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 al. McEvoy-Ley, 2013). Deleuze and Cohnalier (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 (Blush at Saturka, 2000; Oli at Merri, 2014) and belonging (Allen et Albins, 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 (Coller, 2000) and improve social cohesion (Heyneman, 2003; Bush et Saltarelli, 2000; Gil et Niens, 2014) and belonging (Allen et Albins, 2012). 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 and primarily impoverished made Rwandan youth to carry out the mass killings. Munene (2005) suggests that Interahamwe started as a youth sports movement and was manipulated to enforce the social and political desires of the Hutu Extremists ideology.

Post Genocide: While the Rwandan Patriotic Front's (RPF) initial move was to create an inclusive government, much criticism has been conferred upon the current RPF regime given unquestionably its democratic victory in 2003 and authoritarian tendencies (Ibid). In 2008, Rwanda started Punishment of the Crime of Genocide Ideology and the Prevention effectively making public discourse around ethnicity illegal. According to Kurunewske (2014), "in order to-gainlight and help the country progress and free itself from old mentalities, the RPF attempted to erase the initial ethnic identity of Rwandan citizens." (p. 61). Kurunewske explains outlawing ethnicity, which historically leads to conflict and international perceptions of "backwardness." Despite internationally painting a progressieve 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 Stagnere, 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 (Schnaat et Elbert, 2008; 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 national and citizenship has been shaped by disabilities for the transitions from childhood to adulthood and challenges the access of a quality education (Sommers, 2008; Hilker, 2011). Rwandan OVC have experienced a breakdown of protective social networks and their communal supports (Scharf et Albins, 2010). The dysfunctions of these systems has led to a social capital crisis which has had serious implications for OVC wellness (Thurman, 2006).

Excluding 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.

Conceptual Framework

Belonging

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

- **Influence**: the feeling of belonging or sharing a sense of personal realization. The second element of influence is influence, a sense of mattering, of making something happen.

- **Connection**: the feeling that members need will be met by the resources received through belonging to a 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, 1985, p. 9).

Peace Building

In Gwarc's definition of peacebuilding, there is a nod to the local systems and interactions that are play with one another as it comes to the peacebuilding process. The focus on local actors as key actors for peacebuilding resides in the understanding that not only are individuals directly affected by conflict, as victims (es) of violence (chout, 2007), the displacement of a group is affected by the post conflict situation and the national narrative of peace (Gwarc, 2006). Critical to Gwarc's definition is the necessary transformation that a society and all of its stakeholders, local, national and international actors must undertake in order to embark on a path toward lasting peace.

Novelli et al (2015): In line with Gwarc'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's (2005) who proposes that education has a pivotal role in the past of participation in the peacebuilding process due to educational their framework in the group. (Novelli et al, 2015, p. 10). Building upon Fraser's work, Novelli adds reconciliation to the Fraser's 3 Rs, where "historical and present tensions, grievances, and injustices are dealt with to make a more sustainable peaceful society" (Ibid). These four Rs not only possess the ability to act on one another but also have the propensity to either hinder or behaviors the 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 thematically areas of belonging and peacebuilding should be further investigated in the focus groups.

- **Quantitative**
  - The quantitative component transpired into a online survey in efforts to compare OVC demographics, understandings of belonging within the educational space, and 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 group, 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 participate in one of three focus groups where there were four OVC in each focus group. (n=12)

Analysis & Discussion

Student's membership conceptualization of belonging was not as strong as the other three components of McMillan and Chavis' Belonging typology

Findings

- **Students' membership conceptualization of belonging**
  - 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 emulated the national narrative and they are primed to contribute to the lasting peace of their country by instituting themselves in 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 ethnicity 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 perceptions influence their ability to contribute to the peacebuilding process. 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-grounded sense of belonging.

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 "couin" affiliated with each family.

- Students live with their families for all four years during schooling.

- 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?