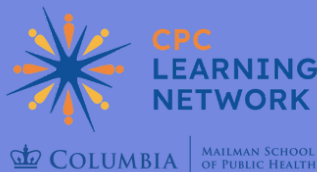


Summary Project Report: Ubumwe: Exploring Arts for Education and Psychosocial Support with Refugee Children and Youth

2024



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Columbia World Projects (CWP) is a university-wide initiative established in 2017 to bridge scholarly knowledge and real-world action. With the goal of achieving the greatest possible impact on pressing challenges of our time, CWP mobilizes Columbia University's scholars, researchers, practitioners, and students to identify and implement interdisciplinary solutions to complex societal challenges in partnership with targeted change agents, such as policymakers, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and corporations.

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Ubumwe: Exploring Arts for Education and Psychosocial Support with Refugee Children and Youth

Introduction

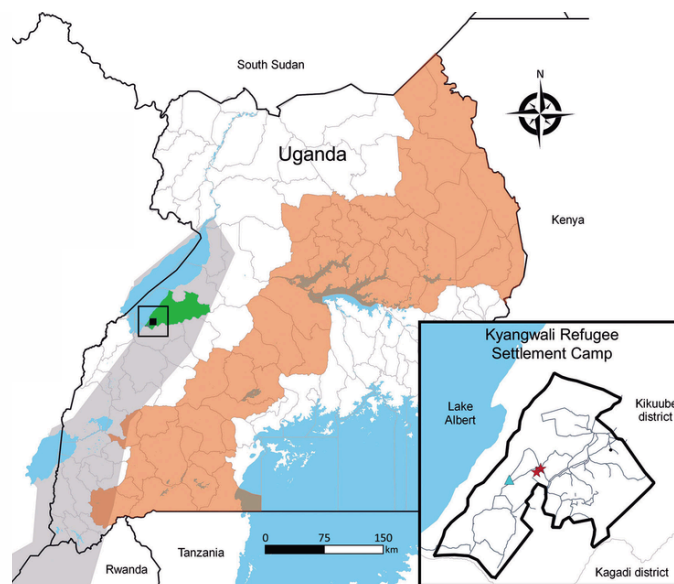
Children have the right to quality education that offers opportunities to learn and thrive across subjects and experiences, including the arts. The arts can shape and improve the lives of all children, including those who are forcibly displaced and living in conflict-affected areas. In 2023, the ***Ubumwe: Exploring Arts for Education and Psychosocial Support with Refugee Children and Youth*** project received a CWP Early Concept award to develop and test an arts education curriculum with teachers in Uganda's Kyangwali Refugee Settlement. The project aimed to integrate the arts into existing educational and community spaces to improve children's psychosocial and educational outcomes and make communities, including those for displaced children and families, safer and healthier for all.

Ubumwe: a Kinyabwisha word meaning *togetherness*.

Background

Uganda is home to 1.6 million forcibly displaced people, primarily from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, and Burundi. An estimated 57% (912,000 people) are children [1]. Globally, nearly half of all refugee children are out of school, with access to schooling at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels at 68%, 37%, and 6% respectively [2]. Students who are able to attend school in refugee settings often face additional obstacles, such as overcrowding, minimal teaching and learning resources, under-qualified teachers, and curricula that do not align with their native language or lived realities. Access to education, a basic human right enshrined in the 1989 *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, offers a stable and safe environment where displaced children can learn how to rebuild their lives. For children whose lives have been disrupted by conflict, war, and natural disasters, engagement in the arts can serve as a tool to strengthen individual and communal resilience, help mitigate trauma, and support their successful resumption and continuation of education [3].

The arts can awaken young people's creativity, reveal their "beliefs about themselves, their roles in society, and social locations," [4] and positively affect physical and mental health and well-being. Although "creative arts" are included in Uganda's national primary school curriculum, they are rarely taught due to a host of factors—art teacher shortages, lack of teacher training, inadequate curricula, lack of time and resources, and prioritization of other subjects. In the Kyangwali Refugee Settlement, located in the Kibube District of Western Uganda and home to over 125,000 residents, a community-based school proposed a collaboration with Columbia University to support local teachers with more engaging arts curricula. As a result, the *Ubumwe: Exploring Arts for Education and Psychosocial Support with Refugee Children and Youth* project was born, bringing together a unique group of partners from academic, research, arts, education, and public institutions in the U.S. and Uganda to reimagine how schools, communities, and organizations can use the arts to better meet the needs of children whose lives have been disrupted.



***Ubumwe's* unique consortium of partners:**

- **Columbia University, Teachers College** and the **Mailman School of Public Health** Program on Forced Migration and Health and the Care and Protection of Children (CPC) Learning Network
- **AfriChild Centre of Excellence for the Study of the African Child**, a research institute housed at Makerere University in Uganda
- **Arts Ignite** and **Artolution**, two New York City-based arts education, non-profit organizations
- **Community-based Primary School**, in Kyangwali Refugee Settlement
- **Hopelink Action Foundation (HAF)**, a Ugandan non-governmental organization

The Ubumwe consortium also closely collaborated with:

- **Office of the Prime Minister (OPM)**, Uganda
- **Ministry of Education and Sports**, Uganda
- **National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC)**, Uganda
- **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)**, Uganda
- **Windle International Uganda (WIU)**, a non-governmental organization in Uganda

Objectives

The *Ubumwe* project aimed to create and pilot a culturally relevant and responsive art education curriculum for primary school teachers in Kyangwali Refugee Settlement. Further, the project aspired to establish a multi-sectoral and international partnership that could lay the groundwork for future expansion of arts education in refugee settings, in Uganda and elsewhere.

Methods

The *Ubumwe* project included four key components, each described below:

- Design and development of an arts education curriculum for primary grades 3-6 with accompanying evaluation tools
- Adaptation of the curriculum and teacher training for implementation
- Curriculum delivery, teacher supports, and evaluation
- Stakeholder engagement.

Ubumwe curriculum development

The Teachers College team, including 12 graduate students enrolled in the spring 2023 *Education in Emergencies* course taught by Dr. Mary Mendenhall, and with key leadership and supervision by graduate research assistant Kemigisha Richardson, developed an evidence-informed draft of the arts education curriculum as part of their coursework. The curriculum for primary grades 3-4 focused on the performing arts (under the themes *storytelling and self-expression* and *building self-confidence through collaborative art*), and for grades 5-6 on the visual arts (under the themes *self-exploration, identity, and vision for the future* and *making art with materials found in the local environment*). Students then engaged in a series of curriculum design workshops with teaching artists from Arts Ignite and Artolution and 15 Ugandan teachers, which helped make lessons more interactive, culturally responsive, and feasible within the Kyangwali context. Three additional graduate students adapted the theory of change to align with the one-year project timeline and developed monitoring and evaluation tools (as a final project for their *Monitoring and Evaluation* course).

Curriculum adaptation and professional development workshop

In May 2023, 30 attendees representing project partners, teachers, and other stakeholders met in Hoima, Uganda, a town close to Kyangwali Refugee Settlement, to participate in a one-week curriculum adaptation and professional development workshop. Several interactive sessions allowed teachers and other participants to explore performing and visual arts and apply arts-integrated instructional practices. For example, Arts Ignite led performance art sessions where participants wrote and presented short stories and songs, developed their own choreography, and learned how to use the body as an instrument. Artolution engaged participants in the creation of a community mural and through their “foundstrument, soundstrument” community activity, a sculpture made of locally found, recycled materials. On the concluding day, teachers led community-building activities at the school and the nearly 200 participating students were invited to add their own creative touches to the mural and sculpture. Thirteen participating teachers completed a survey about their experiences at the close of the workshop.



Images from the curriculum adaptation and professional development workshops

Curriculum piloting and evaluation

The curriculum was piloted during a single term by 15 teachers in their classrooms from June-August 2023. Throughout this time, the NYC-based team and teaching artists from Arts Ignite and Artolution provided additional support through a WhatsApp group chat. Teachers aimed to deliver two lessons per week (totaling 40 minutes) for 12 weeks. However, as the arts-focused content was new for teachers, the lessons took longer to implement than planned and not all of the materials were piloted

by the end of the school term. During the pilot, Artolution teaching artists returned to the school to facilitate community-based arts programming, including painting murals on the school walls and making a sculpture entitled “Book of Hope”, out of recycled materials. The team conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers at the end of the project to explore their perspectives and reflections on integrating arts lessons into the curriculum. While the team was able to pilot monitoring and evaluation tools, a more robust assessment of project outcomes would have required additional time and resources outside of the pilot scope.

Stakeholder engagement and support

Throughout the project, the *Ubumwe* team prioritized relationship building with key stakeholders in Uganda—including the Ugandan Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), the National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC), the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), and UNHCR—which established buy-in and enabled necessary permissions for, and support of, the curriculum pilot. These collaborative relationships also lay the groundwork for potential curriculum expansion.

Findings and Lessons

Impacts on students and teachers

Teachers’ observations and reflections on their learners’ engagement with the arts were generally positive, citing many benefits, including:

- Improvements in students’ **creative thinking** as they experienced new ideas in the classroom
- Learners’ **eagerness to attend school and active participation** in lessons
- Improved **dynamics between teachers and students**
- Shifts from more teacher-centered to more **student-centered pedagogies**
- **Bidirectional learning** whereby teachers also participated in the creative arts process
- **Expansion of pedagogical practices** through arts-based professional development.

Teachers perceived that the community-based arts activities were well-received and expanded the reach of the project beyond the classroom to the larger community.

“One [change] was the children starting loving [school] [...]. It improved the teacher-pupil relationship...the children now were [keen] to engage with teachers, especially where they feel [they have] not understood...”

– Primary School Teacher

Impacts of the *Ubumwe* partnership

Ubumwe was able to leverage a network of partners who were uniquely positioned to design and implement arts-focused curriculum to improve child well-being in school and community settings in Kyangwali Refugee Settlement. Ongoing efforts to engage key stakeholders in Uganda, including sharing feedback from the curriculum adaptation workshop, lay the groundwork for future curriculum replication and scaling, with the potential for greater impact in refugee settings via integration into the national primary school curriculum.

Lessons learned

Several lessons emerged from the pilot that can inform future adaptation and expansion. First, additional time needs to be allocated for the professional development workshop. Continuous, in-person professional development and mentoring is recommended to support teachers who may still

be developing their teaching and classroom management practices and English fluency amidst acquiring skills for a new subject matter. Additionally, the arts education curriculum could not be completed in one school term, necessitating a careful review of both the scope and sequence of the curriculum and the unique needs of teachers in refugee settings. Finally, the *Ubumwe* pilot took place at a community-run school which, while resourceful in fundraising for salaries, infrastructure, and teacher and student learning materials, was not consistently able to pay teacher salaries throughout the pilot. Partnering with schools officially registered with the Ugandan Government (OPM) would help avoid this implementation barrier and benefit students, teachers, and communities.

Key Outputs

- Formed a consortium of teaching artists, child well-being professionals, and researchers.
- Built institutional relationships with, and obtained critical support from, key stakeholders in Uganda, including OPM, NCDC, MoES, UNHCR, and WIU.
- Drafted a primary grades 3-6 arts education curriculum.
- Conducted professional development training for 30 participants, which resulted in pedagogical growth and a commitment to fostering a creative learning space for children.
- Engaged 15 teachers to pilot the primary 3-6 arts education curriculum at the school, reaching 187 children, with positive feedback from teachers and students.
- Submitted an article, *Reimagining education: Integrating the arts in schools with refugee children* to NORRAG, a network for international policies and cooperation in education and training.
- Presented the *Ubumwe* project at the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) March 2024 Conference.

Why This Project Was Important

Of the estimated 110 million forcibly displaced people globally, 43.3 million (40%) are children below age 18 [5] and, nearly half of refugee children are out of school. Along with provision of basic services, engaging in the arts can positively affect children's physical and mental well-being and resilience and support the continuation of education. This project brought together a strong, committed team of partners—Columbia students, educators, teaching artists, Ugandan governmental and non-governmental agencies, UNHCR, and child well-being professionals—to develop and test a replicable, arts-focused curriculum for primary school teachers working in a refugee settlement in Uganda. Results showed that the proof of concept at the center of *Ubumwe* is feasible, relevant, and strongly supported by teachers, students, and stakeholders in education policy, programming, and curriculum development in Uganda.

Lessons on Implementing Social Impact Projects at Columbia University

The *Ubumwe* project exemplifies Columbia's mission to advance human welfare and apply interdisciplinary approaches to address complex local problems. It built on the University's strengths in research, teaching, service, and impact and leveraged a network of multidisciplinary partners who were uniquely positioned to accelerate and amplify the social impact of the project. Through this unique partnership, Teachers College students were offered an opportunity to co-design and test curriculum alongside Ugandan teachers, teaching artists from Artolution and Arts Ignite in New York City, a refugee-led Ugandan organization, and a Ugandan research center with a strong history of collaborations with Columbia. The team's commitment to building equitable collaborations across partners and providing opportunities for a range of voices to contribute to *Ubumwe* project implementation can serve as a model for other collaborative projects.

“Meaningful partnerships are key to achieving social impact goals. Together, we can accomplish so much more by making space for different perspectives, leveraging one another’s strengths, and working through challenges in harmonious ways. The *Ubumwe* project brought together an amazing group of people and expertise and we look forward to continuing this collaboration.”
– Dr. Mary Mendenhall, Teachers College

CWP as Catalyst

The *Ubumwe* project experience and arts education curriculum illuminate the importance of forming partnerships across disciplines and borders to explore how the arts can best be integrated into existing educational and community structures for displaced children and communities. CWP funding and support enabled the *Ubumwe* team to develop and test its proof of concept and gain necessary buy-in and support from key stakeholders in Uganda for future expansion and integration.

“We have been working in Uganda since 2018, and we have never been part of a consortium like this. This is something extraordinarily unique that I think provides a really strong framework and model for how this could expand in collaborating with a U.S.-based university, like Columbia...”
– Max Frieder, Artolution

Next Steps

The *Ubumwe* partners have successfully secured additional funding from CWP to implement “*Ubumwe 2.0*,” which will expand the project to more schools in Kyangwali, strengthen psychosocial support and social and emotional well-being components, and allow for more rigorous monitoring and evaluation. Support from key Ugandan stakeholders established during the pilot phase will play an important role in project expansion and sustainability in the next phase. The team will continue to disseminate the *Ubumwe* approach and materials, for example through publications, webinars and at international education conferences, and ensure that all materials are open source.

“Because of this strong partnership, by the end, we were able to address some urgent challenges and that was because we had built a strong relationship; we built trust. So, collaboration with partners—each with different strengths and abilities, different and unique points—was a plus and, I believe, contributed to the success. It is our wish to see this scaled up to cover more refugee settlements and even more schools.”
– Clare Bangirana, AfriChild Centre Uganda

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- [3] Jones, S.A. (2018). *Art-making with refugees and survivors: Creative and transformative responses to trauma after natural disasters, war, and other crises*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- [4] Ibers, P. M. (1999). Art education and the possibility of social change. *Art Education*, 52(4), 6-11.
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