Author's response to reviews

Title: The Good Schools Study: A cluster-randomised controlled trial of a program to prevent violence against children in Ugandan primary schools

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Version: 2 Date: 31 May 2013

Author's response to reviews: see over
May 31 2013

Dear Editors,

Please find attached a re-submission of our article “MS: 1431164166907237 - The Good Schools Study: A cluster-randomised controlled trial of a program to prevent violence against children in Ugandan primary schools”.

We wish to thank the reviewer and editors for their helpful comments. We have incorporated suggestions into the text of the article using track changes, and also detailed responses to each comment below.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if any further changes are required.

With best wishes,

Karen Devries, on behalf of the study authors
A content-related issue problematic throughout this proposal is what form of violence the researchers are aiming to prevent and who they are surmising the perpetrators are. Despite the introduction, it would appear that the toolkit is focused on teacher corporal punishment of students within the classroom. However, bullying of students and sexual violence (also perpetrated by students and dating partners) is also mentioned. At minimum, the authors need to strengthen their rationale for their focus on corporal punishment and also address directly the social norms which exist in both schools and families that allow for the pervasive use of physical violence (see WHO VAW studies, CDC/UNICEF VAC studies).

Our primary outcome is physical violence from school staff towards students, as this is the most common form of violence in schools and what we believe will be the main factor to change as a result of exposure to the Toolkit. However, the Toolkit also addresses power relations between teachers and students as well as students and students, and other forms of violence such as sexual violence and emotional violence. We will also measure these but have not made them primary outcomes:

“As highlighted previously, available data for Uganda suggest that corporal punishment by teachers is a common form of violence children experience in Ugandan primary schools. Corporal punishment is the main form of violence addressed in the Good School Toolkit. The primary objective of the Good Schools Study therefore is to assess the impact of the Good Schools Toolkit on children's experiences of violence by school staff among those attending school in Luwero District, Uganda.”

We have also added a line on norms to the introduction:

“This high prevalence is likely due at least in part to widespread norms condoning the use of physical discipline to punish children, among parents, teachers and community members[4]. ”

We have also clarified our description of the Toolkit itself (see below) to address these concerns.

In addition, it is unclear whether the Good Schools Toolkit is evidence-based and to what extent it has been adapted from other violence prevention intervention initiatives. What are the key indicators of its success? Has initial qualitative work been done with its measures among this age and population by the authors? Is there any data thus far that would indicate that this study intervention could be successful, and, if so, among which groups? There is a lack of formative work and evidence, at least evinced in this manuscript.

We have added substantial detail to the description of the intervention, how it was developed, previous testing, and the theoretical underpinnings:

“The experimental group is receiving the Good School Toolkit (http://www.raisingvoices.org/children/good_school_toolkit.php) and implementation support over an 18-month period. The Toolkit is an established intervention which has been popular in Uganda since it was developed 6 years ago by Raising Voices. This implementation period was chosen based on Raising Voices programmatic experience and is the period during which the Toolkit is designed to produce changes in a school.

The Toolkit is designed to be implemented with minimal cost, appropriate for low resource settings. Development was in close collaboration with six Ugandan schools over 18 months, and the Toolkit has had two rounds of extensive revisions based on in-depth feedback from 40 schools to increase
acceptability and effectiveness. Raising Voices also conducted interviews with 200 teachers, and 91% reported that both teachers and students in their schools were using the materials, and nearly 100% reported that the materials were useful for their school. The Toolkit is currently being used in approximately 450 Ugandan schools, and in all of these cases, schools or their NGO partners have sought the Toolkit from Raising Voices, showing demand. No schools that have been offered the Toolkit have declined to use it.

The intervention content is based on well-established behaviour change techniques that have been shown to be effective in a variety of fields[25] and have been included in interventions which reduce intimate partner violence perpetration[26] and change teacher behaviour and discipline methods in primary schools[22, 27]. Drawing on the Transtheoretical Model[28], the Toolkit uses a six step process to engage teachers, students, administration, and parents to reflect on how they can promote quality of education in their school. The intervention support materials consist of booklets, posters and facilitation guides for 60 different activities related to creating a better learning environment, respecting each other and understanding power relationships, using non-violence discipline, and improving teaching techniques.

The process begins by selection of a school-based ‘protagonist’, usually a motivated member of staff in each school, to engage other staff, students, and the administration to set school-wide goals[25] and develop action plans[25] with specific dates for deliverables[25]. Activities are facilitated by the protagonist and other school personnel, and use written materials to encourage empathy by facilitating reflection[25] on experiences of violence[26], provide new knowledge[25-27] on alternative non-violent discipline, and opportunities to practice new behavioural skills[25-27]. Students are also encouraged to reflect on use of physical, sexual and emotional violence in relationships with each other. Schools are encouraged to self-monitor[25] their progress according to their action plans on a quarterly basis, and are prompted[25] to do so initially by Raising Voices. Reinforcement of new information and ideas[25, 26], feedback on progress and modeling of new techniques and behaviours[25, 27] is provided by visits from the Raising Voices team, and also within school by ‘protagonists’ to their peers as they gain new knowledge and skills. Schools are encouraged to reward[25] successful achievement of their goals and action plan deliverables by creating celebrations. Because the intervention engages multiple groups within a school (teachers, administration, students, and also parents), changing ideas and attitudes in different groups also creates social support[25-27] for behavior change as the intervention progresses. Social support and specific techniques, tips and experiences is also provided by a ‘Peer Learning Network’ of more than 100 schools using the Toolkit, moderated by Raising Voices."

Additional detail should also be provided as to the sampling strategy and stratification of schools, if any.

We added stratification criteria to our description of how the schools were selected on page 11, highlighted in yellow: “Using the official 2010 list of all 276 primary schools in Luwero as our sampling frame, we excluded 105 very small schools (with less than 40 registered Primary 5 students) and 20 schools with existing governance interventions, and then stratified the remaining 151 schools by gender ratio of their pupils, into >60% girls, mixed, or >60% boys. From these 151 schools, we selected a random sample of 42 schools, proportional to size of the stratum. 100% agreed to participate in the study. Upon acceptance, a list of all P5, 6 and 7 students, and a list of all teaching and non-teaching staff will be obtained from school headteachers.”

As well, there is no mention of incentives given or IRB approval.
We specified on page 15 that we “received full ethical approvals from both the LSHTM (#6183) and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (SS 2520).” Incentives were not given to schools, students or staff for participation, so we did not mention it.

There is mention that “students deemed unable to understand the study content and procedures (and unable to given informed consent) will be excluded.” The authors need to elaborate on this statement and explain if not understanding the study content could result in a student selection bias.

Thank you for pointing this out, we have clarified our wording. “Students deemed unable to understand the study consent form (who will be therefore unable to provide informed consent) will be excluded.” We meant that students who were unable to understand the description of the study given on the consent form and the procedures on the consent form were considered unable to consent. In practice, this was one student (versus 3706 surveyed) in our baseline sample that was approached, so we do not believe this has resulted in selection bias.

Inadequate information is also given regarding the assessment periods. Will the intervention still be ongoing when the first assessment is given? How many follow-ups will there be and how much time will be between each follow-up assessment? Given that this is being written as a study proposal, authors need to provide much more detailed information here, as well as their rationale for their assessment period decisions.

On page 7 under ‘Design’ we report: “The trial will involve 2 cross-sectional surveys, at baseline and endline (Figure 1). Our main analysis will involve a cross-sectional comparison of endline data; here we report procedures for our endline survey.” All assessments will happen at the one follow-up survey, there are no interim assessments. We have added a line to explain the implementation time frame under our revised description of the intervention: “The experimental group will receive the Good School Toolkit ([http://www.raisingvoices.org/children/good_school_toolkit.php](http://www.raisingvoices.org/children/good_school_toolkit.php)) and implementation support over an 18-month period. This implementation period was chosen based on Raising Voices programmatic experience and is the period during which the Toolkit is designed to produce changes in a school.”

Last, how will the authors be sure that a difference in assessment can be attributable to the toolkit itself? Although a challenge with all interventions, authors need to address this point.

We were unclear as to the meaning of this comment—apologies if we have misunderstood. We are doing a randomised trial, and monitoring the implementation of other interventions in our study schools as well as contamination. This is the gold-standard design which allows attribution of whatever changes are observed in the outcomes to the Toolkit intervention.