



Games, activities and narrative practice: Enabling sparks to emerge in conversations with children and young people who have experienced hard times

by Serge Nyirinkwaya



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Abstract

Drawing on narrative practices – re-authoring conversations, the absent but implicit and collective narrative practices – and on experiential learning models, this paper describes a playful practice to assist children and young people who have experienced hard times to respond to traumatic memories from a safe territory, without requiring them to speak in the first person about their experiences. Games and other activities are used to create a shared experience in which young people employ skills and values. These experiences are used as the basis for a cycle of experiential learning in which children reflect on their experiences and make links with their pasts and futures to support alternative story development and rich acknowledgment of what they give value to and their skills of living and being. In addition to seeking ways to avoid retraumatizing, pathologising and stigmatising young people, this process has been developed to offer practitioners an easy to apply and locally resonant way of engaging with children and young people who have been through hard times. It uses local metaphors like making visible young people's capacity to resist and endure (being *mudaheranwa*), inviting young people to stand together on *Akarwa k'amahoro* (Peace Island), and enabling mutual contribution through features of traditional Itorero schooling, including the use of stories of pride, songs and poetic mottos (*ibyvugo*).

Key words: *games; experiential learning; re-authoring questions; children; youth; Rwanda; narrative therapy*

Introduction

In this paper, I describe a narrative-informed approach that I use in my work with vulnerable children and young people who have gone through hard times and have been living on the streets. My intention has been to develop a simple, resonant, relevant and replicable process to use with large numbers of children and young people within short consultation periods. This playful approach has allowed enabling sparks to emerge even during brief therapeutic sessions. The games and activities described in this paper are informed by narrative ways of responding to people and the problems they are facing, particularly responses to trauma that are not retraumatising and do not oblige children to speak about their experience in the first person (Denborough, 2008). The games allow young people to stand together on the 'riverbank' (M. White, 2006), to say 'hullo' again to important people (M. White, 1988), and to use locally resonant songs and other folk culture treasures that sustain people in hard times (Denborough, 2018).

From games to group conversations in three steps

Before sharing stories from my work with young people, I would like to describe the three-step process I use to facilitate group conversations using games or activities.

Step one: before playing

This can involve welcoming the children to the session, asking how they feel, doing some warm-up exercises and introducing the game or activity.

Step two: playing a game or doing an activity

There are many sorts of play activities that can be done here. For instance, I have used games that involve competition and games that involve co-operation, creating and acting out stories and fairy tales, and craft activities.

Step three: group conversation

Borrowing from experiential learning methods (Kolb, 1984; Sugarman, 1985), I invite the children to participate in a cycle of experiencing, sharing, reflecting, generalising and application. In this way, new knowledge is 'created through the transformation of experience' (Kolb, 1984, p. 34). The game or group activity becomes a shared experience that the children

can reflect on. Sharing and reflection include naming and externalising themes that emerged during the activity. Generalisation involves making connections to past experiences, and weaving between the landscapes of action and identity (M. White, 2007). A session ends with questions exploring ways our learning might be applied in the future, including in subsequent activity sessions.

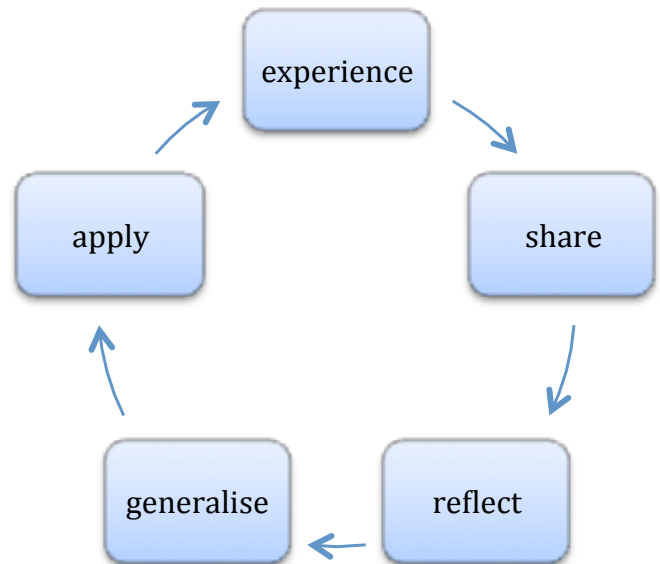


Figure 1: experiential learning cycle

Olika's story

When working with groups of children, my intention is to facilitate conversations that all the children benefit from. However, I noticed that in a given session there would always be one or two children who seemed more impacted than others – perhaps they externalised their feelings in a significant way or provided a spark that helped others. While still seeking to connect with all the children in a group, I have learnt to notice and focus my interviews on the invitations and contributions of these especially engaged participants. This approach is illustrated below in my conversations with Olika during a group session, which followed the three-step process above.

Olika was a 14-year-old boy who came to our village from a transit centre for street children. When I started a psychosocial conversation group with him and other five children who had recently been referred to us, Olika always came but he didn't like to talk much. When I asked him how he was feeling he always just said '*ni byiza*' – it's okay! He grew up in the south and from a young age he liked very much to study, but his parents were not keen on sending him to school and paying his school fees. They would rather have him stay at home

and help them in their small farm. He was not happy about the idea of leaving school for farming, and he decided to start selling nuts and eggs to earn money and pay his own school fees. He did this for a few years against his parents' will. His father started using violence on him and when he felt it was too much, he decided to run away from home and live on the streets.

One day, I proposed to the children in this group that we play a game called 'tying the rope'. I had noticed that when doing activities, the children had difficulty collaborating as everyone wanted to succeed individually. My intention was to introduce a game involving collaboration.

Before playing

Serge: Today, I'd like to propose a game called 'tying the rope'. We will play it in two teams, and we'll need to form them. Who wants to volunteer to form the teams?

The children decided to let the young ones form the teams, which they did quickly.

Serge: Now that we have two teams, each team will hold a rope, and when I say 'go', each team will tie the rope around a tree. After three minutes, each team will go and untie the other team's rope. The team that is first to bring back a rope with no knots will be the winner.

Children: Can you repeat the instructions?

I explained the game again. Olika had taken lead of one of the groups.

Olika: Could we take a moment to talk among ourselves before we start?

Serge: Yes.

Playing the game

I gave the signal and each team started tying the rope around their tree. Olika's team (Dream Team) had developed a strategy of adding many knots as they tied the rope around the tree. The other team (Hope Team) decided to climb the tree to tie the rope up high. When it came to the round of untying, Olika's group was the first to bring the rope back to the circle while the other group continued to struggle with the knots. I encouraged them to finish and they succeeded in doing so.

Group conversation

Sharing and reflecting

Serge: How do you feel?

Olika and teammates (Dream Team): We feel happy and strong!

Serge: What did you like, what didn't you like?

The other team (Hope Team): We didn't like their strategy of tricking us with many knots.

Serge: Are you saying that Dream Team tying lots of knots in the rope was a strategy for them to win?

Hope Team: Yes! They were clever.

Serge: And what about you? Did you have a strategy?

Hope Team: Yes, tying the rope up high so that they would take a long time to reach it.

Me: What does that say about your team, even though your strategy did not work as you wished?

Dream Team: Their strategy worked somewhat because we had difficulty climbing up to untie the rope.

Serge: [To Hope Team] What does it mean to you that you had a strategy and that it did actually mean that they had difficulty climbing to get the rope?

Hope Team: Well, we tried. And if we were given another round, we are sure we would win next time.

Serge: [To Hope Team] That's a good thought. What would you name the strategy the Dream Team used, or what you would use if you were given a second chance?

Hope Team: Cleverness.

Serge: [To Dream Team] What do you reckon about them saying that you had a clever strategy? And what does it mean to you that the other group thinks you had cleverness?

Dream Team: Yes, we had a clever strategy and also *ishyaka [courage and persistence]*.

Serge: *Ah, so cleverness was not alone? There was also courage and persistence? Is that how you would name that?*

Dream Team: *Yeah.*

Serge: *Tell us, how did you come to that?*

Olika: *At the beginning, when I asked for a moment to plan together, that was helpful. And also, I used to tie goats to trees so that they didn't run away so I know about knots. And I don't like to lose!*

I built on Olika's story to ask questions of connecting the skills to the past real experiences.

Generalising

To link Olika's account to other experiences, I could have sought a rich description of him tying goats to trees so that they didn't run away. Instead, I chose to ask him about not liking to lose and the values behind this, and to invite him to explore the history of this. My choice was influenced by what he made visible while playing the game.

Serge: Could you tell us more about that? What is that you hold precious in not liking to lose?

Olika: Courage.

Serge: Could you tell us more about that? Can you remember a story when you used this skill of courage?

Olika: Before I escaped home to live on the streets, we once had a football match and we had bet money with the other team. We played hard, but the first round ended without any score. We started the second round and after a while I realised that time was flying and I told myself: let me use all my courage, even if I die, to lead my team to winning. I played very hard, and towards the end of the match I scored a goal that made our team the winners. The team was awarded the money because of my courage.

Serge: Where do you think your courage and your football skill came from?

Olika: They came from my father. He used to play football and bring me to the playground. He was good at going after the ball.

Serge: If we were birds flying over the playground at that time and watching you playing, what do you think we would have seen?

Emmy: I have an idea. We would see courage, hard work and commitment.

Serge: Olika, is that what you think we would see?

Olika: Yes, I think you would see courage and commitment.

Application

Serge: How might these skills and knowledge apply in similar situations in the future?

Olika: I think I can use this in my studies – if I want to move from 60% to 70%, I will need to work hard.

Serge: In the future, if this skill were to develop, who would be the most satisfied?

Olika: My father.

Until this moment, the conversation had turned mainly around Olika with other children making small contributions. At this point, I invited the other children to become outsider witnesses to Olika's story.

Because of time and children's attention, it is often impossible to explore experiences of the game with more than four children. I introduce a brief version of outsider witnessing so that the other children can become an audience to witness the shared stories. It can be a challenge to keep everyone involved and this process is a response to that challenge. In this case, the other five children present were listening to me and Olika and were providing some confirmations but were not much involved until I asked the question: if we were birds flying over the playground, what we would see?

I interviewed the other children about what had touched them in Olika's story. Some said his courage during the match, others mentioned how he had led his team to victory. I also asked them how they see Olika after listening to the story: if you were to draw or paint a picture of Olika, what would that be? Some said, a Ronaldo, a Messi, a boy with big biceps, etc.

The following question was: did anyone experience similar things, or know of another person who experienced similar things, that you would want to share?' Two children shared how they had lived on the

streets and survived by taking courage. I then asked: 'Where did Olika's story take you that you could not have arrived at if you had not been at this session?' They answered: 'To work hard especially in our studies', 'to work together and to strive to be achievers'.

When children evoked working together, they related it to the teamwork they had demonstrated during the game and how this was helpful. In this way, the group conversation that focused on thickening Olika's individual storyline expanded to touch on collective actions and experiences and how they might support the children in the future.

Through his participation in this group, Olika gradually became very open and very interactive. He was elected group captain by other children. When we were preparing to celebrate World Mental Health Day with a theme of 'young people and mental health', he gave a moving testimony to Radio Rwanda, which was broadcast on two talk shows: the mental health and psychosocial support show of the Ministry of Health and the family talk show. His story was full of his skills of resisting and living, and he was self-confident and eloquent in the interview.

We initially named these themes of preferred identity 'safe islands', seeking a local translation of the 'riverbank position' in which people establish a 'safe territory of identity' before touching on traumatic experiences (M. White, 2006). Later, when I was facilitating a workshop with school-based counsellors, we co-translated these safe territories as 'Uturwa tw'Amahoro' – Peace Islands. The inspiration came from Uturwa tw'Amahoro or Peace Island, situated in Lake Kivu, the biggest lake in Rwanda. Uturwa tw'Amahoro has become a symbol of pleasure and adventure, escaping from bustling city life and connecting with nature (New Times, 2009). The metaphor of Uturwa tw'Amahoro suggested the many possibilities of a riverbank position. I linked this to the possibilities brought by games, which can generate conversations about hard themes in ways that are not retraumatising, particularly when we have first travelled through Uturwa tw'Amahoro. These conversations have led to alternative story development and enabled mutual contributions and acknowledgment of skills of resistance and living, values, hopes and dreams among children who have experienced hard times in their families and who lived on streets before coming to our alternative care program.

Riverbanks and peace islands

I use games to create an experience 'in the now' in which children use different skills and values in the safe territory of playing and having fun, and then connect these to their pasts and futures to support alternative story development and rich acknowledgment of what they give value to and their skills of living and being without requiring self-praise. I then introduce questions to seek connections to different themes and place these into storylines, linking them across time. I may ask, for example, has this game reminded you of or connected you to any:

- important people in your lives?
- safe places or personal sanctuaries?
- other skills and things you are good at?
- values or things you treasure?
- dreams, hopes, intentions, goals or plans for the future?
- new inspirations or ideas about you, your life and the lives of other people you care for?

Could you tell me/us more about that, share a story around that?

Some helpful questions

In adapting the experiential learning cycle to use a game as the experience and bringing a narrative approach to sharing, reflection, generalisation and application, I adapted a series of questions to guide each part of the group conversation. These are not necessarily asked in the order they are listed in below, and I don't ask all of them in a single conversation – I have found that a few questions are enough, and that children don't have to give very elaborate answers.

Questions for *sharing and reflecting on the game that has just been played (the present)*:

- How do you feel after this game?
- What happened during the game?
- What did you do? What did you see?
- What did you enjoy? What didn't you enjoy?
- What went well?
- What worked?
- What did you feel in your body or with your senses during the game?

- What did you experience? What did you think?
- What skills/strengths/tips were helpful to you?
- What else was helpful?
- Were any other people helpful during the game? Did place and nature where the game was played contribute to your experience?

Questions for *generalising or connecting to the past*:

- What does it mean for you?
- What does this tell us about you? (skills, knowledge, intentions)
- How does this skill/knowledge/intention/tip relate to similar moments from your recent and distant past? Could you share with us a short story where the same skill was helpful?
- Where was this?
- When was this?
- Where were you? Describe the place where it occurred.
- What were you doing?
- What happened?
- What was the expression on your face or the faces of the other people who were there?
- If we were like birds/butterflies/flies/mice/geckos passing by, what would we have seen?
- Does it relate to your history or your family's history?
- How is it related to your plans, dreams, aspirations and values?
- How did you prepare yourself for it? What led you to it? What did you do to allow it to happen?
- Who is the person from your past who would be the most and least surprised to hear about this sparkling moment? Why?

Questions for *application in the present and future*:

- How might this skill/knowledge/tip/intention be relevant to similar situations in the future?
- How will this moment affect the future?
- In the future, if this moment develops, who would be the most satisfied?
- What is the next step?
- Can you think of any examples of things

you could do at home, at school or with your friends in relation to this development?

- If your parent/dad/mom/relative were here listening to you, what would they say?

The use of outsider-witnessing practice

In a group of eight to twelve children or young people, a conversation guided by the above questions might be possible with two to four of them. The rest of the group can become an active audience witnessing these stories. The following questions can be used to guide their responses:

- When listening to your groupmate's story, what touched you? Which of their words stayed in your mind and that you can repeat?
- If you were to draw or paint a picture of your groupmate with his or her abilities, hopes and values, what would that look like?
- Has anyone experienced similar things or do you know another person who has experienced something similar that you would want to share?
- Where did your groupmate's story take you that you would not have arrived at if you had missed this session? What do you think those who are not here today missed out on taking with them into their lives and in their boxes of treasures?

Integrating local indigenous knowledge and practice

Bagele Chilisa contributions inspired me to look back at the local traditional and cultural practices that could support my explorations. As she puts it out well (Chilisa, quoted in C. White & Denborough, 2014, p. 43):

This could be the beginning of your own journey into decolonising and indigenising research. All journeys take small steps ... And as you proceed on this journey, you have to know one thing. You have to know yourself before you can know others. You have to know the culture of your community, the culture of your people'

Although Chilisa was referring here to research, her words inspired me to explore ways to include some of

our cultural treasures in my practice. Rwandan culture is rich in songs, dances, poems, rituals and metaphors (Byanafashe & Rutayisire, 2016; NURC, 2019). These cultural treasures have been used in traditional African psychotherapy and counselling (Maneno & Makuna, 2018). There are also home-grown approaches inspired by that rich cultural heritage. Among these, I thought about *Itorero*.

Itorero was a cultural school in which Rwandans would learn about their language and history, social relations, sports, dancing, songs, patriotism and national defence. *Itorero* was initiated during the reign of King Ruganzu I Bwimba in around 1312. It was created so that people acquired a good and deep understanding of their culture. Participants were encouraged to critically discuss, explore and analyse Rwandan cultural values. *Itorero* also provided formative training for future leaders. From 1924 to 1994, *Itorero* was banned by the colonial rulers and by post-independence regimes. *Itorero* lost its significance, which resulted in distortions of the Rwandan culture and breakdown of Rwandan social fabric, mutual support and selfless service to the nation (NURC, 2019).

In the following example, I share how I have drawn from these home-grown and Indigenous approaches and the rich cultural heritage they are shaped from. In *Itorero*, songs, poems (including *ibyvugo*), dances, games and other activities were vehicles for discussions. In my groups with children, *Itorero*-inspired conversations have a particular tone, focusing on preferred storylines, identities, what people give value to or treasure, their hopes and dreams for the future, what they have learnt from the past and what they are living and want to pass on to future generations.

Fabi, Kerin and collective story-making

Fabi and Kerin were two young boys in one of my support groups. Kerin was very young – five years old. He was born to homeless parents, and he grew up on the streets with his mother. They survived by begging. His father was alcoholic, and whenever he saw Kerin, he would beat him badly. This led Kerin to flee the place where his mother had found refuge. Kerin was caught by the police and placed in a transit centre. Fabi was 11 years old. He had been raised by his mother in very poor conditions. He said that his father had died from poisoning. His mom would leave him at home

alone and do small jobs to earn their living. Fabi ended up on the streets. He didn't like to talk and was always in a defensive mode, ready to fight.

I had been wondering whether the two boys were really benefiting from the group conversations they were involved with. When I asked if they had anything to say or any comment they would respond with 'I have nothing to say today'.

The experience

At the start of one session, I asked the group what they would like to do together.

Serge: Does anyone have an idea of what we might start with today?

Children: Dancing, drawing...

Kerin: Ducire umugani – tell us a story!

I don't know how he got that idea, although stories and fairy tales had been mentioned earlier in a list of activities we could do in the group.

Serge: This is how we're going to do that. I will tell you a piece of a tale, cut it short and anyone who wants to imagine the following sequence can share. Does that sound okay?

Children: Yes. [They kept very quiet with their curious eyes staring at me]

Serge: In a forest lived a family of animals, you can imagine who was in— [before I could continue, Kerin had raised his hand]

Kerin: In the family there was a mom and three siblings.

Serge: And was a dad there too?

Kerin: No, no dad.

Serge: What had happened to dad?

Kerin: He had gone away.

Serge: Do you have an idea where?

Kerin: No.

Serge: And what about the family?

The children, one after another, contributed to build the story: the family was composed of different animals:

a monkey that was skilled in climbing trees, a mother monkey, a dog and a snake. They had neighbours: a hyena, a lion and an elephant that they lived in harmony with, apart from the hyena, which used to come when mom monkey went to get food.

I encouraged this process of collective story-making to decentre myself and let the children build the tale together. However, I continued to check in with Kerin, the owner of the idea, about whether the story that was being formed was fitting with his ideas. He said that it was okay, but insisted that a dad monkey was not there and that the little monkey was not healthy. I took care to preserve Kerin's co-authorship role and made sure we respected his ideas. I suggested that we act out the story. I would introduce the play with a narration of the tale so far, and then they could start playing out the story and adding to it. I said it was also okay to change the sequence if need be.

The children agreed to this idea, and I asked 'who wanted to be who', starting with Kerin. He said he wanted to be mom monkey. Other children laughed because he was so young, but I said it was okay. The other children took on different roles. There was a lot of elaboration in the play that was not in the original story.

Kerin played a very protective mother in the forest and showed skills in caring for children – asking what they wanted to eat and in advising them about where they shouldn't go to avoid meeting hyena. Fabi, who played the elephant neighbour, kindly came to the rescue of the family when it was attacked. He used his physical majesty in a confident way to do so.

After the play, I asked the children to let go of their roles and to say, for example, 'I was mom monkey but I am Kerin'; 'I was the elephant but I am Fabi'.

Generalising: Resonance between the co-authored story and real life stories

When I asked about what they had enjoyed, Kerin and Fabi mentioned protecting others, chasing away those who attacked them and caring for the family. I picked up on those skills and asked questions to link them to their pasts – where else they had used or seen these skills of protecting and where did they think they got them from. Kerin mentioned that when he begged for money and got some coins, he would give them to his mother to buy bread. Fabi said that when he was at home, he would do things like cleaning so that his mother was happy.

When I asked what they thought their mothers would say if they could hear them telling all those stories,

each of them answered: 'Mama would feel happy!' It was not possible to reach out to the children's parents directly, but this question was a way to invite them into the sessions. I have found it very helpful to have this consciousness of parents in the room even when they cannot be there in person.

Fabi and Kerin were so engaged in the conversation and I wanted to find ways to acknowledge their contributions. This was when I introduced the *Itorero idea of catchphrases or mottos that express what people give value to, what they have achieved and what they hope to in a poetic, dignified and dramatic way.*

Application: ibyvugo – Itorero-inspired mottos

I started by sharing a short story about *Itorero* and how it once helped young people to develop knowledge about their culture, including through the use of poetic mottos or *ibyvugo*. I then shared a video of a child performing such a motto. I encouraged the children to think about what they had shared in the group conversation after the day's storytelling and play. I suggested that those who hadn't spoken much that day could draw from previous sessions. I explained that we would be developing our own mottos to capture what we had discussed, and that it was okay to come up with just a simple sentence. The children started practicing and the activity became a collective process with children checking on one another. I confirmed it was okay not to use sophisticated language, and suggested that they use the words they spoke or heard during our reflection and sharing.

Three of the children spontaneously performed their mottos and the rest applauded, as a usual local response to the poem teller by only saying 'ahoooo' or 'guma guma guma' in a fun fashion.

I then had the idea of arranging an exchange of their *ibyvugo* with other groups of children and inviting the children to respond to each other's mottos. This led to us receiving a collective contribution from a group in another rehabilitation centre:

Abajeunes ... Imbaraga z'igihugu zubaka kandi vuba [Youngsters, strength of the nation that builds faster]

My group answered them with a collective *ikivugo*:

Cyizere group, dufite imbaraga zo kwigira cyane, n'ikinyabupfura kandi tukagera ku cyo dushaka [Hope group, we have skills of studying hard and we value discipline and we achieve our goals]

When Fabi came for the session of the following week, he asked me, 'When shall we have *ibyvugo* again?' I was surprised that Fabi, who usually didn't show his feelings easily, had been drawn to the *ibyvugo*. He had obviously been transported by these literary explorations, or by seeing the storylines of the group's own lives represented in the mottos they co-created.

The above process can be summarised in five steps:

1. Introduce the children to histories of *Itorero* and the place of *ibyvugo*.
2. Explain what *ibyvugo* is all about and give some examples (this is now easy as there is material that has been generated by two groups. Otherwise one could use a YouTube video of a child performing *ikivugo*).
3. Compose a collective poem with the children negotiating the content. I did this by inviting the children to recall the preferred stories they had shared in the group. When I sent the material to other groups, I suggested to group leaders that they do this after the Tree of Life or hand or power flower activities.
4. Compose an individual *ikivugo* – this doesn't necessarily need to be done by all the children, just those who want to.
5. Arrange an audience to receive the group's contribution and compose a response. My hope is to have a long chain of groups witnessing others' *ibyvugo* and sending back responses. Responses can be recorded on phones with children's consent and sent via WhatsApp to group leaders. A living document could also be developed and shared with school-based counsellors.

In all the composed mottos or catchphrases, the *ibyvugo*-lines recorded and enriched alternative stories that had been shared before, and did so in a culturally resonant way. This is further illustrated by the following example from a children's group who participated in the exchange:

Imbaraga zacuuu [Our strength]

Turi abana bafite icyerekezo cyiza [We are young people with a good vision]

Ahooo... ni ho ho

Imbaraga zacuuu [Our strength]

Twubatswe urugo rw'amahoro mu mitima yacu
[We built a Peace Island/home in our hearts]

Muze dufatanye turusigasire [Let's protect it in solidarity]

Ahooo... ni ho ho

Imbaraga zacuuu [Our strength]

Turi abahanga bahangana n'ibiduhungaanganya
[We have insider knowledges that help us to get through hard times]

Tugahanga ibifitiye akamaro isi dutuye
[We are able to create relevant things for our mother land]

Ahooo... ni ho ho!

Imbaraga zacuuu [Our strength]

Twateye ibiti by'ubuzima [We planted trees of life]

Na rya zuba ryo mu mpeshyi ntiridukanga [Even the heat of summer does not scare us]

Kuko bya biti biturengera [Because those trees come to our rescue]

Ahooo...ni ho ho!

Making visible the capacity of being *mudaheranwa*

Kudaheranwa is a Rwandan word that could be translated as resilience or, better, what Rita Giacaman calls 'survance': the capacity to endure and resist (Giacaman, 2014). *Kudaheranwa* literally means 'not being kept down or defeated by a hardship' and some parents call their children *Mudaheranwa* to pass on to them this value and skill of enduring and resisting hardships or traumatic situations. In my work with vulnerable children, especially with children who have been living on the streets, I have observed, in contradiction to some deficit-based descriptions, that these children have many skills of *kudaheranwa*. During my recent experience using games and activities, many have said that when they lived on streets they were sustained by mobilising skills like perseverance, observation, anticipation and cleverness. I was interested in how the games and drama stories that we play might make visible such

skills and capacities, and to develop them further so that the children can transfer them to other dimensions of their lives and use them to contribute to others.

I explored this with Titi, Emmy and Olika.

Titi came from a family of four siblings born by different fathers. He said that his mother was a sex worker and used to bring different men home. On many occasions these men were very violent, and hence Titi decided to leave his home and live on the streets. He was caught and reunited with his grandmother who was very poor and lived in a remote area. Titi ended up returning to the streets and lived there for many years before being placed in institutions.

Emmy had grown up with his grandmother's family because his parents were very poor. He experienced violence from his grandfather to an extent he thought it was too much for him and decided to go to live on the streets.

You have already met Olika in my first example.

In one session, I brought a game that involved sweets tied on a small string. Each child got a sweet on a string. They were asked to put the end of the string in their mouth, and to try to catch the sweet without using their hands. Each child tried their best with some finding a strategy to do it quickly. In the end, all were able to catch the sweet and eat it.

Through the experiential learning framework, the children talked about skills and tips for solving problems, and skills to endure and resist. One child shared his story of journeying from his home to Kigali, a distance of over 150 kilometres. This resonated with another two children who shared stories about their lives on the streets:

Emmy: When I left the home where my family lives in Nyamagabe in the south, I agreed to go with my friend. We wanted to come to Kigali, and we walked all the way from home. After like 50 kilometres we were exhausted. I jumped on a lorry and after some distance I realised that my friend was not with me. I stepped down and waited for him. Luckily, he had also found a truck that he was holding on to. When I saw him, I told him to come down and we passed the night at that place. The next morning, we continued our journey and arrived in Kigali city in the evening.

Olika: When I came to Kigali, I didn't know anyone and I didn't want to sleep on the road. So, I decided to go and report to the police station.

I pretended that I had come with my mother but that she had left me behind. They gave me a place to sleep and the next morning I cleaned their compound and they kept me for some more days before bringing me to the transit centre.

Titi: To escape from police, we would travel during night from one place to another, walking all night through until we reach our destination in the city without being caught. During the day, we would hide in our self-made shelters.

These skills of life on the streets and travelling had never been shared before. There had existed a single story of damaged children who needed to be 'fixed' by the rehabilitation program before they could be reunified with their biological families. Dominant discourses pathologise them as delinquents or damaged. These dominant discourses affect their identities and the stories they tell about themselves. They also make invisible what these children have gone through and their skills of responding to hardships they experienced. A lot of sparks emerged when I asked them to name all the skills that were present in their stories of survival on the streets. They came up with a name that depicts skills to resist, endure, solve problems: *kudaheranwa*.

Conclusion

The playful practices I have described in this paper emerged out of work with children and young people who were not in the care of their parents, and who had been exposed to life on the streets of Rwanda. They had experienced hard times such as physical and sexual abuse, men's violence against their mothers, poor nutrition, lack of health care, and child labour. I sought a child-friendly and youth-friendly, non-stigmatising psychosocial approach in which young people would not be labelled mentally ill or delinquent and would not be retraumatised. The process I have developed of playing and reflecting on games and using other activities was a way to engage with and assist these young people without requiring them to speak in the first person about their experiences. Instead, the young people were invited to stand together in a safe territory of identity – Akarwa k'amahoro (Peace Island).

In addition to drawing on children's cultures of expression through play (Kende, 2016), the practices

described in this paper use narrative ideas – re-authoring conversations, the absent but implicit, conversation on personal failure (M. White, 2007), collective narrative practices (Denborough, 2008) – and Kolb's experiential learning model (Kolb, 1984; Sugarman, 1985) to create experiences in children using different skills and values in a fun and safe game or activity and then connecting these to their pasts and futures to support alternative story development, rich acknowledgment of what children and young people give value to, their skills of living and being, and their capacity to resist and endure (being *mudaheranwa*).

This approach was also part of an effort to decolonise our practice (Drahm-Butler, 2015) and to develop an approach that would be easy to use for practitioners who do not have time and resources to devote to further studies. One of the biggest challenges in my context is building the professionals' competency in child-friendly approaches that are resonant with the local context and culture, based on local Indigenous knowledge and practices like fairy tales, songs, poems, mottos (*ibyivugo*), and the traditional *Itorero*, a cultural school in which Rwandans would learn about their culture, language, history, social relations, sports, dancing and songs. The practices described in this paper have helped to address this need. In my explorations so far, I have found that this approach is easy to engage for both children and facilitators.

Another challenge in my work is to encourage children and young people to open up and talk about their stories. As a survival strategy, some of the children we work with have invented stories about their lives and identities in an attempt to gain access to care services. They may reduce their age or invent stories about their families or origins. After admission into our care

system, children often stick to these stories for some time as they are scared of how workers might react to the true stories. At the beginning of a support group, children often ask me, 'If we tell you the truth, are you sure they will be no consequences?' I have found that the sharing of true stories becomes easier after a shared game experience. It is helpful that our reflective conversations create a context in which children can participate without having to 'tell the whole truth'. This makes it possible for children to share their 'truths' in ways that don't put them at risk.

I have, however, noticed some limitations to using games that involve competition. Some children have been frustrated at not winning a game. Some have insisted on being given a second chance to win, and some have declined to continue with a session after 'losing' a game. For others, competition seemed compelling and highly motivating. For these young people, competitive games generated useful multi-storied conversations and applications. To respond to the issues I encountered with competitive games, I have sometimes proposed additional rounds to give those who lost an opportunity to try the tips generated in the discussion. When frustration has been high, I have sometimes altered a game so that everyone can win. I try to keep our focus not on who will win, but on how the experience can generate significant group conversations. Winning and losing themselves have become the theme of some sessions. We have discussed what was important to the young people in playing games, putting in and sustaining effort, and focusing on the skills and values demonstrated and what they might make possible rather than on winning or losing. I have also introduced games that involve co-operation and teamwork towards a common goal.

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