



# “Every Child Is Special...”: Perspectives on the Integration of Children Born of War and Their War-Affected Peers at a Local School in Northern Uganda

Boniface Ojok\*

College of Arts and Law, Department of History and Cultures, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom

## OPEN ACCESS

### Edited by:

Susan Bartels,  
Queen's University, Canada

### Reviewed by:

Catherine Baillie Abidi,  
Dalhousie University, Canada  
Michelle Lokot,  
University of London, United Kingdom  
Elke Kleinau,  
University of Cologne, Germany

### \*Correspondence:

Boniface Ojok  
ojok.boniface@gmail.com

### Specialty section:

This article was submitted to  
Peace and Democracy,  
a section of the journal  
Frontiers in Political Science

Received: 17 November 2021

Accepted: 08 April 2022

Published: 06 May 2022

### Citation:

Ojok B (2022) “Every Child Is  
Special...”: Perspectives on the  
Integration of Children Born of War  
and Their War-Affected Peers at a  
Local School in Northern Uganda.  
*Front. Polit. Sci.* 4:816736.  
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2022.816736

This article examines the circumstances of 16 Children Born of War (CBOW) who participated in a classroom activity designed to understand their experiences of integration at a local school in post war northern Uganda. The children are part of a generation of returnees who were conceived as a result of sexual violence and forced marriages between the commanders of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and young girls abducted from their communities. The research at the Alur Primary School (APS) articulates the children's views, and how this one school managed to integrate CBOW and war-affected children, treating each as special, to advance their learning and their education. Specifically, each of the 181 war-affected children involved in the class activity was given a chance to recall key moments of their time at APS. Their write-ups were analyzed into themes illustrating what happened when CBOW were integrated into the school, and how the school responded to their educational needs. The activity did not isolate CBOW from their non-CBOW peers, hence giving every child the opportunity to freely express their views regardless of their background. This article contributes to our understanding of how schools, as one of the most influential institutions that shape the development of children, can foreground the voices of CBOW as beneficiaries of education and actors in their own right.

**Keywords:** education, reintegration, children, war-affected, born of war, integration

## INTRODUCTION

Visitors to Alur Primary School (APS)<sup>1</sup> are met with a big signpost bearing the school's symbol and flag colors. Along this sign is the familiar black, yellow, and red colors of the Ugandan flag—found in all national government grant-aided schools to remind the public of the importance of schooling to the future of the nation. Like all government-aided schools in Uganda, APS operates

<sup>1</sup>The name used for this school is a pseudonym, to protect its anonymity. In order to further this, some additional information such as date of establishment and precise location of the school has been left out on the basis that it would appear obvious for local residents in northern Uganda to know which school the researcher is referring to.

a free universal—based education curriculum that runs at all levels from Primary One (P.1.) to Primary Seven (P.7.).<sup>2</sup> Nearly all the 800 children hosted at the school were “war-affected.” They include Children Born of War (CBOW) and other groups of children who were born and grew up in northern Uganda during times of conflict and displacement<sup>3</sup>.

The terminology CBOW has been used in reference to “persons of any age conceived as a result of violent, coercive, or exploitative sexual relations in conflict zones” (Carpenter, 2007, p. 3). CBOW in this northern Uganda study were part of a generation conceived as a result of sexual violence and forced marriages between the commanders of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and young girls abducted from their communities<sup>4</sup>. 16 CBOW were identified from a total population of 181 children of the upper-classes of P.6 and P.7<sup>5</sup>. Of the 16 CBOW, the majority were among some 138 beneficiaries of NGO scholarships offered to war affected children<sup>6</sup>. In 2015 the school offered 25 placements to CBOW under a child sponsorship scheme known as Sponsoring Children Uganda (SCU)—allowing the children to enroll at the different primary grade levels. The scheme has been run in collaboration with mothers of CBOW who resided in the peri-urban settlements of the study location<sup>7</sup> and have formed an association known as *Watyē Ki Gen*<sup>8</sup>. This group of young girls (hereinafter referred to as mothers, or young mothers) constitute a part of the larger number of 30,000–60,000 school age children and youth abducted in northern Uganda during the war between LRA and the Ugandan army. In this war, young female captives were forced into marriage and motherhood where they served as “wives” and sex slaves to senior commanders in addition to being domestic servants, porters and fighters in the LRA (Baines, 2014, p. 406). Under these circumstances, the young mothers conceived and gave birth to children—the subject of interest in this study.

Today, over a decade from the end of the war, studies have shown that the children usually fail to integrate into their maternal clans due to communal obstacles that their mothers face in attempting to negotiate their positions in their communities

(see for example Apio, 2016; Baines, 2017; Porter, 2017; Stewart, 2017; Atim et al., 2018, p. 68). Some of the mothers reported that upon return, their families had been killed or displaced—the result of which was life in poverty, and inability to fend for their children. In as much as some of their relatives wanted their “children” (young mothers) to return to them, their having had children born from the “bush” impacted negatively on the way CBOW have been received as children of the enemies (also see Apio, 2016; Mukasa, 2017; Stewart, 2017). Research has also revealed how the mothers’ lives are clouded with shame and agony of being associated with the LRA (Liebling and Baker, 2010; Mukasa, 2017; Liebling, 2018). In most of these cases, the mothers were welcomed, while their “rebel” children rejected, hence perpetuating a cycle of stigmatization and victimization during the post war period (Mukasa, 2017).

The unraveling challenges that the returnees are faced with has forced some of them to migrate and start new lives in the anonymity of *kwo town*—Luo language meaning life in urban locations. In Ojok’s (2021) study, the mothers viewed *kwo town* in terms of opportunities these present to their life outside of the social scrutiny they experienced in the camp<sup>9</sup>. A key notion of the current study was that mothers, through their peer associations and networks<sup>10</sup>, have negotiated their statuses with NGOs and other charity associations for support—which is a demonstration that their migration in the urban settlements became a form of social agency employed as an alternative to life in their maternal homes. According to Caramés et al. (2006) relocation to new environments (especially town centers) is often fundamental in ensuring that returnees mitigate their experience of stigma and assimilate as “normal” people. In the case of the mothers, many of them were able to benefit from different forms of educational support for CBOW, making it possible to raise the children in the peri-urban settings of the study location where their LRA identity is unknown (Ojok, 2021). Such social negotiation sometimes manifests in different forms: Erin Baines and Rosenoff-Gauvin have for instance observed that the mothers have embraced their motherhood responsibilities as an act of social repair (Baines and Rosenoff-Gauvin, 2014). By doing so, they have begun to forge a way to raise their children as opposed to being held back by the stigma they encounter in society. It also follows that in the performativity of their motherhood duties, the returnees desire that their children be educated to become *lutino makwiri* (also see Oloya, 2012), a Luo language phrase meaning “responsible children”—who are able support their parents to overcome the

<sup>2</sup>The school is a standard primary setting for pupils from P.1. to P.7., of which P.6. and P.7. constitutes the upper primary. After P.7., the children sit a Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) to join secondary schools or vocational training before being enrolled into the university or other tertiary institutions as a final step.

<sup>3</sup>Some of the children were designated by NGOs as “vulnerable children”. These include orphans, those living with HIV/AIDS, street children and children in need of urgent support.

<sup>4</sup>The definition falls within category 3 of the four broad sub-categories of CBOW advanced in academic research, i.e. 1) children of enemy soldiers, 2) children of soldiers from occupation forces, 3) children of child soldiers and 4) children of peacekeeping forces (Mochmann and Lee, 2010, p. 271).

<sup>5</sup>The 16 CBOW were identified through their write ups and reflections at a composition activity organized by the research as discussed in the methodology section below.

<sup>6</sup>School Registry 2016/17 accessed from office of Director of Studies (DoS), Alur PS, August 6, 2018, northern Uganda.

<sup>7</sup>The name of the urban center located in northern Uganda (location of research) has been concealed to avoid easy identification of the school, and the children associated with it.

<sup>8</sup>An association of mothers of CBOW who have been formed as a non-governmental organization to advocate and draw attention to the circumstances of their children.

<sup>9</sup>Borrowing from elsewhere Adam Branch in his study on the urban town of Gulu in the post war northern Uganda introduced the everyday usage of the phrase *kwo town* – often ambivalently expressed to denote both challenges and opportunities that came with the growth and expansion of Gulu town following the conflict (Branch, 2013).

<sup>10</sup>At the time of the study a group of 100 mothers had formed three different associations under the Women Advocacy Network (WAN) – a network of the young mothers and survivors of sexual violence who have been supported by a local NGO to carry out advocacy and lobby for their needs and that of their children. For more on WAN see website <http://www.justiceandreconciliation.org/initiatives/womens-advocacynetwork/>. Of these, *Rwot Lakica* group comprised 30 mothers while *Kica Pa Rwot* Women’s Group had 35 mothers. A third group known as *Can Rwede Peke* had 48 young mothers. However, some mothers do not join these groups due to fear of stigmatization (Ojok, 2021).

adversities faced in their communities (Ojok, 2021). In this way, the education of returnees (mothers and their children) can become a source of “emancipation” and “hope” (Mukasa, 2017, p. 363). Upon this understanding, this study examines the experiences of CBOW and their encounter with schooling at APS—contributing to our understanding of how schools, as one of the most influential institutions, can shape the development of children.

Specifically, the article discusses how this one school has managed to integrate CBOW and war-affected children, treating each as special, to advance their learning and their education. Significantly, the teachers at APS have argued that “Every Child is Special” moots this approach as suitable to addressing the educational needs of all children, including CBOW enrolled at the school. The research revealed that there exists no consistent approach to what special education means, which does not speak to any national or international discourses around the support of children with Special Education Needs (SEN): the statement “Every Child is Special” meant different things to different teachers when it comes to CBOW. On the one hand, the statement points to the fact that all children at the school are taken as individuals with specific needs regardless of their background. On the other hand, this same reasoning also implies that some of the children require special attention and support because they returned from the LRA camps where they faced particular challenges and received an unusual socialization (Ojok, 2021). On this basis, the school’s philosophy advances the view that the educational provisions at the school have been focused on the individualities of the child—the fact that every child has unique academic and non-academic needs, and that sometimes there are children who are “special” due to their circumstances, and have to be treated that way. This research is an attempt to unpack these processes as they relate to the experiences of the CBOW.

The discussion in the next section lays out the study methodology. This is followed by a section that discusses the findings arising from children’s experiences—foregrounding their voices as beneficiaries of education and actors in their own right. Throughout this article, pseudonyms are used for the school, the study location (district), mothers, the teachers and the children to avoid negative consequences (stigma, exclusion) for the children who participated in the study.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was part of a doctoral field study at University of Birmingham which was organized in the summer of 2017 and 2018 to examine the educational circumstances of CBOW in northern Uganda. This study used a mixed methods approach to understand the situation of CBOW: The main research activity required CBOW to write down their reflections during English composition writing sessions organized to generate insights about their experience at APS. Additional methods of Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and face to face interviews were carried out with teachers and mothers—the children’s immediate proxies—in order to understand the school practices

and attitudes toward education of CBOW. In addition, the researcher undertook participant observation of the school in order to learn first-hand the experience that the children go through while at APS, as well as understand how they were treated by the school teachers and management. The use of mix methods in understanding the children’s experiences offered complementary insights and understandings that would not have been possible had the researcher relied on a single method of gathering information (also see Darbyshire et al., 2005).

The pilot phase of the field trip to northern Uganda was carried out in the summer of 2017 when the researcher spent 3 months undertaking participant observation of the school and 12 face to face interviews with the mothers. The activities were done to gain a background understanding on the situation of CBOW, and generate the different perspectives toward their schooling. Eight FGDs were also organized to that effect with the mothers. A second field trip was organized in the summer of 2018 lasting over three months that enabled the researcher to undertake an additional phase of participant observation. This was carried out along with FGDs and face to face interviews with the teachers and school management. In total, 14 class teachers of the upper-class levels of P.6. and P.7. participated in the face to face interviews. The same teachers also participated in 2 separate Focus Group Discussions (FGD) for the male and female teachers. All the FGDs and face to face interviews were carried out by the researcher who was assisted by two female research assistants. Consents were obtained both verbally and in writing in the Luo language spoken by the participants. The interviews were audio recorded, and transcription of data was carried out by the researcher. The FGD and face to face interviews with teachers were carried out within the school premises, while the ones with mothers were carried out at different places preferred by the participants. Confidentiality and comfort of the participants was prioritized in the choice of location for the FGD and face-to-face interviews.

Detailed field work started in the summer of 2017—during which the researcher negotiated his entry with the school head teacher at a meeting organized to introduce the study<sup>11</sup>. Following this, the head teacher introduced the researcher to the teachers at a second meeting organized for the same purpose. The researcher was also introduced by the head teacher to all the school pupils and the general school community at a routine Monday morning school parade. He was introduced as someone interested in learning about the experiences of education for war affected children. They were informed that the researcher’s presence would not interfere with normal school routine—a point that the researcher articulated and clarified when asked to address the school assembly, and during different occasions. He also emphasized his independence, clarifying that he had no relationship with the NGOs that provided scholarships to the

<sup>11</sup> A consent letter to allow school participation in the research was obtained from the head teacher. The researcher also obtained both verbal and written consent from the mothers of CBOW for their children to participate during an earlier set of meetings, interviews and FGDs organized by the researcher prior to including the school. The mothers had organized themselves under their associations *Watyé Ki Gen* and *WAN*.

children, which minimized possibilities of perceived coercion of the children into providing responses. In essence, in order for the children to be involved in the research, it was important that the researcher adopted a role that defines and allows the children to recognize his relationship with them (also see Birbeck and Drummond, 2005).

During the participant observation, the researcher spent time understanding the school practices and policies relating to the integration of CBOW into everyday schooling which generated a rich set of field notes used to support analysis. He blended with the children during class hours and play time. Observations were also done around some of the key school activities that the researcher attended, which included: school assemblies, academic activities in the classes (teachings and interactions between teachers and their pupils), and extra-curricular activities (games, sports, drama, music and dance). Because of this, the researcher was able to probe the events, and the role of the pupils as “actors within it”—always asking the “how” and the “why” questions (Yin, 1994) to allow for a deeper reflection of what was being observed. This information helped in ensuring that the researcher developed an all-around understanding of the school system and its practices.

In the summer of 2018, the researcher introduced a creative and flexible activity for children of the upper classes of P.6. and P.7. in an effort to directly involve children and foreground their voices within the research. The researcher had been invited by a male English teacher of P.6. and P.7. to attend his introductory lessons on English Composition, during which he was also asked to speak to the pupils, as had been the case with all class observations conducted during this period. During this process, the researcher and teacher discussed possibilities of a collaborative activity that involved the children writing down their reflections to contribute their own perspectives toward the study. In doing so, the researcher introduced a more active role for children, as opposed to obtaining information from their proxies. This mitigated against underestimating the children’s abilities to “draw” or “write” [Backett-Milburn and McKie, 1999 cited in Darbyshire et al. (2005), p. 423] as a form of expressing their opinions in the research.

The proposed questions for the composition for the two classes required the children to recall their experiences when they first joined the school. These questions were shared with the research supervisors, and developed into open ended questions deemed comprehensible to the pupils (Waterman et al., 2001), and pertinent to the children’s own experiences (Scott, 2000). To enhance free expression and confidentiality, the pupils were not required to write their names, although all of them insisted on having their names on the scripts; these have since been coded. The children were also assured that the researcher was the only person who would be reading their compositions, making clear that no teachers would be grading them. This process was useful as it freed the children to candidly express their views of the school, resting in the knowledge that their teachers would not read their texts, hence minimizing the risk that children would interpret their involvement in the activity as “school work” (Kellett and Ding, 2004). Although the researcher told the pupils to feel free to write in the Luo language, the children opted

for English, and were generally mature at expressing themselves about their lives at the school.

Of the 181 children who participated in the composition activity, 97 pupils were from P.7., 39 of whom were girls, and one student in P.7. was visually impaired. The total number of pupils who participated in P.6. were 84, 47 of whom were girls. Two boys were considered to have special needs because of their visual impairments, with one other student being physically impaired and supported by a wheel chair. Of the total number of class participants, 16 were CBOW. All the 16 (10 boys and 6 girls) identified themselves as CBOW in the write-ups. Apart from general information from the NGOs that the school is hosting CBOW at the different class levels, no attempt was made at identifying the children during the class activity, or more generally during observation at the school. However, 3 children outside of the 16 were identified by the teachers as CBOW, however they were not singled out for any activity. The study with CBOW was underpinned by the understanding that when the children are singled out, this would lead to their stigmatization.

Previous research studies with CBOW in northern Uganda had revealed that children prefer to conceal their LRA identity so that they are able to integrate seamlessly in educational and other communal settings (Denov and Lakor, 2017; Stewart, 2017). These views were confirmed with CBOW mothers during preliminary interviews conducted in February and March 2017. Although the children were not singled out on the basis of their ages, the older CBOW comfortably discussed their ages in the essays—which points to the experiences they had in comparison to their peers, as explained below. According to the age range of pupils documented in the P.6 and P.7 class rosters accessed from the Director of Studies (DoS), the group encompassed children between the ages of 12 and 17. In most schools in Uganda, the expected age range for P.6 and P.7 pupils is 11–12-year-old, although in practice, children’s grade-levels are not always dependent on their chronological age due to some children’s education having been delayed by war. This is especially true of CBOW, as many of them missed out on educational opportunities in their early childhood.

More than half the children were able to fill the three sheets of paper provided to them – a demonstration that they were willing to share information about their experiences at the school. At least 40 of the 181 pupils in P.6 and P.7 who participated in this activity were given extra time to keep their answer sheets as they preferred to carry their work home in order to embark on more reflections on their lives. For those who were able to complete their work in time, their answer sheets were collected and the children were thanked for their participation. After reading the children’s work, the researcher spent some time with four of the P.6 and P.7 teachers reflecting on the process of the assignment without revealing details of what had been written by individual pupils. This additional session with four of the P.6 and P.7 teachers was helpful for contextualizing the way the teachers relate with CBOW.

The pupils were happy to participate in the essay writing and some of them had important messages written to the researcher at the end of their answer sheets. For example, Anefah, a girl of P.7. wrote, “sir may God bless you for bringing this project to our

school to make us talk freely about our life in school”<sup>12</sup>. Similarly, another young boy, Openke, of P.7. wrote, “we like this exercise because it is fun. I enjoyed writing about myself”<sup>13</sup>. Such remarks underline the importance of asking questions that children already know and which are not harmful, as was the case with the specific questions that were designed to allow the children to talk about daily events, routines or feelings (Mauthner, 1997). Other pupils drew pictures of flowers at the end of their work as a thank you for participating in the activity—actions which teachers interpreted as the children’s enthusiasm and joy in writing about themselves. In some of the remarks, the children wrote about how they enjoyed the process of participation: “I liked throwing the ball. It was fun because I like football. Football makes me happy”<sup>14</sup>, said Ochenda a boy of P.6. White Stream. This shows that the ice-breakers can be significant in making children feel at ease<sup>15</sup>.

Throughout the research process, a local organization working with war affected children and their mothers—the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) was on site to provide specialized support to the participants who were assumed susceptible to distress resulting from their participation in the research<sup>16</sup>. An ethics approval was granted by the University of Birmingham Ethics Review Board, after a lengthy review of the study methodologies and several adaptations of the study protocol. This was followed by similar approvals of the Uganda national ethics board in Kampala, and Lacor Ethics Review Board. These permits allowed participant observation at the local primary school in northern Uganda including the researcher’s participation in classroom activities, conditional on permission from the school management, and respective consent from the school teachers who would collaborate in the research. Safety and security of information regarding the research was ensured by using the UoB Bear-Datashare system of research data management, where interviews, observations and primary source documents have been stored as per ethical review protocol. All written scripts/data have been coded and made available in the open access repository at UoB. In addition, pseudonyms have been used throughout the study in order to protect the CBOW and their mothers from any form of victimization resulting from the exposure they are likely get as a result of the information they provided in this thesis. On similar grounds, a pseudonym for the school (Alur PS) has been used—including its teachers—to avoid any forms of stigma that may arise from the public toward those associated with the school. On the same note, references to the

specific district and town where the study took place has been avoided by simply using northern Uganda.

Data from face to face interviews and FGDs were audio taped, transcribed and all translations were carried out by the researcher. The transcripts were then checked for accuracy by the research assistant who also accompanied the researcher at all times during the fieldwork. The researcher then undertook the analysis, allowing the participants’ voices to take precedent in articulating their experiences. To a large extent, most of the participants’ views, and children’s write-ups were quoted verbatim as a way of foregrounding the evidence gathered from the field. The analysis of the children’s class activity was grounded on empirical knowledge gained from the school without relying on an overarching theory to inform the fieldwork—which is consistent with aspects of approaches adopted in ethnographic studies (see for Guba and Lincoln, 1989). As the research program evolved, the researcher was able to record and generate important patterns which were developed into the two main themes that informed the class activities, i.e., “a day I will never forget,” which explored the children’s feelings or narratives of their time at school, and “a typical day at school,” which examined the way CBOW and their peers experienced the school policies and practices. Beyond superficial explanation, the use of questions such as “how” and “why” enabled the researcher to gain a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of the participants which in turn was helpful in generating themes that informed the analysis (Yin, 1994; Stake, 2003).

Although comprehensive data analysis was done after the field activities, a preliminary analysis was carried out after each phase of the data collection. The process involved “sifting, sorting, and reflecting” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 539) with constant comparisons across data sets in order to be able to identify patterns, consistencies and differences in data collected from interviews and observations (Thomas, 2013). The reflective process and cross data comparison were enhanced by making references to field diaries and reflective journals that were kept by the researcher. This enabled him to undertake analysis while integrating his personal experiences and articulation of the interface he had with the participants—as well as knowledge generated through participant observation of the field. The researcher’s observation of the everyday school setting allowed him to enhance his analysis with emerging issues (Gluckman, 1961)—through an extended case study approach. In this way he was able to “close in on real life situations” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 235)—many of which were given as examples to inform the different sections of this article. The analytical framework that informed the process also relied on additional literature and publications related to emerging research on CBOW and war affected children in Africa.

Lastly, the study had some limitations that ought to be considered when the results are being interpreted. Information was gathered from a single school that captured the experiences of only 16 CBOW. The sample size does not allow for generalization of findings (Yin, 1984, p. 21; Yin, 1993; Tellis, 1997; Thomas, 2011). It was not possible within the study parameters to obtain a larger sample of CBOW considering they were a hidden population within this setting. Additionally,

<sup>12</sup>P.7. White (Folder 1), Script no. 1, August 15, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

<sup>13</sup>P.7. Red (Folder 2), Script no.1, August 15, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

<sup>14</sup>P.6. White, (Folder 3), Script no.1, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

<sup>15</sup>A more detailed analysis of this study methodology, its rationale and broader application to research with minors has been articulated in a recent co-authored book chapter titled “Children Born of War: Past, Present and Future” (Akullo and Ojok, 2021), and the doctoral thesis by the researcher (Ojok, 2021).

<sup>16</sup>During the research none of the participants obtained any form of support resulting from their participation in the overall research. Information for support was availed to the participants during the information sharing sessions at the start of the interviews, FGDs and class activity.

the researcher only considered CBOW from the upper classes of P.6. and P.7. which presumably left out a bigger sample of CBOW within the school itself. The case therefore provides practical rather than universal knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of the education experiences of only 16 CBOW at this one school. Further to this, the case study was taken from a school in the urban center of the study location. The case of APS therefore does not include the perspectives of CBOW who study in the rural areas, and whose experiences would have offered a unique and balanced view of the circumstances of CBOW in post war northern Uganda. Another issue has been that in spite of efforts to triangulate data obtained through other methods, e.g., observation of school interactions and interviews with mothers/teachers, it was difficult to rule out social desirability bias. At this particular school, it is possible that some participants did not want to provide information that would make them appear “bad” (Paulhus, 1984, p. 22) or to be perceived as speaking negatively about the school or their teachers. Similarly, social desirability bias may have existed for teachers who would not want to go against the school philosophy of treating every child as special because such views would appear unacceptable or insensitive toward CBOW.

The discussions that follow examines some of the children’s written narratives, illustrating what happened when CBOW were integrated into the school, and how the school responded to their educational needs. Based on the children’s perspectives, and the teachers’ opinions, effort is made to evaluate the philosophy ‘Every Child is Special’ as a way of understanding how the children have been treated at APS. These discussions fall within two main themes of the study, i.e., “a day I will never forget” which explores the children’s feelings or narratives of their time at school, and “a typical day at school,” which looks at the way CBOW and their peers have experienced the school policies and practices. While discussing the first theme, ‘a day I will never forget’, the researcher analyzed the children’s narratives on a time they spent at school. This was different from their reflections on the way they are being treated in terms of educational provision which will be discussed later where the children reflect on their typical day at school.

## **“MY FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL”: CHILDREN’S FEELINGS ABOUT TRANSITION TO EARLY SCHOOL LIFE**

Analysis from the class composition activity revealed that CBOW felt insecure when they initially joined the school because of imagined or actual experiences encountered while with their peers and teachers. Other than their concerns about being shamed as a result of their association with the LRA, the feelings of CBOW were found to be consistent with the more general experiences encountered by other war affected children. A recurrent theme in the children’s frustration with life at APS stemmed from the poor socio-economic circumstances their families lived in, which did not matter whether one was from the LRA (CBOW) or not. These are discussed below.

When CBOW joined APS, there was an initial sense of withdrawal in participation in the school life. Opimma, a 15-year old CBOW of P.6. described that he remained isolated because he felt different: his peers dressed better than him because the family could not afford decent clothing for him to join the school<sup>17</sup>. Similarly, Okoju (P.6) a CBOW, described his circumstance in the following ways:

I came here from Anaka very far away. My mother came with me from Sudan (the LRA) and life was not easy in school when I joined. My mother is poor and cannot buy everything I need here [in school]. Sometimes my friends laugh at me. This made me start staying on my own those days [when I just joined school]<sup>18</sup>.

The above two comments from CBOW about their sense of feeling “out of place” and loneliness during the early days of school shows that their feelings were not based on real prejudice they experienced, but on the state of mind they found themselves in as a result of being different from others. We shall however discover later below from Okoju that he was provided a supportive environment by his teachers to enable him cope with the situation he faced in the new school setting. The comments did not necessarily suggest that CBOW had a particular way they viewed the school that was different from the rest of their non-CBOW peers. From the write-ups, 16 non-CBOW expressed similar challenges related to poverty. These circumstances are indicative of the struggles experienced by many children in the post-war society—and the more general impact of war on the children’s families.

In addition to the children’s family situation, the write-ups indicated that some CBOW felt out of place because they were relatively older than their peers—which revealed implicit differences in the experiences of older CBOW from the rest<sup>19</sup>. However, the age gap did not affect their motivation to continue schooling, neither did it reveal that the school treated them differently from the rest. Rujok, a CBOW of P.6. wrote the following statements about his experiences:

When I was about to join school, my mother struggled to get money. She was not able to get enough until when I was 9 years old. I started school late. I had to skip some of the classes in the lower primary school. I am now 17 years old. God knows why he did that to me. Even though I am very big I will still finish it (complete school)...<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>17</sup>CBOW 1 (Opimma), P.6. White, (Folder 3), Script no.3, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

<sup>18</sup>CBOW 2 (Okoju), P.6. Red (Folder 4), Script no.1, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

<sup>19</sup>According to the age range of pupils documented in the P.6 and P.7 class rosters, the group encompassed children between the ages of 12 and 17. In most schools in Uganda, the expected age range for P.6 and P.7 pupils is 11-12-year-old, although in practice, children’s grade-levels are not always dependent on their chronological age due to some children’s education having been delayed by war. This is especially true of children born in captivity, as many of them missed out on educational opportunities in their early childhood.

<sup>20</sup>CBOW 3 (Rujok), P.6. White, (Folder 3), Script no.4, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

Although the statement shows that the CBOW felt different from his peers, he did not view his circumstances negatively; instead the age difference has propelled him to become an ambitious child. Similarly, at 15 years old, Akali who is a CBOW, joined APS while she was older than most of her peers in P.5. Akali remarked, “I felt bad when I found out that other children were younger than me...”<sup>21</sup>. Her narrative revealed that a teacher had encouraged her to remain in school urging that if she worked hard she would perform well in class and be able to join secondary school. This showed that Akali did not have any negative feeling about the way the teacher treated her.

According to the Ugandan average age of enrolment in P.1., by the age of 14, the two CBOW - Akali and Rujok should have already been in secondary school—a fact the teachers attributed to the school practice of providing special considerations to war affected children<sup>22</sup>. Of the 16 CBOW in P.6. and P.7. who participated in the essay, at least 8 were between the ages of 14–17. According to information from the school DoS, who also oversees the school admission process, all CBOW admitted to APS had started their education from P.1. in other schools, at the ages of 8–12 and therefore were 4–5 years older than many of their peers who had not been born in the LRA at the time they began their formal education<sup>23</sup>.

In a discussion with teacher Omara Denish, an attempt was made to explain why older CBOW may feel out of place compared to their non-CBOW counterparts of similar ages. Omara Denish said:

The reason they may want to talk about their experiences as older pupils in this school is because their case is different from say a child who stayed home because his parents could not afford the additional charges at school, or whose parents died in the war, and others. However, this does not mean we have been treating them differently. Like others, we treat the older children who returned from the bush the same way we treat all other children, but I really see there is a difference between these ones [born in the bush] and those who found themselves in difficult situations<sup>24</sup>.

Considering the school philosophy on inclusion, this teacher’s statement is a surprising revelation—seemingly contrary to the understanding that all children have to be treated equally regardless of circumstances. On this particular issue, it is clear that CBOW feel negatively impacted by their age compared to their younger counterparts, which also impacts negatively on the way they interpret other people’s feelings toward them.

Of those who did not write about their experiences of studying in the same class as their younger peers, the school records held

<sup>21</sup>CBOW 4 (Akali), P.6. White, (Folder 3), Script no.5, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

<sup>22</sup>Personal Interview with Director of Studies (DoS), APS, May 6, 2019, northern Uganda; Personal Interview with Mr. Opiyo Chris, Maths Teacher for P.6. and P.7., APS, August 4, 2018, northern Uganda.

<sup>23</sup>No systematic age records of P.6. and P.7. exists in a register. The researcher was able to trace the ages of the CBOW by looking at their data during the time of enrolment record. Some of the children mentioned their ages in the compositions they wrote.

<sup>24</sup>Personal Interview with Mr. Omara Denish, SST teacher APS, May 7, 2019, northern Uganda.

by the school DoS show that at least 13 children in P.6. and P.7. were of comparable age to their older CBOW counterparts, i.e., between 14 and 17<sup>25</sup>. The DoS, however, revealed that to a large extent some of the children were older due to several reasons such as ill-health, being asked to repeat grades due to poor performances and the pressure to provide domestic labor. Such trends are not unique to APS. Observation of schools at the study location still shows that there is a high incidence of children missing school—a demonstration of how widespread the problem has been in the post conflict region. It also shows that in spite of the existence of universal education, school age children still abscond or remain out of school due to factors that are sometimes beyond their control.

From the above evidence, CBOW often felt prejudiced on the basis of their backgrounds and feeling of indifference from their peers—in spite of school emphasis that every child is special. In reality, the research also shows that the children’s feelings stem from perceived realities derived from the children’s viewpoints as opposed to being derived from objectively different treatment by their peers, or the school community. Having discussed the children’s feelings of life upon joining APS, the next section will examine what the children felt about the relationship with teachers.

## CHILDREN’S FEELINGS ABOUT THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH TEACHERS

To a large extent the narratives showed that CBOW became accustomed to life in their school—allowing them to establish viable relationships. On the whole, the CBOW’s narratives showed that they were afforded the environment they required to excel socially and academically, which was different from their early experiences. Regardless of these sources of support, the children’s narratives showed that some of the teachers’ negative attitudes toward CBOW influenced affected their self esteem—which was a feeling that both CBOW and their non-CBOW peers reported. These aspects contradicted the school practice of treating every child as special as we can see below.

In terms of the positive relationships, CBOW reported that their teachers were able to help them overcome academic and social challenges that held them back from enjoying their time at school. In the case of Okoju (discussed above), the child was able to overcome the social intimidation in the relationship he had with his peers. He wrote, “so when I came here I was scared I would not be able to understand the way of the school (system) but I was happy...” He added, “here if you come in the middle of the term, teachers can give you work and you do it alone. There is one teacher who used to give me work to do even after class has ended. She wanted me to catch up with my friends in class. That is what I liked”<sup>26</sup>. The comment shows that the individual attention paid to the child has been important in helping the

<sup>25</sup>School Registry 2016/17 accessed from office of Director of Studies (DoS), APS, August 6, 2018, northern Uganda.

<sup>26</sup>CBOW 2 (Okoku), P.6. Red (Folder 4), Script no.1, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

CBOW overcome his weaknesses. Similar efforts were extended to Opimma who is also a CBOW. She said:

Why do I like this school? It is because one of my teachers maybe knew that I was from the bush, he is always calling me to staffroom and finding out how I am doing in school. He used to call me many times so I began to think that he knew [I came from the bush]. But he made me begin to like teachers and go to them when I have something to talk about<sup>27</sup>.

The statements from the two CBOW, Okoju and Opimma, show how the pupils value the individual efforts teachers make toward their progress in school; which is also a demonstration of the efforts their teachers put toward inclusion of individual children ensuring that every child is supported on the basis of their background. These forms of support reveal that CBOW are likely to develop positive attitudes and become better pupils when they feel welcomed by the teachers in the school.

Some CBOW however provided negative feedback in the way they related with their teachers. The case of Odupi, a CBOW who recollected his experience from two years back, shows how some teachers can be abusive and less caring toward children. He wrote:

... whenever I see this teacher I do not concentrate because he does not like me. One day he said to me, "Odupi I don't know where this head of yours came from. It must be from your parents. They are wasting a lot of money on a useless boy, bringing you to school as good as APS. You will never be of use to them even if we waste our time teaching you..." I don't like this teacher<sup>28</sup>.

The child's negative feeling is influenced by the way his teacher made a mockery of his academic ability. Although it was difficult, within the confines of this study, to conclude that CBOW are singled out for mockery, such attitudes from the teachers directed against any child is likely to discourage the child's efforts to succeed at school, and contradicts the way teachers are supposed to handle every child with compassion—a likely betrayal of the school philosophy of treating every child as special. As observed by Stewart, such experiences show that schools can become "simultaneously a place of hope and a place of exclusion." Hope in the sense that CBOW viewed schools as avenues where they could build positive relationships with their peers, and a route out of the "harmful aspects of their identities." At the same time, they also viewed schools as places where they experienced everyday exclusions and stigma from their peers and teachers (Stewart, 2017, p. 137). In the case of APS, children wrote about the way teachers were abusive and less caring.

Odose's statement illustrates the emotional and psychological distress that CBOW can encounter when they become victims of mockery:

Some teachers can decide to use abusive words which are so bad to mention in public. Like some of them can abuse the child, "You are rubbish, you are useless..." It can hurt the child

emotionally. Like when the teacher comes to teach, the child will not understand because they hate the teacher. When the teacher enters class, they remember the words which the teacher said to them. Even sometimes when the teacher comes to teach, they deliberately choose not to concentrate<sup>29</sup>.

The direct insults thrown at pupils can have negative consequences on their feelings of inclusion. The act of withdrawal and lack of attention shown by the CBOW in the above quote is a testament to how far these feelings can impact individuals. For most of the part, this can reinforce feelings of victimization toward the targeted children at school.

Similar comments were also made to pupils who were not born in the bush to LRA fathers. At least six pupils commented on the fact that their teachers are sometimes rude toward them whenever they do not perform to expectation. Atigi (P.6) for instance expressed upset with the way she encountered insults from her teacher upon giving a wrong answer during a class activity, which was the same way Anenocon (P.7.) felt when she failed to respond to a class activity. This shows a more general indication of the complacency that some of the teachers have when it comes to observing their professional teaching ethics. This result is likely to breed mistrust and suspicion from children, regardless of their background.

Sometimes the attitudes of teachers toward children stood out when it came to providing feedback on the children. Ms. Adong Irene a teacher of Social Studies (SST) in P.6. for instance commented on how teachers address the behavior of children at school in the following ways:

We try to treat these children equally, but one thing for sure is that the children who come from the bush their behaviors usually stand out from others; they are very cruel to other children. We had many of them in the past. One almost fought a teacher but he had to reform. At APS we know how to deal with these ones (swaying the cane in demonstration) ... sometimes they even fear us. What is a teacher here for then? You find them staying alone, which is dangerous<sup>30</sup>.

The teacher's comment shows how the behavior of one or a few children can make teachers feel differently about the CBOW. These are sometimes genuine challenges that teachers face in teaching children who have been socialized in a setting that encouraged and necessitated behavior that in a school context is challenging (and may be perceived as threatening by the teachers). Bush and Saltarelli have argued that such teachers (usually from the majority group) in post-conflict situations may display negative dispositions against the non-normative groups, then employ certain sentiments to justify their in/actions (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000, p.15). However, in this study, evidence from two FGDs and individual interviews with teachers confirmed that the returnees sometimes indeed displayed different behavior from their peers, far from just looking at their behaviors as

<sup>27</sup> CBOW 5 (Opimma), P.6. White Stream, August 8, 2018, APS, northern Uganda.

<sup>28</sup> CBOW 6 (Odupi), P.6. Red (Folder 4), Script no. 4, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

<sup>29</sup> CBOW 7 (Odose), P.6. White (Folder 3), Script no.6, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

<sup>30</sup> Ms. Adong Irene during FGD female teachers, APS, August 16, 2018, northern Uganda.



stereotypical to having been born from the bush. During FGD with mothers of CBOW, they too have conceded that CBOW tend to display negative behavior due to their early socialization in the bush where behavioral norms were different<sup>31</sup>. Therefore, Ms. Adong Irene's less tolerant attitude in the above statement suggests a reasonable basis to assume that CBOW's behavior indeed differed at APS and was not acceptable or in line with school policies. However, even so, it may not be appropriate to identify a child as CBOW or articulate in front of them that this behavior was linked to their past experiences in the bush as this might result into their feeling of not being valued at the school, or by society more generally.

From the above evidence we can see that although the school teachers have attempted to treat all children as special, in practice CBOW have felt that certain practices and attitudes undermines their experiences of war. The teachers' attitudes reinforced feelings of prejudice among a group that already feels different.

Having explored the children's feelings about their social life at school, the next section examines the reflections by CBOW on how they are being treated in practice—and these have been derived from the children's write-ups regarding their "typical day." The discussions are divided into two short themes: the first looks at the children's school routine which is centered on their academic experiences, and the second theme specifically examines their experiences in classrooms which is centered on streaming policy and other classroom practices and activities.

## THE CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE ON SCHOOL ROUTINE (THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE IN SCHOOL)

More generally, the children's reflections demonstrate that they are determined to succeed—which is what their teachers and parents demand of them. Their determination to succeed did not however make the children hold back on their views: the philosophy "every child is special" was to some extent undermined by the extreme focus on academic routine of the school above everything else. On that basis, children were unable to adequately explore other aspects of their life that would guarantee them opportunities to socialize, derive therapy and healing and develop life skills. The positive academic environment and emphasis was also seen, however, as an avenue where CBOW can harness their abilities to work hard and meet the performance benchmarks set by their school—which promoted a positive feeling among the group. These views are discussed below.

At the time of this research, P.7. pupils were due to sit their mock preparatory examinations, in time for the national Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) that was due in November. The pupils of P.6 and P.7 wrote about the intensity of class activities and the attention that teachers pay to their performance. Obeno of P.7. said, "In P.7 we do not waste time outside the class. All the time there is teaching, reading, tests and revisions. There is no

time for playing even when you want to relax..."<sup>32</sup>. The pupils provided different opinions on the school's focus on academic life: Rujok of P.6 (discussed earlier above) for instance wrote that, "the teachers here are serious. They say we have to perform well. I like to stay in class so I can read and pass well. This is why I like this school. In my former school the teachers sometimes did not teach us..."<sup>33</sup>. In this comment, Rujok's taste for his school is centered around the teachers' commitment which is different from those at his former school. Similarly, another child, Ouma, remarked on how the school focus on academic life is in line with his dream to become a responsible person in future. He said, "...for me I think this is the school that if one wants to perform well they have to follow what their teachers tell them. I want to become someone in future, say like a doctor even if it is difficult and my parents do not have money"<sup>34</sup>. Despite his parents' circumstances, the child dreams for a better future.

Other children discussed their experience of becoming accustomed to school life. One CBOW mentioned, "when I first came here it was very difficult. The children here like to be in class from morning to evening. I would always fall sick, but my class teacher warned me if I want to perform well I should go to class like others. I wanted to leave school but now I like the school"<sup>35</sup>. This experience shows the efforts teachers put in with some children to ensure they conform to the school standards. The children's views indicate that some pupils are sensitive to how education can affect their social standing by opening up employment opportunities (although better qualifications in Uganda, and elsewhere does not necessarily guarantee these opportunities). This is in contrary to the social stigma associated with living in poverty which children appear to associate with having not gone to school or for having failed to work hard in school.

All pupils at APS were expected to strictly follow school routines, failure of which usually led to punishments in the form of caning, school suspension or dismissal. At least half of the pupils of P.6. and P.7. reported being punished for acts of disobedience related to the non-compliance to the school schedule and academic expectations required of them. Comments from some of the children showed initial apprehension with the school punishments, but then later they came to accept that it played a role in their academic performance or improved discipline. However, some mothers of CBOW were hesitant about the caning of children. Ababu, a CBOW of P.6. reported that she was caned wrongfully for wasting time in the school dormitory while other children attended classes<sup>36</sup>. She was feeling unwell but her plea was not welcomed by the teacher in charge. When she reported the issue to her mother, she

<sup>32</sup>P.7. Red (Folder 2), Script no.5, August 15, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

<sup>33</sup>P.6. White, (Folder 3), Script no.4, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

<sup>34</sup>P.7. White (Folder 1), Script no. 6., August 15, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives.

<sup>35</sup>CBOW 8 P.6. Red (Folder 4), Script no.5, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

<sup>36</sup>CBOW 9 (Ababu), P.6. White (Folder 3), Script no.10, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

<sup>31</sup>FGD with mothers of CBOW, May 3 2017, northern Uganda.

contemplated moving her away from the school on grounds that that such forms of punishment were a reminder of the violence they faced during LRA captivity<sup>37</sup>. This shows that physical forms of punishment may not bode well with those who returned from the LRA—some of whom still held bitter memories of the past<sup>38</sup>. This shows that the position on punishment is far from resolved: Some parents, including the mother of CBOW above, may not like that their children are punished physically because of previous experience with the LRA, while others have embraced it. The teachers on the other hand do not want to do away with a practice that they have relied on as a disciplinary approach for so long<sup>39</sup>, and which some pupils continued to refer to as a practice that led to their better academic performances. This has implications on the school approach to violence, and the way this has affected the different stakeholders at the school.

Despite the children's narratives on physical punishment, teachers have insisted that the school's priority lies in the academic success of its pupils. Mr. Kifefu Albert, the class teacher for P.6. and P.7 has said, "our goal is to make these children become tomorrow's future. We want the children of APS to shine their light among others [children from Uganda]...even those born in captivity, they need to be considered here [at APS]"<sup>40</sup>. Here the teacher assesses the role of teachers in ensuring their children excel like their peers in other regions less affected by the war. This is an interesting consideration in light of APS's approach to education ("every child is special")—a demonstration that the teachers perceive APS as being "a war-affected school" teaching war-affected children. More generally, it has to be considered that the teacher's view is informed by the fact that the majority of schools in the north remain below par in terms of academic standards compared to schools in the South—a fact largely attributable to the impact of war and underdevelopment in the region.

In relation to the school academic focus explained above, some pupils have remarked about having to deal with competing and contradictory expectations. Petero, a pupil of P.7. commented on how his participation in football activities were met with mixed reactions from his teachers and parents—making him decide to drop out of sports<sup>41</sup>. Ababu, a CBOW in P.6. has mentioned that she used to spend most of her time at the Music, Dance and Drama (MDD) activities because it makes her forget about bad things. She wrote:

MDD makes me to forget my problems. I come from a poor family and never met my father, life at home is not easy because my mother is always in town looking for money for food for us. When we came from the bush we had no one to help us. I was always

thinking about my life in future so MDD has helped me forget about what happened to us...<sup>42</sup>

The child's case shows how therapeutic some of the activities at the school can be for CBOW<sup>43</sup>. It is therefore of no coincidence that NGOs and child rehabilitation agencies in post conflict northern Uganda have placed a high value on these activities for the role they play in supporting children to come to terms with their traumatic past—Gulu Support the Children Center (GUSCO) and World Vision Children's Rehabilitation Center being cases in point. During the field visits to the peri-urban outskirts of the study location where the returnees settled, mothers used music, dance and drama as a way to galvanize their associations around a common identity. The activities were also used by organizations like *Watye Ki Gen* as options for psychosocial support for CBOW during school breaks. While at the site visits, the researcher noted that CBOW were encouraged to interact with the other members of the community—who usually joined them in the cultural dances. The spectacle of entertainment that ensued during these communions were found to contribute to the positive collective empowerment of returnees and their communities<sup>44</sup>. On this basis, the activities have to be viewed as a kind of celebration of shared Acholi identity between the children and community, which in this case of APS children temporarily displaced, provided an alternative to the school's policy and insistence on academic priorities. Similarly, the connection with the community members shows that the dances are a way that CBOW can display their resilience outside of the school context—which can also help them manage depression or other harmful feelings (also see Liebling and Baker, 2010).

The above statements from the children point to the fact that in practice the competing priorities and contradictory messages the children receive tend to affect the way they make choices on the academic and non-academic options available at the school. The conclusion is that in this school, the tension between academic and extra-curricular activities is not resolved for the pupils of P6 and P.7 leading to frustrations among some CBOW who might have other non-academic priorities. This implies the school's approach of putting the individual at the center is undermined by the focus on academic merit (performance and "under"- performance) espoused by the school. This tends to ignore the stakeholders' expectations (including pupils') as it engenders a league-tables oriented mentality amongst the teachers and their pupils. Because of this, the ability of other children who would have preferred non-academic options is

<sup>37</sup>This was also confirmed during a separate personal Interview with Josephine Adong, mother of CBOW (Ababu), October 1, 2018, northern Uganda.

<sup>38</sup>Also confirmed during reflections in FGD with mothers of CBOW, May 3 2017, northern Uganda.

<sup>39</sup>FGD male teachers, APS, August 16, 2018, northern Uganda; FGD female teachers, APS, August 16, 2018, northern Uganda.

<sup>40</sup>Mr. Kifefu Albert, FGD male teachers, APS, August 16, 2018, northern Uganda.

<sup>41</sup>P.7. White (Folder 1), Script no. 2, August 15, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

<sup>42</sup>CBOW 10 (Ababu), P.6. White (Folder 3), Script no.10, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

<sup>43</sup>The MDD teacher mentioned to the researcher that "the traditional songs and dances brings out the passion in a child making them forget what happened to them. They are able to mingle with other pupils and feel they are part of one APS community, whether they are orphans, from the bush or children from poor homes. All are one... ", he remarks. He was however not aware of the existence of a CBOW among the people who were being trained to participate in the interschool MDD competition.

<sup>44</sup>Field Note, July 2017; also based on Personal Interview with Nancy, a secretary and member of *Rwot Lakica* peer group of mothers, December 17, 2018.

hindered. This is counterproductive as it sends the message to CBOW that failure in exams defines their destiny and as a result influences the value teachers place on them based on performances vis-à-vis their peers—which ends up stigmatizing the children and promoting school disaffection (also see Nicholai and Triplehorn, 2003; Dryden-Peterson, 2011). Although this may seem to directly contradict the school's approach to special education, the different views show the dilemma posed when there is no agreement on what good education means for children. In principle, if parents want a good education for their children, and children need to pass national exams—failure of which results into them not being afforded further educational opportunities and thus perpetuation of poverty cycles, then the school has little option but to focus on academic merit.

This final section discusses the children's reflections on the school policy regarding streaming and other classroom practices.

## CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF STREAMING AND OTHER CLASSROOM PRACTICES

The children's reflections on classroom practices were mainly centered on the school's streaming arrangements. At APS, the streaming of children of the upper classes of P.6 and P.7 has been practiced on the assumption that this would maximize students' potential through providing them an ability-appropriate learning environment. The streaming practices reinforces the school's policy of integration (every child is special) because it considers the uniqueness of the child, where segregating them on the basis of their intellectual abilities ensures that they attend classes that match their ability, promotes positive competition resulting from their drive to be promoted to the higher streams.

Specifically, all CBOW begun their education at APS from the lower stream—a fact that the DoS explained was necessary to assess their levels before being assigned. 90% of the study sample still remained in the lower stream at the time of this study. In most cases, their belonging to the lower streams reinforced the feeling of being viewed as academically weak or deemed slower than others. Specifically, the children have complained about the bias teachers hold toward them when grouped in different class streams. Anyum, who is a CBOW of P.7. noted: "I am in P.7. and my mother is not happy that I am in Red Stream because when you look on one side you have a dull person, you look another side there is also a dull person. You cannot be able to discuss with someone because you see that they are also weak like you. This is the bad thing I see about APS"<sup>45</sup>. In this quote, Anyum assesses her situation in P.7. Red in terms of the gloomy picture she has painted about the academic ability of her peers. In the case of Anyum, streaming can be counterproductive because the homogeneity of student ability undermines the opportunity for the valuable learning and social dynamic of inter-pupil learning—brighter students reinforcing their own understanding of concepts by helping other children grasp those same concepts.

Some of the observed relationships in the classrooms (especially among the girls) naturally extended into the playground: the children of P.6. and P.7. usually preferred to play with those in their streams—with whom they shared classes or were allocated by the teachers to sit together. The implication is that the streaming significantly reduces the scope to learn with, and therefore to communicate and socialize with, the broader class cohort. Therefore, the argument that "Every Child is Special" has been complicated by a streaming policy that leaves certain groups of children, especially CBOW with a feeling of marginalization on the basis of their weak academic standing compared to their peers. This practice runs contrary to inclusive education and the concepts of academic and social inclusion within the education system. When accompanied by negative attitudes from the teachers such a policy runs a risk of widening the gap in relationship between children in the different streams, hence impacting negatively on affected groups such as CBOW. However, this is not to undermine the fact that some children still had positive experiences from the streaming process. Comments from a significant 10 of the pupils still shows that in spite of streaming practices, they sometimes do gain positively from their interactions with peers, regardless of the streams they occupy.

In addition to the streaming policies, some classroom practices were notable in the children's comments. More generally during the four classes attended by the researcher, teachers have attempted to arrange the way pupils sit in an attempt to effectively address some of their learning needs. Notably in both classes of P.6. and P.7., the boys and girls occupied clearly distinguishable locations—the younger boys and girls of 11–13-year olds sat in the front and middle section of the rows in the classes, while the older and bigger boys and girls between the ages of 14–16 sat behind the class. Sometimes students were assigned seats at the back of the class based on their physical appearances, i.e., those who appeared bigger and taller, even if a few were relatively younger compared to their size. In lesson 4 of P.7., the class teacher informed the researcher that the 8 older girls who were seated together at the back of the classroom were friends from P.4. and had since been very hardworking in their classes. This arrangement for the 8 older girls suggests that sometimes friend groups and seating arrangements to accommodate friend groups increases enthusiasm and school performance. However, the case was different when it came to friendship groups among the older CBOW. With some teachers, there was evidence of deliberate efforts to discourage such associations among CBOW. One female teacher Ms. Adoch Flavia mentioned:

The children [who returned from the bush] were not concentrating...always talking and not paying attention to teachers. They wanted to sit very far so that teachers do not disturb them. When those children come together they are usually impossible...the bad things that happened in the bush keep coming. We had to separate them. One was actually forced to repeat P.6. because his performances were not good. He is in White Stream<sup>46</sup>.

<sup>45</sup>CBOW 11 (Anyum), P.7. Red (Folder 2), Script no.8, August 15, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

<sup>46</sup>Ms. Adoch Flavia, during FGD with female teachers, APS, August 16, 2018, northern Uganda.

The comment shows that unlike the non-CBOW peers, the teachers sometimes viewed the relationships among CBOWs with suspicion. As discussed above, teachers and mothers of CBOW noted that sometimes the children may indeed display different behavior, and it appears the teacher's approach to the CBOW was based on his previous experience working with the group. The above example relates to what the teacher perceived as bad behavior—and the response in addressing the children based on their individualities as seating them together may indeed have adverse effects on the learning environment—which is a pointer toward a positive approach the teachers have adopted to improve the group dynamics in the class. According to the researcher's observation of the different classes from P.1. to P.7. it was common to have different seating policies in order to manage the classroom; one teacher mentioned her preference to have the older boys sit away from each other because of the possibility of having bad influence on other children because they were adolescents. This points to the fact that it is not a foregone conclusion that seating CBOW separately is based on prejudice or stereotypes: sometimes the seating arrangements reflect the way teachers' wish to ensure that all pupils learn without disturbances from their class cohorts, as it is also in keeping with the school's approach of treating children as special, i.e., based on their individualities.

Finally, in terms of teaching practice, the children wrote how they sometimes loved the way their teacher praised them whenever they responded to the questions asked in class. For instance, during one of the class observations in P.7., when a girl was able to answer a question posed to her by the teacher, the teacher congratulated her saying, "Stella I can see that you are finally going to pass well and join Sacred Heart School. Can we clap for Stella please? (followed by all pupils clapping in three uniform rhythms)." Such praise from the teacher is aimed at motivating the girl to achieve her academic goal of joining secondary school. This is similar to the way the children admitted in their essays that they enjoyed the way their teachers praised them: Obinah wrote, "whenever I do something good in class like when I raise my hands and give the right answer, I enjoy when the teacher asks the children to clap for me". The method adopted by the teacher contributes to a positive and hardworking atmosphere for the pupils. It also shows that in this school some of the teachers put some efforts and enthusiasm in the learning of their children, which has a positive impact on the way they feel when are being supported at the school.

## CONCLUSION

CBOW experience socially stigmatizing labels that affect their everyday lives (Apio, 2007; Carpenter, 2010; Seto, 2013, 2015; Denov and Lakor, 2018), which to a large extent minimizes the potential for successful integration into their communities. From the education point of view, Dryden-Peterson (2011) has argued that there often is a danger of physical integration without social integration. This implies that more generally for children to be accepted, local attitudes have to change (Apio,

2007; Erjavec and Volcic, 2010; Denov and Lakor, 2017) to enhance schooling opportunities for CBOW. Drawing on the experience of education of CBOW at APS, this article singled out the school as an important place in the children's lives. It noted that the school can become a place where children can recall their memories of the past, and yet also recover from bad memories of the war. The case further shows that the potentially harmful experiences that children undergo has been encumbered by barriers that are sometimes entrenched in social and professional attitudes as well as values and misunderstandings about differences (also see Ainscow and Miles, 2009)—impacting on the way CBOW or their peers who had not been in the bush felt they were treated or accepted into the school setting. CBOW who arrived at APS when they were overaged lacked prior exposure to formal education which limited their abilities to learn (also see Sommers, 2009), hence positioning them as "a problem" to their teachers in the academic-oriented curriculum of the school. In line with this limitation, the more general emphasis on academic performance along league standards potentially limited the children's abilities at the school—which undermined the school philosophy of treating every child as special because such an approach betrayed the focus on individual limitations and competences in the non-academic areas. On the whole, there was no significant differences at APS between the experiences of CBOW and other war-affected children who had not been born in the LRA. Moreover, CBOW did not link much of their school experiences to the LRA in spite of contrary interpretations of their behavior by school teachers. In practice, however, whenever there was reluctance by school teachers to acknowledge differences, children encountered and felt a sense of instability (also see Weinstein et al., 2007) and which often led to self-stigmatization of CBOW. For example, CBOW expressed apprehensiveness in the way they related to their teachers in the initial stages of their time at school, but also made specific attributions to the way teachers sometimes became a source of frustration to their lives. These arose whenever the children's LRA backgrounds were uncovered owing to the observed behavior and stereotypes held about the returnees.

Stigmatization and exclusion can also become prominent when children feel different, feel treated differently from the rest—or simply put "out of place" (see Stewart, 2017). Evidence from the streaming policy revealed that the children in the lower streams or those with talents outside the core academic subjects often felt less able to adapt to the formalities of the school. In terms of teaching pedagogy, it was found that treating CBOW categorically as "problem children" rather than acknowledging specific attributes/individualities also made the children to feel fundamentally different from others. However, the study also shows that CBOW respond very positively when they felt cared for: at APS, the teachers have adapted pedagogical approaches to support the children in the lower-class streams. They have also provided avenues where children can progress through positive aspects of teaching, such as delivering messages of encouragement to the pupils. In essence, such measures show that the school's approach to education, i.e., "Every Child is Special" has worked to

the extent that in spite of challenges, it has triggered a learning environment quite adaptable to children in the post-conflict setting.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary materials, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of Birmingham Ethical Approval Committee. Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardian/next of kin.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

BO was responsible for field research and analysis of this article.

## REFERENCES

- Ainscow, M., and Miles, S. (2009). *Developing Inclusive Education Systems: How Can We Move Policies Forward?* University of Manchester.
- Akullo, E., and Ojok, B. (2021). "Researching children born of war in Uganda: methodological reflections on the inclusion of minors in CBOW research," in *Children Born of War: Past, Present and Future*, eds L. Sabine, H. Glaesmer, and B. Stelzl – Marx (London; New York, NY: Routledge), 87–110. doi: 10.4324/9780429199851-5-6
- Apio, E. (2007). "Uganda's Forgotten Children of War," in *Born of War: Protecting Children of Sexual Violence Survivors in Conflict Zones*, ed C. Carpenter (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press), 94–109.
- Apio, E. O. (2016). *Children Born of War in Northern Uganda: Kinship, Marriage, and the Politics of Post-Conflict Reintegration in Lango Society* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis), University of Birmingham, England.
- Atim, T., Mazurana, D., and Marshak, A. (2018). Women, survivors and the children born of wartime sexual violence in Northern Uganda, *Disasters* 42, S61–S78. doi: 10.1111/disa.12275
- Backett-Milburn, K., and McKie, L. (1999). A critical appraisal of the draw and write technique. *Health Educ. Res.* 14, 387–398.
- Baines, E. (2014). Forced marriage as a political project: sexual rules and relations in the Lord's Resistance Army. *J. Peace Res.* 51, 405–417. doi: 10.1177/0022343313519666
- Baines, E. (2017). *Buried in the Heart: Women, Complex Victimhood and the War in Northern Uganda*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Baines, E., and Rosenoff-Gauvin, L. (2014). Motherhood and social repair after war and displacement. *J. Refug. Stud.* 27, 282–300. doi: 10.1093/jrs/fev001
- Birbeck, D., and Drummond, M. (2005). Interviewing, and listening to the voices of, very young children on body image and perceptions of self. *Early Child Dev. Care* 175, 579–596. doi: 10.1080/03004430500131379
- Branch, A. (2013). Gulu in War...and Peace? *The Town as Camp in Northern Uganda. Urban Stud.* 50, 3152–3167. doi: 10.1177/0042098013487777
- Bush, K. D., and Saltarelli, D. (2000). *The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict: Towards a Peace Building Education for Children*. Florence: UNICEF. Available online at: <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/insight4.pdf>
- Caramés, A., Fisas, V., and Luz, D. (2006). *Analysis of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) existing in the world during 2005*. Available online at: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/0A27FE2806661B10C125760400417858-SCP\\_Feb2006.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/0A27FE2806661B10C125760400417858-SCP_Feb2006.pdf)
- Carpenter, C. (2007). *War's Impact on Children Born of Rape and Sexual Exploitation: Physical, Economic and Psychosocial Dimensions*. Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.
- Carpenter, C. (2010). *Forgetting Children Born of War: Setting the Human Rights Agenda in Bosnia and Beyond*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. doi: 10.7312/carp15130
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K. (2011). *Research Methods in Education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Darbyshire, P., Macdougall, C., and Schiller, W. (2005). *Multiple Methods in Qualitative Research With Children: More Insight or Just More?* London: SAGE Publications.
- Denov, M., and Lakor, A. A. (2018). Post-War Stigma, Violence and 'Kony Children': the responsibility to protect children born in Lord's Resistance Army Captivity in Northern Uganda. *Glob. Responsib. Protect* 10, 217–238. doi: 10.1163/1875984X-01001011
- Denov, M. S., and Lakor, A. A. (2017). When war is better than peace: the post-conflict realities of children born of wartime rape in Northern Uganda. *Child Abuse Negl.* 65, 255–265. doi: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.02.014
- Dryden-Peterson, S. (2011). Conflict, education and displacement. *Interdiscipl. J. Conflict and Education*, 1, 1–15. Available online at: <http://www.tinyurl.com/y6yvu48p>
- Erjavec, K., and Volcic, Z. (2010). "Target", "cancer" and "warrior": exploring painful metaphors of self-presentation used by girls born of war rape. *Discourse Soc.* 21, 524–543. doi: 10.1177/0957926510373981
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case study research. *Qual. Inq.* 12, 219–245. doi: 10.1177/1077800405284363
- Gluckman, M. (1961). Ethnographic data in british social anthropology. *Sociol. Rev.* 9, 5–17. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-954X.1961.tb01082.x
- Guba, E. G., and Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth Generation Evaluation*. London: Sage Publications.
- Kellett, M., and Ding, S. (2004). "Middle childhood," in *Doing Research With Children and Young People*, eds S. Fraser, V. Lewis, S. Ding, M. Kellett and C. Robinson (London: The Open University), 161–174.
- Liebling, H. (2018). "Service Responses for Survivors of Conflict and Post-Conflict Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and Torture in the Great Lakes Region," in *Global Health and Security: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, eds C. O'Manique and P. Fourie (Routledge). doi: 10.4324/9781315559568-3
- Liebling, H., and Baker, B. (2010). *Justice and Health Provision for Survivors of Sexual Violence: A Case Study Of Kitgum, Northern Uganda, LAP Lambert, Germany*.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research could not have been possible without the Children Born of War Ph.D. research funding from Marie Skłodowska-Curie Innovative Training Networks grant number 642571 – CHIBOW at the University of Birmingham, UK. The study was carried out under the direct supervision of Prof. Sabine Lee the Head of Department of History and Dr. Benedetta Rossi of the Department of Anthropology and African Studies. Part of the methodological processes entailed in the study has been published into a book chapter *Researching children born of war in Uganda: methodological reflections on the inclusion of minors in CBOW research* as part of the book collection *Children Born of War: Past, Present and Future* – courtesy of the CHIBOW Global Network. Specifically, I wish to extend my sincere thanks to Dr. Benedetta Rossi and Dr. Erin Baines for constructive comments and suggestions made toward this article. Most importantly, the research benefitted from the unreserved willingness and enthusiasm of the children at APS, their teachers and mothers whose voices and aspirations for education inspired this writing.

- Mauthner, M. (1997). Methodological aspects of collecting data from children: lessons from three research projects. *Children Soc.* 11, 16–28. doi: 10.1111/j.1099-0860.1997.tb00003.x
- Mochmann, I. C., and Lee, S. (2010). The human rights of children born of war: a case analysis of past and present conflicts. *Historical Soc. Res.* 35, 268–298. doi: 10.12759/hsr.35.2010.3.268-298
- Mukasa, N. (2017). War-child mothers in northern Uganda: the civil war forgotten legacy. *Dev. Pract.* 27, 354–367. doi: 10.1080/09614524.2017.1294147
- Nicholai, S., and Triplehorn, C. (2003). The role of education in protecting children. *Conflict Humanitar. Prac. Netw.* 42, 1–36. Available online at: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/96795/networkpaper042.pdf>
- Ojok, B. (2021). *Education After Conflict: An Examination of Schooling Policies, Attitudes and Responses to Children Born of War Following their (Re-)integration into the Post-conflict Settings of Northern Uganda* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis). University of Birmingham, England.
- Oloya, O. (2012). *Child to Soldier. Stories From Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army*. University of Toronto Press. doi: 10.3138/9781442664241
- Paulhus, D. L. (1984). Two-component models of socially desirable responding. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 46, 598–609. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.46.3.598
- Porter, H. E. (2017). *After Rape: Violence, Justice and Social Harmony in Northern Uganda*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scott, J. (2000). "Children as respondents: the challenge for quantitative methods," in *Research With Children*, eds P. Christensen and A. James (London: Falmer).
- Seto, D. (2013). *No Place for a War Baby: The Global Politics of Children born of Wartime Sexual Violence*. Ashgate Publishing.
- Seto, D. (2015). Children born of wartime sexual violence and the limits of existence. *Peacebuilding* 3, 171–185. doi: 10.1080/21647259.2015.1052631
- Sommers, M. (2009). Education amidst conflict: the youth challenge. *Fletcher J. Human Security*, XXIV, 29–39. Available online at: [http://www.way.org.my/files/Youth%20Issues%20Education%20Publication/PRAXISXXIV\\_3Sommers.pdf](http://www.way.org.my/files/Youth%20Issues%20Education%20Publication/PRAXISXXIV_3Sommers.pdf)
- Stake, R. E. (2003). "Case studies," in *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, 2nd Edn, eds N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (London: Sage Publications).
- Stewart, B. W. (2017). *I Feel Out of Place: Children Born into the Lord's Resistance Army and the Politics of Belonging* (Ph.D. dissertation). University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.
- Tellis, W. (1997). Introduction to case study. *The Qualitative Report*, Vol. 3. Available online at: <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR3-2/tellis1.html>
- Thomas, G. (2011). *How to Do Your Case Study: A Guide for Students and Researchers*. London: Sage
- Thomas, G. (2013). *How to Do Your Research Project: A Guide for Students in Education and Applied Social Sciences*. London: Sage.
- Waterman, A. H., Blades, M., and Spencer, C. (2001) 'Interviewing children and adults: the effect of question format on the tendency to speculate'. *Appl. Cogn. Psychol.* 15, 301–20. doi: 10.1002/acp.741
- Weinstein, H. M., Freedman, S. W., and Hughson, H. (2007). School voices: Challenges facing education systems after identity-based conflicts. *Educ. Citizenship Soc. Justice* 2, 41–71. doi: 10.1177/1746197907072128
- Yin, R. (1994). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods, 2nd Edn*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publishing.
- Yin, R. K. (1984). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Yin, R. K. (1993). *Application of Case Study Research*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

**Publisher's Note:** All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

Copyright © 2022 Ojok. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.