



# Education and Empowerment: Voices from Ugandan Youth

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## List of Abbreviations

CSOs	Civil society organizations
ILO	International Labour Organisation
LLMICs	Low- and lower-middle-income countries
PAR	Participatory action research
SSA	sub-Saharan Africa
UBOS	Ugandan Bureau of Statistics
UPE	Universal Primary Education
USD	US Dollar
USE	Universal Secondary Education

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## Abstract

Despite the fast-growing body of literature on education and empowerment, young people's perception of their own educational setting has not received adequate attention in advancing our understanding of the empowering but also disempowering elements of education. This is especially the case for the sub-Saharan African context. Addressing this gap, this study lets 497 Ugandan youth speak for themselves in the scope of a questionnaire. The diversity of young people's responses shows that experiences of empowerment through formal education differ significantly among individuals. By drawing on the work of Stromquist, this paper broadly relates young people's responses to cognitive (e.g.: critical understanding of one's reality), psychological (e.g.: feeling of self-esteem), political (e.g.: awareness of power inequalities and the ability to organize and mobilize) and the economic (e.g.: capacity to generate independent income) dimensions of empowerment through education. While the majority of youth indicated that they feel psychologically empowered through formal education, perceptions differed significantly in regard to economic empowerment. Besides, political or cognitive aspects of empowerment appear to happen outside and not in schools. A notable majority (75 %) feels disempowered by the many political, economic and social barriers they are facing outside their education, suggesting that education alone is not the magic bullet for systemic change at large.

**Keywords:** Education, Empowerment, Youth, Uganda

# 1. Introduction

Development actors, such as the World Bank,<sup>1</sup> the Global Education Fund,<sup>2</sup> The Global Partnership for Education<sup>3</sup> or the United Nations (in particular Sustainable Development Goal 4),<sup>4</sup> tend to embrace and present education as an empowering tool towards human capital, economic development, increased health and democratization processes. Empowering individuals through education is expected to increase the likelihood of employment prospects and is positively associated with higher wages, improvement of health, and resilience to political, economic or environmental shocks (Bird et al. 2011; UNESCO 2017; UNESCO Institute for Statistics/UNICEF 2015). It is further assumed that education will lead to individual as well as collective empowerment in the form of social returns to less-educated members of a society (Blundell et al. 1999; World Bank 2017). While education can undeniably empower individuals in multiple ways, these assumptions are frequently made without any input from school-going children and youth about their experiences. This study challenges the common notion that formal schooling ultimately empowers youth in low- and lower-middle-income countries (LLMICs). In centralizing young people's perspectives on the challenges they faced in their education already prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the paper aims to contribute to ongoing debates on how to 'build-back better' in education in LLMICS. Drawing on young people's viewpoints from Uganda, it showcases why empowerment in the context of formal education is a complex and inhomogeneous process that cannot be detached from social, political, and economic structures. Empowerment is not only theoretically a highly contested and debated concept (Kabeer 1999; Monkman 2011) but also depends on subjective and individual life experiences and circumstances that cannot always be generalized. Against this backdrop, the study examines the following questions: *What aspects of formal education either empower or disempower Ugandan youth in uncertain and difficult life circumstances? And consequently, Do young people feel that their public schooling experience has helped them to better manoeuvre the several political, social, and economic constraints they encounter in their everyday lives and experiences? If so, how? And, if not, why and what are their concerns?*

Addressing these questions, I let youth speak for themselves in my analysis and examine perceptions of their own realities, everyday lives and challenges prior to the COVID-19 crisis. There is a lot to learn from young people's past experiences in current efforts to send children and youth back to school. That way, Ugandan youth are deliberately treated as active agents (and not research objects) who, with their own voice, are able to contribute, on the basis of their own experience, to existing research and debates on education and empowerment (Lehtomäki et al. 2014; Narayan et al. 2000). In placing youth as social actors at the centre of the research process (Barker/Weller 2003; Little 2014), I present and discuss the voices of 497 Ugandan youth who participated in a survey, in four different regions across the country. Some findings from this survey have already been published elsewhere (Datzberger/Le Mat 2019). We found that Uganda's public education sector makes a very limited contribution towards youths' individual political agency, in regard to both: youths' understanding and knowledge of national and local political structures; and in regard to the lack of critical reflection taking place in schools (ibid.). This paper takes this research a step further and presents new, hitherto unpublished data from the same survey to assess what aspects of the education sector Ugandan youth feel is useful or unhelpful in enabling them to take active charge of their lives in extremely challenging economic, social and political circumstances.

The first section delineates the general situation of Ugandan youth before and during COVID-19. The paper continues to conceptualize the highly contested and often overused buzzword "empowerment" in the context of this study. The subsequent methods section provides an overview of how data was collected, coded, and analysed. The remaining sections

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education>, 06 March 2022.

<sup>2</sup> See: <http://www.globaleducationfund.org/>, 06 March 2022.

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.globalpartnership.org/>, 06 March 2022.

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/>, 06 March 2022.

present and critically discuss quantitative descriptive and qualitative data from the questionnaire. Given the magnitude of comments underneath 5-likert questions (1762 comments from 5 questions, at an average of 352 comments per question), the paper will not conclude with an *in-depth qualitative* analysis of young people's unique experiences and positionalities of empowerment through education. Rather, its contribution is to synthesize youths' viewpoints on pre-COVID-19 conditions, and offer initial findings and points of discussions to stimulate new research, ongoing debates and efforts in education during and after the pandemic.

## 2. Political, economic and social conditions for Ugandan youth

It is estimated that about 75.2 % of Uganda's entire population (39 million) is under the age of 30 (National Population Council 2018). The many challenges youth are facing include poverty, unemployment, a general lack of opportunities, low educational attainment, a rapidly growing population, inter-generational power imbalances, persisting gender inequalities, and shrinking space for civil society. Most recent figures estimate that 57.2 % of all Ugandans live in multidimensional poverty and 41.3 % have an income below 1.90 USD.<sup>5</sup> For the Ugandan scholar Lubaale (2019), the root causes of poverty manifest in varying degrees, in a complex web of ethical, ecological, historical, social, economic and political factors. Apart from the country's colonial legacy, which fuels conflict and social injustices to this day, *Transparency International* listed Uganda as one of the most corrupt public sectors in the world, ranked at 144 out of 180.<sup>6</sup>

*Politically*, youth are confronted with discrimination in exercising their rights and freedom of speech (Freedom House 2020). Several local civil society organizations (CSOs) I interviewed in 2017<sup>7</sup> referred to office raids (allegedly by the government) as well as violations of freedom of association, assembly and expression in the country. Civil activism in Uganda has been further dampened by the controversial *Non-Governmental Organisations Act*, passed by the GoU in 2015, that severely limits political advocacy activities of CSOs. Overall, Uganda's political environment remains highly restricted for youth under the regime of long-ruling President Museveni – notwithstanding a highly resilient press and citizenry. In light of several recent incidences, Freedom House downgraded Uganda from *partly free* to *not free*.<sup>8</sup>

*Economically*, unemployment and underemployment among youth is pervasive. However, the exact estimates on youth unemployment rates vary tremendously by source, depending on the definitions of both unemployment and youth. For example, the African Development Bank does not consider unstable and informal income generation or being enrolled in education or training as employment (Broecke/Diallo 2012); whereas other actors do. According to the ILO (International Labour Organisation) statistics database, which defines youth as aged 15 to 24, the rate of unemployment among youth in Uganda in 2017 was 33.5 %.<sup>9</sup>

*Socially*, intergenerational power imbalances also hamper young people's agency and empowerment. As pointed out by Mutyaba (2017) resistance to change by some Ugandan elders are not only impacting youth but the wider society as a whole. The significant lack of opportunities for Ugandan youth, coupled with the current government administration and increase in corruption and insecurity, has pushed youth to dissent and resist traditional structures in hopes of replacing them with a more progressive ideology (ibid.).

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/UGA>, 04 March 2022.

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://www.transparency.org/country/UGA#chapterInfo>, 04 March 2022.

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/702880/results>, 04 March 2022.

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/uganda/freedom-world/2020>, 04 March 2022.

<sup>9</sup> See:

[https://www.ilo.org/ilostat/faces/oracle/webcenter/portalapp/pagehierarchy/Page3.jspx?locale=en&MBI\\_ID=20&\\_adf.ctrl-state=p0a188qqy\\_4&\\_afLoop=3975531474243930&\\_afWindowMode=0&\\_afWindowId=null#!%40%40%3F\\_afWindowId%3Dnull%26locale%3Den%26\\_afLoop%3D3975531474243930%26MBI\\_ID%3D20%26\\_afWindowMode%3D0%26\\_afCtrl-state%3Dssjs4hgjm\\_21](https://www.ilo.org/ilostat/faces/oracle/webcenter/portalapp/pagehierarchy/Page3.jspx?locale=en&MBI_ID=20&_adf.ctrl-state=p0a188qqy_4&_afLoop=3975531474243930&_afWindowMode=0&_afWindowId=null#!%40%40%3F_afWindowId%3Dnull%26locale%3Den%26_afLoop%3D3975531474243930%26MBI_ID%3D20%26_afWindowMode%3D0%26_afCtrl-state%3Dssjs4hgjm_21), 04 March 2022.

## 2.1. Uganda's education sector for youth prior and during the COVID-19 pandemic

Since independence in 1962, there have been several attempts to reform the education sector in Uganda, which continue to be challenged by slow and weak policy implementation in areas such as teacher training, lack of funding, poor infrastructure and livelihood generation for youth. Despite the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) (1997) and Universal Secondary Education (USE) (2007), school drop-out rates remain shockingly high, with 64.5 % of primary school children dropping out before reaching the last grade of primary education.<sup>10</sup> In 2017, Uganda's Gross Enrolment Rate<sup>11</sup> in secondary education reached only 25 % (UBOS 2019: 27). Besides, the quality of education at both the primary and secondary level is extremely low (Uwezo 2016, 2015; World Bank 2017). Education sector and government programs specifically designed for youth to reduce youth unemployment rates have, thus far, failed to respond to the educational needs of youth and the local economy (Datzberger 2018).

Most recently, COVID-19 has put multiple challenges in young people's lives. Uganda enforced the longest school-closure world-wide – in total 22 months – during the pandemic.<sup>12</sup> Around 15 million children and youth are believed to have not attended school for almost two years (Al Jazeera 2022). While the long-term effects of school closures can only be speculated, the immediate effects on children and youth have already been devastating. Recent statistical models predict a learning deficit of 2.8 years in Uganda (Angrist et al. 2021). According to the UBOS (Ugandan Bureau of Statistics) there has been an increase of child labour from 21 % to 36 % during the pandemic – affecting in particular girls (Human Rights Watch 2021; UBOS 2021). UNICEF (2021) observed a 22.5 % increase of pregnancies among Ugandan school-going girls between March 2020 and June 2021. As far as secondary school net enrolment is concerned (i.e. percentage of adolescent youth of the official age group for a given level of education enrolled in secondary school), recent data points to a substantial drop in enrolment (UBOS 2021), though no accurate figures were available at the time of writing. The true extent of COVID-19 on young people's educational paths in the longer term is still difficult to predict. It remains to be seen how young people cope with challenges such as paying for school fees, catching up on missed learning content or the lack of employment opportunities after completing school (Datzberger et al. 2022). In light of current attempts to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on children and youths' education in LLMICS, this paper wants to specifically shed light on what elements young people found already disempowering in their education prior to the crisis. This perspective is important to better understand how pre-pandemic inequities, that already affected and disadvantaged young people before COVID-19, may and will be further intensified.

## 3. On the buzzword empowerment in education

The term empowerment has fuelled many debates across academic fields and development actors. Critics allege that the concept has been entirely deprived of its intended meaning and rendered into quantifiable, apolitical and de-contextualized indicators. For instance, Batliwala (2007a) refers to a contemporary angst about how difficult empowerment is to measure. Making empowerment quantifiable (through specific outcomes, achievements or indicators), critics argue, inherits the risk that it is measured as an isolated outcome, an isolated sphere of engagement (personal, economic, political) and an isolated scale of analysis (individual, household, community/society) (Goldman/Little 2015). Apart from the difficulties in measuring empowerment, the term has also become a highly depoliticized development recipe, neglecting the dimensions of power and transformation originally inherent in the concept

<sup>10</sup> Percentage retrieved from: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/UGA> last accessed 04 March 2022.

<sup>11</sup> I.e.: enrolment in secondary school regardless of age and grade expressed as a percentage of the official secondary school going population of 13-18 years

<sup>12</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse#durationschoolclosures>, 04 March 2022



(Battliwala 2007b, 2007a; Cornwall/Brock 2005). Scholars such as Naila Kabeer, Nelly P. Stromquist, Jo Rowlands, or Karen Monkman, further remind us that empowerment happens not just at the individual level but also at the collective level, across different spheres. This was also reflected in young people's responses (see section 5).

When it comes to specifically studying the interplay of education and empowerment, existing research and debates predominantly focus on the following themes: education as an empowering human right (Onuora-Oguno 2019; Tomasevski 2001), education and economic empowerment (Glewwe et al. 2014; Gyimah-Brempong 2011; Gyimah-Brempong et al. 2006) or education and empowerment through gender equality (Monkman 2011; Stromquist 2015, 2003, 1995; Unterhalter 2016). There is also a steadily growing body of literature on the role of education and political empowerment (Bleck 2015; Croke et al. 2016; Quaynor 2015). Besides, academic scholarship that specifically focuses on education and empowerment in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has arrived at diverse conclusions and results depending on country and context. In comparing the cases of Kenya, Mali, Mozambique and Nigeria, Woolman (2001) convincingly summarizes the multiple challenges to realizing the potential of education as empowering. These obstacles, which are still of relevance today, include rural-urban disparities; ethnic, geographic and gender inequality in access to education; inadequate facilities and instructional resources; a shortage of trained teachers; a struggle between collectivistic traditions and so-called modernization; the (ir)relevance of education to social and economic needs; and the legacies of colonial education that neglect African culture and history, subordinate Africans, and perpetuate neo-colonial cultural dependency (ibid.).

The above literature represents an important contribution to the study of education and empowerment, however, it falls short on acknowledging learners' own viewpoints on empowerment through education, especially in the SSA context. A few studies focus on the voices of European youth in regards to their education (Bates et al. 2009; Kintrea et al. 2011), but, as far as SSA is concerned, young people's perceptions about their educational setting has not received adequate attention among scholars and practitioners. This is surprising, as the SSA region is one of the biggest recipients<sup>13</sup> when it comes to foreign aid for education. In addressing this gap in the literature, I place young people's experiences at the centre of my analysis and 'theoretical' attention. At the same time, I want to shed light on the political, economic, psychological and social aspects that surround their education. In this attempt, I found Nelly Stromquist approach towards empowerment most useful. Stromquist (2003), in short, distinguishes between, the cognitive (e.g.: critical understanding of one's reality), the psychological (e.g.: feeling of self-esteem), the political (e.g.: awareness of power inequalities and the ability to organize and mobilize) and the economic (e.g.: capacity to generate independent income) dimensions of empowerment. I will refer back to her framework in the scope of my analysis in section 5. A thorough elaboration of her dimensions of empowerment, which she developed from a gender equity perspective, can be read here: Stromquist (2015, 2003, 1995). Her work deliberately approaches empowerment as a process and not an end result that can be measured based on indicators. Embracing empowerment as a process is essential for this analysis as it makes room for young people's accounts on their everyday challenges, including how political, economic and social structures affect them (see section 2).

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<sup>13</sup> See for instance: <http://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-data/Africa-Development-Aid-at-a-Glance-2019.pdf>, 15 January 2022

## 4. Methods and modes of data collection

This paper is one of several outcomes (Datzberger 2018; Datzberger/Le Mat 2019) from a research project on education and democratization.<sup>14</sup> Quantitative data was obtained from 497 questionnaires conducted with upper-secondary school students (n = 336), university students (n = 130) and youth not enrolled in university or secondary school (n = 31). In total, 98 % of participants were between 15-29 years old<sup>15</sup> (only 2 % were aged 30-40 years), which was the responding category in the questionnaire. All participating schools were public (government-led) institutions, enrolling youth with a low socio-economic status. The aim behind this selection was to reach out to vulnerable youth who were still in a position to share their viewpoints about the formal education system and experience in Uganda.

The survey has an unequal number of female and male respondents (see Table 1), with 40.4 % female and 59.6 % male. At first this may seem as a gender imbalance; however, it is, in fact, reflective of actual and nationwide enrolment rates (prior to the pandemic) in upper-secondary S6-S7 (Senior 6 and Senior 7) based on sex, which are currently 39.8 % female and 60.2 % male in S6 (MoES 2016). Therefore, this disproportion challenged obtaining an equal gender balance during data collection.

**Table 1: Overview of number of respondents per region and respondent characteristics**

<b>Respondent Characteristics</b>	
Female	201 (40.4 %)
Male	296 (59.6 %)
Age range	98 % were between 15-29 years old
Income	79.8 % had no income; 6.7 % earned less than 7.000 UGX (1.94 USD) a day
<b>Region (Districts)</b>	
Central (Kampala)	139 (28 %)
North (Gulu)	128 (25.8 %)
North-East (Moroto, Kotido)	189 (38 %)
South-West (Mbarara)	41 (8.2 %)

An extensive amount of qualitative data informing the empirical section of this paper was gathered from the additional comments sections of the survey. These sections were made available underneath quantitative 5-point Likert scale questions and aimed at learning from participants' everyday experiences, thereby treating them as individuals who were able to contribute their own viewpoints of their educational experience (Lehtomäki et al. 2014; Narayan et al. 2000). All comments were compiled, assessed and subsequently grouped into common emerging themes. By primarily focusing on these additional comments from youth, I wanted to gain more knowledge about their priorities and concerns.

<sup>14</sup> <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/702880/results>, 04 March 2022

<sup>15</sup> During data collection, it was ensured that all respondents were 18 or older, however, the category in the questionnaire was 15-29.

## 4.1 “Voice” as a research method

My research methods and approach share some similarities with participatory action research (PAR) methods aiming to democratize knowledge by focusing on young people’s perceptions and viewpoints as my main unit of analysis. However, data and findings do not translate into immediate educational interventions or new educational programming co-led or co-developed by youth, as it would be the case in traditional PAR projects (see for instance: Halliday et al. 2019). Instead I analyse young people’s views about reality (i.e. their educational experience) to contextualize and better understand the interplay of education and empowerment through their unique lens. In this endeavour, my main challenge was to do justice to the diversity of their subjectivities. Scrutinizing a wide range of comments made by 497 youth was admittedly not an easy task. This paper should thus not be mistaken as an in-depth qualitative analysis of youths’ individual experiences, but rather as a synthesis and broad analysis of their responses. I offer initial findings, which may inspire subsequent in-depth studies on particular themes and issues.

At the same time, I am aware that my analysis is not free from the problematic nature of interpretation, recognizing that I bring my own perspectives when examining the data. As noted by Kincheloe and McLaren (2000), it is not solely our respondents’ experience and viewpoints that are being brought to light but also our own interpretation of their experience. While letting young people speak for themselves as a research method can be emancipatory, I acknowledge that the researcher often benefits more from the telling than the researched (ibid).

## 5. Young people’s perceptions on empowerment through education in Uganda

I want to first draw attention to what factors youth believe denied them possibilities and abilities of free choice, agency, opportunity and, consequently, a certain degree of control over some aspects of their lives, both at the individual and collective level. This relates to an understanding of empowerment that is inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment (e.g.: Kabeer 1999). At the same time it acknowledges Stromquist’s (2003) cognitive aspects of empowerment, namely the importance of critical consciousness about one’s reality. These findings serve as a point of departure to inform subsequent sections on young people’s views about their educational experience.

### 5.1 Young people’s perceptions on what disempowers them

#### 5.1.1 Structural constraints

*“We have seen tragedies happen more times than the good things.  
Fellow students struggling to acquire fees. Begging for coins to survive.  
And this all is seen daily all one needs to do is take a walk on the streets  
and prove for themselves.”*

– (female, aged 15-29, central region, Kampala).

Around 75 %<sup>16</sup> of youth indicated that there are uncontrollable issues that disempower them in their everyday lives, reflecting the several challenges for youth outlined in section 2. Notably, the number of females who felt generally disempowered was only slightly higher than those of males, with 78 % of all female and 74 % of all male respondents. While this suggests that both genders are equally affected by challenging life circumstances, other studies have shown that

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<sup>16</sup> In total, 375 (75.45%) out of which 195 ‘strongly agreed’ (85 females, 110 males); 152 ‘agreed’ (63 females, 89 males) and 28 (8 females, 20 males) ‘somewhat’ agreed.

grievances are gender specific in Uganda (OECD 2015). In this survey, for both genders the inability to pay for school fees, followed by general financial and economic constraints were perceived as most disempowering factors (see Table 2). Youths' concerns reinforce an earlier study, showcasing that multidimensional poverty in Uganda is still one of the main causes for exclusion from education (Datzberger 2018; Datzberger/Le Mat 2019). Young people have to cope with constant uncertainty of either accessing or continuing with secondary education as it is not fee-free and entails several hidden costs (Kakuba et al. 2021; Omoeva/Gale 2016). By and large, respondents generally associated their economic grievances more to the individual (Table 2) than the collective level (Table 3). By contrast, political grievances, such as corruption, poor governance and the lack of democracy, were rather described by youth as taking a toll on Ugandan society at large (see section 5.1.2); thus the collective level. Generally, young people's accounts are illustrative of the many economic and political constraints surrounding them. In other words, the absence of pro-poor education sector policies (such as making education truly fee-free) and de-facto implementation thereof challenges any attempts to empower youth through education in the first place (Datzberger 2018; Datzberger/Le Mat 2019).

**Table 2: There are certain issues that affect my life but are completely out of my control**

<b>Key themes</b>	<b>Female responses (137 or 68.1 % of all female respondents, n=201)</b>	<b>Male responses (210 or 70.7 % of all male respondents, n=296)</b>	<b>Total responses (n=347 / 69.8 % of all respondents)</b>
Inability or struggle to pay school fees	25.5 %	22.9 %	23.9 %
Financial issues more broadly, including income insecurity and poverty	20.4 %	20.5 %	20.5 %
Health related issues, including illness	10.9 %	10.0 %	10.4 %
Political issues including corruption, poor policy, riots	4.4 %	12.4 %	9.2 %
Issues at home, including domestic violence	6.6 %	6.7 %	6.6 %
Personal issues, such as self-confidence, guidance	2.2 %	9.0 %	6.3 %
Education system and/or provisions	8.0 %	4.8 %	6.1 %
Issues with peers and friends in school	8.8 %	4.3 %	6.1 %
Relationships	5.8 %	2.4 %	3.7 %
Sex and sexuality related issues – including advances from opposite sex, early pregnancy, sexual desire	2.9 %	3.8 %	3.6 %
Climate change and environmental issues	2.9 %	1.9 %	2.3 %
Early marriage	1.5 %	1.4 %	1.4 %

*Total responses: 347 out of 497; 69.8 % made use of the additional comments section*

Note: Percentages are calculated out of 347 respondents who made use of the comments section

### 5.1.2 Socio-political awareness

*“Uganda as a country honestly is going through lots of corruption both in big and small offices which makes it politically, socially and economically unstable.”*

– (female, aged 15-29, northern region, Gulu).

*“One president ruling for more than thirty years.”*

– (male, aged 15-29, north-eastern region, Karamoja).

In view of the political, economic and social situation of youth in Uganda (section 2), the survey sought to get a better understanding of youths' critical awareness in regard to their surrounding structures – reflected in Stromquist's political and cognitive dimensions of empowerment. In total 72.4 %<sup>17</sup> indicated on the 5-point Likert scale that they are aware of political, social and economic issues that potentially disempower Ugandans at a collective level. Strikingly, most mentions were made of, or in relation to, corruption. Young people's answers also revealed a general mistrust towards Uganda's political leaders from the local to the national level (including the president). While young people's comments did show critical consciousness about their political, economic and social environment, a previous study (based on different data from the same survey) found that the formal education system hardly contributes to this awareness and consequently also their individual political agency (ibid.). The majority of respondents had little to no knowledge about how Uganda's national and local political system functions. As shown in Table 4 (see section 5.2.1), only 3.9 % of all respondents (7 female and 8 male) wrote that their education helped them gain political knowledge. Written comments generally suggest, that young people's critical consciousness about unfair, corrupt and dysfunctional political structures, seems to stem from their everyday experiences, or through discussions with family and friends rather than from their schooling experience. One respondent, for instance, wrote:

*Most teachers concentrate so much on class work other than helping us with other aspects of life. They always leave upon us to find out which is not good for a student growing up in the society.*

– (female, aged 15-29, northern region, Gulu).

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<sup>17</sup> 360 out of 497 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' to this question

**Table 3: I am aware of political and social and economic issues affecting Ugandan society – which issues concern me most?**

<b>Key themes</b>	<b>Female responses (number of responses 121)</b>	<b>Male responses (number of responses: 217)</b>	<b>Total responses (number of responses: 338)</b>
Corruption	47.1 %	44.2 %	45.3 %
Political and governance issues, including political instability, poor governance, lack of democracy	34.7 %	32.7 %	33.4 %
Economic issues broadly	18.2 %	20.7 %	19.8 %
Education (low levels of education, education system)	16.5 %	12.9 %	14.2 %
Societal issues, such as injustice, social services, tribalism	9.1 %	15.2 %	13.0 %
Poverty	13.2 %	12.0 %	12.5 %
Job and employment issues – including high unemployment and work place discrimination	9.1 %	12.9 %	11.5 %
Health based issues, including disease, poor health care	5.8 %	8.8 %	7.7 %
Security of the country (including rising number of killings)	6.6 %	7.8 %	7.4 %
Discrimination broadly	6.6 %	7.8 %	7.4 %
Environmental issues, including farming, mineral exploitation, famine, rainfall	9.1 %	4.1 %	5.9 %
The country's infrastructure	0.8 %	4.1 %	3.0 %
Abuse of human rights	1.7 %	2.3 %	2.1 %
Gender inequality	2.5 %	1.4 %	1.8 %
Child rights, child abuse	3.3 %	0	1.2 %
Sexual assault	1.7 %	0.5 %	0.9 %

*Total responses: 338 out of 497 thus 68.0 % took advantage of raising their concerns in the survey.*

Note: Percentages are calculated out of 338 respondents who made use of the comments section

## **5.2 How did young people feel empowered through education?**

Building on the previous section (5.1.1) on what youth believe (dis-)empowers them, the questionnaire subsequently aimed at gathering young people's viewpoints on whether the education they receive enables them to make changes that enhance their current situation, and whether and how education increases their self-esteem.

## 5.2.1 Agency and education

*“I developed the knowledge of getting money on my own that is by selling pancakes during the holidays.”*

– (female, aged 15-29, northern region, Gulu).

*“Skills in reading; This is me different from others and able to teach my young brother and sister.”*

– (male, aged 15-29, central region, Kampala).

Despite youths’ pessimistic outlook on disempowering political and economic barriers affecting their everyday lives, in total, 88.5 % in the 5-point Likert survey either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that their education did provide them with some skills to improve their situation. Apart from basic literacy skills, slightly more than one-fifth (27.5 %) noted that their education helped them develop practical skills to earn money, such as in agriculture, crafts and entrepreneurship. However, this result diverges from the 33.2 % (see section 5.3) of youth who critiqued the education system as not being practical enough or as unhelpful to find employment later on, signifying that education does not have the same empowering elements for everyone. This further implies that empowerment through education is not a homogenous process in that respondents prioritize different skills shown in the variety of answers in Table 4.

**Table 4: The education I received provided me with the knowledge and skills to make changes that improve my own life**

<b>Key themes</b>	<b>Female responses (number of responses 137)</b>	<b>Male responses (number of responses: 245)</b>	<b>Total responses (number of responses: 382, n=497 )</b>
Practical skills to earn money (e.g. agriculture, crafts, entrepreneurship)	32.1 %	24.9 %	27.5 %
Educational skills (e.g. how to read and write, critical thinking, decision making)	23.4 %	26.9 %	25.7 %
How to conduct oneself (e.g. discipline, hard work, self-control, self-esteem)	24.8 %	20.0 %	21.7 %
Social skills (e.g. how to interact with others, how to deal with disputes)	13.1 %	17.6 %	16.0 %
Knowledge of how to take care of one’s health (including sanitation and SRHR)	19.0 %	20.0 %	19.6 %
Career advice/knowledge and counselling	3.6 %	7.8 %	6.3 %
Leadership skills	5.8 %	3.3 %	4.2 %
Political knowledge (e.g. knowledge of rights)	5.1 %	3.3 %	3.9 %
How to dress	3.6 %	1.6 %	2.4 %

Total responses: 382 out of 497 thus 76.9 % took advantage of raising their concerns in the survey

Note: Percentages are calculated out of 382 respondents who made use of the comments section

## 5.2.2. Self-esteem and education

*“I came to know that through education I will become the better and respected person of my community.”*

– (male, aged 15-29, central region, Kampala).

*“Knowing at least something about most of the subjects that we use in our day to day lives made me feel better about myself than ever before.”*

– (male, aged 15-29, central region, Kampala).

As far as psychological forms of empowerment (Stromquist 2015, 2003) are concerned, 85.7 % of all 497 respondents, with no significant differences per gender (84.07 % of all females and 86.53 % of all males), indicated that their education did make them feel better about themselves, their lives and their future. In total, 24.5 % explicitly related their educational experience to notions of self-esteem. Others felt psychologically empowered in believing they have more opportunities in their lives thanks to education, or by having a higher social status in their communities (see Table 5). Feelings of self-worth are as important as political or economic empowerment to gain some sort of agency. In Stromquist's (2015) words, “one needs to feel self-confident, have strong self-esteem, and develop self-assertiveness in order to press for change and feel competent to enter public spaces.” In the context of Uganda, young people's self-esteem and confidence to exert agency is yet continuously subdued by the lack of freedom of speech; – not just in public spaces or social media (Freedom House 2020), but also in educational institutions. As noted by one participant:

*It is hard to discuss (...) issues [in school] that of society and the world because even teachers fear attacking the evils of the world and society so even as students, we develop the fear because we are afraid of being singled out as less patriotic.*

– (female, aged 15-29, northern region, Gulu).

The above statement showcases how the regulation of what is possible to say in the classroom and what not, not only affects discourses of citizenship but also politically disempowers youth (Datzberger/Le Mat 2019).



**Table 5: The education I received made me feel better about myself, my life and my future.**

Key themes	Female responses (number of responses 129)	Male responses (number of responses: 235)	Total responses (number of responses: 364)
Given opportunities for a brighter future	24.8 %	25.1 %	25.0 %
Improved knowledge about self (e.g. abilities, emotions, confidence)	29.5 %	21.7 %	24.5 %
Extended skills, such as language, communication skills	18.6 %	18.7 %	18.7 %
Improved career / livelihood opportunities	18.6 %	16.2 %	17.0 %
Enhanced positioning in community/world (recognize self as important)	7.7 %	9.8 %	9.1 %
Extended thinking about the world	7.0 %	6.4 %	6.6 %
Now able to help others	6.2 %	3.8 %	4.7 %
Knowledge of personal health	1.6 %	5.1 %	3.8 %
Differentiates from uneducated population	2.3 %	3.8 %	3.3 %
Overcame school dropout	1.6 %	0	0.50 %

Total responses: 364 out of 497 thus 73.2 % took advantage of raising their concerns in the survey

Note: Percentages are calculated out of 364 respondents who made use of the comments section

### 5.3 Desired changes in the education sector.

*“I would like the methods of teaching to change from much theory to much more practical so that we create job creators but not job seekers.”*

– (male, aged 15-29, north-eastern region, Karamoja).

*“I would like to change it in a way that it should be more practical as in it should contain more of skills application like promotion of one’s talent because most of us have talents but we do not have a way to express and show our talents which makes us always lagging behind from the world.”*

– (female, aged 15-29, northern region, Gulu).

In light of the many barriers Ugandan youth are facing, the survey aimed to learn from young people whether they would like to see any changes in the education they receive. This question seemed to be significant, as only 8.2 % (27) of all respondents explicitly noted that they would not change anything in the education they received.

**Table 6: What would you like to change about the education you received?**

Key themes	Female responses (number of responses: 132)	Male responses (number of responses: 199)	Total responses (number of responses: 331)
Make the course more practical (especially to prepare for job market)	33.3 %	33.2 %	33.2 %
Subjects (e.g. ensuring subjects are relevant (not euro-centric), decreasing number of subjects)	13.6 %	13.6 %	13.6 %
Structure of the program (e.g. the different levels, hours in school)	12.1 %	13.6 %	13.0 %
Desire to help community/need with education received	15.2 %	10.6 %	12.4 %
Desire to make changes in personal situation	11.4 %	11.1 %	11.2 %
Practice of teachers (e.g. attitude to students, more interaction with students, teaching style)	7.6 %	12.6 %	10.6 %
Nothing to change	7.6 %	8.5 %	8.2 %
Include more learning equipment, e.g. books, uniform, computers	4.5 %	5.0 %	4.8 %
Change attitudes towards education (e.g. showing importance of education to community/girls)	3.0 %	2.0 %	2.4 %
Address financial issues	2.3 %	1.5 %	1.8 %

*Total responses: 331 out of 497 thus 66.6 % took advantage of raising their concerns in the survey*

Note: Percentages are calculated out of 331 respondents who made use of the comments section

A significant number of participants (33.2 %) noted that they wished their education would be more practical arguing that it currently does not prepare them for the job market, help them find employment or teach them how to generate an income to make ends meet. Many statements from youth implied that education in the formal schooling system is quite detached from young people's everyday lives and experiences. Pedagogically, youth critiqued that seemingly theoretical topics are not followed by or explained through practical examples or exercises, including the wish to have more and better equipment for learning.

Across several different questions and comments sections, some youth made references to the negative influence of "western" education in Uganda. Here, critical statements revolved around a western-centric curricula especially in regard to history. Also sex education was critiqued by some as being based on western and not African values, or how Ugandan societies are portrayed as being underdeveloped in comparison to western societies. Although these concerns were voiced by a rather small group of participants, they should not be sidelined and deserve greater attention in practice and research. The need to decolonize education

in the African context has been voiced already for decades by many African scholars (e.g.: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, or N'Dri Thérèse Assié-Lumumba) – with thus far little to no implication for education practice. This is unfortunate as the appropriation of western-style education to non-western and postcolonial settings can have many unintended consequences. What is learned and how it is being taught can be also disempowering (Freire 1970). For instance, being taught of one's apparent "underdevelopment" nourishes feelings of backwardness and disrespect for one's own culture and heritage, as expressed by one female participant in the following written comment:

*I would like to change the mindset about Africans as being an inferior nation because it has lowered African countries down especially Uganda and this making Uganda low in anything compared to other countries e.g. in terms of development.*

– (female, aged 15-29, northern region, Gulu).

## 6. Concluding Discussion

In broadly relating young people's responses to Stromquist's framework (1995, 2003, 2015), their accounts suggest that their education seems to generally empower them psychologically, whereas cognitive or political dimensions of empowerment hardly emerged out of their schooling experience. Perceptions around economic dimensions of empowerment through education varied among youth. The diversity of young people's responses showcases how empowerment in the context of formal education is a complex and inhomogeneous process that is not detached from external social, political, and economic structures. Young people's viewpoints further illustrate why empowerment cannot be quantified or measured through isolated outcomes in education (such as literacy skills, enrolment rates or attendance). Instead, empowerment is multifaceted and varies among individuals. While the 5-point Likert scale questions pointed to some clear quantitative (descriptive) trends, the volume and diversity of (qualitative) comments underneath each question indicate that perceptions and experiences of empowerment differ among youth. Synthesizing and consequently analysing these comments was admittedly not an easy task, given how nuanced and varied individuals' opinions and needs are. Findings from this study should be therefore seen as a starting point for further in-depth studies tackling some of the issues I raised in the scope of this paper. For instance, more research is needed on gender-specific dimensions of empowerment and disempowerment through formal schooling. Gender disaggregated data did not reveal significant differences between female and male responses, which may be also due to the lack of gender-specific questions in the survey. Overall, my intention was to let youth speak for themselves and find meaning in their opinions of their educational experience. In an attempt to summarize and discuss young people's perceptions, I want to return to the main questions presented in the introduction of this paper.

As for the first question, it is worth repeating that 75 % (see section 5.1.1) of all youth generally felt disempowered in their personal lives, thereby largely relating economic grievances to the individual and political grievances to the collective level. One reason for this trend could be that the consequences of economic hardship affect young people's everyday life more explicitly (e.g. not having enough food or poor housing), whereas the direct effects of wider political injustices (e.g. corruption at the state level or fraud elections) can be more subtle. Most young people (72.4 %) indicated to be well aware of political, social and economic issues affecting Ugandan society, including: corruption, nepotism, social injustices or economic constraints. However, a synthesis of survey comments as well as an earlier study with different data from the same survey (Datzberger/Le Mat 2019), suggests that youth have gained this awareness outside their schooling experience, namely in their everyday lives and social interactions. This result was to be expected, considering Uganda's highly restricted political

environment and limited freedom of speech, which does affect young people's schooling experience, especially in regard to discourses around citizenship. Further research is needed to better understand whether and how youth also understand these grievances as interlinked and deeply rooted in historical events.

As for the second question, young people's responses imply that education has not the same *perceived* empowering effects for everyone when it comes to skills for employment or income generating activities. Although 88.5 % of respondents felt education provided them with knowledge and skills for improving their lives (more generally), only 27.5 % found their education useful for generating an income. This, in part, may stem from the fact that secondary education is more designed towards preparing students for tertiary education than it is preparing them for the realities they face either after completing or dropping out of school. Data from recent household surveys shows that 64.6 % of the working population earn a living in the agriculture sector, followed by trade (12.1 %) and manufacturing (3.8 %) (UBOS 2018); all professions for which no secondary or higher education degree is needed. Although secondary education has reportedly increased individual income and affected the quality of work for Ugandans (World Bank 2016), there has been no proven impact on the quantity of work (Bird/Higgins 2009; UBOS 2016). Thus, considering the critique from young people to make their education more practical, there is a pressing need to rethink how secondary education can be made more relevant to the economic realities young people are facing. One option could be to integrate vocational training programmes into secondary schooling, while still giving young people the opportunity to complete their O- or A-levels, if they wish to do so. Responses from young people further highlight the importance to introduce fee-free education, which in the current COVID-19 pandemic may even become more relevant than before. Being unable to pay school fees was not only a major concern of youth who took part in this survey, but also among young people we interviewed in a recent study about the effects of school-closures in their lives (Parkes et al. 2020). Many feared that they won't return to school because of intensified economic hardships caused by the pandemic.

Despite the numerous economic and political barriers young people are facing, they still saw many benefits in their education, such as gaining more self-esteem, confidence or in broadening their horizons. Even if the quality of education in Uganda is very low (Uwezo 2016, 2015; World Bank 2017), young people's comments imply that their current educational experience still appears to be better than being out of school. At the same time, they will continue to face multiple disempowering elements if their surrounding political and economic environment is not conducive to transformation and change, including the education sector. If Ugandan youth ought to be empowered through education they not only need the means and skills to empower themselves, but also the political, economic and social conditions that allow them to live up to their highest potential. A task, according to young people's responses, the education sector cannot solve on its own.

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