CASE STUDY

Literacy Achievement and Retention Project

In the development sphere, there is a growing realization that addressing social norms is key for successfully shifting behaviors within and across sectors. This case study is one of three done in the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), energy and infrastructure, and education sectors. It takes a deep dive in what social norms meant for one education project, and how integrated programming that focuses on self-reflection can begin shift the norms around violence among teachers, students, and communities.

"YOU CAN ONLY CHANGE IF YOU BELIEVE IN IT YOURSELF": SOCIAL NORMS ON PREVENTING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN SCHOOLS IN UGANDA

Investment in children's education is a global priority, including supporting achievement in early grade reading, with a focus on the most marginalized and vulnerable.[1] To foster child learning and school retention, safe, inclusive, and positive school environments are key.[2] Worldwide, violence against children in schools (VACiS), including school-related gender-based violence and corporal punishment is common, and Uganda is no different.[3] School-related gender-based violence is defined as "acts or threats of sexual, physical or psychological violence occurring in and around schools, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics.[4]* All behaviors encompassed under VACiS often start at young and developmentally formative ages, and can comprise threats and acts of physical and psychological violence, bullying, sexual harassment, and violence in and around schools. A school environment where VACiS occurs is not conductive to learning or teaching, and negatively

*LARA uses both the terms 'VACiS' and 'school-related gender-based violence' across their work; in this brief, we have chosen to use the more all-encompassing VACiS unless specifying a form thereof.

affects child physical and mental well-being, school performance, and future development.[4,5]

The USAID/Uganda Literacy Achievement and Retention Activity (LARA) project (2015-2020) aimed to advance achievements in Ugandan children's early grade reading through improved learning instruction and student retention. To achieve this, LARA sought to build a violence-free and supportive school climate and promote effective instruction where teachers invest in each child's education and well-being, and nurture students' social and emotional learning. Managed and implemented by RTI International in partnership with the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports, LARA worked at scale, implementing its programming across 38 districts in Uganda and reached more than 3,500 public schools, 40,000 teachers, and 1.3 million students.[6]

Box 1

WHAT IS PASSAGES?

Passages is an implementation research project that aims to address a broad range of social norms, at scale, to achieve sustained improvements in violence prevention, gender equality, family planning, and reproductive health. The project uses norms-shifting approaches to build the evidence base and contribute to the capacity of the global community to strengthen reproductive health environments, especially for very young adolescents, newly married youth, and first-time parents. Passages capitalizes on these formative life course transitions to test and scale up interventions that promote collective change and foster an enabling environment for family planning, especially healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies.

Activity Overview

With support from USAID's Office of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GenDev), the Strengthening Social Norms Programming activity studies social norms programming in sectors outside of health. Following a landscaping report, three projects were selected for in-depth case study including review of program data, in-person and phone interviews, and discussions, site visits and observations. Each case study focuses on understanding the role of social norms in the program design and implementation, successes, challenges and lessons learned for future programming.

ROLE OF NORMATIVE CHANGE WITHIN JOURNEYS

The Journeys program, the component of LARA focused on transforming the school culture and climate, including prevention of VACiS through norms-shifting strategies, is the focus of this brief.[7] To achieve desired changes, Journeys engaged teachers and students in schools, and adults and key stakeholders in communities. Journeys' social norms-shifting strategies sought to change expectations and acceptance about the need for and use of VACiS, build positive discipline skills, and increase reporting of and response to incidences of VACiS in schools (Box 2). Journeys activities included promotion of equality and inclusion including across sex, age, and family wealth.

Box 2

JOURNEYS PROJECT OBJECTIVES

1. Establish a school and classroom climate that is welcoming, warm, and supportive; safe physically, emotionally, socially, and academically; inclusive with equal opportunities for all students; and nurturing of students' positive social and emotional development

2. Strengthen students' socioemotional skills, confidence, and agency

3. Eliminate VACiS

NORMATIVE CHANGE WITHIN JOURNEYS:
APPROACH AND STRATEGIES

Journeys included three complementary and age-appropriate handbooks that engage teachers, students, and community members in facilitated activities and reflective discussion, shown in Figure 1, on the previous page. The programming in Journeys addressed multiple norms, listed in Box 3, to prevent and increase reporting of VACiS. Design of the Journeys programming built on formative research that identified norms, reference groups (i.e., teachers, parents, principals, school staff), and power holders (e.g., traditional community leaders, principals, parents) that lead to or could prevent VACiS and those that limit reporting of VACiS, particularly forms of school-related gender-based violence. Journeys applied social emotional learning approaches to deepen individual, group, and school-wide understanding and commitment to change. Through Journeys, LARA engaged multiple interlinked norms-shifting strategies.

The approach employed cascading training of influential and committed teachers and community members to become **school and community 'change agents'**

Staff from the Luwero Field Office of the Multi-Community Based Development Initiative (Mucobadi) a subgrantee community-based organization implementing LARA. Credit: Jamie Greenberg

who facilitate Journeys programming, as well as school principals who are responsible for supporting the program. Change agents and principals went through the same activities they would later facilitate, allowing them to reflect on their own behaviors and beliefs.

Box 3

NORMS THAT UNDERPIN VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN SCHOOLS (VACIS) IN UGANDA AND ARE RELEVANT TO JOURNEYS

- Physical, verbal, and labor punishments (i.e., corporal punishment) are necessary for student learning

- Corporal punishment is necessary to control student misbehavior

- Dispensing with corporal punishment will adversely impact Ugandan society and youth development

- Teachers that are committed to student learning use corporal punishment

- Good colleagues will not report other teachers' sexual harassment of children or their use of corporal punishment

- Only children who misbehave (e.g., dress inappropriately) experience sexual abuse/harassment

- Reporting any form of school-related gender-based violence will not prevent its use and may be harmful for teachers, students, and learning environments

- Bullying (physical, verbal) is normal among students and cannot be stopped

- Child abuse does not concern me; I am not responsible for stopping it

Trained school and community change agents engaged teachers and school support staff and community members, respectively, **in individual and collective social and emotional reflection, dialogue, games, art, and drama** guided by the Journeys handbooks. Supportive supervision, both planned and as-needed, was available for these change agents. The audience-specific Journeys handbooks shown in Figure 1, each cover four thematic areas: inclusion and attachment, social and emotional learning, positive and supportive schools, and physical and emotional safety. The program used applied adult education techniques to teach and empower people to prevent and address VACiS.[8,9] See Table 1 for examples of activities.

Through facilitated exercises, school and community change agents supported participants in understanding how children feel and experience VACiS, and how it affects their learning. In addition, to prevent VACiS, **reminders of school values and positive discipline strategies** were displayed in classrooms, and principals tracked school-wide engagement in Journeys. School change agents visited teachers individually to encourage their transformation; principals validated this effort through **recognition** of teachers' efforts and efforts to ensure consequences

FIGURE 1. Journeys handbooks for teachers and school staff, community members, and learners/students

Teachers and School Staff — Community Members — Learners

for those who continue with VACiS, particularly corporal punishment. School change agents also led efforts to build **reporting and response mechanisms** for VACiS. These strategies included encouraging students and teachers to report VACiS, and for school change agents and administrators to investigate and respond to reports. The strategy intended to identify and respond to violence early.

School-based student groups, called Uganda Kids Unite, engaged in individual and collective reflection and dialogue in safe spaces using the Journeys hand-

TABLE 1. Journeys program: Example of self-reflection and social emotional learning

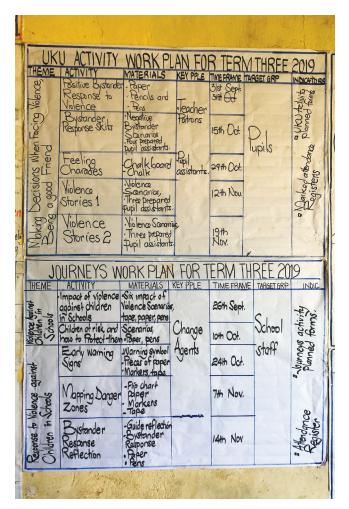| AUDIENCE	FACILITATORS	VENUE	EXAMPLE OF STEPS FOR SELF-REFLECTION
School staff and teachers	School change agents	Schools	Remember and reflect on your childhood experience of corporal punishment. Connect with your feelings of corporal punishment as a child and how this affected you. Share your reflection.
Students	School change agents and teachers	Uganda Kids Unite clubs in school	Reflect on power differentials through role play exercises. Discuss how you feel playing differently powered community members. Consider how this relates to school and the implications power differentials have on bullying.
Community members	Community change agents	Community	Remember and reflect on your childhood experience of corporal punishment. Connect with your feelings of corporal punishment as a child and how this affected you. Share your reflection.

book. Uganda Kids Unite groups were mixed-age, co-ed student groups led by teachers who had already engaged with Journeys programming themselves. Activities sought to **build students' socioemotional skills and agency.** Students engaged in role playing, group problem solving, and a variety of interactive activities to "practice perspective taking, develop empathy and compassion, and learn to appreciate differences of opinion.[10]" Uganda Kids Unite built relationships and understanding between students and encouraged students to take initiative in improving their school environment and learning. An RTI staff member explained, *"we want the children to be able to […] challenge any act of violence, internally: can you identify an act of violence, can you challenge it, […] by either reporting or refusing it."*

Another approach used to shift norms related to reporting and response to VACiS was the creation of **village child case management committees,** facilitated by community change agents and partner organizations. In streamlining and promoting case management of child abuse, structural changes were linked with shifting community norms. By modelling case management and providing support for children who have experienced violence in homes and the community, this strategy sought to shift norms, including the societal attitude that *"we say it's [child abuse] not our business, it doesn't concern me,"* and the stigma that children who have survived abuse may face.

Journeys Workplan, including Uganda Kids Unite! Activities, From School Implementing LARA. Credit: Jamie Greenberg

> **"**
> *You engage people by having them talk about what they know…once they tell you what they know, you see the gaps and plug them."*
>
> COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATION STAFF
> —

A pilot **mass media campaign** in select sites incorporated messages to shift social norms related to VACiS. The campaign, implemented through radios and road shows, took a two-pronged approach: **de-normalizing corporal punishment** and **offering alternatives.** As part of the first prong, children narrated radio spots describing their own experience with corporal punishment, aiming to build empathy in listeners. As part of the second prong, teachers shared their personal childhood experiences with corporal punishment in schools and strategies for positive discipline, connecting to the self-reflection thread that runs through Journeys.

JOURNEYS' FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

Journeys challenged existing norms and acts of VACiS through multiple complementary approaches, including reaching individuals and groups on an emotional level, building skills to prevent and respond to violence, using positive discipline, and designing programming to support both classroom- and school-level change.

- Programming grounded in evidence and formative research, the use of multiple channels for messaging, and targeting different levels of the socioecological model are factors that led to the success of Journeys program. The **Journeys handbooks for teachers and school staff, students, and communities reiterated audience-appropriate key messages** that promoted what a district-level implementer called *"collective responsibility between the child, parent, and school."*

- **Integrated efforts to achieve prevention and response of VACiS in schools and communities led parents to support school changes on discipline,** even when parents previously endorsed corporal punishment, and to be actively engaged with schools and teachers. Participation in the Journeys training and teachers' facilitation of Journeys programming in Uganda Kids Unite may have improved relationships both among teachers and between teachers and students, making it easier to learn from each other. Finally, the mass media campaigns complemented messaging already delivered through Journeys, with one district-level implementer describing them as "adding salt in the sauce."

- Another key success factor was **careful selection of change agents from respected and committed members of communities and schools,** rather than recruiting outsiders. *"If someone is accepted by the community…. it is easy…to welcome them, and the message they come with."* Networked and respected community change agents were able to build their work into planned community meetings, church gatherings, and other social events.

- **The use of social and emotional learning principles aided participants to internalize messages,** including cultivating the belief that change within schools and community is possible. For example, reflection and dialogue in Journeys groups encouraged participants to remember and discuss childhood experiences of corporal punishment, including the adverse emotional consequences, and propose changes that would make learning safer for students. As a result, participants became skilled to actively prevent and respond to VACiS.

- **Journeys built participants' agency to change their own behavior and support similar change in others at all levels of the community.** It promoted self-efficacy in teachers to use positive disciplinary practices, with one female teacher (who was not a change agent) demonstrating how she internalized the principles that she learned in Journeys: *"now we are change agents… I tell the other teachers to be change agents."* Parents were asked to imagine an ideal school for their children, and take proactive steps, supported by their community change agent, to achieve them. Finally, children were encouraged to report VACiS, and principals and school change agents were tasked with responding to such reports. **Through building participant and group agency, transforming collective norms, and defining new behaviors as desirable, people can actualize their beliefs in nonviolence, child safety, and learning.**

- Finally, **the project allowed for adaptation during initial program implementation** using feedback from the project's monitoring and evaluation system, partners, or in response to unforeseen factors. An example was the teachers' Journeys handbook, which originally contained theoretical descriptions of social and emotional learning competencies as they manifest in children and adults. After teacher feedback, activities were adjusted to focus on the practical, engaging participants on what the competencies mean to them, and how to support children in developing these skills.

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING JOURNEYS

Implementers and participants in LARA identified five key challenges to shifting norms. These indicate opportunities for improvement and areas in need of additional data and reflection.

At the school level, LARA sought to engage **school change agents who were motivated and committed to the project,** could lead activities, support change, and model behaviors. Though many change agents met these criteria and were committed to LARA despite the additional workload, others were less motivated or not convinced that change was desirable or possible.

For the community Journeys programs, some interviewees described efforts to form and lead discussion groups in urban settings as more challenging than in rural areas, due to busier schedules and weaker ties to their community and schools. Partner organizations and community change agents suggested increasing the number of community change agents relative to **geographic and population coverage,** perhaps allowing for more time and effort on the part of change agents to organize and facilitate the groups.

VACiS reporting and response mechanisms, structures, and systems in the community are sometimes limited in terms of accessibility and availability in rural villages. Participants emphasized the **importance of quality and timely response to reports of VACiS** to meet children's needs.

Teachers and implementers explained that VACiS comprises many different behaviors, attitudes, and norms. Some norms and behaviors are more easily changed. Others require **additional time and resources to support and sustain change.** For example, a teacher may stop using corporal punishment in the classroom, yet students may not immediately respond with being obedient and attentive. Therefore, teachers must be prepared and supported to persist with positive discipline even when the positive effects are not immediate. Additionally,

strengthened relationships between teachers and students takes time. Children need time to understand and adapt to these normative and behavior changes and start to develop trust with their teacher and other students. Teachers also need ongoing support and patience during this process.

> " *Making sure that a child who is abused will receive services to help them stay comfortable in school and learning."*
>
> COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATION STAFF

Additionally, **VACiS behaviors can be public or hidden, and may encompass a range of behaviors.** School bullying and physical and labor-related corporal punishment were more amendable to early shifts, compared to sexual harassment and other forms of school-related gender-based violence. This may be related to **power differentials** between students and teachers, and those between teachers. In schools, children may be concerned about reprisals if they report VACiS perpetrated by students or by teachers. Similarly, some teachers reported discomfort reporting other teachers for VACiS. An RTI staff member reflected that teachers *"...will report a lot of bullying, but not much corporal punishment because it implicates them."* Given the hidden and taboo of the behavior, teacher involvement in preventing and responding to sexual harassment was challenging. When schools adopted the policies of positive discipline and values underlying the LARA program, there was more success in shifting teacher and school administrators' practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM JOURNEYS TO THE EDUCATION SECTOR

Journeys has shown that a program grounded in formative research, implemented through multiple channels, and across the socioecological model can shift VACiS norms and behaviors in the classroom, school, and community. The program demonstrates the value of a socioemotional approach to facilitated group reflection and dialogue to identify new values and behaviors for students and teachers. The LARA program and Journeys included a strong learning and evaluation component, which allowed for adaptive learning. This approach allowed the program to adjust based on feedback and monitoring data and resulted in more audience-acceptable and effective strategies. An evaluation of LARA, to include baseline and midline surveys in control and intervention groups, will unpack the program's effectiveness. This case study of Journeys within the LARA project has highlighted recommendations for the Education Sector to advance and sustain violence prevention in schools through norms-shifting approaches.

Advance understanding of what supports and activities are needed to sustain norms and behavior change after participation in programming. The Journeys program highlighted that change does not happen at a uniform pace. As individuals and groups experiment with new ideas and behaviors, individual and institutional support can encourage change and sustained action. Understanding the type,

frequency, and format of support for change would help guide Education Sector policy and programming.

Integrating VACiS prevention activities across systems and structures. LARA engaged government officials on the Journeys approach early in implementation to ensure the program is consistent with national and local policy. Yet not all schools within the public school system implemented Journeys, and private schools were not included in the program. At a local level, different disciplinary practices by public and private schools and frequent teacher transfer between schools and systems put success at risk. Mainstreaming the Journeys approach in teacher training programs and schools, as well as all private schools, could yield local and national norm change.

Enhancing VACiS response systems in schools and communities. Journeys gives importance to developing structured systems to respond to VACiS in schools and communities so that children are not stigmatized and receive quality, timely support. Safe and good-quality VACiS response systems can support prevention activities. Unpacking how children experience existing response systems and identifying strategies to systematically develop this component is important for students and adults to understand the value given to safer schools and to build student confidence in reporting.

> **"**
> *I wanted to make new friends, but especially in lower classes, because they didn't have ok friendship with upper classes, and I would like to have a good relationship with them."*
>
> STUDENT IN UGANDA KIDS UNITE"

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7   Some of LARA's work to change behaviors around teaching strategies and parental engagement with children's early grade reading included developing norms-shifting strategies. Though important to the program, these activities are not the focus of this brief.

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Cover photo: Community members involved with LARA activities at a Luwero school implementing LARA. Credit: Jamie Greenberg

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