Exploring Child Rights Clubs potential on promoting Child Protection Education in Schools

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Abstract
The purpose of the study was to document the child protection knowledge that children are able to acquire through the child rights clubs in schools which often helps them in coping with the appalling conditions in which they continue to live. A total of 68 respondents were purposively selected for the study, who included 60 children who are members of child rights clubs in schools and 8 key informants. The study findings indicated that child rights clubs are important avenues for encouraging child protection education in schools. Through these child rights clubs, children are well versed with information on child rights, child abuse and reporting child abuse cases. The paper recommends infusion of the child protection component in the country's education policies for extensive child protection information dissemination, education and communication and thus improved child protection outcomes. To have a greater impact on children, child protection should become a priority.

Key words: Child Rights Clubs, Child Protection, Schools, Uganda

1. Introduction
Like in many developing countries, violence against children in Uganda has taken its stroll regardless of the absence of accurate information about the prevalence (Devrie et al., 2013). In overwhelming numbers, children have described the rampant use of violence against them in their homes, in schools and in the wider community (Naker, 2005). Although schools provide an environment in which children are able to interact and play (Atkins et al., 2010), most of the physical and psychological violence inflicted on children happens within the school setting (ACPF, 2011). Male teachers are the main perpetrators of beating in Uganda (ACPF, 2006). Many schools in Uganda have not prioritized child protection (CP) education as an important component for children's safety in and out of schools (Ayebazibwe, 2013). It is safe to say, moreover, that child protection education in schools is often overlooked, and such information is very important for both the students and the schools authorities at large. The introduction of child rights clubs in schools has been believed to help bridge this gap although these clubs at the moment in Uganda are largely dependent on NGO projects for funding, supervision and sustenance. There is need of educational reforms in Uganda to include such innovative programs. It has been proved that incorporation of child protection knowledge and other child protection activities into educational research can provide a well-rounded secure learning environment for
children. Chigunta (2005) concluded that the Child Rights Clubs in Zambia have had a positive impact on the awareness and knowledge of the rights of the child in the schools where the clubs operate. According to Gillmore (2014), Child Rights Clubs help kids to help themselves. They provide children with information and experiences that bring real-world relevance of own protection in and out of school which is as paramount as academic excellence in learning (Gillmore, 2014; UNICEF, 2007). But few schools based interventions include the child protection component (Ayebazibwe, 2013). Most school-based programs target academic excellence (Evans-Winters, 2005). Researchers have called for greater attention to internalizing issues, such as abuse and exploitation of children (Collin-Vézina, Daigneault and Hébert, 2013; UYDEL, 2011; Lansford et al., 2007). This paper focuses on documenting the child protection knowledge that children are able to acquire through the child rights clubs in schools which often helps them in coping with the appalling conditions in which they continue to live. The OVC Situational Analysis report (2010) places the level of vulnerability among children in Uganda at 96% with 8% (1.4 million) critically vulnerable, 43% (7.4 million) moderately vulnerable and 45% generally vulnerable (7.7 million) (Kalibala and Elson, 2010). This implies that the living conditions of children in Uganda are still far from desirable. Improving children protection will lead to increased student academic achievement and higher enrollment and completion rates, which will result into lowered abuse and exploitation of children and increased economic activity.

2. Methods
The study employed largely qualitative techniques in data collection, analysis and presentation. The qualitative approach to research was used because it deals with human conduct and motivation which cannot be captured by the quantitative approach. The study was conducted in Busega village, Kampala District, Uganda. The purposive selection of Busega village was due to the proximity and familiarity of the locale to the researchers. A total sample of 68 respondents were involved in the study. These included 60 in-school children (30 primary students and 30 secondary students) who were purposively selected because they were members in the child rights clubs in their respective schools. The key informants included 8 school authorities who consisted mostly the teachers/patrons of the child right clubs in the selected schools. The total sample was drawn from four (4) schools (2 primary schools and 2 secondary schools) which were purposively selected because of the existence of child rights clubs in these schools. Data collected involved use of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (4 focus groups were conducted) with the primary respondents, and key informant interviews for the school authorities. Content and thematic analysis were used for qualitative data. Transcriptions and translations were made, edited to ensure completeness and logical flow, and critically read by the researchers. Content and thematic analysis enabled the researchers to identify and isolate the major themes, meanings, common explanations, patterns, trends and understandings in the respondents’ responses. Quantitative data analysis was done using a computerized programme SPSS to provide descriptive summaries and more manipulations were done by use of Ms Excel.

3. Results
3.1 Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents
3.1.1 Age of Respondents
The age of the children varied according to the level of education. In the primary schools, the age was much younger and narrower, mostly between 11 - 12 years as shown in Table 1. This is because at primary level, this age group is normally believed to have developed sound reasoning and understanding and can easily
nominate themselves in different school activities, usually in primary six and primary seven as opposed to children in the lower grades. In the secondary schools, the age was much higher and broader, from 13 - 18 years as shown in Table 1. At this level, children are deemed to be mature enough, to be able to make own life choices. This is normally a transition period from childhood to adulthood where children normally exercise their rights and responsibilities. Key informants included teachers/patrons of the child right clubs in the selected schools. These are the advisors of children at school, on whom students can rely for proper direction.

Table 1: Age of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Age (Years)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child rights club</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>members</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child rights club</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>members</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.8</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Informants</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>68</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1.2 School Grade
The grade range of primary children was Primary four - Primary seven while for secondary children was senior one - senior six. There was equal representation for both primary and secondary children. This follows the fact that all are still children under parental care and guidance, no matter the level of education.

3.1.3 Gender of Respondents
Of the 60 children selected for in - depth interviews and FGDs, 31 or 51.7 percent were female while 29 or 48.3 percent were male. There was almost equal representation of female and male children because both the
primary and secondary schools were all mixed schools. The study was also gender sensitive. The Key informants included 5 male teachers and 5 female teachers.

3.2 Child Rights Clubs: Overview on Formation and Management

In the four (4) schools visited, the Child Rights Clubs were formed under the NGO projects running in these schools. The school authorities occasionally mentioned about the existence of this idea before the NGO's came in. The researchers learnt that NGOs first orient the teachers about the concept of the child rights clubs. The NGOs then delegate the responsibility of marketing this idea to the rest of the school children to the teachers in-charge of children affairs in the respective schools, who officially become the child rights club patrons, with selected assistants just in case of absence or in need of suitable replacements. The study discovered that the child rights club patrons in all the schools visited were males. This was because women in Busega village have not been well established in the leadership roles. The child rights club patrons are responsible for guiding school children through this innovation. The NGOs are supposed to oversee the activities of these child rights clubs through offering technical assistance such as funding, training, monitoring and support supervision. Child participation is at the forefront in the establishment of the child right clubs. Participation in these clubs is always voluntary. Membership is open to all children in the schools. The children willingly choose to participate in these clubs as opposed to being chosen by the facilitators. The child rights clubs are directly run by the school children. The club activities include debates, music, dance and drama and sports undertaken mainly in the school environment. In almost all the schools visited, an executive comprising a president, a vice-president, secretary and treasurer, typically runs a child rights club for a period of one year. Executive members are mainly children in higher grades. All child rights clubs meet at least once a week. The club members brought to the researcher's attention that the level of attendance in the club meetings was high. The child rights club members described the club meetings as an important source of learning. The study observed that the size of the child rights club membership was too large in all the schools because there were no restrictions to membership. The researcher's view is that at the inception of such new innovations, it is crucial to include all members for a solid foundation. This explains the absence of club registers in all the schools visited. In the FGDs and key informant interviews, the researchers learnt that not all children are actively participating in these clubs but the size of the club membership in all the schools visited ranged from 30 in primary schools to over 70 in secondary schools. Active support of the initiative by the school administrations' was noted although instances of reluctance on the part of some teachers to participate in the club activities were also recorded.

3.3 Child Rights Clubs potential on promoting Child Protection Education in Schools

Studies have indicated that the school environment in Uganda is a source of child abuse. But important to note is that the same environment can be used to prevent abuse on children. Child Rights Clubs are important avenues important avenues for encouraging child protection education in schools.

3.3.1 Awareness of Children's Rights

The findings indicate that the child rights clubs have improved the knowledge and understanding of children rights for both children and teachers. Children got to know the different types of rights they are entitled to such as the right to education, the right to freedom of speech and the right to good health among other rights. At least all club members could mention at minimum two child rights they are entitled to. One of main
activities that NGOs undertake in schools under these child rights clubs is to offer trainings for teachers and club members. Discussions with club patrons in schools visited indicated that, as a result of such trainings, teachers are not only aware of their roles and responsibilities to protect children but they have also become important actors in the protection of children.

Case Study

I was one of the teachers who used to seriously beat students. Some students even used to report me to the school administration but of course, the school administration could do nothing by then. But with the establishment of these child rights clubs coupled with the trainings we receive from NGOs, my punishment approach has changed. For senior five and senior six school children for instance, counseling is done because these are mature students. For senior one – senior four, small punishments are given because they are still young. But these punishments depend as well on the offense the student has committed. Not every wrongdoing by a student is punishable unless it is an aggravated abuse on a teacher. These punishments are done after classes such as sweeping a certain class, picking part of the school compound, fetching water, etc. For sure, they are just very simple punishments to teach other students not to do the same. My fellow teachers have also changed. In fact, students are now acknowledging that teachers are not beating them like they used to do before. Teachers meetings are all rounded now. We no longer talk about only those things which affect us as teachers but we have started including issues that affect children in our meetings agenda, talking about them and findings solutions for them. There is always a unanimous decision to attend to issues of children. This is such a great change in our school because before, teachers could not allow issues of children to be included in their discussions. (Child Rights Club Patron, Secondary School, Busega village, Kampala District)

The child rights club members bear witness to child protection awareness in and around schools. Some of them had this to say;

We normally utilize the general assembly every Monday of the week as a platform to share with the rest of the school children messages on child protection. Our topics normally come from those child protection issues we identify at school or even in the communities where we live. We have concentrated a lot on sexual violence and corporal punishments because these are the child abuse concerns we have identified repeatedly. The child rights clubs have helped us deal with child protection problems in and around schools. They have also boosted our self confidence and especially talking to people. (FGD, Child Rights Club Members, Secondary School, Busega village, Kampala District)

From the above information, it is clear that the child rights clubs have helped to increase children's and teacher's awareness about child protection. Children have become more confident in reporting abuse to the relevant authorities. The teachers/child rights club patrons the researchers talked to acknowledged that there is a general sense of responsibility on the part of children with regard to capacity to reporting abuse. This is a notable achievement registered by the existence of the child rights clubs in schools.
3.3.2 Awareness of the different forms of Child Abuse

Child Rights Club members seemed aware of the different forms of child abuse. In the in-depth interviews and FGDs, club members identified domestic servitude, defilement, corporal punishment in schools, sexual relationships by teachers, early marriages, psychological abuse, child neglect and abandonment, conscription in armed conflict, child sacrifice, subjection of children to hazardous work such as scrap collection, selling in the streets and working in stone quarries as examples of child abuse. Children appreciated the knowledge acquired about child abuse (through the child rights clubs) and how it has helped them learn how to stay safe.

At one primary school, one child rights club member demonstrated knowledge on how to stay safe as follows:

*I often refuse free transport and gifts from strangers, I avoid bad groups, I desist night movements, and I always refuse bad touches. This is how I protect myself from bad people not to take advantage of me.*

(Child Rights Club member, 12 years, Primary School, Busega Village, Kampala District)

Discussions with teachers also highlighted an improved capacity among teachers in handling child abuse in schools and beyond.

3.3.3 Awareness of the different stakeholders responsible for children affairs

Child Rights Clubs have helped children know where to get help. Club members were able to single out the different entities in charge of children affairs in the communities and these included the police, local leaders, court, NGOs and the teachers in schools. Children are aware that the perpetrators of child abuse are punishable by law. Children had started using these child protection systems as the school patron of one secondary school confirmed that,

*Children normally report teachers to police, for the corporal punishments suffered.*  (Child Rights Club Patron, Secondary School, Busega village, Kampala District)

Another teacher made the following observation:

*Children never used to report cases of child abuse to us. But with the introduction of the child rights clubs in schools, children are now able to talk to us about issues affecting them. The local leaders in one of the parental meetings we had at school also recognized that there is an increase in the number of children reporting cases of abuse to them in the community.*  (Child Rights Club Patron, Primary School, Busega village, Kampala District)

The greatest achievement in building the capacity of children as well as the relevant stakeholders is the change in attitude. Teachers have the right attitude to handling child protection issues. Children have the right attitude in participating in their own protection. One club member made the following compliment:

*We are now able to express our problems because our teachers now allow room for interaction with students.*  (Club Member, Secondary School, Busega Village, Kampala District)

Another teacher added that:

*We normally hear these children telling their friends to sit properly in case of any indecent disclosure such as peeping under wears and sometimes commenting on the dressing of their fellow friends and especially those that might come at school shabbily dressed.*  (Child Rights Club Patron, Secondary School, Busega village, Kampala District)
4. Discussion
Child Rights Clubs have positive effects on enhancing children’s knowledge and awareness of their rights, awareness of the different forms of child abuse and awareness of where to report in case of any abuse. Schools are often successful in improving the child protection outcomes of children if they carefully integrate child protection education in their academic programs. Children in schools are always eager to learn new things. Working with schools was found to be the most effective means of addressing the issues of child protection at the school level. Child Rights Clubs are a vital means of mobilizing schools around children's protection and wellbeing. It was found that these child rights clubs can make it possible and contextually appropriate to: identify, prevent and respond to significant child protection risks; mobilize schools around child protection issues; and provide a base of school support and action that can be taken to scale through links with other community groups such as the police, local leaders, and child protection committees in the community. Child participation is at the forefront of the operation of these child right clubs. This is paramount for any successful child protection intervention. Children need to be involved right from the initial stages of any child protection activity designing, planning and implementation. The Child Rights Clubs have proved that children can participate in their own protection. For example, if a child can report a case to any relevant authority, it shows that children can participate in their own protection. When you engage children often, then you are able to get good results from them. It was good to enable club members to come up with initiatives of their own such as 'utilizing the general assembly as a platform to share with the rest of the school children messages on child protection,' as earlier reported in the study findings. Engaging teaching staff and school children is important to bridge the gap between the school-led activities and the student-led activities. The study showed improvements in teacher-student relationships, suggesting that child right clubs may be helpful even in building social bonds among children and teachers in schools. Child Rights Clubs have the potential to benefit many children, improve the school environments, and reduce burden on the schools’ limited resources for handling child protection issues. For instance, even though there is little consensus on what defines a 'vulnerable' child or household eligible for receipt of support services in Uganda (Kalibala et al., 2011), there are so many children in Uganda assessed to be in need of immediate care and protection (Walakira, 2013; Kalibala et al, 2011; Kalibala and Elson, 2010). The formal child protection system in Uganda is often under resourced to address the child protection needs of children in the country (Sembatya, 2012). Teacher-student dialogues as encouraged through the child rights clubs, is a promising child protection intervention component, as it can offer self esteem development for children and it embodies an effective model for behavioural change through information sharing. Although potentially costly, the trainings offered by NGOs in schools preceding the establishment of the child rights clubs promotes the sustainability of child rights clubs outcomes, as the skills and capacities acquired will remain in the school and support continued activities beyond the life of the club. Increased awareness and sensitization on child protection among the school communities has helped to increase reporting of abuse and violence against children. There is increased willingness of the teachers as well as school children to support children facing abuse and violence in the school communities.
Conclusion
Efforts towards addressing child abuse and enhancing child protection are a welcome development nationally. The findings of this study indicate that child rights clubs have made significant steps in promoting child protection education in schools. In particular, the evidence from the study indicates that the child rights clubs have made attempts at encouraging information sharing on child protection. The school children and the school authorities have been sensitized on child protection issues through the club activities at the schools. From the evidence gathered through discussions and interviews with the study respondents, there is a right attitude to handling child protection issues. There is an increased awareness about child protection among children and teachers in schools. Relationships among teachers and school children are critical in making the child rights clubs maintained in schools. Child protection is not a one day activity. It takes time and requires significant commitment from all the stakeholders. The paper recommends infusion of the child protection component in the education polices of the country for extensive child protection information dissemination, education and communication and thus improved child protection outcomes of the country.

References


