A Conceptual Framework on Self-Agency:
Out of School Children and Children at Risk of Dropping Out of School

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Education Above All

Contents

Acronyms

CAMFED	**Campaign for Female Education**
EAA	**Education Above All**
EAC	**Educate A Child**
EDT	**Education Development Trust**
FPD	**Fundación Pies Descalzos (Barefoot Foundation)**
GCN	**Girl Child Network**
OOSC	**Out of School Children**

Photo Credit: Villamil Visuals / EAA

Foreword

Out of school children (OOSC) face multiple barriers in accessing and engaging in education. With the stark realities of poverty, hunger, ill-health, discrimination, and low-quality education, among others, why would EAC commission work on children's self-agency? Why focus on the internal when the external obstacles are staggering? The answer is simple.

Self-agency is a cornerstone of transformative education. It equips children with the confidence, skills, and determination to navigate challenges, advocate for themselves, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. For OOSC and those at risk of dropping out, fostering self-agency is vital in breaking cycles of marginalization and enabling their sustained access to and engagement in quality education.

This framework on self-agency is grounded in insights from an in-depth case study of six Educate A Child (EAC) partnership projects, which was conducted in partnership with the Education Development Trust (EDT). It reflects our commitment to advancing inclusive educational solutions. By exploring how self-agency is conceptualized, contextualized, and implemented across diverse settings, this document provides a roadmap for embedding self-agency into educational programming. It highlights practical interventions, skill-building activities, and best practices that ensure every child has the opportunity to develop their potential fully.

The insights presented here reaffirm the role of self-agency as a transformative tool. When children are empowered to understand their abilities and take action, they transcend barriers, build resilience, and inspire positive change in their communities. Self-agency facilitates learning in many dimensions and it is a foundational skill for the future. We hope that this framework will serve as a valuable resource for educators, policymakers, and practitioners dedicated to building education systems that empower and uplift all children.

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Acknowledgements

Self-Agency:

A Critical Pathway to Empowering Children Who Are Out of School or At Risk of Dropping Out of School.

Self-agency is the capacity to act independently, make informed choices, and create positive change. It is a critical tool for out of school children and those at risk of dropping out to realise their right to a quality primary education. This document builds upon a thematic case study that draws broad insights from six Educate A Child programme (EAC) partnership projects[1] regarding the concept of self-agency and its wider implications for out of school children. It presents a framework for understanding the concept and summarises the framework's implications for programming.

Self-agency is understood as equipping individuals with the belief and confidence in their ability to create change through their actions and empowering people to use their voice effectively to address problems and challenges. Self-agency is seen as especially important for OOSC and those at risk of dropping out because, by the nature of their educational status, they are likely to be disadvantaged in relation to their peers who are better engaged in education. Self-agency can be one of several tools that a child can bring to bear to support her or his own development, to make positive decisions, and to have the confidence to effect positive change in the lives of others.

The document also explores how self-agency varies across different contexts, its impact on education— particularly for formerly out of school children—and the importance of community and peer support in nurturing this vital capacity. Finally, the case study's findings contributed to the development of a conceptual framework that links the concept of self-agency with the likelihood of access to and retention in education. From this framework, a summary of best practices for implementing self-agency initiatives in programming for out of school children is developed.

[1] The six EAC partnership projects are: Imagine1day Ethiopia; CAMFED Malawi; Plan International Uganda; Plan International West Africa; Fundación Pies Descalzos (Barefoot Foundation) Colombia; and Girl Child Network (GCN) Kenya

Photo Credit: Maher Attar / EAA

Exploring Self-Agency:
A Foundation for Positive Change

To understand how self-agency can be cultivated and applied to address the challenges faced by out of school children, it is important to explore the concept itself.

The Value of Self-Agency
Self-agency equips individuals with the belief and confidence that they can create change through their own ability to act. It empowers individuals to confidently use their voice to address problems and challenges in order to transform their outlook.

Self-agency is often linked to various related concepts such as **self-efficacy**, which is when a person trusts in their ability to perform a specific task well (Bandura, 2006). If a person has strong self-efficacy, it usually indicates they have a high level of **self-esteem** or **confidence**. These characteristics are often related to having an **internal locus of control** and a **growth mindset** meaning a person thinks that their own actions and efforts are what lead to different results in their life, rather than luck or the actions of others (Kirkpatrick et al., 2008; Furnham and Cheng, 2017). Self-agency is also connected to the concept of **self-reliance** (Ishikawa et al., 2023) or being able to handle problems independently or the concept of **resilience** (Leipold, Munz and Michele-Malkowsky, 2019), the belief in one's ability to overcome challenges. Individuals with these capacities have the **confidence** or **voice** to share their thoughts and are **empowered** to impact change in their lives and communities (Brooks & Young, 2011, p. 49). The goal of making the community a better place, driven by self-agency, can be seen as a form of **civic engagement**.

The various concepts related to self-agency are depicted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Concepts Related to Self-Agency

While the concept of self-agency is widely recognised, its manifestation and emphasis can vary significantly across different cultural and social contexts. The next section examines these variations and highlights their implications for programme design and implementation.

Contextualising Self-Agency:
Adapting Approaches for Diverse Educational Needs

Self-agency is a tool that facilitates change; its related concepts underscore its diverse nature, which varies according to context. In societies that emphasise collective action, civic engagement may be strongly attributed to self-agency while in other countries autonomy, voice and empowerment may be more significant (Abiko, 2017). Thus, understandings of self-agency are not universal, and different forms of the concept appear across contexts.

These variations have important implications for implementing self-agency initiatives in diverse settings. It is crucial to tailor self-agency initiatives to align with the cultural and social values of the target population, ensuring that the interventions are both relevant and impactful. However, it is equally important that strategies do not solely focus on narrow dimensions of self-agency. Efforts to promote self-agency should be holistic, encompassing a range of aspects such as autonomy, empowerment, voice, and civic engagement, to address the diverse needs and values present within each context.

Building on the understanding of how self-agency varies across contexts, the conceptual framework to follow demonstrates how these principles can be applied to support out of school children and those at risk of dropping out.

Applying a Conceptual Framework:
Empowering Out of School Children through Self-Agency

And inspire others to join me

Which means I will stay in school

improving the world, I live in

I go to school

I am able to and actively work towards

improving who I can be tomorrow

When barriers to education are addressed and mitigated

When schools and school-based programming help me by

- Teaching me to understand and regulate my emotions
- Allowing me to solve problems independently
- Teaching me how to make rational decisions
- Connecting me with positive and supportive role models and mentors
- Allowing me to participate in youth advocacy programmes and peer–peer support programmes

being the best version of me today

And when I am supported by a community and peers that believes in my empowerment
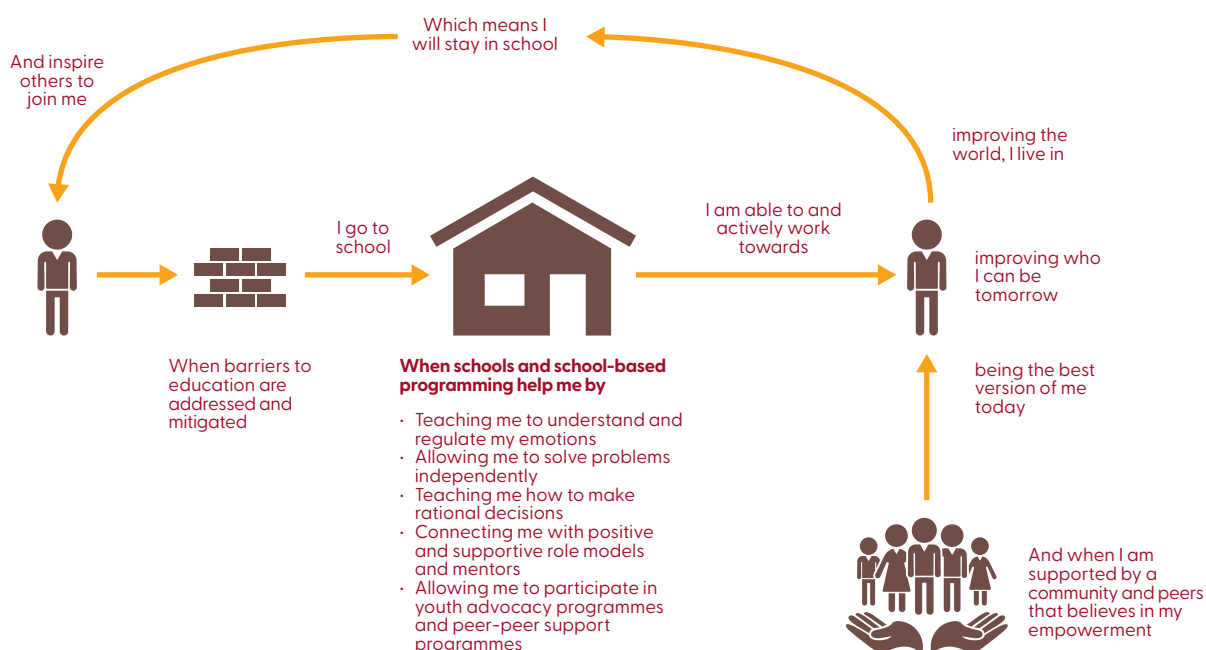
Figure 2: A Conceptual Framework: The effect of self-agency programmes on out of school children

Figure 2 demonstrates the linkages between self-agency and programming for out of school children or children at risk of dropping out. It highlights the relevance of self-agency initiatives for access to, and retention in, school and educational activities. Once initial barriers to education are addressed, children can access schooling and programmes designed to enhance self-agency. These programmes can be structured to provide children with the knowledge and skills needed to understand their emotions and express them in healthy ways.

They also enable children to independently strive to resolve conflicts or think through solutions to problems faced in their day-to-day lives, knowing when and where to seek help. Children with these skills tend to have a better capacity to make decisions based on what is best for them and others, resist peer pressure and plan for the future. This all supports the ability of children to protect themselves from harm and reach their potential. In addition, programmes enhancing self-agency tend to promote the concept of growth mindsets; that is, they allow children to believe and actively work towards improving who they can be in the future. Finally, children with an enhanced sense of self-agency feel empowered and able to positively impact the world in which they live. That means they are able to act as leaders in their community actively engaging in community initiatives, advocating for positive change, and inspiring others around them to believe in their own self-agency.

The conceptual framework above also highlights other factors that can optimise the impact of self-agency programmes including the importance of community and peer support, which creates the enabling environment for children to use, and strengthen, their own self-agency. These aspects are explained in further detail below along with an overview of related concepts and best practices related to self-agency and programming for out of school children and learners at risk of dropping out.

Creating Supportive Environments:
The Role of Communities in Nurturing Self-Agency

Agency can more broadly include co-agency, which is the influence of a person's environment and society including parents, teachers, peers, and the wider community on his or her sense of self-agency (Leadbeater, 2022; OECD, 2018). Parents, siblings, friends, or community members can either enhance a child's sense of self-agency or impede it. Therefore, it is better if all members of a child's community value and support the education, empowerment and resilience of their children to enable them to fully realise their potential. Figure 3 below provides an example of how agency initiatives can be enhanced or impeded by these co-agents in a child's life.
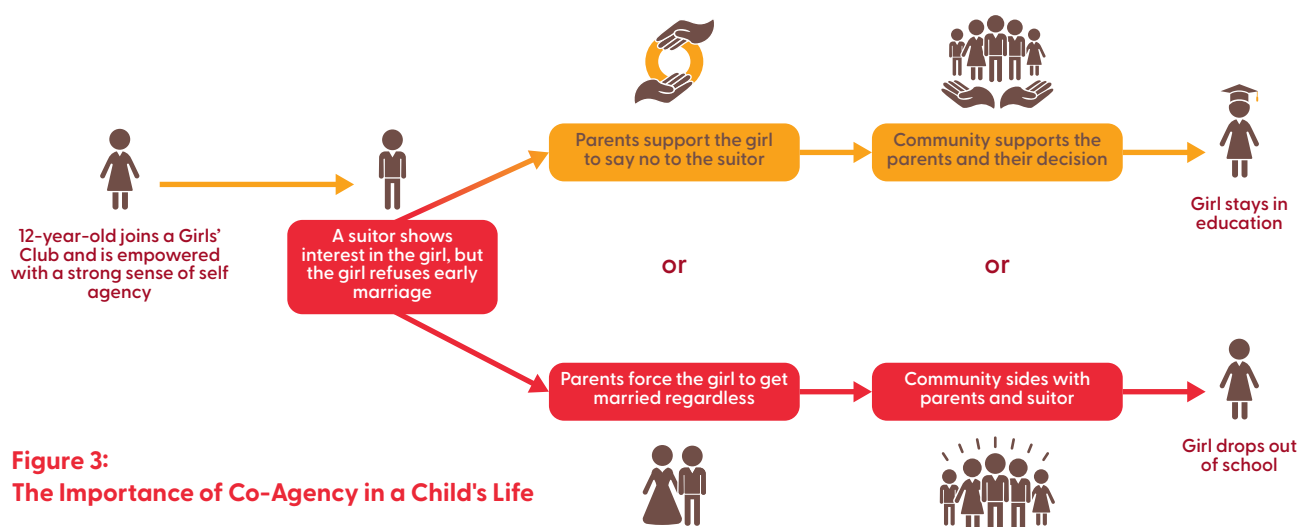

Figure 3:
The Importance of Co-Agency in a Child's Life

An enabling environment plays a crucial role in fostering self-agency—one where peers emerge as powerful agents of influence. The next section delves into the role of peer-to-peer support and its effects on self-agency and education outcomes.

The Power of Peers:
Strengthening Self-Agency through Collaboration

Not only does the concept of co-agency provide the rationale for community-wide approaches to child self-agency but it also provides the rationale behind the support of, and implementation of, peer-to-peer support activities in educational programming. Peer-to-peer support activities are any activity where children are able to provide assistance or advice to other children within their age group. These can be purposely embedded into programming in the form of mentorship programmes, peer tutoring, or collaborative projects. They can also manifest in the form of peer encouragement as a result of programming, which promotes teamwork and collaboration. This is particularly beneficial as children can better relate to and connect with others, whether they come from similar or diverse backgrounds, fostering understanding and collaboration.

Since children are highly influenced by their peers, they are likely to be empowered by the children around them. Once empowered, they are likely to inspire peers in their own social network. Thus, self-agency initiatives promoting peer-to-peer support can have a cascading effect with far-reaching positive outcomes. This is illustrated in Figure 4 below.

Peer to peer support

3 boys attend a sports club where they are empowered, learn to support one another and develop a love for school

Each boy influences two of his out of school friends, inspiring them to come to school
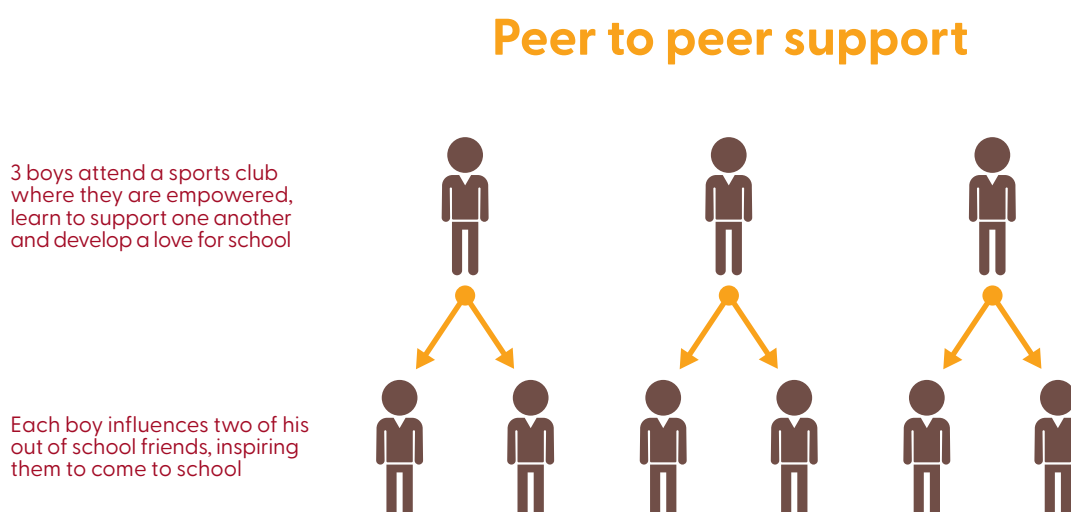
Figure 4 : The Effect of Peer-to-Peer Support Activities

Positive peer influences are impactful regardless of whether they are mere words of encouragement, challenges to discrimination, name-calling or bullying, or support that helps children navigate and overcome a wide range of obstacles that they face in their lives. Thus, the purposeful integration of peer-to-peer support activities can strengthen programming, offering a cost-effective way to gradually change attitudes and behaviours to transform entire communities.

Photo Credit: Tim Bishop / Quite Frankly

Developing Key Skills:
Fostering Self-Agency in Children

Self-agency is closely linked to a range of skills including, problem-solving, decision-making, establishing positive relationships, resolving conflicts, working independently, and being able to communicate and manage emotions (emotional communication competence). These skill sets both enhance and are enhanced by improved self-agency. For example, a child with an enhanced sense of agency can have the competence to identify problems and make decisions towards positive resolutions. In addition, a child who has had experiences and has been guided towards successfully solving problems will tend to have an enhanced sense of self-agency. To foster self-agency, programming should incorporate opportunities for children to develop and practice key skills, including problem-solving, decision-making, building positive relationships, resolving conflicts, working independently, and effectively communicating emotions.

Effective Interventions:
Strategies for Enhancing Self-Agency in Education

There are various activities, which can be incorporated into educational programming to enhance self-agency. These can include:

- **Student-centred pedagogy:** Student-centred pedagogy offers children the opportunity to creatively and critically think in a collaborative environment. Using this approach, students are part of the teaching and learning process and are fully engaged and respected within the classroom. Teachers are able to identify and support most at-risk students to reduce the chance of drop-out.
- **Socio-emotional or life skills within the curriculum:** Curricula are designed to provide children with the skills required to understand and manage their emotions, foster healthy relationships, and make responsible decisions. Such programmes may also be embedded in education approaches to help students develop critical interpersonal and self-regulatory skills essential for personal and academic success.
- **Mentorship programmes:** Mentors can play an important role in fostering positive relationships between children and older peers or adults in the community. These relationships can help children to navigate risks and challenges creating a protective environment that promotes their safety and well-being.
- **Empowerment through art and sports:** Performing arts, visual arts and sports can serve as powerful tools for enabling children to safely express themselves. These opportunities can be embedded into programming, co-curricular offerings or pedagogy allowing children to gain confidence, and inspire those around them.
- **Clubs and co-curricular activities:** Clubs and co-curricular activities can be embedded within the school day or out of school time. These activities range from gender clubs to sports clubs and child rights clubs offering children an opportunity to build positive relationships, enhance relevant skills, develop trust, and collaborate with their peers.
- **Child leadership opportunities:** When children are given leadership roles, whether by leading outreach efforts or taking charge of clubs, events, and activities, they build confidence in their abilities leading to improved self-agency.

Based on over a decade of EAC's experience, the above examples have the potential to increase self-agency, leading to multiple positive outcomes. First, children will be able to understand, and claim their rights, leading to an enhanced sense of safety and an appreciation of the potential of an education. When faced with ongoing barriers, and harmful and/or dangerous practices, they will use their voice and their resilience to challenge these and seek assistance from positive role models and trusted adults. Children who have a sense of self-agency will be better equipped to understand the importance of education in maximising their potential for a positive future and be more inclined to enrol in school and stay in school. Educational programming is always much more effective when basic needs have been met, such as food, nutrition, clean water, access to health facilities, and safe housing. While not key elements of self-agency, they can be factors that underpin success.

Leading Best Practices to Foster Self-Agency in Vulnerable Learners

Implementing programmes to enhance self-agency among children requires a holistic approach that involves children, their communities, and households. The following best practices provide a comprehensive approach to fostering an environment where out of school children or children at risk of dropping out can develop a strong sense of self-agency, contributing to their increased enrolment, attendance and retention in education.

- **Implement student-centred pedagogy:** Empower children by adopting student-centred learning approaches that foster a more engaging and inclusive learning environment.
- **Support academic achievement:** Active support for children's academic progress through tutoring, mentoring, and access to educational resources will empower children to have the confidence needed to believe they can progress, achieve and remain in school.
- **Leverage community support:** Recognise the community as a vital resource in fostering children's self-agency, utilising local knowledge and strengths to support developmental initiatives.
- **Engage families directly:** Work closely with families and caregivers at the household level to ensure that the programme's goals align with the needs and expectations of the children while addressing cultural values and potential barriers to self-agency
- **Promote peer advocacy and youth leadership:** Encourage peer-to-peer support and develop youth leadership programmes to amplify the impact of initiatives and enable children to inspire one another.
- **Address basic needs:** Ensure that children's basic needs are met, as a stable foundation is crucial for their ability to learn, and focus on personal growth and self-agency development.

Shaping the Future:
Empowering Children to Realise Their Full Potential through Self-Agency in Education

Self-agency is an essential skill that ensures out of school children can face adversity with resilience. Children with a strong sense of self-agency will be focussed and able to identify solutions and long-term goals. They will be able to actively problem solve and make decisions, leading them towards a positive future, which uses their potential. Children with a strong sense of self-agency will understand their rights to life, protection and an education. They will be able to speak out against dangerous practices such as child labour, discrimination, or harmful cultural customs as these stand directly in the way of maximising the potential of who they can be. Children with a strong sense of self-agency will work independently without being affected by negative comments and individuals trying to hold them back; they will strive for success and know how to communicate and seek help from trusted individuals when needed.

To create lasting change, we must rethink traditional educational models. By integrating self-agency into education systems, we can equip children with the skills and confidence needed to overcome barriers and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

For these efforts to be truly effective, it is essential that educators, policymakers, and community leaders collaborate and invest in self-agency to make it a central focus of education reform. By doing so, we can ensure that every child is empowered with the skills and confidence needed not only to overcome challenges but to thrive and shape a positive future for themselves and their communities.

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About
Education Above All
Foundation

The Education Above All (EAA) Foundation is a global foundation established in 2012 by Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser. EAA Foundation aims to transform lives through education and employment opportunities. We believe that education is the single most effective means of reducing poverty, creating peaceful and just societies, unlocking the full potential of every child and youth, and creating the right conditions to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through our multi-sectoral approach, unique financing models, focus on innovation as a tool for social good, and partnerships, we aim to bring hope and real opportunities to the lives of impoverished and marginalised children and youth.

EAA Foundation is comprised of the following programmes:
Educate A Child (EAC), Al Fakhoora, Reach Out To All (ROTA), Protect Education in Insecurity and Conflict (PEIC), Innovation Development, Silatech and Together project.

About
Educate A Child

Aiming to trigger significant breakthroughs and a material difference in the lives of children who have no access to primary education, Education Above All's Educate A Child (EAC) programme launched in 2012, has been helping millions of out of school children (OOSC) all over the world, through partnership and innovation, overcome the access and retention barriers blocking their path to education. Playing a catalytic role in the field of OOSC and quality primary education, EAC strives to achieve individual and social outcomes for these children, their communities and a more sustainable world for us all. Learn more at:
https://www.educationaboveall.org/our-programmes/educate-a-child