



Breaking the Silence: Exploring Participation Inequities and Empowerment in Violence Reduction Efforts Among Children in a Rural District of Uganda

Jackline Bwire Achan^{1a}, John Samson Maani^{1b}, Grace Lubaale^{2c}, David Kabugo^{3d}

¹ Early Childhood Development, Kyambogo University, ² Kyambogo University, ³ Makerere Institute of Teacher Education and Research, Makerere University

Keywords: Child Participation, School Violence Reduction, Early Childhood Education

<https://doi.org/10.70060/o1p2q3r4s5>

Makerere University Journal of Research and Innovations in Teacher Education (RITE)

Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2024

This study investigated young children's perceptions of school violence reduction, focusing on primary three students in Bugiri district, Uganda. The research explored children's participation in voicing experiences of violence, building positive relationships, and influencing violence reduction efforts in line with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Recognizing that children's participation is essential for their development and well-being, this study aimed to understand how young children perceive their involvement in addressing school violence. This paper emerges from a larger study that employed a mixed-method sequential explanatory design, with qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews with ten primary three children from two government-aided schools in Bugiri district. The study adhered to Clarke and Braun's (2021) thematic analysis framework, identifying five key themes: beneficial, inequity, inequality, silence, and harm. The "beneficial" theme highlighted children's understanding of their participation as contributing to their knowledge of non-violent practices and coping strategies. "Inequity" and "inequality" reflected the disparities in opportunities for participation and emotional support, notably between younger and older children and among peer relationships. The "silence" theme revealed instances where children chose not to report violence, including sensitive issues like sexual violence and spiritual attacks, due to fear or mistrust. Finally, the "harm" theme underscored the negative experiences children faced when their participation led to reprimands or verbal abuse. The findings suggest that while children recognize the benefits of participating in violence reduction, significant challenges remain, particularly in ensuring equitable and supportive environments for younger children. This study emphasizes the need for schools to meaningfully engage young children in violence reduction efforts, fostering autonomy and agency. The implications for practice include developing tailored interventions and policies that prioritize the voices and needs of young children in school settings.

Practitioner Notes

What is already known about the topic

- School violence is a widespread issue globally, affecting students' safety, well-being, and academic performance.
- Child participation is recognized internationally as crucial for effective violence reduction, and it is supported by frameworks like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).
- In Uganda, while policies such as the National Strategic Plan on Violence against Children in Schools emphasize child participation, there are significant gaps in implementation, particularly for younger children.

^a Jackline Bwire Achan is a PhD student in the Department of Early Childhood Development at Kyambogo University

^b Dr. John Samson Maani is a Lecturer in the Department of Early Childhood Development at Kyambogo University.

^c Grace Lubaale is a Lecturer at Kyambogo University.

^d Dr. David Kabugo is the Deputy Director of Makerere Institute of Teacher Education and Research (MITER) at Makerere University.

- Previous research has often focused on older children, with limited attention to the participation of younger children in violence reduction efforts.

What this study contributes

- This study provides insight into young children's perceptions regarding their participation in school violence reduction efforts in Bugiri district, Uganda.
- The research identifies five key themes—Beneficial, Inequity, Inequality, Silence, and Harm—that reflect both the positive impacts of participation and the significant barriers younger children face.
- The study highlights the exclusion of younger children from participation opportunities and the resulting feelings of disempowerment.
- It reveals the importance of creating supportive and inclusive environments where young children feel safe and encouraged to participate in violence reduction activities.

Implications for practice and policy

- Schools should implement and enforce policies that ensure the inclusion of younger children in participation mechanisms, such as junior student councils or child rights clubs tailored to their developmental stage.
- Educators need targeted training on engaging younger children in discussions about violence, building trust, and using age-appropriate communication strategies.
- Schools should develop child-friendly reporting systems, such as oral or digital platforms, accessible to younger children.
- Schools should strengthen the role of parents and the community in supporting children's participation through workshops and community meetings.
- The education monitoring and standards unit needs to establish frameworks to monitor and assess the effectiveness of child participation initiatives, ensuring that younger children's voices are heard and acted upon in violence reduction strategies.

Introduction

School violence is a pervasive issue that undermines the safety and well-being of students worldwide. It takes various forms, including physical aggression, bullying, sexual harassment, and psychological abuse, all of which contribute to an environment of fear and insecurity (Jones et al., 2008). According to UNESCO (2020), one in three students globally experiences bullying, and many face physical violence within the school environment. Such experiences not only disrupt learning but also have long-lasting effects on children's mental health and social development, leading to such problems as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Creating safe, educational spaces where children can learn and grow without fear is thus a critical global priority.

The impact of school violence extends far beyond the immediate physical harm inflicted on students (Jones et al., 2008; UNESCO, 2020). It creates an atmosphere of fear and anxiety, which can severely hinder academic performance, lead to absenteeism, and, in some cases, result in students dropping out of school entirely. Moreover, the psychological scars left by such experiences can persist into adulthood, affecting individuals' mental health, social relationships, and overall quality of life. Consequently, addressing school violence is not only a matter of safeguarding children's physical well-being but also a crucial step in fostering their long-term development and ensuring that their rights are upheld.

In Uganda, the situation is particularly alarming. Violence in schools is prevalent, with both students and teachers acknowledging its widespread occurrence. The Uganda Violence Against Children Survey reported that over 90% of children aged 13-17 had experienced some form of violence in their lifetime, with schools being one of the primary environments where such incidents occur (Wandera et al., 2017). Despite legal prohibitions, corporal punishment remains common in many Ugandan schools, accompanied by verbal abuse, bullying, and gender-based violence. This culture of violence in educational settings severely compromises the safety and well-being of Ugandan children.

The consequences of this violence are profound and multifaceted. Children exposed to violence in school often suffer from a range of psychological issues, including depression, anxiety, and trauma, which in turn affect their academic performance and social interactions (Jones et al., 2008). Moreover, the normalization of violence within the school environment can lead to a cycle of aggression, where children who experience violence may become perpetrators themselves. This not only affects the individual child but also perpetuates a broader culture of violence within the community. Therefore, addressing school violence in Uganda is not only a matter of protecting children but also a crucial step toward breaking the cycle of violence that plagues many communities.

Recognizing the critical role of children in addressing the issues they face, there has been a growing emphasis on the importance of children's participation in violence reduction efforts. As Lundy et al. (2019) defined, children's involvement involves expressing their views, listening to their opinions in safe spaces, and ensuring that these views are acted upon and taken seriously. This concept is grounded in the belief that children, as primary stakeholders in the education system, possess unique insights into the challenges they face and should, therefore, play an active role in shaping the policies and practices that affect them.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified by almost every country globally, including Uganda, underscores the importance of child participation (United Nations, 1991). Article 12 of the UNCRC states that children have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them freely and that their opinions should be given due weight by age and maturity. This principle is particularly relevant in the context of violence re-

duction, where the involvement of children can lead to more effective and sustainable solutions. Research has shown that when children actively engage in efforts to reduce violence, the strategies developed are more likely to address their actual needs and concerns, leading to better outcomes (Correia et al., 2023).

In Uganda, the importance of children's participation in violence reduction is formally recognized in the National Strategic Plan on Violence against Children in Schools (2015-2020). This strategic plan emphasizes the need to involve children in decision-making through various means, such as student councils, child rights clubs, and peer support programs. These initiatives are designed to empower children to prevent and respond to violence within their schools actively. For example, child rights clubs provide platforms for students to discuss violence-related issues, share their experiences, and propose solutions. In contrast, peer support programs encourage older students to mentor and support younger ones.

Despite these initiatives, challenges remain in effectively implementing these participatory approaches, particularly for younger children in early primary education. Much of the existing research and policy focus has been on older students, with less attention given to the participation of younger children in violence reduction efforts. This gap is significant, as early childhood is critical for shaping attitudes and behaviors. Ensuring that younger children are actively involved in these processes is essential for creating a school environment that is truly safe and supportive for all students.

While the concept of child participation is widely recognized, there is a notable lack of research focused specifically on young children, particularly those in early primary education, and their role in violence reduction efforts. Understanding the perceptions of these young children is crucial for developing effective and appropriate interventions for their developmental stage. Studies from developed countries (Heikka et al., 2022; Kri & Roundtree-Swain, 2017) have shown that children value participation and that their involvement leads to more tailored and effective strategies for addressing issues like violence. However, these studies often focus on older children or are conducted in contexts that differ significantly from those in developing countries like Uganda.

This study sought to address this gap by investigating the perceptions of primary three students in Bugiri district, Uganda, regarding their participation in school violence reduction. By exploring how these young children experience and engage with violence prevention efforts, this research aimed to contribute to the development of more inclusive and effective strategies for reducing violence in schools. The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the specific challenges and barriers that younger children face in participating in these processes, as well as the potential benefits of their involvement.

To this end, the reduction of school violence is a global imperative with significant implications for the well-being and development of children. In Uganda, where violence in schools remains a pervasive issue, involving children in vi-

olence reduction efforts is not only a matter of upholding their rights but also a practical strategy for achieving safer and more supportive educational environments. This study focuses on the perspectives of young children in Bugiri district, providing a critical lens through which to understand the effectiveness of current participatory approaches and offering recommendations for enhancing the role of young children in violence prevention efforts.

Literature Review

Children's participation in decision-making processes, particularly in matters that directly affect them, has become an increasingly recognized and advocated concept worldwide. The foundation for this recognition is laid in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), adopted in 1989, which has since been ratified by nearly every nation globally. Article 12 of the UNCRC explicitly states that children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and these views should be given due weight according to the child's age and maturity. This principle has become central to international discourses on children's rights and is particularly emphasized in educational settings where children's voices are integral to creating inclusive and responsive environments.

Numerous international studies have underscored the importance of involving children in decision-making, particularly in educational contexts. For example, Lundy et al. (2019) developed the "Lundy Model of Participation," emphasizing four key elements: Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence. This model advocates for providing children with safe spaces to express their views, ensuring relevant audiences hear their voices and that their opinions have a tangible influence on decision-making processes. Studies implementing this model, particularly in European contexts, have demonstrated that when children actively shape school policies, the outcomes align with their needs, enhancing well-being and academic performance (Kennan et al., 2019).

In Finland, Heikka et al. (2022) researched early childhood education, focusing on how educators incorporate children's participation into pedagogical plans. Their findings indicated that while participation is emphasized in playful activities, it is less integrated into formal educational planning and evaluation processes. This reflects a broader trend observed in various educational systems where children's voices are more valued in informal than formal decision-making.

Research from Australia also highlights the importance of child participation. Studies have shown that children's involvement in school governance leads to more effective and sustainable policies, particularly in violence prevention. Kri and Roundtree-Swain (2017) conducted interviews with children and adolescents, revealing that those who were given opportunities to participate in school decisions felt more empowered and were more likely to engage positively with school policies, including those related to behavior and discipline.

Uganda's commitment to children's rights, particularly their participation in decision-making processes, has grown

significantly in recent years. The country ratified the UN-CRC in 1990, which guides national policies on children's rights. However, implementing these principles has faced several challenges, especially in educational settings.

The National Strategic Plan on Violence against Children in Schools (2015-2020) marked a significant step towards integrating children's voices into violence prevention efforts in Uganda (Walakira et al., 2017). The plan emphasizes the importance of child participation through mechanisms such as student councils, child rights clubs, and peer support programs. These initiatives aim to empower students to prevent and respond to violence within their schools actively. For instance, child rights clubs provide platforms for students to discuss issues related to violence, share their experiences, and propose solutions. Similarly, peer support programs encourage older students to mentor and support younger ones, fostering a sense of responsibility and mutual care among students.

Despite these initiatives, research indicates that the participation of younger children, particularly those in early primary education, remains limited. Much focus has been on older students, with younger children often excluded from formal participation mechanisms. For example, a study by Walakira and Nyanzi (2002) found that while older students were frequently involved in student councils and other decision-making bodies, younger children were rarely consulted or included in these processes. This exclusion not only undermines the rights of younger children but also limits the effectiveness of violence prevention strategies, as the experiences and perspectives of this group are not adequately represented.

Thomas (2009) conducted a study in Kitgum and Pader districts, focusing on empowering children to speak out against violence. While the survey highlighted the success of child rights clubs and peer support programs in reducing violence, it also revealed that these programs primarily targeted older children, with minimal involvement of younger students. This finding underscores the need for more inclusive approaches that engage children of all ages in violence prevention efforts.

The table below ([Table 1](#)) summarizes key studies on child participation in Uganda, highlighting the focus areas, methodologies, and key findings.

While there is a growing body of research on child participation in Uganda, much of it has focused on older children, particularly those in upper primary and secondary education. This focus has resulted in a significant gap in understanding the experiences and perceptions of younger children, particularly those in early primary education (ages 6-9), regarding their participation in violence reduction efforts. The limited attention given to this group is concerning, given that early childhood is critical for shaping attitudes and behaviors.

Younger children are often perceived as less capable of participating in decision-making processes, leading to their exclusion from formal participation mechanisms such as student councils or child rights clubs. This exclusion not only violates their rights as outlined in the UNCRC but also limits the effectiveness of violence prevention strategies, as

the experiences and perspectives of younger children are not adequately represented.

This research sought to address this gap by focusing on pupils in primary three in selected schools in Bugiri district, Uganda. By investigating how these young children perceive and experience their participation in violence reduction efforts, this study aimed to contribute to a more inclusive understanding of child participation in Uganda.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study employed a mixed-method sequential explanatory design to explore young children's perceptions of school violence reduction, focusing on primary three pupils in Bugiri district, Uganda. The mixed-method approach was chosen because it provides a comprehensive understanding of the research problem by integrating quantitative and qualitative data. The sequential explanatory design was particularly suited to this study because it involved two distinct phases: an initial quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase. This design was advantageous as it provided the opportunity first to gather broad, generalizable data through quantitative methods and then explore the findings in depth through qualitative interviews.

The rationale for selecting this approach lies in its ability to offer both breadth and depth of understanding. The quantitative phase allowed the researchers to identify trends and patterns in children's perceptions of violence. In contrast, the qualitative phase enabled a deeper exploration of these perceptions, focusing on the lived experiences and contextual nuances often missed in quantitative research. The integration of both methods ensures that the findings are not only statistically significant but also rich in context, offering a holistic view of young children's experiences with school violence and their participation in violence reduction efforts.

Study Design

The study was designed to include two phases. In the first phase, a survey was administered to a larger sample of students to quantify their experiences with school violence and their participation in violence reduction activities. The second phase involved in-depth interviews with a smaller, purposively selected group of primary three students to understand their experiences and perceptions better. This sequential explanatory design was chosen because it allowed the qualitative findings to build upon the quantitative results, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Participants

The study was conducted in two government-aided primary schools in Bugiri district, Uganda. The participants in the qualitative phase of the study included ten primary three students (ages 8-9 years), with an equal representation of boys and girls. The selection criteria for these partic-

Table 1

Author(s)	Year	Title	Focus Area	Methodology	Key Findings
Kelly Clarke, Praveetha Patalay, Elizabeth Allen, Louise Knight, Dipak Naker, Karen Devries	2020	Patterns and predictors of violence against children in Uganda: a latent class analysis	Patterns of physical, emotional, and sexual violence against Ugandan children	Latent class and multinomial logistic regression analysis of cross-sectional data. Sample: 3706 primary students in Luwero District, Uganda.	Identified three distinct violence classes among children: 1) Emotional and physical violence by parents and relatives, and sexual/emotional abuse by unrelated adults; 2) Physical, emotional, and sexual violence by peers, with high exposure to violence by school staff; 3) Primarily physical violence by school staff. Children in Classes 1 and 2 had higher risks of mental health difficulties and school absenteeism.
Wandera, S. O., Clarke, K., Knight, L., Allen, E., Walakira, E., Namy, S., & Devries, K.	2017	Violence against children perpetrated by peers: A cross-sectional school-based survey in Uganda	Peer violence victimization among primary school children in Uganda	Cross-sectional school-based survey; multilevel multivariable logistic regression analysis of data from 3706 primary students in 42 Ugandan schools	29% of students experienced physical violence, and 34% experienced emotional violence by peers. Factors associated with both types of violence include exposure to interparental violence, supportive attitudes towards violence from school staff, not living with biological parents, working for payment, and higher SDQ scores. Physical violence was linked to younger age and sharing a sleeping area with an adult, while emotional violence was associated with being female, walking to school, reporting disability, and low socio-economic status. Interventions should focus on family contexts, school environments, and supporting children from low socio-economic backgrounds.
Devries, K. M., Kyegombe, N., Zuurmond, M., Parkes, J., Child, J. C., Walakira, E. J., & Naker, D.	2014	Violence against primary school children with disabilities in Uganda: a cross-sectional study	Violence against disabled primary school children in Uganda	Secondary analysis of data from the Good Schools Study baseline survey. Sample: 3706 children aged 11-14 from 42 primary schools in Luwero District, Uganda. Descriptive statistics and logistic regression models were used.	8.8% of boys and 7.6% of girls reported a disability. Violence levels were extremely high for both disabled and non-disabled children. Disabled girls reported significantly more physical and sexual violence compared to non-disabled girls, with 99.1% experiencing physical violence and 23.6% experiencing sexual violence. Risk factors for violence were similar between disabled and non-disabled children. Schools were identified as a primary venue for violence, particularly against disabled girls, suggesting that schools may be effective sites for interventions. Further research is needed to understand and prevent violence against disabled children in low-income countries.
Walakira, E. J., Ddumba-Nyanzi, I., Lishan, S., & Baizerman, M.	2014	No place is safe: violence against and among children and youth in street situations in Uganda	Violence against and among street children in Uganda	Data collection from 21 major towns in Uganda.	Violence is endemic among Ugandan street children, perpetrated by both peers and adults. Boys experienced more physical abuse, while girls were more frequently subjected to emotional and sexual abuse. The study highlights the need for policy actions addressing the vulnerabilities of street children, particularly based on gender, age, and other risk factors. It also emphasizes the importance of changing attitudes and behaviors among duty bearers, such as police and other adults, who contribute to the violence against street children.

Author(s)	Year	Title	Focus Area	Methodology	Key Findings
Ssenyonga, J., Hermenau, K., Nkuba, M., & Hecker, T.	2018	Reducing violence against children by implementing the preventative intervention Interaction Competencies with Children for Teachers (ICC-T): study protocol for a cluster randomized controlled trial in southwestern Uganda	Preventative intervention to reduce school violence	Cluster randomized controlled trial conducted in six districts in Southwestern Uganda. Random selection of schools; intervention and control groups. Pre-assessment and post-assessment using self-administered questionnaires to measure exposure to violence, psychological well-being, and teacher attitudes.	The study aims to evaluate the feasibility and efficacy of the ICC-T intervention to reduce violent disciplinary measures in Ugandan schools. The study's findings will contribute to global efforts to reduce violence against children, particularly in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 16.2.
Chiang, L., Howard, A., Stoebe, K., Massetti, G. M., Apondi, R., Hegle, J., ... & Aluzimbi, G.	2021	Sexual risk behaviors, mental health outcomes and attitudes supportive of wife-beating associated with childhood transactional sex among adolescent girls and young women: Findings from the Uganda Violence Against Children Survey	Association between childhood transactional sex and negative outcomes among adolescent girls and young women in Uganda	Logistic regression models using data from the 2015 Uganda Violence Against Children Survey. Focused on 18-24-year-old young women who had sex prior to age 18.	Engaging in childhood transactional sex was significantly associated with higher odds of multiple sexual partners, infrequent condom use, intentional self-harm, and attitudes justifying spousal abuse. The study suggests that interventions should focus on prevention, harm reduction, and support for young women.
Nguyen, K. H., Padilla, M., Villaveces, A., Patel, P., Atuchukwu, V., Onotu, D., ... & Kress, H.	2019	Coerced and forced sexual initiation and its association with negative health outcomes among youth: Results from the Nigeria, Uganda, and Zambia Violence Against Children Surveys	Association between forced sexual initiation (FSI) and negative health outcomes among youth in sub-Saharan Africa	Cross-sectional analysis of data from the 2014 and 2015 Violence Against Children Surveys conducted in Nigeria, Uganda, and Zambia. The study examined prevalence and consequences of FSI among youth aged 13-24 years.	FSI was associated with infrequent condom use, recent experiences of sexual, physical, and emotional violence, moderate to serious mental distress, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts. The study highlights the need for prevention strategies to reduce FSI and its adverse effects on youth. FSI was not significantly associated with transactional sex, multiple sex partners, or STIs.

Author(s)	Year	Title	Focus Area	Methodology	Key Findings
Saile, R., Ertl, V., Neuner, F., & Catani, C.	2014	Does war contribute to family violence against children? Findings from a two-generational multi-informant study in Northern Uganda	Impact of war on family violence against children in post-conflict Northern Uganda	Two-generational study with interviews of 368 children, 365 female guardians, and 304 male guardians using standardized questionnaires	Key predictors of aggressive parenting included guardians' childhood maltreatment, female guardians' intimate partner violence experiences, and male guardians' PTSD and alcohol-related problems. Children's victimization was linked to violence between adults in the household and male guardians' PTSD severity. The study suggests an intergenerational cycle of violence exacerbated by war experiences.
Kyegombe, N., Abramsky, T., Devries, K. M., Michau, L., Nakuti, J., Starmann, E., ... & Watts, C.	2015	What is the potential for interventions designed to prevent violence against women to reduce children's exposure to violence? Findings from the SASA! study, Kampala, Uganda	Impact of IPV prevention interventions on children's exposure to violence	Mixed-methods approach using a cluster randomized controlled trial (RCT) in Kampala, Uganda, including quantitative and qualitative analyses	The SASA! intervention led to a 64% reduction in the prevalence of children witnessing IPV at home. Additionally, improvements in parenting practices and parent-child relationships were observed, with some parents rejecting corporal punishment entirely. The study suggests that interventions aimed at preventing IPV may also reduce children's exposure to violence and improve family dynamics.

ipants were based on their voluntary willingness to participate in follow-up interviews, their experience in the school, and their ability to express themselves. The participants were purposively selected from those who had participated in the quantitative phase of the study, ensuring that they had relevant experiences related to the research topic.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted from January 2023 to June 2023. The qualitative data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the ten selected primary three students. The interviews were designed to be child-friendly, using language and prompts appropriate for the age group. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, and the sessions were conducted in a comfortable and familiar environment within the school premises, typically in the playground or a quiet corner of the school compound.

Several strategies were employed to ensure the comfort and engagement of the young participants. The interviews began with ice-breaker activities, such as singing or playing simple games, to help the children relax and feel at ease with the research team. Before delving into the interview questions, the research team introduced themselves and explained the purpose of the study in simple, age-appropriate language. The conversation was initiated with familiar and non-threatening topics to build rapport and trust. The questions were framed in an open-ended manner, allowing the children to express their thoughts freely. The interviewers used prompts such as "Tell me about..." or "I

am looking forward to hearing your ideas," encouraging the children to share their experiences without feeling pressured. The interviews were conducted in locations chosen for comfort and familiarity, such as outdoor spaces where children felt free to move around. This approach was guided by research suggesting that interviews with children are more effective in informal and relaxed settings (Adler et al., 2019; Cameron, 2014). All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants and their guardians' consent, ensuring the data collected were accurate and comprehensive.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines to protect the rights and well-being of the young participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Uganda Christian University under ethical code UG-REC-026. Additionally, the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology granted authorization to conduct research under registration number UNCS SSS3332ES. Written informed consent was obtained from the parents or guardians of all participants. The consent forms detailed the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and the rights of the participants, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. In addition to parental consent, the children verbally assented before participating in the study. The research team explained the study's purpose and procedures to the children in simple terms, ensuring they understood what participation entailed. The assent process was designed to respect the chil-

dren's autonomy and make them feel valued as active participants in the research.

To protect the privacy of the participants, all data were anonymized. Pseudonyms were used instead of real names, and any identifying information was removed from the transcripts. The data were stored securely, with access restricted to the research team only.

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, particular attention was paid to creating a supportive and non-threatening environment. The interview process was carefully designed to avoid causing distress. If a child appeared uncomfortable or upset, the interview was paused, and the child was allowed to take a break or stop the interview altogether. The ethical considerations were grounded in the principles outlined by the UNCRC, particularly Article 12, which emphasizes the child's right to express their views freely and take those views seriously. By adhering to these ethical standards, the study ensured that the children's participation was both respectful and empowering, aligning with the overarching goals of the research.

Presentation of Findings

The findings from this study are organized thematically, reflecting the primary themes identified through the analysis: Beneficial, Inequity, Inequality, Silence, and Harm. These themes encapsulate the experiences and perceptions of young children in Bugiri district regarding their participation in violence reduction efforts at school. Each theme is presented with supporting qualitative data, including direct participant quotations. Visual aids such as word clouds highlight common phrases used by the children. At the same time, scientific arguments are integrated to underscore the significance of these findings in the broader context of child participation and violence reduction.

Beneficial

The theme "Beneficial" emerged from the children's perceptions of their participation in violence reduction as a positive and empowering experience. The children recognized that their involvement contributed to their knowledge of various forms of violence and preventative strategies. This awareness was often linked to the information they received from external sources, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) like World Vision and Mucobadi.

Many children highlighted how participating in school programs helped them learn about non-violent practices. For instance, one child mentioned: *"We learned from World Vision that we should respect our teachers and avoid fighting."* (Child 4, Male)

The children felt that their involvement in violence reduction activities made them more confident in addressing issues of violence. This sense of empowerment was evident in their willingness to discuss violence and report incidents to trusted adults.

The positive impact of participation aligns with existing literature, suggesting that involving children in decision-making enhances their sense of agency and control (Lundy

et al., 2019). This empowerment is crucial in fostering resilience and encouraging children to take proactive steps in preventing violence (Correia et al., 2023).

Some children mentioned specific actions they took due to their increased knowledge. For example: *"We know now to stay in groups for safety and to tell teachers if something bad happens."* (Child 2, Female)

Inequity

The theme "Inequity" describes the children's experiences of unequal opportunities for participation in violence reduction activities. Despite clubs and reporting mechanisms in schools, younger children often felt excluded from these opportunities.

Younger children said they were not members of clubs, which older students primarily dominated. This exclusion was a common sentiment among the participants: *"The clubs are for P.7, P.6, and P.5. For us, no clubs."* (Child 5, Male)

Children mentioned difficulties using suggestion boxes, which were often located in areas accessible only to older students. Additionally, their limited writing skills made it challenging for them to report incidents in writing.

The exclusion of younger children from participation opportunities exacerbates feelings of disempowerment, as highlighted in studies by Heikka et al. (2022). This exclusion not only violates children's rights but also hinders the development of effective violence reduction strategies that are inclusive of all age groups.

Some children reported that maintaining friendships was complicated due to material inequalities. Friends would often distance themselves if a peer did not have something to offer, such as food. *"It's hard because if I don't have something to give, they won't be my friend anymore."* (Child 10, Female)

Several children mentioned that they preferred seeking emotional support from family members rather than teachers, as teachers were often perceived as unapproachable or harsh.

Inequality in relationships, whether among peers or between students and teachers, can significantly impact a child's willingness and ability to participate in violence reduction efforts. Research supports this, showing how unequal power dynamics and social hierarchies in schools can lead to feelings of isolation and marginalization among younger students (Kri & Roundtree-Swain, 2017).

Silence

The "Silence" theme emerged from the children's accounts of choosing not to report incidents of violence, particularly in cases involving sensitive issues such as sexual violence or spiritual attacks.

Children often remained silent about their experiences with violence due to fear of being reprimanded or facing retaliation from perpetrators. This silence was particularly pronounced in cases of sexual violence. *"I saw something bad happen, but I didn't tell because I was scared."* (Child 9, Female)

Table 1. Key Quotations and Interpretations for the “Beneficial” Theme

Quotation	Interpretation
“We learned from World Vision that we should respect our teachers and avoid fighting.”	This quote reflects how external programs contribute to children's understanding of non-violent behaviors.
“We know now to stay in groups for safety and to tell teachers if something bad happens.”	Demonstrates how children apply the knowledge gained from participation to real-life situations.

Table 2. Key Quotations and Interpretations for the “Inequity” Theme

Quotation	Interpretation
“The clubs are for P.7, P.6, and P.5. For us, no clubs.”	Reflects the systemic exclusion of younger children from formal participation opportunities.
“I can't write well, so I don't use the suggestion box.”	Highlights the practical barriers that prevent younger children from effectively participating in reporting violence.

Table 3. Key Quotations and Interpretations for the “Inequality” Theme

Quotation	Interpretation
“It's hard because if I don't have something to give, they won't be my friend anymore.”	Highlights the material inequalities that affect peer relationships and, by extension, participation in violence reduction.
“I would rather tell my sister than my teacher because the teacher might get angry.”	Reflects the lack of trust and support from teachers, which can discourage children from participating in violence reduction activities.

Table 4. Key Quotations and Interpretations for the “Silence” Theme

Quotation	Interpretation
“I saw something bad happen, but I didn't tell because I was scared.”	Reflects the pervasive fear among children that reporting violence could lead to negative consequences.
“I would rather not tell the teacher because they might not believe me.”	Indicates a lack of trust in the support system, which contributes to the culture of silence.

The children expressed a general mistrust of adults, particularly teachers, whom they felt would not believe or support them if they reported incidents of violence.

Silence as a response to violence is a significant barrier to effective violence reduction. Research indicates that children who do not feel safe or supported in disclosing their experiences are more likely to suffer long-term psychological harm (Wilson et al., 2020). The culture of silence perpetuates the cycle of violence, as it prevents the necessary interventions from taking place.

Harm

The “Harm” theme describes the negative experiences children faced when their participation in violence reduction led to reprimands or verbal abuse from teachers and peers.

Children reported instances where teachers responded harshly to their attempts to participate in discussions about violence or when they reported incidents. This reaction discouraged further participation. *“The teacher shouted at me when I tried to tell her what happened.”* (Child 8, Male)

Some children mentioned that reporting violence led to retaliation from their peers, further deterring them from participating in the future.

The harm that children experience when they participate in violence reduction efforts without adequate support is a significant barrier to effective violence prevention. Research indicates that when children are not provided with safe and supportive environments for participation, their involvement can lead to adverse outcomes, including increased psychological distress and further victimization (Bovarnick et al., 2018). This underscores the importance of ensuring that participation mechanisms are designed with adequate protection and that children are supported throughout the process.

The five themes—Beneficial, Inequity, Inequality, Silence, and Harm—provide a comprehensive view of how children in Bugiri district perceive and experience their participation in violence reduction efforts. The findings reveal that while participation can be empowering and beneficial, significant barriers such as inequity, inequality, silence, and harm undermine the effectiveness of these efforts. These barriers not only prevent younger children from fully engaging in violence prevention activities but also contribute

Table 5. Key Quotations and Interpretations for the “Harm” Theme

Quotation	Interpretation
“The teacher shouted at me when I tried to tell her what happened.”	Reflects the lack of supportive responses from teachers, which can deter children from future participation.
“Some children end up beating you when you report them.”	Highlights the risks of peer retaliation, which can further isolate children and discourage reporting.

to a cycle of fear and disempowerment that perpetuates violence in schools.

This thematic analysis underscores the need for more inclusive and supportive participation mechanisms that are sensitive to the needs and vulnerabilities of younger children. By addressing these barriers and ensuring that all children are given a safe and supportive environment in which to participate, schools can create more effective and sustainable violence reduction strategies.

Discussion

This study’s findings on young children’s perceptions of violence reduction in schools, particularly in Uganda’s Bugiri district, align with and diverge from existing literature on child participation and violence reduction, both within Uganda and internationally. The comparative analysis below explores these similarities and differences, offering scientific explanations for the observed patterns and their implications for theory and practice.

Global Perspectives vs. Local Realities

International studies, such as those by Lundy et al. (2019) and Heikka et al. (2022), emphasize the importance of creating environments where children’s voices are heard and acted upon. The “Lundy Model of Participation” highlights the critical elements of space, voice, audience, and influence in ensuring meaningful child participation. These studies show that in contexts where children’s views are genuinely considered in decision-making processes, there is a notable improvement in their well-being and academic performance. However, the findings from Bugiri district suggest that while similar participatory structures exist (e.g., child rights clubs, suggestion boxes), younger children are often excluded, particularly in Uganda. This exclusion is not just a matter of oversight but reflects deeper systemic biases where younger children are deemed less capable of meaningful participation.

In Uganda, as indicated by the National Strategic Plan on Violence against Children in Schools (2015-2020), there is a strong policy emphasis on child participation. However, the practical implementation of these policies often needs to be improved, particularly for younger children. This discrepancy between policy and practice was evident in this study, where themes of inequity and silence emerged prominently. Younger children in Bugiri often felt their voices were neither valued nor heard, contrasting with international contexts where efforts to engage children from early childhood are more robust and systematic.

The disparities observed can be attributed to several factors, including cultural perceptions of childhood in Uganda, where younger children are often viewed as less competent in contributing to serious discussions like violence reduction. This cultural bias results in their exclusion from participatory mechanisms that might otherwise empower them and lead to more effective violence prevention strategies.

Empowerment vs. Disempowerment

This study’s “Beneficial” theme aligns with international findings that emphasize the empowering effects of child participation. For example, research by Correia et al. (2023) highlights that when children are involved in violence reduction efforts, they develop a sense of agency and are better equipped to cope with and prevent violence. However, the “Harm” theme found in Bugiri district, where children’s attempts to participate led to reprimands or peer retaliation, indicates a significant gap in the support structures necessary to foster true empowerment.

This discrepancy can be explained by the different levels of support provided to children in various contexts. In more developed educational systems, children who participate in decision-making often do so within frameworks that protect them from potential harm. In contrast, the lack of such protections in Ugandan schools, particularly for younger children, means that participation can sometimes expose them to additional risks, leading to disempowerment rather than empowerment.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings of this study contribute to the broader theoretical frameworks on child participation by highlighting the importance of age inclusivity in participatory practices. While existing theories, such as the Lundy Model, advocate for children’s involvement in general, this study underscores the need for frameworks that specifically address the unique challenges younger children face. The emergent themes of inequity, inequality, and silence indicate that younger children are systematically marginalized in participation efforts, suggesting a gap in current theoretical models that needs to be addressed.

For instance, while the Lundy Model provides a solid foundation for understanding the principles of child participation, it needs to fully account for the barriers younger children face, particularly in contexts like Uganda. This study suggests that for participatory frameworks to be genuinely inclusive, they must explicitly address age-related biases and include mechanisms that ensure younger chil-

dren's voices are heard and influential in decision-making processes.

Conclusion

This study explored young children's perceptions of school violence reduction in primary schools within Uganda's Bugiri district, focusing on three primary students. The research identified five key themes that reflect the children's experiences and perspectives: Beneficial, Inequity, Inequality, Silence, and Harm. These themes highlight both the positive aspects of child participation in violence reduction efforts and the significant barriers that undermine these efforts, particularly for younger children.

The "Beneficial" theme revealed that children engaged in violence reduction activities learned about non-violent practices and developed a sense of empowerment. However, the themes of "Inequity" and "Inequality" demonstrated that younger children often faced exclusion from participatory opportunities, with older students dominating platforms such as student councils and child rights clubs. This exclusion was further compounded by practical barriers, such as the inaccessibility of reporting mechanisms for younger children and the need for more emotional support from peers and teachers.

The "Silence" theme underscored the pervasive fear and mistrust among young children, leading them to refrain from reporting incidents of violence, particularly in cases of sexual violence and spiritual attacks. Finally, the "Harm" theme highlighted the negative consequences of participation, where children's efforts to engage in violence reduction led to reprimands from teachers or retaliation from peers.

These findings suggest that while participation can be empowering for young children, significant structural and cultural barriers prevent their full engagement in violence reduction efforts. The study emphasizes the need for more inclusive and supportive environments that prioritize the voices and needs of younger children in school settings.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following policy recommendations are proposed to enhance the integration of young children's perspectives into school violence reduction efforts:

- i. Schools should establish and support participation structures specifically designed for younger children. Junior versions of student councils or child rights clubs could be created to provide age-appropriate platforms where young children can express their views and participate in decision-making processes.
- ii. Teachers should receive training on how to effectively engage younger children in discussions about violence and other important issues. This training should focus on building trust, creating safe spaces for dialogue, and developing age-appropriate communication strategies.
- iii. Schools should implement reporting mechanisms that are accessible and appropriate for younger chil-

dren. These could include oral reporting systems, child-friendly digital tools, or the establishment of trusted adult liaisons who can help younger children report incidents of violence.

- iv. Policies should encourage greater involvement of parents and the broader community in supporting children's participation in school violence reduction efforts. Schools could facilitate workshops and community meetings to educate parents on the importance of child participation and how they can support their children's involvement.
- v. Enforcing existing policies mandating child participation in school governance should be strengthened. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should be established to assess the effectiveness of these policies, with particular attention paid to the inclusion of younger children.

Areas for Future Research

To build on the findings of this study and further enhance our understanding of young children's participation in violence reduction efforts, the following areas for future research are suggested:

Future research could benefit from longitudinal studies that track the impact of participation in violence reduction efforts on children over time. Such studies would provide insights into the long-term effects of the involvement on children's development, well-being, and ability to engage in violence prevention as they grow older.

Research that involves implementing and evaluating specific interventions designed to enhance the participation of younger children in violence reduction efforts could provide valuable evidence on the effectiveness of different approaches. These interventions could include the introduction of junior student councils or tailored teacher training programs.

Comparative research across different cultural contexts could help identify universal principles and culturally specific practices in child participation. Understanding how cultural factors influence the effectiveness of participatory approaches can inform the development of more culturally responsive policies and practices.

With the increasing integration of technology in education, research exploring digital tools to facilitate child participation, particularly among younger children, could provide innovative solutions to existing barriers. This could include studies on the effectiveness of child-friendly apps or platforms that allow children to report incidents of violence or participate in school governance.

In conclusion, this study underscores the critical need for schools to integrate young children's perspectives meaningfully into violence reduction efforts. By addressing the identified barriers and implementing the recommended policies, schools can create safer, more supportive environments that empower all students to contribute to violence prevention, fostering a culture of respect, safety, and inclusivity within educational settings.

Submitted: April 30, 2024 EAT. Accepted: June 28, 2024 EAT.

Published: August 15, 2024 EAT.



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