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Democratic Education Only for Some:

Secondary Schooling in Northern Uganda

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Abstract

This article analyzes the effects of the political, social and cultural contexts of secondary education in northern Uganda. Specifically, the authors examine interactions between several factors with the schooling system, including

- post-colonial curriculum,
- centralized examination system,
- several decades of war and instability,
- poverty, and
- intra-national and inter-tribal prejudice and discrimination.

Informing the analysis is the fact that Uganda is a democracy and thus has certain democratic responsibilities to its children and students. To explore these issues, the lenses of democratic theory and critical theory are employed.

Keywords: International education, Democratic education, Africa

1. Introduction

We are all shaped by our social context. Whether we are passively molded by the external forces in which we grow and develop, or we actively rebel against such forces, there is no escaping the fact that our social contexts define in large part who we are and what we do. This paper examines the effects of the particular social context of secondary students and their teachers in northern Uganda upon the process called schooling. Northern Uganda provides an interesting case in which to explore the interplay between context and schooling for a number of reasons. First, the area was ravaged by civil war/rebel insurgencies for almost a quarter century, which has left the educational infrastructure in shambles and made abject poverty the norm. Second, the remnants of British colonialism are evident in both the structure and content of the Ugandan educational system (Okoth, 1993). Third, the Acholi people of northern Uganda historically have been oppressed because the inter-tribal prejudices within the country (Eichstaedt, 2009). Finally, Uganda is simultaneously a democratic state in structure and one of the most corrupt nations in the world (Transparency International, 2009).

Within this social context, the Acholi people of northern Uganda are trying to rebuild their economic and educational infrastructure, reweave their social fabric, and develop the human and political capital necessary to effectively compete in national and international arenas. This paper examines those efforts through the lenses of democratic education (Gutmann, 1999) and critical theory (Freire, 2000).

2. Historical Background

With the formal colonization of Uganda into a British protectorate in 1894, the British Empire forged multiple tribes living within the newly created "Ugandan" borders into a single entity. Such forced assimilation is problematic at best. Given the different cultures and languages within the nation, the difficulties of nation building were exacerbated. Uganda is home to 17 indigenous tribes, speaking 43 different languages. Furthermore, the major ethnic groups can be divided into the Nilotic peoples of the north and the Bantu people of the south whose histories, languages and physical appearances have fueled unrest throughout the history of Uganda.

Since its independence in 1962, Uganda has struggled – on all fronts. Racked by successive wars and oppression, the Ugandan people have proven to be incredibly resilient. During its brief history as an independent nation, Uganda has suffered from several bloody regime changes and civil wars, accounting for the deaths of approximately one million people (CIA 2008, Morrison 2006, Tripp 2004). In first twenty-four years of its existence as a nation (1962-1986), Uganda had twelve different heads-of-state. The shortest duration of any head of state was two days, being that of Brigadier General Bazilio Olara Okello, from July 27-29, 1985. The most famous, or infamous, Ugandan leader must be Idi Amin Dada, whose murderous eight-year reign as a dictator lasted from January 15, 1971 to April 13, 1979. The notorious despot's brutality earned international condemnation and permanent exile. The longest duration of any Ugandan leader is that of the current President Yoweri Museveni,

who captured the presidency by leading the victorious rebel army, the National Resistance Movement. Museveni gained the presidency on January 16, 1986. Since that time, most Ugandans have enjoyed decreasing violence, with the northern Uganda insurgency of Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) being the exception.

While the presidency of Museveni has brought relative peace to much of the country, the northern regions of Uganda endured an insurgency by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) for more than two decades. This insurgency was responsible for displacing 95% of the population of 2 million Acholi, killing 200 000 people and abducting approximately 60 000 children (Republic of Uganda, 2007). The major Ugandan newspapers, *The New Vision* and *The Daily Monitor*, did not devote much coverage to the atrocities occurring throughout the northern regions of the country. In the most comprehensive analysis of the LRA war, Eichstaedt (2009) condemns Museveni's military efforts, writing

> The war was halfhearted at best. There was no interest in victory, only in the perception that a war was being fought. Continuation of the conflict meant money for commanders and their cohorts. Why end it? After all, the Acholi were decimating themselves. Why endanger Ugandan soldiers? (p. 139)

Eichstaedt concludes that the Ugandan People's Defense Force (Ugandan army or UPDF) could have (and should have) ended the LRA war long before the rebel forces finally crossed the border out of northern Ugandan and into the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2009. However, allowing the war to continue kept potential political enemies from the northern Acholi tribe occupied in the pursuit of simple survival, not the national politics of the Museveni government in Kampala. The region is now transitioning from a region in crisis to one focused on rebuilding and recovering.

3. Theoretical Framework

We have chosen to combine the theoretical lenses of democratic education (Gutmann, 1999) and critical theory (Freire, 2000) for two simple reasons. First, and most apparent, we are examining an educational system of a group of people oppressed by various forces within a democratic country. Second, the genesis of this paper sprang from multiple conversations and discussions with Acholi educators in the Gulu region of Uganda. Through these discussions, this author (Kelly) was impressed by the extent to which people negated their voice within larger political arenas such as educational policy regarding curriculum and schooling or national politics. The ideas of Gutmann and Freire share a common nexus, the importance of dialogue and deliberation to people within a humane society. We propose to use this emphasis as mechanism to focus our retelling of their stories and as an instrument of analysis.

At the heart of Freire's (2000) work lies the ideal of dialogic interaction between people, which necessitates that the participants recognize the humanity in one another. In an oppressive setting, colonial or otherwise, it is necessary for the oppressor to negate the humanity of the oppressed, thereby eliminating any need for dialogue. From the oppressors' point of view, Freire asks

> How can I dialogue if I consider myself a member of the in-group of "pure" men, the owners of truth and knowledge, for whom all non-members are "these people" or "the great unwashed"? (p. 90)

In their efforts to dehumanize the oppressed, oppressors must develop a mindset of "intrinsic inferiority" within the oppressed (Freire, p. 153). Once this is accomplished, the very definition of what it means to exist, simply "to be," changes. As the oppressed begin to respond to, and internalize, the values and goals of the oppressors, they begin to delegitmate their own values and goals. Ultimately, the definition of "to be" devolves into "*to be like*, and *to be like* is *to be like the oppressor"* (Freire, p. 50, original emphasis).

Within a colonial setting, such as the British protectorate of Uganda, the educational system becomes a crucial part of the oppressive process of delegitimating the indigenous culture in favor of the colonists' culture. Describing such an education system, Freire (2000) explains the "banking" concept of education as one in which students are dehumanized and treated as "containers… The more completely (the teacher) fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are" (p. 72). Within a banking model of education, "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (p. 72). Thus the banking concept of the teaching/learning interaction rejects dialogue as a pedagogical tool. For how can a teacher (a representative of the oppressive state) engage a student (a member of the ignorant oppressed) in the dialogic process that demands a mutual recognition of the humanity of the other? In Freire's (2000) analysis, they cannot. In its stead, Freire offers "problem-posing education" as an alternative (p. 83).

The introduction of "problem-posing" into education in a society brings with it the requirement to critically think about alternate solutions to problems. The work of Gutmann (1999) focuses centrally on this issue, which she calls deliberation. Through her use of deliberation Gutmann expands dialogue to a societal level and in the process adds the necessary condition of political equality. In a democracy, deliberation manifests itself through political discourse among citizens about large social issues (Yankelovich, 1991). For citizens to effectively engage in such deliberation, their education must prepare them both "to deliberate, and to evaluate the results of the deliberations of their representatives" (Gutmann, p. xiii). Thus to be considered *democratic*, a system of education must develop both the critical thinking skills upon which deliberation rests, as well as the dispositions necessary for ordinary citizens to engage in the deliberative process. Gutmann, (1999), applies a tripartite test based upon the principles of nonrepression, nondiscrimination, and the democratic threshold to determine the democratic worthiness of systems of education. If a system of education fails on any one of the principles, it cannot be democratic.

Nonrepression is a limit on governmental authority to prevent "the state or any group within it, from using education to restrict rational deliberation of competing conceptions of the good life and the good society" (Gutmann, p. 44). To maintain the principle of nonrepression, a nation's education system must protect for its students the opportunity for self-determination, which rests upon "developing the capacity to understand and to evaluate competing

conceptions of the good life and the good society" (Gutmann, p. 44). The principle of nonrepression does not protect *all* conceptions of the good life, for as in any functioning society, some conceptions fall too far outside the boundaries of the standards of communal living necessary for societal cohesion. Simply put, a democratic system of education would necessarily recognize some ways of life as *bad* or *anti-social*. Thus, the usefulness of the principle of nonrepression hinges on how a society defines "rational deliberation." For the sake of this analysis, the range of rational deliberation of good lives is constrained to include any way of life that does not deprive another citizen of life, liberty, or self-worth.

Nondiscrimination requires governments to educate "all educable children(Note 1)" (Gutmann, p. 45). In a democracy, all citizens carry the right and responsibility to engage in "self-consciously shaping the structure of their society" (Gutmann, p. 46). Therefore, any action or inaction by the state to disallow children from participating in the educational system is inherently undemocratic on the basis of failing to equip certain citizens with the skills and dispositions necessary to participate in democratic deliberation that shapes their society. The principle of nondiscrimination is one based on resource allocation. Not only must all children be included within the schooling institutions of a nation, resources such as teachers, supplies and support structures need to be allocated on some reasonable, democratic and humane basis.

Gutmann's (1999) last principle, the democratic threshold, can be defined as that level of knowledge, skills, dispositions and values necessary to effectively engage in democratic deliberation within a society. It is not dependent upon an individual, but upon the characteristics of a society. This becomes a guiding principle for democratic educational systems when it acts as a standard against which student learning is measured and guides resource allocation. Thus, the democratic threshold principle

> establishes a realm of what one might call nondiscretionary democratic authority. It does so by imposing a moral requirement that democratic institutions allocate sufficient resources to education to provide all children with an ability adequate to participate in the democratic process. (Gutmann, 1999, p. 136)

In other words, the democratic threshold establishes what it takes to participate as a democratic citizen and then demands of the system that all children are brought to that level – at a minimum. If groups of children are systematically not brought to the threshold, then the system is not democratic. As a result, resources may be reallocated to the children below the threshold. However, if all children are brought to the threshold, resource inequalities between groups are democratically allowable.

4. Methodology

To examine the phenomenon of secondary education in the Gulu region of northern Uganda, we have constructed an intrinsic case study. As such, an intrinsic case study is undertaken "because, first and last, one wants better understanding of this particular case" (Stake, 2007, p. 121). In this study, the "case," secondary education, is bounded within its multiple contexts, historical, social, political, and psychological. We have endeavored simply to unpack the

multiple contexts in which the Acholi people are attempting to education their secondary students. In an effort to filter the various forms of data in which we find ourselves, we have apply the lenses/filters of democratic education and critical theory. We are not trying to generalize to any particular theory or set of cases, only trying to better understand an very interesting phenomenon.

The larger social, political and cultural contexts are analyzed from review of Ugandan education literature and analysis of government reports and non-governmental organization evaluations. For the most current analyses of the contexts in which secondary education operates, the two leading newspapers in Uganda, *The New Vision* (www.newvision.co.ug) & *The Daily Monitor* (www.monitor.co.ug) were analyzed for the past three years (2007-2010) for content relevant to the study.

The "reality" of northern Ugandan classrooms is constructed from a combination of the writings of Ugandan teachers and their students from secondary schools covering approximately 8,800 km^2. Reflective writings were collected from a total of 178 informants (55 teachers and 123 students). To supplement their writings, interviews were conducted with 15 key informants including classroom teachers and educators in supervisory positions. Contributing to analysis of the secondary schooling are the reflective writings of North American teachers teaching in the same schools as the Ugandan informants. The North American teachers were partnered with Ugandan teachers through the non-governmental organization (NGO), Invisible Children, which focuses on educating secondary students affected by the LRA war. Observation notes and personal reflective journals were also collected from the North American teachers. Focused interviews were conducted with both Ugandan and North American educators. All writing samples and interviews were collected from June 2007 to September 2009, transcribed and coded for emergent themes. Pseudonyms are used for all informants.

5. Findings

To provide as complete a picture as possible of the social context in which secondary schooling in northern Uganda functions, each of the major factors contributing to that context will be presented separately. Although any such separation is false, for the factors are fluid, intermingle and affect one another as well as the act of schooling, it is necessary to tease out the differential aspects in which the Acholi people struggle to rebuild their society. The major factors to be examined include the LRA war and resultant insecurities, poverty and economic disenfranchisement, the post-colonial education system, and recent Ugandan educational initiatives.

6. LRA War/Insecurity

Since its inception, the LRA, led by Joseph Kony, has populated its army through child abduction. It has been a common occurrence for the LRA to invade local villages or secondary schools (Note 2) at night and abduct children to be either soldiers, porters, or sex slaves. Official estimates place the number of abducted children as high as 60 000 (Republic of Uganda, 2007). As a result of these actions, most children in the area live in a state of fear.

Many children were forced to commute nightly from outlying areas to the well-lit, guarded bus park in Gulu-town to sleep and to avoid being abducted.

Furthermore, the Ugandan government displaced more than 1.8 million people (95% of the population) from their familial villages and farms into internally-displaced-person (IDP) camps, supposedly to protect them from the frequent LRA raids. Within IDP camps, as many as 100,000 people were housed in huts so closely packed together that one can not walk between the huts without squeezing between their almost touching thatched roofs. Because of the great poverty and fear among the people, camp life is often dangerous, chaotic, and violent.

Radoja's (2007) work with Acholi youth clearly demonstrates the extent of the violence in the Gulu region of northern Uganda. Over half of all Acholi male youth have witnessed torture. Three-fourths of abducted children witnessed murder, and sadly, more than a third of non-abducted Acholi youth witnessed murder as well. So widespread is the violence in this area, that Radoja (2007) found that even among Acholi adolescents who were never abducted experienced violence, and large numbers are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Because of the violence perpetrated against the people of this region, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Joseph Kony and several of his highest-ranking officers of war crimes against humanity (Eichstaedt, 2009).

In 2006, a ceasefire was signed in hopes of negotiating peace between the warring parties. Between 2006 and 2009, the LRA and the UPDF tenuously vacillated between talks of amnesty and indictment. In 2009, the peace talks were officially abandoned. Currently, the LRA is actively abducting young people in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda's western neighbor. From an international aid perspective, northern Uganda is no longer in a state of emergency, but in a position of recovery and reconstruction. For teaching and learning communities this means that the school buildings that still exist, which at the height of insecurity were commandeered as outposts for the LRA and/or the UPDF, can now be finally used for their intended purpose.

Although the war has physically left the Gulu region, its psychological effects pervade its schools and classrooms. Daily, teachers and students must struggle with the traumatization from living in a war zone for two decades. Amazingly, no Acholi students in school had known peace in their lives prior to 2007. A young Acholi teacher, Ogweng, describes a typical abduction scenario from his school days 2002-2006 in the region,

> *Students were abducted from school and taken to bush, they were taken in great number. The students were taken from the same dormitory where I was in. I was very fear. Because the rebels could come and move so very close to the dormitory when we were there… That situation affected our studies a lot. Because when we were in class, we could hear the gunshots just near the school. When the students heard the gun shot, they moved away from the class. Lessons end like that. When you come back one day later, sometimes the students also ran away from the school towards town. At least it is safer when you come towards town. It's a long way from school, but we used to walk five kilometers. When we hear the rebels are coming closer to the school,*

> *we leave the school before they reach there. So we persevered until we finish the four years.*

Ogweng's story is one of resilience among the lucky students not abducted. However, many (approx. 60 000) were not so lucky and were abducted to live in the bush as child soldiers or sex slaves.

The reentry of the formerly abducted children into schools has introduced a new, dangerous dynamic into the schools throughout the region. The newly either captured or escaped abductees must make the transition from living a lawless rebel life in which they may have commanded other rebels and killed soldiers, civilians, and/or children, to the subservient role of student within the Uganda education system. A secondary science teacher, Olanya, explains

> *You know our system, we are "do this, do this." Some of them were (LRA). From there they were boss. Some of them were commanders. They would say "No, sir. I am not going to do it." I ask, "Why, why don't you do this?" If you ask her to sweep, she may decide to refuse to sweep. And you as a teacher, try to use your what?... your position as a teacher to force that child to do it. You say, "If you don't sweep, I will report you." But the child says, "You go ahead and report me." Those kind of reactions we have been through.*

When asked about what specifically they do with these students in their classes, most Acholi teachers respond that they try to "avoid stigmatization" and that they remind all students that "all of us have been traumatized." A female Acholi history teacher relayed, "I tell them maybe your colleague in the room might not have gone there (in the LRA), but also they have lost their dear ones." The emphasis across all Acholi teachers was to minimize the differences between the former abductees by ignoring their particular circumstances as much as possible. Thus, the personal trauma of the war is rarely directly addressed in classrooms, even among former abductees and child soldiers who now are beginning to return to school.

Occasionally however, evidence of their traumatic childhoods emerges in the students' academic work. A visiting American teacher taught a simple lesson about if-then statements in English that generated student examples such as

> *If I were Kony, I would kill people.*
>
> *If I were Obama, I would kill Kony.*
>
> *If I were a bird, I would fly to America.*
>
> *If I found a dead body in the bush, I would report it to the police.*
>
> (Various students, July 2009)

During a poetry lesson at a different school, Komokech, a 17-year old student, raised entirely during the LRA war submitted the following poem in his English class.

> *Death*

Death who are you?
Death where are you from?
Death who introduced you into this world?
Oh death why are you taking many lives of people
Both they young and old?
Death do you want to rule this world?
I wish we could find a solution for you
So that you can leave us in peace
But not in pieces.
Oh death leave us alone
Go, go we don't want you.
(Komokech, July 2007)

Even though similar writings were collected across the eleven schools in this study, the common practice continues to be to avoid directly addressing the lived war experiences of the students.

The downplaying of the effects of trauma upon the Acholi is best explained in the words of a local educational leader, Apiyo

> *Teachers and students are traumatized. Everyone in northern Uganda is traumatized. So if you talk to people, talk with care, because somebody can blow up at you. … Even me I can just blow up from nowhere. The trauma is in us. Living in a war situation for over 20 years is not easy. We are just trying to recover.*
>
> *Nobody wants to listen. You keep it to yourself. Because you are talking about your child being abducted, and the other person says my child was also abducted, so what about it? It is like the situation is the same, you know, my husband was chopped(Note 3) while I am seeing and she also expresses the same situation. So why talk about it?*
>
> *Who offers the support if everyone is traumatized? There are people who offer counseling. There is a counseling center that is here, but people don't go there. Very few people are going to think about that I need support. The trauma is there, it is in the people. People don't know they are supposed to be supported. It is strange, I know. It is strange when you talk about it. I don't know that I am supposed to be supported. I don't know that if I talk about my problem to somebody that it helps me to come out of it. So it is like a whole population is traumatized, so you cannot offer support to everybody.*

Thus, while the teachers and students throughout northern Uganda struggle to rebuild their educational system, the vast majority of them must come to terms with their traumatic pasts individually, unassisted by counseling or support services.

7. Poverty and Economic Disenfranchisement

Within an already poor country, Uganda, the LRA war decimated the Gulu region economically. The loss of any form of a healthy economy has significant effects on the

schooling of the Acholi youth. At the height of the LRA war, the UPDF forced up to 95% of the Acholi into internally-displaced person (IDP) camps (Eichstaedt, 2009, p. 18). When the UPDF would come into a village for relocation purposes, the local people were given 24 hours to abandon their homes, crops and animals. This devastated the Acholi people, for in their traditional culture, land and animals were a way to accumulate wealth and social standing. The displaced Acholi were forced to abandon both their economic and social resources to live in a "wretched and seemingly endless gulag existence" (Eichstaedt, p. 123). In 2007, the Ugandan government reported that over 3.1 million people remained in IDP camps across the northern regions (Republic of Uganda, 2008, p. xi). Specific to the Gulu region, 79.2 % of all Acholi remained in IDP camps in 2008, twenty-two years after the start of the war. For an agrarian people, relocation to such camps "destroyed the Acholi people's ability to feed and sustain themselves" (Eichstaedt, p. 5).

To better put into perspective the overall effects of the LRA war on the Gulu region, a comparison to the rest of Uganda is useful. Compared to the nation at large, the Gulu region continues to lag behind on several economic indicators. (see Table 1). The

Table 1. 2007 Comparative Indicators

Indicator	Uganda	Gulu Region
Annual Income per Capita	570 000 UGX ($275-$330)	183 600 UGX ($88-$106)
Literacy Rate	70%	56%
Life Expectancy	48.1 yrs	44.3 yrs
HIV/AIDS Prevalence Rate	6%	9%

economic vitality of the region is critically important to education for two main reasons. First, although Uganda is striving to achieve universal primary and secondary education, it is neither universal nor free. Second, the overall poverty generated throughout the region negatively affects the employment of qualified teachers.

Although Uganda implemented a policy of Universal Secondary Education (USE) in 2007 (Cooks, 2007), and officially many schools are "tuition free," all schools charge fees on top of the meager support allocated by the national government. These extra fees pay for necessities such as uniforms, supplies, food, and dormitories. Students unable to pay their fees are removed from school. In addition to these fees, because of the chronic understaffing of secondary schools throughout all of Uganda, most schools have PTA organizations that charge fees to students to pay for additional teachers. According to local educational leader Apiyo, the government allotment given to secondary schools in the Gulu region is 78,000 schillings per term. However, the average fees in the area are approximately 200,000 schillings per term, thus leaving a deficit of about 120,000 schillings per term. With three terms per academic year, the total cost to an Acholi family in northern Uganda for an average quality school can be 360,000 schillings – or double the average annual per capita income for the region. Ultimately, secondary education is beyond the means of most youth in northern Uganda.

For students able to secure the necessary fees to attend secondary school, they sit in classrooms averaging 70-80 students, sometimes with as many as 150 others. The classrooms are in physical disrepair, damaged by war and decades of neglect. The schools for displaced students are even worse – often made of scrap lumber held together by reclamated wire with dirt floors and no windows. For most students, using laboratory equipment or having a textbook, any book, is no more than a pipedream. The lack of textbooks and instructional materials, in turn, forces the teachers to rely heavily on dictation from their personal notes as the dominant method of instruction.

Teachers are no exception to the poverty that plagues northern Uganda. Because of low government wages and very limited ability among the Acholi population to augment teachers' income, most teachers work multiple jobs, or operate small subsistence farms, simply to survive. Okello, a biology teacher, poignantly describes the situation,

> *The worst thing (about teaching) is that you remain a poor person for a very long time. By this, I mean you may not be able to even support your family well because the pay is so low in teaching people's children… You reach a time when if you do not plan well, there may be a point when you cannot even pay your children in school… So at the end of it, when you retire, you have to go back to the village (and) you have to go back and dig.* (Note 4)

Aromorach, a geography teacher, demonstrates the budgeting pressures teachers face by sharing how he copes on a teachers' salary. First, his family is lucky enough to live in "teachers' quarters" on the campus of his school in a small, two-room dwelling. Without the need for rent or constructing his own home, his monthly salary of 220 000 schillings ($106) is allocated as presented in Table 2. While, the numbers below paint a bleak economic outlook for Aromorach and his family, he explains that Acholi cultural expectations within the extended family puts additional financial strain on his budget.

Table 2. Aromorach Monthly Budget

Salary	220 000 UGX	$ 106
- Food	- 142 000 UGX	- $ 68
- Charcoal	- 20 000 UGX	- $ 10
- School Fees (for his children)	- 25 000 UGX	- $ 12
Remainder	33 000 UGX	$ 16

> *In our setup in (Acholi) society, we have extended family. It is not like you people in Europe or in America. We have extended family where your brothers will need to help your brothers, you need to help your sister, you need to help your mother. So being the first born in the family, I have a lot of responsibility. I have already paid (school fees) for my younger brother and I am paying (school fees) for my sister.*

Unfortunately, Aromorach's story is not atypical. Teachers in the Gulu region are often ridiculed within Acholi society because of the very poor return on investment for their education. Thus, secondary teachers throughout northern Uganda struggle to raise their

families, or simply leave the area for higher salaries and more stability in other parts of the country.

8. Colonial Remnants

The structure of Ugandan schooling is unchanged from its colonial origins. Most children begin school at the age of six. Seven years of primary school (P1-P7) are expected of most Uganda children, during which class sizes average approximately 80 children/teacher. At the conclusion of primary school (P7), all students are required to sit for the Primary Leaving Examination (PLE), which students must "pass" to be eligible to attend secondary school. The PLE assesses children's knowledge in four major subjects; English, mathematics, science and social studies. Students must pass each subject individually to pass the PLE.

Secondary schooling is divided into two levels, ordinary (O-level) and advanced (A-level). O-level is comprised of four years of schooling (S1-S4), during which students study a wide variety of subjects. Class sizes in O-level can range from 50 to 150 students per teacher. At the conclusion of O-level, students are required to sit for the Uganda Certificate Examination (UCE). For the students that remain through O-level, the UCE results direct them along three main options. First, if they score well, students may proceed into A-level secondary education. A-level lasts two years (S5-S6) and much more narrowly focuses on students' academic strengths to prepare them for possible post-secondary education. If students score in the middle ranges, they may hunt for a secondary school willing to accept them, or transition into a vocational school to learn a trade or become a teacher. Lastly, if students score poorly on the UCE, they have two options, repeat the S4 year of schooling and retake the exam, or terminate their formal education.

Complicating matters further, in an effort to maintain some semblance of standardization, the Ministry of Education and Sports enforces very strict adherence to its testing protocols. While normally, such standardization of testing conditions works to support the validity of the testing results, in the Gulu region it has had the opposite effect. An English teacher from a school that suffered through LRA abductions explains

> *The problem is that there is no consideration for war-affected zones to sit the exams differently. It doesn't matter. I think the attention should be drawn on to that. Now, exams are set. The examiners have to brave the bullets. Many of them sacrificed their lives. The performance is very poor.*

In addition to the psychological bias introduced by assessing academic proficiency in a war zone, for many students the first time they ever get the opportunity to use laboratory equipment is on the testing day. Because of a lack of resources, almost all instruction focuses on theoretical knowledge, however the UCE and UACE exams include practical laboratory assessments, such as titration or solving for unknown ions.

The curriculum and pedagogy experienced in the eleven schools participating in this study also harken back to their colonial roots. Whether the effects of colonialism upon Uganda was good or bad was a matter of debate among some of the Acholi teachers. Of the effects, Aliker, a local coordinator of teachers laments, "*We have become half British, and remained half*

Acholi. We are two halves and a whole of nothing." This sentiment is echoed by Denis, a Ugandan English teacher, reporting that "*the Acholi people are in fact losing their identities by thinking that the western way of thinking is the 'right' way*." Ironically, Denis' observation was confirmed in an interview with Adong, who viewed things much more positively.

> Adong: *With the history we have, we have always had the British system of education. It makes an individual a better person in society*.
>
> PK: *How do you do that?*
>
> Adong: *You get civilized – by learning more*.
>
> PK: *You get civilized? These girls* (students) *aren't civilized yet*?
>
> Adong: *NO. The moment you get literate, you get civilized. Then you know the do's and don'ts. Because this is a developing country, Britain has been civilized for centuries. I must appreciate they are kind enough to share it with us in Africa. It is just recently that Africans have grasped education … Otherwise, it has been a lot of primitivity, warfare. And I think education does make people know the boundaries*.

Whether British colonialism was a gift or a burden to area named "Uganda" by the British, we will leave for others to address. However, from classroom observations in 75 classes across northern Uganda, several themes stemming from colonization emerged.

Okoth's (1993) observation that colonial education is for subjugation and silencing the voices of the people was reaffirmed in many classrooms. Steve, an American partner teacher reports

> *Most of the classes observed rely on banking knowledge. They dictate and have students write—for up to 80 minute periods. No real interaction, group work, or ongoing assessment, which is understandable to a great extent when you consider that the … class … had 115 students.*

The content taught in the teacher-centered classrooms comes from the few textbooks used by teachers and are generally of UK or USA origin and severely out of date. Akello laments that in the geography curriculum,

> *The curriculum of geography is not … practical. Students may not know the map of Gulu, but they will know the one of Switzerland and America and talk much of that area when living in the home district (Gulu). It's not good at all. Right now it's (Geography) is more like History, because the book we are using talks of things from years past. I'm teaching Germany in S4 and am teaching about the coal fields from those years past. We don't know if they're still using coal*.

In one of the science classes observed, the students were listening to a Ugandan teacher trying to explain the functioning of a carpet vacuum because it was part of the national curriculum. However, carpet in northern Uganda is extremely rare. As a result, neither the teacher, nor the students had ever used a carpet vacuum.

Not all curricular areas struggle to the same extent with relevancy however. Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports has worked to "Africanize" the English curriculum, by incorporating significant African authors into the literature selections. This is a good step, however, the schools lack the resources to actually procure the books necessary to allow the students to actually read substantial literature. Russ, an American partner teacher, relates the frustrations of many English teachers, writing

> *It's killing me that the students don't read books in "English" class. Short anecdotes or passages are all they get. Everyone talks about what a poor reading culture there is in the country, but there aren't resources to support real reading. Moreover, the adults are not modeling reading for the students. I would kill for a good read aloud right about now.*

The final remnant of colonialism discussed here is the subservient way in which students are treated within the schools. Across the schools studied, Ugandan students had very little opportunity to actually contribute to the teaching-learning process. Teachers almost never used student names. Instead, when a student was to be called upon in class, the teacher would simply point and call "This one." Furthermore, the student government structure present in all Ugandan secondary schools appeared to be a mechanism of control rather than a conduit for communication between the faculty/administration and the student body. Lamara, a former school inspector for the Ministry of Education and Sport, when arguing with a British consultant (Abby) explained the thinking about the role of students in a school. A shortened version of their exchange follows.

> Lamara: *Student leadership is used for the students to discipline each other. Students should not be involved in decisions about the school.*
>
> Abby: *The Layibi (student) strike was due to no voice. They didn't feel there was a way for them to air their grievances.*
>
> Lamara: *If we go to strikes in schools, there are a lot of things that trigger strikes. The students recently struck in Kampala for no reason – it was just student unrest. If I get stressed, then I'll get friends and make noise, then throw stones… All schools are a kind of dictatorships. If the head teacher says "You must do it, you must do it." Where there is strong dictatorship, there are no strikes. Schools need to have strong leadership… Student membership on the school development committees does not add any value. They should not have a voice, because it is a dictatorship.*

This exchange reveals the way in which many leaders in education think of the role of students. In short, they are to "be seen and not heard." This then sets up a situation in which the lack of communication and/or respect results in harsh discipline of students on the one hand and student strikes on the other.

Typical student discipline in Ugandan secondary schools involves the meting out of physical chores, such as "slashing" or "digging." (Note 5) Often, such punishments are carried out in a public area, where members of the faculty and student body ridicule the offending the student. Frequently however, the disciplining of students becomes violent through the use of caning,

which is the beating of students with bamboo poles while they lay on the ground. The dehumanizing act is described vividly by Jackie, an American partner teacher who witnessed a caning first hand, writing

> *In a matter of seconds the air in the room went from a calm reticence to brutal violence as (a teacher) stormed into the room holding a S2 student by the collar, and threw him onto the ground. "Lay on the floor," he screamed, "Lay on your face!" This was a student who I had just finished teaching in a classroom that was jovial and happy… (The teacher) was furious because (someone had drawn on the chalkboard without permission). As I was digesting the fact that this teacher was hazing this student like a frat pledge, the student was trying to explain to the teacher that he didn't draw the picture; it was another student in class, Okello. (The teacher) then screamed at the student to stay where he was, and stomped out of the room to get the other "offender."*
>
> *The boy was literally a foot away from where I was sitting, and to make the situation that much more unbearable, he looked up at me with scared eyes, said "Madame?" and handed me the composition books from the class for me to grade. As my heart was breaking from the combination of his innocence mixed with the violence that still hung in the air, I decided to try and talk him through it. Not the smartest idea, I know, but I couldn't ignore him, I just couldn't sit there and pretend like nothing was happening. I asked him what had happened, tried to get him to sit up a little bit and talk to me, but directly after I saw the shadow of (the teacher) in the window of the staffroom and whispered, "get back down, get back down!"*
>
> *The second student was thrown down next to the first, and after a minute of listening to their panicked explanations, (the teacher) reached by the wall of the staffroom and picked up a (cane). He beat the students three or four times each, on their backs and on their hands that they held up to protect themselves.*
>
> *Every human being has specific times in their life when they have an internal emotional battle, and I definitely did. I wrestled with the idea of walking out of the room in protest… It was right next to me, and in the end I stood up because I couldn't take it, but instead of walking out of the room, past (the teacher), I walked to the back. I pretended like I was carrying books from one end of the room to the other, but I'm sure it was obvious that I didn't know what to do. The female teacher caught my eye and said, "The students are used to this." I looked her dead in the eyes, strongly said, "I'm not," and she looked away…*
>
> *What was even more shocking to me than what I had witnessed was the carefree attitude of the other teachers while this was happening. It just seemed as if they didn't care, the one female teacher, Acii, was actually smiling while Chris and I had looks of horror on our faces. Afterwards, when all of the students were gone, Chris' teacher Rubankane looked at me and almost laughing said, "Allison, you looked scared," to which I said, "Scared isn't what I'm feeling right now," with (the teacher) sitting right next to me. Yes, it was a lie, but because I couldn't say anything to him*

directly…

The dehumanization inherent in the treatment of students, and the tacit allowance of such practices by authorities, further perpetuates the oppressive acts of the British colonialists upon the Acholi people of the north. As Frankl (1984) notes, in the moment, it is not the physical pain that hurts the most, but the insult (or dehumanization) implied in the injustice of the act.

9. "Universal" Secondary Education

The last facet of the social context of schooling in the Gulu region to be addressed is the implementation of universal secondary education (USE) by the Ugandan government. After implementing universal primary education (UPE) nine years earlier, on February 12, 2007 Uganda enacted its plan to provide "free" secondary education to all students in the nation that successfully passed the Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) (Cooks, 2007). In both cases, the expansion of education to Uganda's children was part of a campaign platform of President Museveni that directly solicited votes from parents and secondary students over 18 years old. Remarkably, Museveni repeated the process that exploded enrollment numbers in primary schools "faster than a sufficient cadre of teachers could be recruited and trained, and faster than facilities and administrative systems could be expanded. This resulted in a drop in education quality from which it took years to recover" (Chapman, Burton, & Werner, 2009, p.77). As with UPE, the initial reaction to USE was massive school enrollments, increasing the number of S1 secondary students by 33% in the first year (Bugembe, 2009).

As with UPE, USE was the victim of poor policy implementation and a nation of undereducated children thirsting for more schooling. To spur even more enrollment of students, one year after starting USE, Museveni's vice-president, Gilbert Bukenya announced that parents who fail to enroll their children for the appropriate secondary grades would face either six months in jail or a two million schilling fine (Muhereza & Naturinda, 2008). Ironically, the following week, the government announced that as many as 160 000 secondary students would be denied enrollment because the program was 26.6 billion schilling short of covering fees for all students requesting USE (Mugerwa, 2008). One year later, USE was saved by a huge influx of monetary support from the World Bank, which pledged 300 billion schillings ($150 million) specifically to support the expansion of secondary education (Bugembe, 2009).

At the local level, USE produced dramatic changes throughout schools in northern Uganda. In a perfect storm of policy incongruity, the central government implemented USE and banned the recruitment of secondary teachers, essentially expanding enrollment while simultaneously restricting the hiring of teachers by the government. Apiyo explains

> *Before USE, the schools used to enroll maybe 150 to 180 students for S1. But now, once USE started, the enrollment shot up to 250, 300, 400… The number is absurd. When you only have 3 classrooms for S1, you expect me to take 300 students… So the enrollment actually increased dramatically in secondary schools when USE started,*

but the government did not provide the other structures as well… So in secondary schools, we're almost choking with students.

The net effect forced the PTAs of the schools to charge much higher fees than before the implementation of USE. Ironically, in the end, some Acholi teachers complain that because of the additional fees, some schools are actually more expensive for parents, now that they are being given "free" education.

Finally, USE is also having curricular effects in both primary and secondary schools. Because the minimum "pass" score on the PLE does not equate with secondary school preparedness and because the Ugandan government has guaranteed secondary enrollment to all students who pass the PLE, those schools are now forced to enroll students not ready for S1 level work. Uniformly, secondary teachers interviewed in this study complained about the lack of skills among the new enrollees and the fact that P7 students no longer have an incentive to work hard on their studies. Since the language of instruction in all secondary schools is English, not the indigenous language of the area, all S1 students are expected to be conversant in English. Students minimally passing the PLE, but with insufficient English skills are being thrust into an environment not equipped to meet their needs. Unfortunately, the quality of secondary education across northern Uganda is dropping precipitously, while secondary school dropouts are rising dramatically.

10. Discussion

Upon review of the various insights provided by multiple participants in this study, several conclusions may be made regarding the ability of the education system in northern Uganda to develop the liberatory practices of critical thinking and democratic deliberation among the Acholi people. Three major factors shape the social context in which secondary education occurs in the Gulu region and contribute to its current dismal state; 1) the LRA War, 2) British colonialism, and 3) Ugandan educational policies.

We cannot underestimate the effects of two decades of rebel warfare upon the victimized civilian population. Specific to secondary education, the LRA war has

- destroyed the educational infrastructure for much of the region.
- displaced most of the Acholi population from their ancestral homes.
- driven many of the teachers out of northern Uganda to safer regions.
- traumatized most of the Acholi people, including students.
- interrupted the education of many students, sometimes for years.
- destroyed the economy of northern Uganda.

As a result, secondary education is merely a shadow of its former self. The war and the terror it generated was an oppressive force among the Acholi that directly interfered with the educational process. The LRA forces dehumanized the population through their campaigns of torture, murder, and child abduction. In most student writings, as evidenced by the poems presented herein, and during most teacher interviews, the northern Ugandans simply ask for peace. They are tired of being afraid. Living in a state of fear, being displaced from their homes, interferes with students' ability to concentrate and be future-oriented.

The war, as terrible as it was, damaged what was originally a school system mired deeply in the muck of its colonial beginnings. As the one British participant, Abby, quipped, "they are attending schools reminiscent of 1950s Britain." The current structure of Ugandan secondary education is virtually unchanged from its colonial days. The curriculum is often irrelevant to the lives of the Acholi students, with the possible exception of language arts classes in which some Ugandan authors' works are incorporated. The British exam system remains, though lamented, and is strictly followed, even when counterproductive. The exam system looms large in the minds of teachers who refer to it constantly when asked about their recitation style of teaching. The subjects covered on the test are broad and are for the most part, fact-based, thus teachers recite facts to their students to memorize. Because of this, the classrooms of northern Uganda are often fallow ground for growing the deliberative skills and dispositions advocated by Gutmann (1999) or the problem-posing education of Freire (1999).

Furthermore, the separation of formal schooling from the indigenous schooling described by Ssekamwa (2000) has achieved completely what Okoth (1993) warns us about. Secondary education is something to be pursued to escape the rural life of northern Uganda. The educational system clearly conveys this message to students when students with high scores on their UCE exams are shunted into math and science fields, while low achieving students are left to study humanities and agriculture. The use of "digging" or farming as a punishment within the schools further delegitimizes agricultural endeavors, and thus is repressive to conceiving of a rural existence as a "good life."

Widening our lens just a bit, the pall of colonialism can be identified in the words and thought of the participants. Freire's warning that within an oppressive society, knowledge becomes a gift bestowed from the knowledgeable to the ignorant was clearly echoed in Adong's comment that "*Britain has been civilized for centuries. I must appreciate they are kind enough to share it with us in Africa. It is just recently that Africans have grasped education…*" While Adong sees the results of colonialism as a positive, Aliker express the opposite view with his comment, "*We have become half British, and remained half Acholi. We are two halves and a whole of nothing*." Whether one tends to believe Adong, or Aliker, or both, it is clear that the oppressive phenomenon of identifying with oppressor has occurred among the Ugandans. Clearly, this is a repressive mindset that devalues the worth of being African, Ugandan, or Acholi.

Finally, the policies of the Ugandan government present a complex confluence of pressures upon the educational system. Within the national political arena, the intolerance of Museveni for dissenting opinion establishes a repressive environment in which educators must advocate for change. Acholi teachers, being physically distant from the capital, being without fiscal resources, and finally simply by being of the wrong ethnic group, lack the political capacity to effect change. More local to the Gulu region, two major policies affect the democratic worthiness of secondary schools; school fees and universal secondary education (USE).

The charging of school fees within a war-ravaged, poverty stricken society effectively eliminates large portions of the Acholi youth from the possibility of pursuing secondary

education. By itself, this is a discriminatory practice. Uganda, however, in an effort to expand access to its citizens instituted USE. Based solely on the principle of nondiscrimination, this is a tremendous victory. However, the manner in which it was implemented was flawed at best, deliberately disingenuous at worst. One must ponder why the national government opened the gates to the schoolhouse with USE while at the same time banning the hiring of teachers with government funds. On the one hand, secondary enrollment in S1 increased by 33% in one year. On the other hand, the school system was not prepared to enroll so many students so quickly. As a result, the actual quality of secondary education was greatly diminished in the process. So more Ugandan students are attending schools where less services can be delivered. Freire (2000) would call this "false generosity," a form of generosity that while laudable on the surface does very little to actual change the plight of the oppressed. The same could also be said of the half-hearted attempts of the UPDF to stop the LRA atrocities in northern Uganda.

However, we must be fair to the Ugandan government when it comes to the process of democratizing education within the Gulu region. Uganda is a very poor country. The World Bank is currently supporting USE financially. By itself, Uganda lacks the resources to educate all Ugandan children. The north lacks buildings, teachers, utilities, books and supplies. A resource-rich country would have difficulty mounting such a massive domestic project, for a resource-starved country it is close to impossible. While the secondary school system of northern Uganda is far from democratic or liberatory, efforts to improve it need to be applauded and supported.

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Notes

Note 1. While one can rightfully debate the propriety of Gutmann's use of "educable children," as exclusionary, we leave that debate for others and focus on the democratic ideal of educating all.

Note 2. Many Ugandan secondary schools are boarding schools with dormitories on the premises.

Note 3. "chopped" refers to being attacked or killed with a machete.

Note 4. "dig" in the Acholi version of English means to farm or grow crops.

Note 5. “Slashing” refers to cutting the grass around the campus with a panga, or machete. “Digging” in this use refers to hoeing a plot of ground used for growing food at the school.

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