

The Need for School-Based Counseling and Guidance Programs in Uganda

By Charles Onencan

A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step

Lao-tzu, Chinese Philosopher, (604BC – 531 BC)

Following a horrifying, protracted war in Northern Uganda in which two million people were displaced from our prosperous, culturally rich rural villages, we have been enjoying “relative peace” for the past two years. This is a great relief, despite the fact that a formal peace agreement has yet to be signed. Our communities have suffered greatly for the past twenty-two years. We were murdered, raped, mutilated and degraded. We were caused to live in overcrowded, unsanitary Internally Displaced Persons camps or cramped quarters in town. Many of our infants and children did not survive the malnutrition and fatal diseases of camp life. Our culture was severely damaged and children grew up with less supervision. Displacement and chaos damaged our family life and marriages. Many of us became HIV positive and died. Women were especially affected, suffering personal indignities, depression and continuously stressed from the pressures of providing for large extended and surrogate families. Many of our fathers were killed in this war, or died from war-related causes. Our elders were marginalized, sidelined from their traditionally respected place in the family and village. Our cultural leaders lost some of their status, standing in the same food lines as those who looked up to them, waiting for World Food Program handouts. Our children and siblings were robbed of large segments of their childhoods. Many were abducted and forced into child soldiering and sex slavery. Some were forced to commit atrocities against our family members and neighbors, blurring the lines between victim and perpetrator. Others witnessed atrocities, saw dead bodies of friends and strangers and lost family members. To say these experiences were traumatizing is an understatement. For many of us, the trauma was absorbed, creating the need for restoration in its various cultural, therapeutic and clinical forms.

I was six years old when our family and neighbors in our ancestral village in Attiak sub-country in Amuru District (then Gulu District) were displaced to town. We packed everything we could carry by hand. I carried a jerry can almost as tall as me throughout the week-long journey walking through the bush, hiding from rebel attacks, refugees in our own land, our backs to our village and to my father’s grave.

As Uganda Country Director of United Movement to End Child Soldiering, (UMECS), I am part of a team responsible for deciding our program priorities which best fulfill our mission and meet the needs of children and youth affected by conflict. Within our core program areas of education, peacebuilding and strengthening grassroots organizations serving affected communities, there are many urgent needs to address.

Two years ago, we decided to plan and launch a School-Based Counseling and Guidance Program. This is because the vast majority of children and youth in Northern Uganda were affected by this conflict yet few have ever received counseling services. This includes children who were abducted and forced into child soldiering. Civil society organizations such as the highly committed Gulu Support the Children Organisation (GUSCO) ran needed psychosocial reception centers for formerly abducted children, but the high numbers of such children greatly exceeded the capacity of reception centers to handle the demand. Most children and youth in Northern Uganda have never had counseling services.

Furthermore, youth in school need a wide range of *guidance* services. We determined both of these needs – counseling and guidance - were not being sufficiently addressed in Northern Uganda schools and decided to fill these gaps with a combined program. We are launching this program in three partnered secondary schools in Kitgum and Pader Districts on a pilot basis with a goal of mainstreaming the program into Uganda schools on a systemic basis.

Our first step was taken in February and March 2007 when the head of Africa University's Counseling Department, John Mapfumo, came to Northern Uganda with a team to conduct initial assessments and trainings to launch the first stage of our program at Lira Palwo Senior Secondary School in Pader District. This short term experience of familiarization, sensitization, assessments and teacher trainings at Lira Palwo had remarkable outcomes: the counseling needs of teachers were first addressed as teachers also suffer from trauma from their own ordeals during the war coupled with continually absorbing the symptoms and stories of trauma from their students. There was a noticeable attitudinal shift among many teachers in terms of empathy and compassion toward students, and understanding their own needs. Equally important, a core group of teachers gained rudimentary skills to counsel students.

Throughout the next year, we held numerous planning sessions with the school leadership and teachers of Lira Palwo Secondary in Pader, Y Y Okot Memorial College in Kitgum, an all girls school, and Kitgum Alliance College, all three of which are serving as the program pilots. These sessions included exploring the various training scenarios (we will start with certificate level training); identifying the private space at each school to run the programs, and preliminary program design. We also unpacked some of the specific needs at each school, some of the criteria to be selected as counselors, and the role and elements of guidance.

In late April, we conducted full scale needs assessments at each of the three pilot schools. Dr. Regis Chireshe, an experienced educational psychologist, together with our staff conducted the assessments, addressing these major research questions:

- What are the students' main guidance and counseling needs?
- What priority should major service areas of a program be given in the schools?
- How should schools address the students' identified needs?

- What challenges do teachers face when trying to offer guidance and counseling services?
- Which guidance and counseling materials do teachers want to effectively offer guidance and counseling services?
- In which guidance and counseling areas/topics should teachers receive training?

Representative students were selected at each school who participated in questionnaires and focus group discussions. Findings were made in response to issues students identified by gender. The needs assessment also addressed the priorities to be given to major guidance and counseling service areas for teachers, by gender. These areas include counseling services, appraisal services, information services, placement services, consultation services and curriculum services. In addition, issues and areas in which teachers need training, by gender, were identified as: guidance and counseling delivery, guidance and counseling resource identification, developing a guidance and counseling calendar, responsive services, identifying and understanding students' abilities, program administration and specific guidance and counseling skills.

Upon completion of teacher trainings, the program will be formally launched at each school. Ongoing technical assistance, assessments and evaluations will help to fine tune the program as students utilize services. A major goal of the program is to replicate and mainstream the program in Uganda

As we move forward with the trainings of teachers as psychosocial counselors and guidance counselors leading to the formal launch of the program at the three pilot schools, it is important to put this program into context through the following key points:

1. Not all psychosocial problems are related to war-caused trauma

The war has traumatized many of us, especially children and youth. However, psychosocial problems of students and youths in Northern Uganda may have many different origins. There is a tendency in war-affected areas to attribute all psychosocial problems to the conflict (e.g. students are hyperactive because of bad experiences during the war, or children are aggressive because of the violence they experienced in the war). It is difficult, however, in many instances to link one exact cause to one effect. There is often overlap and similarities in the symptoms of the different psychosocial problems students and youths may have. This can make it complicated to determine what the "main" problem is, the problem that would need most attention for things to improve. For example, symptom of schizophrenia can easily be confused with symptoms of drug abuse, or a student with a hearing problem who is withdrawn because he does not understand what is happening may be mistakenly seen as academically or otherwise mentally handicapped. A student who had traumatizing experiences during the war may have psychosocial problems which are war-related, or, stem from very different origins or a combination of both. Without a war, psychosocial problems still exist so it is important that in assessing psychosocial problems that there are not automatic assumptions as to the

causes. This is why counseling programs should have the training and expertise to fully and professionally assess the causes as well as solutions to psychosocial problems.

- 2. The strengths of our family and community support systems and our culture, including our resilience, are important aspects of our well-being. Counseling services are needed to address emotional issues and heal wounds as a needed supplement to our cultural and community strengths and practices.**

Viewing Northern Ugandan society as suffering from collective mental illness because of the war is inaccurate and detrimental to utilizing our community and cultural healing and reconciliation processes.

The fact of the war's brutality and extreme violence should not play into the stereotype that all of the youth of Northern Uganda are traumatized, dysfunctional and suffering from mental illness. Resilience is the main story. The children and youth of Northern Uganda play critical roles in family and community and despite the challenges of under-resourced schools, apply themselves diligently to their education.

That said, the war and displacement has affected children and youth in ways that require accessibility to counseling, including accessible options for referral of persons with severe and clinical needs to appropriate professional services.

So what is the scope and depth of the counseling needs in Northern Uganda? There are different levels of counseling needs. To categorize these needs, I will refer to social scientists Arntsen & Knudsen who lay out a pyramid of three levels of scenarios to evaluate psychosocial program needs following a crisis affecting a society and apply these to the current situation in Northern Uganda as it relates to the need for school-based counseling and guidance programs:

Level I: The largest proportion of the population was less directly affected by the war and for this group, families and community support structures are still functional. For this segment of the population, given the cultural, family and community support systems and the role of individuals in family and community structures, there is a high degree of demonstrated resilience. Most of the reactions that children and youths display can be considered "normal" in an abnormal, post-conflict situation. When given adequate attention and support including consistent access to counseling through school-based counseling and guidance, the causes of these reactions and symptoms will be addressed and the issues will resolve themselves for the majority of this group over time.

Level II: This segment of the community includes children and youth from vulnerable groups who possess limited coping mechanisms or social support structures upon which to fall back. For instance, children and youth who have lost family members in violence, witnessed deaths, or have become victims of violence fall into this group. Children and youth from this level are significantly distressed, and may be experiencing despair and hopelessness, but their social and psychosocial ability to function has not yet

been overwhelmed. In 2007 and 2008, when school-based needs assessments were conducted by the Africa University team led John Mapfumo and Professor Regis Chireshe respectively, the vast majority of students who fall into this category indicated they lacked or have limited coping mechanisms and support structures upon which to rely. This group is at particular risk of psychosocial and social deterioration if their needs are not addressed through timely programs such as school-based counseling and guidance.

Level III: In a given population that has endured a severe crisis, a small percentage of people will require psychiatric or clinical mental health care. In a conflict setting such as in Northern Uganda, this number is expected to be higher as the psychosocial and social functioning of some children, youths and adults may be severely compromised. The good news is that in northern Uganda, this is a relatively small group, generally estimated to be less than 5% of the overall population. For this group, individualized approaches with a range of clinical options are likely to be the most appropriate responses, resources and accessibility permitting. For students and youth who require this more specialized care, individual attention can additionally be provided in the form of traditional rituals or local cultural practices in addition to psychiatric and clinic modalities. In other words, Level III needs should not be limited to western-derived responses such as clinical referrals and psychiatric care. These should be accessible options.

3. School-Based Counseling is needed now since one unaddressed problem can lead to others. Time is of the essence.

As with all problems, the sooner they are addressed, the sooner they are resolved. Unaddressed, they can mushroom out of control. This is especially true of psychosocial problems. Furthermore, the nature of the program we are launching includes addressing family issues if the origins of a student's problems have family connections. This is all the more reason for expeditious attention to student psychosocial problems. If a family issue is affecting a student in school, it may also have ramifications for other family members. Likewise, if the family issue is addressed expeditiously, then the student's problem is concurrently being addressed for other family members.

Furthermore, one psychosocial problem can lead to another, or exacerbate another. Having one problem makes students more at risk of developing other problems. This makes providing counseling services to students in schools a high priority, not only to address existing psychosocial problems but to prevent one problem leading to the next.

4. Schools Provide Physical and Emotional Safeties

Schools provide physical and emotional safeties for children and youth affected by conflict, both of which are essential elements for students' development and especially

so in war zones and post-conflict situations. Students and youth cannot function properly in dangerous living conditions. In situations in which hatred, discrimination, and distrust are prevalent, students can be inhibited in their social and academic development. Students all over the world manifest emotional distress after exposure to overwhelming, life-threatening events through some form of behavioral change, developmental delay, or other disturbances. Students in Northern Uganda have experienced extreme violence, fear, loss, panic, confusion and displacement; now in post-conflict Northern Uganda, there has been relative peace for more than a year yet there remains on going risk-assuming situations to deal with, for instance, coping with the problem of land-mines or unexploded ordinances. Abuse within the family has been exacerbated by displacement, damage to family support systems, and the advent of excessive drinking to medicate depression, humiliation, idleness and despair. Such abuse, whether physical, sexual, or emotional, or neglect, can have particularly serious immediate and long-term consequences for the student's development.

Being in school, especially boarding schools, which are protected environments, reduces safety concerns and risky situations. Through teachers and school leadership, schools provide emotional support systems for students not as easily accessible at the family and community levels, given the post-conflict needs for restoration of family and community support structures.

Even more so, school-based counseling and guidance programs – especially the model we are implementing – are designed to provide emotional support systems and help students develop coping mechanisms and problem solve. Since our program model includes outreach to students' families and communities, school-based counselors will proactively assist students address psychosocial problems and emotional issues outside the school grounds as well as within.

5. The Benefits of a Positive School Experience – Elevating Self Esteem, Building Confidence, Nurturing Hope, Growing Success, Restoring Trust

An essential aspect of rehabilitation is finding ways of promoting children, youth and adults' self esteem and a sense of hope and confidence in future. Positive school experiences provide a source of strength amidst an environment which for many children and youth has been chaotic, confusing, disorienting, violent and challenging.

One of the side effects of the intentional infliction of trauma is that it is abusive and personal, and for children, makes it difficult to trust adults. A perpetrator responsible for the abduction and abuse of children has the potential to implicate all of humanity. If one person can abuse, then all others become potential abusers. Abuse (child soldiering, sex slavery) injures or destroys a child's capacity to connect and trust in relationships (Robert Grant). School provides the opportunity for children and youth affected by conflict to learn how to trust adults again. Caring, trusting adults (teachers, school leadership) help formerly abducted children to trust relationships with adults again because teachers demonstrate they care unconditionally about the well being of the child,

the child's education and social development. This is another reason why schools are a significant source of comfort, safety and restoration of trust for children affected by conflict in Northern Uganda.

School provides the opportunity for a wide range of positive experiences and success. The benefits of positive school experiences can stem from academic pursuits but also from social success, a special relationship with a teacher, the opportunity to hold a position of responsibility, or success in non-academic pursuits as sports, music and the arts (Rutter, 1987) Children seem most resilient in school and home environments that are warm and responsive, but also organized and predictable with clearly defined, consistently enforced rules, standards and responsibilities; these characteristics appear especially important for children and youth experiencing life changes such as displacement and separation (Werner, 1990).

School also, both symbolically and practically, is a return to normal life. School uniforms, a characteristic of all schools in Northern Uganda, represent an identity associated with scholarship and positive self-image. Throughout Uganda, children and youth are eager learners and have a zeal for education. Being in school elevates self-esteem, nurtures hope and breeds success.

Since secondary school requires school fees and substantial costs for school requirements (uniforms, shoes, mattresses, blankets, scholastic materials, personal hygiene supplies and more), children and youth enrolled in secondary school do not take their educations for granted. Someone is paying (parents, extended family, sponsors) and most students are very grateful for and accountable to those who are bearing the costs of their education.

For formerly abducted children and other children and youth affected by conflict, school is also the opportunity to return to normal social interactions: normal youth conversations about music, sports, community affairs, family, relationships, dreams, complaints and worldviews. Children and youth can now be children and youth again without fear of retribution, punishment or death. Normal peer relationships resume, resulting in the opportunity for social development and to grow into mature women and men.

It is for these reasons, among others, that UMECS is now in Year IV of our Northern Uganda Education Program (NUEP) in which we holistically sponsor children and youth affected by conflict in secondary boarding schools through higher education graduation. Our support includes school fees, all school requirements, transport, mentorship and career guidance. With a 97% retention rate of 107 students, we try to urge other organizations to consider adopting a model similar to NUEP in Northern Uganda.

Within NUEP, we decided to have a wider and deeper impact on many more children and youth in Northern Uganda by piloting school-based programs with the

intention of mainstreaming them into Uganda's education system. In this way, there is impact on thousands of children and youth in focused areas of need.

This is why we are piloting school-based counseling and guidance programs in Northern Uganda schools, to systemically address students' and teachers' psychosocial needs, and School-Based Peace Education, to prepare children and youth to become lifelong peacebuilding practitioners to prevent future wars. The pilot project of these school-based programs will provide immediate direct benefits to over two thousand children and youth. As we replicate and mainstream these programs, the impact will directly benefit tens of thousands of children and youth.

6. Modeling Social Behaviors

Following the ordeals of living in a war zone and suffering the affects of conflict, returning to school provides the opportunity to model positive social behaviors. Both adults and peers are models of appropriate social behavior and in turn, can provide positive reaction in response to adequate social behavior of the students. This aids the development of feelings of social competence, which in turn contributes to the development of self-confidence and positive attitudes. Also success in school work or excelling at school related activities like sport or arts and cultural activities is a powerful force for enhancing self-esteem and self confidence which has a positive influence on improved coping skills. Going to school also fills the daily life of children with purposeful activity; it gives structure and meaning to each day (Mikus Kos, 2005)

7. School Capacities – Quality Education

Despite the enthusiasm of education, and the essential need of secondary and higher education for children and youth affected by conflict, most students in Northern Uganda are enrolled in under-resourced schools, a situation created in part by the war during which time, schools, school equipment and materials were destroyed and many students were displaced to IDP camp schools. While there are still highly functioning schools in Northern Uganda, most of these tend to be formerly well resourced religious-founded schools, especially in or nearby to Gulu Town. Most secondary schools in Northern Uganda are severely under-resourced, with few books, science labs or adequate teaching and learning materials. This also demoralizes teachers, who find it difficult to teach properly without proper teaching tools. In addition, many teachers in Northern Uganda need and want professional development including higher levels of diplomas and degrees, and in-service training and development.

Due to lack of sufficient resources and infrastructure, therefore, schools in Northern Uganda as a whole are not able to provide quality education which permits Northern Uganda students to sufficiently compete in national exams for advanced level education placements and for precious higher education bursaries.

It goes without saying that the greatest challenge to access to education in Northern Uganda and throughout much of Uganda is the prohibitive cost of school fees and school requirements. Despite the need for education, the vast majority of secondary school-age children and youth affected by conflict in Northern Uganda are not in secondary school – and never will be until or unless sustainable secondary school funding strategies are implemented. Whereas the Ministry of Education and Sport has instituted Universal Secondary Education (USE), the program is at its beginning stages, and the USE grant provides only a small fraction of student needs.

Yet when children and youth from Northern Uganda are in supportive school sponsorships (or sufficiently supported by family), they excel in school. Despite the war and post-conflict challenges, our children and youth come from traditional cultures, are resilient and self-disciplined. These are great factors which lead to success in education. Education is an investment in the children and youth – and future – of Northern Uganda.

Your advocacy for the education of children and youth in Northern Uganda will be highly appreciated – and contribute to the restoration of our children and youth, families, communities and society.

8. School-Based Guidance is not Counseling. School-Based Guidance is a critical component in the social, academic and personal development of students everywhere – including in but not limited to Northern Uganda.

Guidance is not counseling yet all too often, the terms are confused on the ground, including in schools. Milner, in 1970, stated that Guidance was the presentation of knowledge, information and/or advice to individuals or groups in a structured way so as to provide sufficient material upon which they may base choices or decisions. Guidance in this case (in schools) is used as a broad term which refers to the more general provisions of information to enable pupils to achieve future education and vocational and other personal goals. (Mapfumo, 2007).

School-based guidance is a critical component of high-functioning school communities. School-based guidance combines group learning with individual consultations in areas which include peer pressure, self-awareness, time management, study skills, career exploration, relationship issues, problem solving, decision making, coping mechanisms, peer counseling, test taking, acquiring improved academic and learning skills, academic planning and other guidance areas. Counseling, on the other hand, deals with the more personal and intimate issues that derive from that person's history and circumstances, the person's abilities or inabilities to socialize, cope, come to terms with a particular set of circumstances, and other personal issues. In a sense, counseling, as a special need, is a component of guidance. (Mapfumo 2007).

9. Teacher Training

In addition to the standardized, accredited curricula provided by academic institutions and training institutes, teacher training as counselors and guidance counselors will be particularized to include conflict and displacement-related trauma counseling, HIV/AIDS counseling, family counseling and other areas of needs identified during the April 2008 needs assessments at each school. Teachers at the three schools identified these training needs as it relates to their ability to serve student needs:

- a. Educational needs (e.g. study skills techniques, test taking skills, academic persistence, academic/educational planning skills, acquiring skills, attitudes and knowledge to learn effectively),
- b. Career needs (e.g. career exploration and planning, subject choice, job seeking and job keeping skills, relationship between personal qualities and work, investigating the world of work in relation to knowledge of self) and
- c. Personal-social needs (e.g. self-awareness, conflict resolution, handling crisis situations, peer pressure, coping with emotion, sexual issues).

Teachers also expressed training and information needs in the following areas:

- a. Counseling Services
- b. Appraisal Services
- c. Information Services
- d. Placement Services
- e. Consultation Services
- f. Curriculum Services
- g. Ways of Counseling and Guidance Delivery
- h. Guidance and Counseling Resource Identification
- i. Developing a Guidance and Counseling Calendar
- j. Responsive Services
- k. Identifying and understanding students' abilities
- l. Program Administration
- m. Specific guidance and counseling skills

More specifically, and by each school and gender, teachers identified the following training areas they need to competently and comprehensively deliver counseling and guidance: The following is a partial list:

- a. Methods/techniques of counseling
- b. Professionalism and qualities of good counselors
- c. Emerging issues in counseling and guidance
- d. Planning and implementation of counseling and guidance
- e. Handling challenging clients/situations
- f. Handling special populations
- g. Basic skills in evaluation and appraisal in counseling and guidance

- h. Health education
- i. HIV/AIDS counseling
- j. Choosing a career
- k. Psychosocial issues
- l. Trauma counseling
- m. Creating client/counselor relationship
- n. Planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating the counseling and guidance program

In addition, it was agreed that many teachers need counseling, including those who will be selected as counselors and guidance counselors to come to terms with their own war-related experiences and ordeals, and the emotional trauma that is associated with the experiences, stories and needs of conflict-affected students.

In terms of selecting teachers as counselors and guidance counselors, criteria have been established at each school for the selection process. In general, the following characteristics, among others, are desirable for prospective counselors: (Mapfumo 2007)

- A keen self-awareness
- Ability to analyse one's own feelings
- Ability to serve as a model and an influence
- Predisposition to be helpful as a way of life
- A thorough sense of selflessness
- A healthy mind and body capable of breathing life into other people
- A broad intelligence and willingness to gain informed experience
- A basic love for people in every way possible
- Ability to see things as other people see them
- Well developed ability to listen

10. School-Based Counseling and Guidance Programs Needed Throughout Uganda

The war has been a huge intervening factor in the lives of children, youth, adults and families in Northern Uganda, accelerating the need for school-based counseling and guidance. At the same time, had there been no war, those needs would still be there, although there would be much less war-induced trauma. That said, school-based counseling and guidance programs are essential for the psychosocial, social and academic development of students throughout Uganda, and throughout the world. In other words, even without a war, school-based counseling and guidance is needed in Northern Uganda and for the same reasons, such programs are needed throughout Uganda....

Conclusion

By virtue of having been affected by a brutal, protracted war, children and youth in Northern Uganda need long term commitments to their educations. Schools in Northern Uganda need to be strengthened to improve the quality of education. School-based Counseling and Guidance Programs are an essential component to address and advance the academic, social and psychosocial development of students. The benefits of School-based Counseling and Guidance Programs are equally important for students who have not been affected by conflict. Therefore, there is a need for School-Based Counseling and Guidance Programs throughout Uganda.

Selected Resources:

1. *Children in Crisis: Good Practices in Evaluating Psychosocial Programmes*
http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMH/Resources/Evaluating_Psychosocial_Programming.pdf
2. *Psychosocial Support To Learners, UNESCO, Guidebook for Planning Education in Emergencies and Reconstruction, Chapter 19*
<http://www.unesco.org/iiep/eng/focus/emergency/guidebook/Chapter19.pdf>
3. *The Role of Art in Psychosocial Care and Protection for Displaced Children* by Bo Viktor Nylund, Jean Claude Legrand and Peter Holtsberg <http://www.fmreview.org/text/FMR/06/05.htm>
4. *Action for the Rights of Children (ARC), Protecting Children Affected by Armed Conflict and Displacement, An Introductory Training Module*, <http://www.crin.org/docs/ARC%20Training%20Module.doc>

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