the teachers' model, and neither is statistically significant. This indicates that gender does not play a major role in determining a child's awareness of online safety practices when guided by either parents or teachers.

Additionally, the analysis reveals notable differences in children's awareness of online safety practices across various school categories in Zimbabwe. The significant negative parameter estimates and odds ratios for school categories P2, P3, and S3 in parents' and teachers' models suggest that children in these categories are less likely to be aware of online safety practices than those in the P1 category. In the parents' model, the odds ratios for P2, P3, and S3 are 0.51 ($p<0.001$), 0.32 ($p<0.001$), and 0.55 ($p=0.042$), respectively. This indicates that children in P2 are 49% less likely, those in P3 are 68% less likely, and those in S3 are 45% less likely to be aware of online safety practices than those in P1. Similarly, in the teachers' model, the odds ratios for P2, P3, and S3 are 0.55 ($p=0.001$), 0.34 ($p<0.001$), and 0.47 ($p=0.009$), respectively, suggesting similar trends. Schools in categories S1 and S2 were found to be insignificant, possibly due to their similarities in characteristics and resources with the P1 category.

These findings suggest that children in the P2, P3, and S3 categories may have less exposure to online safety education or fewer opportunities for guided discussions about online risks, whether parents or teachers facilitate these discussions. Several factors could contribute to this discrepancy. For instance, schools in categories P2, P3, and S3 might have fewer resources dedicated to digital literacy and online safety education than those in the more elite categories. This could include limited access to technology, fewer trained educators, and less comprehensive online safety curricula. Additionally, parents of children in the better categories might be more proactive or better informed about online safety issues, thereby providing more practical guidance. Teachers in the P2, P3, and S3 categories might not receive the same training or support to address online safety issues as those in the elite

categories, impacting their ability to guide students on safe internet practices effectively. Socioeconomic disparities between different school categories can also play a role. Schools in lower socioeconomic areas may face additional challenges that limit their ability to focus on online safety education, such as addressing basic educational needs and infrastructural deficits. The results underscore the need for the Ministry officials and policy makers in Zimbabwe's education sector and those in other developing economies to formulate deliberate policies and initiatives to close this digital divide. Providing internet infrastructure for example assistance with computers, power provision and ensuring internet accessibility in remote schools are some of the initiatives that could help in supporting these disadvantaged schools.

Furthermore, the multivariate analysis underscores the pivotal roles of parents and teachers in promoting children's awareness of online safety practices through specific activities. Parents have a substantial impact on children's online safety awareness, particularly in suggesting safe internet usage practices (odds=2.06, $p<0.05$) and advising on appropriate online behaviour (odds=1.52, $p<0.05$). Similarly, teachers significantly contribute by explaining the nature of websites and providing support when children encounter distressing online content (odds=1.4, $p<0.05$). These findings highlight the crucial influence of parental and teacher guidance in shaping children's awareness of online safety practices.

6. Conclusion

It has been proven that while parents' interventions are more effective to 13-15 years old children, teachers' influence is more effective to the 16-18 years old children. The study therefore concludes that the synergy between parental and teacher guidance is essential for a comprehensive approach to enhancing children's online safety awareness. The findings also suggest that targeted efforts from home and school environments are essential for promoting safer online behaviours among children, especially younger age groups. Therefore, schools and educational policymakers should consider developing comprehensive online safety programs involving parents and teachers, ensuring a cohesive and supportive approach to online safety education.

In terms of children's gender, the study concludes that gender does not matter as it emerged that being a male student does not significantly impact the likelihood of being aware of online safety issues. Policy makers and practitioners in the education

sector are informed that gender does not play a major role in determining a child's awareness of online safety practices when guided by either parents or teachers. Therefore, interventions to increase the children's awareness of online safety practices should be standardized rather than being gender specific.

Another important conclusion is that in Zimbabwe's education sector, there is a digital divide between privileged and disadvantaged schools. Due to their high socioeconomic status, P1 and S1 schools have more access to internet and hence are more aware of online safety issues than their counterparts in the P1 and S2 schools. Policy makers should therefore formulate and implement measures to close this gap to foster inclusivity in the digitisation drive. That way, the country can achieve its goal of attaining an inclusive digital economy.

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