



Organic and institutional views of learning in Northern Uganda: Toward a theory of dichotomous education in postwar contexts

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ABSTRACT

A dichotomy of organic and institutional views of education emerged as a strong theme in a qualitative research study that was undertaken amongst primary school teachers in Northern Uganda. Teachers clearly conceptualised children's learning in two categories – dependant upon culture and village life (termed organic education in this paper), and dependent upon organised schooling (termed institutional education). As the study progressed the complementary nature of these two categories became salient, as did their importance in community redevelopment after war. When the effects of war decimate organic education by destroying family units and interrupting village life, communities heavily rely upon institutional education to raise children. However, the necessity to re-establish organic structures so that education is not limited to schools and teachers was also apparent. This paper discusses the need to take a dual (organic and institutional) approach to community redevelopment, and considers the wider implications for practice and policy in post-war contexts.

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1. Introduction

The tensions that exist between organic and institutional modes of learning are apparent in literature (Cuban, 2009; Furedi, 2009; Beckett, 1999; Robinson, 2009). The presence of this organic-institutional tension was found in a qualitative research study in Northern Uganda (Willis, 2012) of primary school teachers' conceptions of children's learning. Teachers described children's learning as a product of both the education (schooling) system and their cultural heritage. Two views emerged: one, that children's learning is a product of the schooling system; and two, that learning occurs around the village fireplace without the constraints of time and place that are imposed by institutional systems. Teachers explained that both of these modes of learning had been impacted by the effects of war, particularly organic learning that occurred in village life. Prima facie these binary views seemed somewhat paradoxical, but as the study progressed their complementary nature became salient, as did their importance in community redevelopment in post-war contexts. This study demonstrated that when the effects of war decimate organic modes of education by breaking down family units and interrupting and displacing village life, communities heavily rely upon

institutional modes of education, specifically organised schooling, to holistically educate children. Simply, family and village structures in Northern Uganda struggled to pass down generational wisdom as parents had been killed in war, villages were displaced, and traditional fireplace learning had been lost. By the end of the most recent conflict, over half the population in Uganda was under the age of 15 (Uganda Demographics Profile, 2011). For a time, due to a shortage of adults and the phenomenon of child-headed families, communities relied on schools to educate children; and this study demonstrates how schools acted as villages and teachers acted as parent-figures while communities rebuilt after war. Furthermore, this study also highlights the necessity to rebuild organic structures so that education does not become the sole responsibility of schools and teachers. This paper discusses the need to take a dual organic and institutional approach to rebuilding education systems in Northern Uganda, and considers the wider implications for practice and policy in post-war developing contexts. Social research in Northern Uganda is timely as although there has been much aid and development activity in schools in this region, after decades of civil unrest there is a notable lack of literature.

To better understand the dichotomy of organic and institutional views of education, a phenomenographic methodology was employed. Accordingly, the research questions that guided this study were: 1) what are the experiences of teachers in Northern Uganda with children and their learning?; and 2) how did teachers

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describe their experiences? Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 participants from four local primary schools in the Gulu district of Northern Uganda. The study described the variation of teachers' experiences and categorised these in a model of children's learning (Willis, 2012).

1.1. A brief history of education in Northern Uganda

Before colonisation and Western influence, education in Uganda was based on tribal traditions where every adult took responsibility for the care and education of all the village children (Ofori-Attah, 2009; Ssekamwa, 1997). Learning was not confined to school systems, curriculum documents, buildings, timetables, or fees; rather it was more organic in nature (Beckett, 1999) as it took place in the field or around the campfire (Ssekamwa, 1997). Boys were taught by men and girls were taught by women in a generationally integrated society. Lessons included "desirable social behaviour, customs, history, geography, biology, chemistry, agriculture, religion, psychology, philosophy, economics and politics" (Ssekamwa, 1997, p. 2); however, they did not occur within the institutional bounds of buildings or timetables. Rather, learning was an ongoing experience and the education of every child was considered the responsibility of every adult. One of the head teachers who participated in this study articulated this cultural values when he explained: "the child is for everybody" (Willis, 2012).

Some academics lament the lack of this kind of collective adult responsibility in current Western societies (for example, Feurstein et al., 2010; Furedi, 2009). Views of learning in the West have become increasingly individualistic and competitive in recent times with the introductions of international comparative studies and national testing programmes. Such institutional views of learning is a far cry from the organic traditional learning experienced by the Acholi tribe of Northern Uganda before colonisation.

Colonial influence came in 1875 when the king of Buganda invited English interest to his region, and the institutionalisation of learning and education was introduced soon after (Ssekamwa, 1997). This phenomenon reinforced socio-economic and gender divides as formal education was most accessible to the sons of wealthy and powerful families (Syngellakis and Arudo, 2006). Education in Uganda today is redolent of the colonial era as didactic teaching methods and rote learning remain (Syngellakis and Arudo, 2006).

Forty years of consecutive civil wars, from the time of Idi Amin in 1971 to the end of the most recent conflict in 2006 between the Ugandan army and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebel forces, led to dramatic breakdowns in society (Mwakikagile, 2009; Van Acker, 2004). Entire villages, schools, and families were displaced during the recent conflict with the LRA, and in many instances formal education ceased. LRA warfare was particularly horrific as children were a central feature in the hostilities. An estimated 30,000 children were abducted and forced to serve as soldiers or sex slaves over a 20-year period (United Nations OCHA/IRIN, 2004). During this time the Universal Primary Education programme was launched, which meant that schools in the North had to simultaneously manage the effects of war and the introduction of free compulsory schooling for every child. By 2003, James Lomoro, the Gulu District Inspector of Schools, reported that 116 of 234 schools had been displaced and only 56% of primary school aged children were attending school in the Gulu war zone (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

In all of this, children in Northern Uganda did not cease to grow and learn, but instead of learning literacy and numeracy like their contemporaries in other communities, they were learning war tactics and survival skills. Research shows that displacement,

conflict and/or poverty affects the psychological development and neurological patterning of a child (Adjukovic and Adjukovic, 1998; Feurstein et al., 2010), as whatever neurological attractions are first, most frequent and most coherent affect the formation of synapses (Medina, 2009). The various effects of war upon school-aged children are outlined in Joshi and O'Donnell's (2003) work, including regression (Osofsky, 1995), stomach complaints and inattentive behaviour at school (Dodge, 1993), and fear for safety or of being alone (Perry, 2001). In addition to this, post-traumatic stress disorder and antisocial behaviour also feature strongly in youth who have been exposed to war (Derluyn et al., 2004).

Given that learning does not just happen 'in the head' but is a product of social and cultural interactions (Bandura, 1986; Bruner, 1966; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) the impacts of social stresses are also significant. Such stresses in Northern Uganda include the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS that leave many children as the heads of their homes, and a largely uneducated parent population, which is a by-product of years of conflict (Republic of Uganda, 2003). The education of girls is often terminated early as poverty situations encourage the early marriage of girls to attract a bride price, which in turn results in child-mothers and the perpetuation of the cycle of uneducated parents. Those children who do attend school are likely to share a classroom with 50–100 other students with only one teacher (UNESCO, 2008). Power outages are frequent, and books and clean water are scarce. Altogether, the very human trait of learning is vulnerable to the effects of war, poverty and disease.

2. Theoretical framework and methodology

Seeking to describe how teachers in Northern Ugandan conceptualise children's learning demanded the fluid and dynamic nature of qualitative research (Burns, 2000; Lichtman, 2006). Further, the open-ended nature of the guiding research questions demanded a phenomenographic methodology (Marton, 1981). Marton (1993) aptly described phenomenography as "the empirical study of the limited number of qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena in, and aspects of, the world around us are experienced, conceptualised, understood, perceived and apprehended" (p. 4425). The defining quality of phenomenography – which differentiates it from its more widely known cousin, phenomenology – is the construction of a mental model that brings together the categories of description and metaphorically illustrates the variation of participants' experiences. The experiences of teachers in Northern Uganda were thusly described and shared in open-ended interviews, and teachers' conceptions of learning were identified and organised into categories of description for analysis. Nine interviews were conducted with 16 participants from four schools, two government and two non-government. The dynamics of the researcher's role in the data collection and analysis processes are documented in Willis (2012) and Willis and Allen (2011). Phenomenography is particularly suited to educational research due to its dependence upon experience and its practicality for solving pedagogic problems (Marton, 1988; Marton and Booth, 1997).

During the data analysis phase a code scheme was created to reflect the emerging themes. This scheme was reorganised several times to move away from merely describing the data (Richards, 2009) to describing the conceptions. The software NVivo™ was used as a tool to organise the codes and monitor the development of themes. As this process progressed, it became apparent that six categories of description could accommodate the identified conceptions. These categories of description were organised into a mental model that used a local metaphor to describe teachers' conceptions of children's learning, according to phenomenographic convention. (A simplified version of this model is depicted in the graphical abstract).

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