Relationship between Primary School Children's Right of Expression and Self-Esteem in Bugiri District, Uganda

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Abstract
This study investigated the relationship between primary school children's right of expression and their self-esteem in Bugiri District, Uganda, using the explanatory mixed-method approach. The study used a sample of 236 learners through a questionnaire. Data treatment involved mean scores and Pearson correlation. The study established that while children experienced limited freedom of expression, the school culture undermined their sense of belonging and agency. The lower level of self-esteem suggests that the children were emotionally vulnerable, which may negatively affect their academic performance, social relationships, and ability to cope with challenges. Therefore, school teachers should create safe and inclusive spaces that actively promote child participation. The Directorate of Education Standards should recognize children's expression as legal right and developmental need.

Keywords: Right of expression; self-esteem; children's voice; primary schools.

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Introduction

According to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, young children have a right to enjoy a violence-free environment that allows them to study and learn effectively. Besides home, school becomes the most important place for children's development and education. Available evidence, however, shows that for some children, schools have become the worst environment for learning to take place (Breetzke et al., 2021). The global prevalence of violence against children reports at least one billion children and one in two children experiencing violence every year (Hillis et al., 2016). The impact of violence on children's social, emotional, cognitive, and mental welling is very devastating (Hillis et al., 2017). Violence against children imposes immense financial burdens on societies, including costs related to healthcare, legal proceedings, social services, lost productivity and long-term consequences, such as reduced earning potential and

increased need for mental health support (Pereznieto et al., 2014).

Particularly in Ugandan schools, 94% of girls and 86% of the boys' report having experienced physical violence perpetuated by their teachers (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2018). There is a belief that one in four children is believed to have missed school after experiencing physical violence, with twice as many girls compared to boys.

Violence against children has a long history, and measures to lessen it and give children a safe environment have always been a focus of research. The use of children as property, for instance, resulted in a very high violence with severe effects on children in ancient times (Golden, 2015). In response to this violence, civilizations from ancient Europe began to create laws meant to rescue children from widespread abuse (Crosson-Tower, 2010). The field of child participation gained prominence in 1989 with the adoption of the United Nations Convention on Children's Rights. This convention emphasized children's inherent dignity as well as their right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Children became distinct individuals with distinct rights, and not defenseless objects of care.

This study centers on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and philosophy of consicentization (Freire, 1972a), which both support the idea of empowering the oppressed to take active role in their own liberation. Young children's voice is conceptualized as freedom given to young children below eight years to express their views and experiences about violence reduction using channels such as speech, visual art, dance, songs, music, poetry, photography, drawings, drama, writing, and movement (Edwards et al., 2012). When young children speak out about violence, it leads to changes in behavior (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). Therefore, this study sought to establish the relationship between children's freedom of expression and their self- esteem.

Literature Review
Violence against children could be more adequately discussed and resolved by global policy debate if children were able to contribute their opinions and knowledge to the conversation (O'Kane et al., 2018). There is a dearth of research regarding the relationship between young children's voice and reduction in violence against children (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2022). As indicated by Mathews, et al., (2021), much as evidence trying to relate children's voice to violence reduction has begun to emerge, it is still limited and segmented in scope, with most evidence coming from older children's voice and from developed nations. O'Farrelly (2021) contends that the move to include stakeholder's voices in interventions meant to improve their lives is now beginning to take shape; yet young children's voices are still missing. Only a handful of published studies have attempted to relate older children's voices and maltreatment (Cossar et al., 2016).

A study by Marković et al. (2016) investigated the correlation between participation of seventh and eighth grade pupils in Serbia school sports clubs and their exposure to reduced levels of school violence. Results evidenced that participation of the primary school children in school sports clubs was predominantly connected with the diminishing of their exposure to the violence in schools and their readiness to help learners who suffer from violence. Much as this was a good study, it dealt with older children between 12 and 13 years.

Additionally, Child Fund International and the AfriChild carried out an evaluation of child participation intervention in Uganda. The study aimed to provide children with knowledge, self-assurance and skills they required to speak up against violence in their schools and communities, campaigning for its abolition. Much as this study provided wonderful results relating child participation voice to reduction of violence, this study exclusively focused on 1,570 boys and girls between the age of 10 and 17. The study still lacked evidence of a link between young children's participation and decline in aggression. There was, therefore, a need for more studies to show how young children's voices are associated with reduction of violence against children.

Methodology
Design
This study used the explanatory mixed-method approach to examine the connection between early childhood participation and reduction of

violence against children in selected Ugandan primary schools in the Bugiri Distict. The method broadened the understanding of the relationship between early childhood Participation and reduction of violence against children.

Population and Sampling
A random sample of two out of 104 government-aided schools in the Bugiri District participated in the study. Using the online sample calculator, the study sampled 236 out of 365 learners to participate in the study through questionnaire.

Reliability
The study used the test-retest method to establish the reliability prior to actual data collection. The analysis yielded the correlation coefficient of above 0.7, which according to Amin (2005) is acceptable. Content validity index test results registered CVI 0.800, which is greater than 0.70, hence the tools were presumed to have collected valid responses.

Statistical Treatment of Data
Data treatment involved descriptive analysis as well as correlational analysis. Particularly, the study used mean scores to describe the views of the respondents and Pearson Correlations to establish the relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

Ethical Considerations
The Uganda Christian University ethics review board provided the ethical approval. The researchers obtained both the parents' and the children's voluntary informed consent. Participants received comprehensive information about the goals, methods, risks and advantages of the study so they could decide for themselves to participate or not. The researchers did not disclose the identities of participants in the findings.

Results and Discussion
The results section begins with presentation of descriptive findings, where the interpretation of mean scores was as follows: 1.00 – 1.49= strongly disagree, 1.50-2.49 = disagree, 2.50-3.49= agree and 3.50 - 4.00= strongly agree.

Research Question 1: What is the perspectives of primary school children's right of expression in Bugiri District regarding their voices?

The first research question sought to establish the primary school children's right of expression. The respondents had to present their views about freedom to air out their voice in various aspects of school life as appears in table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on Children's Right of Expression

SN	Statement	Mean	Interpretation
1	I am free to talk about negative experiences I have had in school clubs.	1.86	Disagree
2	I usually get to speak about bad things that happen during school sports	1.17	Disagree
3	I can speak up if I do not like how my teachers mark my work	1.70	Disagree
4	I can speak up if I am not happy with the way my teachers treat me	1.68	Disagree
5	I am allowed to speak what I think about the way children are punished	1.63	Disagree
6	I usually get to speak what I think about school rules	1.64	Disagree
7	I usually get to speak if I am not happy with what I am learning	1.89	Disagree
8	I am given chance to speak what dangers happens on my way to school	1.93	Disagree
9	I am given chance to speak about dangers that happen in the play ground	1.74	Disagree
10	I am allowed to speak if I am not happy with the school food	1.62	Disagree

Interpretation: 1.00 – 1.49= strongly disagree, 1.50-2.49 = disagree, 2.50-3.49= agree; 3.50 - 4.00= strongly agree

In Table one, the responses ranged within the mean score of 1.50 to 2.49. This shows that the children disagreed with all the statements in the table; therefore, children were not free to express their outcry concerning various aspects in schools. For instance, they were not free to talk about negative experiences in school clubs, during sports, in the marking of their assignments, treatment by teachers, punishment measures, school rules, learning process, in the playgrounds, and about the food they took at schools. These findings show that the freedom for children to express their concerns was low. Similarly, a study by Larkins and Sherwood (2021) noted that in many educational settings, particularly in the Global South, children's voices are frequently constrained by adult-dominated structures and rigid disciplinary cultures. These findings suggest that when schools do not provide safe,

structured opportunities for expression, children may internalize a sense of powerlessness, potentially undermining their psychosocial well-being and limiting their sense of agency.

The implication of this study's findings is that the absence of a participatory school culture not only violates children's rights under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), but may also contribute to the perpetuation of violence, both in its physical and psychological forms. When children are unable to voice concerns about mistreatment, bullying or unfair punishment, it becomes difficult for schools to detect and respond to violence effectively (UNESCO, 2021). Moreover, the lack of expression may inhibit the development of protective factors, such as self-esteem, resilience, and social competence attributes that are essential for children to thrive academically and emotionally (Orth & Robins, 2022).

Therefore, the low levels of voice reported by children in this study calls for immediate educational reforms aimed at promoting participatory learning environments. These should include the integration of child-led platforms, the training of teachers in child rights and participatory pedagogy, and the institutionalization of feedback mechanisms that ensure children's views are not only heard but acted upon.

Research Question 2: What is the primary school learners' self-esteem level in Bugiri District?

To determine the primary school learners' self-esteem level, the first three items in table two were positively stated.

With exception to the first two items of which the children felt to be important persons (Mean=2.53) and they liked the way they dressed (2.72), the third statement, which was also positively stated shows limited self-esteem since most of the learners never thought of the possibility to become number one in their classes. The rest of the items in the table were negatively stated with the mean score of between 2.50 and 3.49.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Children's Self-esteem

SN	Statement	Mean	Interpretation
1	I am a special or important person in my class	2.53	Agree
2	I like the way I dress	2.72	Agree
3	I can become number one in my class	2.48	Disagree
5	I sometimes feel so bad about myself that I wish I were somebody else	2.56	Agree
6	I am not very sure if I will pass exams	2.69	Agree
7	I am not very sure if I can make friends at school	2.76	Agree
8	I feel I cannot do things as good as other people	2.66	Agree
9	I do not like myself	2.54	Agree
10	No one pays attention to me at school	2.56	Agree
11	I wish I were a different person to make friends.	2.61	Agree

Interpretation: 1.00 – 1.49= strongly disagree, 1.50-2.49 = disagree, 2.50-3.49= agree; 3.50 - 4.00= strongly agree

These findings show that the children's self-esteem was low, due to feeling bad about themselves, not being sure whether they would pass their examinations, feeling that they may not manage to do things as good as other people do, not liking themselves, feeling that no one pays attention to them and wishing to be a different person to make friends. These findings indicate that the self-esteem of the children under investigation was generally low. These findings align with earlier studies that reported low self-esteem as a common concern among children in under-resourced school environments, especially where learners face rigid teacher-student hierarchies, limited recognition and exposure to punitive discipline (Larkins & Sherwood, 2021). A study by Devries et al. (2021) in Ugandan primary schools found that children exposed to corporal punishment and other forms of school-based violence reported significantly lower self-confidence and feelings of self-worth. Such negative school climates—where children feel unvalued and unheard can suppress their motivation, hinder academic performance and disrupt social development.

Low self-esteem, as documented in the present study, has far-reaching implications. Psychologically, it is associated with increased

vulnerability to anxiety, depression, social withdrawal and helplessness (Orth & Robins, 2022). From a child rights perspective, low self-esteem is not only a developmental issue but also a violation of children's right to dignity and emotional well-being, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, 2020). The implications of these findings are therefore critical for educators and policymakers: fostering school environments that affirm children's worth, recognize their contributions, and build their confidence is not optional—it is essential.

Research Question 3: What is the relationship between children's right of expression and their self-esteem?

This research question sought to establish the relationship between the children's right of expression and their self-esteem. The research question called for testing the following null hypothesis: there is no significant relationship between children's right of expression and their self-esteem.

Table 3: Correlation Between Children' Self Voice and Self-Esteem

		Children Right of Expression	Children's Self-Esteem
Children's Rights of Expression	Pearson Correlation	1	.424[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	229	229
Children's Self-Esteem	Pearson Correlation	.424[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	229	229

[**]. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation analysis that aimed at exploring the relationship between Children's right of expression and Children's Self-Esteem revealed a positive and statistically significant relationship. The correlation coefficient (r = 0.424; p=.000) indicates a moderate positive correlation between the two variables. This means that as children's Right of expression increases so does their self-esteem.

These findings suggest that children who are given opportunities to express themselves and participate meaningfully in matters that affect them should tend to have higher levels of self-worth and confidence. In the context of protective factors against violence, this implies that amplifying children's voices may not only promote psychological well-being but also serve as a buffer against vulnerability to violence. Programs and interventions that aim to reduce child violence, therefore, enhance child participation and empowerment. The findings are consistent with recent global research emphasizing the psychosocial benefits of meaningful child participation. Studies, such as Pavarini et al. (2021) and Kennedy et al. (2023) have shown that when children are provided with opportunities to voice their opinions and influence decisions that affect them, they demonstrate greater self-confidence, resilience and emotional well-being.

This is further supported by Freire's (1972b) view that dialogue and critical awareness are key tools of liberation from oppression. Therefore, child protection interventions not only aim to prevent violence but also challenge the silencing structures embedded within school systems. Centering children's voices is not only a right but a transformative practice that fosters psychological strength and collective emancipation.

Conclusions

The study concludes that while primary school children in Bugiri District experience limited freedom to express themselves in various aspects of school life, their school culture that does not prioritize or value children's participation undermines their sense of belonging and agency within the learning environment. Since the majority of learners had low self-esteem, as evidenced by their self-reported feelings of self-doubt, inferiority and emotional insecurity, this level of self-esteem may suggest that the children in the study context are emotionally vulnerable, which may negatively affect their academic performance, social relationships, and ability to cope with challenges. The established correlation between children's right of expression and their self-esteem implies that rights of expression are essential to increase their levels of

confidence, self-worth and emotional well-being.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and corresponding conclusions, the study recommends that school teachers should create safe and inclusive spaces that actively promote child participation. This can be done through the establishment of child rights clubs, suggestion boxes, class meetings and student councils. Psychosocial support services by non-government organizations should be made available in schools, and teachers should be trained on how to cultivate a culture of listening respectfully and mutual dialogue. Directorate of education standards in the country should recognize children's expression as both legal right and a developmental need. This includes embedding voice indicators in school quality assurance tools, and regularly consulting children in school governance and during program evaluations.

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