



Building Refugee Youth Resilience, Voice, and Expression Through Wellbeing Pedagogy

Uganda hosts the largest number of refugees of any country in Africa. The current refugee population in Uganda is estimated to be 1.5 million and at least 200

new refugees enter Uganda every day, seeking a safe haven. The largest proportion

of refugees are from South Sudan, due to existing political fragility and instability in the region, and rising numbers of refugees are

coming from other countries, like Congo and Burundi. Thus, Uganda continues to be Africa's refugee hub. To protect the rights of refugees in the country, Uganda has designed policies regarding the right to quality education participation and freedom of expression.

Our non-profit organization, Africa Education & Leadership Initiative (Africa ELI), works with refugee youth to increase their ability to achieve their dreams and reach their potential. When we ask our refugee beneficiaries what they want, they say they want an

education that can make them confident and knowledgeable in order to build peace and unity in their home countries. As such, Africa ELI focuses on education as a tool for community transformation.

However, refugee education in Uganda faces a number of challenges. The first is that many refugee youth continue to lack access to such basic needs as food, education, clothing, and shelter, which prolongs their healing process and negatively affects their wellbeing. In our work, we have also learned that trauma affects academic success. We noticed

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continuous depreciation in academic performance due to trauma, experiencing fear, depression, and mood swings. Refugee students were being referred to as “aggressive” by their peers and teachers, which impeded student learning as well as their student-teacher relationship-building. Our observations are supported by the latest research in psychology and education about how trauma affects learning, behavior, and relationships.

Additionally, Uganda continues to have education policies that are not fully inclusive of refugees, such as the English-only policy that establishes English as the only language taught and valued within the school setting. English-only policies have particularly negative effects on refugee students. Language is a tool for voice and expression and refugee students who have experienced acute trauma benefit from sharing their needs and feelings, in order to feel confident in their identities, experience a sense of belonging, feel seen and heard, and seek support to cope with their current and past challenges. Therefore, our intervention, The Wellbeing Club, was designed to support refugee and local Ugandan youth to help them build their resilience, voice, and expression.

The Wellbeing Club and Pedagogy

We realized that we needed to focus on wellbeing in order to help our beneficiaries achieve their potential in academics and beyond. In 2019, Africa ELI started a partnership with researchers in the Department of Education at University of California San Diego to design and implement a curriculum to support youth wellbeing: The Wellbeing Club, founded by Dr. Amy Bintliff.

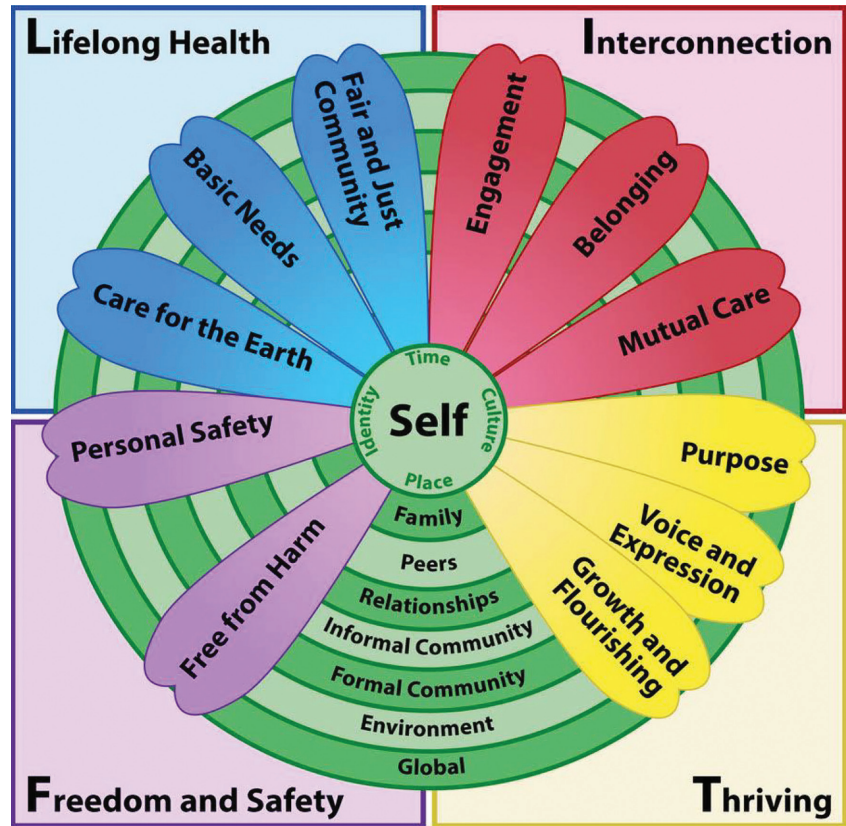


Figure 1.

The Wellbeing Club is an afterschool or summer curriculum for youth who have experienced trauma. It has now been used in multiple places around the world, including Uganda and the United States. This curriculum relies on hands-on artistic activities, team-building games, discussion circles (also known as talking circles), and mindfulness approaches to help youth learn the language of wellbeing. Through activities and conversations, youth are able to identify both their strengths and the challenges they are experiencing, and they feel less alone as they hear from their peers about their own wellbeing. The curriculum moves from understanding personal wellbeing to understanding community wellbeing, ending with a youth action project in which youth design and lead a project to improve wellbeing within their community.

At its core, the Wellbeing Club is based on a model of wellbeing called the 4W LIFT Model. The 4W LIFT Model was developed by researchers, including Lori DiPrete Brown and Nancy Kendall, at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, as part of its 4W initiative (Women & Wellbeing in Wisconsin & the World). This model represents a multidimensional framework of wellbeing that arose from research with vulnerable women and children in seven different countries. The primary question of the research was, “What does wellbeing mean to you?” From these conversations, the 4W LIFT model emerged, comprising 11 dimensions of wellbeing in four quadrants (Lifelong Health, Interconnection, Freedom and Safety, and Thriving), positioned within seven spheres of influence, with self at the center (see Figure 1).



Images courtesy of author

Learning the Language of Wellbeing

The 4W LIFT Model gives youth the language to be able to understand wellbeing, and the corresponding Wellbeing Club creates a structure through which wellbeing can be embodied, practiced, and expressed. The curriculum includes many techniques for helping youth learn and become more comfortable with language, voice, and expression. First, the curriculum starts with inviting youth to define wellbeing for themselves, and to contextualize the dimensions of wellbeing from their perspectives. For example, one of the early activities invites youth to draw or write what a “Fair and Just Community” looks like, using examples from their experiences. In addition, the curriculum invites a wide variety of opportunities for self-expression, including visual arts (like drawing, painting, and collage), drama, writing,



and verbal communication, both individually and in groups. This enables choice and practice to help youth feel more comfortable with self-expression as they learn the language of wellbeing. Importantly, all activities are an invitation; youth are encouraged

to participate but if they do not feel comfortable sharing, they are nevertheless welcomed to listen and learn from others.

Participating students in our study initially experienced difficulties with the dimension of “voice and expression,” due to

past traumatic experiences leading to a fear of being judged by their peers. They lacked the trust to share personal experiences with peers and counselors. Through the talking circles, however, they were able to develop a sense of trust and belonging. The talking circles followed a specific structure: When a student had a talking piece (an appointed object), they could speak; when they did not have the talking piece, they would listen. The talking piece was passed around the circle. The talking circles created opportunities to voice wellbeing needs. Those students who did not feel comfortable to share through voice were supported to use art to express themselves. After immersing themselves into the Wellbeing Club, one student shared, *“I learned to be confident about myself. I learned to know that I’m worthy of something.”*

Learning Wellbeing Skills

Our participating students learned wellbeing strategies that help them build their own wellbeing and that of peers. Students learn how to handle challenging situations that may affect their voice, engagement, and academic performance. For example, students practice mindfulness, sing, dance, play, use positive self-talk, and engage in self- and community advocacy, relying on their strengths and support systems to help improve wellbeing.

“When someone has annoyed you, what do you do? You just cry or you just keep quiet and keep the anger? But through mindfulness, you can sit yourself down, you talk to yourself and, let me say, you breathe in, you breathe

out. Just calm yourself down. Yeah, it helps us.”

Participants also explore and develop a sense of purpose that can provide motivation during challenging times.

“When we are here learning Wellbeing Club, in one of our dimensions, we learned about purpose. So, in achieving your goals, or like, for me, I want to become an accountant, so I have to be with purpose so I have to go to school and I achieve my goals.”

Opportunity to Share Culture, Language, and History

The Wellbeing Club brings together a diverse group of youth from various backgrounds. These groups comprise various tribes, languages, and cultures. Before active wellbeing engagements, students felt comfortable working closely with peers from similar tribal cultures. However, we ensured that the wellbeing culture was the “new tribe” for all participants, to avoid segregation, division, conflict, and retraumatization that may stem from cultural stereotypes. When students are immersed into the wellbeing knowledge, they become open minded and want to learn more about each other’s cultures, languages, and history, which has promoted reconciliation and belonging. There was a balance between honoring one’s own identity and appreciating both similarities and differences with others.

“I learned that there are people like me. We are the same. Same blood, same people. So it made me realize that we are not different.”

Helping Teachers and Facilitators Use the Wellbeing Pedagogy

The Wellbeing Club relies on pedagogical techniques that we call “the wellbeing pedagogy.” The Wellbeing Club is student-centered, student-driven, hands-on, and culturally responsive. We recognize that students possess incredible knowledge about themselves, including their identity, skills, and resources, and the role of facilitators is to open opportunities for students to explore, understand themselves better, and try new skills.

The wellbeing pedagogy isn’t only for the Wellbeing Clubs. Classroom teachers can use the wellbeing pedagogy to learn about all students’ needs and goals, and then contextualize their lessons based on learners’ needs. A learning community is created as peers learn from and support one another. In such a learning community, students are responsive to learning engagements through teamwork, which has improved their attitude toward education and academic performance. Africa ELI also offers training and workshops on wellbeing pedagogy, available to staff and administration, to support school-wide transformation.

Takeaways From the Wellbeing Club

The Wellbeing Club is a powerful idea to support the wellbeing of learners, teachers, and, ultimately, the parents and community. We have tested the wellbeing model through practice. Our next steps are to train more teachers in the wellbeing pedagogy and to host more Wellbeing Clubs in Uganda and beyond.

Disclosure Statement:

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.