

# Measuring and Improving Ugandan Students' Physical and Emotional Safety in School

A Summary Brief Based on the Impact Evaluation Findings of STiR Education's Programme in Uganda



## Study Context

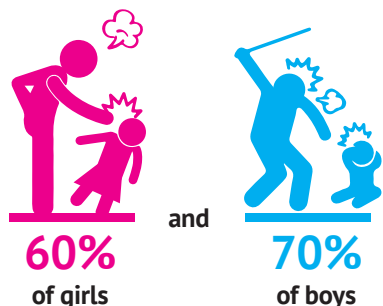
STiR Education commissioned Ichuli Institute, an independent research organisation headquartered in Kampala to investigate long-term trends and impacts from their programme over 4 years in Uganda.

The goal of the study is to understand how the STiR programme impacts the intrinsic motivation – the self-motivation, drive, interest and satisfaction in engaging in a behaviour or activity – of students, teachers and education officials in order to improve teaching practices and student learning.



## The Challenge

Corporal punishment and peer bullying are rampant problems in many countries, but **in Uganda violence against children at home, in the community and at school is exceptionally high**. According to a 2015 national survey,<sup>1</sup> 60% of girls and 70% of boys in Uganda experience some type of physical violence during their childhood. It is estimated that 41% of boys and 31% of girls will experience **physical abuse at the hands of community members, most often by male and female teachers**. In addition, 39% of boys and 22% of girls will suffer physical violence from a peer. In 2014, local NGO, Raising Voices, recorded even higher rates of corporal punishment at schools where more than 90% of boys and girls reported experiencing physical violence at school at some point in their lives and **more than 50% had been subjected to violence at school in the past week.**<sup>2</sup>



in Uganda experience some type of physical violence during their childhood

In an effort to make classrooms and schools safer for children, **STiR's programme helps teachers create positive and healthy physical and emotional learning environments.**

STiR measures safety at school by studying the relationship between students and their teachers and the use of verbal and physical punishment. Key indicators include teachers' and children's positive relationship, use of physical punishment/negative words and children's self-reported feelings of safety at school. **The independent evaluation investigated these outcomes, additionally exploring teacher, children, head teacher and local education official beliefs and practices around school violence, corporal punishment and bullying.**

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, (2015). 'Uganda Violence Against Children: Findings from a National Survey', Kampala, Uganda: UNICEF.

<sup>2</sup> Devries K, Child J, Allen E, et al., (2014) 'School violence, mental health and educational performance in Ugandan primary school children: a cross-sectional survey', *Pediatrics*, 133(1), 129–37.



## The Findings

Year 1 of the study found that 97% of **students reported feeling safe at school and in their classrooms**. Independent observers in classrooms primarily witnessed teachers treating students respectfully, using positive language and **creating an enjoyable, emotional connection with them**. Students, teachers and education officials also all reported that teachers frequently smile and laugh with students during their lessons.



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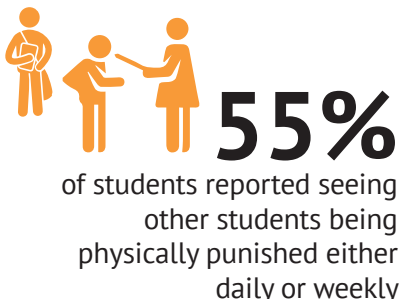
One third of students reported having asked someone at school for help, indicating that **some students trust adults at their school to help them** with their problems. Students, teachers and education officials reported that **verbal punishment by teachers is somewhat uncommon**, with 14% of students reporting experiencing it in the past two weeks and 77% of teachers and 84% of head teachers reporting that verbal abuse of students is **not** acceptable.

However, the study found that **corporal punishment is deeply entrenched in school culture**. Even though it is illegal in Uganda, teachers, head teachers and local officials reported that **it is widely used and believed to be an effective and necessary method of punishment**.

An  
important  
finding from  
the study  
concluded:

Teachers self-reported and were observed being welcoming and friendly towards students and calling on them by name. This corresponds to students reporting liking school and feeling safe in their academic environment. But, conversely, both teachers and students reported that corporal punishment is a common method of discipline, indicating a disconnect between purported feelings of safety at school and normalized physical punishment practices.

This finding indicates that there is **likely a mismatch between what students report about their feelings of safety and what they are actually experiencing at school**. Although the majority of students reported feeling safe at school and in their classrooms, 55% of students reported seeing other students being physically punished either daily or weekly and 50% reported being physically punished themselves at least once during the current term, on average 2.7 times in the previous two weeks, most frequently by a teacher.



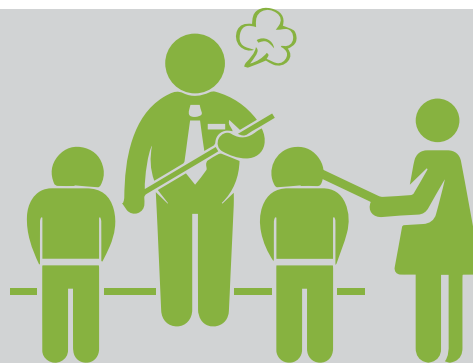
One **possible explanation for this mismatch is students' attitudes towards physical punishment**. When asked if they believed the best way to discipline a student who breaks the rules was through physical punishment, 65% of students agreed. These results suggest that **students may not correlate being physically punished with feeling unsafe at school**. It is possible that physical punishment at home and school are normalised for many students and they are unaware that corporal punishment is a characteristic of an unsafe school.



**65%**  
of students agreed that physical punishment is best  
when students misbehave



Teachers are welcoming and friendly...



but also use physical punishment to discipline.

The study also found that **a teacher being welcoming and friendly is not necessarily mutually exclusive from a teacher that uses physical punishment.** Independent observers witnessed positive interactions between teachers and students in the classroom; however, based on students' reports about physical punishment and admissions by 68% of teachers and 56% of head teachers to having used corporal punishment, it is clear that a culture of punishment is common amongst otherwise warm and friendly teachers.



## Recommendations for STiR and its Government Partners

STiR works to **strengthen the education system** and **empower stakeholders** including teachers, head teachers and education officials to **perform their respective functions.**

Going forward, STiR and its government partners should focus on:

1

Reiterating the government's ban on corporal punishment at school and ensuring all school actors know and understand the policy and follow it.

Ensuring there are structures, safe guarding policies and reporting mechanisms in place and being applied for identifying and reporting instances of violence.

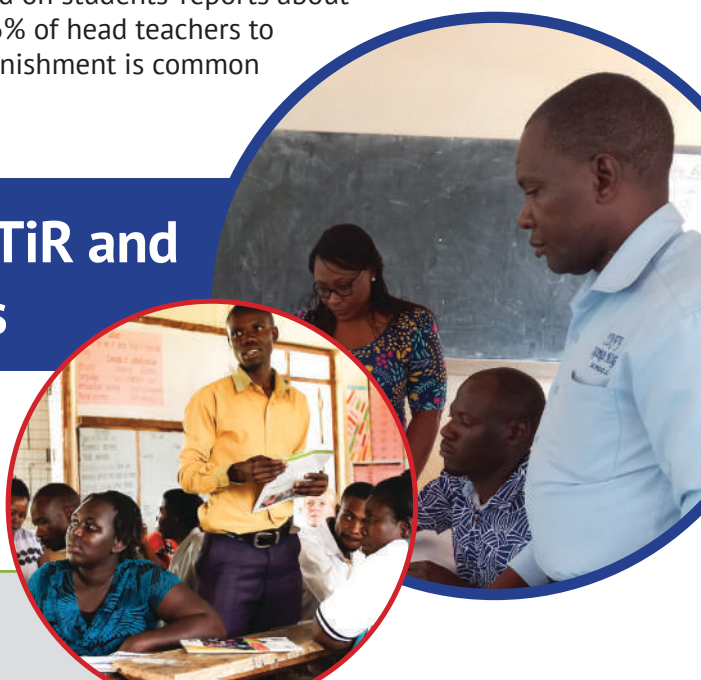
2

3 Involving education stakeholders and students in targeted activities to improve the safety and emotional well-being of all learners.

Educating teachers about effective, non-physical ways to discipline students and ensure they are implemented.

4

5 Sensitising education officials to apply appropriate sanctions for teachers and head teachers who use corporal punishment.



Sensitising education officials about their role to observe and provide support to teachers and head teachers so they can use alternative, non-violence methods of discipline.

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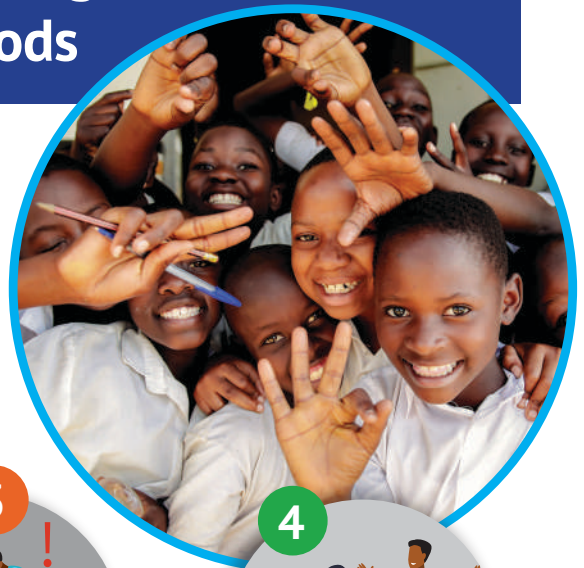
7 Bringing parents, communities and local education officials together to address school-based violence.

Increasing students' knowledge about their rights in regards to corporal punishment.

8

## Recommendations for Adapting the Study's Measurement Methods

Year 1 of the study also revealed that **the way school safety is measured must be more holistic since violence and feelings about safety are complex** and cannot be accurately measured through student self-reports and teacher actions alone. Ichuli and STiR are **exploring alternative metrics to measure safety at school** during future evaluation points, which may include collecting additional data about:



1 Peer-to-peer bullying at school;



2 Existence, knowledge and application of policies, structures, reporting mechanisms and disciplinary measures used for curbing corporal punishment and bullying at school;



3 Violence in the community and how it influences feelings about physical punishment and safety at school; and



4 Activities led by stakeholders to reduce violence at school and improve methods of discipline.



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