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Peace Education and Its Discontents: An Evaluation of Youth, Violence, and School-based Peace Programs in Northern Uganda

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This research paper discusses current efforts and programs designed to address the issues of peace and conflict resolution, post-war recovery and education in northern Uganda. Through the collection of stories of life after war, I examine the experiences of children and youth and pilot peace education programs in secondary and primary schools. Northern Uganda was the site of a brutal civil war waged between the rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army, and the government's Uganda People's Defense Force. The war resulted in the mass abduction of children and the forced displacement of the northern population into internally displaced persons' camps. Although active combat ended in a 2006 cease-fire, there are still challenges and lessons to be learned that could aid in understanding the conditions that give rise to violent uprisings and movements and in turn mitigate those conditions for a healthier society. In addition, a decade of displacement has birthed various tensions between the youth and adults in the face of changing customs and the return of abducted children. The young people of northern Uganda occupy a unique position in their communities given the role they played in the war, their potential part in reconstruction process, and their national calling as "the pillars of tomorrow's Uganda." The government and international organizations, recognizing a need to remedy factors that could lead to a relapse into conflict, developed peace education programs with the goal of creating a "culture of peace" in the region. My fieldwork focuses on two such programs and this paper explores early attempts and outcomes to implementing these programs in schools. With conceptual issues surrounding peace education philosophy, practice and policy, I argue that these programs encourage, rather, a "culture of complacency" in the face of a harsh economic and sociopolitical reality for Ugandan children and youth.

Introduction

Rebuilding the education sector in a post-conflict society is founded upon the idea that education can be used for conflict resolution by fostering an atmosphere of nonviolence and reconciliation in schools that will radiate out into the community. The focus of this study is children and youth living in a post-conflict environment amidst a harsh socio-political reality and their engagement with peace education. I take the approach of anthropologist Sverker Finnstrom when he notes in his ethnography, *Living With Bad Surroundings: War, History, and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda*, “Young people’s stories, in public only too commonly sidestepped or reshaped, are comments on contemporary Ugandan society as such. Their stories can deepen the understanding of contemporary African societies in emerging global realities.”¹ Their voices, as well as their teachers, are essential to realizing the potential for the emergence of peace education to address mass physical and structural violence, citizenship, social inequality, and larger systems of dependency and agency in the post-conflict environment. By privileging indigenous knowledge and understanding the historical legacies of contemporary violence, marginalization and poverty in Uganda, critical engagement with peace education philosophy and practice can create fertile ground for realizing greater social and political change by developing the agency of children and youth.

Methodology

My research study was conducted in northern Uganda from February to June 2010 and July through August of 2011. The districts that were the focus of my fieldwork include Gulu, Amuru and Kitgum. The category of *children* for the purpose of this study is defined as persons under the age of eighteen. Similarly, *youth* refers to children, but can be thought of more broadly to include those over the age of eighteen, but who are still in primary or secondary school due the war’s disruption of their education. The category of *students* refers to all children and youth that participated in my research. Although I use and define these categories for my study, I acknowledge that “children” is not a universal category and “youth” is a fairly recent category. “Youth,” in particular, is a problematic category in the African context, as individuals can retain the status of youth well into their thirties, especially if they are not married. Specifically youth is “inextricably linked with colonialism and the growth of Western-style education as a normative practice.”² In Uganda, “youth” continues as a category not only in this regard, but politically if one considers those who have been abducted, whom are often referred to as “the lost generation.” This is a result of both local conceptions of childhood and the presence of foreign non-governmental organization terminology which permeates the vocabulary of the community. While more research needs to be conducted along these lines, deconstructing these categories is beyond the focus of this research study.

From the districts listed, four secondary schools were chosen to conduct my research. They include: Kitgum Alliance, Pabo Secondary School, Gulu High School and Gulu College. These schools were chosen by the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES)³ in conjunction with the United Movement to End Child Soldering-Uganda (UMECS)⁴, and United States Agency for Internal Development (USAID)’s Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Uganda program (SPRING)⁵. They served as the first participating secondary schools, out of six, for this peace education pilot project. In addition, I conducted research in four primary schools. They include: Pece, Gulu, Police and Liliyah.

One of the four primary schools was implementing Insight Collaborative's pilot peace education project and the others either had peace education books distributed by the MoES or the Revitalization of Education, Participation, and Learning in Conflict Areas (REPLICA) program.

My fieldwork consisted of open-ended interviews with thirty-three secondary and primary school students along with weeks of participant observations in classrooms. Because of the size and nature of this study, I mainly focused on qualitative data, but I recorded quantitative data on whom I interviewed and where the interviews took place. Other participants in my study included instructors, civic, religious and government leaders, and foreign, nongovernmental and community-based organization staff and administrators. Depending on the willingness of the participants, interviews were conducted one-on-one or within groups. Practicing confidentiality was a major component of my research. I took precaution to protect all participants in oral and written accounts mandated by the University of Tennessee's Institutional Review Board for Research.⁶ In addition, I was careful to observe how my presence affected the data I received or did not receive through selective telling. I did this by using commentary by students to cross examine that of teachers and affiliated staff, and vice versa. I do not claim that the information I received is purely objective, but this study seeks to prioritize the complexity of people's lives as well as situate their daily experiences into larger macro-level structures and processes to understand certain themes and patterns.

Branding of the War in the North

There is a more complex version of the socio-political reality that exists for children and youth in Uganda that is not reported internationally or even nationally. The history of the war, rehearsed by humanitarian and advocacy groups, involves a linear progression from peace to war to peace again. Familiar statements on "child-soldiers" and the lingering threat of a rebel group un-apprehended betray the complexity of a historical narrative that has largely been told in reductionist tones by humanitarian organizations and the Ugandan government. Children and youth live out complicated, meaningful lives, yet they are rarely called upon to narrate their lives outside the sensationalism that western donors want, or rather need, to hear. Many young people's hopes hinge on a new interpretation of the historical past, present and future that connects them to a national identity rooted in the local: "as they shape their future, perhaps the young generation that grows up with war, conflict, and bad surroundings will be able to achieve this balance, exactly because of their experiences in life."⁷ It is their experience that will contradict the "propaganda of war in relief"⁸ to reveal their political dignity. Recounting the history of the war will provide context for understanding why children and youth occupy a unique position in (northern) Ugandan and why they must "negotiate their places in Ugandan society among competing notions of what children should and should not be" to become active participants in the future of their country, but more importantly their community.⁹

Colonial Legacies and the LRA Insurgency¹⁰

For a little over two decades, from 1986 until late 2006, northern Uganda was home to one of Africa's lengthiest civil wars. This conflict was waged between the Lord's Resistance Army, led by the rebel leader Joseph Kony, and the Ugandan government's Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF). The history of the conflict itself can be traced back to

post-colonial social and political grievances expressed by those living in the north against the standing government to the south. Those in the north, largely Acholi, were marginalized and provided with fewer opportunities than their counterparts in the south (largely Buganda) because of hostilities created between the two regions by British colonizers. British colonizers primarily recruited northerners into the army, while those from the south were formally educated through higher educational institutions built disproportionately in the south.

Independence from colonial rule came to Uganda in 1962 and after several coups and violent authoritarian rulers (Presidents Obote and Amin) the current president, General Yoweri Museveni, claimed the capital and presidency in 1986 through a five-year guerrilla war in central Uganda. During the early stages of his rule, Museveni and his party, the National Resistance Army/Movement (NRM), “restricted the space of action for political parties in favor of the nonparty ‘Movement’ system that he had introduced ... by the time Uganda reverted to a constitutional system with political parties in 2005, the long established Movement had accumulated enormous military, numerical and other advantages over other parties.”¹¹ However, the same year that Museveni came into power a rebel movement in the north would grow into the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). The initial movement was called the Holy Spirit Movement and was led by Alice Lakwena (“messenger” in the Acholi language). At the time of Lakwena’s Holy Spirit Movement, the northern community had many grievances against Museveni’s regime because of previous atrocities committed by the UPDF when Museveni assumed power. Consequently, many northerners held sympathy for early movements against the government.

However, after Lakwena’s defeat by the national army in 1986-7, Joseph Kony rose to fill the void left behind the failed rebellion as the leader of the LRA. The fact that Kony and the LRA in the north operated in opposition to the government the longest, compared to 22 other rebel groups claiming to be resisting the new government, is very telling and illustrates how “neo-colonial forces have contributed to the continuous ethnification and increased political violence in Uganda.”¹² The conflict became regional with the rebel group’s move out of the north into neighboring Southern Sudan in the 1990s where they set up base. In the early 2000’s, the LRA began attacking people in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic and Southern Sudan. However, with the crossing of international borders, the national and colonial origin of the conflict has often been ignored or side-stepped.

The national nature of the conflict in northern Uganda is seldom acknowledged by Museveni’s government, which persistently references the conflict as “the northern question.” This top-down neglect, coupled with the fact that Kony himself is Acholi and his rebel insurgency for most of the 21-year period was carried out primarily in the north, disguised the fact that the conflict was national in nature. Local voices and international monitoring of the conflict reveals that both the UPDF and LRA are responsible for violence, unrest, and human rights abuses during the war.¹³ In the early 1990s, after losing what little civilian support they had in the north, the LRA began abducting men, women and children, pillaging villages and homes, and stealing anyone and anything beneficial in guaranteeing the success of the rebel movement. The Acholi along with the Langi and Teso ethnic groups bore the brunt of the civil war being the predominant ethnic groups living within the region. According to Resolve (formally Resolve Uganda), an advocacy and humanitarian organization that works in central Africa, 38,000 children and 37,000 adults have been abducted in the course of the conflict.¹⁴ In addition to the war, the forced displacement of 90 percent of the Acholi population into internally displaced persons camps by the Ugandan

government interrupted or destroyed traditional forms of inhabitation and practices. At the height of the war, Resolve reported, 250 camps were in operation.¹⁵ Physical, sexual violence and disease outbreak persisted in the camps, with the UPDF this time as the guilty party. Besides abducting and arming children and youth, the war became characterized by tactics of terror used by the LRA, one being to cut off the lips, ears and noses of individuals. Entire villages were burned and looted and inhabitants massacred.

In a Time of No War

An end to active violence came in 2006 with a ceasefire agreement between the Ugandan government and the LRA (although efforts for peace negotiations were initiated as far back as 1993, led by Betty Bigombe, then Minister for the Pacification of the North). Today, northern Uganda is in a state of relative peace and is generating signs of long-term stability. The population, as well as local and international government and non-governmental agencies (NGOs) are actively engaged in peace-building, reconciliation, transitional justice and reconstruction projects. Remaining LRA commanders are still wanted by the International Criminal Court, but some senior and lower level commanders have been granted amnesty for returning from the bush—a decision that has received various forms of criticism from the civil society community of northern Uganda. The rebel army is reported to be segmented, but still attacking civilians and committing similar atrocities in the neighboring countries mentioned earlier. Over one million people have returned home, but several thousand remain in the camps, mostly the elderly and youth. They rebuild their livelihoods in the face of economic instability, land disputes, disease outbreaks, and lack of everyday resources. The difficult task of establishing a life outside of the camps and returning to a state of “normalcy” characterizes a large part of social conditions in northern Uganda. Looking at education, the two-decade conflict severely debilitated the educational infrastructure, resulting in wider disparities associated with access to education and the quality of schools in the north versus those in central or southern Uganda. Furthermore, many of the schools in the rural region were destroyed by rebels and have not been re-built or have been poorly restored. The political environment of the north is one of estrangement from that of the south. Peace education has the potential to serve as a bridge between the past and present conditions, facilitating social and political change on a level that children and youth can access.

Between Vulnerability and Resiliency

Often youth and children, especially those under the age of 18, are relegated to the category of “victims” in conflict and disaster situations. In northern Uganda, the abduction and arming of children complicates this notion of passive victim. As aid workers, local and international, seek to emphasize vulnerability and dependency, they are met with the reality of these children’s participation in the war after being forcibly recruited. This is relevant because this narrative is told and re-told until children are left with no agency over their lives. Scholarship argues a different position: “Childhood scholars advise against treating ... children as one universally vulnerable category, maintaining that conceptualizations of childhood and acceptable roles for children at different ages vary across time, space, and class.”¹⁶ Used as a philosophical and literary concept, this view is often referred to as the Apollonian view, in which children are seen as innocent, vulnerable and in need of special care and protection from the world. On the other hand, the Dionysian view portrays

children as easily corrupted and in need of discipline. Both views miss the complicated identities of children and their ability to organize on their own. Although the strategic advertisement of children as victims does lead to effective fundraising, it also leads to less effective programs on the ground where this image remains dominant. Increasingly incorporated into ethnographic studies on children, each concept presents children as incomplete adults and passive recipients rather than agents in their own lives.

Jan Egeland, former United Nations Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief, declared in 2003 that the war in northern Uganda was “the world’s worst forgotten humanitarian crisis.”¹⁷ In many senses this simplified the conflict as solely humanitarian in scope rather than politically and historically motivated. The LRA began abducting children into its army in the early 1990s and in 1996 the government launched its “protected villages” policy that would force the northern Ugandan population into camps. The idea was not solely to protect the people from violence but to isolate the LRA from a community that allegedly supported them. The abductions, however, did not stop because of these camps. Instead, life became even more insecure as thousands of people were concentrated in one area when before they were spread across rural areas. What resulted was the most remarkable example of agency recorded during the long history of the war: children commuting at night to the nearest towns to escape abduction.

Current scholarship on children in difficult situations suggests that relying solely on what disadvantages children have is counterproductive to assessing their needs. Recognizing agency means also taking into consideration the diversity of children’s experience from one culture to the next. In what looked like a mass exodus from the rural areas and encampments, children would walk miles to the nearest town where they would sleep for the night. Towns provided a level of security because the LRA rarely came into the municipalities. This type of demonstration points more to the coexistence of children’s vulnerability and their “social agency and active involvement in the construction and interpretation of their own lives and the lives of those around them.”¹⁸ Even though their ability to cope with this violence and fear may have been weakened by internal displacement, northern Ugandan children were still able to assess their situation and find ways to survive during the war. Now, in the post-conflict era, peace education can serve as a tool to nurture that ability. Seeing children purely as a vulnerable population has permeated NGO and government programming. This is the narrative that today’s peace education programs will either reproduce or transform. However, in order for these programs to avoid reflecting these dominant and problematic patterns, an emphasis on youth’s agency, and their stories of survival and hope during extremely fearful and difficult times is warranted.

A Crisis in Itself: Education in Northern Uganda

It would only take a visit to a primary or secondary education institution or the time to converse with those working within this sector to conclude that the state of education post-war is in need of urgent attention, assistance and investment: “For the West Nile region, teachers and educational leaders feel abandoned and are greatly distressed by the undeniable deterioration of staff, salaries and facilities as a whole. They speak bravely of development in public, but in private they say with profound sadness ‘We have gone backwards.’ ... by the collapse of the health and education budgets of the central government.”¹⁹ The West Nile region is the north-western most point of Uganda, but these sentiments are similar to those collected in my fieldwork sites.

The north's situation, because of the two-decade insurgency, is lacking even more. Although enrollment in schools across Uganda has tripled since 1986 (mainly due to Universal Primary Education), it is still the case that few students complete primary school. Due to lack of accommodation and sporadic pay, teacher absenteeism is another challenge. This can especially be observed in the rural areas of Uganda and in the general teacher-student ratio standing at 1:100 and even 1:200.²⁰ To further add to the complications resulting from the war, many former abductees and those children whose education was disrupted by displacement are returning to school or enrolling in adult "catch-up" education programs several years after they were to complete primary or secondary education.

As a result, an entire generation has been handed a fate of continued poverty and reduced literacy. In addition, the majority of these youths cannot afford to pay for such adult education programs and have settled for trade or vocational schools in hopes of generating income in the fast developing town of Gulu. Still others are not satisfied with their options. The central and south are producing youth who will have greater access to pursue fields in medicine, law, education, government, and business. The north, meanwhile, has only to offer its youth those skills required to be carpenters, mechanics, tailors and bricklayers. While these professions are no less reputable than others (or mutually exclusive), an overwhelming base of workers for the same jobs in a few fields leads to sporadic employment and lower wages. This is a key issue in other Global South regions and countries such as India where underemployment and unemployment is widespread amongst educated youth.

In August of 2011 I received an email correspondence from one of northern Uganda's most prominent peace-builders, Reverend Macleord Baker Ochola II, Retired Anglican Bishop of the Diocese of Kitgum. He expressed his concern over State neglect, writing, "my people ... are deliberately being marginalized and denied education opportunities, by our own government of the day."²¹ In fact, Bishop Ochola's sentiments are similar in nature to those recorded in Sverker Finnstrom's ethnography:

Perhaps the most important development is Gulu's new university, established in 2003. At the same time, many young people in the war-ravaged north with expectations of a better future regarding education and work, expressed an experience of being increasingly, betrayed, a feeling of being severed. For them, Gulu University stands there as proud evidence of modernity and developmental Uganda, but few have the means to go for higher studies.²²

Ochola's and Finnstrom's findings point toward a very salient reality that exposes the co-existence of post-war rumor and the reality of government ostracism through education.

Ironically, education is often thought of as a solution to war or violence, hence peace education. However, education is not a neutral space but can serve as a form of violence symbolically through structural inequality. Because it is not always recognized, symbolic violence becomes the most persistent type of structural inequality and political and social alienation. Schools are sites where this type of violence is implanted into language and action on an unconscious level, legitimizing the current power relations that disenfranchise people and communities. Addressing structural violence will prove a challenge to peace education developers, but should not be ignored. Their task is arduous at best, but the post-war reconstruction phase may provide the most fertile time to pursue such innovative educational practices.

Education in Africa and Colonizing Epistemology

Just as in the history of Uganda, acknowledging the powerful legacy of colonialism on African systems of knowledge leads one to consider the contemporary manifestations of such education that “has tended to emphasize mimicry over creativity, and the idea that little worth learning about, even by Africans, can come from Africa.”²³ Critics of the contemporary structure of education in Africa point to colonialism as the means by which “African creativity, agency and value systems” have been devalued in place of European or Western conceptualizations and truths. This can be seen on several fronts such as the emphasis on colonial languages as the sole medium of learning, the blind acceptance of the way in which Africa has been defined and categorized by the West, the inability to question existing ideologies, and the favoring of imported teaching mechanisms over local traditions.

In my fieldwork I was often perplexed by courses that taught United States (U.S.) geography, often encountering students who asked me if I knew of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). They would explain to me how they learned about TVA in their U.S. studies course, having to choose between that or European geography. A small detail in my daily experience, I found this to be a contribution to the uncritical internalization of colonial and colonizing yardsticks of what it meant to be educated or modern: that in order to be counted, one must possess knowledge about the West and its history. The fact that knowledge of U.S. geography will be unlikely to improve the situation of youth and children in accessing higher education or negotiating their sociopolitical futures remains unchallenged. U.S. geography instead may serve as an unconscious tool that reinforces existing power relations and Western hegemony. However, strategically, this knowledge is useful under the current global hegemon that privileges knowledge familiar to the West. Yet, the key issue surrounding acquiring this type of knowledge is the wider pedagogical context in which it is imparted. Although schools, and other sites, are privileged locales, because of Western notions on learning, I acknowledge that Ugandans and people living in the Global South are not passive recipients of this type of education, but have in many cases reconfigured it to fit their needs.²⁴

The colonial model of authoritarian organization, however, remains a feature of education in Africa. This model leaves students with little freedom to participate in classroom spaces and teachers “little part in school processes other than as receivers of rules, instructions, and information.”²⁵ Therefore, the link between educational disparities in Uganda today that Ochola and Finnstrom document are not contemporary manifestations, but have been inherited from the colonial model of “divide and conquer” evident in Uganda’s own history. Francis Nyamnjoh provides a general historical account of how education became a vehicle for colonizers to maintain power and how it is still being reproduced in the post-colonial era along ethnic and regional lines:

[...] that disparities arising from the lack of unified or uniform education offered by different bodies—colonial government and different and often warring missionary denominations within the colonies—set the stage for rising conflicting expectations and inequities in education attainment and across different ethnic groups and colonial demarcated regions by the colonial system would at independence manipulate postcolonial education policy, admission to schools and access to scholarships for further education to the advantage of people from their regions and ethnic groups.²⁶

Although not every aspect of Africa or African cultures is the quintessence of human achievement, for the ethnic groups in northern Uganda, colonizing epistemologies form their everyday realities in a country where notions of meritocracy and democracy are contradicted on the ground. English is given precedence over African languages, such as Acholi, Langi or Iteso as the speech of the powerful, knowledgeable and educated. African epistemologies, in this case Acholi cultural and social means of prompting knowledge, are only relevant when talking about what has been lost due to war instead of what can be.

In one secondary school classroom, where the teacher had received training through UMECS/SPRING/MoES, I was confronted with an interesting lesson on “peace.” During the middle of a lesson on what peace was and what peace was not, a young student stood up and proceeded to exit the classroom. It was assumed he went to the restroom, but the teacher, not distracted, completed his thought before saying “now, what is wrong here?” He then began to tell the class why it was inappropriate for the student to leave the classroom during a lesson. “He breached peace! You much follow the school’s rules to maintain peace and he did not. We would normally cane students, but that is not peaceful. Let us take a vote ... how many of you would like him to stay ... how many of you would like him to be punished?” The class was divided while raising their hands and some did not raise their hands at all. Luckily, those who wished for the student to be given a second chance were in the majority. The offending student came back shortly after that moment and the teacher began explaining how he had broken a school rule.

The student did not speak, he sat quietly. With a smile on his face, the teacher explained that he had broken peace because of his actions, but was spared by his fellow classmates. After this uncomfortable incident, the teacher went forward with the lesson. I found the entire scenario to be peculiar at best because of the way in which a trained peace education teacher defined peace and conflict saying, “If you deviate from these [practices] and you do something unexpected then you breach peace.” The student created conflict by leaving the class and this was labeled as “bad” and anything that deviated from school rules or the status quo was conflict. This method, however, left out a very important point in peace and conflict studies: that conflict is inevitable and there are various forms and states of conflict that have to be mitigated rather than defined in black and white terms such as “good” and “bad.” In addition, ideas on the legitimacy of various forms of power are also a part of this conversation. Peace education, instead, should be used to provide a way to counteract colonial influence on African education by nurturing and inspiring young people to seek out alternative forms of conflict resolution and acquiring knowledge in and outside of the classroom that are rooted in local understandings.

Defining Peace Education as a Process and Philosophy

In Uganda, peace education at its most basic level involves early childhood development via activities involving sharing and working in groups, lessons on how to deal with emotional stress in a positive manner, and interacting with others. Turning toward peace and education more specifically, The University of Peace—the United Nations-mandated graduate school of peace studies—defines peace education as “the process of acquiring the values, the knowledge and developing the attitudes, skills and behaviors to live in harmony with oneself, with others and with the natural environment.”²⁷ Ian Harris and Mary Morrison in the second edition of their book on peace education give a more detailed description of peace education:

Peace education is currently considered to be both a philosophy and a process involving skills, including listening, reflections, problem-solving, cooperation and conflict resolution. The process involves empowering people with the skills, attitudes and knowledge to create a safe world and build a sustainable environment. The philosophy teaches nonviolence, love, compassion and reverence for all life. Peace education confronts indirectly the forms of violence that dominate society by teaching about its causes and providing knowledge of alternatives. Peace education also seeks to transform the present human condition by, as noted educator Betty Reardon states, “changing social structures and patterns of thought that have created it.”²⁸

Harris and Morrison’s work provides an important assessment of peace education that is missing from international discourse. It also provides a model for the prospective outcomes of peace education throughout the world. As noted in their definition, peace education combines aspects of both negative and positive peace to discuss cultivating peace on an interpersonal and structural level. Defining peace in both regards is, thus, imperative to understanding the prospects and limitations of peace education in its current form in northern Uganda.

Concepts of positive peace are commonly less embraced than the concept of negative peace. Negative peace indicates the absence of war and physical violence. Positive peace, however, denotes not only the absence of war, but the minimization or eradication of covert forms of violence specific to structures and institutions. Furthermore, warfare is linked to the emergence of social stratification and control of resources under complex political and social organization such as states, which is evident in Uganda’s colonial and post-colonial history. There are many definitions of peace education that include more or less the same language, but few evaluations exist. This makes it difficult to assess the success or failure of peace education programs or to create an effective model for future programs.

The institutionalization of peace education in schools across the globe, however, is a response to increased militarism and mass violence in contemporary society. The fact is that there is a collective familiarity with violence that places Ugandan children and young people of the last two decades in very important and powerful positions as the next leaders of the country, but also as potential agents of violence. Cheney elaborates: “because of this violent past, Ugandan childhood is constructed in everyday discourse as a primary space in which national prosperity will either be made or broken.”²⁹ However, she notes rather boldly how conceptions of childhood and the proper place of the child contradict the reality of their agency, changing identity and engagement with citizenship: “Ugandan children are therefore becoming—at least discursively—primary vehicles for social change. Yet children’s abilities to participate in the activities of citizenship are still constrained by often-contradictory adult notions of childhood, both local and international.”³⁰ Not only are children from the north navigating through contradictory notions of childhood, their powerlessness is magnified on a group level due to the added stigma of feeling like pariahs in their country of birth.

For peace education to be an effective tool in preventing a relapse into violent insecurity or war, it is imperative to find a stable yet working definition of peace. The difficulty comes when “most people think they know what *peace* means. But in fact, different people often have very different understandings of this seemingly simple word ... although most people would agree that some form of peace—whatever it means—is desirable.”³¹ Peace,

however, should not be seen as the absolute ideal of human existence. Rather, it should be acknowledged that “peaceful life can be infested with conflicts and frustrations, but in the peaceful order of things, problems are handled, strategies beyond mere survival are developed, life is continuously constituted and reconstituted.”³² This captures the distinction between positive and negative peace that is essential to more complete definitions of peace.

Most teachers attested to the fact that before peace education, students exhibited violent behavior towards their peers when disputes or misunderstandings arose. Students’ behaviors were described as amoral in regards to respecting authority, school rules and property. Teachers expressed how peace education in the schools helped to curtail these things, which may describe more of their emotional and spiritual attachment to peace education as an idea rather than a direct relationship between it and the reduction of violence. James Page and other scholars, including Gur-Ze’ev and Johan Galtung suggest that it is exactly this emotional and spiritual connection that simultaneously hinders the development of a systematic philosophy of peace education, but also points toward its need: “those involved in peace education tend to be already convinced of its importance and see the reasons for peace education to be self-obvious. Yet is it precisely the fideistic [or reliance on faith rather than reason] nature of the commitment to peace education which underscores how important it is to articulate clear reason for such an educational endeavor.”³³

The Need for Peace Education

There is documented international interest in peace education: “the Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations (1945), the Constitution of UNESCO (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1949) all contain statements undergirding the significance of peace education ... the value of peace education has been affirmed in official documents of UNESCO, the United Nations General Assembly and the Hague Appeal for Peace.”³⁴ These documents show that there is an international awareness of peace education and an inherent value recognized in the notion, but there is “no well-developed philosophical rationale for peace education.”³⁵ Because more complete definitions of peace education emphasize transforming structures and cognitive dissonance, peace education can be a very important aspect of reshaping the future for children and youth living in a post-conflict society. However, peace education can also serve as a threat to current monopolizing power structures. Yet with such escalating global insecurity, peace education should be considered an indispensable initiative to pursue. Specifically in northern Uganda, it should be given precedence if post-conflict reconstruction is to “ensure that education does not [continue to] contribute to the likelihood of a relapse into violence and actively builds social cohesion to help prevent it.”³⁶

The Interconnection among Peace, Violence and Education

There is an interconnection among peace, violence and education in schools in that what affects one can have an incredible effect on the others. Ensuring that education “plays a role in reversing the damaging effects of conflict and building or rebuilding social cohesion requires a deep analysis of the way education impacts conflict” and vice versa.³⁷ Education is seen as an everyday activity while conflict and war are seen as outliers to everyday life. Peace education, however, lies at the intersection of peace, violence and education, exposing how the three are related. Separating them may be easier for one to

digest but “war is a total social phenomenon, affecting not just the combatants, but every person, object, social structure, and ideal.”³⁸ The violence of war and conflict permeates education through not only physical violence and the abduction of children from schools, but through gender discrimination and ethnocentrism. Because of ethnocentrism’s unconscious domination over political, cultural and social customs and institutions, it is the most powerful and most difficult to recognize and deconstruct. So while education can and has been used to contribute to violent conflict, it can also be harnessed to promote new social relations and attitudes.

Cultures of Peace and Violence: Teaching Peace in the North

Addressing the concept of “peace” among the Acholi is important to the discussion of bridging peace and education. When peace education is mentioned, in most cases, it is assumed that one is “teaching peace” to those who otherwise would not know what it is. The term peace education, generally, is problematic as it suggests that “peace” is absent from countries like Uganda, rather than a world-wide scarcity. Thus, it is important to recognize culture in the teaching of peace education. If one recognizes the profound effect of colonialism on African education, coupled with that of present-day neo-liberal/colonial policies, one must also acknowledge that “hope for the future of education in Africa depends on providing for the creative processes of cultural endogenization popular with ordinary Africans.”³⁹ Peace education must be taken on as a societal norm, rather than imported product of foreign (national and international) interest. Culture is a dynamic process and the material and abstract importance it plays in the lives of people offer significant points of consideration for peace education.

I often heard Acholi people remark that their culture was a peaceful one that promoted harmony at all levels of civic and domestic life. Sverker Finnstrom recounts how the Acholi have been labeled as violent due to colonial stereotypes and heavy recruitment into the army: “still today it is common for people in Kampala and beyond to regard people from northern Uganda as backward and martial, and in the Ugandan context, sometimes the very epitome of primitiveness.”⁴⁰ Even though the Acholi were not passive actors in this assignment or re-assignment of their identity these historical categories remain a strong and evolving narrative of ethnic stereotyping in Uganda. Many Acholi are adamant about their culture being peaceful in nature, which is a form of strategic essentialism itself: “I encountered some young men frustrated by the collective blame put upon the Acholi, who painstakingly collected data and statistics to challenge the image of Acholi as violent and militaristic.”⁴¹ Similarly, I encountered the same response and was told of traditional methods of reconciliation as proof. Thus, what is troubling about peace education in its current state in Uganda is its emphasis on “creating a culture of peace” or more specifically as outlined by UMECS’ goal “to build a culture of peace and healing to prevent new wars.”⁴² How does one create or build a culture of peace within a community that has been stereotyped as martial, but asserts peace has always been essential to its cultural heritage?

If peace were simply about creating a culture around it, violent uprisings in Uganda would have been less numerous, since according to Acholi people, peace is not absent from their cultural heritage. Both the Holy Spirit Movement and Lord’s Resistance Army, because of fear of government violence and marginalization defied cultural customs and observances on peace and declaring war to launch their rebel movements. To avoid reinforcing the Western monopoly on knowledge, peace education in northern Uganda should incorporate or increase knowledge of Acholi traditions in the classroom. For example,

the ceremony of *Mato Oput* is described as a traditional reconciliation ceremony between families or clans that aim to achieve forgiveness, justice, and healing while, ultimately, reconciling parties and reestablishing relationships broken due to a killing. Belonging to a network of rituals, *Mato Oput* is a ceremony acknowledged by most Acholi as a viable solution to post-war recovery. It is encountering revitalization difficulties and problems of applicability towards mass atrocities committed during war, but it serves as a reminder of local means of seeking justice and healing. It would benefit children, especially those who were not exposed to the tradition due to the war, to learn of its significance to their cultural history, especially as they encounter ethnic stereotypes. In addition, the tradition of storytelling by fireside or *Wang'oo* was used to pass along cultural norms to young people and allowed the storyteller to manipulate myths to “mediate a sense of direction in the present, or a sense of a future, despite the fact that war makes the surroundings seriously bad.”⁴³ Storytelling, coupled with a more holistic understanding of peace and how conflict develops and ways in which it can be resolved, would enable children and young people to begin the creative process of recognizing how politics, history and culture interact to inform the choices they make and the environment they must navigate.

This assumption that people living in northern Uganda, in particular Acholi people, have adopted violent ways to respond to disagreements is reductionist and rooted in ethnocentric thought. A more comprehensive analysis by all parties associated with peace education would evaluate not only what influence war has had on interpersonal interaction, but also the influence of structural hardships and violence, such as poverty. It is true that war can have a profound impact on social relationships, such as creating new forms of intergenerational conflicts; however, it would be an oversimplification to assume acts of violence or “irregular” behavior are a direct cause of war or culturally innate. It is fathomable that other factors like not having money to pay for school fees, coming to school hungry, domestic violence, the loss of a relative, or sickness prompt children or youth to display aggressive or depressive behavior. Physical violence reproducing physical violence is a slippery slope when so many other factors are intensely affecting people’s lives. Thus creating a “culture of peace” should not be a blanket explanation for the need for peace education.

Fieldwork: Evaluating Peace Education Programs⁴⁴

This section will outline, more specifically, important similarities and differences between the two main peace education projects I observed in northern Uganda related back to theoretical sections above. Both the Insight Collaborative and UMECS/SPRING/MoES pilot-projects focused on conflict resolution, social-behavioral symptoms of conflict, resolving inter-personal disputes through techniques of negotiation and mediation. Learning to manage anger, improve communication, and separate facts from emotions constitute other main elements of these programs. However, it is important to note that peace goes beyond individual choices and behaviors; peace education extends to structural, historical and political conditions that simultaneously limit choice and agency.

When I began my research in February of 2010, Gulu, Kitgum and Amuru, UMECS/SPRING/MoES’ peace education pilot project⁴⁵ had been operational for two and a half months in a few secondary schools. The Ugandan government introduced peace education to secondary schools in the north for one year in order to expand it to the rest of the country. Many students and instructors were eager to learn about peace education and retained high hopes that it could help them re-build after war. On several occasions Ugandans would remark that just because the war was over did not mean peace had come to northern Uganda.

They were still suffering. However, the war itself is a result of a longer history of violence, tribalism, political oppression and exclusion in Uganda. The current model that is being offered by UMECS/SPRING/MoES' peace education program has a quality foundation that can be built upon, but because of shortcomings in teacher training, the provision of material resources, and proper follow-up assessments, it falls short of offering students and teachers the resources to prepare more in-depth and nuanced peace and conflict lessons. Observing peace education then, one has to ask to what extent does this education reproduce complacency, authoritarianism and colonizing epistemologies? Conversely, how often are students and instructors re-appropriating the content of peace education programs to promote their own agency and understandings of peace and conflict?

In June 2010, Insight's two primary schools had just begun their third lesson unit on "conflict resolution and communication." Insight's site director remarked, "we want to teach in the beginning of this unit that conflict is okay, it's inevitable and all that it means is an interaction or a communication with some disagreement"⁴⁶ I found her words to be quite different from what I was observing in the secondary school classrooms where "conflict" seemed to have a very restricted definition and was often talked about in negative terms with "conflict" being a functional term for an infinite amount of "bad" actions. Insight's pilot-project, compared to the UMECS/SPRING/MoES' project, was small in scale in regards to participating schools and staff size. However, in the months leading up to their launch, Insight was able to collaborate with the community in much of the same way as UMECS/SPRING/MoES.

Both programs emphasized lessons on citizenship. Yet the contradictions between Uganda's nation-building rhetoric and the wide-spread inequality and poverty that are so central to people's lived experience were not discussed. In particular, for the children and young people in the north, an exploration of how they feel about their identity in the larger national setting is warranted. A 13 year old secondary school student in senior one, (under UMECS/SPRING/MoES' project) when asked if she thought peace education was important, replied: "yes, because if there is peace in northern Uganda then we will even study well and our government will also plan well for us."⁴⁷ Her comment is revealing because of the way she perceives the government's involvement in her region. It is up to her and the people of her region to establish peace in order for the government to provide assistance.

However, the murders, beatings, and rapes that took place by the UPDF have cause widespread mistrust between the people and the State. Simultaneously nationalism is still a strong feature of northern Ugandans' political and cultural identity, and schools are principal sites of indoctrination. Peace education currently seems to be geared to produce a child in line with ideas of citizenship and nationalism which anthropologist Kristen Cheney describes as contradictory to reality:

Yet children's abilities to participate in the activities of citizenship are still constrained by often-contradictory adult notion of childhood, both local and international (James 1993, 72). Despite all the rhetoric about children's rights, it seemed to me that many children felt rather powerless over their circumstances.⁴⁸

Critical engagement with peace education can help children navigate this sociopolitical environment in a way that encourages belonging without reinforcing nationalism and the notion that the only significance of the child is her or his economic contribution to the nation-state. Peace education that gives attention to structural inequality has the potential to empower and stimulate creativity so that the harshness of daily life does not amount solely to individual failure. This is needed now more than ever, as comments such as this from

a peace education school teacher still abound: “though you have lost your parents, you’re maybe positive there is still hope you are still useful to the nation, you are still useful to the country.”⁴⁹ This is problematic because of the powerlessness that children and youth may feel in a nation that is continually encouraging them to build it up while their opportunities for upward mobility are dismal. Being critically engaged with history and contemporary issues that shape life in Uganda can empower children in a more viable ways than simply reproducing notions of citizenship and nationalism. It can allow them to participate in engaged citizenship.

Each program had a goal of reaching the wider community through the students—a child-centered approach. Education, formal and informal, is tied to local conceptions of power, identity and knowledge. Traditionally in Africa, the maintenance of knowledge was the task of elders. Peace education empowers children to be the “ambassadors of peace” and teach their communities about peace without taking into account traditional roles for children and working towards a model that considers all societal members. In Acholiland there is the *Wang’oo*, but it was discontinued because of the danger associated with lighting fires at night with rebels in the area. This is important because of my recommendations for peace education as a source of cultural understanding through privileging African epistemologies. Therefore a simultaneous effort to offer peace education as a child-inclusive community-centered program should be considered. This entails making sure students know that schools are only one site of learning and that their community and culture is a resource for understanding how peace education lessons in the classroom are made manifest outside of that setting. Although preliminary planning did involve the community, workshops should be organized for interested elders, youth and children who cannot access schools and for parents to make sure that peace education is community-centered—or that the knowledge is there for the community scrutiny and consumption as well. This would be an enormous undertaking, but these initial steps set the stage for a more meaningful, sustained and inclusive peace education project.

There are some significant differences between UMECS/SPRING/MoES and Insight as well. For instance, both projects promoted ideas on human and child rights, equality, conflict resolution (how to deal with small disagreements and conflicts) and non-violence. Yet the programs most associated with the MoES seemed to perpetuate models of complacency to systems of inequality and sociopolitical hardships, working only to educate students about personal and interpersonal forms of conflict and problem solving, such as sharing, instead of broader themes of social justice, socio-political change and violence created by structural factors as well as human beings. This is why some scholars say that one should not expect peace and educational initiatives to offer solutions to conflicts, especially where there is an unequal allocation of resources. Children are already receiving interpersonal skills through daily life and interactions with elders, adults and their peers. Is the goal of peace education then to reproduce social norms? Or allow students to critically engage with their aspirations and troubles? This is not to say that there is no space for teaching caring and empathy, but peace education must go beyond “just a rational understanding of the problems faced by others” and question “the structures of violence that dominate everyday life ... to create a peaceful disposition to counteract the omnipotent values of militarism.”⁵⁰

The intellectual rigor of the programs differed as well even though two-thirds of their curricula promoted the same ideals. For example, one secondary school student when asked about what he was learning in his peace education course remarked “it is all the same” indicating feelings of monotony.⁵¹ Most students, however, when asked to identify

some of the challenges they faced responded that they did not know (some reported that there was nothing difficult about the curriculum), but could more easily say what they liked about peace education and why it was important. Teachers were more supported through the Insight project while teachers associated with UMECS/SPRING/MoES felt abandoned as staff members were not always aware of other programming and problems happening in the school. Furthermore, types of resources and materials ranged. Insight provided peace education books, teacher guides, journals for the students and a “child-friendly” declaration of human rights handbook, while UMECS/SPRING/MoES’ teachers were concerned about the lack of teaching materials they had at their disposal. UMECS/SPRING/MoES’ pilot project was more State supported, but Insight displayed better organization and engagement between the students and curriculum. Each initiative has strong points and areas that require further evaluation and improvement. The similarities between the programs suggest that collaboration would be valuable in ensuring the continuation of peace education from primary to secondary school.

The World Bank’s report, *Reshaping the Future: Education and Postconflict Reconstruction*, suggests that “simultaneous and complementary efforts from above (government efforts) and from below (grassroots social movements) must emerge in order to institutionalize” peace education.⁵² On the other hand, scholarship on peace offers a different approach, which suggests that peace is more effective when it is not institutionalized. What can be extracted from these two thoughts is that because the projects face structural and institutional barriers, a community-centered model should be considered as foundational for peace education. Yet at the same time, making the curriculum available to the Ministry of Education and Sports would ensure that peace education is facilitated in other schools around the country. The problem lies, thus, in the State’s ability to be an effective implementer of peace when it is itself an exacter of violence. How much of the curricula would resemble nation-building ideology rather than critical participation and dialogue? This question remains to be answered, but constitute areas of further research.

The Future of Peace Education in (Northern) Uganda

Through my evaluation of peace education in Uganda, I recognize two things: (1) that peace education *has* the ability to give children and youth the tools to navigate a post-conflict environment that emphasizes their agency and ability to bring about social change and (2) that schools themselves are social spaces that reproduce historical and larger systems of inequality, but also positive social norms. Peace education may give young people the tools to identify and negotiate with these systems, but it remains unseen if these tools will also help them work toward transforming these systems. Because gaining knowledge through the privileged site of the classroom is highly valued, schools and other educational institutions have a responsibility to pursue peace education. The future of peace education in northern Uganda is difficult to predict because of the number of peace education programs being implemented and phased out. Many work separately from each other although many of the goals and much of the content of the programs is similar. An ideal direction for peace education would be the creation of a child-inclusive but community-centered umbrella organization that monitors projects implemented by various organizations, where these groups can share curricular ideas, best practices, and nuanced strategies. These would be partnered with community-created and -based systems of conflict resolution that would complement the school-based curricula.⁵³ Although both projects were specifically

designed for the north as a result of the LRA insurgency, the Ugandan government has an opportunity to recognize more assertively the potential of peace education in an effort to promote national reconciliation due to the conflict's national origin.

The post-conflict environment is perhaps the most ideal time to implement initiatives such as peace education. It provides an opportunity to reinvent social spaces even among the constraints of reconstruction. The post-conflict setting offers a chance for policy reform and systemic change as well as rapid development, which is all taking place in northern Uganda. Specifically, with the curricula, a more complete lesson plan that presents war and peace as a continuum would help students to recognize different types of violence and conflict. It is important to acknowledge that peace is not just the absence of war or "even the absence of interstate violence. It is social condition in which "exploitation is *minimized* or *eliminated*, and in which there is neither overt violence nor the more subtle phenomenon of underlying *structural violence*."⁵⁴ Everyday violence such as starvation, disease and limited access to healthcare and education that "marginalize humans with even great frequency are usually invisible or misrecognized."⁵⁵ The task of peace education, then, would be to complicate the conflict itself, and "these complexities should help us problematize our present approaches and should encourage us to keep searching for new, pedagogical, context-sensitive strategies to better cope with the multiple and varied problems confronted by educators in conflict and post-conflict societies around the world."⁵⁶ The northern Ugandan community's expectations for change and improvement are high. UMECS/SPRING/MoES and Insight are working to implement peace education under very extraordinary circumstance following a protracted conflict. Yet, as this analysis and evaluation suggests, there are examples and lessons to be learned from the first couple years of piloting that can help promote peace education as critical to the wider reconstruction of northern Uganda.

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- 44 This is an abbreviated version of my fieldwork
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- 46 Personal correspondence, 2010, Gulu.
- 47 Personal correspondence, 2010, Gulu.
- 48 Cheney, *The Pillars of The Nation*, 3.
- 49 Personal correspondence, 2010, Gulu.
- 50 Harris and Morrison, *Peace Education*, 31.
- 51 Personal correspondence, 2010, Gulu.
- 52 Sarbib, *Reshaping The Future of Education and Postconflict Reconstruction*, 47.

53 Yakubu, Derry-Joe M. 2003. "Toward a Framework for a Model for Peace Education in Nigeria." *Conflict Resolution and Peace Education in Africa*. Ernest E. Uwazie, eds. New York: Lexington Books. p 133.

54 Baresh and Webel, "The Promise of Peace, the Problems of War," 6.

55 Scheper-Hughes, Nancy and Philippe Bourgois. 2003. *Violence in War and Peace*. Blackwell Publishing.

56 Bekerman, Zvi. 2009. "Peace Education and Contact: Introduction." Claire McGlynn, Zvi Bekerman, and Tony Gallagher, eds. *Peace Education in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. p 91.

About the Author

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