

THE RIGHT TO BELONG:

A mixed methods study of self-reported feelings of belonging in Rwandan orphaned and vulnerable children and their perceptions of national peacebuilding

INTRODUCTION

Young people's contributions to peacebuilding are constantly overlooked despite the notion that lasting peace is dependent upon youth participation (Berents et McEvoy-Levy, 2015). Deutsch and Coleman (2012), point out basic human needs and education as critical components pertaining to the psychological aspect of lasting peace. Human needs can be viewed through Maslow's (1954) understanding of belonging or an innate desire to build relationships with others, as a critical component of internalized peace. Both peacebuilding (Bush et Saltarelli, 2000; Gil et Niens, 2014) and belonging (Allen et Bowles, 2012) in the post conflict context, have the propensity to be positively affected through schooling. Recent research suggests that access to and the quality of education has been seen to diminish the risk of national violence (Collier, 2000) and improve social cohesion (Heyneman, 2003). Furthermore, more educated people are less likely to engage in civil strife (Deininger, 2003). Connecting belonging to peacebuilding, offers a unique opportunity to understand how the most at-risk youth can be included into the national post conflict reconciliation process in order to avoid future conflict.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Pre Genocide: Due to the increase of opportunity for wage labor, the reliance on family support and obligations through which parents controlled their children weakened (Fletcher, 2007). The disintegration of familial ties to land combined with the pungent propaganda, led youth to violence and a belief in extremist views. The Interhamwe ('those who work together', or 'those who fight together'), the youth wing of President Habyarimana's political party, recruiting primarily impoverished male Rwandan youth to carry out the mass killings. Munene (2005) suggests that Interhamwe started as a youth sports movement and was manipulated to enforce the social and political desires of the Hutu Extremist ideology.

Post Genocide: While the Rwandan Patriotic Front's (RPF) initial move was to create an inclusive government, much criticism has befallen upon the current RPF regime given questionably it's democratic victory in 2003 and authoritarian tendencies (ibid). In 2008, Rwanda instated Punishment of the Crime of Genocide Ideology and the Prevention effectively making public discourse around ethnicity illegal. According to Kuradusenge (2016), "in order to enlighten and help the country progress and free itself from old mentalities, the RPF attempted to erase the initial ethnic identities of Rwandan citizens" (p. 61). Kuradusenge explains outlawing ethnicity, which historically leads to conflict and international perceptions of "backwardness." Despite internationally painting a progressive picture of Rwanda. Ethnicity plays a crucial role in understanding belonging, particularly in the post conflict context where ethnic differences between groups rarely result in armed conflict unless belonging-ness is politicized (Rosenthal et Bogner, 2009).

Rwandan Orphan and Vulnerable Children (OVC): The genocide left many child survivors without relatives and 300,000 were living in a child headed household (Schaal et Elbert, 2006; Ntete, 2000). Twenty five years later, Rwanda is attempting to integrate OVC youth into its conceptualization of Rwandan citizenship (Kuehr, 2015) Demonstrating how OVC will participate in the peacebuilding process despite their marginalization. OVC understandings of nationhood and citizenship has been shaped by inabilities for life transitions from childhood to adulthood and challenges the access of a quality education (Sommers, 2009; Hilker 2011). Rwandan OVC have experienced a breakdown of protective social networks and their communal supports (Schenk et al, 2010). The dysfunction of these systems has led to a social capital crisis which has had serious implications for OVC wellness. (Thurman, 2006). If belongingness and education is essential to peacebuilding and OVC are feeling the effects of social isolation due to disrupted social systems that have traditionally cared for OVC (Veale et Donà, 2003), then identifying avenues for policies and practices which are most effective in mitigating these challenges is essential.

EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

- This research was hosted at a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) four year secondary education boarding school for Rwandan and displaced orphan and vulnerable children
- Formal learning is complemented with after school arts and sports programs, in addition to faculty led clubs
- When students are invited to the school, they are given new 'families' (20-24 single gender groups), where there will be a 'mama', a 'big brother or sister' and a 'cousin' affiliated with each family
- Students live with their families for all four years during schooling

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

BELONGING

McMillan and Chavis (1986) delineated four main elements of belonging:

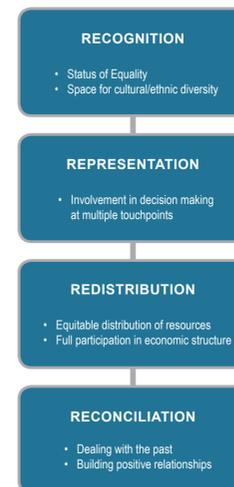
"The first element is membership. Membership is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. The second element is influence, a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members. The third element is reinforcement: integration and fulfillment of needs. This is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group. The last element is shared emotional connection, the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences." (McMillan et Chavis, 1986, p. 9).



PEACE BUILDING

In Gawerc's definition of peacebuilding, there is a nod to the local systems and interactions that are at play with one another as it comes to the peacebuilding process. The focus on local actors as key agents for peacebuilding resides in the understanding that not only are individuals directly affected by conflict, as victims or perpetrators of violence, they are also the ones who will act on the post conflict national narrative of peace (Gawerc, 2006). Critical to Gawerc's definition is the necessary transformation that a society and all of its members, local, national and international actors must undertake in order to embark on a path toward lasting peace.

Novelli et al (2015) : In line with Garwerc's definition, Novelli et al (2015) offers a unique peacebuilding framework to analyze how education has the ability to address root causes of inequalities and promote reconciliation in the post conflict context. They base their framework off of Fraser (2005) who proposes that education has a pivotal role to play in the 'parity of participation' in the peacebuilding process due to education's interconnectedness in the "process of social justice and society transformation" (Novelli et al, 2015, p. 10). Building upon Fraser's work, Novelli adds reconciliation to the Fraser's 3 R's, where "historic and present tensions, grievances, and injustices are dealt with to make a more sustainable peaceful society" (ibid). These four R's not only possess the ability to act on one another but also have the propensity to either hinder or behoove the peacebuilding process.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do Rwandan OVC understand their belonging in relation to their educational space?
- What is the relationship between Rwandan OVC feelings of belonging and how they see themselves participating in Rwanda's peacebuilding process?



METHODOLOGY

A convergent mixed method approach was used to investigate the research questions. I prepared both the survey instrument and focus group. Beginning with the quantitative instrument, provided guidance unto which thematic areas of belonging and peacebuilding should be further investigated in the focus groups.

Quantitative

- The quantitative component transpired into an online survey in efforts to compare OVC demographics, understandings of belonging within the educational space, and to analyze trends in the collected data (n=78)
- The survey could be toggled between english and kinyarwanda based on the students preference

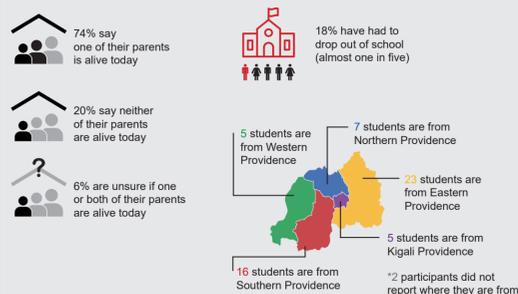
Qualitative

- The qualitative component came about in the form of three semi-structured focus groups which were used to add personal narratives and definitions of the constructs being measured in the quantitative analysis.
- Twelve participants, stratified by gender and grade from those who had taken the survey, were invited to partake in one of three focus groups where there were four OVC in each focus group. (n=12)

ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

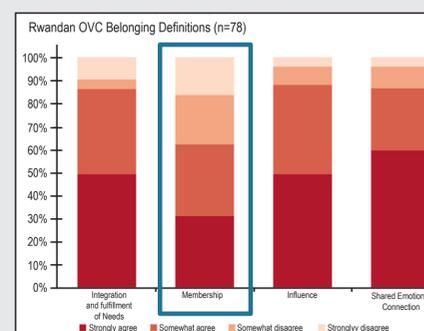


VULNERABILITY METRICS

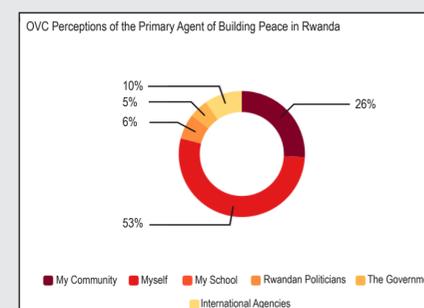


FINDINGS

- Student's membership conceptualization of belonging was not as strong as the other three components of McMillan and Chavis' Belonging typology
- When students were asked how they foresaw themselves contributing to peacebuilding they shared that mainly through economic participation they would build their country.



- Students saw themselves as the primary agent of peacebuilding in Rwanda



CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that both the school, due to its familial based approach to youth development, and the Rwandan national narrative are both factors that students harbor as part of their belonging. Rwandan OVC have embodied the national narrative and they are primed to contribute to the lasting peace of their country by first reimagining themselves in their educational space, then constructing their own sense of within the national narrative of "We are all Rwandans". OVC see their future shaped by their ability to garner employable skills to economically participate in the peacebuilding process.

This research offers a unique perspective into the Rwandan post conflict reality. It places the most vulnerable population at the forefront to uncover their perspective of belonging and how the RPF's policies around ethnicities might be implicated in OVC membership ideation. It also takes a deep look into how the educational space fosters belonging for OVC youth. It contributes to the growing body of literature around how youth peacebuilding actors can participate in setting the course toward peacebuilding. Ultimately, this research reveals Rwandan national policy narratives contrasted with Rwanda's current political reality and how these gaps may pose as concerns if OVC are meant to be fully integrated into the peacebuilding process and develop a well-rounded sense of belonging.

