Rebuilding, Healing and Transforming: Innovative Approaches and Promising Strategies for Children Affected by War

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Abstract
The discussion in this paper is drawn from a research program conducted in Lira and Gulu – two districts in northern Uganda that have experienced in excess of 20 years of civil war. Researchers from Uganda, Canada and the United States explored the educational and psychosocial needs of youth who are living in post-conflict situations through the use of interviews with secondary teachers, students, parents, community members, and district education leaders. The findings provide insight into how the various ecological systems support the personal, social and academic development of youth who are living in post conflict contexts. We identify some innovative approaches for uncovering the unique gifts and talents of children who are affected by conflict and war. Several school-based approaches and creative strategies are proffered as a means to facilitate healing and personal transformation.

Keywords: Healing; innovative approaches; strategies; war, USA; Uganda; gifted children.

The exploration of educational practices that contribute to the normative construction of society is well documented in the field of comparative education (Hayhoe & Mundy, 2008). Scholars continue to investigate educational strategies and practices to encourage cross-cultural dialogue, personal self-reflection, global understanding and citizenship. The study of moral education, conflict and peace education and education for global citizenship are burgeoning fields in comparative studies (Bickmore, 2008; Evans, 2008). International attention has now been drawn to the importance of peace building and the role of education in building a sustainable future (Smith Ellison, 2014; UNESCO, 2011). Scholars from the field of at-risk education remind us of the importance of highlighting the strengths and talents of children before identifying weaknesses and challenges (McCluskey, Treffinger, Baker & Wiebe, 2016). The educator's role should be to foster a nurturing environment that encourages, rather than discourages the child to feel a sense of belonging, acceptance and personal power (Wiebe, McCluskey, Baker, Van Bockern, Brendtro, Brokenleg, 2015). War and conflict disrupt this opportunity to create a safe and nurturing environment to foster creativity, resilience, capacity building, and productivity.

During conflict, one of the most immediate concerns for organizations such as UNICEF is to establish schooling for displaced and war-affected children and youth. Yet, numerous barriers and obstacles complicate and disrupt the educational progress of children throughout the world. Initiatives to provide a sense of normalcy and to provide psychosocial support to children are perceived as ways to mitigate the harmful effects of violence against children. Having said this, Davies (2011) argues that there is a reluctance to see education as a priority in humanitarian or development aid, and investment in human capacity building is not recognized as having easily measureable returns that attract donors. For these aforementioned reasons, there seems to be a retraction in educational support from international and community-based organizations once there is relative stability. In conflict-affected countries, communities, schools and governments must rebuild programs and infrastructure. More importantly, as Udow, Anderson, and Magro (2013) note, individual and psychological support must be emphasized for transformative

learning to occur and for creativity and imagination to be released.

This research examines ongoing issues that affect the lives of youth who have been affected by war, conflict and violence in northern Uganda. While the purpose of our research was not to delve into the detailed experiences of each youth, we were more focused on how best to support their future educational and psychosocial development following conflict. More specifically, we set out to investigate how best to support teachers who work with youth affected by war and how to provide psychosocial and academic support within the classroom to better meet the needs and challenges of youth.

Our study uncovered numerous innovative approaches that supported the children's healing as well as creative activities that uncovered their remarkable resilience and unique gifts. Consistent with these goals, our inquiry was focused on the following three questions: (1) What are the major needs of war-affected children in northern Uganda? (2) What challenges does the educational community face in addressing these needs? (3) How might teachers more effectively respond to the psychosocial and educational needs of children who have been affected by war?

We concentrated our research program in two districts in northern Uganda, namely, Lira and Gulu. These northern regions were two of the areas most affected by war and the terror inflicted by Joseph Kony's and the Lord's Resistance Army. Lira and Gulu are two northern regions in Uganda close to the border of South Sudan. Lira is a Lango sub-region with a population just under 100,000. Gulu is located approximately 100 kilometres from Lira and is the largest city in northern Uganda with a population of just over 150,000 with a majority (80%) being of the Acholi sub-region.

Consistent with other post-conflict environments, education in northern Uganda has been disrupted, resources are limited, children are suffering from the effects of violence, torture, loss and instability, and teacher education is lacking at all levels (Ezati, Ssempala, and Ssenkusu, 2011). It is easy to take a deficit model approach when dealing with war-affected children, instead of recognizing them as a marginalized group in need of creative and innovative strategies to help connect them to school and to help uncover their unique skills, interests, and talents. War and violence undermine the foundation of education, and they destroy buildings and infrastructure (Sinclair, 2000).

Also, teacher preparation and development are often compromised. When conflicts have weakened the local educational administrative structures, priority is given to strengthen the capacity of the ministry and the regional and district levels of educational management (Sinclair, 2007) at the expense of providing sustainable teacher development and long term training to improve teacher capacity.

As a building block of human development, education serves as a foundation to progress in health, nutrition and development of institutions and democracy (Novelli, Mieke & Cardozo, 2008). Building the capacity of teachers is paramount to addressing the post-conflict needs of children and youth (Stewart, 2017). Moreover, preparing teachers with creative strategies to support conflict affected children is essential if we hope to develop the potential of each child. With the overarching goal of improving teacher capacity and knowledge to better meet the needs of children living in conflict-affected areas, this research was designed to provide the necessary data to develop inservice teacher development workshops and preservice teacher training courses.

Background

Uganda is a former British colony, and has endured constant unrest and violence from its independence in 1962 until 2008. The more recent conflict between the LRA and the government of Uganda differs from conventional situations of civil war. Without a coherent political agenda, the LRA is largely a movement organized around the Acholi leader Joseph Kony (Veale & Stavrou, 2007). Between 1986-2006, Kony rose to power by discrediting the government and by claiming inspiration from the Holy Spirit. He proclaimed that his army, and in particular, the children of northern Uganda, should kill the opposition and raise a new generation of Acholis who would repopulate the country. Throughout the 20-year period of civil war and the creation of Kony's LRA, it

is estimated that 1.5 million people have been displaced (Ezati et al., 2011). Over 30,000 children have also been abducted to become child soldiers, spies, and domestic workers or to be victims of sexual exploitation (UNICEF, 2008).

The Ministry of Education and Sports in Uganda (2008) reports that over a quarter of a million children over the age of 10 have lost one or both parents due to conflict and/or disease.

The civil war in Uganda has created a humanitarian disaster leaving over 400,000 people homeless and generations of children in crisis (Global Security, 2008). Since the peace talks in 2005, most of the northern Ugandans have left internally displaced camps to return to their communities. In November 2010, there were still 166,000 people in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, but this figure has been greatly reduced since October 2008, when there were reported to be 915,000 IDPs (Internal Displacement Monitoring System, 2011).

While the majority of "returned children" have attempted to settle back into their communities, there are said to be in excess of 1200 children who are still held captive by the LRA serving as combatants, concubines or slaves (Blanc, 2011). With hope of rebuilding their lives after war and creating a culture of peace with this "lost generation" of youth, schools and district leaders face a tremendous challenge to meet the educational and psychosocial needs of these children. The reintegration of formerly abducted children has posed numerous challenges for teachers, parents, local organizations and government officials. After years in the bush, many children have great difficulty returning to a non-violent way of life and many are ostracized by their peers who remained in IDP camps during the war.

Education in conflict-affected areas

Discussions surrounding the role of education in post-conflict environments and the emergence of peacebuilding initiatives as a means to reconstruct and rebuild communities after conflict have become increasingly more prevalent in the comparative education literature (Barakat, Connolly, Hardman, Sundaram, 2013; Davies, 2004; Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Paulson, 2011). Education can be a stabilizing force that helps to establish a sense of normalcy and routine (Mendenhall, 2014), yet education can also contribute to the escalation of conflict and the reinforcement of gender inequalities and marginalization (Davies, 2002).

The complexity of the relationship between conflict and education is difficult to articulate partly because it indirectly influences several structural causes of conflict that are difficult to disentangle (Brown, 2011). Socio-economic inequalities, political inclusion and exclusion, cultural influence and ethno-religious preferences, and potential sites for mobilization are four key factors that intersect other dimensions of conflict dynamics (Brown, 2011). Setting aside the conflicting discourse, the role of education in conflict- affected areas plays a critical role in reshaping the future and contributing to the creation of a more peaceful and stable society (World Bank, 2005). As Kirk (2007) asserts, if a lack of education leads to instability then it is imperative that we prioritize education in fragile contexts. Moreover, a more comprehensive understanding of how conflict has disrupted education and the effects it has had on children requires a more in depth understanding so that the most appropriate and relevant programs are provided to promote peace and stability.

Although the impact of conflict will vary between different contexts, Davies (2011) refers to the following factors influencing fragile contexts: a weak state; lack of legitimacy of government structures and/or public disengagement; conflict and inequality between and amongst groups; violence and despair; inequalities of wealth and extreme poverty; corruption; lack of accountability and trust; cultures of nepotism, natural disaster; poor technical skills; and a volatile or unpredictable population. Despite contextual differences, research affirms that there are tremendous challenges to support the educational and psychosocial needs of children living in conflict-affected areas (Betancourt Agnew-Blais, Gilman, Williams & Ellise, 2010; Cheney, 2005; Denov, 2010, Kirk, 2007). Conflict can have a devastating effect on both the infrastructure of communities and educational institutions (Bretherton, Weston, & Zbar, 2005). Moreover, exposure to conflict and

violence can influence the mental health and psychosocial well-being of students, staff and community members (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; World Bank, 2005). Conflict disrupts families, destroys homes and schools, divides communities and shatters the foundation of children's lives and their trust in adults (Machel, 2001).

Ager et al. (2011) found that children in northern Uganda had been significantly affected by conflict. Reports indicate that 60% of schools in the conflict-affected region are not functioning and result in over 250,000 children not attending school (Ager et al., 2011). Displacement, trauma, loss and family separation has had a significant impact on learning and despite the relative stability in northern Uganda, teachers and students continue to be affected from their past experiences. Ezati, et al. (2011) report increased aggressiveness, lack of discipline, low academic ambition among learners, and low morale and motivation among teachers in northern Uganda. Furthermore, the experiences of conflict were said to "remain with teachers, children and young people, and affect their experiences, relationships and possibilities in the classroom" (Ezati, et al., 2001, p. 186).

The involvement of children and the forced abduction by the rebel Lord's Resistance Army exacerbates the complexity of the situation for children who are frequently and simultaneously referred to as both victims and perpetrators of violence (Cheney, 2005). As Maclure and Denov (2006) state:

> [W]hen systems of governance function to serve the interests of a privileged few, and when family and community structures are weakened as a result of impoverishment and civil strife, children can be easily attracted or co-opted to join forces of social disruption and violence that ostensibly aim to transform the status quo" (p. 130).

Wessells (2005) notes that children are recruited as soldiers because they can easily be influenced and exploited, they are readily available, and they are considered expendable. Commanders manipulate and terrorize children who often have no other means of survival. In northern Uganda, the LRA was noted as consisting of 75% abducted children and youth who were subjected to isolation, physical beatings and intimidation to force them into obedience (Wessells, 2005). Veale and Stavrou (2007) found that although returnees from northern Uganda were accepted back into communities, many experienced isolation and disenfranchisement and were therefore vulnerable to rejection and re-recruitment. As a result of this, many of these children and youth have complications with participating fully in community activities and contributing to peacebuilding efforts.

Peace education is not without its challenges in situations of intractable conflict — program sustainability, legitimacy, applicability, impact, and the need to differentiate programs pose challenges for peace educators (Salomon, 2011). However, research suggests that even when faced with these barriers, peace education programs yield positive results (Rosen & Salomon, 2011). Many youth who have grown up through conflict and war possess an insatiable desire for social, political and economic justice (Stewart, 2011). Without a collaborative process for teaching and learning about peace education including children and the individuals that influence their development, issues such as structural violence, gender inequity, discrimination and racism will continue to perpetuate violence and conflict. For some youth, who have only lived in times of conflict, the promise of peace and stability is what motivates them to improve their lives, and it is what keeps them in school, off the street, and out of gangs and rebel groups.

Theoretical perspective

Bronfenbrenner (1999) conceptualizes the ecological environment "as a set of nested systems ranging from the 'micro' to the 'macro'" (p. 11). Bronfenbrenner's model provided an organizational structure for the investigation, and insight into what systems need to be involved, and what interventions need to occur, in order to support war-affected children. While we considered the student's perspective to be of great importance, we were also intrigued to learn about the multiple spheres of influence that contribute to the education and development of the student. Moreover, we were particularly interested in the phenomenon of continuity and change in the people as both an

individuals and groups now that the conflict has ended. As Bronfenbrenner (2001) notes, the development of the individual is profoundly affected by events and conditions in the larger environment, and as such, we determined that the child who grows up in a community affected by conflict has either been directly affected by violence or displacement or indirectly affected by simply growing up in an environment where there was prolonged conflict and insecurity. We wanted to understand the needs of students as evidenced through the various individuals and systems interacting with the student for the purpose of finding practical strategies and theoretical models to help foster positive and healthy development following war and conflict.

Methodology

This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and focus group interviews. The research program addressed the question: *How can educators more effectively respond to the psychosocial and educational needs of children who have been affected by war?* Our research activities included the following components: (1) collecting data on the effective strategies for educating war-affected children; (2) investigating the various systems and the programs that support children post-conflict; and, (3) developing teacher training curriculum to better prepare teachers to work with war-affected children.

The discussion for this paper will focus on the data concerning the effective strategies for educating war-affected children in Uganda. More specifically, we will discuss the findings from the data collection phase conducted in northern Uganda in November and December 2010 and two pilot studies also conducted in northern Uganda in 2008 and 2009. We identified seven key themes relating to the strategies for supporting children after war, and these themes will be discussed in relation to Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (2001) which we used to frame this research program.

As a brief explanation of these spheres of influence, the microsystem includes the closest connections an individual has with other people, such as parents, teachers, and friends. The mesosystem expresses the interrelations between these people and the individual, as in how parents and teachers relate to support a child. The exosystem includes spheres of influence that indirectly affect the child. These could include parents' places of work, school district procedures, and governmental policies. The macrosystem relates to the cultural attitudes and norms of the individual's social context. Finally, the chronosystem indicates changes to the individual over time.

Individual interviews and focus group interviews were conducted with 240 participants from northern Uganda, representing the five environmental systems, ranging from the individual's school, the community, and the broader culture of society in which all other systems exist. A total of 104 participants were interviewed in Lira and 136 in Gulu.

Lira Participants

Students	70
Teachers	8
School Administrators	1
Counsellors	5
School Officials	1
Parents/Community Members	5
NGO	14
Total	104

Gulu Participants

Students	72
Teachers	5
School Administrators	7
Counsellors	8
School Officials	2
Parents/Community Members	20
NGO	22
Total	136

Using Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological framework, 142 high school students were interviewed and their various ecological systems examined in an attempt to identify common trends and themes found in their various experiences. Students were interviewed in focus groups ranging from 4-15 participants per group. We asked students to identify what war-affected students needed to be successful and what was being done to help them adjust to life after war. In addition to this, we asked them, "In a perfect world, what would you do to best support the war-affected children in the schools or in the community?"

Specific schools in each district were identified as having a large number of students who were directly affected by war. Once we had the district supervisor's permission, we travelled to the respective schools to discuss our project with the headteacher. We asked him/her to help us identify both staff and students who might be willing to be interviewed. Prior to arriving in Gulu and Lira, we identified NGOs who worked specifically with children who were affected by war and we set up individual interviews with the directors or agency staff. We identified other potential organizations and people who worked with war-affected children and we travelled to meet them to set up interviews. In total, we conducted 240 interviews.

Three distinct activities based on the work by Taylor and Bogdan (1998) were incorporated into the phases of analysis: (1) the continual process of identifying themes and trends in the data; (2) the coding of data and the refinement of the subject matter; and, (3) the interpretation of the data in the context it was collected. Findings from two pilot studies (2008, 2009) and the November/December 2011 data collection phase revealed several effective strategies for assisting children who live in post-conflict situations. Each of these will be discussed in the following section and further analyzed in relation to Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model.

Discussion of findings

Everyone is affected by war: The microsystem

The microsystem is the setting within which the individual is behaving at a given moment in his or her life. After decades of conflict and instability, it became apparent that many of the microsystems were fractured. Furthermore, the developmental processes that took place within these settings — whether it be in the home or classroom — were delimited by the macrosystem within which the microsystem was embedded. Participants frequently stated: "in northern Uganda, everyone is affected by war." The people who make up the microsystem were experiencing their own psychological and financial burdens due to the years of conflict, and they were facing limitations due to lack of training, limited resources and the complexities of issues affecting children who may have no other means of support. Many teachers were trained during times of conflict, when resources were limited and training might not have been as rigorous or comprehensive. Teachers were coping with their own trauma, while at the same time, they had to support the emotional needs of children who were dealing with the effects of war. A headmaster explains this problem in the following excerpt:

> What I have also observed is that some of these teachers actually their education background has not been very good because you know during the war. And I don't think the current teachers have undergone quality education that would actually make them very effective….But generally you can gauge the teacher's ability by the level of preparedness to teach and to work with the children and then you find the majority of teachers are having no progress record of the learners. Guidance and counselling would help them come out of their difficulties and be ready to work with children. I think that the best we can do at the moment because each of you get to interact with a teacher and all of a sudden you see the teacher is crying That means that something has affected him. Focusing on the teachers' needs would actually help them meet the needs of the learners.

Teachers indicated that they needed more training in helping children with psychosocial support, and they felt that their training in university or teaching colleges did not adequately prepare them to deal with the issues surfacing in their classrooms. Teachers frequently noted that they wanted more training in counselling because students often came to them with problems and they sought their advice on many issues. Students discussed the need for more teacher training so that teachers would be more understanding and supportive of their needs. Students indicated that if their emotional needs were not handled properly, they would experience more difficulties.

A student explains why more teacher training is needed*:*

> Students begin developing feelings, if not handled in a positive way, can lead them into trouble further trouble. So they need that kind of support. They need access to resource persons and teachers who can share with them and guide them in discussions and get them into the habit of opening up for themselves so that they are confident.

Underscoring the need for basic necessities was the overarching need for children to be loved and nurtured by teachers. The following excerpt outlines the need for both financial and emotional support and the difficulties students experience with some teachers.

> Interviewer: What kind of support do you think students need?
> Student 1: At least scholastic material should be given to them, like books, pads, soap. But to me the most important one I think is love. They should be given love from teachers and other people who are close to them.
> Interviewer: Do you think teachers give this love?
> Student 1: No. Rarely. They don't. If it is there, it is very rare. It is minimal.
> Interviewer: Why don't they give it?
> Student 1: The population is so big. So they… you cannot know if this one is affected. If that person does not come and say they are disturbed…I am an orphan…. You cannot understand. So it is difficult for teachers to differentiate and give these people such kind of love.
> Student 2: There is a problem of manhandling especially in this school. Teachers don't know how to handle students. Mostly when you are blamed. You have done something wrong. Someone just comes and drags you, pulling you….Oh my God, it is very shaming and alarming.
> Student 3: And another problem for this class, we don't have some good teachers when they enter inside class. No greeting, just start paragraph. No introduce yourself, no smiling.

Students mentioned that in some schools students organized strikes or protested against harsh discipline or poor teaching. Students indicated that teachers often reported to school so that they would be paid, but they would not go to class to teach, and this angered the students. In some schools, students mobilized a "strike" that resulted in vandalism, violence and theft, usually targeted towards the teachers. In one school, teachers were tied up and rocks were thrown at them and the school buildings. With class sizes breaching over 60 students for one teacher, combined with little or no teaching resources, little government support, and poor remuneration for the work, teachers in northern Uganda are battling with poor morale and low confidence. Combining these factors with the reality of what it means to teach children who may have been abducted, tortured, or forced to kill and who do not have parents or guardians to support them at home, teaching was reported to be "frustrating," "demoralizing" and "depressing."

In addition to guidance and counselling training and support for the teachers' mental health, participants noted that teachers needed to be more personable with students and they needed to invest in forming relationships with students, instead of just delivering information. The use of corporal punishment was said to "cause fear and embarrassment" for students and it contributed to the lack of trust between the teacher and student and it frequently led to retaliation in the form of striking, vandalism, or fire setting. In one school a student was expelled but he returned in the night and set fire to the school building where the exams were being stored. An NGO suggests that teachers need to talk more to children and to stop using punishment to discipline children because it reminded them of what they had experienced in the bush. He states,

> These children have experienced aggression where everything is done by force, infliction of pain, beating all the time. So if one commits a crime or does something bad, what we should not think about is using the stick because it reminds them about aggressiveness they have experienced before. The best is having a dialogue with them. Those who have returned, the focus should be on their health. We should focus and see how they are behaving, what they say, etc. because many of them are coming back with trauma, so we really need to focus on their health.

Despite the underlying challenges facing both students and teachers in the microsystem, the school system also provided numerous opportunities to support students through the provision of extracurricular and co-curricular activities. Sports, clubs and games were noted as being a source of support and a time to get together to have fun, to share experiences, and to gain a sense of accomplishment. Most schools offered both extra-curricular clubs and clubs during the school day. Some of the school-based clubs were the following: wildlife, crime prevention, debating, theatre, puppetry, knitting, basket-making, sports, human health, peace-building, conflict resolution and

livelihood (income generating projects). Students indicated that when there were no clubs to join, it made time for students to be "lazy" or to "think more about their experiences during the war" or to "remember the bush." Competitive games were cited as being fun and offering both a therapeutic effect and helping students gain confidence. A teacher also notes that during games, he/she can see when a child is dealing with trauma. She says, "*doing games, competing and yes it is at such games that you can identify this child has trauma because the child may be very aggressive and any slight mistake you will see the child overreacting.*" Because many of the secondary schools were boarding schools, the clubs also helped to keep children active after school hours and provided a sense of belonging and a source of fun.

We can't do this on our own: The mesosystem

The mesosystem is the set of microsystems and the interrelations among major settings that influence the student at a particular point in his or her life (Lerner, 2005). With many of the microsystems stretched to capacity and unable to provide essential services to support children, the infrastructure for collaboration and dialogue was limited. People in the microsystem and the settings within which the students interacted were in many cases the primary system or only system of support for the child. Many of the children were orphans and did not have parents, guardians or other family members. With the school being the primary source for providing this sense of belonging and acceptance, students indicated that because of the high needs, many students did not get the love they needed, either because of the teachers' lack of training or because the needs in the system were so overwhelming. Complicating this matter was that students also felt that they were mistreated by some teachers, further contributing to the difficulties they experienced. A teacher notes,

> Many of these children have lost parents during the war and as such many are orphaned children. They are trying to care for the young ones, and to do that some of them go and work. They get 500 shillings, they get 1000 shillings and that is not enough to maintain the family. You are asking the school to pay a bit of money but there is no way of getting it. And that time there were a lot of suicide cases, a lot of them…they needed some basic necessities where they cannot get them alone, they are not able to. And that kind of thing poses a lot of challenges for us.

References were made to the need for the school and the family to work together to support children. A parent indicates that schools cannot do all of the work to support children without the help of parents and the community working together. He states:

> And then also the school administrators, including management committees and the PTA coming together to discuss a number of issues that would help to support these children to help them stay in school. The level of support of the parent and commitment is quite low. Teachers are trying, but they can't make it complete without the parents. And we have a big number of children dropping out of school, especially the girls.

Historically, parental involvement in schools is fairly limited and considering that some of the schools were boarding schools, many parents had little interaction with the school.

While the various non-government organizations were providing several meritorious programs and services to students, we observed that many of these agencies were operating in isolation and sometimes duplicating services with little coordination between the systems. In some instances, the researchers noted that there seemed to be some competition or rivalry between the organizations, where workers would keep some of their programs private and not want to work collaboratively with other agencies. In instances where the school had a student who had a high level of trauma, there were particular NGOs who would work more closely with the school to support the child. Having said this, the exchange of knowledge in terms of what was being done to support the child was not always shared with the school. One of the counselling centres in Gulu was set up as a result of students returning from the bush and presenting serious psychological issues in the classroom. The counsellor from this centre states:

> This is not holistic development. This means something should be done to help people with psychosocial. We need to concentrate on how we can help deal with the problems of abductions, the killings, the house burnings. If you combine psychosocial with development, for food, and water and security then this is holistic. We have not won the

> battle because the war of trauma is still there. Counselling has to be a coordinated intervention because the war on trauma is just starting.

The counsellor's comments not only indicate the importance of coordinated services, but also the long-term necessity for psychosocial support that is integrated into all development programs. The counsellor further states:

> We have had 20 years of war and 'development' vanished at once, when the war was done. No one cares about the post-war situation and honestly I can tell you the post-war situation is more dangerous than the actual combat situation. Households and families are fighting over land, child abuse issues are high and we have dependency issues.

The counsellor's comments are consistent with the literature noting the perception that education is considered emergency aid and not a form of development (Davies, 2011). As such, there is a paucity of educational capacity building and sustainable programs to support peace education.

In addition to the need for more interaction and coordination, some of the systems designed to support children are not trusted and the community will not access these systems for fear of retribution or because of the perception that the people working in these systems are corrupt. For example, an NGO worker states,

> We get frustration from the police because they compromise about serious crimes like defilement or rape and end up bringing parties together and they send them back. May be the police is also corrupt. The perpetrators can come compromise with the police through bribes. That problem is everywhere, that is a frustration.

In addition to the challenges we noted between the organizations, participants also noted that families were enduring stress between members and therefore contributing to the dysfunction in the mesosystem. Compounding many of the issues in the school and community was family violence, drug and alcohol abuse and the lack of strong parental role models. A parent states,

> The biggest problem is with parents. Most of them are not role models to the children. There is a lot of domestic violence. Children grow up thinking that the best way of solving problems is through violence or fighting. Communities need to be sensitized so that they stop domestic violence that may affect the children.

Participants indicated that community and parent capacity building was essential to combat the aforementioned issues. Participants indicated that peace workshops and parenting seminars would be beneficial as would home visits in the villages to talk to parents in their environments as a means to learn more about the issues they are experiencing. Several suggestions were made to work directly with the women in the community, as participants frequently mentioned that this would be more advantageous than calling the men together.

As a team of researchers we were never certain of the extent of suffering each person encountered and the effects war had taken on the family and community. While always being careful not to ask personal questions, we were constantly reminded that the effects of war and violence have taken an enormous toll on the individuals who now work tirelessly to rebuild both their own lives, the lives of their children, and the infrastructure in the community. Memories of loss, torture, violence and abduction continue to live on in the survivors and as many participants noted, this makes it challenging to offer help to support others who are also healing from similar experiences.

During an interview with a retired headteacher, he disclosed the pain and suffering he experienced because of the war and how it had an impact on his family. He made reference to feeling helpless in protecting both his own children and the children in his school. Our interview with him was solemn yet reflective as he recounted his decision to save his child by offering himself to the rebels.

> I was in the war. I lived through all those times. I physically participated in those times….I was captured. It was very painful. I was the one, as the head teacher, they came to me. I was in the bush for three years, my children suffered. (tearing) That all. (pause)
> So I know the needs… when I was away my children suffered. Until I came back. At night. I participated. And my foot is disfigured. They abducted my young girl, when she was cooking, she was taken to the bush. I wanted to die. If I had a gun … But they said if you

> want your child to go back, then you come and serve. I offered myself. And they released her. So, my life saved hers. Otherwise she would have been killed. I went instead of her. I suffered instead of her. And I came out after two years.

The words of the headmaster illustrate the tremendous burden left on this man because of the war and the loss of connection he felt to both his family and to the school community. As he recounted the story, he spoke of guilt and his feelings of failure in his role as an adult in the community because he could not stop the rebels from taking children. Within the mesosystem, we found fractured connections, yet we also observed that groups who were engaged in common or complementary tasks were working tirelessly to overcome personal difficulties from their own experiences for the collective purpose of helping the current generation of children. It is this collective goal or purpose that encouraged and united the system of microsystems.

They call us murderers: The exosystem

While not directly involving the developing student, the formal and informal structures also contribute to the delimitations and challenges imposed on students. The exosystem could be any social institution that ultimately affects the conditions of the student's life. Events occur in this system that affect the student and while the system may not have individuals that are significant to the child, these members can influence the child. The perception of the community greatly influenced and contributed to the self-worth of the students. Students and teachers discussed the negative perceptions of community members directed at the children who were abducted and have now returned from the bush. In particular, the schools that were exclusively for war-affected children, often noted the problems they had in the community. Many of the children would wear their school uniforms in the community and members would refer to them as "murderers," "rebels," and "killers." School administrators were working to develop more community acceptance, by talking to groups about how children were abducted and what happened to them in the bush. In one school, where there was excessive stigmatization in the community, students wrote and performed a play about their lives as abducted children. The play was presented at a community gathering and the headmaster felt that this increased the sensitivity to the children; he also believed that there was less name-calling after the play. A parent refers to the stigmatization in the following excerpt,

> They should stop using bad language referring to them. Like some people call them killers. If you call them killers they will get traumatized. They might have killed because they were forced. So that stigmatization should stop so that they can live in peace.

Beyond community perceptions, policies affecting NGO funding and the overall support for teachers have a great effect on the development of the student. Moreover, the international community and contributions from donors might just be one of the most influential structures that can subvert or support the development of war-affected children. Much of the programming was dependent on non-government agencies, many of which were dependent on year-to-year funding grants that were ultimately funded by international donors and governments. That said, most of the programs and services were delivered to a small percentage of students. Teachers reported that morale was low, children were presenting with enormous challenges, and most teachers felt that they were not adequately prepared to meet the needs of their students. Many teachers commented that they were tired and they no longer felt the support of the community. One teacher states, "*We are a joke now, just a joke, like beggars, they shun us. The community does not respect us anymore.*" Teachers made an overwhelming call for more education, which included pedagogical training, more knowledge of psychosocial support and strategies to maintain personal wellness and stress management. The perception of the teachers was low and contributed to a low morale that had an effect both on how the teachers perceived their role in the school and how the community perceived teachers.

While youth strive to create a successful future for themselves, the overarching goal of getting an education remained at the forefront of their priorities. Despite much adversity and hardship, the youth remained focused on earning money to pay school fees, committed to long-term career goals and determined to achieve their dreams. Putting aside the ubiquitous need for financial support were strategies that would help rebuild this generation of children. Many adults commented on the crime they see in the community and the teachers frequently discussed behavioral issues in the school.

Implementing more of the programs that were said to help children and youth and working to build capacity within the family and community were thought to be the best ways to "save this generation of children." Participants noted that during the war there were a number of organizations providing assistance, but now that there is relative peace, many international organizations have left and the country must now struggle to meet the long-term effects of war. A community counsellor says, "*What we are saying is we haven't won the battle because the war of trauma is still here. Counselling has to be an intervention, because the war of trauma is just starting.*" A retired headmaster eloquently states:

> It is like a fire burning. When the fire burns for five miles, there is still life behind. You think that all the creatures are dead. They are not dead. They were somewhere when the fire was coming. As the fire burns, there are organizations that will do the work so the beneficiaries—there is just too much for the organization. Which other organizations can come to help? So I advise other organizations who want to come and help to advise them to come to let them come. Come. To help people like us and to see who is left for you to help. There are a lot of interested people and children who you can help. We still need you. Let the people who want to help the children invest.

We need to bring back our culture: The macrosystem

The macrosystem is the superordinate level of the ecology of human development such as culture and public policy (Lerner, 2005). The culture in the society, the level of stability, the lifestyle and belief systems all shape the developing child. In Acholi culture, the "wang oo" was a communal space around a fire where elders told stories to the young. During times of conflict, the fires could not burn because rebels would find the homes and children could be abducted or killed. Children talked about how important the "wang oo" was to their culture and how the communal storytelling was beginning to occur again. We found that the rebuilding of culture was a prominent theme for helping individuals express themselves, to heal from the effects of instability and conflict, and to bring the community together again.

Storytelling was also a technique used to help children talk about a difficult experience. A counsellor notes,

> "When you bring it in story form, the child is very attentive… You give it as a story, you may notice a problem with a child, sometimes you may not deal with the problem directly, you bring it in the story form of what could have happened to say an animal. The child listens and sees for himself or herself what or where the child has gone wrong and what the mother has been trying to say to correct the wrong deed."

In this case, instead of discussing what the child directly experienced, the story was used as a conduit to personal expression. It appeared to be a safer way to express personal feelings or to recount a difficult experience. Participants frequently noted both the importance of music and dance to the Acholi and Lango culture and how music, dance and drama can be used to preserve culture and to support healing. Singing and dancing was said to "help students forget" or "take their mind off their suffering." Others said it was an activity to do to keep busy and to provide self-confidence. Participating in school and local competitions was "friendly competition" that provided a source of pride and accomplishment. Songs and dances also had meaning or a moral that taught a lesson about being a good person. The following quote from a teacher highlights the importance of music and dance and the connections this has to the overarching culture and societal attitudes.

> The different traditional dances, different traditional songs. And when they organize that of course, when you present then you involve the rest of the team, you know? From different areas of difficulty, you involve the rest of the team to participate. And normally all our different dances have their, their what? - their meanings attached, and there is something very particular that, you know, normally you gain out of sight, you know, such activities, even way back before, before this war. So it's a way of helping people come back to their normal routine, look at themselves still positively, and still discover something that they can be able to do.

Storytelling took many forms, from performance of drama or theatre scripts, to sharing family stories around a fire. The use of drawing or art making tended to be used more with primary level

children. When art was used with secondary level students, it tended to be sketching and sculpting out of wood. The process of doing art was often discussed as a way to listen to the students talking about their experiences. A teacher states, "*Through drawing, they have identified very many learners with trauma. When they [the students] were drawing they just let the draw go on and you will hear a lot."* Teachers and counsellors noted that it was easy to see trauma in a child's work. One counsellor states, "*From doing a piece of art you can identify that this child has trauma."* A teacher also notes, " *In drawing alone, flashbacks may be there and then you see the child is just crying. You may ask the child, What is wrong with you? Then they start telling you, Madam, do you know what? When I was here, I saw my mother doing this, and that…So you let art talk*." Art was used both as a process in which to talk and discuss common experiences, as well as a technique to express feelings, emotions or events when words were insufficient. Art was used as a way to bring back culture and to sustain traditional forms of expression, personal connections, and understanding.

Conclusion

This study helped to contribute to a greater understanding of the educational issues unique to youth from northern Uganda. At the time of the intensive conflict, most of the emergency relief work targeted teachers at the primary level because this was the age of most of the formerly abducted children. Because of this, there was a lack of resources for secondary students and a paucity of training offered to secondary level teachers. These children were now at the secondary level, and without adequate training, teachers were feeling at a loss to help many of the children who were presenting with serious social and emotional issues. Interviewed teachers often described their students as unmotivated, disrespectful, aggressive, angry, agitated, sad, afraid, and depressed. Many of the war-affected students were not enrolled in secondary schools because of disruptions to schooling, a lack of financial resources, and low academic preparation. In some cases, students were expelled from school because of behavioral issues and they were contributing to additional problems in the community.

Secondary teachers were struggling to deal with long-term psychosocial issues of students while at the same time coping with their own trauma and loss. Students felt that their teachers were too authoritative and did not understand their situations or needs. They often felt unsupported and fearful to talk to their teachers. At the same time, they expressed their gratitude to be in school and their desire to be educated. While peace education programs and strategies are needed to build the capacity of students in northern Uganda, the findings illustrate the overarching need to provide personal wellness and coping skills to help the teachers work through their own experiences of war. Approaches such as storytelling, music, dance and theatre were instrumental in not only helping children heal from war, but also act as a catalyst for uncovering the unique gifts and talents of each individual. War has deprived many children of the opportunity to develop their own gifts and talents, thus leaving them further marginalized and at-risk. With the appropriate tools, strategies, and teacher training, northern Uganda will be more prepared and hopefully feel more supported in their efforts to support and educate children.

Examining the findings using Bronfenbrenner's (1999) model illustrates that the ecological systems that are intended to support the development of the child are in need of capacity building, healing and widespread coordination. At the basic level of the microsystem, many children lack supportive, intimate individuals, as they may be orphans or children with sick parents. Many also lack positive relationships with teachers. Lack of a supportive microsystem also creates an insufficient mesosystem as members simply do not have the resources or time to collaborate or exchange information. The exosystem is not supportive when there are insufficient financial policies and practices to support children through a positive educational environment. Cultural attitudes (towards former child soldiers, about gender, etc.) can negatively affect children's opportunities. Finally, the length of time the children and communities have been under stress and trauma, for some their entire lives, contributes to the urgency of the problems and the overarching struggle to regain culture and the traditional way of life.

While there are pockets of programs that help children and youth, they are sporadic, limited in scope, and dependent on both funding and qualified staff to implement them. Participants in this study were quite clear about what was needed to support the educational and psychosocial needs of children in their country. The answers are there, but the resources are limited and infrastructure is fragile. Participants agreed that help from researchers, governments and the international community was essential for the necessary support to reach these children. War has left devastating effects on the people of northern Uganda. Everyone has been affected by war and a coordinated, multi-ecological systems approach to providing long-term assistance and support is needed.

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