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Exploring child-based strategies in addressing child-to-child violence in selected primary schools in Kitgum District in Northern Uganda

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Abstract
Child-to-child violence in schools is a vice in society. Appreciating the views of children in addressing this vice is critical because it helps in valuing the contribution of children in solving problems among themselves. This study explored the child-based strategies used to address child-to-child violence in primary schools in Kitgum District, Northern Uganda. The study adopted a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design involving conversational focus group discussion and children's drawings. In- depth interviews were also conducted to collect data from selected teachers. Results showed that children commonly use: individual child based; informal peer group-based and formal peer group based-strategies; and they involve their teachers/counsellors in overcoming child-to-child violence. Conclusively, child-to-child violence cannot be overcome by adults only, but it requires also the involvement of children because children have the resilience, commitment, love and other child-based abilities to overcome child-to-child violence.

Keywords Child, Child-based strategies, Child-to-child violence, Primary schools, Uganda

1 Introduction and background

1.1 Introduction

Violence against Children (VAC) has had a global effect on children's wellbeing which has become an impetus for national and international children's rights agencies to advocate and enforce measures against VAC on children (United Nations, 2012) [44]. The commonest concern of all advocates against injustices imposed on children is promoting a violence-free environment for all children. The response to VAC in Uganda by both government and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) is consistent with the global response as efforts are made to make research-informed decisions that will influence policy and practice. Globally, the causes and effects of VAC have been emphasized, along with relevant measures to fight it (MGLSD, 2018).

A survey of 25 schools across five districts in Uganda found that 81% of the children experienced physical violence while at school and more than 90% of primary

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school pupils had been exposed to physical and emotional violence at school (Ssenyonga, Hermenau, Nkuba and Hecker, 2018). Violence in schools is said to be a painful experience and it is associated with physical injuries, child aggression and anti-social behaviour, among others (Gershoff, 2002). The other consequences are depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, where Ainamani et al. [2] found that the variable predicting depression in such case was the child witnessing intimate partner violence (OR = 1.30; 95%CI: 108–1.57, p =.006). Studies also found that students who have been victims of violence at school have always had lower self- esteem and they are engaged in destructive avoidance behaviour later in life (Ssenyonga et al., 2018). Close to 1 in 3 pupils between the ages of 13years and 15years worldwide have ever reported involvement in one or more physical fights and slightly more than 1 in 3 pupils between the ages of 13years and 15years experience bullying on a regular basis [39].

In the violence against children study, it was found that of all Ugandans aged 13–17 years, one in four girls (25%) and one in ten boys (10%) ever reported sexual violence before 2018 (MGLSD, 2018). Additionally, of Ugandan children aged 18–24 years, six in ten females (60%) and seven in ten males (70%) reported experiencing physical violence during their childhoods whereas four in ten girls (40%) and six in ten boys (60%) aged 13–17 experienced physical violence in 2017. Although schools have important roles to play in protecting children from violence (WHO, 2019), it seems to expose children to violence. Yet the teachers and other staff who oversee and work in educational settings have a duty to provide environments that support and promote children's dignity, development and protection. Kitgum district in northern Uganda has a 60 per cent violence ranking according to the Ugandan Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS) 2016. This ranking placed Kitgum district among districts with the highest number of physical violence, child neglect, defilement, child abuse and other forms of violence against children [4].

1.2 Background of the study

This research project was conceived during our training in child-focused research organised by AfriChild Centre. After being exposed to and reflecting on the National Child Policy, National Child Focused Policy Research Agenda, and National Development Plan III, we became curious and were motivated to delve deeper into the issue of violence by and among school-going children. In the literature about Uganda [1] (Chiang et al., 2021; MGLSD, 2015), there is decimal consideration of violence against children by peers in primary schools, hence, we developed interest in the research study to get further insight about child-to-child violence and the child related strategies to address the problem in the selected primary schools.

Our training experience in child-focused research and informal interactions with stakeholders in primary schools, coupled with a paucity of information on child-to-child violence and inadequate information on child-to-child strategies to overcome violence against children in Uganda motivated the team to undertake this research. This research project explored child-to-child strategies that children use in alleviating peer-imposed violence among primary school children in Kitgum District of Northern Uganda. For use, child-based strategies where defined as the measures developed and used by the children to overcome peer-imposed violence in the primary school context. Though there is a claim that child-to-child violence exists in primary schools in Uganda and

Kitgum district, little is documented about the vice, as well as on school children's strategies to curb the vice. It is against this background that our research team considered it necessary to explore child-to-child violence and child-based strategies against violence in primary schools. The situational analysis and intervention of appropriate steps will enable children to become resilient in protecting themselves, thus, creating an environment that is free from violence and conducive for learning.

1.3 Statement of the problem

Children who study and live in a violence-free environment are able to appreciate the importance of education and complete their primary school cycle. Respect and harmony among the pupils create a feeling of belonging and togetherness as members of the same school. However, this violence-free school environment is not enjoyed by all the pupils in Uganda and Kitgum District in particular. Globally, in the study (between 2003 and 2005), it was found that: in China (Beijing), 17% of girls and 23% of boys aged 13–15 reported having been bullied within a period of 30 days, meanwhile, in Zambia, it increased to 67% and 63% respectively (United Nations, 2012). Whereas few studies in Uganda highlight the general causes of violence against children ([1]; Chiang et al., 2021; MGLSD, 2015), none of these studies focused on the problem of child-to-child violence and child-based strategies in addressing child-to-child violence in primary schools. In order to overcome peer- imposed violence among pupils, it is necessary to involve them in exploring the child- based strategies they use to overcome child-to-child violence.

If not addressed, the challenge of child-to-child violence in primary schools will escalate and become a national problem in Uganda with many adverse consequences such as school drop-out, poor academic performance, child pregnancies and related sexually transmitted diseases [41, 44]. These negative impacts of violence in schools may go beyond the children who are directly affected by the vice to other children thus creating an atmosphere of fear, anxiety and insecurity, all of which are incompatible with learning and proper up-bringing of children [8, 13, 24]. Therefore, this study is timely in exploring child-to-child violence and child-based strategies to empirically inform policy and practice about children's learning and wellbeing in primary schools in Uganda, and particularly in Kitgum District.

1.4 Theoretical underpinning: social learning theory

This study is well grounded in the Social learning theory developed by a psychologist Albert Bandura [31]. The pupils observe the vice being perpetuated by their peers and by their parents at home, retain the violence and reproduce it in their way of life. Should they observe positive reward, the reproduce the vice the more.

According to Bandura, the learning process involves four key steps [11, 31]:

Attention to the model This where a person notices and pays attention to a behavior in his or her environment, preferably from a role model.

Retention In this step, he or she tries to remember or retain what was observed to use it later.

Reproduction The next phase is to reproduce the observed behavior. They use their physical and mental abilities to imitate or reproduce the action.

Motivation The learner gets motivated to keep reproducing the behavior if he or she sees positive reward associated with the behavior.

In this way, a negative behavior such as child-to-child violence get learnt by the pupils, unless a negative reward is introduced. Sometimes negative rewards take long to be observed, further perpetuating the vice [27].

1.5 Specific objectives

1) To explore the individual child-based strategies used to overcome child-to-child violence in primary schools in Kitgum district.
2) To establish how children apply informal peer group-based strategies to overcome child- to-child violence in primary schools in Kitgum district.
3) To find out how children use formal peer group-based strategies to overcome child-to-child violence in primary schools in Kitgum district.
4) To investigate how children involve their teachers and counsellors to overcome child-to- child violence in primary schools in Kitgum district.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Study design

The study employed a phenomenological qualitative design. This is because qualitative approach provides an exploratory capability needed to investigate a phenomenon in order to gain understanding of social and human activities [9, 10]. Husserl [17], Gearing [15], Barrow [5] Qutoshi , Amin [3] and Kothari [19] believed that phenomenological design is important in qualitative research because it helps researchers to focus on describing into detail, and interpreting people's authentic-lived experiences related to a specific phenomenon under study. This was very relevant to our current study. Therefore, on the basis of this design [26], we focused on upper primary children's lived experiences and teachers' experiences of child-to-child violence and child-based strategies in curbing violence against children in primary schools in Kitgum District.

2.2 Study area and period

The study area is Kitgum district, with a particular focus on children in 4 selected primary schools between March 2022 to August 2022. These schools were; Kitgum public primary school, Pandwong primary school, Namukora primary school and Mucwini primary school. Kitgum District is a district located in Acholi Sub-Region, Northern Uganda. The district has 12 sub-counties, 56 Parishes and 631 villages. The District has over 201 schools currently, with 41 Nursery Schools, 130 Primary Schools, 23 secondary schools, among others [18, 36]. The selection of Kitgum district as the study site was based on the fact that among the many Northern Uganda Districts, Kitgum suffered much the effects of the Lord Resistant Army (LRA) rebel insurgency which left the community more traumatized, thus propagating violence as a result of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The investigators were seeking to ascertain the magnitude of child-to-child violence and the child- based approaches to curbing child-to-child violence

in primary schools in the district, especially among upper primary school pupils. This would form a basis for comparison with similar studies in other settings in the future.

2.3 Target population

The target population was upper primary school pupils in primary five to primary seven aged 10–17 years old and teachers in the selected schools aged 22–60 years old. The estimated target population was 45,203 for all the primary schools in the district, including pupils, senior men, senior women and class teachers. Our estimated study population in the four selected primary schools was 1683, which included the pupils and senior teachers and class teachers. The population size of all children in upper primary section (primary 5–7) for these four schools was 873. The choice of upper primary was because the children of the upper primary are older compared to those in the lower primary school sections hence we assumed that they were capable of settling disputes among the other younger children [36].

2.4 Sample size estimation and recruitment of study participants

According to Boddy [7], the determination of sample size in qualitative studies is contextual, and it partially depends on the scientific paradigm under which the investigation is taking place. For example, quantitative researches oriented towards positivism usually require larger sample sizes than in-depth qualitative researches. This is to enhance a representative picture of the whole population under investigation. It is acceptable for this sample to be determined prior to data collection [3, 32]. Therefore, between May 2022 and September 2022, we recruited 60 respondents: 40 children of upper primary and 20 teachers. Teachers comprised of 4 senior men, 4 senior women and 12 classroom teachers of upper primary of the 4 selected primary schools in Kitgum district. The inclusion of the 40 children considered representation of both boys and girls. Teachers' selection was purposive based on their experiences and knowledge in managing the affairs of children in primary schools. Sample size estimation was based on the principle of data saturation.

2.5 Sampling procedure

Schools were selected using stratified and random sampling procedures to include 2 urban and 2 rural schools. This helped us get a clear insight of what children do to overcome peer-imposed violence in both categories of schools in the study area, and also to work within our means in terms of time and financial resources.

Children of upper primary in all the 4 selected schools were purposively sampled. Class teachers selected 40 children volunteers to participate in conversational FGDs. This is because conversational focus group discussion allows the respondent to tell his/her story and it allows the researchers to also probe for more information from the participants during the discussion. Therefore, the study had 4 conversational FGDs of 10 children in each group (Morgan, 2013).

Twenty (20) teachers were sampled purposively for in-depth interviews because of their experiences, knowledge, involvement in counselling and day-to-day management of the pupils' affairs, including child-to-child violence. We considered the senior man and woman, and 3 Upper Primary school classroom teachers from each of the 4 selected primary schools.

2.6 Data collection and tools

Data was collected using: Conversational Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Children's drawings on the child-based strategies and child-to-child violence, and in- depth interviews with senior women and senior men teachers, and class teachers of the upper primary section of the selected primary schools.

(i) *Focus group discussion*: We had 4 conversational FGDs of 10 children in each group, drawn from the four selected primary schools. Children's views on different aspects of child-based strategies in addressing child-to-child violence were recorded (See Online appendix 1).

(ii) *Children's drawings*: To clarify more on the views of children from FGDs, children were asked to draw specific aspects on their background as it relates to violence. They were asked to draw the different ways of addressing child-to-child violence while at schools. No assistance was given to them on how to draw (Fig. 2). They made their drawings freely and after words explained the drawings to research assistants who wrote down children's meaning of each drawing.

(iii) *In-depth interviews*: In- depth interviews were held with senior women and senior men teachers and with class teachers of the upper primary section of the 4 selected primary schools. The views of these teachers were recorded as guided by the questions in the tool (See Online Appendix 2).

2.7 Data management and analysis

A thematic-analytic model based on data reduction, display and verification, and drawing conclusions from data analysis was done [23]. The field notes and audio recordings were transcribed. The reviewed transcripts were imported into Atlas.ti version 8.0 computer software for data organization and coding. Themes and sub-themes were created within the Atlas.ti during qualitative data analysis. Atlas.ti also aided the creation of nodes and parent nodes to match with the sub-themes and themes respectively (Edhlund & McDougall, 2016). The 4 conversational focus groups of pupils were identified by numbers. Each of the group participants was allocated a different number from those of other group members such as Conversational FGD 1, Conversational FGD 2, Conversational FGD 3 and Conversational FGD 4. The organized data captured was exported to word processor for interpretation [22].

For Children's drawing, children were asked to draw how their family looks like and to draw the ways they use to solve child-to-child violence both at home and at school. They were asked to explain each drawing in relation to child-to-child violence to the research assistants, who captured the information. Children's drawings were then coded based on themes and sub-themes, and were interpreted following the thematic-analytic model [23].

The 5 teachers from each of the selected primary schools were given codes such as: Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, Teacher 4 and Teacher 5. The numbers were given randomly without reflecting the seniority of the selected teachers in their respective school settings. The results were displayed in text form and content analyzed accordingly, with the aid of Atlas.ti.

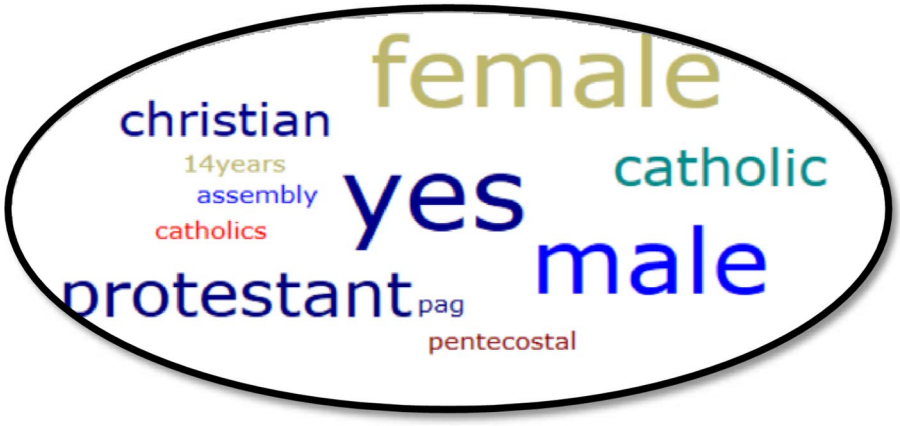


Fig. 1 Word cloud showing that most pupils experience violence

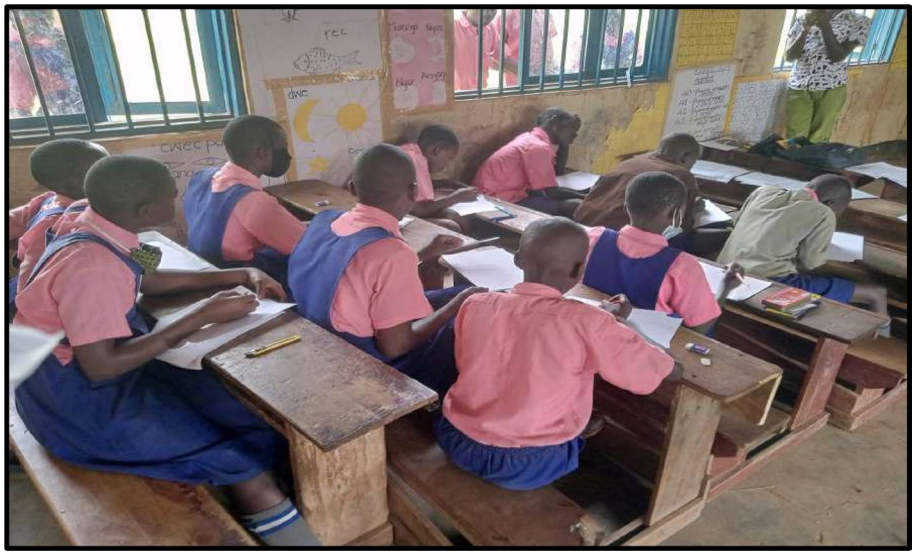


Fig. 2 Children in one of the primary schools during the drawing session

3 Results

3.1 Background findings

Data was collected from teachers and pupils of upper primary, primary five to primary seven, in four selected primary schools in Kitgum district. The teachers were aged 22 to 60 years, both male and female. The pupils were aged 12 to 17 years old, both male and female. The word cloud from analysis showed that most of the pupils experienced child-to-child violence at school denoted by "Yes" in Fig. 1. The average age of the pupils was 14 years old. Male and female genders, as well as religion of pupils were equally proportionate. Children were asked to draw their family and school background in relation to solving child-to-child violence (See Fig. 2).

3.2 Individual child-based strategies used to overcome child-to-child violence

Analysis using Atlas.ti was run to find out the individual child-based strategies used to overcome child-to-child violence in primary schools in Kitgum district. Twenty-one quotations emerged. The findings indicated that direct guidance of children by

teachers, age and gender of the pupils, experience of the pupils in problem solving and also reporting to teachers were among the key individual child-based strategies used by pupils. These are reflected in the quotations below;

One respondent reported about gender, age factor, children up bringing as a strategy used

> *"[…] Gender, age factor, children up bringing is used […]" - Dataset 2 _ Kitgum Public P/S).*

Another pupil added that the age of the pupils to solve the violence, especially when grouped, makes it easy to solve any violence at school.

> *"[…] Age of the pupils to solve the violence, by grouping them, makes it easy […]"- Dataset 2 _ Kitgum Public P/S).*

One other pupil said,

> *"Sometimes the pupil who is inflicted with the violence runs and report to a teacher" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S)*

It was found that some of the individual strategies used by pupils were associated with the family up-bringing of the individual pupil. These featured in some of the children's drawings (Figs. 3 and 4). When referring to the children's drawing (Figs. 3 and 4), one respondent said,

> *"The picture on the left-hand side, where there are three people, the person in the middle is trying to stop the two individuals in the extreme ends to stop fighting. And on the right-hand side, similar thing is happening [….]" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S]*

In another school (Namukora P/S), experiences in solving problems among pupils also featured as a strong individual strategy used by pupils to solve violence issues among themselves;

> *"[…] Experience of problem solving among students is very helpful […]" - Dataset 3 _ Namukora Primary school)*



Fig. 3 Individual child-based strategy to overcome violence (a)

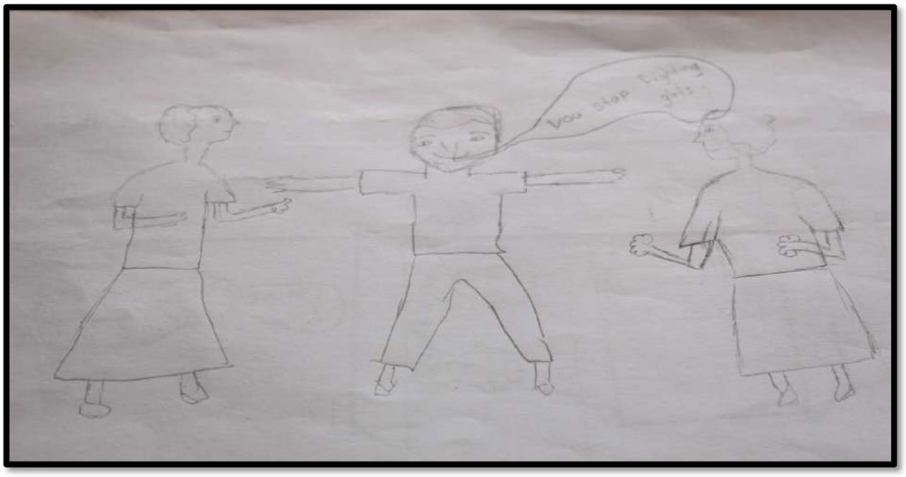


Fig. 4 Individual child-based strategy to overcome violence (b)

The study found that the most common individual strategies used included; reporting to teachers, children up-bringing, pupils coming from same class and same neighbourhood helping each other, older pupils always intervening, the use of fellow friends to stop fighting, age and experiences in solving problems among individuals and lastly, gender disparity. These strategies have been illustrated in some of the direct quotes below;

"[…] Through reporting to teachers […]"- Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"[…] Child upbringing […]" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"Pupils from the same class and same neighborhood help each other […]" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
Older pupils always intervene […]" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"They used their fellow friends to stop fighting […]" - Dataset 2 _ Kitgum Public P/S.
"[…] Age group in solving problem ([…]" - Dataset 2 _ Kitgum Public P/S.
"[…] Experience in problem solving among pupils […]" - Dataset 3 _ Namukora P/S.

The investigators also wanted to know why pupils use some of these most common individual strategies. To explain this, the following quotations were obtained from the pupils themselves;

"[…] It is fast and simple to get information as it sets the child free faster" -Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
" It is part of their upbringing which helps […]" - D 1 Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S
"Because the pupils' numbers are overwhelming, and so individual strategies help us a lot […]" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"It is because the older pupils are aware of the danger of violence and the consequences… So, they come up and help […]" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"Because they do not want more violence to continue among themselves, and must stop it […]" - Dataset 2 _ Kitgum Public P/S.
"In order to let their fellow pupils understand the danger of violence […]"-Dataset 3 _ Namukora Primary school P/S.
Because through reporting to teachers, they would get their problem solved. - Dataset 4 _ Mucwini P/S.

3.3 How children used informal peer group-based strategies to overcome child-to-child violence

Alongside the individual strategies above, the study found a number of informal peer group- based strategies used by pupils to overcome child-to-child violence in primary schools. These included children hailing from the same village, children reporting to parents and elders and informal formation of cliques. See details in Fig. 5.

The children used these informal strategies in a number of ways; by organizing plays and games, by intervening so as to calm the situation and through doing things in groups. They sometimes call the culprit privately and tell the culprit that what he or she did was wrong. They also report to their parents and elders. See quotes below;

"By organizing plays and games, we form group which help us in case of violence among us" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"[…] They help… And by intervening, they calm the situation down" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"[…] Sometimes we call the person privately and tell him or her that what the person did is wrong… And should not repeat" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"They report to their parents. […] like on 25th/05/2022, one of the pupils cut another pupil badly and the parent came to school to find out what happened […]" - Dataset 2 _ Kitgum Public P/S.
"Through doing things in groups" - Dataset 3 _ Namukora P/S.
"Children carry information about the violent and take it to their parents to get help […]" - Dataset 4 _ Mucwini P/S.

The investigators also wanted to find out why pupils use these informal strategies. It was found that the children used these informal strategies for a number of reasons as below;

"[…] Because some children don't feel satisfied with teachers' resolutions of the problem (2488:2544)" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"They are acquainted to each other, and so they help each other in case of problems like violence" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"They do it to improve their social aspect of life […]" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.

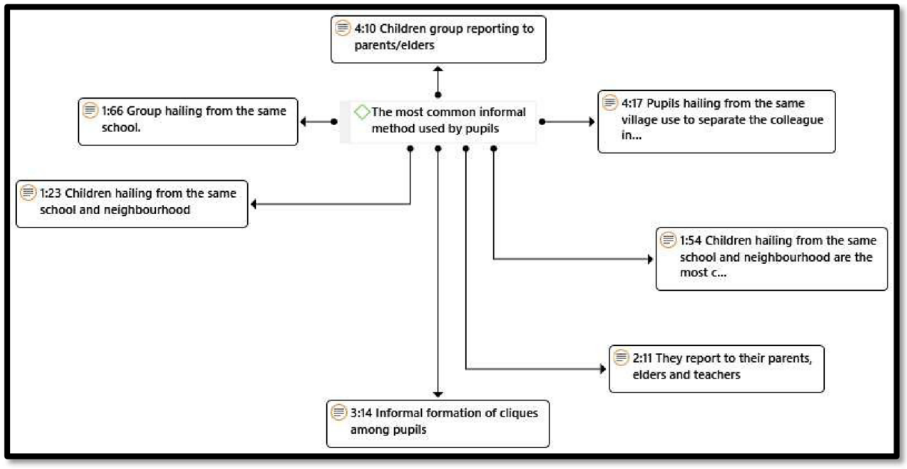


Fig. 5 Network diagram showing the most common informal strategies used by pupils



Fig. 6 Family background of some children in relation to violence

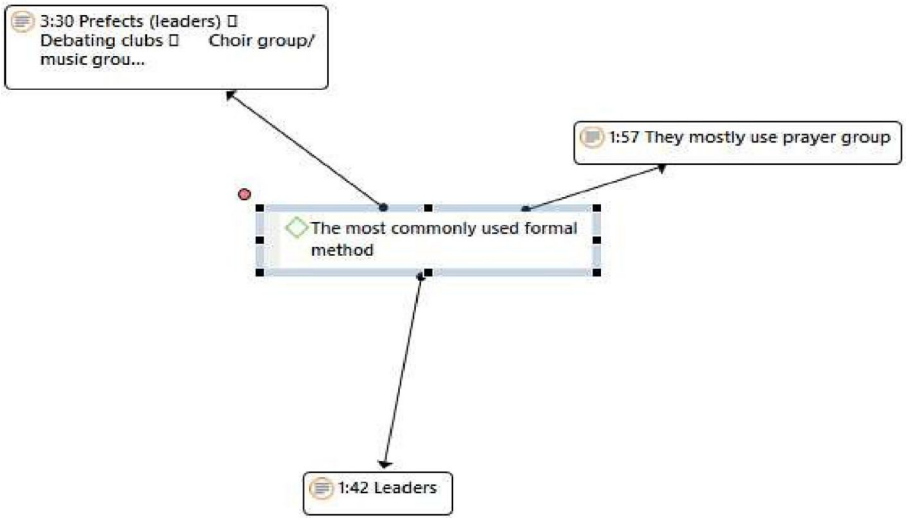


Fig. 7 Network diagram showing the most commonly used formal strategies used by pupils

"Because teachers are the kind of people who can help them out in cases of […]" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.

"[…] Because they feel free when they are with their cliques (2604:2658)" -. Dataset 3 _ Namukora P/S

"[…] Because their queries can be answered through reporting to their parents […]" - Dataset 4 _ Mucwini PS.

Sometimes, the reasons for informal strategies are based on family background exposures to violence among pupils as illustrated in one of the drawing (Fig. 6).

3.4 How children use formal peer group-based strategies to overcome child-to-child violence

A network (Fig. 7) of the most commonly used formal peer group-based methods or strategies used by pupils has shown that reporting to prefects or leaders and the use

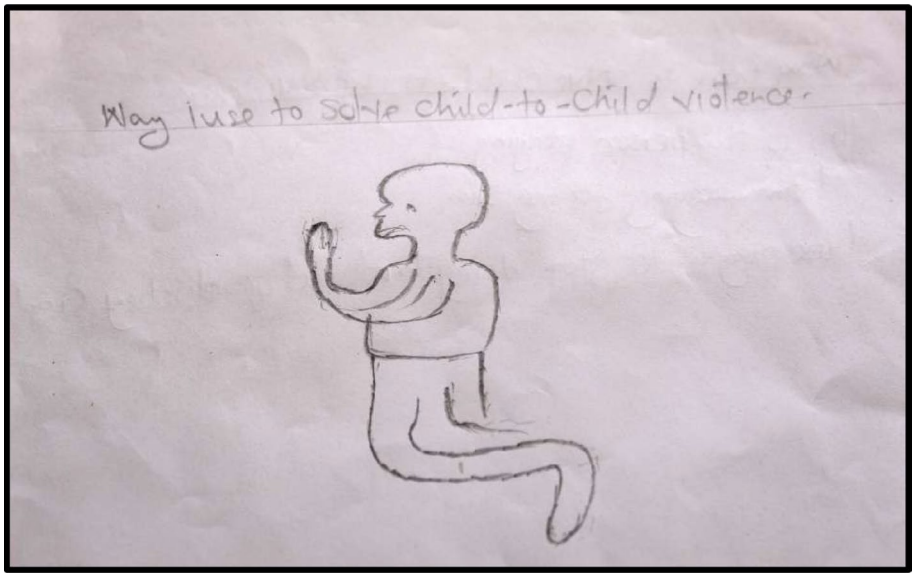


Fig. 8 Pupils using prayer as a formal strategy to combat child-to-child violence

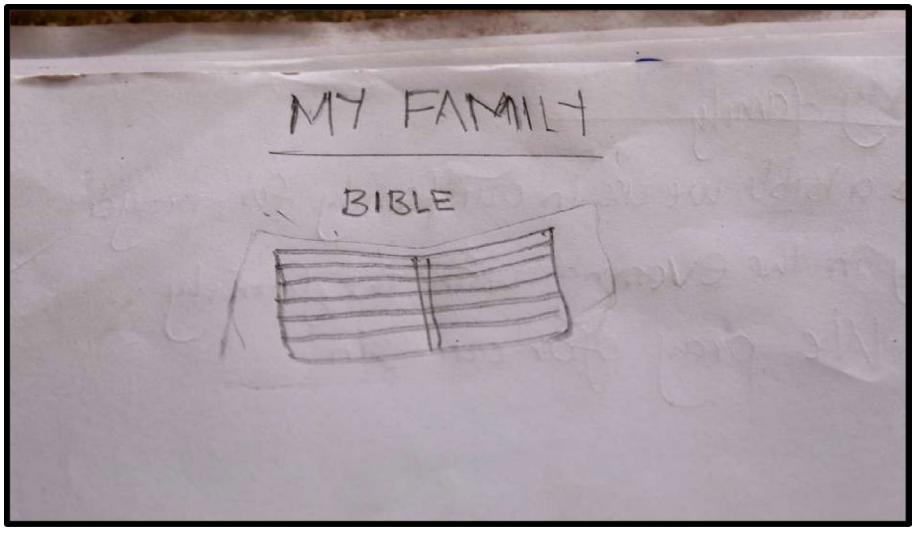


Fig. 9 Pupils using bible reading as a formal strategy to combat child-to-child violence in schools

of prayers or prayer groups (Figs. 7, 8 and 9) proved effective. To a greater extend, the use of debating clubs in an attempt to combat child-to-child violence, was also widely reported by pupils (Fig. 10).

The investigators proceeded to find out how pupils used these most common strategies to solve child-to-child violence in primary schools. The responses were as follows;

"[…] It Prepares pupils who are stubborn to become good children"-Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"[…] They report minor issues to leaders following set procedures laid down by the school […]" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
Prefects used the teachers on duty to solve the violence cases that happened" - Dataset 2 _ Kitgum Public P/S.

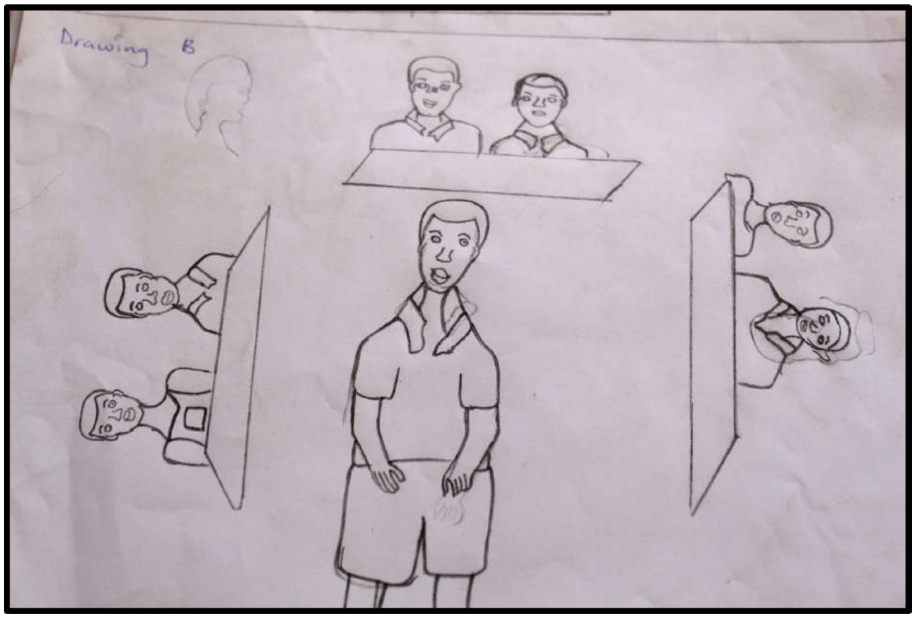


Fig. 10 Using debating as a formal strategy to combat child-to-child violence in primary schools

"They always report verbally to their class prefects... And get helped in case of violence […]" - Dataset 3 _ Namukora P/S.
"Reporting to senior woman teacher reduced cases of violence here […]" - Dataset 3 _ Namukora P/S.
"[…] Prefects call for discussion between those children involved in the violent and […]" - Dataset 4 _ Mucwini P/S.
"[…] Through debating club, topics were sited about child-to-violent in […] We learn how to use better ways to solve violence cases" - Dataset 4 _ Mucwini P/S.

When the reasons for using these formal strategies were sought, the following responses came up;

"[…] Because debate and musical events are communal and pupils try to use the opportunity to bring peace […] It is good […]" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"Because closeness exists. So reporting violence is easy" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S
"[…] Because of the school set up (environment)[…]. Because of acquaintances among the pupils" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"In those prayer groups, they always learn about things which God does […] These help us avoid violence […]" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"[…] It's because prayer groups always talk about spiritual aspect of life, which does not encourage violence" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"Because prefects are nearer to teachers. They are trusted" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"They used this method because teachers are the immediate people to approach by pupils […]" - Dataset 2 _ Kitgum Public P/S.
"It is because in debating clubs there are rules to follow during debate and so it good to learn how to avoid violence […]" - Dataset 2 _ Kitgum Public P/S.
"Because their leaders are easy to approach when it comes to violence in our class […]" - Dataset 3 _ Namukora P/S.

"Because they have respect to their leaders. This help them solve violence issues […]" - Dataset 4 _ Mucwini PS.
"Through bible preaching, the danger of violent can be easily explained […]" - Dataset 4 _ Mucwini P/S.
"The scripture concerning the danger of violence would be preached to victims of violence […]" - Dataset 4 _ Mucwini P/S.

3.5 How children involve their teachers and counsellors to overcome child-to-child violence

The investigators sought to find out how children involved their teachers and counsellors in overcoming child-to-child violence in primary schools. It was found that meetings with teachers to solve such problems were conducted, teaching children about good behaviours, monitoring children's behaviours and guidance and counselling about violence were done. The direct quotations from the pupils were as illustrated below;

"Meetings; girls' meetings are always there to solve problems like during their cycles (menstrual cycles) and also reduces courtship in the school. Violence cases are also handled in these meetings" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"By calling them and teaching them how to behave well and giving them some light punishment like slashing and cleanings the compound" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"By telling them the danger of violence and giving them some light punishment" - Dataset 1 _ Pandwong P/S.
"By monitoring the pupils if they are keeping friendship at school and outside school" - Dataset 2 _ Kitgum Public P/S.
"[…] By counselling the pupils" - Dataset 2 _ Kitgum Public P/S.
"I understand the root causes of violence and then counsel the conflicting parties. I attend to pupils by lowering my level to child's level so that I get the cause of violence and I use age difference and gender disparity […]" - Dataset 2 _ Kitgum Public P/S.
"Normally we tell pupils since they are from the same school, one should look at each other as brothers and sisters and report any form of violence on the way back home to school. They listen and obey this advice […]" -Dataset 2 _ Kitgum Public P/S.
"I normally talk to them to know their family background if those children or pupils have both parents. If so, does it reflect on what the pupil is doing at school? I also do by advising the pupil's friends to talk to the victims of violence to avoid being violence at school and avoid being dismissed from school" - Dataset 2 _ Kitgum Public P/S.
"We also have school rules and pupils have to follow these school rules and normal activities to make them focus on class work" - Dataset 2 _ Kitgum Public P/S.
"By guidance and counselling […]" - Dataset 3 _ Namukora P/S.
"[…] By inviting religious leaders to talk to pupils […]" - Dataset 3 _ Namukora P/S.
"By calling children and tracing the cause of the violence. We guide them (pupils) appropriately based on their cases. […] Sometimes by calling their parents and sharing with them […]" - Dataset 3 _ Namukora P/S.
"We make a separate discussion with them to understand the root causes and then counsel the conflicting parties […]" - Dataset 4 _ Mucwini P/S.
"Guidance and counselling" - Dataset 4 _ Mucwini P/S.

"Individual guidance and counselling; Involving parents of the pupils in solving the problem […]" -Dataset 4 _ Mucwini P/S.

3.6 Summary of results

This study found out that children/pupils use a variety of common individual child-based strategies, for example: direct guidance from their teachers and counsellors; older pupils (age factor) intervene to address violence; gender factor (older boys help girls solve violence); experience of the pupils in solving violence is crucial and pupils report to their teachers and prefects. Major reasons for using these common individual child-based strategies are: pupils can easily get teachers to solve their grevances; pupils' family upbringing enables them solve their violence; and older pupils are aware of the consequences of violence, and they have the experiences in solving violence among children.

Children use informal peer group-based strategies to address child-to-child violence. The following key strategies feature prominently herein: pupils organize plays and games; pupils report to their parents; pupil-peer groups intervene in solving violence; and pupil-peer groups call the violent children privately and tell them that what they have done is wrong. Pupils use these informal peer group-based strategies because: pupils do not feel comfortable with their teachers; pupils are very acquainted to one another; peer groups help them improve their social life; adults such as teachers and parents help them solve child-to-child violence easily, and children feel free among their peer groups/cliques.

The current study also found out that children use formal peer group-based strategies in solving child-to-child violence. Some of the commonest formal peer group-based strategies used are: Pupils report to prefects/leaders; pupils use debating clubs to examine debating motions on violence among them; pupils use the choir/music groups to express peace and love versus violence; and pupils use their Prayer and Bible study groups to solve violence. Pupils use these formal peer group-based strategies because: prefects are approachable; debating is communal-social event that helps them express their views on violence and how to address violence among children; and choir/music and Prayer/Bible study groups help the children relate well with God who is their spiritual anchor in life and source of peace, love and unity versus violence among children.

Lastly, in this study, children have demonstrated their ability to involve adults such as teachers and counsellors in addressing child-to-child violence. For example, children have meetings with their teachers and counsellors to solve violence; children report to their teachers and counsellors requesting them to teach them on good behaviour and avoid violence; children involve their teachers/counsellors in monitoring pupils in or outside school to avoid bad friends and violence; children involve their teachers and counsellors in guiding and counselling them against child-to-child violence, to follow school rules, to focus on school work and to live as brothers and sisters; children involve teachers and counsellors in inviting religious leaders to their schools to guide and counsel them on spiritual challenges including child-to-child violence; and children request teachers and counsellors to contact their parents and guardians in overcoming misbehaviour, particularly child-to-child violence in or outside school.

4 Discussion

This study was intended to investigate the strategies used by individual children to overcome child-to-child violence in primary schools in Kitgum district. It discovered that pupils use a variety of common individual child-based strategies, for example: direct guidance from their teachers and counsellors; older pupils (age factor) intervene to address violence, among others. One respondent said "Sometimes the pupil who is observing the violence runs and report to a teacher". This suggests that pupils can effectively address child-to-child violence and also provide safe environments for learners to disclose abuse and to ensure that they obtain the necessary care to prevent the long-term negative effects of violence. This is consistent with a report by UNICEF which suggested that giving children and adolescents the skills to cope and manage risks and challenges without the use of violence and to seek appropriate support when violence does occur is crucial for reducing violence in schools and communities [39]. The explanation for use of the common individual strategies seem to suggest that the respondents tend to trust their teachers more than any other adults outside the family. These study findings are also consistent with Mutto [25] which suggested that use of this approach had shown effectiveness in reducing aggression and managing violence in schools. To a lesser extent, it is further supported by [34] study carried out in Philippines on violence against children which pointed out the adverse effect on brain function and mental health that can result to poor academic performance and reluctance to participate in school activities.

This study also revealed that child-based strategies help children to overcome child-to-child violence (physical as well as emotional violence), which is consistent with other studies (WHO, 2019). This goes a long way to create a safe learning environment which is vital for children's physical and emotional wellbeing in their learning journey [41].

Again, this study found that the formal strategies used to combat child-to-child violence included the use of debating clubs and prayer groups. In Croatia, however, a school- based workshop programme was found to lead to a reduction in violence (verbal and physical, with a special focus on peer violence, aggression and bullying) in schools by 50 per cent over a period of eight years [37].

Lastly, this study found that children involved their teachers and counselors by reporting cases of violence to them and obtaining guidance on how to manage situations. Normally the pupils are informed to treat each other as brothers and sisters and report any form of violence on the way back home. This is consistent with a study on critical analysis of child protection policy in Philipines [30].

Globally, Children who experience any form of violence in childhood have a 13% greater likelihood of not graduating from school as violence has strong, long-lasting effects on brain function and mental health [34, 43]. Although several studies [20, 40] underscore the fact that the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) condemn abuse, exploitation and all forms of violence against children, there are no explicit efforts made to explain and tackle child-to-child violence in schools. Similarly, the recent Gender Dimensions of Violence Against Children and Adolescents [38] provides a detailed account of the different forms of violence against children and adolescents by different groups of people, but there is limited consideration of violence against children by peers. Violence in schools has long been a global occurrence and there has been long-standing interest in the study of school- based

violence in post-industrial democracies. This is evidenced in Australia, Norway and the United States where the issue has been a wide-spread-international phenomenon [14].

Relating to children with disabilities, Kyegombe et al. [20] posit that there is limited data on the prevention of violence against this group of children that accounts for 20% of the worldwide children's population. Similarly, there is limited mention of the violence inflicted on children with disabilities by fellow children in schools; hence there is a wide knowledge gap that requires researcher's attention too. This challenge could be greater in Uganda in general and Kitgum district in particular where the disabled children attend the same schools with the rest of the other children not categorized as disabled. If this problem remains unattended, children are likely to continue inflicting pain on others.

Unlike in Uganda, researches conducted elsewhere, for example in Burundi and the Philippines, indicate that children's strategies are central in reducing vulnerability to future violence among school-going children [16, 34]. Therefore, this study is needed to investigate and document the nature of child-to- child violence in schools and Child-based Strategies in order to inform policy and practice in Uganda.

Brenda (1992), in her study of conflict resolution strategies in relation to children's peer relation, found out that there were three strategies in responding to conflict situations in their social status: anger retaliation, withdrawal/avoidance and calm discussion. There were 165 children in the first study and 67 children in the second study. Results from the first study indicated that children who were socially preferred were identified by peers as more likely to use a calm approach to resolve conflicts and less likely to use either an anger retaliation approach or an avoidance approach. First, rejected and controversial children were viewed as using the anger retaliation strategy more than did popular, neglected, and average children. Secondly, popular children were viewed as using a calm approach to conflict resolution more than rejected, neglected, and average children. Thirdly, rejected children were viewed as using the withdrawal/avoidance strategy more than popular, neglected, and average children. The first study revealed specific relationship between conflict resolution strategies and social preference among peers in conceptually predicted ways and illustrated the relevance of examining conflict resolution skills further as part of social skill training programs for both boys and girls [28, 29]. The second study provided initial support for the validity of children's ratings of their peers' salient use of particular forms of conflict resolution strategies.

In his study of the effectiveness of the Mato-oput Curriculum in changing school children attitude towards conflicts and violence, and in reducing pupil perpetuated acts of violence in Northern Uganda, Mutto [25] reported that the teacher intervention strategy was used as a non-violent conflict resolution. This strategy was specifically developed for Gulu schools, following earlier baseline studies in the district. The goal of the curriculum was to produce young people who understood the causes and consequences of conflicts and had skills for resolving them non-violently. It had ten learning areas: conflict, peace, conscience, empathy, anger management, self- control/impulse control, fairness, kindness, reconciliation and non-violence. Conflict was considered in the curriculum as a normal fact of life stemming from interpersonal differences which could be physical, social, intellect or emotional. Violence was addressed as a deliberate and learned negative behavioural response to conflict. In his assessment, Mutto [25] attributed the teaching of concepts and values of peace, as they were prescribed, to strategic solution, to the culture of violence that had encompassed the region. In Northern Nigeria, half of

children experience physical violence, 18% experience emotional abuse or bullying, and 8% experience sexual abuse [33].

5 Conclusions

Child-to-child violence is a vice because it is an injustice against children and is counterproductive to children's right and wellbeing. Violence against children cannot be overcome by adults only, but it requires also involvement of the children. From the current study, we conclude that there is child-to-child violence in the four selected primary schools in Kitgum District. This adversely affected children's life and academic performance. Children from the four selected schools have the resilience, commitment and love to overcome child-to-child violence by using child-based strategies. For example: we witnessed children drawing pictures to express their views, feelings and experiences about, and solutions to child-to-child violence. Secondly, children had the ability to use a variety of common individual child-based, informal peer group-based and formal peer group-based strategies to overcome the vice. Finally, children are capable of involving their teachers and counsellors, individually or through their prefects, in overcoming child-to-child violence. These child-based strategies explored demonstrated children's abilities in overcoming this vice in schools. Therefore, researchers, schools, parents, policy makers, governments, NGOs, and others, should not undervalue children's abilities in addressing child-to-child violence in schools.

5.1 Recommendations

The authors recommend as follows;

- Head teachers and staff need revise school policies and child-to-child strategies of addressing violence in schools.
- Alongside adults, Schools should train older children on how to handle child-to-child violence in primary schools.
- Parents need to actively engage their children in combating child-to-child violence at their homes.
- More research needs to be done with children in order to address their own challenges while they are at schools.

5.2 Policy and practice implications

This study on child-to-child violence and strategies for addressing them from children perspectives carries a lot of policy and practice implications. It can be used to form a basis for crafting school policies on handling child-to-child violence in primary schools across Uganda.

Supplementary Information

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Supplementary Material 1

Supplementary Material 2

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Author contributions

Kizito Omona KO made substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work, interpretation of data for the work; AND Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND Final approval of the version to be published; AND Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved. Ouma Richard OR made substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work, interpretation of data for the work; AND Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND Final approval of the version to be published; AND Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved. Kizito Nalela KN made substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work, interpretation of data for the work; AND Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND Final approval of the version to be published; AND Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved. Jane Florence Amoding JFA made substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work, interpretation of data for the work; AND Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND Final approval of the version to be published; AND Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved. Modest Kayi O'dama MKO made substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work, interpretation of data for the work; AND Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND Final approval of the version to be published; AND Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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Data availability

Dataset related to this study has been deposited in a public repository and is available at https://data.mendeley.com/datasets/hbt2chrn3v/1.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The researchers obtained ethical approval from Gulu University Research Ethics Committee (GUREC-2022-217) and then from Uganda National Council of Science and Technology (UNCST-SS1277ES). Administrative clearance was got from Kitgum District local government and the school authorities. We confirm that all experiments were performed in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations [6, 12, 21, 35, 42]. The study observed compliance with the Helsinki Declaration. All safe guarding, distress disclosure and power dynamic between researchers and children were managed as guided by Uganda National Council for Science and Technology [35]. A freely-given informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from each participant or their parent or legal guardian in the case of children under 18 years.

Consent for publication

The informed consents were obtained from all participants who were 18 years and above. For those who were 10–17 years, we obtained informed consents from their parents, and informed assent from the said participants respectively.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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