Emotional Stress and Child Development: Children's Voices as a Means of Understanding Child Trauma in the Learning Process

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Abstract

This article envisages children in Ugandan schools facing emotional exclusion due to a system of grading based on examination scores. Despite wide discussions on inclusion and diversity in education literature, little has been reported on actual systems and processes that close out certain groups of learners. Isolating and teaching academically weaker children separately from higher performers as commonly practiced in Uganda is rarely subjected to discussion. While academically weaker children would in other contexts be regarded as vulnerable or at risk, and are given more consideration to learn, these children in Uganda silently harbor stigmatized feelings of abandonment thus, decreasing their self-esteem and undermining their struggle for academic achievement. UNESCO's broadened concept of inclusion in education, advocates for education for all learners, respecting their diverse needs, abilities and characteristics. Basing on the theory of non-abandonment and Paul Freire's theory of inclusive pedagogies, field experiences with primary school children in Uganda are used to point out the risk of emotional torture associated with exclusionary practices in schools. It suggests collaborative learning as a strategy for aiding the teachers to engage meaningfully with learners. The study contributes on literature of teaching practices that can either aid or hinder the learning of children in schools.

Keywords: *Child development, child trauma, child emotional stress*
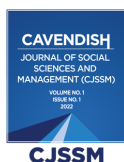
Introduction

"There is a way they treat us… they segregate us from other classes. They take us to be stupid. The bad thing I don't like about teachers, they take those wiser groups as the best, and those of us who are trying, and every time they quarrel to us… they say you are not serious, what, what." (FGD with children)

There is a growing concern in Uganda for improving the academic grades of learners, in the struggle to meet the demands of both parents and the government (UWEZO 2021). This paper reflects upon the voices of the learners and teachers in Ugandan primary schools and how they are affected by a system of academic grading that has been embraced by schools across the country. While it is common knowledge that classrooms comprise a diversity of students in terms of academic abilities, social economic backgrounds and factors that affect achievement, Ugandan children are taught according to their academic achievements. This practice has not only led to mental torture, but also found to create anxiety, divides, tension and exclusion as in the except above. The teachers who are caught in a dilemma of producing academic grades believe that this practice actually goes against the teaching practicum. For instance, it is against the idea of teaching as a 'moral craft' that involves attempting to transform people in ways that are considered to be good or worthwhile (Maxwell, 2017). The major concern is that high academic grades as commonly used as a measure of one's academic abilities, actually, rarely translate into better skills and actual productivity in the adult lives of the majority of the children (World Bank, 2017).

In this study, the voices of both the children and their teachers pointed more to the side of promoting the ranking and image of the school at national examinations than enhancing actual learning, more especially for the pupils who are grouped into weaker streams. I base on this to argue that segregating children promotes tension, intimidation and exclusion for those children who may not be higher academic achievers and yet gifted in other areas that the school system ignores.

The educational welfare for children who are slow learners or academically disadvantaged in Uganda, are actually not helped by the schooling system that may be doing little in building a holistic knowledge base of the students (Maxwell, 2017). This article not only explores the voices of the Ugandan children like the one in the excerpt above, but it also provides critical reflections of the parents and other stake holders. It then offers insights on how undertaking action research with the children and their teachers proved useful in strengthening the children's voice to freely air their concerns.

While academically weak children in Uganda struggle with anxiety due to the segregation that is subjected to them (Wabule, 2017), such children in other contexts are categorized as vulnerable or at *risk,* and are provided with the care they need in order to become more empowered in their own abilities (Razer & Friedman, 2017). More so, while segregating higher achievers from those with lower grades is interpreted as aiding academic excellence, it contradicts UNESCO's (2014) declaration of education as a human right and foundation for a just and more equitable society. More so, the teachers who participated in this study confessed that they are passively conditioned to adhere to curriculum guidelines,

Volume 1. Issue I. September 2022

CAVENDISH
JOURNAL OF SOCIAL
SCIENCES AND
MANAGEMENT (CJSSM)
VOLUME NO. 1
ISSUE NO. 1
2022

CJSSM

2

unquestionably obey policies and work towards achieving performance standards they have little say in defining. Similar concerns are raised by educational scholars elsewhere in the world (Fullan 2010; Sahlberg 2011) who decry the limits to professional self-regulation, thus, hindering adherence to the actual norms of teaching. UNESCO's broadened concept of inclusion is that education should reach out to all learners, respecting their diverse needs, abilities and characteristics, and eliminating all forms of discrimination in the learning environment (UNESCO, 2009). This is upheld by the global commitment to universal access to primary education under the Education for All (EFA) agenda, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), that advocate for teaching approaches that meet the needs of diverse populations. Moreover, inclusive and equitable quality education are emphasized as a vision for promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all as expressed by Sustainable development goal (SDG4).

Far from international policies that stress an empowering relationship between the teachers and the learner, an authoritarian top-down stance undertaken in Ugandan schools as also observed by Skovdal and Campbell (2010) in a study on orphaned children in Zimbabwe, provides little room for children to engage in dialogue with teachers about their learning challenges and how best to respond to them. Exclusionary tendencies create a distant teacher pupil relationship with little room for emotional engagement (Wabule, 2017).

Informed by the theory of non-abandonment which accords a central role to participation and dialogue (Razer & Friedman, 2017), this article focuses on two issues. First, on academic scores; puts children in a vulnerable position because it ignores their wider emotional development, creativity and social needs (Sahlberg, 2011; Razer & Friedman, 2017). It also ignores the wider purposes of education and the ideal of the teacher.

Secondly it explains how creating a collaborative learning environment facilitates a forum for feedback and free discussion with children about their anxieties. The article bears much significance to Uganda given the increasing recognition of the vulnerability of children and youths to dropping out of school (Tukundane, Zeelen, Minnaert, & Kanyandago, 2014). Accordingly, school processes and experiences are a significant factor for early school leaving. While academic achievement is commendable, it is important that schools devise strategies that minimize threats of emotional anxiety and exclusion to the children.

Exclusion and Vulnerability in Education: A review of literature
Teaching comprises of both analytical and technical aspects, which must be fulfilled in the process of transmitting values, social ideals, knowledge and skills (Maxwell 2017; Sahlberg, 2011). Inclusive education is the major impetus for the education agenda worldwide (UNESCO, 2009). UNESCO defines inclusive education as a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach to all learners. Inclusion is thus, seen as a process of responding to the diverse needs of all children. Achieving this requires that ordinary schools work towards combating discriminatory attitudes and creating welcoming classrooms for all children regardless of gender, race or socioeconomic background. Literature, media and every day public talk has often identified frames of exclusion or inclusion in education such as concern about poverty stricken, HIV/AIDs orphaned children (Skovdal & Campbell, 2010), but little is mentioned about exclusion based on learning abilities and vulnerability within the classroom.

In this article, vulnerability is taken to mean that population of learners labelled as under achievers- the children who are in schools as 'hidden dropouts' because they do not benefit meaningfully from the schools (Razer & Friedman, 2017). The key feature of exclusion as also shared by Walker and Walker (1997) is the lack of effective participation, a process of being shut out either fully or partially from a system.

Isolating and labelling children as under achievers without engaging them in discussion on actual life challenges, shuts them out because it disempowers learners who are already vulnerable, creates in them feelings of alienation, leads to negative learning experience, insecurity and poorer results (Friedman 2017). Studies conducted in different parts of the world show that academic achievement is often a process involving a number of extricating factors (Klasen, 1999 cited in Friedman, Sykes, & Strauch, 2014; Skovdal & Campbell, 2010), among them being the deprived socioeconomic backgrounds. Identifying such challenges amongst individual learners becomes useful for teachers in creating interventions for dealing with them.

Friedman and Razer (2017), underscored the role of the school culture and teacher behavior in producing either exclusion or inclusion inclinations. In their view, proper guidance should be provided on how to create constructive, encouraging, positive and welcoming classroom environments that foster positive attitudes in children. This is necessary despite the intense pressure on schools to produce high grades in national examinations. This is also provided for in Freire's (2005) notion of inclusive pedagogy which conceptualises education as based on mutual respect, flexibility and dialogue between teachers and learners. Skovdal and Campbell (2010), espouse similar ideas by advocating for schools to work towards constructing a caring relationship that is not only linked to academic performance, but which creates opportunities for children to develop an affirmative sense of self and positive classroom experiences.

The theory of non- abandonment as suggested by Friedman and Razer (2017) is a foundation for inclusion, as it centers on a caring and respectfulness teacher-pupil relationship that offers room for solidarity and involvement of all categories of children. It is based on a belief that children have the potential to succeed but for some reason get caught up in a cycle of failure and destructive behavior. Using the non-abandonment and an inclusive learning approach implicitly means that teachers strive to professionally commit to staying with the children even in most difficult times, express genuine concerns and desire to help, and act upon the prevailing situation. Dialoging on issues creates a sense of self-awareness and self-worth. This, Is echoed by Mncube (2008), who suggests a shift from authoritarian learning strategies that stigmatise children to democratising the learning spaces.

Methodology
This article is part of a larger qualitative exploratory study that was concerned with the problem of unprofessional and unethical behavior, particularly absenteeism, alcoholism and abuse of learners by teachers in Ugandan schools (Wabule, 2017). It was undertaken within the framework of Participatory Action Research (PAR). The intention was to explore new mechanisms through which teachers could take responsibility to cultivate a positive change in attitudes, perceptions and thinking about their interactions with the learners (Kemmis, 2006).

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Van Strien (1997) defines PAR as the application of systematic procedures to gather information about a practical problem in a social situation with the intention of improving the quality of action within it. Reason (2006), underscores the crucial role of participation and democracy in action research, as it seeks to do research with, for, and by people, not only to create knowledge but to engage deeper into actions for change. Our approach took the form of a collective learning process (Pimenta, 2007; Wicks & Reason, 2009; , 2016) whereby the teachers and children took joint actions with the interest of informing school based practices that would bring about reforms in the teaching and learning environment.

A step by step process was undertaken in line with the cyclic principle of action research (Van Strien, 1997; Wicks & Reason, 2009), in order to engage participants in cycles of action and reflection that would empower and transform them into researchers of their own practice.

The first phase involved collecting data from 214 people from six institutions, selected from both rural and urban areas to gain broader insights into the nature of the problem (Krueger, 1997). The entire participant categories that included the teachers, retired teachers, tutors, teacher trainees, pupils, parents, and key education stakeholders were purposively selected. The children in this study were recruited from upper primary (primary six) because they were assumed to have a better experience of the school. Class lists were used to randomly select every name that came fifth. I then talked to them and only those children that accepted to take part in the study were considered. My selection was not aimed at achieving representativeness of the sample but at the richness of sharing data from different perspectives (Creswell, 2002). Date collection involved a mix of questionnaires, in-depth interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FDGs) and observation in order to triangulate and get a better picture of people's perceptions, attitudes, and opinions (Wabule, 2016). Mixing methods as pointed out by Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2010) is necessary to provide information from different perspectives in the research process.

The second phase was limited to discussions at one school, and marked a shift from deliberating on general problems to school specific ones, including possible suggestions for intervention. The school was chosen because of the rapport that was created with the Head teacher, and it was more easily accessible by the researcher considering the frequency and collaboration that participatory action research would require. Engaging in discussions provided opportunities for the teachers to meaningfully reflect on emerging issues, thus, promoting a learning culture characterised by openness, inquiry and dialogue (Friedman et al., 2014; Wabule, 2016).

We finally ventured into an intervention after gaining trust with a group of 21 participants, who voluntary agreed to join as a team of co-researchers. By taking charge of the activity implementation, they guided themselves to create more conversational space (Snoeren, Niessen, & Abma, 2012), for discussing specific issues that affected them and the children at school. The local innovations of involving the children in writing stories, drawing pictures of their

Volume 1. Issue I. September 2022

5

CAVENDISH
JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND MANAGEMENT (CJSSM)
VOLUME NO.1
ISSUE NO.1
2022

CJSSM

experiences with the teachers, the newsletters, peer counselling, workshops and school based informal learning activities were based on what teachers considered useful for their practice.

This article draws mainly on data generated from 83 questionnaires and 3 focus group discussions with 15 children in the first phase of the study. Additional data was generated from short scripts and pictures drawn by the children on what they liked or hated about the school and the teachers, from which two news letters were produced. Data analysis was conducted with the aid of the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti (Creswell, 2002). I use pseudonyms and excerpts from data to illustrate the children's voices.

Findings

The findings in this article are twofold. First, I show the negative effects associated with segregating learners and then demonstrate how PAR created conversational space for collaborative learning and children's empowerment.

Effect of grading children on the teaching and learning process

The findings indicate that the practices associated with the process of producing academic grades and subsequent separation according to perceived ability undermined the children's sense of self-worth. Constant pressure on the learners for higher grades was also found to be damaging the relationships between the teachers and children. For instance, it resulted into ill behavior such as fear for the teachers, lack of concentration, general disruptive conduct and uneasiness during lesson time. The children who were assigned weaker streams alleged that teachers were biased when dealing with them. Accordingly, teacher cast their frustrations on the children by punishing them heavily for failure to perform to the academic expectations. Other teachers used abusive language, became resentful or made derogatory remarks that created unfriendly learning environments:

They [teachers] use abusive words which are so bad that you cannot talk them in public. Like some of them can abuse the child, "You are rubbish, you are useless…" It can hurt the child emotionally. Like when the teacher comes to teach, the child will not understand because they hate the teacher. When the teacher enters class, they remember the words which the teacher said to them. Even sometimes when the teacher comes to teach, they deliberately choose not to concentrate. (FGD with children)

The children who failed to stand the mental torture and physical insults from the teachers either stayed in schools as silent dropouts or face above average risk of dropping out. When probed further as to why they chose to misbehave, one pupil self-confessed that 'sometimes things are too tight so we just have to'. Too tight, could mean the extreme pressure that is exerted on them.

The table below provides additional information on what the children considered to be negative experiences during interaction with the teachers.

Negative experiences	Consequences
- Sometimes over react and get angry and beat us - Sometimes the teacher shouts at you when angry and you feel hurt - Abusing and embarrassing us in front of the whole class - Making fun of pupils. Although they joke, it hurts - Teachers do not want to help a child in some areas - Threatening and beating children for nothing - Some teachers pick on only one person to answer all questions - Putting a lot of pressure on pupils and when you fail, they beat - Sometimes use pupils as examples and are laughed at by friends - Some teachers are tough, and hard to speak to. - Being punished for making a mistake - Give punishments to children before knowing the matter - Shame you in class when your parents tell them your problem - Punish harshly for what you have not done - Doesn't mind where and what they use to cane - Over quarrelling - May not accept my opinion in class/ Sometimes what children want is refused by teachers - Teachers easily run out of control and transfer the anger to the pupils when annoyed - Teachers decide to give work without explaining because of mistakes by few pupils	- Children abuse teachers - Make noise in class - Do not finish work and assignments - Eat while the teacher is teaching - Play in class - Burn the school (strikes) - Do not listen to the teacher - Do not pay attention in class - Make fun about teachers when they are hearing - Pupils never respect teachers sometimes - Some pupils abuse teachers - Some become big headed and disturb teachers - They break school rules because of boredom and in order to be ruled by themselves - They become undisciplined and disrespectful to teachers - Some children make fun when the teacher is teaching and you are tempted to laugh - Some become rebellious and do what they feel happy about - They do not have time to concentrate on studies - Those who shout are chased out of class and they miss - Stubborn children are suspended for two to three weeks - Misunderstanding and lack of cooperation between the teacher and the pupils - We may fail the work given, and not understand what is taught

Table 1: Negative experiences by children during interaction with teachers

Volume 1. Issue I. September 2022

7

CAVENDISH
JOURNAL OF SOCIAL
SCIENCES AND
MANAGEMENT (CJSSM)
VOLUME NO. 1
ISSUE NO. 1
2022

CJSSM

The interviewed children suggested that the teachers should relax and cooperate with them. They also stressed that the teachers should correct them where they go wrong and provide guidance and counseling in order for them to be obedient and good rather than caning them. Providing direction during assignments, being friendly in class, giving clear instructions and helping them solve personal problems were perceived as paramount if the teachers were to provide good services. Besides, the children underscored involving them in activities outside the classroom like study tours as way of reducing boredom and echoed that inclusive classroom would enable children learn from their peers:

For me, what I like is to put a child who does not know with the one who knows so that they can ask and discuss with each other. Those who know can help those who don't know to understand the answers. But they leave them alone failing numbers, which is bad. (FGD with children)

The children's submissions underscore the importance of shifting teaching from a purely cognitive approach to learning that involves both socialisation and emotion (Bergey, Parrila, & Deacon, 2018). Regrettably, in Uganda, the children that were deemed not to measure to the schools' standards after the rankings were asked to repeat or discontinued from the school. Some schools created alternative examination centers or teamed up with weak performing schools to register the weaker students for national examinations. The children who are sent out are looked down upon and labelled by their colleagues as rejects of the system, which kills their self- esteem and image, as well as their ability for innovation and creativity in other fields. Bergey and others (2018), indicate that when children perceive themselves to be incapable of a task and do not anticipate success, they are less likely to choose to engage in it or persist longer and achieve better outcomes.

Moreover, the children in Uganda were subjected to long hours of classroom interaction which violated their rights. For instance, most schools opened for teaching by 7:00 am and ended at 5:00pm, as a 'normal' school routine, and many learners complained that they were fatigued. This in part accounted for the lack of active participation of learners during lesson time (Wabule, 2017). Yet, many schools did not observe the national school calendar and kept children at school at the time when they were expected to be on holiday recess. The children during a group interview confessed that many of them slept during lessons because of fatigue. As stressed by Apple (2007), such realities in the schools turn teaching into artificial rituals that leave many children behind instead of pushing them forward.

Besides, special torturing was conducted for the children whose parents could afford to pay for extra lessons, thus leading to exclusion of those whose parents cannot afford. This led to learner favoritism, by for example, assigning them front seats in class or ensuring their books were marked first. The participants decried that child were used as social capital for schools to make money because in Uganda, the ranking of the schools in national examinations is the major justification for escalating the tuition. Consequently, mostly children from middle income families are able to meet the monetary demands of 'good performing schools' at the expense of would-be promising students who cannot afford.

The teachers who are caught up in this dilemma believe that the practices associated with commercialisation of education went against the teaching practicum because it contributes less to sustainable livelihoods and the quality of life. Accordingly, isolating children in schools encouraged social exclusion in their entire lives. Such findings are consistent with studies carried out in other parts of Sub- Saharan Africa. For instance, Mncube, (2008) attests that a failure for children to connect and integrate while at school in South Africa instigated social hierarchies and dominant classes that perpetuate divisions and social inequality in their entire lives. Accordingly, it becomes a genesis for prejudice and discrimination that culminates into a broader social challenge. Indeed, it follows that in Uganda, higher performing children ended up in specific high performing secondary schools in the country, thus leaving the weaker ones to find their fate in less competitive ones. The system of socialization that is embedded in schools positions some graduates in more privileged statuses. For example, it was pointed out that children enjoy social networks with colleagues of the same social class hence, gaining exposure to better life opportunities. Thus, understanding how ideas of social inequality can be embedded through the schools' socialization process and how this can unconsciously influence the daily dealings amongst the children could help the teachers to engage in critical reflection and develop a conscious awareness of their predispositions and assumptions about learners.

Enhancing Children's Voice through Action Research
Central to the study was to counter the power relations gap by opening up communicative space for engagement and information sharing between the teachers and learners. It was by consensus that the bond with children shifts to a 'reciprocal relationship', in which they would honor each other's needs and responsibilities in order to minimise re-victimisation and reach a shared understanding (Kemmis, 2006). Firstly, was to ask children to draw pictures and tell their stories in way of co-constructing knowledge (Van Strien, 1997). This marked a shift from viewing learners as passive recipients of knowledge to seeing them as stakeholders with experiences to bring to light. It was a step of action (Kemmis, 2006) that initiated in the school a forum that helped unearth both positive and negative aspects of their interactions with the teachers. Some articles pointed to practical aspects of unhealthy practices, including the one of grading them according to academic scores. Although such revelations caused uneasiness amongst staff, nevertheless, children brought to light unwelcome truths that prompted some teachers to take immediate corrective action (Wabule, 2017). For instance, a staff meeting to deliberate on immediate ways of intervening was held. Consequently, teachers revealed that they eliminated the cane from the classrooms. Others made effort towards social integration of children:

Although it did not come directly from one of my classes, but I discovered that it was one of the methods I was using and it was somehow mental torture to these children... I used to say, 'if you know you are not scoring this mark, for you your line is going to be on this side, separate them... the clever ones on this side. Because you are stubborn, you are not even putting a lot of effort; you are going to spoil these ones from doing well. So when I read this thing [the newsletter], the child who wrote the voice said that is totally mental torture, that teachers are segregating them... So when I came back, I started mixing them...And it has also improved on that child's performance. So it gives me a guide that if a child has failed to learn from a

Volume 1. Issue I. September 2022

CAVENDISH
JOURNAL OF SOCIAL
SCIENCES AND
MANAGEMENT (CJSSM)
VOLUME NO. 1
ISSUE NO. 1
2022

CJSSM

9

teacher, he can learn from another child. (Sarah,)

As outlined earlier in this article, teachers were used to having children controlled. Receiving feedback from the children inspired them to reflect on certain practices and developed new understanding of the self as voiced by Patience:

I just wanted to say that for me it was a challenge and very interesting... because I am one person who believed in a stick. I felt like, because of the big numbers we handle, if you don't use a stick, they will not listen, they will not do anything. But after reading, I realised that children hate the stick... I came to know that I should not use a stick at all. Even if it does not mean caning but even if you just handle a stick, they fear...

Teachers narrated how action research enabled them revise their teaching approaches, which draws attention to the importance, of integrating research into teaching (Song and Kenton, 2010). Engaging learners in evaluating lessons, and inputting on what methodologies they felt were more desirable led to a shift in relationship that enabled the teachers to understand what learners thought or felt about them and the lessons as shared by Dinah:

And another thing, it has again brought up that bonding, because now we can bond with them [children] easily because we know that they know us. At first, we didn't know how much they know us, but now we know they know us, so we bond with them and get to know them better.

Similarly, Susana recounted how involving the learners in evaluating her lessons changed her attitude to teaching and the way she related with them:

I became a victim of some of the writings. There is a way I changed my attitude towards teaching this particular year. During the time of writing, I got a note direct. I learned of it because the child was from my class... said 'teacher, you have been very rough to us... Teacher (name) has been too cruel to teach us' ...mentioning the name! So, I really felt it at heart. I would read what was in the child's mind. So, I called a child plus a few friends and said, can you tell me whether I have been too cruel?' And he said, 'teacher you have really been too cruel..., I had to check myself. I now had to say am sorry... in fact I had to apologise. I said 'I am sorry, if I have been too cruel...'

While Agatha confessed that previously she was less concerned about attending to certain issues. During the research she realised that it impacted negatively on the children's learning:

I used to have several issues in the class and I used to call them petty issues. 'This one has taken my book'... I say 'you also go and get his'. 'This one has beaten me'... I say 'you also go and beat him'. 'This one has abused me'... 'you also go and abuse him'. My work was about teaching the syllabus and finish, but not taking into consideration these inner details. (Agatha)

The practice of the teachers seeking to understand the children's problems through mutual interaction, as seen from the examples of Dinah, Susana and Agatha, was a step in creating

CAVENDISH
JOURNAL OF SOCIAL
SCIENCES AND
MANAGEMENT (CJSSM)
VOLUME NO.1
ISSUE NO.1
2022

CJSSM

Volume 1. Issue I. September 2022

10

a positive school culture that is self-regulative, caring and committed to improving learning opportunities for the children. This corresponds with Song and Kenton' (2010) notion that action research provides opportunities for teachers to become part of a self-regulating profession. Rather than developing feelings of anger, revenge and fear for losing control, they turned stronger in dealing with children. The shifting relationship was also presented by the deputy head teacher who was impressed with the manner in which the children were empowered and assertive when discussing issues with them:

And the best thing I have liked most is on the side of children. Children get that opportunity to talk about the teacher, to tell you what they want. It is very great. And this communication does not stop here; they go and talk to their parents. You know they share… they have told us to talk about the teachers and others were even coming and sharing. You see the teachers have changed, he no longer beats, and we no longer see sticks. (Deputy Head teacher)

 Prima, a teacher who doubled as a parent at this school reported that her daughter was delighted about the opportunity of giving feedback to teachers through writing:

My daughter came and said, 'Mummy, children were given chance to write about teachers and they were told not to put their names… at least Mummy, this time at least… some teachers… we are supposed to talk about it. That magazine should be brought every year so that we get chance to write again.' So, I felt so touched. I felt we have to change ourselves as teachers.

What is profound was the ability of the teachers to realise and accept their weaknesses after getting feedback. Although, not all the teachers took a positive step as some of them were defensive and laboured hard to justify their actions, such small acts according to Zeichner (1993) could be a step towards enforcing valuable emotional support for children.

Conclusion

Academically weak children are vulnerable unless they are exposed to healthy and supportive relationships with the teachers who are able to contain their emotions (Razer & Friedman, 2017). This research acknowledges the limitations associated with a failure to engage in meaningful dialogue with children about their social and academic challenges. Scholars have argued that continuously silencing children skillfully disguises in them a fundamental distrust in their capabilities, while serving as a regulatory instrument of power by the teachers (Mncube, 2008; Kwon, Kupzyk & Benton, 2018). It is clear from the findings that the authoritarian nature of schools and the resultant negative feedback (Sheen, 2004) impacts the way children construct emotions about schools and learning. Kwon and others (2018), posit that intense negative emotions interfere with the children's ability to develop mental and physiological energy to engage in learning. The findings of this study revealed feelings of abandonment, stigma, helpless and despairs amongst the children who were isolated from their peers. The children responded with disruptive behavior, by silently resisting participation in classroom activities, or by becoming sluggish and ill-mannered. These traits of ill behaviour were also reported by Friedman and others (2014) about children in Israel who were filtered and isolated as non-achievers.

Participatory action research to a large degree reinforced the ability of teachers to form new connections with the learners by creating engaging and trustful learning environments (Razer & Friedman, 2017). Other researchers who actively engaged with vulnerable children (Garth & Aroni, 2003; Skovdal & Campbell, 2010) recognise the importance of acknowledging children's ideas in order to boost their resilience and wellbeing.

This research demonstrated that understanding the academic needs of learners enhances affirmative perceptions whereby teachers develop positive emotions, and work towards cultivating improved relationships with the children. In line with the theory of non-abandonment highlighted earlier, PAR enabled the teachers to engage with children in a more meaningful way through feedback and self-evaluation. The practice of connecting with children if embraced by schools could be significant for the teachers to take actions that serve the best interests of children, such as helping them to acquire essential values, attitudes, knowledge and skills that meet the challenges of contemporary societies (UNESCO, 2009). As envisioned by the United Nations convention that acknowledges the right for children to express opinions about issues that affect them, giving voice to children and acting upon it, could be a positive step towards overcoming the limitations that are associated with the traditional exclusive and authoritarian structures that make children vulnerable. The study makes a significant contribution in highlighting school-based hiccups that hinder effective learning, and brings to the fore the importance of learner feedback in improving teaching and learning practices

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14