

## **BUILDING TEACHERS' CAPACITY TO CREATE A SAFE AND INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR STUDENTS**

**By**

**Abubakar Ibrahim Hassan, Ph.D**

Department of Health Education and Promotion, Bayero University, Kano  
[aihassan.phe@buk.edu.ng](mailto:aihassan.phe@buk.edu.ng)

### **ABSTRACT**

To restore the past glory of educational system in Kano State and Nigeria at large, we need to implement effective and inclusive learning environment at all level of education. In line with first means of implementation of SDG 4 is “effective learning environment”. This encompasses building and upgrading learning facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive to provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environment for all students. On the other hand, Inclusive Learning Environments create accessible, welcoming, shared educational spaces that work for all students. In this case, inclusivity means accepting and including all students in the classroom, understanding and responding to differences in ability among students. Effective programmes on safe school environment can led to positive outcomes such as improved performance, access to quality education among hard-to-reach and vulnerable children, fewer suspensions and expulsions, increased time for academic instruction, as well as greater student participation. To foster inclusive and safe learning environment, teachers, schools, agencies under MOE and development partners should expanding schools’ mental health services, such as mental health and behavioral health counseling programs, hosting community experts to speak at student assemblies, train teachers and support staff, support specific student populations, create a school safety plan, building a sense of community and celebrate student achievements. All people, irrespective of sex, age, social background, religion and political opinion, type of disability, migrants, type of residency, children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations, should have access to inclusive, equitable quality education and safe learning environment.

**Key Words:** Building, Inclusive, Learning Environment, Safe, Students, Teachers’ Capacity.

### **Introduction**

To recover the past glory of educational system of Kano State and Nigeria at large, we need to implement effective and inclusive learning environment at all level of education. Furthermore, for quality and effective safe and inclusive learning environments to take place, schools should build capacity of teachers to establish a learning environment that allows all students to participate and work with issues that are challenging to them; an environment where teachers and

students express their ideas without threat of judgement or prejudice, a school where students believe that their ideas are valued, a conducive learning environment, where if a student experience conflict, compassionate teachers can help him/her to manage the conflict (Holley & Steiner, 2005).

Global Education Campaign (2024) reported that the first means of “SDG 4 Implementation” is effective and safe learning environment . This encompasses building and upgrading learning facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive to provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environment for all students

According to Hotlley and Steiner (2005), a safe learning environment is a school setting that is free of threat of emotional or psychological harm and allows students to explore difficult issues and express their views honestly. Duttweiler and Smink, (1997) stated that a safe learning environment is focused on academic achievement, maintaining high standards, fostering positive relationships between staff and students, and encouraging parental and community involvement. Furthermore, Bright (2024) explained that a safe classroom environment aims to make children feel protected and valued. It promotes trust between children and teachers, allows children to ask questions and take risks, supports children's safety and learning, and celebrates children's self-expression, diversity, and achievements. It is therefore paramount that teachers and educational leaders step up to create plans to help both their students and teachers thrive.

On the other hand, Inclusive Learning Environment create accessible, welcoming, shared educational spaces that work for all students (Augusta University, 2024). In this case, inclusivity means accepting and including all students in the classroom, understanding and responding to differences in abilities of the students and their challenges without limitations. Inclusive education allows students of all backgrounds to learn and grow side by side, to the benefit of all. According to UNICEF (2020), inclusive learning environments are increasingly recognized worldwide as a way of addressing a basic human right and transforming the face of education. When inclusive education succeeds, each student will have equal access to quality education that will prepare them for success in an increasingly interconnected and diverse global society. Some students excel at traditional academic learning, while others may have different abilities that make succeeding in a traditional learning environment a challenge

(UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2008). As such, teachers need to learn effective interpersonal skills to cope with learning situations (Hamby, 1999). It is therefore important for teachers to know how to deescalate conflict, manage it, and resolve it (Schargel & Smink, 2001).

Creating a safe learning environment is a top priority for inclusive education. This goes beyond physical safety; it encompasses a space where children feel seen, heard, and valued, laying the groundwork for deep, meaningful learning (Bright, 2024). Therefore, creating a learning environment that prioritizes our students' safety without restricting their learning opportunities is crucial to helping them reach their social and emotional developmental milestones. A safe inclusive classroom allow students explore and learn without risks to their health, safety, or well-being. It is against this background that this paper will address how teacher's capacity will be built to create a safe and inclusive learning environment.

### **Safe Learning Environment**

A safe classroom environment is one where learners feel physically, emotionally, and socially comfortable. They know that their needs are taken care of and that they are protected by caring and thoughtful teachers and members of their community (National Dropout Prevention Centre, 1996). A safe learning environment is focused on academic achievement, maintaining high standards, fostering positive relationships between staff and students, and encouraging parental and community involvement (Duttweiler & Smink, 1997).

Effective programmes on a safe school environment can lead to positive outcomes such as fewer suspensions and expulsions, increased time for academic instruction, as interruptions were reduced, greater student participation

The plan should cover behavioral and property aspects of crime prevention. There are seven basic steps in the planning process:

1. Identify your safe school planning committee members;
2. Assess data on school crime;
3. Identify school safety strategies and programs;
4. Ensure that school procedures comply with existing laws related to schools;
5. Hold a public meeting before your school adopts the plan;

6. Make the plan available for public review; and
7. Amend the plan once a year, as needed (Stephens, 2004).

### **How Education Leaders Can Foster a Safe Learning Environment**

[Shean](#) and Mander (2020) stated that while emotionally unsafe academic environments lead to stress, poor attendance and lower academic performance in students' engagement, schools deemed to be emotionally safe are linked to good identity development, positive learning experiences and a greater sense of self-worth in students.

It is therefore paramount that education leaders step up to create plans to help both their students and teachers thrive. Below are a few ways in which leadership can create a safe school environment..

1. Expanding schools' mental health services, such as mental health and behavioral health counseling programs, which are also likely to improve students' performance
2. Hosting community experts to speak at student assemblies
3. **Train Teachers and Support Staff:** Principals, deans and other school leaders should ensure that teachers and supporting staff are receiving training, resources and support in key areas of a safe school environment and students' well-being.
4. **Support Specific Student Populations: Teachers and other** Education leaders need to consider the specific student populations they are responsible for educating. They need to understand students' specific needs in order to implement emotional safety solutions that will work for them.
5. **Create a School Safety Plan:** The National Center on Safe Supporting Learning Environments (2020) reported that schools that have a school safety plan aimed at protecting students from bullying, exposure to weapons, the sale and use of drugs, harassment and violence and the schools have better student outcomes.
6. **Building a Sense of Community:** When people have a sense of community, they are likely to be healthier than people who do not. Lacking a sense of belonging is associated with stress, illness, decreased well-being and depression. Schools should empower teachers to build community within their classrooms and throughout the

school as a whole by hosting community-building events such as assembly programs and contests that celebrate school values and togetherness

7. Education leaders like principals can also build community in their schools by seeking advice from teachers, parents and students. In doing so, leaders can communicate that they value collaboration.
8. **Celebrate Student Achievements:** When teachers cultivate an environment of celebrating student achievements, they tend to see positive effects like increased student motivation, greater student self-esteem and more positive classroom environments. The celebration of student achievements also creates an opportunity for education leaders to communicate their holistic vision for student education. Rather than only celebrating academic successes, leaders can praise students for volunteerism, kindness to fellow students or achievements in the arts or athletics.

### **Inclusive Learning Environment**

Inclusive learning environments create accessible, welcoming, shared educational spaces that work for all students (Augusta University, 2024). It allows students of all backgrounds to learn and grow side by side, benefiting everyone. According to UNICEF (2020), inclusive learning environments are increasingly recognized around the world for addressing a basic human right and transforming the face of education.. Inclusivity in education means accepting and including all students in the classroom, understanding and responding to differences in ability among students and , challenging every student equally without limitations.

Teachers who believe educational opportunities should be accessible to every student can explore how earning an advanced degree equips instructors with the skills needed to contribute to the global inclusive learning movement (University of Illinois, 2024). Inclusive learning at it core provides each student with a chance to succeed in a community that welcome all and marginalizes no one.

According to Diversity for Social Impact (2023), teaching students with differing abilities together in regular classrooms or conventional schools have benefits in numerous ways. For example, inclusive classrooms recorded a 6 percent higher graduation rate compared to non-

inclusive classrooms. When inclusive education is implemented successfully, every student gains equal access to a quality education that prepares them for success in an increasingly interconnected and diverse global society while some students excel in traditional academic learning setting, others may have unique abilities that make success in environment more challenging (UNESCO, 2008)

### **Benefits of inclusive learning environments**

The benefits of these inclusive learning environments include the following:

1. **Boosting Students' Self-Esteem through a Compassionate Culture** Inclusive learning environments welcome all students and strive to show them that they are valued and valuable, regardless of any differing abilities.
2. **Helping Students Reach their Potential:** Inclusive learning ensures academic support is available for all students, regardless of differences in their cognition or physical ability or any other differences that might limit their participation in a less nurturing environment.
3. **Improving Academic Outcomes:** According to Indiana University (2022), Inclusive learning environments foster better academic outcomes. High school students with disabilities in high-inclusion classrooms scored higher on state math and reading exams than similar students in low-inclusion classrooms. The study also found that students in high-inclusion classrooms were better prepared for college and for the workplace than students in low-inclusion classrooms. Furthermore, Li and Singh (2022), stated that inclusive learning environments inspire all students to excel.
4. **Principals and Agencies under Ministry of Education can foster equity and inclusion for students by encouraging teachers to present content in multiple ways and ensuring that accommodations are offered, implemented and maintained for students who need them.**
5. **It is student-centered:** Because every child has the ability to learn and the right to reach their highest potential, an inclusive learning environment is vital.

6. An inclusive learning environment is less focused on the teacher and formal instruction and more focused on the learning that is taking place.
7. It gives opportunity for students to learn in different ways: This is important because research has shown that [children do not all learn the same way](#). Some learn through the use of pictures, graphs, and images, while others learn best through auditory means. Some students need hands-on activities that allow them to manipulate and grasp materials for better processing of new skills.
8. It helps to shape one's tolerance and acceptance of those different from oneself: Children learn to accept their own strengths and work to improve their weaknesses.
9. It is a way of finding different ways of teaching so that each child is engaged in rigorous activities by which they can grow and understand new skills and concepts.
10. It finds what works best for each child and adjusting the instruction so that everyone has a chance to meet their needs.

### **Strategies for Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment**

The following two strategies; (i) Establishing a safe classroom culture and (ii) making learning accessible are the bedrock of planning and creating inclusive learning environments.

#### **1. Establish a Safe Classroom Culture**

A teacher's highest priority when creating an inclusive learning environment should be to establish a safe classroom culture at the outset. In a setting where students feel free to share their interests, goals and setbacks with the teacher and with each other, they can also feel comfortable discovering their own paths, challenging themselves and striving for their personal best. A safe classroom culture allows students to begin to feel free to try, struggle and make mistakes along the way. Teachers can take a proactive role in establishing a safe classroom culture that fosters respect by:

- i. Setting clear classroom rules
- ii. Assigning defined student roles

- iii. Recognizing teachable moments and pointing out the lessons to be learned
- iv. Establishing guidelines for equitable and respectful interaction
- v. Performing regular teacher self-assessments to ensure they're keeping classroom culture safe

## **2. Making Learning Accessible**

The cornerstone of an inclusive learning environment is accessibility. Accessibility in education means making lessons and materials available for use by all types of students. In this way, everyone can explore the same content at the same time.

Ways to make lesson content accessible include:

- i. Giving all students any accommodations and tools they need to physically, intellectually and emotionally access lesson content
- ii. Working to create lesson content that is accessible to all students, such as audio content for visually impaired learners or auditory learners
- iii. Arranging for modifications and accommodations (such as fewer test items for some students) to meet individual needs
- iv. Collaborating with a co-teacher in the classroom, such as a special education teacher, who can help apply specific teaching techniques for differentiated instruction

## **Conclusion**

All people, irrespective of sex, age, race, ethnicity, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property or birth, as well as persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, and children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations or other status, should have access to inclusive, equitable quality education and safe learning environment.

To achieve a Safe and Inclusive Learning environments, learners should be provided with a stress-free space that encourages them to learn and explore. With diligence and care, you can create safe classrooms that not only meet the basic needs of young learners but also foster a sense of belonging, encourage curiosity, and support diverse learning styles.

## Recommendations

Based on the issues discussed in this paper, the following recommendations were made:

1. There is need of collaborative effort between teachers, school management, community, development partners and state key actors to address the key challenges that may improve safe and inclusive learning environment in Kano State.
2. State Ministry of Education, schools and teachers should consider the specific student populations they are responsible for educating, by making provision of teaching and learning equipment and facilities that will cater for each student based on his specific need and to implement emotional safety solutions that will work for them.
3. Schools should create a school safety plan that aims at protecting students from bullying, exposure to weapons, the sale and use of drugs, harassment and violence and the schools have better student outcomes.
4. Education leaders can foster a safe learning environment for students by empowering teachers to build community within their classrooms and throughout the school as a whole by hosting community-building events such as assembly programs and contests that celebrate school values and togetherness
5. Hosting community experts to speak at student assemblies and parent nights
6. Teachers at all level of education are greatly in need of professional development that is collaborative and feasible. Additionally, teacher efficacy is associated with positive attitudes toward professional development and teaching students with special educational needs
7. Schools should ensure that teachers and supporting staff are receiving training, resources and support in key areas of safe school environment and students well-being.
8. Expanding schools' mental health services, such as mental health and behavioral health counseling programs to vulnerable children, children from poor socio-economic background and broken home, which are also likely to improve students' performance.

9. To establish schools in IDP camps and make a budget in Line in Education sector budget to provide teaching and learning equipment to IDP camps and hard to reach areas
10. State Ministry of Education through Kano Senior Secondary School Management Board (KSSMB) and State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) should be posting competent teachers and those with higher qualifications to all schools in the state including schools in hard to reach communities, to make education accessible to all children.
11. Teachers should cultivate an environment for celebrating student achievements, they tend to see positive effects like increased student motivation, greater student self-esteem and more positive classroom environments.

## References

- Augusta University (2024). 5 Tips for Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment. <https://www.augusta.edu/online/blog/inclusive-learning-environment>
- Bright, W. (2024). What is a safe Learning Environment? <https://mybrightwheel.com/blog/safe-learning-environment>
- Duttweiler, P. C., & Smink, J. (1997). Critical strategies for effective dropout prevention. *School Safety Journal*, 4-9.
- Educational Development Center, Inc. (1996). *Schools and violence*. National Network of Violence Prevention Practitioners Fact Sheet, 1(3). Washington, DC: Author.
- Global Education Campaign (2024). Sustainable Development Goal 4. <https://campaignforeducation.org/en/key-frameworks/sdg-4-and-targets>
- Hamby, J. V. (1999). *Developing a comprehensive violence prevention plan: A practical guide*. Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center/Network.
- Hance, M. (2020). What is an Inclusive Learning Environment? <https://www.graduateprogram.org/2020/03/what-is-an-inclusive-learning-environment/>
- Holley, L. C. & Steiner, S. (2005). Safe space: Student perspectives on classroom environment. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 41(1), 49 -64.
- Indiana University (2022). 5 Tips for Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment. <https://www.augusta.edu/online/blog/inclusive-learning-environment>

- Li, Y. & Singh, C. (2022). Inclusive learning can improve students learning and motivational belief. *American Physical Society*, 18(2), 147-151
- Marymount University (2023). How Education Leaders Can Foster a Safe Learning Environment. <https://online.marymount.edu/blog/safe-learning-environment>
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (1996-97). *Violence and discipline problems in U.S. public schools*. U.S. Department of Education.
- National Centre for Education Statistics (2023). Mental Health Services in Public Schools. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=1130>
- Schargel, F. P.. & Smink, J. (2001). *Strategies to Help Solve our School Dropout Problem*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.
- Shean, M. & Mander, D. (2020). Building Emotional Safety for Students in School Environments: Challenges and Opportunities. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341588373\\_Building\\_Emotional\\_Safety\\_for\\_Students\\_in\\_School\\_Environments\\_Challenges\\_and\\_Opportunities/citation/download](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341588373_Building_Emotional_Safety_for_Students_in_School_Environments_Challenges_and_Opportunities/citation/download)
- Stephens, R. D. (2004). Creating safe learning environments. In F. P. Schargel & J. Smink (Eds), *Helping students graduate: A strategic approach to dropout prevention*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.
- Talley, S. (1999). *What does it take to reform a low-performing school?* Office of Educational Research: National Institute on the Education of At-Risk Students. Baltimore, MD.
- UNESCO International Bureau of Education (2008). *Inclusive education: the way of the future, general presentation of the 48th session of the ICE* [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000161565\\_eng](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000161565_eng)
- University of Illinois (2024). Nine Powerful Ways to Promote Inclusion in the Classroom. Office of Online Programs, College of Education. <https://education.illinois.edu/about/news-events/news/article/2024/04/12/nine-powerful-ways-to-promote-inclusion-in-the-classrooms>