



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Formal Education and the Transformation of Street Children (Aguu) in Northern Uganda

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Author's Contributions

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine formal education and the transformation of street children (Aguu) in Northern Uganda. The study was primarily anchored on Humanistic Theory, with Reintegration Theory serving as a supporting framework. It employed a convergent mixed-methods design, integrating phenomenological and cross-sectional survey designs. The target population comprised street children, community leaders, cultural leaders, and religious leaders from selected districts in Northern Uganda. Probability and non-probability sampling techniques were used to select the study participants. The study used questionnaires to collect quantitative data from street children and in-depth interview guides to collect qualitative data from community, cultural, and religious leaders. The research instruments were validated by research experts, while the reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. Trustworthiness of qualitative data was ensured through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS, employing descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, while qualitative data were analysed thematically and presented in narrative form supported by relevant direct quotations. The findings indicated that formal education significantly supports the transformation of street children (Aguu) in Northern Uganda. Formal education enhanced literacy, life skills, positive behaviour, self-worth, social relationships, and opportunities for socio-economic reintegration among the rehabilitated children. However, inadequate educational resources, limited access to schools, poverty, negative peer influence, family instability, and irregular school attendance affected the effectiveness of formal education programmes. The study recommends that the Government of Uganda strengthen collaboration with faith-based organisations and increase support for educational programmes targeting street-connected children. It further recommends that the Catholic Church strengthen access to formal education, provide learning resources, support school retention, involve families, and establish continuous educational and post-rehabilitation support to promote the sustainable transformation and reintegration of street children (Aguu) in Northern Uganda.

Keywords: Formal Education, Street Children, Aguu, Transformation, Rehabilitation, Catholic Church, Northern Uganda

INTRODUCTION

Formal education is widely recognized as an important pathway for improving the well-being, capabilities, and future opportunities of vulnerable and marginalized children. For street-connected children, access to education extends beyond acquiring literacy and numeracy skills; it can promote self-worth, positive behaviour, social interaction, life skills, and opportunities for sustainable socio-economic reintegration. Street children are exposed to multiple forms of vulnerability, including poverty, family breakdown, violence, exploitation, social exclusion, and limited access to education (UNICEF, 2022; Hart & Lofton, 2023). Consequently, providing appropriate educational opportunities can contribute to transforming their circumstances by restoring their agency, strengthening their social relationships, and creating pathways towards productive participation in society.

The existence of street-connected children remains a significant social, developmental, and human rights concern globally. UNICEF (2020) estimates that approximately 150 million children live or work on the streets worldwide, although the actual number may be higher because of undocumented and hidden populations. Street-connected children are highly vulnerable and marginalised due to interconnected factors such as poverty, family breakdown, armed conflict, urbanisation, violence, abuse, and social exclusion (Mabhala et al., 2020; Olowu & Akinola, 2021). UNICEF (2022) describes street-connected children as minors for whom streets or public spaces have become significant places of residence, livelihood, or social activity, often with inadequate adult care and protection. Their experiences are frequently associated with trauma, violence, substance use, poor health, disrupted education, and psychological distress, although they also demonstrate resilience and agency through various survival strategies (Ayuku et al., 2021). These circumstances demonstrate the need for interventions that move beyond immediate protection towards holistic and transformative rehabilitation, including access to formal education.

According to Cavazzoni et al., (2023) stated that the transformative rehabilitation of street children is greatly aided by formal education, which is an essential route to empowerment and reintegration into society. As these vulnerable children navigate the complex challenges of life on the streets, access to quality

education not only equips them with essential knowledge and skills but also fosters resilience, enhances self-esteem, and promotes psychosocial healing. For street children, access to structured learning not only restores a fundamental right but also provides stability, cognitive development, and pathways out of marginalization. In post-conflict contexts such as Northern Uganda, formal education plays a particularly significant role by supporting the transformative rehabilitation of street children through academic reintegration, psychosocial healing, and the rebuilding of future-oriented life trajectories (Gaffar & Sardin, 2025). However, many street children remain excluded from formal education due to poverty, trauma, stigma, mobility, and weak institutional support systems. Therefore, meeting the educational requirements of Aguu is more than just a welfare intervention but a transformative process that restores dignity, builds human capital, and strengthens social inclusion. By prioritizing inclusive and context-responsive educational pathways, societies can facilitate the transition of street children toward stable, productive, and hopeful futures, ultimately breaking the persistent cycles of poverty, marginalization, and social exclusion (Mwende, Shivachi & Siboor, 2022).

Furthermore, formal education is an important component of transformative rehabilitation because it can enhance children's knowledge, skills, self-worth, social relationships, and capacity to participate meaningfully in society. For street-connected children, access to formal education can provide opportunities to develop literacy and numeracy skills, acquire life skills, strengthen positive behaviour, interact constructively with peers, and develop aspirations for their future. Education can also contribute to restoring children's dignity and agency by creating pathways towards social inclusion, community participation, and socio-economic reintegration (Healey, 2021; Hart & Lofton, 2023). In this context, formal education provides an avenue through which street-connected children can acquire knowledge and competencies, rebuild confidence, develop positive relationships, and improve their prospects for sustainable reintegration into family and community life. Globally, studies indicate that educational exclusion is closely associated with the continued marginalization of street-connected children. Mabhala et al. (2020) found that disrupted education, poverty, family disintegration, and social exclusion contribute to vulnerability to street

life and long-term marginalization. Similarly, Hart and Lofton (2023) emphasized that vulnerable children require rights-based and empowering interventions that restore dignity, participation, and social inclusion. In the United States, Jung (2024) revealed that reeducation initiatives for homeless children emphasized self-discipline, moral reform, and individual responsibility, demonstrating that educational rehabilitation could influence children's personal development and behavioural transformation. Julien (2024) examined inclusive education for street children and identified stigma, discrimination, and established street lifestyles as major barriers to educational participation in Jamaica. The study further highlighted the importance of flexible and context-sensitive educational approaches for improving the inclusion of street-connected children. However, the study was largely literature-based and did not empirically establish the extent to which formal education contributes to psychosocial recovery, behavioural transformation, or long-term reintegration. This limitation provides a basis for further examination of education as a transformative intervention for street children.

In Africa, access to formal education remains a major challenge for children living or working on the streets because of poverty, family instability, inadequate social protection, and limited educational opportunities. In Ghana, Kusi-Amankwah (2023) observed that access to basic schooling among former street children can improve their income potential, self-esteem, and participation in the community. Similarly, Arthur-Ewusie (2024) found that although vulnerable young people may acquire livelihoods through informal apprenticeships, the absence of formal education limits their ability to achieve sustainable socio-economic outcomes. These findings suggest that education can complement vocational and other rehabilitation interventions by providing foundational knowledge, social skills, and opportunities for future economic participation. However, educational interventions for street-connected children in many African countries remain fragmented, with limited evidence on how formal education contributes to their broader transformation and reintegration. In addition, in Nigeria and Cameroon, Smart (2021) and Agbaire et al. (2021) found that access to formal education reduces marginalization and promotes social integration, although challenges such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, teacher shortages, and limited parental support hinder implementation. Similarly, Umar and Maaji (2025) and

Ogbuabo (2021) reported that educational exclusion, poverty, and weak educational systems increase children's vulnerability to street life, underscoring the need for targeted formal education programmes to support long-term transformation and reintegration.

In East Africa, the experiences of street-connected children similarly demonstrate the importance of holistic interventions that include education. In Kenya, Bunkers et al. (2022) documented integrated approaches to the rehabilitation of street-connected children involving faith-based organisations, including educational and vocational support. Chepchirchir and Nyang'au (2022) further noted that faith-based rehabilitation models provide safe and supportive environments addressing the spiritual, emotional, material, and developmental needs of street children. However, much of the existing literature focuses on general rehabilitation outcomes rather than specifically examining how formal education contributes to changes in self-worth, behaviour, social relationships, community participation, and socio-economic reintegration. This creates a need for context-specific research examining education as an integral component of transformative rehabilitation.

In Uganda, street-connected children, locally referred to as *Aguu* in Northern Uganda, continue to experience challenges associated with poverty, family breakdown, conflict-related trauma, social exclusion, and limited access to formal education. Gahungu et al. (2024) highlighted the exclusion of vulnerable children from formal education, while Mugabi et al. (2021) demonstrated the potential benefits of skills-based interventions for vulnerable youth, although their study did not specifically focus on post-conflict Northern Uganda. The prolonged Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict further disrupted families, communities, and traditional child-protection systems, leaving some children vulnerable to street life and educational exclusion. The Catholic Church has responded through educational programmes, counselling, vocational skills training, family tracing, and reintegration initiatives (Bunkers et al., 2019; Massaro, 2019). Nevertheless, existing studies have not sufficiently established how formal education within Catholic Church rehabilitation programmes contributes to the transformation of *Aguu* in Northern Uganda. Therefore, the present study sought to examine the extent to which formal education contributes to the transformation of street children (*Aguu*) in Northern Uganda. The study specifically considered education in relation to positive behaviour, self-worth, social relationships, community integration,

and socio-economic reintegration. By focusing on the educational component of the Catholic Church's broader rehabilitation approach, the study sought to provide empirical evidence on how formal education can support the transformation and sustainable reintegration of street-connected children in a post-conflict context.

Statement of the Problem

The Aguu phenomenon remains one of the most persistent child protection and social development challenges in Northern Uganda, particularly in post-conflict districts such as Gulu, Kitgum, Pader, and Lira. According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) and the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (2021), Gulu City alone accommodates approximately 2,500–3,000 street-connected children, most of whom are boys aged 8–17 affected by poverty, family breakdown, and conflict-related displacement. Ideally, these children should return to formal education, rebuild their lives, and reintegrate successfully into their families and communities. Formal education has the potential to restore learning opportunities, develop life skills, strengthen social inclusion, and support long-term transformation beyond street life. The Catholic Church has established rehabilitation programmes through parish networks, Caritas Uganda, and Church-affiliated centres that provide access to formal education alongside psychosocial counselling, vocational skills training, and family reintegration support. Despite these efforts, many Aguu continue to return to the streets, suggesting that sustained educational reintegration and long-term transformation remain difficult to achieve. Existing studies have largely documented the Aguu phenomenon descriptively without providing sufficient empirical evidence on how formal education contributes to lasting rehabilitation and successful reintegration in Northern Uganda's post-conflict context (Olanya, 2024). Consequently, there is limited context-specific understanding of the extent to which formal education supports the transformation of street children (Aguu) in Northern Uganda, creating the need for this study.

Research Question

To what extent does formal education lead to the transformation of street children (Aguu) in Northern Uganda?

Significance of the Study

This study was important because it addressed the knowledge gap on how formal education contributes to the transformation of street children (Aguu) in post-conflict Northern Uganda. The findings may benefit the Catholic Church, government agencies, social workers, policymakers, and street-connected children by providing evidence on the role of education in rehabilitation and sustainable reintegration. The findings may help the Catholic Church strengthen education-based rehabilitation programmes by improving access to formal education, enhancing school reintegration strategies, and promoting collaboration with families, schools, and communities. The study may also provide evidence that can guide the Church in developing more effective interventions that support children's long-term educational and social development.

For street children (Aguu), the findings highlight the importance of returning to formal education as a pathway to literacy, life skills, self-confidence, and successful reintegration into society. The study also demonstrates how educational opportunities can reduce vulnerability and promote long-term transformation. The findings may assist the Government of Uganda, policymakers, and development partners in strengthening child protection and education policies by promoting school reintegration, improving support for education-based rehabilitation programmes, and enhancing collaboration with faith-based organizations working with vulnerable children. Finally, the study may contribute to scholarship by providing context-specific evidence on the role of formal education in transforming street children in Northern Uganda, offering a practical framework for future education-centered rehabilitation programmes in post-conflict settings.

Research Hypotheses

H₀₂: There is no statistically significant relationship between participation in formal education programs and higher measures of the transformation of Aguu.

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

The study examined formal education and the transformation of street children (Aguu) in Northern Uganda, focusing on how access to education contributes to their growth, self-worth, positive behaviour, social relationships, community integration, and socio-economic reintegration. Geographically, the

study was limited to Gulu, Kitgum, Lira, and Pader districts and covered the period from 2010 onwards, targeting Aguu aged 5–30 years, Catholic Church personnel, and community and cultural leaders involved in rehabilitation and reintegration. The study was conceptually delimited to formal education as a component of Catholic Church rehabilitation programmes, particularly school access and participation, life skills, moral and values education, and social interaction. Institutionally, it focused on education interventions supported by the Catholic Church through diocesan structures, Caritas, and Church-affiliated centres, excluding programmes operated exclusively by non-Catholic or secular organizations. Methodologically, the study employed a mixed-methods approach using questionnaires and in-depth interviews to examine participants' experiences and perceptions of formal education and transformation. The study therefore focused specifically on the post-conflict, Catholic Church-supported educational context in Northern Uganda.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is a visual diagram that illustrates how different variables are connected, including the independent, intervening, and dependent variables in the study. It depicts how the variables relate to one another (Rustamov et al., 2023). The methodological structure of this study focused on the idea that formal education for street-connected children influences their rehabilitation and reintegration. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship among the study variables.

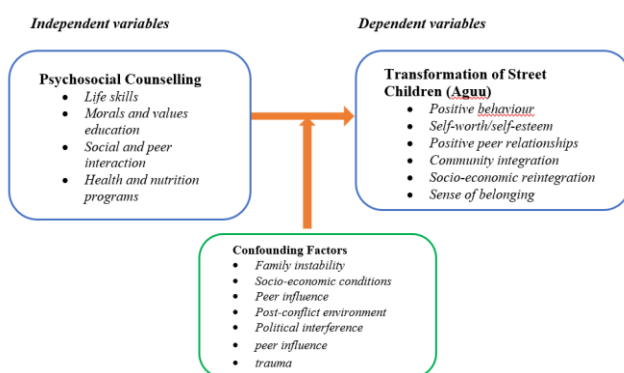


Figure 1: *Conceptual Framework*

Literature review

In this section, the theoretical framework and empirical review are presented.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on Behavioral Theory (BT), developed by John B. Watson in 1913 and later advanced through the works of Ivan Pavlov and B. F. Skinner. The theory emphasizes that human behaviour is learned through interaction with the environment and can be shaped, modified, and sustained through conditioning, reinforcement, and punishment (Watson, 1913; Pavlov, 2010). BT is particularly relevant to this study because formal education provides a structured environment in which street children (Aguu) can acquire and reinforce positive behaviours through regular school attendance, classroom routines, life-skills education, moral and values education, social interaction, and supportive learning experiences. It helps explain how repeated exposure to positive educational environments can contribute to behavioural change, discipline, responsibility, positive peer relationships, self-worth, and social integration among Aguu in Northern Uganda. The theory therefore provides a practical framework for examining how formal education influences the transformation of street children by focusing on observable and measurable changes in behaviour and social functioning.

The study also employed Humanistic Theory (HT), associated with Abraham Maslow (1943) and Carl Rogers (1951), complements Behavioral Theory by emphasizing human dignity, self-worth, personal growth, and the fulfilment of individual potential. The theory proposes that individuals develop positively when provided with supportive, empathetic, and enabling environments (Maslow, 1943; Rogers, 1951). This perspective is relevant to the study because formal education can provide Aguu with opportunities to experience acceptance, belonging, confidence, personal development, and meaningful participation in society. While Behavioral Theory explains how structured educational environments and reinforcement can shape observable behaviour, Humanistic Theory provides insight into the internal dimensions of transformation, including self-esteem, belonging, personal growth, and the development of a positive sense of identity.

Reintegration Theory, closely associated with John Braithwaite's work on reintegrative shaming, further complements the two theories by emphasizing social inclusion, restoration of relationships, community acceptance, and the reintegration of marginalized individuals into society (Braithwaite, 1989). The theory views reintegration as an ongoing process involving the

restoration of social bonds, trust, belonging, and opportunities for meaningful participation (Kuschminder, 2022). In relation to this study, formal education can contribute to reintegration by strengthening Aguu's social and peer relationships, promoting a sense of belonging, and preparing them for constructive participation in family and community life. Thus, Behavioral Theory serves as the main theoretical foundation, while Humanistic Theory and Reintegration Theory provide complementary perspectives for understanding the personal, social, and community dimensions of the transformation of street children (Aguu) in Northern Uganda. Together, the three theories provide a comprehensive framework for examining how formal education, through life skills, morals and values education, social and peer interaction, and health and nutrition programmes, contributes to the transformation of street children (Aguu) in Northern Uganda.

Empirical Review

The transformative rehabilitation of street children is greatly aided by formal education, which is an essential route to empowerment and reintegration into society. As these vulnerable children navigate the complex challenges of life on the streets, access to quality education not only equips them with essential knowledge and skills but also fosters resilience, enhances self-esteem, and promotes psychosocial healing (Cavazzoni et al., 2023). For street children, access to structured learning not only restores a fundamental right but also provides stability, cognitive development, and pathways out of marginalization. In post-conflict contexts such as Northern Uganda, formal education plays a particularly significant role by supporting the transformative rehabilitation of street children through academic reintegration, psychosocial healing, and the rebuilding of future-oriented life trajectories (Gaffar & Sardin, 2025). However, many street children remain excluded from formal education due to poverty, trauma, stigma, mobility, and weak institutional support systems. Therefore, meeting the educational requirements of Aguu is more than just a welfare intervention but a transformative process that restores dignity, builds human capital, and strengthens social inclusion. By prioritizing inclusive and context-responsive educational pathways, societies can facilitate the transition of street children toward stable, productive, and hopeful futures, ultimately breaking the persistent cycles of poverty, marginalization, and social exclusion (Mwende, Shivachi & Siboor, 2022).

In the United States, Jung (2024) explored the self-rehabilitation of homeless children within transwar transpacific reeducation programmes using a historical and comparative qualitative approach grounded in trans-imperial and post-colonial theory. The methodology of the study was historical discourse and cultural analysis of *Bell Hill*, *Boys Town*, and *Homeless Angels*. The study demonstrated how narratives of child self-rehabilitation were adapted across colonial, imperial, and occupation contexts, revealing strong ideological continuities. The findings showed that reeducation initiatives were not neutral welfare interventions but were embedded in broader political projects that emphasized self-discipline, moral reform, and individual responsibility, thereby facilitating a shift from formal colonialism to informal liberal imperialism. While the study offered a critical theoretical insight into the political dimensions of rehabilitative education, it did not empirically assess the lived experiences of homeless children or the long-term rehabilitative and educational outcomes of such programmes, indicating a gap for contemporary, child-centered and outcome-focused research.

Julien (2022) conducted a study on street children and the importance of education in the Caribbean. The study employed a non-empirical, conceptual approach to explore why many street children remain excluded from formal schooling. The study drew on a review of scholarly and policy literature to define street children, describe their lived realities, and analyze the structural and social factors shaping educational participation. The normative premise that education is a fundamental right and a critical essential part of a child's development served as the foundation for the investigation. The findings study revealed that survival imperatives such as securing food, shelter, and personal safety often take precedence over education. Additional factors, including irregular lifestyles, poverty, social stigma, lack of parental support, and rigid schooling structures, further constrain school attendance. Common characteristics of street children identified in the study included disrupted family ties, limited prior schooling, and early engagement in informal economic activities, all of which undermine educational continuity. The study concluded that while education is essential for holistic child development, conventional schooling systems frequently fail to accommodate the realities of street life. However, the study did not empirically examine educational interventions or rehabilitation outcomes. This

underscored the need for empirical research investigating adaptive, inclusive, and rehabilitative education models that can support the transformative reintegration of street children, particularly in low-resource and post-conflict settings such as Northern Uganda.

A similar study was conducted by Julien (2023) who found that despite education being a fundamental right, street children are largely excluded from formal schooling due to survival needs, poverty, instability, stigma, disrupted family ties, limited prior education, and engagement in informal work. The study emphasizes that educational exclusion is shaped by structural and social factors, calling for flexible and context-responsive education models. However, its non-empirical nature limits insight into how formal education supports rehabilitation in practice. This gap highlighted the need for the current study, which empirically examined how formal education, integrated with psychosocial support, contributes to the transformative rehabilitation and reintegration of street children in post-conflict and low-resource contexts such as Northern Uganda.

In the United Kingdom, Lacey (2024) conducted a study on Homelessness, Motherhood and Education: An investigation into the experiences of homeless women at the University of Sheffield who are caring for school-age children. In order to investigate the living experiences of homeless mothers, the study used a qualitative research design navigating housing instability while caring for school-age children. Semi-structured interviews were used in the study, and information was gathered from women experiencing homelessness in Manchester as well as practitioners working within housing and education sectors. The research examined how homelessness is intersected with motherhood and formal education, particularly focusing on the emotional, behavioural, and structural challenges faced when accessing and sustaining children's schooling. The study found that living in temporary accommodation significantly disrupted children's educational continuity, affecting attendance, concentration, emotional stability, and overall academic engagement. Homelessness was found to reshape mothers' identities and create emotional strain that indirectly impacted children's school participation. The study further established that although teachers were often willing to support families experiencing homelessness, many lacked adequate training to respond effectively to the behavioural and emotional

consequences of housing instability. However, where schools provided understanding, flexibility, and supportive environments, formal education functioned as a stabilizing and protective factor, offering routine, identity formation, and hope for improved future outcomes. Despite the study providing important insights into the relationship between homelessness and children's educational experiences in the UK, its scope remains limited in several important aspects.

First, it did not explicitly engage with the realities of those children with ties to the streets, experiences are frequently different from those of children residing in temporary accommodation with parental care. Street-connected children frequently encounter more acute forms of social exclusion, disrupted attachment systems, survival-based livelihoods, and prolonged detachment from formal schooling. As such, the findings, though relevant, cannot be fully generalized to the complexities surrounding street-based childhoods. Second, the study did not directly examine structured rehabilitation programmes designed to facilitate transformative reintegration through formal education. Its analytical focus was largely situated within the broader structural interplay between housing instability and educational disruption, rather than on deliberate, programmatic educational interventions aimed at long-term psychosocial, academic, and socio-economic transformation. Furthermore, the exclusive reliance on a qualitative research design, while generating in-depth experiential accounts, limited the ability to measure the scale, patterns, and measurable outcomes associated with educational access and rehabilitation trajectories. In contrast, a mixed-methods research strategy was used in this study in order to integrate both quantitative and qualitative evidence. This approach enabled not only an exploration of lived experiences and contextual dynamics but also an empirical assessment of educational participation, retention, and transformative outcomes among street children. By triangulating narrative insights with measurable indicators, the study aimed to offer a more thorough comprehension of how formal education contributes to rehabilitation processes. Therefore, these gaps underscored the necessity for focused research that interrogates how formal education can intentionally and systematically function as a transformative rehabilitation mechanism for street-connected children. This is particularly significant in settings such as Northern Uganda, where structured reintegration programmes aim to move beyond mere school enrolment toward holistic

transformation encompassing psychosocial recovery, identity reconstruction, social reintegration, and sustainable long-term life outcomes. Such an approach recognizes education not simply as access to schooling, but as a strategic instrument for restoring dignity, agency, and social belonging among formerly street-connected children.

In Canada, Partridge and Kennelly (2024) from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Carleton University conducted a study on “*What are the schooling experiences of young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness?*”. 28 young people ages 16-23 participated in semi-structured interviews as part of the study’s qualitative research design in two cities in Ontario. The research explored participants’ reflections on their schooling experiences, support systems, bullying, stigma, and how schools could better respond to housing insecurity. Using a phronetic and social-ecological framework, the study centered the voices and real-life experiences of young people who had already dropped out of school and were experiencing the risk of being homeless. The findings of the study revealed that although most participants valued education and aspired to complete high school or pursue post-secondary studies, their schooling experiences were marked by stigma, bullying, exhaustion, lack of information about homelessness, and inconsistent institutional support. Some teachers and staff provided compassion and flexibility, but systemic barriers, overcrowding, and limited policy frameworks constrained meaningful intervention. Participants recommended increased discussion of homelessness in curricula, training for school employees to identify the “signs and symptoms” of precarious housing as well as the creation of more supportive and inclusive school environments as preventive strategies.

Similarly, Sohn and Gaetz (2020) developed *The Upstream Project Canada as an early intervention strategy to prevent youth homelessness and school disengagement*. Upstream Canada addresses the fact that between 35,000 and 45,000 young people in Canada are homeless each year. This initiative applies to an equity-focused, preventive model using the Student Needs Assessment (SNA) to identify at-risk students aged 12-18, including those without visible signs of vulnerability. A 40% decrease in teenage homelessness was claimed by Upstream Australia, formerly known as The Geelong Project, and the program fosters collaboration between schools and

community organizations to prevent school dropout and housing instability.

However, both studies did not specifically examine formal education as a structured mechanism for transformative rehabilitation or measure long-term reintegration outcomes. Its focus remained on schooling experiences, stigma, and prevention rather than on education as a deliberate rehabilitative framework. Additionally, the study relied solely on qualitative interviews, whereas the present investigation used a mixed-methods strategy to provide broader empirical evidence. Related studies such as Vetrone et al. (2022) on education aspirations among street-involved youth in Victoria, Kennelly (2020) on urban masculinity and homelessness in Ottawa, Kennelly, Larkins, and Roy (2023) on youth participatory action research, and Poulin et al. (2024) on education policies and youth homelessness prevention in Canada further highlighted systemic barriers within educational institutions. These gaps underscored the need for empirical research that evaluates how formal education can move beyond awareness and prevention toward functioning as a structured rehabilitative tool for long-term transformation and social reintegration, particularly in contexts such as Northern Uganda.

In Bangladesh, Ahmed (2024) conducted a study on comprehending the Rights of children: views from Durham University’s street children in Dhaka. The study adopted an ethnographic qualitative research design to examine how Dhaka’s street children comprehend and express their rights in the context of their daily lives. Data was collected across three sites in collaboration with local NGOs using interviews, observations, and visual methods. The research was grounded in the framework of the Convention of the United Nations on the Child’s Rights (UNCRC), examining how the discourses on the global rights of children intersect with children’s cultural realities and power dynamics in Bangladesh. The findings revealed that street children conceptualize rights not merely as legal entitlements but as lived experiences shaped by participation, citizenship, survival struggles, and relationships with adults who often exercise dominant authority over them. The study showed that children’s understanding of rights is deeply connected to their daily negotiations for food, safety, dignity, and recognition. While the children demonstrated agency and decision-making abilities, their voices were frequently constrained by structural marginalization and power imbalances. The

research emphasized that promoting children's rights requires meaningful inclusion of their perspectives, particularly in education and social interventions affecting their lives.

However, this study did not specifically examine the role of formal education as a structured mechanism for transformative rehabilitation. Its focus remained on rights discourse and children's voices, rather than on educational reintegration strategies or measurable rehabilitation outcomes. Additionally, while the original study relied solely on ethnographic qualitative methods, the current study employed a mixed-methods approach in order to provide a more thorough understanding of the role of education in rehabilitation of Aguu. These gaps underscore the need for empirical research that assesses how formal education can transcend a rights-based framework to function as a deliberate rehabilitative tool, fostering long-term transformation and social reintegration of street children, particularly in contexts like Northern Uganda.

NurSeki and Sujarwo (2021) researched on *the Development of a Transformative Learning Model and Its Influence on the Social Behavior of Street Children at "Rumah Singgah" Surabaya* in Indonesia. The study examined how a structured transformative learning approach can support behavioral change among street children in Indonesia. Using a Research and Development (R&D) design based on the ADDIE model (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation), the study involved foster children at Kampung Anak Negeri Surabaya. Questionnaires, interviews and observations were used to gather data. According to the report transformative learning model grounded in real-life experience, reflection, conceptualization, and implementation significantly improved social behavior. The findings showed reduced rebellious tendencies, greater participation in learning activities, and enhanced socialization skills. The study concludes that transformative learning offers an effective framework for education and rehabilitation programs targeting street children in Indonesia. However, the study was limited to a single rehabilitation center in Surabaya and focuses primarily on social behavior outcomes. It did not thoroughly investigate long-term reintegration into formal education systems or explore the role of formal education in facilitating sustained rehabilitation and socio-economic transformation of street children (NurSeki & Sujarwo, 2021).

Across Africa, the discourse on rehabilitation is increasingly shifting from charity-based interventions to structured, education-centered transformation. In several African contexts, formal education is gradually being recognized as a critical pathway for the transformative rehabilitation of vulnerable children, including street-connected youth. In Nigeria, Smart (2021) and Agbaire et al. (2021) conducted a study on Education for Street Children in Nigeria: Issues, Problems and Prospects. The study examined the challenges and interventions in educating street children, highlighting economic poverty as a key driver pushing children onto the streets, where they encounter criminality, exploitation, and health hazards. Street children often lack family support, which undermines their social development, while street girls are particularly susceptible to early labor, sexual exploitation, and survival-based commercial sex work. On the same, the findings of Smart (2021) study indicated that:

"...access to formal education can reduce marginalization and enhance social integration, but implementation challenges persist, including insufficient funding, inadequate infrastructure, shortage of qualified teachers, cultural resistance, and lack of parental support" (p. 60).

The study further stated that, in Nigeria out-of-school children number between 10.5 and 13.2 million, with 70% of street children being dropouts and 30% never attending school, showing a clear link between educational exclusion and street life. Educational interventions have included Universal Primary Education (1976), later restructured as Universal Basic Education (1999), with strategies like mobile schools, shift systems, and Almajiri schools targeting marginalized children. NGOs have also provided shelters, learning support, and family reunification programs, such as enrolling over 1,600 street children in Lagos schools. Despite this, access to formal education has reduced marginalization and promoted social integration but challenges persist. The study emphasizes the importance of collaboration between government, NGOs, religious leaders, and communities to sustain educational opportunities. However, there are still gaps in our knowledge of these therapies' the long-term impacts, especially regarding reintegration into formal schooling and socio-economic transformation.

This gap is relevant to Northern Uganda, where street children face similar poverty, displacement, and limited access to education, underscoring the need for targeted programs for transformative rehabilitation.

Similarly, Umar and Maaji (2025) examined the transformation of the Almajiri system in Northern Nigeria, the study found that Almajiri system, once a respected Islamic educational tradition, has deteriorated into a humanitarian crisis, forcing children into street life and exposing them to neglect, malnutrition, disease, and exploitation. The study highlights the lack of structured educational systems as a key factor in their vulnerability but does not examine formal education as a tool for transformative rehabilitation, which the current study sought to address. Ogbuabo (2021) found that in Enugu State, many street children remain excluded from universal basic education due to poverty, hidden fees, inadequate facilities, and societal barriers, pushing them further into street life. Both studies stress the necessity of focused, situation-specific measures to guarantee access to education as a pathway for social reintegration and long-term transformation.

Chapirah (2022) studied streetism among children in Atimpoku in Ghana. The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design and purposively selected fifteen participants. To gather data, an interview was used, after which the data was then analyzed thematically. The study found that key factors driving children to the streets included family break-up, fear of punishment, poverty, lack of parental care and control, and child abuse. On the streets, children face social challenges such as theft, police arrest, accidents, and peer aggression, as well as personal challenges including truancy, illness, lack of basic needs, and emotional neglect. Coping strategies included seeking help from peers and caregivers, begging, self-medication, and substance use. The study recommended establishing training centers in partnership with NGOs to provide formal education and employable skills like ICT, hairdressing, carpentry, and fashion design. However, it did not specifically assess formal education as a tool for transformative rehabilitation, indicating a need for research in contexts like Northern Uganda on how education can promote the reintegration and social transformation of street children.

Badat and Buchizya (2024) analyzed selected Non-State Actors' interventions addressing street children in Lusaka District, Zambia. The study adopted a

qualitative design using focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, and data was analyzed thematically. Results showed that NGOs, community-based organizations, and faith-based organizations employ initiatives such as identifying street children, providing shelter, healthcare, education, food, clothing, sports, recreation, and facilitating family reunification. Challenges included financial constraints, lack of coordination, cultural barriers, government resistance, stigma, COVID-19 disruptions, and inadequate infrastructure. The study recommended strategies such as sponsorship, partnership building, and empowerment initiatives. However, it did not specifically assess how formal education functions as a mechanism for transformative rehabilitation, highlighting the need for research in contexts like Northern Uganda on how education can support the reintegration and social transformation of street children (Aguu).

Banda et al. (2024) explored substance abuse among street children in Lilongwe, Malawi, using a qualitative phenomenological and symbolic interactionist approach. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to gather data, and data was analyzed thematically. The study found that substance abuse among street children is influenced by familial absence, emotional voids, peer pressure, economic hardship, environmental accessibility, and coping mechanisms. Findings highlighted how peer dynamics, socio-environmental factors, and personal experiences contribute to substance abuse, emphasizing the need for context-specific interventions and policy frameworks. While the study provided insights into the challenges faced by street children, it did not examine formal education as a deliberate tool for transformative rehabilitation, pointing to the importance of research in contexts like Northern Uganda where structured education can support reintegration.

Mundibi (2024) investigated child poverty and streetism in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, through the lens of the Preferential Option for the Poor within Catholic Social Teaching. The study employed an interdisciplinary approach combining theological, ethical, sociological, and practical perspectives. Focusing on initiatives by the Jesuit Centre Monseigneur Munzihirwa, the research highlighted the reintegration of street children into families, poverty alleviation, and social justice efforts. It identified challenges including systemic inequalities, material deprivation, and insufficient transformative interventions. While the study emphasized

empowerment and systemic change, it did not specifically explore formal education as a structured mechanism for rehabilitating street children. This gap underscored the relevance of research in Northern Uganda on how formal education can foster holistic transformation and social reintegration for street-connected children. Several studies in Kenya have examined the educational conditions and rehabilitation of street children. For instance, Burkholder (2020) examined the education levels for street-connected children in Nairobi and found that many could communicate in Sheng and recognize numbers but struggled with literacy and basic arithmetic skills. Despite these challenges, many aspired to professional careers such as pilots and doctors, leading to the proposal of an “education for life” centre to help transition them from street life to formal schooling. However, the study did not explore how free education policies could be used to support street children. In another study, Mwendu et al. (2022) examined the adaptation of former street children in Trans Nzoia County and found that although many reintegrated well after rehabilitation, they continued to face challenges such as inadequate resources and limited job opportunities. The study, however, did not emphasize formal education as a central component of rehabilitation. Weru (2024) examined the challenges of rehabilitating street children in Starehe Sub-County, Nairobi, using a qualitative narrative inquiry. The study found that many children return to street life because rehabilitation programmes often fail to address root causes and do not adequately develop social-emotional skills necessary for reintegration. It also noted that many rehabilitation centers lack research-based approaches in assisting street children. However, the study did not examine how formal education can serve as a structured mechanism for transformative rehabilitation and long-term reintegration, highlighting a gap for further research. Iminza and Kimaru (2023) found that poor living conditions in some centers often pushed children back to the streets, even though some developed a sense of belonging when integrated into schools. However, the study also did not analyze how national education policies address the unique needs of street children. Overall, these studies highlight important challenges faced by street children but do not clearly examine how formal education can function as a structured mechanism for transformative rehabilitation and long-term reintegration.

Studies in Ethiopia have examined the experiences and problems street children face. Chimdessa (2022) explored the initiation into street life and survival strategies among street children in Addis Ababa using a phenomenological design with 103 participants. According to the report, children had to deal with issues including being trafficked, being harassed, and not having enough basic needs, and often experienced social rejection and weak legal protection. Solutions such as, shelter, access to education, community support, health services, and income-generating activities were perceived by street children. Similarly, Abate et al. (2022) investigated the health status and causes of streetism among 220 street children in Harar using mixed methods. The study revealed that many children had limited or no schooling due to poverty and negative parental attitudes, while substance abuse and health problems were common. However, the study did not examine how formal education policies could effectively support street children.

Other studies have also focused on survival and social conditions of street children. Fikre (2024) examined livelihood strategies of street children in Addis Ababa and found that children relied on social networks, creativity, and street subculture to survive and gain sympathy from the public. Fantahun and Taa (2022) studied social exclusion among street children in Gondar and reported that poverty, lack of parental support, and negative societal attitudes led to deprivation of basic needs and psychological challenges. Similarly, Arabbadvi et al. (2023) evaluated the effect of nutrition education among 70 street children and found that targeted training significantly improved their nutritional knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Despite these findings, the studies largely did not examine how formal education systems can serve as a structured pathway for the long-term reintegration leading to rehabilitation of street children. The impact of schooling on the lives of street children has been studied in Tanzania. For example, Athumani et al. (2026) investigated caretaker perceptions at Drop-In Centers in Kinondoni Municipality, finding that positive attitudes towards education fostered school attendance and behavioral changes, while negative perceptions could lead to increased poverty and social exclusion. They suggested the need for tailored curricula, trained educators, and stable housing to improve educational outcomes. Similarly, Haji (2025) evaluated inclusive education for primary school-aged street children in Dodoma City, revealing that while it

was aligned with policy, funding and training challenges limited its effectiveness. Both studies underscored the necessity of supportive educational frameworks but did not adequately address structured formal education as means for the long-term reintegration of street children leading to their rehabilitation.

Studies conducted in Uganda have shown how important social protection, parenting, education, and resilience are in resolving the difficulties experienced by youngsters connected to the streets. For example, Edmonds et al. (2022) examined resilience-based programmes through the Building with Bamboo initiative, showing that fostering resilience among street-connected children improved their educational and well-being outcomes by engaging them in strength-based activities and supportive peer, family, and community networks. Apecu and Zabibu (2022) explored parenting practices in Arua City, finding that inadequate parenting including neglect, abuse, poverty, and weak parent-child bonding significantly contributed to children joining street life, emphasizing the importance of family-based interventions and economic empowerment.

Furthermore, Kakuru et al. (2019) found that social protection for street children in Kampala was underfunded, donor-dependent, and largely inaccessible, highlighting the need for greater government support. Similarly, Africa Educational Trust (AET) and Child Restoration Outreach (CRO) showed that targeted interventions such as catch-up classes, counselling, family support, and community engagement helped reintegrate street children into formal education, though many children still lack access or struggle to remain in school (AET, 2024). Overall, these studies reveal significant gaps in how formal education is structured and utilized as a mechanism for the long-term rehabilitation and reintegration of street children. While resilience programs, parenting interventions, and social protection provide critical support, there is limited research on systematically integrating formal education with rehabilitation efforts to ensure sustainable outcomes. This gap highlighted the necessity of the current investigation, which seeks to examine how formal education can serve as an organized and transforming instrument to aid in skill development, social inclusion, and reintegration of street-connected children in Northern Uganda.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Gulu, Pader, Kitgum, and Lira districts in Northern Uganda, selected because of the significant presence of street-connected children (Aguu), post-conflict challenges, and active Catholic Church rehabilitation programmes. The districts provided an appropriate setting for examining how formal education contributes to the transformation and reintegration of Aguu. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach using a convergent parallel design, comprising a cross-sectional survey and a phenomenological approach. The target population was 12,360 participants, including 11,000 street children, 600 community leaders, 420 cultural leaders, and 340 religious leaders. Using Krejcie and Morgan (1970), 370 street children were selected for the survey, while 10 community, 10 cultural, and 10 religious leaders were purposively selected for interviews. Cluster and snowball sampling were used for Aguu, while criterion, expert, and homogeneous sampling were applied to the respective leaders.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires and interview guides. The instruments were subjected to face, content, and construct validity through expert review, literature review, and pilot testing. Reliability was established using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding an overall coefficient of 0.802, above the acceptable threshold of 0.70. Qualitative trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation, member checking, audit trails, and standardised interview procedures. The mixed-methods approach enabled the integration of quantitative evidence with participants' experiences and perceptions regarding formal education and the transformation of Aguu.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher obtained the necessary ethical approval and research authorisation from relevant authorities and sought permission from Catholic Church authorities and leaders of selected rehabilitation programmes in Gulu, Pader, Kitgum, and Lira. Research assistants were engaged to support data collection. Structured questionnaires were administered to selected Aguu respondents, while in-depth interviews were conducted with community, cultural, and religious leaders. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw. Data were collected within the selected study areas to ensure contextual relevance.

Data Analysis and Presentation

Quantitative data were coded and analysed using SPSS Version 30. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarise the data, while Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation was applied at a 0.05 significance level to examine the relationship between formal education and the transformation of Aguu. Qualitative data were analysed thematically using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Quantitative findings were presented through tables and descriptive statistics, while qualitative findings were presented through themes, narratives, and selected quotations. The integration of both forms of data provided a comprehensive understanding of how formal education contributes to the transformation of street children (Aguu) in Northern Uganda.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Instrument Return Rates

The research tools were given to various groups of study participants. These included questionnaires distributed to street children (Aguu), while in-depth interviews were conducted with community leaders, cultural leaders, and religious leaders. Table 1 displays the findings.

Table 1: *The participants response rate for the study*

Participants	Sampled Participants	Actual Participants	Return Rate (%)
Street Children (Aguu)	370	370	100
Community Leaders	10	10	100
Cultural Leaders	10	10	100
Religious Leaders	10	10	100

Source: *Field Data (2026)*

As shown in Table 1, all the 370 questionnaires distributed to street children (Aguu) were completed and returned, resulting in a 100% response rate, which was considered adequate for data analysis and reporting. Similarly, all 10 community leaders, 10 cultural leaders, and 10 religious leaders took part in the in-depth interviews, resulting in a response rate of 100% for every respondent category. Indeed, reaching a response rate 100% can be attributed to effective

planning and coordination during the process of collecting data. The questionnaires were personally distributed and collected by the researcher and his assistants, who also gave the participants a thorough explanation of the goal and importance of the study, and worked closely with the Catholic Church rehabilitation centres and community leaders to schedule convenient times for data collection. This approach enhanced participants' willingness to participate and ensured that all interviews and questionnaires were successfully completed. The full participation of the respondents ensured that no data were lost during the data collection process. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2019), a response rate of 50% is adequate for data analysis and reporting, 60% is considered good, and 70% or above is regarded as excellent. As a result, the study's 100% response rate was outstanding and provided sufficient information for the study's analysis, interpretation, and reporting of the findings.

Formal Education and the Transformation of Street Children (Aguu) in Northern Uganda

The second research question of the study was to examine the role of formal education in the transformation of Aguu in Northern Uganda. To achieve this, participants were all asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the various statements regarding the contribution of Church-supported educational programmes to their rehabilitation using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree (SD), 2 = Disagree (D), 3 = Neutral (N), 4 = Agree (A), and 5 = Strongly Agree (SA). The findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Formal Education and the Transformation of Street Children (Aguu)*

Statements	SD Freq. (%)	D Freq. (%)	N Freq. (%)	A Freq. (%)	SA Freq. (%)	Mean	Std. Dev.
I am currently enrolled in a school or educational programme supported by the Church.	36 (9.7)	26 (7.0)	1 (0.3)	137 (37.0)	170 (45.9)	4.0243	1.27386
The quality of education provided through the Church-supported programme is satisfactory because of health and good diet.	31 (8.4)	32 (8.6)	1 (0.3)	114 (30.8)	192 (51.9)	4.0919	1.27183
I have acquired new knowledge, life	37 (10.0)	28 (7.6)	–	110 (29.7)	195 (52.7)	4.0757	1.31479

skills, good morals and values through Church-supported educational programmes.							
The education I have received has improved my confidence and personal development.	32 (8.6)	29 (7.8)	2 (0.5)	98 (26.5)	209 (56.5)	4.1432	1.28300
Educational programmes have helped reduce my involvement in risky behaviours.	34 (9.2)	28 (7.6)	–	102 (27.6)	206 (55.7)	4.1297	1.29390

Source: Field Data (2026)

The findings in table 2 reveal that majority 45.9% (n = 170) of the participants strongly agreed and 37.0% (n = 137) agreed that they were currently enrolled in a school or educational programme supported by the Church, representing a combined 82.9% of the respondents. However, 9.7% (n = 36) strongly disagreed, 7.0% (n = 26) disagreed, and 0.3% (n = 1) remained undecided. The mean score of 4.02 (SD = 1.274) implies that the majority of respondents acknowledged being enrolled in Church-supported educational programmes, although a small proportion reported limited or no access to such educational opportunities. This indicates that the Catholic Church has played a significant role in increasing access to formal education for rehabilitated street children (Aguu), thereby providing them with opportunities to acquire knowledge, develop life skills, and improve their prospects for successful rehabilitation and social reintegration. The findings are consistent with studies by Mwende et al. (2022), who found that access to formal education promotes the social reintegration of former street children by enhancing their knowledge, skills, dignity, and inclusion in society, despite challenges such as limited resources and employment opportunities. Similarly, Edmonds, Ochaya, and Sansom (2022) established that educational interventions, combined with supportive family and community networks, improved educational participation, resilience, well-being, access, and long-term reintegration among street-connected children in Uganda. These findings support the present study, which demonstrates that Church-supported formal education system provides rehabilitated street children (Aguu) with opportunities to acquire knowledge, develop life skills, and improve their prospects for successful rehabilitation and social reintegration. In an interview, CLG 7 said:

For us we believed that formal education has transformed many of the children because it gives them a sense of purpose and prepares them for independent living. Through schooling, they can improve academically, build self-confidence, develop social and communication skills, and begin to believe they can have a better future. The Church also provides guidance, school materials, and continuous follow-up to help them remain in school and complete their education, even though limited resources sometimes affect the level of support we can provide (CLG 7, Interview, 6th July 2026).

Furthermore, a CLL 8 observed:

At our center, we first identify suitable schools or institutions for them. We prefer Catholic-founded schools because they align with the morals and values we teach. Then we solicit funds to sponsor them, paying tuition, providing scholastic materials, and supporting their participation. When they are home during holidays, we also organize remedial teaching on both the school curriculum and life skills. That is essentially how we support their access to formal education (CLL 8, Interview, 6th July 2026).

Another CLK 8 said:

During the end of the year, we always have an end-year party in December with various functions. Many children come; they eat, dance, and celebrate with us. Others who attend the party pick up interest in joining us. Some children already know our religious leaders when they are moving within the city. They will run to them and ask to be with us or join our home. From there, we call them together, talk to them, and interview them. After that, we trace their background, where they come from, whether they have relatives or parents. Once we gather this information, they are brought here. They stay with us for some months, and later we take them to school (CLK 8, Interview, 13th July 2026).

Also, CLG 9 stated:

We also connect with donors who provide support for educational expenses. While we focus on providing psychosocial support at our center, we also invite others to come and share their experiences with the youth. This exposure helps the children see possibilities beyond their current circumstances. In addition, we do engage their families to ensure that there is confidentiality in what we are doing, talk to them, take care of them, and if they are upset, we help them join vocational skills (CLG 9, Interview, 6th July 2026).

Nevertheless, regarding the quality of formal education provided through Church-supported programmes, a combined 82.7% (n = 306) of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed that it was satisfactory because of adequate health support and good nutrition, while 17.0% (n = 63) disagreed and strongly disagreed, and 0.3% (n = 1) remained undecided, with a mean score of 4.09 (SD = 1.272), reflecting strong agreement. This indicates that respondents perceived the Catholic Church's educational programmes as providing a conducive learning environment that supports both academic achievement and the overall well-being of rehabilitated children. These findings are consistent with Cavazzoni et al. (2023), who found that quality education for vulnerable children extends beyond academic instruction by incorporating supportive learning environments that foster resilience, psychosocial healing, self-esteem, and also holistic development. Similarly, Edmonds, Ochaya, and Sansom (2022) established that the educational interventions, when complemented by supportive services and community networks, enhance children's educational participation, well-being, and successful reintegration into society. Collectively, these studies support the present findings that the Catholic Church's provision of quality education, alongside health and nutritional support, creates a favourable environment that promotes both academic success and the holistic rehabilitation of street children (Aguu) in Northern Uganda. During the interviews, a RLG 8 noted:

The Church believes that quality education involves addressing the child's physical, emotional, and academic needs simultaneously. We ensure that the children receive balanced meals, access to healthcare, counselling, and a safe learning environment alongside

classroom instruction. These interventions have greatly improved school attendance, academic performance, discipline, and also the children's overall well-being. Many of them have regained confidence and are now actively participating in school activities (RLG 8, Interview, 6th July 2026).

Another RLG 6 observed:

We observed quality education begins with teaching them to truly know God. The Bible says that knowing God is the beginning of everything. We teach them how to be in a community, how to pray, and all other subjects. The schools we send them to are good schools (RLG 6, Interview, 6th July 2026).

A RLK 9 further explained:

Our schools teach the children to understand how good God is. They learn that without God, they cannot survive. This knowledge helps them not to be consumed by sin because they understand that God sees everything they do. It helps them not only to fear human beings but also to fear God. They learn to share what they have, love one another, and understand the value of education. When they study hard, they can become good and influential people in the future, servants of God, political leaders, and so much more (RLK 9, Interview, 6th July 2026).

The findings demonstrate that the Catholic Church provides quality formal education that extends beyond classroom instruction to attend to the comprehensive needs of rehabilitated Aguu in Northern Uganda. Through the integration of academic learning, adequate health care, nutritious meals, counselling, spiritual formation, and a safe learning environment, the Church has created favourable conditions that enhance educational participation, academic performance, discipline, confidence, and overall well-being. The interview findings further reveal that the Church's educational programmes emphasize not only intellectual development but also moral values, spiritual growth, community living, and character formation, thereby preparing children to grow up to be responsible and useful members of society. However,

some proportion of respondents who actually disagreed that the quality of education was satisfactory suggests that some rehabilitated children continue to experience challenges in accessing or fully benefiting from these educational services, highlighting the need to strengthen and expand support mechanisms to ensure equitable and consistent quality across all Church-supported programmes. Overall, the findings indicate that quality Church-supported education serves as a vital instrument for the holistic rehabilitation, empowerment, and successful social reintegration of street children (Aguu) in Northern Uganda (Cavazzoni et al., 2023; Edmonds et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the findings revealed that a vast majority of the respondents, 52.7% (n = 195), strongly agreed and 29.7% (n = 110) agreed that they had acquired new knowledge, life skills, good morals, and values through Church-supported educational programmes. In contrast, 10.0% (n = 37) strongly disagreed and 7.6% (n = 28) disagreed, accounting for a combined 17.6% who did not share this view. The mean score of 4.08 (SD = 1.315) indicates a high degree of agreement. This shows that the Church-supported educational programmes extend beyond academic instruction by equipping rehabilitated street children (Aguu) with practical knowledge, life skills, moral values, and positive attitudes that are essential for responsible citizenship, personal development, and successful social reintegration. However, the proportion of respondents who disagreed suggests that not all rehabilitated street children have equally benefited from these educational programmes, possibly due to variations in programme implementation, individual learning experiences, or the diverse psychosocial needs of the children. This highlights the need for continuous improvement and targeted support to ensure that all beneficiaries equally acquire the knowledge, life skills, and moral values necessary for sustainable rehabilitation and successful reintegration into society. In an interview, CLG 4 observed:

When these children first come to us, many have never been in a classroom or have dropped out of school for several years. Through our education programme, they gradually learn how to read and write, solve problems, communicate respectfully, and make responsible decisions. We also teach

them discipline, honesty, respect for others, and Christian values. As a result, many become more confident, responsible, and are able to relate positively with their families and the wider community after rehabilitation (CLG 4, Interview, 6th July 2026).

Another CLG 5 noted:

The Ugandan curriculum provides holistic education that prepares them for the future. They learn the syllabus and also acquire life skills that help them integrate into society. Upon completion, we believe they will be qualified for various professions teaching, medical professions, business, social work, and even religious vocations that will help them lead independent lives (CLG 5, Interview, 11th July 2026).

A CLK 8 also explained:

Formal education has contributed greatly to the personal development of street children. I perceive it very positively because it equips them with knowledge, practical skills, discipline, and values that prepare them for a better future. When a child is trained in a professional field such as civil aviation, for example, they can become a pilot, secure meaningful employment, earn a decent living, and live with dignity. Education opens opportunities for self-reliance, restores hope, and enables these children to become responsible and productive members of society (CLK 8, Interview, 10th July 2026).

The findings are associate with NurSeki and Sujarwo (2021) found that transformative learning programmes significantly improved street children's social behaviour in the community, life skills, discipline, participation in learning, and social interaction, demonstrating that education can foster both behavioural change and holistic personal development. And this is consistent with behavior theory. In addition, Gaffar and Sardin (2025) reported that in post-conflict settings, formal education facilitates the transformative rehabilitation of street children by supporting academic reintegration, psychosocial recovery, identity reconstruction, and the development of future-oriented life trajectories.

Collectively, these studies support the present findings that Church-supported formal educational programmes equip rehabilitated street children (Aguu) with practical knowledge, life skills, moral values, and positive attitudes that contribute to responsible citizenship, personal development, and successful social reintegration into society.

Results in Table 6 indicate the majority 83.0% (n = 307) of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed that the education they had received improved their confidence and personal development, whereas 16.4% (n = 61) disagreed and strongly disagreed, and 0.5% (n = 2) remained undecided. The statement achieved the highest mean score of 4.14 (SD = 1.283) among all the education indicators. This suggests that formal education contributes substantially to rebuilding the self-esteem, confidence, and personal growth of rehabilitated street children, enabling them to develop a positive outlook towards their future. These findings concur with Gaffar and Sardin (2025), who established that formal education serves as a transformative mechanism for the rehabilitation of vulnerable children by promoting psychosocial healing, cognitive development, self-confidence, and hope for a better future through structured learning opportunities.

Similarly, Lacey (2024) found that supportive school environments significantly enhance children's emotional well-being, confidence, identity formation, and self-esteem by providing understanding, encouragement, and inclusive learning spaces that enable vulnerable children to develop positive expectations about their future despite experiences of homelessness and social instability. Athumani et al. (2026) also reported that positive educational experiences within rehabilitation centres promote behavioural change, confidence, social adjustment, and long-term commitment to formal education, enabling street-connected children to develop meaningful life aspirations beyond street life. These findings show that formal education helps in rebuilding the confidence, self-esteem, meaning and personal development of rehabilitated street children, thereby facilitating their successful social reintegration and long-term transformation in Northern Uganda. During the interviews, CLL 6 noted:

Many of these children come to our rehabilitation centres feeling worthless because they have experienced rejection, abuse, and life on the streets. Once they

are enrolled in school, they gradually regain confidence. They begin to believe in themselves, participate actively in class, and develop hope that they can have a better future like other children (CLL 6, Interview, 6th July 2026).

Another CLG 7 explained:

Education has transformed many former street children beyond academic achievement. It has helped them develop discipline, self-esteem, and positive behaviour. We have witnessed children who could not communicate confidently becoming class leaders, mentors to others, and responsible members of their families and communities after completing rehabilitation (CLG 7, Interview, 6th July 2026).

Building on this narrative, a RLG 3 noted:

We believe the education offered is sufficient to reduce engagement in risky behaviours because when the children truly understand what they are taught, they begin to distinguish between right and wrong. They stop engaging in behaviours such as stealing, fighting, abusing others, and other actions that are contrary to biblical teachings. This understanding helps them develop good morals and self-discipline, which reduces the likelihood of returning to their former life on the streets (RLG 3, Interview, 6th July 2026).

A CLG 5 explained:

Engaging them in formal education keeps them busy. They do not have time to go to the streets. At the rehabilitation center, they are confined from morning until 5 PM. With that kind of schedule, they don't have any laxity to go outside and engage in negative activities. Formal education confines them and engages them in different stages, preventing them from loitering in town or returning to street life (CLG 5, Interview, 6th July 2026).

CLG 6 observed:

Formal education keeps street children positively engaged in learning and productive activities, giving them the knowledge and skills needed to earn a

living and become self-reliant. By engaging them in school and skill development, it equips them with employable competencies that enable them to secure jobs, generate income, and build a better future. Beyond employment, continuous engagement in education instills discipline, good behaviour, and positive values, helping them become responsible members of society. With proper educational engagement, these children can pursue professional careers such as engineers, doctors, lawyers, or even serve as priests, religious brothers, and sisters, thereby transforming their lives and contributing meaningfully to their communities (CLG 6, Interview, 6th July 2026).

The results show that the majority 83.3% (n = 308) of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed that educational programmes had helped reduce their involvement in risky behaviours, while 16.8% (n = 62) disagreed and strongly disagreed. The mean score of 4.13 (SD = 1.294) indicate a high level of agreement. This finding demonstrates that participation in formal education not only enhances academic development but also serves as a protective factor against behaviours such as substance abuse, theft, violence, criminal activities, and other forms of delinquency by promoting discipline, positive values, and constructive engagement.

Furthermore, the findings imply that formal education is a very critical protective and rehabilitative intervention for street children by reducing their likelihood of engaging in risky and antisocial behaviours while promoting positive personal and social development. The high level of agreement among respondents suggests that educational programmes extend beyond academic instruction to provide structured environments that foster discipline, moral values, self-control, and constructive engagement. Consequently, education equips rehabilitated street children with the knowledge, attitudes, and life skills necessary to make responsible decisions, avoid substance abuse, violence, criminal activities, and other forms of delinquency, and successfully reintegrate into society. These findings further imply that sustained access to formal education is essential for promoting long-term behavioural transformation, social inclusion, and successful rehabilitation among Aguu (street children) in Northern

Uganda (Cavazzoni et al., 2023; Gaffar & Sardin, 2025).

These findings concur with NurSeki and Sujarwo (2021), who found that transformative learning programmes significantly reduced rebellious behaviour in children and also enhanced discipline, participation in learning activities, and positive social and harmonious interactions among street children. Their study demonstrated that structured educational programmes keep vulnerable children constructively engaged while promoting behavioural change and social responsibility.

The findings also agree with Smart (2021), who established that access to formal education reduces marginalization and promotes positive social integration among street children by providing structured learning environments that discourage involvement in criminal activities, exploitation, and other harmful behaviours. The study emphasized that education serves as a protective mechanism by equipping children with positive values and opportunities for personal development. Similarly, Athumani et al. (2026) reported that positive educational experiences within rehabilitation centres foster behavioural change and encourage street-connected children to remain engaged in school rather than returning to street life. Their findings showed that supportive educational programmes promote discipline, responsible behaviour, and long-term commitment to productive activities, thereby reducing children's vulnerability to risky behaviours and social exclusion.

These findings are also consistent with Reintegration and Behavioural Theories, which posits that successful rehabilitation occurs when vulnerable individuals are provided with structured opportunities that facilitate behavioural change, social inclusion, and reintegration into mainstream society. The theory emphasizes that interventions such as formal education help individuals replace antisocial behaviours with socially acceptable values, skills, and relationships. By providing structured learning environments, promoting discipline, fostering positive social interactions, and equipping street children with life and employability skills, formal education strengthens their capacity to disengage from substance abuse, violence, criminal activities, and other risky behaviours while facilitating successful reintegration into their families and communities. The findings therefore support the central proposition of

Reintegration Theory that sustainable rehabilitation is achieved through continuous engagement in constructive social institutions that often promote responsible citizenship, self-reliance, and long-term social inclusion. In an interview, CLG 9 observed:

When these children return to school, they begin following a daily routine that keeps them focused on learning rather than spending time on the streets. As they continue with their education, we see a noticeable reduction in behaviours such as fighting, stealing, substance abuse, and other forms of misconduct. School gives them purpose, discipline, and hope, making it less likely for them to return to risky behaviours (CLG 9, Interview, 6th July 2026).

CLG 6 noted:

Education keeps the children positively engaged throughout the day and helps them understand the importance of making responsible choices. Through classroom learning, moral instruction, and interaction with teachers and other learners, they develop good values, respect for others, and self-control. As a result, many of them abandon harmful behaviours and gradually become responsible members of their families and communities (CLG 6, Interview, 6th July 2026).

A RLG 2 revealed:

The major challenges include inadequate funding to sustain tuition and provide scholastic materials, as the programme largely depends on donor support and local contributions. Additionally, many street children continue to struggle with a street-life mentality, frequently expressing a desire to return to the streets before coming back to the rehabilitation centre. Convincing them to accept the centre as their permanent home and fully embrace a stable lifestyle remains a significant challenge. Coupled with difficulties in adapting to formal education and the absence of family support, some children drop out of school or relapse into street life due to peer influence and the attraction of quick money on the streets. These children require continuous counselling,

reassurance, and individualized attention to facilitate successful integration into the school environment (RLG 2, Interview, 6th July 2026).

A RLG 3 stated:

I recommend strengthening educational support through remedial classes, timely school enrolment, adequate learning materials, and sustainable funding to ensure children successfully remain in school. Rehabilitation programmes should also provide a supportive environment that meets children's basic needs and helps them feel at home. In addition, graduates of vocational training should receive start-up tools, financial support, and continuous follow-up to enable them to apply their skills, remain self-reliant, and reduce the likelihood of returning to street life (RLG 3, Interview, 6th July 2026).

These interview responses indicate that formal education is a powerful rehabilitative and protective intervention that facilitates the behavioural transformation and social reintegration of street children. They demonstrate that structured school routines or schedules, moral instruction, and continuous engagement in learning can reduce the involvement of children in many risky behaviours like fighting, stealing, abuse of substance, and other forms of misconduct by fostering discipline, responsibility, self-control, and hope for the future. At the same time, the responses revealed that the effectiveness of educational programmes depends on sustained psychosocial support, adequate funding, and individualized guidance, as many rehabilitated street children continue to struggle with a street-life mentality, emotional attachment to street living or life, and difficulties adjusting to formal education. This indicates that successful rehabilitation requires education to be complemented by counselling, family-like support, and adequate resources to ensure long-term behavioural change and sustainable reintegration into society.

Hypothesis Testing

The second hypothesis examined whether there was a statistically significant relationship between formal education and the transformation of Aguu (street children) in Northern Uganda. Pearson Product

Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMC) was employed to determine the strength and direction of the relationship. The findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. *Relationship between Formal Education and the Transformation of Aguu*

Variables	Formal Education	Transformation of Aguu
Formal Education	1	
Transformation of Aguu	0.742**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
N	370	370

Source: Field Data (2026)

The results in Table 3 reveal a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between formal education and the transformation of Aguu ($r = +0.742$, $p = .000$). Since the correlation is significant at the 0.05 level, the null hypothesis was rejected. The findings imply that formal education makes a significant contribution to the transformation of street children by equipping them with literacy, knowledge, discipline, life skills, and opportunities for further education and employment. Access to formal education enhances personal development, social integration, confidence, and future career prospects, thereby supporting the successful rehabilitation and long-term transformation of Aguu. The findings are consistent with a study by Saravanakumar (2020), which argued that formal education and life skills development equip young people with knowledge, critical thinking, discipline, and problem-solving abilities necessary for productive participation in society. In addition, Moses and Liu (2023) revealed that education and skills development significantly improve employability, productivity, and social inclusion by enhancing knowledge and competencies required for sustainable livelihoods. These findings reinforce the present study, which shows that formal education contributes significantly to the holistic transformation and successful reintegration of street children.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The study concludes that formal education is a critical component of the Catholic Church's rehabilitation interventions for the transformation of street children (Aguu) in Northern Uganda. It contributes not only to access to schooling but also to knowledge acquisition,

life skills, positive behaviour, self-confidence, discipline, moral values, and social integration. Formal education also provides Aguu with opportunities for personal development, responsible citizenship, and socio-economic reintegration. However, challenges such as inadequate educational resources, limited funding, and difficulties in adapting to formal schooling may affect sustained educational participation. Therefore, strengthening formal education alongside psychosocial support, community involvement, and follow-up mechanisms is essential for the long-term transformation and reintegration of Aguu.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the contribution of formal education to the transformation of street children (Aguu) in Northern Uganda:

1. The Catholic Church should strengthen education-based rehabilitation programmes by improving access to formal schooling, life-skills education, moral and values formation, and supportive learning environments for Aguu.
2. Government and development partners should increase financial and material support for education programmes targeting street-connected children, including school materials, learning facilities, feeding programmes, and other resources that promote sustained school participation.
3. Catholic Church rehabilitation programmes should strengthen school and community follow-up mechanisms to support Aguu in adapting to formal education, maintaining positive behaviour, and sustaining their reintegration into families and communities.
4. Schools, families, communities, and the Catholic Church should collaborate to provide continuous educational, psychosocial, and social support to Aguu, thereby promoting self-confidence, positive peer relationships, and long-term transformation.

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