

In their words: Teacher well-being amidst displacement and fragility in Uganda and South Sudan

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DESCRIPTION OF CRISIS-SPECIFIC CHALLENGE

More than 2.3 million South Sudanese refugees are seeking asylum in neighboring countries, including Uganda, which is currently hosting over 800,000 refugees from South Sudan (UNHCR 2019a). Within South Sudan, an additional 1.97 million are internally displaced (UNHCR 2019b). Young people make up a disproportionate number of those displaced, and many have missed years of school (UNHCR 2019b).

In an effort to address the educational needs of this population, Oxfam IBIS has organized an EU-funded consortium of partners called “Education for Life” in Uganda and South Sudan. The project includes multiple activities designed to help support the well-being and resilience of learners, teachers, and education systems. Our research focuses on the well-being of teachers and learners and how they interact with each other and with program components. Specifically, we focus on two main project activities: accelerated education (AE), which aims to support youth whose education has been disrupted, and teacher education professional development (TEPD), which helps to strengthen teachers’ competencies. There is a paucity of knowledge on AE, TEPD, and well-being in crisis and displacement contexts; yet, research suggests the central role education, and teachers in particular, play in supporting their learners’ achievement and well-being in these settings (Schwille, Dembélé & Schubert, 2011; Winthrop & Kirk, 2005). Our research aims to fill these gaps by generating evidence and learning for the project as well as for the broader field.

BRIEF OVERVIEW

Drawing on the *INEE Teachers in Crisis Contexts (TiCC) Training for Primary School Teachers*, the TEPD is led by the Luigi Giussani Institute for Higher Education and other implementing partners for AE in the four project

sites: AVSI Uganda in Palabek settlement, Uganda; AVSI South Sudan in Torit; Oxfam South Sudan in Juba; and Community Development Initiative in Kapoeta, South Sudan. These consortium partners follow the national AE policies and frameworks in their respective countries. Looking beyond academic achievement, the research team is examining the ways in which AE learners and AE teachers contribute to one another’s well-being and how teacher and learner well-being influence and/or are influenced by the broader community and the consortium’s interventions. The research aims to fill the prominent gap in knowledge on teacher and learner well-being and AE in crisis and displacement contexts.

This case study focuses on the research concerning teacher well-being. Many of the teachers have experienced displacement, either during previous conflicts in the region or during the current conflict. In Palabek settlement, the teachers are primarily Ugandan, with some South Sudanese. Given the protracted nature of the conflict in their country, the South Sudanese teachers in Palabek previously attended Teacher Training Colleges in Uganda while formerly displaced there. Meanwhile, a number of Ugandan teachers in Palabek are from the district or neighboring areas in northern Uganda, and grew up displaced or affected by local armed conflicts. In Juba and Torit, the teachers are South Sudanese. Many received training in neighboring countries (e.g. Kenya, Uganda) while formerly displaced, others are internally displaced and were previously trained in South Sudan, while still others have not received any formal teacher training prior to becoming teachers in South Sudan.

Our mixed methods study is taking place over four years (2018-2021), the same duration as the project. We have begun conducting qualitative research (semi-structured, in-depth interviews and classroom and school observations) in three project sites: Palabek

settlement, Uganda, and Juba and Torit, South Sudan. The goal of this initial research has been to better understand local definitions and experiences of well-being among teachers and learners. The team will continue to conduct qualitative research throughout the project, and in the third and fourth years of the study, the team will design, pilot, and implement a survey on well-being.

EVIDENCE AND OUTCOMES

Between August 2018 and August 2019, the research team completed a desk review of teacher well-being, conducted exploratory research to better understand local definitions of teacher well-being, and conducted the first round of in-depth qualitative research with AE teachers. From the desk review, we found the literature identified two important areas of well-being -- feeling and functioning -- and four central components of well-being -- social connectedness, self-efficacy, resilience, and stress and anxiety.

The exploratory research supported much of what we discovered in the desk review and added rich context-specific details. In this phase, we conducted 34 interviews and two focus group discussions (11 teachers) in Palabek settlement, Torit, and Juba. In addition to bolstering our findings from the desk review, these discussions uncovered important factors that contribute to teacher well-being, including access to basic needs, teacher professional development, and a sense of duty and obligation to the next generation. Further, the importance of one's environment on well-being highlighted the relevance of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological model, which recognizes the interrelated environments, interactions, and relationships that may contribute to well-being.

The second round of in-depth qualitative research in Palabek settlement and Juba, which drew on the first round, included two interviews with 29 AE teachers (total interviews = 58). The first interview focused on the teachers' experiences in the school, while the second focused on their life in the community. Emerging, select findings from these interviews suggest the important role education and teacher-student relationships play in helping or hindering well-being.

Regarding the role of education, teachers frequently discussed their motivation to teach in terms of the long-term impact it will have on their country through

their learners. In South Sudan, teachers talked about how education may be the only route to peace, and therefore, those who have gone to school have a responsibility to educate the next generation. As one teacher in Juba, South Sudan said when explaining why he became a teacher: "To make stability for this country, to be at permanent peace -- or to bring the permanent peace here -- let us go to school. If you have a knowledge, you go there and teach."

Regarding teacher-student relationships, teachers spoke of the pride they felt in seeing their learners excel in school as well as the additional roles they took on to ensure their learners' success. In Uganda, a female teacher shared that one of her learners had recently come back to school after having a baby. The teacher explained, "this one made me [feel] very proud because through talking to her, she has decided to remain in the school. And when she was doing the exams, we were the one taking care of the baby...I personally...was caring for the baby, giving her time to...sit for the exams." The teacher continued with an ear-to-ear smile that this learner had scored the highest in her class.

On the other hand, relationships with learners can also be a source of stress for teachers if they feel ill-equipped to handle the challenges their learners face -- especially when first beginning to teach in a displacement context. The same teacher shared, "if at times when my learners come to school and they are really sad, I feel also stressed. I feel I should find out the problem that learner is undergoing...Now when I ask and I find out that thing, it really stressed me. Because I always take their problem as mine [and] because at times, I cannot support them fully."

LIMITATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND/OR LESSONS LEARNED

Working with many partners in a consortium across two countries presents exciting opportunities and unique challenges. One challenge has been the coordination of project activities, some of which have been delayed. These delays may be attributed to different factors, such as a lack of clarity around who is responsible for specific project activities, or the time needed to secure approval by Ministry officials of the TEPD approach. Additional costs of conducting fieldwork (e.g. transportation costs, insurance premiums) required that we reduce the number of research sites and the

amount of time in the field. Importantly, this combined with connectivity issues required that we scale-back the participatory methodology initially envisioned, an approach we feel is particularly relevant to adopt when conducting research on holistic experiences such as well-being (explained more below).

From these challenges and opportunities, we have learned many lessons, three of which we would like to highlight: coordinating evaluation and research in a consortium, increasing the 'participatory' nature of the research, and contextualizing well-being.

First, as the research partner within a large consortium, it has been important to structure the research as independent from project implementation and evaluation. The European Union has heralded the need for research and supported such work through their Building Resilience in Crises through Education initiative. Yet, research does not replace monitoring and evaluation (M&E), and in a large consortium, it is important to coordinate M&E activities across various partners. It is necessary to adequately fund both research and M&E, and to consider them complementary but distinct.

Secondly, as researchers attempting to foreground the experiences of participants, our work has confirmed the importance of increasing the time with participants through: more time in the field, multiple interviews, and multiple field visits over time. Constant communication may be difficult given the constraints of working in crisis-affected contexts; however, prioritizing more points of contact over broader coverage is more likely to build the relationships and depth of knowledge necessary to foreground local perspectives and engage in more participatory approaches.

Finally, our emerging findings show the value of investing time in understanding the well-being of teachers early in an intervention, particularly as well-being will look different across various contexts, populations, and individuals. Although our research is independent, we have shared initial findings with the consortium in order to inform their ongoing work. We recommend building qualitative data collection and analyses of teacher well-being into routine needs assessment processes in order to help projects provide relevant, responsive support to teachers at every stage of their intervention.

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LINKS

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