Positive Youth Development in War-Affected Children in Uganda

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Abstract

The war in northern Uganda with Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) created over 20 years of terror and turmoil. Tens of thousands of youth were either abducted as child soldiers and/or sex slaves; or they were placed in internally displaced peoples' (IDP) camps, where they lived with inadequate social provisions, such as food, health care, education, and safety. Our study used interviews and focus groups to learn about how these youth were coping post-war. In particular, we focused on youth with positive purpose and goals to understand ways in which they were supported to hold fast to positive development and life goals. Findings indicated that rehabilitation, financial support for education, role models, and sports/arts have helped many youth who experienced war in northern Uganda find pro-social purposes in their lives.

Keywords: Positive Youth Development; Uganda; War-affected youth; Youth Purpose; Former child soldiers.

Résumé

La guerre dans le nord de l'Ouganda menée par l'Armée de résistance du Seigneur (LRA) de Joseph Kony a créé plus de 20 ans de terreur et d'agitation. Des dizaines de milliers de jeunes ont soit été enlevés comme enfants soldats et/ou esclaves sexuels, soit trouvé refuge dans des camps de personnes déplacées (IDP) où ils vivaient avec des ressources insuffisantes, tels que le manque de nourriture, de soins de santé, d'éducation et de sécurité. Notre étude

a procédé *à des entrevues* individuelles et à des *discussions* en *groupe* pour en apprendre davantage sur la façon dont ces jeunes ont surmonté l'après-guerre. En particulier, nous nous sommes penchés sur les jeunes ayant des objectifs positifs dans le but de comprendre les moyens par lesquels ils ont été soutenus pour qu'ils puissent s'accrocher au développement positif et aux objectifs de vie. Les conclusions ont révélé que la réintégration, le soutien financier pour l'éducation, les modèles positifs, les sports et les arts ont aidé de nombreux jeunes qui ont vécus la guerre dans le nord de l'Ouganda à trouver des fins prosociales à leur vie.

Introduction

The exploration of positive youth development and purpose offers social scientists the opportunity to explore an important question beyond deficit research: What elements, given traumatic life events cause some people to follow a path of empathy, compassion, and service? In other words, what supports people to embrace a life of positive purpose during and after suffering tragedy?

As noted by Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003), Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl argued that a life of meaning is not a mere result of self-preservation and defense, nor a result of "instinctual drives" (1959, p. 121), but a search for purpose. Frankl discovered that love was what brought purpose and meaning, and he maintained that love for his wife kept him alive in concentration camps, not knowing that she had died in a camp. This was also a question that Csikszentmihalyi (2008, 2004) explored from the time he was a child in Europe, observing the despairing reactions many adults had to their experiences during World War II. In adulthood, he determined that people were most content when engaged in an activity that involved high challenge, for which they had high skill. He explained this state as "flow" – one in which time, ego, and basic needs seem to disappear, as one becomes completely absorbed in the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Csikszentmihalyi also acknowledged that a state of flow could occur with negative activities, and that it is morally neutral. Thus, for example, high challenge and high skill could result with trained children

attacking communities in the height of battle. His studies are, however, concentrated on the benefits of flow towards a positive life purpose.

Our study focuses on a positive sense of meaning and purpose. As we have discovered in our research in northern Uganda, the desire for a positive, purposeful life can follow war experiences of youth who were forced to torture and kill or be, themselves, tortured and killed by their Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) abductors. Thus, in our work with war-affected youth in northern Uganda, we asked the question: What elements are associated with young people's decisions to lead productive, purposeful lives after experiencing war?

This question of choice in human endeavour has been pondered through the centuries by ancient philosophers, saints, mystics, and historians; as have the notions of "goodness" and positive choices, freedom versus determinism, all part of examining life's purpose. Sociologists and psychologists have used constructs of behaviorism, self-belief theories (self-esteem, self-efficacy, etc.), and theories of motivation to explore positive purpose and choice in human behaviour. Our question for this analysis of our field research addresses a specific circumstance of youth purpose and motivation: Given an environment of protracted war and violence, what can support former child soldiers and abducted girls to choose a life of positive purpose and meaning?

The significance of this inquiry relates to the rights of children for protection and support (UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, 2000). UN Under-Secretary-General Radhika Coomaraswarmy reported that approxi-mately 250,000 children were used by governments and rebel groups as soldiers, servants, and sex slaves in 2008 (IPS, 2008). Corbin (2012) noted that Africa is disproportionately affected by armed conflict, and it requires in-depth research as a result. Betancourt stated,

> When someone's a survivor, it means they are still here today, despite what they went through. It would be terrible if people who had been through events like this saw themselves as hopeless or as victims. A survivor orientation means being able to feel the strength of what it takes to make it through such horrendous experiences and still move forward in life. Betancourt (2011: 25)

Moving forward requires a sense of purpose. To this end, we have inquired about life meaning and purpose with former child soldiers and other youth who were affected by the decades of surviving the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) war in northern Uganda.

Answers to this research question could provide improved methods of rehabilitating former child soldiers for reconciliation with their communities and restoration to a life of purpose.

Background

Northern Uganda, a region held captive for over 20 years by a brutal rebel war with Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), resonates with Frankl's "world of constant threat" (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). With 50% of the country's population under the age of 15 (CIA Factbook, 2013), approximately half of northern Ugandans were born and raised in an environment of terrorists who abducted children and brutalised villages. If they were not abducted to be child soldiers or sex slaves, most young people grew up in internally displaced people's camps (IDPs), where there was inadequate clean water, food, health, shelter, and education (Corbin, 20008; Oosterom, 2011). Thousands who stayed at their homes by day journeyed long distances every evening to sleep near town hospitals, schools, or other community spaces that were slightly more protected than the small villages where they lived (Jagielski, 2009). Rebels raided and stole children from schools, homes, and IDP camps. Those who survived lived through unspeakable horrors of being forced to kill family and community members; beating and killing other abducted children who tried to escape or misbehaved; having to drink their own urine to avoid death due to dehydration; rape; and more (Cook, 2007; Eichstaedt, 2009; McBrien and Byers, 2015).

Kony's LRA created the largest child soldier army in modern history (estimates range from 25,000 to 66,000 strong, as young as eight years old, with the average ages of 14-18) (UNHCR, 2008; Village of Hope Uganda, n.d.).

Children and adolescents were taken from their homes and schools, and many spent from days to years as LRA soldiers and forced "wives" in Kony's army (McBrien and Byers, 2015). Some children have still not returned, and hundreds of others died in captivity. Though a peace treaty has not been signed, Kony has retreated into the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Central African Republic, where Ugandan and international forces are working to capture him.

Northern Uganda has experienced relative peace since 2008 and is in the process of rebuilding. Basic infrastructure was devastated, and poverty is high; thus, rebuilding moves slowly. The majority of abducted children have returned from the bush, and they have been in need of rehabilitation and education. Many faced rejection and loss when they first returned: while some families warmly welcomed the return of their children, others rejected them because the child soldiers killed members of their family or community, a strategy intentionally used by the rebels to discourage children from escaping; and others returned with children rejected by communities due to their rebel fathers (Corbin, 2008). Using fear and torture, the LRA taught children to do as commanded: kill innocent civilians, rape, be raped, torture, and plunder.

As communities began to launch radio programs to call the children to leave the bush, former child soldiers required the support of communities and rehabilitation centers (Cook, 2007). Returning children who wreaked inhumane crimes on their families and communities have presented a challenge for community members who were able to flee the country or survive in internally displaced persons camps (IDPs). In schools, the returned children have often been ostracised by their peers who avoided abduction (Coalition, 2008).

Such conditions are hardly what educators or psychologists would consider typical of positive child development. Research indicates needs for considerable psychosocial support for war-affected children (Barenbaum, Ruchkin, & Schwab-Stone, 2004; Betancourt & Khan, 2008). Adults and youth alike discuss returned child soldiers' problems with anger and with the need to return to systems of peaceful community life. Those not abducted lived in fear of abduction, sometimes traveling miles every evening to sleep in a somewhat

protected space, only to walk back in the morning, then repeat the process for days and months (Jagielski, 2009). They witnessed brutal killings and hid from rebels, often surviving without basic needs of adequate food, water, health, protection, and education.

In spite of the numerous instances of trauma endured, many youth have overcome the trauma of war to exhibit resilience and positive purpose in their lives. Our study focused on youth who have lived through the war in northern Uganda, whether as abductees or those surviving in homes or IDP camps, and who are now intent on their studies and expecting to achieve higher education and/or positive life goals. We examine reasons for their positive development and sources of support. We do not mean to imply a simplistic view of positive integration. Those who suffered traumatic experiences from the war have had to face terrible psychological issues related to war events (Barenbaum et al., 2004). Of course, not all have managed to move onto positive life purpose. Our intent was to investigate those who do move towards a positive life trajectory, in order to consider elements that help them and to consider ways in which to replicate these elements to increase support for war-affected children.

Theoretical Framework

Positive psychology and well-being studies have grown considerably over the past three decades (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2007). Calhoun and Tedeschi (2014) have brought back a theory of post-traumatic growth, the notion that "suffering and loss can lead to highly positive changes in the individual" (p. 6). The research focuses away from more traditional psycho-pathology and deficit theories, and examines instead the meaning of positive purpose and supports for achieving such function in life. Our work over years in northern Uganda has included work with youth who have been severely affected by their war experiences. Some are delusional, remarking on spirits that cause them to want to fight with their peers. Teachers have related incidents with children who describe violent visions of characters or who become violent with peers. For this research, we have chosen to report on those who have found a way to dedicate

themselves to a choice of bettering their communities and their country, whom we have met and interviewed and who have been referred to us for this study.

Resilience studies have focused on ways in which psychosocial factors have been internal or external, as well as how factors contribute to positive outcomes (Luther, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2007). The researchers acknowledge that traumatic factors range greatly. At the same time, they find recurrent themes in terms of "supportive adults, effective schools, and connections with competent, pro-social adults in the wider community" (p. 4). We found similar results in terms of adult role models. Ungar (2012) defines resilience as a child's ability to find the exact resources that he/she requires. Ungar suggests that such resources are available to the child, and that the child needs to find ways in which to access the needed resources. We find this theory problematic in development studies, where supplies are scarce and finite.

Positive youth development explores concepts of thriving (King et al., 2005), positive development and purpose (Damon, Mariano, & Bronk, 2010), and noble purpose (Bronk, 2012; Damon, 2003). Defined characteristics include "five Cs: cognitive and behavioral competence, confidence, positive social connections, character, and caring (or compassion)" (King et al., 2005). Referencing numerous other scholars, Bronk (2012) explains that traits of positive purpose include the following:

1) the choice to progress towards a meaningful goal for oneself;

2) active engagement working towards this goal; and

3) a goal that is important beyond the self; positive action in the world.

Other characteristics include long-term commitment and work towards achieving goals and belief in positive effects in the larger community.

For much of our work we have also used the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's (1999) ecological systems theory as an appropriate frame for the current study. It fits well with theories of positive youth development, as it examines ways in which interdependent spheres of support can create opportunities for an individual's wellbeing. These spheres range from the intimate contexts of family and close relationships through the sphere of cultural

and historic influences on the individual. Influences from the various environmental spheres are fluid and bi-directional. Bronfenbrenner describes five spheres of inter-directional influence and support:

1) The microsystem, which includes the intimate relationships in one's life, i.e., family, school, friends, and neighborhood;
2) The mesosystem, which involves connections between those micro-system elements;
3) The exosystem, which examines more distant relationships between the self and other systems, such as political, economic, religious, and educational systems (i.e., parents' jobs as they affect the child; political effects on education);
4) The macrosystem, which involves the influence of cultural beliefs and values; and
5) The chronosystem, which concerns the effect of history and time.

Our findings examine ways in which these interconnected systems can relate to positive youth purpose.

Procedures and Methods

Between late 2010 and August 2014, our group of researchers from Canada, the United States, and Uganda interviewed or conducted focus group discussions with over 150 war-affected secondary school students (aged 13-18) attending school in Lira and Gulu, Uganda, and 100 adults working with youth: educators, parents, social service providers, and administrators. We used a qualitative approach for this study, relying on structured interview protocols and focus group conversations, as they allowed us to gain a deep and rich description and context for our analysis (Patton, 2002). The study was approved by the Internal Review Boards (IRB) of both primary investigators. One of the Principal Investigators (PIs) was a psychologist, who was thus prepared to work with any child who might have a negative behavioral response to questions about war-time experiences.

Our sampling was a purposeful one. Two co-researchers were Ugandan, so were aware of schools and community organisations that have intentionally worked with children abducted by the LRA. One author held an emic perspective, as she grew up in Lira and Gulu, the two towns where we conducted interviews. We also worked with two female community leaders, one of whom is a trained psychologist, to select participants who would fit the traits of positive purpose as suggested by Bronk (2012) and King et al (2005). We began our interviews by talking with adult leaders from schools and community organisations, who then suggested students appropriate to our inquiry. Our interview questions included the following: What do you want to do with your lives? What can help you achieve your goals? What are your needs and those of the youth of northern Uganda since the war?

We did not create a study that would determine differences in gender, though in hindsight, this would be an important future study. Our gender differential was approximately 55% female and 45% male. Interviews were digitally recorded, then transcribed. We followed Merriam's (2001) three levels of coding: 1) the use of discreet pieces of data as descriptive categories; 2) searching for patterns among the first level codes to arrive at themes; and 3) analysing the patterns to discover ways in which they answered our research question. We used Dedoose (www.dedoose.com), an online mixed method software developed at UCLA, to record codes and analyse our findings for this study. This also allowed us to independently code interview passages for interrater reliability. Our determinations were highly similar, with only about a 10% difference in codes, which we discussed to understand and come to consensus as a result of our explanations. We condensed 90 discreet codes into 24 major fields so that we could easily locate comments related to such events as "war issues," "bush experiences," "rehabilitation/reintegration," "forgiveness," etc.

Limitations of the study included our reliance on local educators and social workers' recommendations for students to interview or include in focus groups. It is certainly possible that they would have recommended favorite students to

include for the study. As a result, those who may have been less prosocial but still resilient may have been omitted from the study. We also did not distinguish responses between those who were captured and those whose trauma came from living in IDP camps or being night travelers. We did not account for class difference; however, most students interviewed or in focus groups readily expressed the need for all students to receive school fees. We did not notice any expressed differences in terms of socioeconomic class. Nearly all of the students with whom we spoke were benefitting from some assistance with school fees.

Findings

The majority of youth expressed high levels of purpose, such as the desire to become teachers, engineers, doctors, lawyers, and politicians. Such responses correlate to King's (2005) concept of confidence and Bronk's (2012) concept of choosing a meaningful goal. However, the desire for highly purposeful lives often contrasted with the lack of financial support to attain achievement. Thus, there were complexities between youth purpose, community realities, and possible programs towards fulfillment. For those who have been able to grow and achieve, we address contexts that have supported their achievement in hopes of suggesting policies for positive youth growth that is critical for the advancement of Uganda, while recognising that economic realities continue to limit the aspirations of many capable youth in Uganda.

Our analysis of youth purpose connected to one or more supports that allow the youth to continue towards their dreams to reach a life of meaning and purpose. Both formal and informal education created essential components for the youth we interviewed for this study. In 2004, the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children conducted research on education in northern Uganda. In their meetings with both children and adults from numerous sectors of society, they found that "education was seen as one of the main sources of hope for the future of northern Uganda" (WC, 2005, p. 2).

Some of those educational components were non-formal, in that they provided out-of-school activities for students to achieve and avoid anti-social

behaviours. One example was a girls' group in which they worked together on various money-making projects and pooled their money together in savings. In a girls' focus group from an informal educational program, the participants described how they made bricks to sell. They collected the money and distributed it back to members during holidays so they had money to purchase presents. This project was also a strategy the group used to protect the girls from prostitution. One of the participants said, "During that time [holidays] men tend to give girls money, then use them as sex objects. But now if a girl has her own money, she won't take any money from the men." This example illustrates that their vocational education was teaching them a useful skill and livelihood that also helped them rise to a more noble purpose for one another. This activity demonstrated Bronk's (2012) element of creating goals that were more important than the self, and King et al's (2005) concepts of compassion, positive social connections, character, and caring to arrive at a life of meaning and purpose.

In other cases, however, youth were reliant on benefactors to fund school fees in order for them to continue in formal schooling. The supports noted correlate to various layers in Bronfenbrenner's (1999) ecological systems models as well as Luther's (2007) conception of supportive and prosocial adults who support the children. For example, primary in the support are financial components, typically in the form of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that sponsor children with school fees so that they can remain in school. This would correspond to the exosystem layer; in this case, the connection between a child, an NGO, and potentially the child's family or school. Second are role models – teachers, parents, or community members that have offered individual attention to the youth, inspiring them to continue to pursue their purposes. These relationships relate to the innermost system, the microsystem, of close connections between the child and others. Psychosocial supports at rehabilitation centers for former child soldiers are other examples of critical support, as are arts outlets and religion. These supports relate to the other layers described in Bronfenbrenner's systems theory. They also correspond to King et

al.'s (2005) description of the need for social connections in order to achieve necessary goals to reach a positive life trajectory.

The following major themes from our analysis correspond to positive youth development among war-affected youth we interviewed in northern Uganda: education, role models, artistic/athletic, and spiritual supports. Each theme will be treated separately in the following sections.

Education

The Uganda Ministry of Health's 2011 AIDS Indicator Survey (2012) includes numerous statistics regarding household characteristics. In the mid-Northern region that encompasses Lira, only 6.3% of females and 10.3% of males have completed primary school (p. 26). Statistics are, however, improved among young members of the population, indicating that enrollment is increasing. When interviewing students, teachers, school administrators, or community support organisations about the need for increasing student education, the top answer is always the same: school fees. Dozens of letters Lira students have written and provided to us, intended for US and Canadian recipients, ask for money to pay their tuition. Even though Uganda has a free public school policy (UPE, or Universal Primary Education; and USE (Universal Secondary Education), many families cannot provide the money to purchase needed school supplies (pens and paper; uniforms), and they feel unable to lose their children's daily work in their small agricultural plots or in domestic chores. This is particularly true of girls. Staff at local community-based organisations (CBOs) estimated that about half of the children in Lira, the largest percentage of which is girls, did not attend school, primarily due to poverty.

Nonetheless, education was the major topic of all sectors of the populations with whom we spoke as the key need to reduce poverty and fortify peace in the region. Educators, social workers, and parents spoke of education not only for academics and jobs, but also for improving family and social relationships, decreasing domestic violence and crime, and deterring unsafe health and sexual practices. Young people spoke of "good teachers" as providing role models and

providing counsel when they were confused or in conflict with others. Community-based organisation staff we spoke with also discussed the need to educate youth and older adults about HIV/AIDS facts in order to curb the growing number of victims.

Students who received funding from local or international organisations indicated their immense appreciation for education and their expectations to contribute to their society. The majority of youth we interviewed believed that education would help them and their country reach a better quality of life, largely through what they, as educated people, can contribute. This "better quality of life" ranged from improvement in local lifestyle to development to international work. One student at an all-girls' Anglican school noted that education keeps students in school and away from early pregnancy. She concluded that educational experiences would help students become the doctors and teachers that were needed in Uganda. Another student at the same school said that she had learned to communicate with international people: "I can even carry out research to make my country be developed." Written and verbal English communication skills were noted by several of the students as information that could help them acquire good jobs. Vocational training, as well as academics, was described as helping students "reach their dreams." In some arts-related activities done with girls at a vocational-technical school, many drew pictures of sewing machines and computers. A male student at the same school stated it would help him achieve his dream to be an engineer. These comments relate to Bronk's (2012) positive purpose criteria of choosing a path that is of service beyond the self and actively engaging to achieve it. They also relate to King et al.'s (2005) elements of confidence and character, and to Luther's (2007) concepts of effective schools and supportive, prosocial adults. All of these intentional plans also connect to concepts of meaningful lives and positive life purpose. The discourse of great commitment to country, individual improvement, and care for one another parallels Frankl's (1959) concept of loving purpose.

Job skills were not the only association between education and positive youth purpose. Other criteria of purpose, as expressed by King et al. (2005) – cognitive and behavioral competence, confidence, positive social connections, character, and caring (or compassion) – are frequent themes in our data, associated with schooling opportunities. Confidence is demonstrated in the previously noted student comments about their beliefs in future occupations, given that they are among the fortunate to attend school. Along with recognition of their privilege came compassion. Many of the girls at the all-girl school we researched expressed their desire to help orphans and street children. They wanted the government to make more provisions to support impover-ished and homeless children to go to school. One girl noted that she would like to "set up organisations for adult education and teach them about the importance of their children's education." Such care for those less fortunate also mirrors Frankl's (1959) conception of love as the seat of a meaningful life.

Other students noted personal growth in confidence and competence. For example, one male student at a public school talked about "building [his] spirit" and "living in an exemplary way." He spoke of resisting "bad" behaviours: "at the end, I will gain something." The interviewer asked, "So if you gain more strength from helping others, it makes you stay good because they're looking up to you?" and the student answered, "Yes."

Of course, the concept of education extends past the umbrella of formal schooling. Numerous CBOs and NGOs were providing youth programmes on leadership, sex education, culture, and basic academic skills, some of which targeted children who could not attend formal schools. In addition, not all of the discussions on school life were useful for building positive life goals. Some students spoke of harsh punishment and humiliation handed down from teachers, and some teachers and administrators spoke of strikes carried on by students that at times became violent. We observed classroom environments that were dominated by authoritarian teachers using canes, particularly in lower grades. One of us observed a primary classroom in which the teacher repeatedly humiliated a six-year old boy for colouring in a male figure with a pink crayon.

Teachers we interviewed who described similar behaviours found them to be problematic and stated the need for ongoing teacher training. These observations suggest a need for more professional development for teachers, as well as psychosocial work. As well as students, teachers endured multiple traumas during the LRA war. They are equally deserving and in need of social services for personal health and rehabilitation.

Role Models

As mentioned, youth saw many of their teachers as role models. They had a great deal to say about adults they admired and how they helped youth strive to positive purpose in their lives. Their comments indicated that such models deterred them from drug use, teen sex, and other antisocial behaviors. Students pointed to teachers who they felt treated all students equitably. They also discussed meetings with local business people who encouraged them to complete their studies so that they could engage in similar business pursuits. One student said,

> Admiring somebody can make you work harder…. yesterday we were talking of doctors and lawyers. You see somebody that you can admire but you also see those doctors they are working near here and they have a very big hospital that they are running and saving people's lives a lot…. We admire their way of living.

Another spoke of a Lira entrepreneur who encouraged him to complete his studies and finish "honorably." Such models represent King et al.'s (2005) theory of the importance of caring and compassion.

Numerous community organisations work to provide children with positive role models. In Lira, these groups include Teen Media, a volunteer group initiated from Radio Wa. Youth volunteers, themselves exhibiting positive youth purpose through their active engagement towards meaningful goals, creating radio plays about important youth issues, such as rehabilitation, teen sex, and conflict resolution. Additionally, Teen Media staff organise teams to visit secondary schools and present creative drama to promote positive goals. The

director told us that supporting and educating youth groups is critical for the students' advancement, and also for their lives. He noted that street children who steal to avoid hunger are likely targets of murder by vendors from whom they take food and clothing. The director stated the role that his nonprofit organisation plays in providing informal education for street children, such as computer training and HIV prevention. At 8.3%, HIV and AIDS prevalence in the mid-North are about one percentage point above the national average (AIDS indicator Survey, 2012). Students both practicing and performing exhibited the concept of flow by being completely attentive to the performance (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008).

Organisations such as Te Cwao and Children of Hope Uganda (COHU) have created reciprocal relationships between war widows and orphans/war-affected children to increase confidence and compassion (McBrien and Byers, 2015; King et al., 2005). In return for training women for jobs that create a sustainable income, the women affiliated with the organisations promise to take in an orphan or otherwise war-affected child and to send the child to school. Additionally, the women recipients of training and jobs agree to take classes in parenting that dissuade them from corporal punishment and discrimination against girls, encouraging them to provide positive reinforcement to the children they offer to raise. We have gathered nearly 100 letters by children in local schools thanking these organisations and their caretakers for sustaining their ability to enter and stay in school. AVCOH, another CBO in Lira, provides programmes to prevent HIV infection. CBOs such as these provide positive role models and opportunities not only for war-affected women, but also for children affected by war.

Athletic and Artistic Supports

While observing in classrooms at three different secondary schools, we noted that the environment is often teacher-centric and something that observers from developed countries might consider repressive. Students were constantly involved in a back-and-forth repetition of academic facts with their teachers in

order to retain information, as they did not typically have textbooks they could use for study or homework. Between recitations, they needed to remain silent during teacher lectures. Even during an art workshop the researchers conducted with girl students, we noted that each girl deferred to the teacher facilitator to explain the paintings they had created when we asked them to tell us about their work. Their deference to teachers indicated a fear to voice their own ideas.

Thus, opportunities for personal decisions, imagination, and teamwork were often best supported by sports and arts that occurred outside the classroom. Eighty-one excerpts from interviews described the ways in which sports and numerous forms of art contributed to bringing children together and helping them to find value within themselves. We observed the girls in both sports and artistic activities and found them fully immersed in the activities, as in flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Interestingly, there was a split between adult interpretations of these activities. Some felt that the arts and games helped young people rediscover their goodness and value. Others, however, valued the activities because they believed that art and play helped the youth "forget" their war experiences. To a Western mind, the idea of forgetting trauma, rather than processing it in a healthy way, is likely to seem unproductive. Certainly this concept struck our research team as problematic. However, the lived culture assessed it as a good process. During a woman's focus group, one participant said,

> We have sports competition and all that. And we get a number of children in those clubs, including those who have been abducted and came back. Sports improve on their brain development. And it is an opportunity for them to forget whatever they did in the war.

A school staff member also spoke of the use of recreation and sports to allow children opportunities to relax, stating that it was as important for rehabilitation as other forms of psychosocial support. Female students were delighted when one of the research team members joined in on their game of "stacking stones," a game that involved running, dodging, and strategy.

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We included drawing and painting as positive therapeutic processes. When we included the arts as a part of workshops with students, they combined drawings of highly traumatic events, such as burning huts with people inside them, hangings, decapitations, and coffins with images of flowers, happy teaching sessions at school, and depictions of their career dreams. One teacher said,

> The child who just sits there has not opened. An approach you can use on young children would be to tell them to draw. Get a pen, colors. They draw pictures of what they have gone through. Drawing for the war-affected children and the formerly abducted, they will begin drawing pictures of a rebel capturing them and abducting them. The student has really communicated and that is very important. He has written it out in pictures. And then next time we will say, let us display pictures and we will talk about it. Can you help me explain this picture? And eventually he is talking about it for the very first time. So drawing is another important way.

This teacher clearly understood the need for young people to find their own voices, as compared to the workshop in which we watched students take their paintings to their teacher to explain. Additionally, this comment indicates the need to remember and process, and not to forget. Such a demonstration indicates cognitive competence and confidence (King et al., 2005). Thus, there are multiple perspectives in Lira on the best ways for young people to gain positive purpose and meaning post-war.

Uganda's is a verbal cultural, and storytelling plays a large part in traditional education and positive messages for behaviour. An elderly storyteller told our research team that Ugandan elders used to teach children after dinner around their evening fires with traditional stories of wisdom. He felt that education had become less valuable with the arrival of the British and European-styled education in rows of desks and recitation. Traditional music and dance have a role, as explained by a Lira adult working at War Child Holland:

> We do drama theatres and music, you know? When peace came, different teams were asked to organise and showcase different areas of talents – different traditional dances, different traditional songs. And when they

organise that, of course, then you involve the rest of the team, you know, to participate. And normally all our different dances have their, their what? - their meanings attached, way back before, before this war. So it's a way of helping people come back to their normal routine, look at themselves still positively, and still discover something that they can be able to do.

The staff member's comment spoke of the need to work together and to recognise individual talents, thus helping youth recognise that they were capable and could feel good about themselves again. Such activities indicate agreement with Bronk's (2012) elements towards positive development with the choice to progress towards a meaningful goal and King et al.'s (2005) indication that confidence is required for positive development. The community can facilitate these positive developments.

Similarly, dramatic arts have played a great role in healing and positive direction among youth in the community. Numerous organisations, including schools, rehabilitation centres, and community centres, have incorporated youth drama to help young people learn to heal divisions and solve problems in positive ways. Unlike performing plays scripted by others, the plays utilised in post-war northern Uganda organise the youth as the playwrights. They are given a theme and asked to create a story around that theme to perform in community settings. Common themes have included issues faced by returning abductees, teen pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, school bullying, and violence prevention. Following the performance, the audience typically holds a conversation with the actors in which issues are further examined and potential solutions – those suggested in the performance and others – are discussed amongst the participants. Students who described their experiences with creating and acting in their own dramatic plays indicated that they made a positive difference in the thinking of the community and in working together with others their age, in terms of "bring[ing] me hope. And explain[ing] how people heal. About how people need to forget and remember. About how stories help us."

Many of those interviewed discussed the importance of games, sports, and the arts altogether as means to help young people return to a positive sense of

self. The best description of these combined methods came from a staff member at War Child Holland, who stated,

> We combine all our interventions with the, what we call creative methodologies. Much as some people feel really resolved in us sharing what they've gone through, when they are mixed together in that blend [with those unwilling or unable to describe their experiences], using creative methods, they all come to participate actively. In that way, they share quite a lot and come to learn quite a lot from one another. And from what we've seen, it has helped to actually build in some of them a sense of hope, because most times you find that they have their own problems, they keep to themselves, and so many of them think that there's no way that they can come out of those kind of problems. So when they share, when they open up, when they get exposed, then they get ways to get along, and it helps them to look at themselves and at the future in a different perspective.

Thus, adult facilitation with arts and sports allows youth opportunities to gain positive purpose skills, such as teamwork, problem solving, creative thinking, and aspirations. These lead to the elements of confidence, caring, active engagement towards goals, and more that enable youth to make positive choices. Such goals match with Bronk's (2012) ideas of group achievement and the recognition that group goals can be more important than individual goals.

Spirituality

Religion, and Christianity in particular, plays a major role in the lives of Ugandans. The majority practice Roman Catholicism, followed by various Protestant sects. Many schools are supported by religious organisations. Thus, this topic surfaced in our many interviews with all participants. One student described exemplary teachers as "God-fearing," stating, "You can't be good when you don't trust in God when it is God who made you a teacher." A teacher stated that student must learn to pray along with learning academics. Another adult leader described parents as "God's representatives on earth," alluding to their critical role in raising children to be God-fearing. Much of this conversation

centred on fear; however, the role of love, as in God's love for his children, and people's love for God also played a role in a love-focused purpose (Frankl, 1959).

Notable in the conversations about religion was one with the director of Teen Media, himself an avowed Christian who shared his NGO's mission as seeing "children and youth following with Jesus and later on transforming the families and the nations of Africa." He described the importance of youth interacting and appreciating each other's religion in order to be able to work together. He said, "One thing children must learn is to live in unity with one another, irrespective of your religious background. We are all working at one God." He also encouraged the youth to visit one another's places of worship to learn more and to live harmoniously. Although this discussion was unique in relation to other references to religion, it signaled that ecumenical behaviour was a possible seed for teamwork and peace in the region.

Discussion

Through rehabilitation, financial support for education, role models, and some acceptance back into communities, many youth who experienced war in northern Uganda have found pro-social purposes and, therefore, meaning in their lives. They are serious and dedicated to their studies, recognising their privilege in attending even rudimentary schools (realising how many of their peers are unable to attend school); and their traumatic experiences create a part of their desire to make a positive change. In addressing our research question, "Given an environment of protracted war and violence, what can support former child soldiers and abducted girls to choose a life of positive purpose and meaning?" we found that formal and non-formal educational experiences allowing for skill-building, teamwork, role models, and creative expression were strong factors in building meaningful and positive goals and aspirations that allowed them to rise beyond the desperation of war experiences. Much of the determination and

involvement in education and positive activities voiced by students related to states of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008), as the youth immerse themselves in their studies and in activities to help themselves and others.

Interview analyses related to these themes also correspond to aspects of positive purpose development. King et al.'s (2005) characteristics of purpose – cognitive and behavioral competence, confidence, positive social connections, character, and caring (or compassion) – were noted in many interviews, particularly with youth who believed their academic learning helped them to attain refined abilities with language and communication and was preparing them for jobs as educators, doctors, and other professions needed to help Uganda increase in prosperity. Building character was referred to in numerous instances, such as inspiring role models (who would also be positive social connections) and the project to protect girls from unsafe sexual activities. Compassion was the topic of numerous students, particularly girls, regarding creating academic opportunities for homeless and orphaned children. This flow of compassion reflects Frankl's (1959) belief in the importance of love in living a life of purpose, no matter the existential suffering that might occur in one's life.

Similarly, we saw evidence of Bronk's (2012) traits of positive purpose. Students expressed their desires to become the future leaders of Uganda, positive goals for not only themselves, but for their community and country. Active engagement was expressed not only in formal academic work, but also in team projects and community problem-solving as a result of self-created dramatic works.

Belief systems (Damon, Menon, and Bronk, 2003), while not as prevalent as other themes denoting youth purpose, were expressed as important elements of doing or being good. Additionally, Bronfenbrenner's (1999) spheres of support are evident in contributing to positive youth purpose. At the microsystemic level are parents who encourage their children to attend school or informal opportunities for development, and teachers who also acted as counselors and confidants of their students in need. Teachers working on improved parent-student-teacher relationships and teacher training represent positive aspects of

the mesosystem. Poverty and cultural practices of keeping girl children at home negatively affect positive youth purpose at the exosystem level, while religious beliefs can promote positive purpose. The macrosystem, or the influence of cultural beliefs and values, also has both positive and negative repercussions. Clearly, traditional arts play a role in creating positive paths for team-building, personal expression, and community building. However, traditional beliefs about the higher value of boys over girls are an ongoing problem that is being addressed. Finally, the level of the chronosystem, which concerns the effect of history and time, is an omnipresent factor in the issue of post-war development of positive purpose. This level involves the ongoing need for healing, forgiveness, and both individual and community rebuilding post-war.

This study provides multiple implications for policymakers. Clearly, increases and improvements in education remain critical needs for providing an impetus for positive youth development. Uganda has a shortage of teachers, rooted in several causes: inadequate money to pay for student tuition and for ongoing teacher training, inadequate salaries, and inadequate transportation to rural schools. This is an area of concentration for the government, as appropriate and positive education will not only increase the capability of the Ugandan population, but can also increase the likelihood for peace by increasing positive purpose in the youth, currently 50% of the country's population.

Informal experiences for young people to engage in group work and practical strategising for positive individual and community good have also proven invaluable for increasing youth purpose. Critical among these are the use of dramatic arts in bringing the community together to consider unified solutions for problematic situations, such as domestic violence, discrimination against girls, alcohol abuse, and issues of returned child soldiers. Given that the youth create the plays and lead with potential resolutions, these activities increase their potential for cognitive and behavioral competence, and other traits of positive youth purpose as described by King et al (2005).

Themes of meaning and life purpose came through in interviews with youth who experienced chronic trauma during the war with the LRA, reminiscent of Frankl's (1959) memoirs.

In spite of decades of traumatic experiences due to brutal war practices, youth enduring these events have risen to positive purposes by demonstrating the desire to achieve pro-social careers and creating projects to help others. They have shown compassion for people less fortunate than themselves, even though they also live in poor conditions. Their ambitions have been bolstered by adults who also demonstrate indications of positive purpose. They provide role models; they counsel and support the youth; provide academic, vocational, and creative direction; and fund-raise to increase their capabilities for service. Future directions in positive youth purpose research include more examination into intergenerational studies, as our work has indicated the essential reciprocity between youth and adults.

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