

EVIDENCE BRIEF

Preventing violence against children through schools in Sub-Saharan Africa

Authors: Shanaaz Mathews, Lauren October, Athraa Fakier, Devin Faris and Dipak Naker

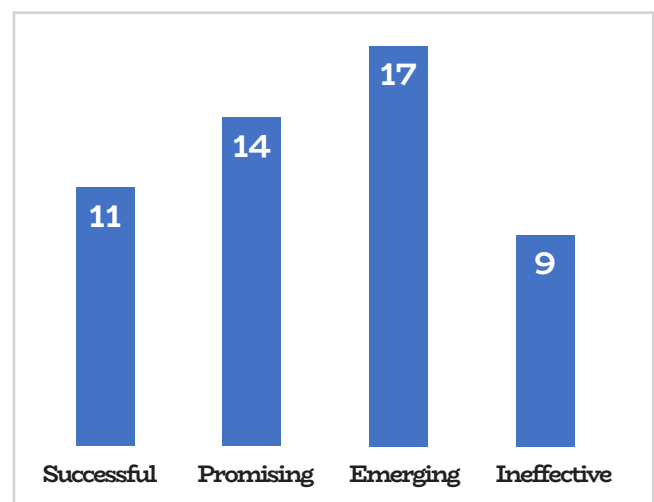
September 2024

Background

The sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) region experiences some of the highest levels of violence against children in schools, including corporal punishment, bullying and physical fights, as well as physical and sexual violence against children (VAC). (1) The dynamics of violence are complex and there is no easy solution, but there is growing evidence that violence is preventable. Schools offer an opportunity to reach a large number of children daily and address multiple forms of violence against children through an existing system that can deliver innovative programmes. (2, 3) In addition, schools are environments in which young people learn and develop social and behavioural norms. Therefore, the education sector presents an entry point for shaping future generations' ideas of healthy relationships and balanced power dynamics. (4) This brief draws on an evidence review conducted by the Africa Hub of the Coalition for Good Schools to guide practitioners on what is known about promising approaches to delivering violence prevention interventions in and through schools in SSA. It aims to provide an overview of strategies that have been found to be successful and promising in reducing violence in and through schools and to highlight the key principles emerging from practice.

This brief explores the 25 programmes that were identified as successful or promising. The review included 82 papers and reports that documented 51 programmes in SSA. We identified 11 successful, 14 promising, 17 emerging and 9 ineffective programmes (see Figure 1). Most of the studies included in the review used experimental or quasi-experimental methods for evaluating the impact of outcomes. More than a third of the papers and reports reviewed were from South Africa, followed by Uganda (18%), Kenya (11%) and Tanzania (11%), with much less evidence emerging from other parts of SSA (see full report for further details). A limitation of the review is the inclusion of English-language publications only.

Figure 1: Programme outcomes (N=51)



What have we learnt from successful and promising interventions?

Three key takeaways from the review:

- 1** It is possible to reduce physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual violence, and to improve behaviours, attitudes, and knowledge that **promote gender equality and healthy power dynamics among young people in SSA through their schools**. Although this is an emerging area of work, just under half (25) of all programmes reviewed were found to be successful or promising in preventing VAC through schools.
- 2** **Prevention is a process**. It takes time, accompaniment, and cumulation. This review found that successful programmes are mainly longer than 12 weeks in duration, with five programmes of more than a year in duration. This would suggest for programmes to be effective, the duration or intensity of a programme matters. It is noteworthy that programmes of shorter duration, such as teacher training programmes where teachers cannot be out of a classroom for extended periods, can still be effective. The ongoing support to teachers or the implementation team offers a valuable mechanism to monitor fidelity to the programme and to ensure classroom behaviour management is mastered on a practical level.
- 3** Successful programmes foster synergy by using multiple strands or components and **adopting a whole school approach**. It is important to locate a school as part of the social 'ecosystem' and to leverage every part of the system to strengthen violence prevention efforts.⁽³⁾ By investing in school-wide, multi-component interventions that include the development of policy and regulations and the training of the teachers, learners and peers at the centre of programmes, with a focus on values and social norms, we maximise the possibility of synergy and promote the sustainability of an intervention.⁽⁵⁾

Programmatic Strategies and Approaches

The **INSPIRE Framework** was used to categorise programmes pragmatically. We further adapted these categories based on the main strategies used by programmes in the region and, noting that programmes seldom use a single strategy, we added a whole school approach as another category as this is identified as an emerging but important strategy for violence prevention in and through schools.

This review found that the highest number of successful and promising interventions were categorised in the following areas:

- **Building knowledge and life skills;**
- **Challenging harmful gender norms and values;**
- **Psychosocial support for children, parents and teachers**

Meanwhile, **income and economic strengthening** and **whole school approaches** are both emerging strategies in SSA, only one impactful whole school approach was identified in SSA. It has shown a significant reduction in violence against children (see page 9).

1

Building knowledge and life skills

This is the most widely-used approach with nearly half (25) of all included programmes falling in this category. Group-based learning was found to be a promising approach to building children’s knowledge of different forms of violence, learning about the negative outcomes of risky behaviours, or enhancing their social and emotional skills to avoid engaging in violence, criminality, and anti-social behaviour. Promising programmes used strategies to empower and build resilience through school clubs or peer support groups. Through this group learning approach, young people can develop positive aspirations through activities such as art, sport, and social action on issues such as violence or girls’ education. (6)

IMpower and Your Moment of Truth

What	A rape prevention, curriculum-based programme with promise for reducing sexual violence, delivered over 6 weeks through 2-hour group-based sessions at school.
Who	No Means No Worldwide
Where	Kenya, Malawi, Uganda
How	<p>IMpower uses empowerment self-defence (ESD) techniques to strengthen girls’ critical reflection and problem-solving skills and to boost their self-esteem and confidence. The programme was adapted to include an intervention for girls and a boys’ intervention called Your Moment of Truth, adapted for the East African context (7, 8, 9, 10, 11).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Both curriculums are implemented simultaneously over 6 weeks and delivered in five separate complementary sessions, followed by a sixth joint session. Find more information on the programme here.• The boys’ curriculum (Your Moment of Truth) is designed to promote positive, non-violent masculinities and to help boys identify emotions and build skills for non-violence, seeking consent, and strategies for safe bystander intervention (i.e., interrupting potential violence and harassment).• In Kenya, Sources of Strength was added as a male component and was evaluated as part of the What Works programme, but it did not show the same promising reduction in sexual violence.• It is thought that this approach is promising in building protective factors and reducing experiences of violence. It requires further research to understand the pathways for risk reduction, and longer-term follow-up to determine the sustained effects of the programme.

2 Challenging harmful gender norms and values

Norms and values shape attitudes and behaviours of young people that can increase the risk for violence victimisation and/or perpetration. Challenging and transforming these harmful gender norms can help prevent and reduce violence in relationships between girls and boys as well as in later intimate relationships. Programmes that position their intervention within a gender equality framework to promote gender transformation and gender equitable relationships can be successful in reducing the perpetration of violence, including sexual and dating violence among young people. Some programmes not only focused on gendered violence but also include a focus on peer-on-peer violence (bullying). These programmes focus on pre-adolescents and adolescents, using group-based activities and participatory techniques to encourage critical thinking and reflection within a supportive peer environment.

Such programmes are often multi-faceted, targeting learners and educators aimed at strengthening protective factors as a pathway to reducing both victimisation and perpetration. These programmes showed significant positive effects on gender attitudes and a reduction in the acceptance of peer-on-peer violence and gendered forms of violence, but we have a limited understanding of the sustained effect of programmes.

PREPARE

What	A curriculum-based programme to prevent intimate partner (dating) violence targeting young adolescents (12-14 years) with success in reducing such violence. Delivered over 21 sessions during Grade 8 Life Skills classes.(12)
Who	The South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) in partnership with the Department of Education
Where	Western Cape, South Africa
How	<p>The programme draws on social, and behaviour change theory to identify the individual and social determinants that underpin the desired target behaviour to strengthen adolescents' knowledge and skills, combined with transforming gender norms.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targets young adolescents (12 -14 years) before they have established sexual behaviour patterns, and before they start dating relationships. • Aims to “change the norms that promote male dominance, increase young women’s agency, improve communication to reduce violence in relationships and increase the ability of young people to negotiate safer sex”. • The 21 lessons aim to develop an individual’s motivation and skills, focusing on gender and power, relationships, assertiveness and communication, decision-making, risk-taking, violence, self-protection and support. • The programme also aimed to create a supportive school environment by working with students, teachers, parents and the police to conduct a school safety audit and create a climate of zero tolerance towards violence. • The programme was evaluated through a randomised control trial (RCT) with a sample of approximately 3,000 learners and showed a significant (23%) reduction in the experience of IPV/ dating violence.(12)

3

Psychosocial support for children, parents and teachers

Violence is a major risk factor for negative mental health and psychosocial outcomes during childhood, with lasting effects into adulthood.(6) School-based programmes focusing on psychosocial support and the mental health needs of children target a range of issues, such as reducing aggression, behavioural problems and the psychosocial impact of child sexual abuse. These interventions are mainly delivered through targeted programmes with a therapeutic component for children, with some element of parental/family support inclusion. Another area addressed in these programmes focuses on building the capacity of teachers to manage learner behaviour and to provide emotional support to reduce negative behavioural outcomes in children. Some programmes combine this with a focus on training teachers to foster positive classroom behaviour management to avoid the use of physical discipline (corporal punishment) in the classroom.

Interaction Competencies with Children for Teachers (ICC-T)

What	A programme aimed at teachers to reduce the use of corporal punishment in the classroom. It is a week-long teacher training programme aimed at fostering positive interactions between teachers and learners and promoting better classroom behaviour with ongoing support to teachers in the classroom (13, 14, 15, 16).
Who	Designed and implemented by an international team of German, Tanzanian, and Ugandan psychologists and teachers.
Where	Tanzania, Uganda
How	<p>The programme draws on attachment, behavioural and social learning theories, to improve teacher-student interactions by enabling teachers to learn and practice essential interaction competencies with children during training.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a 5.5-day x 8-hour teacher training programme with classroom-based support centred on five essential components: teacher-student interactions, maltreatment prevention, effective discipline strategies, identifying and supporting burdened students, and practical implementation of ICC-T aspects in the school setting. • The sessions aim to build teachers' understanding of students' behaviour, while also highlighting teachers' responsibility as role models for the students. • The sessions also focus on integrating the learned material into the daily work routine in the school setting. Thus, successful implementation includes collaboration with school staff and peer support. • In addition, teachers are supported through teambuilding measures, development of referral networks and ongoing support supervision. • Evaluations of the programme indicate a 30% reduction in corporal punishment and enhanced quality of teacher-learner relationships. (14, 15) The effectiveness of the adapted version was examined through RCTs in Uganda and Tanzania, which showed the same positive results that were sustained nearly a year after training.(13, 16)

4 Income and economic strengthening

Income and economic strengthening as a strategy to reduce violence against children aims to reduce the economic stress and vulnerability that can increase the risk of violence in families and communities. This is an emerging area that is showing it can have positive effects on risk factors, such as keeping girls in school, which can act as a protective factor for violence against children.

These programmes combine strategies such as building knowledge and self-esteem through the empowerment of young girls with the aim of keeping girls in school to reduce the risk of early marriage. Evidence has shown cash-only interventions (social protection) to be less effective than economic empowerment “cash plus” programmes that combine cash transfers with other programmatic elements.⁽¹⁷⁾ This is an area that requires further investigation.



5 Whole-school approaches

Whole-school approaches aim to transform the school ecosystem by engaging various stakeholders such as the school administration, teachers, parents, and learners. Such programmes focus on capacitating children and adolescents to deal with conflict non-violently and how to intervene when they witness violence, while also addressing the power dynamics between learners and teachers to improve their relationship and create space for learners to express themselves and seek help when needed.(18, 19)

Engaging with parents, neighbourhoods and the broader community can also foster prosocial behaviour. Effective communication and information sharing among different stakeholders can enable a context-specific and comprehensive approach to violence prevention. Comprehensive whole-school programming is still an emerging area in SSA. Although many programmes integrate multiple components, they fall short of addressing the school as an ecosystem management to avoid the use of physical discipline (corporal punishment) in the classroom.

The Good School Toolkit (GST)

What	A whole school VAC prevention programme delivered by teachers, students and community members affiliated to the school, working together to influence the operational culture of the entire school through four entry points: teacher-student relationships, peer-to-peer relationships, student- and teacher-to-school relationships, and parent- and community-to-school governance relationships.
Who	Raising Voices
Where	Uganda
How	<p>GST is a six-step, school-led process aimed to influence the operational culture in schools through 68 activities implemented over 18 months, with a focus on addressing power relations, non-violent discipline, gender norms and classroom management techniques.(20, 21)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GST equips teachers to increase student confidence and success by creating a safe and respectful learning environment and supports school administrators to become more transparent and accountable, while also strengthening student voice and agency. The overall approach of the GST is regarded as more important than any single activity. See more about the Toolkit here. • GST has been implemented in approximately 1,000 schools with young people aged 11-14 years and another 500 schools with Secondary students aged 14-20 years. The programme has undergone a range of evaluations, including an RCT which found that the GST led to a 42% reduction in the risk of physical violence by school staff, promoted student voice and agency, and increased students' sense of belonging.(21, 22, 23) • Since its inception in 2009, GST has undergone three iterations including GST-P, which was solely implemented for primary schools; the GST-S, which was adapted in 2018 for secondary schools; and GST Agile, a more streamlined version that will be used in both primary and secondary schools and implemented at scale.

Lessons from practice

Significant investment in programming on violence against children, combined with research in SSA, has notably increased our understanding of what works to prevent violence in and through schools. Through this review of programmes, we conclude that there is a need for systemic solutions that are multi-dimensional and address the entire ecosystem with the education system at the centre and for educators to take on a leading role in preventing violence against children. The following points are some of the main lessons learnt:

1 **A whole school approach that builds and maintains relationships and meaningful roles across the school ecosystem (school staff, students, parents, community) is important for programme success and sustainability.**

This requires consultations with, and buy-in from, school management as well as support from community institutions, as these elements are essential for the successful implementation and sustainability of programmes.(24, 25, 26) School management also plays a crucial role in the sustainability of programmes by providing an enabling school culture for programme implementation. **The involvement of students is central for them developing leadership skills and taking on appropriate leadership roles.** Caregiver and community involvement is important in violence prevention programmes as the child is part of a family and community. The shift that young people experience can have a spillover effect on families, but it requires the deliberate engagement of parents to change household norms.(27)

2 **Programme adaptation and contextualisation is vital.**

This should include programme originators to facilitate a process of knowledge sharing, as well as local stakeholders to ensure ownership. No matter how successful a programme is, it needs to be adapted for the local context.(28) **Including communities in the adaptation of a programme helps ensure the success of a programme as they know the context and can point to the shifts required for the programme to become contextually relevant.**(29) Including programme originators ensures fidelity to the original model while taking contextual relevance into account in the adaptation process as a critical component for programme success.

3 **When and how programmes are delivered matters as it can affect participation and overall impact.**

Embedding programmes into existing structures such as classroom teaching curriculum can be an efficient way to ensure that critical numbers of learners are reached with standardised curriculum content. It is important to note that schools face challenges such as resource scarcity, packed school schedules, and overcrowding, all of which limit teacher capacity and availability to deliver programmes.(30) **Early engagement with school leadership can help mitigate these challenges** as it is important to consider integrating programmes into the operational culture of schools to increase the chances of success and sustainability.(12)

4 Teachers are critical in delivering school-based programmes and can be trained to successfully engage in programme implementation.

Teachers are important change agents and central to programme success, but they have to tackle their personal harmful behaviours, beliefs and norms through training focused on self-reflection.(14) Teachers are often overburdened with the demands of their teaching responsibilities, and therefore balancing additional programme demands can be difficult.(31) Supporting teachers to manage their own thoughts and beliefs to build empathy towards learners and better support them is an important part of training teachers .(32) **We must invest in building support systems for teachers**, not only to ensure fidelity to the programme, but to avoid burnout to ensure the sustainability of programmes.

5 Engaging young people as active participants to build their leadership skills and to take ownership of programmes is central to building effective change agents.

Programmes should therefore not only target young people, but they should be involved in all aspects of the programme lifecycle, from planning to implementation as well as being a part of leadership and governance to ensure complete ownership. Importantly, youth participation is also a mechanism to ensure that interventions remain rooted in their realities and lived experience of violence, as it is constantly changing and evolving in ways adults may be out of touch with, and which are not always possible to uncover in research. Even when a programme is adult-led, **including students meaningfully can increase commitment, agency, and learner leadership.**(33) When children of the same gender and age as the target population endorse a programme, it is likely to increase interest and participation amongst other children.(26, 32) Peer experiences are also important in clubs, as they can help create a sense of belonging and provide support.(29)

Conclusion

We now know that VAC prevention is possible in schools when interventions are delivered through a calibrated process. This process must introduce new ideas to actors who are close to the school, accompany them during the learning process, and validate adaptation and iteration. We know that sustained change requires skill and knowledge building, addressing harmful gender norms, and providing psychosocial support to all the actors within schools. We also know that social interventions that address the economics of remaining in school enhance the resilience of students, particularly girls. When these approaches are combined into a systemic whole school intervention, we maximise the chance of sustained change with life-long potential.

Citation: Mathews S, October I, Fakier A, Faris D and Naker D. (2024) Preventing violence against children through schools in sub-Saharan Africa. Evidence Brief. Coalition for Good Schools and the University of Cape Town.

References

1. Akobirshoev I, Nandakumar AK. Violence in Childhood: Technical Note on Imputation of Prevalence Rates. Background paper. 2017.
2. Naker D. Operational culture at schools: An overarching entry point for preventing violence against children at school. For Paper for Know Violence in Childhood Know Violence, Newark. 2017.
3. Naker D. Preventing violence against children at schools in resource-poor environments: operational culture as an overarching entry point. *Aggression and violent behavior*. 2019;47:268-73.
4. Leach FD, M.; Salvi, F. Background research paper prepared for UNESCO. School-related Gender-based Violence: A Global Review of Current Issues and Approaches in Policy, Programming and Implementation Responses to School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) for the Education Sector. . Background research paper. New York UNESCO; 2014
5. Mathews S AP, October L & Makola L. Evidence Review: Prevention of violence against children through schools in the Global South. Cape Town University of Cape Town and Raising Voices 2021.
6. Childhood KVi. Ending Violence in Childhood Global Report 2017. New Delhi, India Know Violence 2017
7. Baiocchi M, Omondi B, Langat N, Boothroyd DB, Sinclair J, Pavia L, et al. A Behavior-Based Intervention That Prevents Sexual Assault: the Results of a Matched-Pairs, Cluster-Randomized Study in Nairobi, Kenya. *Prev Sci*. 2017;18(7):818-27.
8. Decker MR, Wood SN, Ndinda E, Yenokyan G, Sinclair J, Maksud N, et al. Sexual violence among adolescent girls and young women in Malawi: a cluster-randomized controlled implementation trial of empowerment self-defense training. *BMC Public Health*. 2018;18(1):1341.
9. Sarnquist C, Omondi B, Sinclair J, Gitau C, Paiva L, Mulinge M, et al. Rape Prevention Through Empowerment of Adolescent Girls. *Pediatrics*. 2014;133(5):e1226-e32.
10. Sinclair J, Sinclair L, Otieno E, Mulinge M, Kapphahn C, Golden NH. A Self-Defense Program Reduces the Incidence of Sexual Assault in Kenyan Adolescent Girls. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2013;53(3):374-80.
11. Kågesten AE, Oware PM, Ntinyari W, Langat N, Mboya B, Ekström AM. Young People's Experiences With an Empowerment-Based Behavior Change Intervention to Prevent Sexual Violence in Nairobi Informal Settlements: A Qualitative Study. *Glob Health Sci Pract*. 2021;9(3):508-22.
12. Mathews C, Eggers SM, Townsend L, Aarø LE, de Vries PJ, Mason-Jones AJ, et al. Effects of PREPARE, a Multi-component, School-Based HIV and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Prevention Programme on Adolescent Sexual Risk Behaviour and IPV: Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial. *AIDS and Behavior*. 2016;20(9):1821-40.
13. Ssenyonga J, Katharin H, Mattonet K, Nkuba M, Hecker T. Reducing teachers' use of violence toward students: A cluster-randomized controlled trial in secondary schools in Southwestern Uganda. *Children and Youth Services Review*. 2022;138.
14. Nkuba M, Hermenau K, Goessmann K, Hecker T. Reducing violence by teachers using the preventative intervention Interaction Competencies with Children for Teachers (ICC-T): A cluster randomized controlled trial at public secondary schools in Tanzania. *PLOS ONE*. 2018;13(8):e0201362.
15. Kaltenbach E, Hermenau K, Nkuba M, Goessmann K, Hecker T. Improving Interaction Competencies With Children—A Pilot Feasibility Study to Reduce School Corporal Punishment. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*. 2018;27(1):35-53.
16. Masath FB, Mattonet K, Hermenau K, Nkuba M, Hecker T. Reducing Violent Discipline by Teachers: a Matched Cluster-Randomized Controlled Trial in Tanzanian Public Primary Schools. *Prevention Science*. 2023;24(5):999-1010.
17. Rogers K, Le Kirkegaard R, Wamoyi J, Grooms K, Essajee S, Palermo T. Systematic review of cash plus or bundled interventions targeting adolescents in Africa to reduce HIV risk. *BMC Public Health*. 2024;24(1):239.
18. UNGEI. A whole school approach to prevent school related gender-based violence: Minimum standards and monitoring framework. New York: UNGEI; 2019.
19. Women UU. Global Guidance on Addressing School Related Gender-Based Violence. Paris: UNESCO 2016.
20. Devries KMD, Knight LM, Child JCM, Mirembe ABA, Nakuti JMA, Jones RM, et al. The Good School Toolkit for reducing physical violence from school staff to primary school students: a cluster-randomised controlled trial in Uganda. *The Lancet global health*. 2015;3(7):e378-e86.
21. Devries K, Kuper H, Knight L, Allen E, Kyegombe N, Banks LM, et al. Reducing Physical Violence Toward Primary School Students With Disabilities. *Journal of adolescent health*. 2018;62(3):303-10.
22. Devries KM, Knight L, Allen E, Parkes J, Kyegombe N, Naker D. Does the Good Schools Toolkit Reduce Physical, Sexual and Emotional Violence, and Injuries, in Girls and Boys equally? A Cluster-Randomised Controlled Trial. *Prevention Science*. 2017;18(7):839-53.
23. Merrill KG, Knight L, Namy S, Allen E, Naker D, Devries KM. Effects of a violence prevention intervention in schools and surrounding communities: Secondary analysis of a cluster randomised-controlled trial in Uganda. *Child abuse & neglect*. 2018;84:182-95.
24. Chigunta F. Report on the Evaluation of the Child Rights Clubs Project in Zambia. Lusaka: University of Zambia. 2005.
25. Snyman MV. The development of a psycho-educational programme for adolescents who experience aggression in a secondary school: University of Johannesburg; 2006.
26. Masa R, Chowa G, Sherraden M. An Evaluation of a School-Based Savings Program and Its Effect on Sexual Risk Behaviors and Victimization Among Young Ghanaians. *Youth & Society*. 2020;52(7):1083-106.
27. Karmaliani R, McFarlane J, Khuwaja HMA, Somani Y, Shehzad S, Saeed Ali T, et al. Right To Play's intervention to reduce peer violence among children in public schools in Pakistan: a cluster-randomized controlled trial. *Glob Health Action*. 2020;13(1):1836604.
28. Cahill H, Dadvand B, Suryani A, Farrelly A. A Student-Centric Evaluation of a Program Addressing Prevention of Gender-Based Violence in Three African Countries. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2023;20(15).
29. Beatrice SA, Chinedu AC, Omotade SJ, Farotimi AA. Nurse-led training programme on knowledge about sexual violence among adolescent females in selected secondary schools, Abeokuta South local government area, Ogun state. *Global Journal of Pure and Applied Sciences*. 2021;27(2):221-30.
30. Gayles J, Yahner M, Barker KM, Moreau C, Li M, Koenig L, et al. Balancing Quality, Intensity and Scalability: Results of a Multi-level Sexual and Reproductive Health Intervention for Very Young Adolescents in Kinshasa. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2023;73:S33-S42.
31. Bakari M, Shayo EH, Barongo V, Kiwale Z, Fabbri C, Turner E, et al. Qualitative process evaluation of the EmpaTeach intervention to reduce teacher violence in schools in Nyarugusu Refugee Camp, Tanzania. *BMJ Open*. 2023;13(9):e069993.
32. Visser M. Implementing peer support in secondary schools : facing the challenges. *South African journal of education*. 2005;25(3):148-55.
33. Mutto M, Kahn K, Lett R, Lawoko S. Piloting an educational response to violence in Uganda: Prospects for a new curriculum. *African Safety Promotion: A Journal of Injury and Violence Prevention*. 2009;7(2).





Coalition *for*
Good Schools