

Making the Right to Education a Reality for War Affected Children: The Northern Uganda Experience

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ABSTRACT

Articles 28 and 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child seek to guarantee the right to education for all children and adolescents. Further, when children affected by armed conflict are asked to prioritize their own needs, education is at the top of the list. Young people equate education with a hopeful future and are eager to attend school. However, all too often, soon after they receive a school placement, those same young people discover that they find learning difficult and begin to fall away.

Part of the difficulty may lie in the ways in which violence affects cognitive capacity. From intrusive thoughts, to hyper-vigilance, to chronic pre-occupied sadness, young people who have been exposed to violence have difficulty keeping their minds on their studies. This contributes to school failure, early school leaving, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness that can contribute to a cycle of violence.

Serious international attention has been paid to insuring the right of education to children and adolescents affected by on-going conflict through the creation of schools and non-formal educational opportunities in conflict zones. However, little has been written until now on how to insure that when these children attend school they are able to overcome the specific obstacles to learning that exposure to violence creates.

The Ministry of Education and Sports of the Government of Uganda has undertaken a program that attempts to do just that. This article will describe the use of theoretical literature that addresses the learning problems that war affected children face in dynamic interaction with indigenous practices and support for resilience to create an effective program to help these children succeed. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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But when we lose months or years of school because of war, we worry that our dreams will escape us. When we should be learning, we are growing up in ignorance. As a result of this ignorance and lack of hope many of us are tempted into more violence and other dangerous activities. It can even lead to the continuing of war. (OSRSG-CAAC, 2007)

When children and adolescents affected by armed conflict are asked to prioritize their own needs, education is often at the top of the list. Young people and their communities frequently equate education with a hopeful future. They are eager to acquire basic education, skills training as well as access to secondary education so that they can develop tools with which to change the circumstances of their lives (UNICEF, & OSRSG-CAAC, 2008).

However, ironically, when they are given the opportunity to participate in educational activities, those most severely affected by the conflict often find that they have difficulty learning and fall away. Certainly, there are many practical reasons for this from the need to earn a living or care for small siblings to the lack of essential materials (Lowicki, 2004). However another factor that plays a role is the demonstrated effect of exposure to violence on cognitive capacity. From intrusive thoughts to hyper vigilance children affected by armed conflict have difficulty sitting in a classroom, concentrating and learning (Macksoud, 1993).

In order for children and adolescents affected by armed conflict to enjoy the right to education, they need physical and material access to educational programs. In addition, they need those programs to address the barriers to cognition that come from exposure to violence so that they can participate effectively in educational programs designed for their benefit.

During the last 10 years, increasing attention has been given to the problem of providing safe access to education for children affected by armed conflict. Parallel efforts have looked at the psychosocial effects of armed conflict on children's development and well-being, for the purpose of addressing these issues. The next step is the application of research findings to the classroom so that war affected children can be successful in school.

This article will discuss the application of advances in the theoretical understanding of the origins of cognitive capacity, to a program innovated by the Government of Uganda, Ministry of Education, Department of Guidance and Counseling for children in the combat zones in the north of the country. The program combines access to education, with community-based psychosocial supports, engagement of traditional healers and leaders with teaching innovation that builds on these theoretical advances to help children to stay in school, and to improve their performance so that they can make their dreams come true (Opiro, 2006b).

BACKGROUND

Articles 28 and 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) detail the right of children to receive an education. In 1996 the Secretary General of the United Nations received the result of an 18-month study by Graça Machel, on the impact of war on children. In this report Machel (1996) urged United Nations agencies, along with governments, to make education available to children affected by armed conflict. The United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees responded by developing protocols for the establishment of educational resources for refugees living under their protection (United Nations

Higher Commissioner for Refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2000). The same year, Oxford University issued a draft paper on "Implementing the Right to Education in Areas of Armed Conflict," which synthesized current thinking and issued practical directives toward the establishment of education, both formal and non-formal in zones of conflict (Boyden & Ryder, 1996).

In 2000, the International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) was established. INEE is a global network of United Nations agencies, donors, non-governmental organizations, practitioners and researchers who joined together to support the right to education during and after emergency situations. INEE has established "Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction" (International Network on Education in Emergencies (INEE), 2004). By 2008, when the 10-year review of the Machel report was published, the principle of providing education to children affected by armed conflict had been well established.

However, even though consensus had been reached in the international community, teachers, schools, and pupils were still targeted during armed conflict. The report indicated that students in areas of armed conflict continue to have their education interrupted (UNICEF, & OSRSG-CAAC, 2008). The report encouraged the provision of psychosocial support for students and teachers, but did not clearly link that support to the question of improving the capacity of children affected by armed conflict to learn at school.

By 2009, INEE reported that while a great deal of progress has been made to ensure that all children and youth affected by armed conflict have access to educational opportunities, the content of what is taught, the teaching methodologies and the evaluation of learning outcomes has yet to be adequately addressed (International Network on Education in Emergencies (INEE), 2009). It is this question, the theory and practice necessary to actually provide effective education to children and adolescents living in ongoing conflict that the remainder of this paper will try to address.

Northern Uganda

Uganda represents a unique example of a country working to provide successful learning outcomes among pupils affected by armed conflict. Most of Uganda is at peace and participating in a process of rapid development in which compliance with the CRC has been given center stage. Effective education for all children is among the goals that the country as a whole takes seriously (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2005). Among its signature efforts are the implementation of Universal Primary Education (UPE), and, Universal Secondary Education (USE) programs, which make primary and secondary education available to all children of school-going age.

However the District of northern and eastern Uganda have been involved in a 22 year long armed conflict, which has wrought havoc on the lives of its

citizens. The armed group that initiated the conflict, The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), destroyed communities and abducted children and adolescents to fight on its behalf. Villagers suspected of being hostile to the rebels were tortured or murdered in reprisal, and their homes and crops destroyed. The population was unable to farm in safety, and eventually moved to crowded camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), where the government attempted to provide for their safety. However, even in the camps, the population was not always safe. Camps were raided, massacres were committed, and some were even burnt to the ground. Due to the constant fear of abduction, children were forced to leave home at night to the relative safety of the large towns, where they got little sleep. When abducted children were rescued or escaped, they returned to the community severely affected by the horrors they experienced. Girls often returned with babies. While the conflict is in the process of negotiated settlement, and children are sleeping at home now, no one in the region has been unaffected. Every child and family, teacher, student, and public official has known fear, loss and violence.

The Government of Uganda has partnered with local communities, civic and religious institutions, as well as international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to develop a comprehensive package of policies to support children in the region. Community-based efforts have included both traditional and contemporary leaders in efforts to re-integrate the abducted children and develop avenues for peace and productivity. However, the signature program for the development of hope for the future of the populations of the north and east has been the extension of the universal education programs to these areas.

When the program of UPE first began, no one expected its popularity. Children were eager to attend, and parents were eager to send them. Class sizes rose to over 100 pupils; straining the best efforts of teachers, who were working under danger and duress, and often without the most basic materials. Classes were often held in big bare rooms, in tents, or under trees. Further, with the stresses of ongoing violent conflict, many pupils found it difficult to sit still and attend to lessons. Some of those most in need of schooling began to drop out.

This raised the question of how to meet both the need to deliver quality education and keep every child of school-going age in school, despite the ongoing conflict. Initial studies indicated that the children in the conflict zones who did attend were failing to meet educational standards on par with those in the rest of the country, based on national examinations (Bragin, 2004a). This led the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) to commission an international study, which included participation from teachers, students, and community members, to discover the causes for this lag and create a plan for an effective intervention. The main feature of this initiative was to develop specific strategies that would make it possible for the teachers to teach and the students to learn, under the duress of ongoing conflict.

The result was a multi-layered strategy that would:

- Create conditions in the conflict areas that allowed for regular attendance by teachers and pupils
- Address the assets within the community and bring them together to support the learning community
- Address the psychosocial needs of teachers
- Support teachers to address the needs of pupils
- Provide creative classroom solutions

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN GROWING UP IN ONGOING CONFLICT

Resilience and the Community

Children and adolescents in ongoing conflict are best understood in a social ecological context (Boothby, Strang, & Wessells, 2006). When children are born and raised in an atmosphere of terrible violence they cannot be seen solely as the products of the violence around them. The very fact of their existence should be understood as a tribute to the continuity of their community. They cannot be understood or supported without an understanding of the totality of their surroundings, including the strengths that their culture, community and families provide, in conjunction with the dangers that have come from the violence of war. In this context, all of the elements of their community can be seen as contributing protective factors that help them survive the conflict and give meaning to their lives.

Figure 1 shows how ongoing conflict and its concomitant poverty, dislocation, danger and disruption is only part of the picture. Culture, community, and family are all elements that can provide protective factors to help children survive and develop the cognitive, social, and emotional capacities to learn.

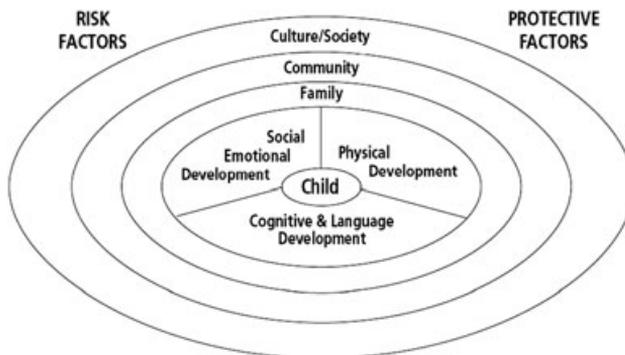


Figure 1: Social ecology of the child (Duncan & Arntson, 2004).

Protective factors help children, families and communities to endure in spite of multiple stressors. This endurance, and even favorable growth and development, under the worst of circumstances is known as resilience. While some characteristics of resilient children, such as good health, parents with money, or status, are simply the result of good fortune, there are many that can be developed through care. Within the social ecological framework we place a particular focus on increasing the protective factors available to mitigate the risks from the ongoing conflict. Protective factors that were especially important to our model included:

- A close nurturing connection to at least one person able to give consistent and competent care
- Connections to competent caring members of their own cultural group outside of the extended family
- Connection to faith, or other belief-based organizations
- Participation in familiar cultural practices and routines
- The belief that they are able to affect their surroundings, sometimes called self-efficacy
- The belief that they are good and valuable members of their community, sometimes known as self-esteem
- The ability to access available community resources including effective educational and economic opportunities. (International Resilience Project, 2006)

SPECIFIC PSYCHOLOGICAL DIFFICULTIES THAT MAKE IT HARD FOR CHILDREN EXPOSED TO VIOLENCE TO LEARN AT SCHOOL

Cognitive Responses to Violence

Communities are building and creating protective factors from the beginning of the development process. Children first begin to make sense of the world around them through the loving care of family members (Fonagy & Target, 1997). They first name people and then things in their environment. This is sometimes called symbol formation. Over time they begin to be aware of the fact that they are thinking beings and are able to reflect on their thoughts. Through loving care and soothing from others they begin to think about the world around them. This is called reflective function (Fonagy & Target, 1997). While all societies do this differently, they each have ways that children begin to form symbols, think and think about thinking through the care and attention of the people around them.

When events that are violent and beyond the normal happen, a child's capacity to make mental use of these events is strained. Extremely violent events are processed differently in the brain. One significant result of ongoing conflict is a decreased capacity for symbol formation and reflective thought in children. Short-term consequences include inattention and poor school performance, while long-term consequences affect of concrete thinking and decrease a child's ability to master difficult interpersonal situations (Siegel, 1999).

Failure of symbol formation creates situations in which children act in ways that show us what they are feeling, instead of speaking about them. They may stare at information on the blackboard and not be able to understand it. Failure of reflective function means that they are unable to think about their experience or to express it (Fonagy & Target, 1997; Bragin, 2005). They often have difficulty processing abstract thoughts.

When children have difficulty thinking they often behave badly at school, because they are angry and frustrated by their inability to understand their lessons. They also tend to act in ways that repeat aspects of the violent experience, when other types of thinking fail them. When they are faced with large classrooms that provide little chance to struggle through the material and to learn how to think clearly, they may experience themselves as stupid, uncared for, and simply give up (Perry, 2002).

However, recent studies in attachment and human development have helped us to know how to address difficulties with symbol formation and reflective function. Regular classroom contact with teachers and fellow students, in which specific attempts to focus on each individual student is made can be helpful. Theater, story-telling, and cultural activities help to restore meaning. Support for thinking about thinking can help children to reflect on their experiences. So that the very factors that promote resilience will also help to promote thought (Allen & Fonagy, 2006).

Emotional Responses to Violence

In addition, exposure to violent events wakes aggression in people who observe or are victims of it. All people are born with a certain amount of untamed aggression. Usually, society helps children to bring that aggression under control, moving it from something they experience as babies, to something they “play out” as young children, to something they harness in to energy to accomplish other tasks later in life (Bragin, 2005). Constant exposure to violent events continually stimulates this internal aggression. They can become excited by the violent events and feel aggressive themselves. They find themselves feeling angry and unable to settle down. Unwelcome and violent thoughts infiltrate the mind. They feel badly, often as though they themselves are bad, for having such terrible thoughts and feelings (Bragin, 2004b).

These fears make it difficult for some pupils to respond to other’s efforts to help them begin to think. As they begin to do so, they realize that they have avoided thinking for a reason and so they are in a difficult bind. They cannot learn unless they can be helped to think, but if they think they may experience intolerable emotions.

However, such difficulties can be mitigated through the promotion of activities that build the protective factors mentioned earlier, such as participating in familiar cultural (or classroom) routines, the belief that they are able to affect their surroundings, and that they are good and valuable members of their

(classroom) community. Opportunities to do something good, and affect their community in a positive way, can make children feel profoundly better (Bragin & Bragin, 2010). Children who find themselves unable to connect, or who sulk in the corner isolating themselves from others, can be given activities that help the teacher, a schoolmate, or the community at large. This is also called reparation. Even young children can do something that helps the community or family members. Helping children to make reparation can be built into classroom activity. Programs can also be designed to provide a means for youngsters to feel that they can do some good within the community and be active protagonists in building a secure future. Younger children may find assisting the elderly, caring for animals, or participating in similar activities, especially activities they might have undertaken under more normal circumstances, very useful in this regard. For older children, participating in community reconstruction projects or non-violent security activities can be very effective. It is also beneficial to adolescents to be given the opportunity to identify community problems and help fashion appropriate solutions in which they can take part.

By fostering tangible, positive connections – protective factors – between the child and her community, and a sense that the child is capable of being a good and contributing member of that community, all of these earlier activities help children to reduce their “bad” feelings about the violence that they have experienced and come to terms with the emotions that the violence has evoked. These activities provide them with the sense that they can grow to be good people who are not forever “tainted” by the violence that they have witnessed and experienced. This helps them to tolerate thinking and learning again (Opiro, 2005).

APPLYING THE CONCEPTUAL FRAME TO EDUCATION FOR ALL IN NORTHERN UGANDA

In order to assist the children to succeed at school we designed our program based on this social ecological model in Figure 1. We engaged the culture, community, and family to support the school, the teachers, and the children. Then we focused on specific educational techniques that would foster cognitive development within a classroom receiving support from the children’s families, communities, and culture (Opiro, 2005). Playing an active role in shaping and contributing to their children’s future empowered the families, communities, and the Acholi culture as a whole, rather than simply seeing themselves as the victims of a hopeless conflict over which they had no control. Having received the support needed to help them succeed, Teachers felt empowered as well.

The program focused on supporting the community structures that help to connect teachers, parents and children to cultural and civic institutions who were interested in them. It focused on supporting the capacity of teachers and parents by connecting them to their children and to one another. It also focused on creating opportunities for children to connect to one another. The remainder of this article will be a description of this program.

The REPLICA Program in Northern Uganda: Incorporating Psychosocial Principles to Improve Outcomes for Conflict Affected Children and Adolescents

The REPLICA (Revitalization of Education, Participation and Learning in Conflict Areas) program was developed to implement the social ecological model to meet the education needs of children in Northern Uganda. It was implemented in Uganda's most severely war affected districts, under the coordination of the Department of Special Needs Education, Guidance, and Counseling. The program created three model schools (or learning centers) in each affected districts. These centers then received extra attention to ensure the full implementation of all aspects of the program in the first year. If successful, these were to be replicated throughout the conflict zones.

The REPLICA program applies the social ecological psychosocial approach to addressing the teaching and learning needs of students in the conflict areas. The magnitude and scope of the conflict presented a multiplicity of psychosocial challenges: assessment batteries and therapeutic exercises designed for specific war related trauma treatment and assessment fell short of being useful (Opiro, 2006a). Differentiating between abductees, former combatants or an IDP did not make sense since the gruesome experiences of war were common to all of them.

Therefore, the underlying premise of the program assumes that while some students may in fact have special needs, almost all teachers and learners are affected by their experience. Rather than being a counseling program alone, (although individual counseling is provided when appropriate) the key elements of psychosocial well-being – factors meant to promote resilience – and the building blocks to improve cognitive capacity at school are embedded in the program through its multiple components (Opiro, 2006b).

The Establishment of Learning Centers: Creating the Conditions Necessary for Teaching and Learning in Conflict Zones

In response to UPE and eventually USE, school districts were created all around the country based on population and attendance. The schools were assigned teachers, supervisors and resources. Teachers' pay was sent to these locations. However, in the conflict areas these districts were a fiction. Neither teachers nor students could travel to their assigned schools from the camps for displaced persons, where they were living.

Therefore, new learning centers were set up within the camps, with as much safety as could be provided. Teachers were assigned to teach in the camps in which they were located. In many cases, schools that should have been smaller were grouped together into larger learning centers for security and convenience of access for camp residents. This made it possible to run education programs on national standards in the conflict zones.

The learning centers are supported by local District Education Officers, who visit the camps from nearby towns to monitor the learning centers' progress,

address difficulties, and connect the schools to local university partners who could assist with curriculum development and teacher training and support.

Commitment to Quality Assurance, Monitoring and Evaluation: Let's Not Leave the Schools and Teachers Alone!

Creating conditions for teaching and learning requires a commitment to quality assurance. Quality assurance can be difficult to provide in ongoing conflict, as when the program began the area remained unsafe. To maximize quality assurance, the REPLICA program has been subject to annual, external evaluation since its inception (Lynd, 2005, 2006).

Teachers in the conflict zones of northern Uganda face the same hardships as the other members of the community: they and their family members are at risk of abduction, raids, destruction of their homes, and loss of loved ones to war and disease. They face classes of 100 students, each of whom has a story more heartbreaking than the next. Who will care if they give superior performance? Quality assurance allows teachers to know that when they show up every day, despite hardship, and work hard to help students to succeed, that their efforts are recognized, not only by local people, but also by their superiors in the District, and ultimately at the national level.

In the REPLICA program, District Education Officers spend a night in the camps with students and teachers on a regular basis. The Commissioner of Guidance and Counseling comes regularly from the capital city to visit classrooms, meet with teachers, and with District Education Officers as well (Opiro, 2006b). These efforts supplement the usual examinations that students must pass to move to the next level, which are then only part of the way that the school and the teachers are evaluated by the community and by education officials.

Community Integration and Participation (CIP)

The REPLICA program transformed school into an important safe and viable place for socialization in situations of war and conflict. It reunited scattered community members, offered them opportunities to share their experiences of the war, and built collective life skills and resilience for continuing to survive. The REPLICA program enhanced the capacities of schools and school personnel in carrying out this role. It paved the way for the learning centers to become beacons of hope for revitalizing social activities and hope for the future of the entire community and all of its members.

In the case of the conflict in northern Uganda, no known local person could convincingly distance herself from the effects of the war. In the same way, learning centers were not isolated from the community, but are part of it; serving community needs and linking the home, the school, and the cultural milieu. This was particularly true with the learning centers that were situated directly

with in the camps. Everyone shared the same war experiences, the teachers lived in close quarters with the children and their parents, and day-to-day transparency was a normal part of life. The Community Integration and Participation (CIP) process simply formalized this reality, and gave both community members and teachers a formal mechanism for facilitating discussion and exchange.

The first stage to implementing CIP was a series of consultative meetings with cultural and religious leaders and local politicians and educationists to address education challenges in their communities and to hear their specific concerns. They were asked to make commitments to continual dialogue and support for the schools, including attending meetings with the School Management Committees and performing school visits ensuring. They also agreed to pass education messages to parents and children. Performing visits, attending meetings, and communicating with parents and students ensured that both the community and the local leaders themselves saw that local leaders had an integral role in the process.

Next, meetings were held with local universities to discuss the gap between research in education and implementation in order to understand this gap and to obtain the universities' commitment to participate throughout the life of the project.

Then, education officials and teachers were trained in problem solving and working with parents and community members. A training package was developed, including a tool kit, facilitator's guide, posters, brochures, and guidelines for community workshops. Trainings were conducted with the involvement of community members, which included dialogues on critical issues and concerns relevant to an area.

The next step was the implementation of regularly occurring community meetings to insure that the success of the learning centers was everybody's concern. In effect, solving intractable community and education problems was no longer left to teachers alone and community board members became active participants in school governance.

Traditional leaders and people of cultural importance agreed to be especially involved in the schools. They insured that traditions, customs, and cultural values that supported learning and social integration were applied and transmitted to the young. This also provided additional adult presence in the classrooms, making it possible for small groups to meet with the teacher for extra help (see later for teaching techniques). Traditional healers brought interventions that transcended individual religious belief and contributed to psychosocial support.

Leadership and Governance

The leadership and governance component of REPLICA was designed with the overall objective of empowering primary school managers so they are able to provide visionary and accountable leadership, optimize resource utilization, initiate positive change in their respective institutions, and create sustainable collaborative networks with the wider community. In conflict zones, poor management becomes a symptom of despair. Poorly managed systems (where no one

knows how to properly dispose of trash or care for basic supplies) reflects a lack of concern for teachers, and eventually a lack of hope that they or their students can or will succeed.

Therefore, the Ministry of Education took extra care to train and support management staff and school management committees at all levels. A special handbook was developed and translated into local languages, and University partners were engaged to support school management as a serious component of the endeavor.

Supporting Teachers Capacity to Think Through Solidarity, Participation, and Art

Teachers were the most important component of the program, and addressing their needs was paramount to their success. Nothing could be put in to place without their engagement. Further, the fact that the war affected them everyday could not be ignored in supporting their capacity to teach. Since teachers were living with daily violence, fear, and loss their capacity to think and reflect was also being compromised. Therefore they too needed special attention and support in order to be able to think, reflect, and encourage their pupils to do the same in the classroom.

While standard supports used in teacher trainings were utilized in the REPLICA program, we wanted to focus on additional, specialized individual and group supports able to address the particular issue of thinking in the classroom. A critical component of this process was the Coordinating Center Tutors (CCTs). These supports are part of the Ugandan educational system as a whole, but in the conflict areas their role took on a new significance.

In order to be able to teach and learn, teachers needed attention in small groups that helped to first address their material needs and then their emotional needs. This process encouraged a natural dialogue in which they could think about their classrooms. In weekly peer support supervision and monitoring meetings head teachers and CCTs of the model schools were able to share implementation experiences, identify areas of improvement, and think about the needs of the teachers as well as their own.

CCTs then met with teachers in small groups and learned how the week was going, how they were feeling, and inquired about the teachers' welfare. In these meetings they could also begin to think together about their classrooms, receive praise, encouragement, and support. It was a time where success could be applauded, where expressing frustrations could lead to discussing new ideas, and where a lack of materials could find creative solutions. Not only did group members put their heads together, but they also provided emotional support for each other. If someone felt that he or she just could not go on, the group was there with reassurance and support. When teachers felt cared about and important, as well as part of an important project and collective, it was a lot easier for them to participate. From a cognitive point of view, when the problems of each overwhelmed teacher were shared with others, and time was given to analyzing and externalizing these problems, thinking about and solving each

problem became possible. Small groups further empowered teachers with a model for a way to work with students.

In addition, a cascade training approach was implemented that allowed master trainers to train master teachers from each learning center, who could in turn provide classroom wide support to others. University partners also prepared specially designed interactive teacher support modules for teachers to use to solve problems in teaching and learning. Manuals were also distributed, but the program stressed interactive and participatory supports for teachers as it did for pupils.

In addition, teachers participated in cultural activities – theater, music, and dance – that were an essential part of the REPLICA curriculum (see later). Engagement in these activities was as therapeutic for teachers as it was for students. It gave them the opportunity to forget and manage their daily sufferings through symbolic expression. This symbolic expression further helped support their work with students.

In addition, as mentioned earlier, the monitoring and evaluation system brought District Education Officers and Ministry of Education officials to teacher meetings, helping them to understand teachers' concerns and to providing official recognition and support of their success.

Into the Classroom: Improving Student Outcomes Through Classroom Structure

Since the implementation of Education for All, the problem of overcrowded classrooms had already come to the attention of the Ministry of Education, as well as its university partners. In northern Uganda, Kyambogo University and Gulu University, located in the heart of the conflict zone, had been experimenting with educational techniques adapted from research in poor communities in the UK (Kyambogo University,).

First, community volunteers were engaged to provide support for teachers so that small groups of 10 to 15 students could be formed. This enabled teachers to circulate amongst the groups and give one on one attention where necessary, while providing options for other groups to engage in reviewing or arts based activities. Then, classrooms were converted to mini centers. Materials were located, and made available at different centers so that students not engaging with the teacher had materials available with which to practice skills or work on a community project.

Specific Psychosocial Components of the REPLICA Program Designed to Work in Concert to Improve Results

The following components of the REPLICA program (the six pillars described in Figure 2) work in an integrated fashion to promote resilience, reduce risk, and make the human connections that are the building blocks of thinking. Within each decentralized classroom, students learn together in small groups and work together as a team to develop creative arts programs that serve the community through giving important messages about health, safety, and peace. Each member

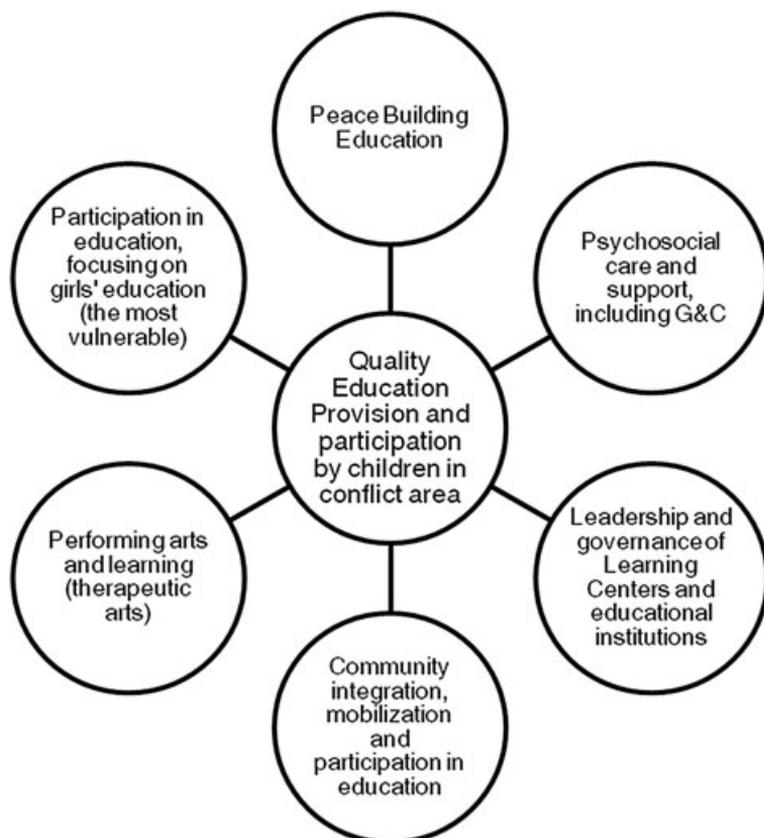


Figure 2: The six pillars of quality education.

of the team can think together with others about these important issues and, in the process, it is hoped that the capacity for thinking and learning will be improved.

Direct personal attention to each student

Children affected by armed conflict are easily distracted. They avoid thinking to avoid painful memories, are pre-occupied with urgent family problems, or are so anxious about how difficult learning is that they cannot think at all. One to one attention helps the child to focus attention on the subject at hand. It calls the child out of their daydreams or blank state by directly calling their name directly, speaking to them clearly, and looking directly at them. With the small groups, this becomes possible. Students, teachers, and teaching supports all address to group members directly and by name. Students are encouraged to speak to their peers gently while in the small group. Group leaders help support and encourage the process.

Permission to express unwanted thoughts

In the REPLICA program children have special times during the day for expressive activities where all thoughts are acceptable. They can simply say them out

loud without being questioned or attacked, and encouraged to refocus attention on the subject at hand. However, sometimes a student appears too pre-occupied or distressed to go further. That student is then encouraged to say what is on his or her mind as best as possible. The following dialogue between a teacher and a student shows an example of such an encounter:

Teacher: I see that you are not with us right now David. Are you worrying about your family right now?

Student: I'm so mad after those last raids, that I don't think it's even worth trying to study. We are all just going to be dead like my brother!

Teacher: Can you stay with us for the lesson now or do you want to go to do another project until you feel ready to join? We all feel hopeless sometimes, but we haven't given up on you! If you can't concentrate on the lesson, can you help sort the supplies in the back of the room . . . that would be a big help to the class and I'd appreciate it.

In order to prevent students from reliving their experienced trauma, teachers were trained to never press a child in to discussing his or her feelings or experiences. Rather, they were instructed to let the child choose what they express, and how they express it, as long as they respect the rules of the classroom and do not harm themselves or others.

Utilizing manipulatives and movement in the classroom

Children having trouble managing the process of sorting through difficult thoughts and ideas are helped by doing practical things. Locally available learning materials can be used for children to do remedial and practical work so that they understand their lessons better. Kyambogo University led workshops to teach teachers how to make and use these manipulative devices. Most teachers found these fun and helpful. Through these techniques, children also made local play materials that in turn were used to tell their stories and work out conflicting feelings through play. These play materials were also used in counseling sessions provided by the guidance department.

Bringing local knowledge into school

When schools utilize local knowledge and honor respected elders and leaders, they help children to experience continuity between the past to the present. This helps them to remember that they are more than the terrible things they have experienced – that they are part of a valuable tradition that has existed for a generations long before them, and will continue to exist against all odds into the future, because of them.

Symbolic activities (Performing Arts in Learning or PALS)

Symbolic activities, like music, art, drama, and dance, help children learn to take the stark world in which they live and turn it into symbols. They may start by

drawing everyday things, and after time begin to draw or write about their feelings, as they come to know and understand them. The REPLICA program has trained arts therapists and traditional healers in the classroom working with the children as a regular part of the curriculum. Pupils were encouraged to participate in story writing, dance, drama, and musical performances. Story writing helped children to create and control a narrative, which helped to heal rifts in their past, present, and future created by exposure to conflict. Control over the ending of the narrative helps children to feel a moment of power instead of powerlessness.

Further, arts education engages students and community members around something that is culturally relevant and participatory, promoting exchange between pupils, teachers, and community members. The psychosocial developmental aspects of the arts programs were beneficial to students and community members alike.

Instruments and costumes were procured and made available to schools. These performances spilled outside of the learning centers and were utilized for community mobilizations and awareness as well. In addition to the therapeutic benefits of these activities, they were also just plain fun, and the joy that the community got from students' talents and performance increased self-esteem.

Problem solving through peace education

Helping children to think of solutions to practical life problems, as well as the kind of problems that are utilized in math, are important to helping children to begin to think and reflect. Problem solving activities should encourage the establishment and reinforcement of age appropriate thinking patterns. Extending this problem solving to resolving conflict creatively in home, school and between communities supports young people to feel effective in the world. In situations of intractable conflict, all too often, people feel that they are just pawns, incapable of changing their worlds. Peace education promotes a sense of efficacy, an "I can" sense of self, that in turn promotes resilience and helps children to learn.

Life-skills discussions and HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention

When children have been over-stimulated by violence, they often have difficulty concentrating on abstract subjects. HIV/AIDS materials are body based. They encourage children to talk about their own bodies, the bodies of others, and the physical realities in their lives. These techniques have been very effective in helping children concentrate and participate successfully at school. Having masters concrete subjects, they are often better able to turn to more abstract lessons. Conversely, many abstract subjects can be taught in the context of the "practical" and body-based instruction.

Opportunities to participate in service

Service is built into many aspects of the classroom program. As noted earlier, children who feel bad about themselves, their lives and the violence that they have experienced feel better when they can do good things. Helping others

makes children feel effective and confident even when they are struggling with learning or with life. When children are struggling in a group, they are offered opportunities to help with classroom chores or help another student.

Promoting Girls' Participation in Education

The situation of girls in the conflict zones of northern Uganda is an especially difficult one. Years of conflict, economic hardship, and separation from farms have created a situation in which many women spend time performing income generating activities in order to support their families. This leaves the girls to tend the smaller children, and complete household chores including fetching water and wood, cooking, and cleaning.

Girls have been subject to abduction at approximately the same rate as boys. Also similar to boys, girls have been forced to fight after being taken away. However they are often seen as defiled after they return and are left on the outskirts of the community.

In these situations, education for girls becomes important to their future. Education provides the means for them to earn their own living and gain control over their lives.

Girls in focus groups were asked what they needed to be able to attend school. Many pointed to privacy and sanitary facilities, in addition to sensitization of teachers to their needs and their plight. To help girls stay in school, older girls in upper level classes were employed as mentors and role models, and given time to spend with younger girls in the classroom. Teachers were trained on "gender friendly" teaching techniques and group discussions helped teachers to understand the problems of girls and create conditions that were friendly to them. Gender friendly curricula were introduced that helped girls to learn by relating teaching to the context of their lives.

In addition, hygiene facilities and trash incinerators were constructed so that girls could clean themselves or change clothes during menstruation. These few innovations resulted in a significant increase in girls' attendance and grades.

Specialized Psychological Care and Support

The bulk of students' psychosocial needs relevant to supporting their ability to participate and learn at school were addressed through the integrated psychosocial program described earlier. In a sense the education curriculum was infused with the psychosocial curriculum and vice versa. However, there were some students for whom more was needed.

Teachers were trained to screen for problems that required additional, specialized care. A specialized handbook was designed to help teachers to distinguish those needing extra help. Schools designated rooms for private guidance and counseling sessions, which used locally made materials and local traditions to support play and other therapeutic techniques.

Networking and Referrals

A strong network exists of organizations providing competent specialized mental health care, both individual and residential programs exists in the region. The REPLICA program strengthened links to these programs so that referrals could be provided as needed.

In addition, referrals took into consideration the beliefs and customs of individual children and their immediate family members. Cultural leaders and elders as well as different religious organizations were available as referral points where appropriate. For formerly abducted children, the local tradition of having cultural rites and follow up with traditional healers has been a standard first step in psychosocial care. By having many of these cultural and religious institutions present in schools, referral to these programs was streamlined.

CONCLUSION

The REPLICA program combined administrative, psychosocial and educational interventions to help war affected children to learn at school. Whilst the program was closely monitored, and replication is in effect, the precise evaluation of its effectiveness in improving academic outcomes has yet to be formally established. However, initial examination results look promising. Consistency of student attendance has improved dramatically, especially among girls. Teachers rate of retention has improved and community members in the conflict areas remain involved and positive. Early pregnancies have been reduced in school going girls.

More work is needed in the area of evaluation to determine the exact rate of educational effectiveness of the program. We hope that by sharing this experience we will have indicated that much is possible with will and determination. We await data on outcomes of standard educational measure.

AUTHOR NOTE

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ENDNOTES

1. The Universal Primary Education (UPE) program was started in 1997 in Uganda. Initially, the program targeted three children per household, giving priority to females and children with disabilities. The program has been expanded to now include all children.
2. The Universal Secondary Education (USE) came into force in 2007, expanding the achievements of UPE and providing an opportunity for continued education for pupils from poor communities and disadvantaged groups, including conflict affected areas. All schools in the conflict areas discussed, irrespective of their status (boarding or day) and fee structures became part of the USE program.
3. The MOES response is documented in the *Strategic Framework for Education for All in the Conflict and Post Conflict Districts*.
4. The author suffered abduction and stayed in captivity for one week, in 1997 when he was a student on vacation.

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