

Transforming Lives Through Play-Based Learning Programmes in Kyaka Refugee Settlement, Uganda

Debra Laxton, Senior Lecturer in Education – Early Childhood Lead

Sarah Ndlovu, Education Specialist at Children on the Edge

Early childhood is often perceived as idyllic; a frivolous and enjoyable time of life without the stress and strain that adulthood can bring. In reality, many children around the world have unsettled childhoods impacted by social, economic, and political factors. This article highlights the complexities of living and working in emergency settings focusing on the work of Children on the Edge (COTE), a child's rights organisation, in promoting safe play spaces for children in Kyaka Refugee Settlement, Western Uganda.

Emergency settings arise out of humanitarian crisis. Humanitarian crises can be man-made e.g. armed conflict or natural disaster e.g. earthquakes, epidemics, droughts, or a combination of both (Laxton and Cooper, 2012). Humanitarian crisis affects countries globally when families are forced to flee countries to survive and protect their children. Over 117 million people are displaced worldwide, 40% of whom are children. Uganda is the largest refugee host in Africa, and has faced unprecedented influxes of refugees, with over 1.5 million people fleeing conflict and instability in South Sudan, the DRC, Burundi, and Somalia. Uganda has progressive refugee policies that grant land and work rights upon refugee arrival. Kyaka refugee settlement hosts over 125,000 refugees, most are Congolese and 65% are children. COTE estimate that 20,000 of children aged 3–6-years living there are not only missing out on early education but are vulnerable to exploitation.

There is growing global recognition of the importance of early childhood education (ECE), and play-based learning specifically, as a foundation for lifelong learning and development. Countries, including Uganda, have responded to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all and SDG target 4.2 to ensure all girls and boys have equal access to quality pre-primary education, but progress is slow. In Uganda less than 20% of children attend pre-primary education. The reasons are complex but include a lack of trained teachers and resources, a lack of parental knowledge around ECE value, small attendance costs can be unaffordable, and a lack of ECE provision in poorer locations prevents access in rural areas like Kyaka.

COTE was founded in 1990 in response to the Romanian orphanage crisis. The organisation works with communities to address specific needs and circumstances supporting more than 17,000 children in Bangladesh, India, Uganda, Myanmar, and Lebanon. COTE's vision is for a world where every child thrives regardless of geography, ethnicity, or gender and their values focus on Hope, Dignity, Justice, and Freedom of Expression. Their work in the Kyaka refugee settlement highlights how COTE help to transform the lives of marginalised children and communities by co-creating protective, nurturing environments where children can be safe, play, learn and grow.

Initially, COTE partnered with 30 refugee communities in Kyaka to train and support existing caregivers and contributed to the building and maintenance of fifteen ECD centres. When the COVID-19 lockdown was announced the centres had to close but COTE worked quickly to change their strategy and develop their innovative Cluster Learning Approach (CLA). The approach was cost effective enabling a speedy upscale of provision that continued after lockdown so that thousands of refugee children could access playful learning across five settlement zones. Instead of being limited to buildings, ECE was arranged in small community clusters e.g. people's homes and compounds, shaded areas around local churches, and under trees.

The Kyaka refugee settlement context should be explained; it covers a huge expanse, 81.5 km² and dispels preconceived ideas about refugee homes. No commonly reported media refugee camp with rows of tents on barren ground, suggesting the transient or temporary, exist here. During a visit in November 2024, the settlement's vast lush landscape was evident, with rock formations and agricultural fields. The settlement stretches far and wide, a patchwork of rural communities and emerging small towns connected by mud roads criss-crossing the settlement. Movement across the settlement is challenging, especially in the rainy season and access to essential services e.g. education, healthcare, and food is challenging, particularly for those in remote areas. Water is drawn from central pumps, and electricity in homes is rare. The presence of cluster learning groups in small, remote rural communities is remarkable and to date COTE have partnered with locals to create 250 learning spaces; each space has 3 classes – baby, middle, top. The number of children aged 3 – 6 years accessing early childhood education has increased by 90%.

Emergency settings can be unsafe places to live, and children are vulnerable to neglect, exploitation, and trauma. It is crucial that every learning space is a safe place for children to be, emotionally and physically. Although often outside, due to a lack of alternatives, safety of cluster learning spaces is assured by community educators who are familiar to children and parents and facilitate play-based learning in identified areas near to homes where neighbours keep a watchful eye over each other's safety. Parents can confidently leave their children to play and learn away from pressures and responsibilities of home e.g. caring for siblings, carrying out domestic chores. The structure of play sessions provides certainty, familiarity and a sense of normalcy adding to feelings of safety and security allowing them to be self-assured and able to play and explore, be curious and build positive relationships.

The cluster learning approach is a sustainable empowerment model with key principles and practices that promote quality community led play-based ECE:

- **Community ownership** – ensures sustainability. Local committees manage resources and cluster learning increasing family investment in education. They source the learning space, and provide shelter, mats, latrines and hand washing facilities. COTE and the community collaborate to solve problems and safeguard children.
- **Inclusion: Access for All** – The CLA ensures learning is accessible for all children, removing barriers of finance, language, culture, ethnicity, disability and location. Children with SEND in the community are targeted for attendance and parents are signposted to other services. There is no cost for attendance; children don't need uniforms and don't take lunch. Children are taught in their own language. These practices go against the norms and resulting in regular attendance.
- **Cultural Sensitivity** - Community engagement and use of the Ugandan early childhood framework ensures cultural relevance and creates a balance of cultural respect with innovative learning approaches. Using local languages, indigenous toys, and traditional games, fosters community acceptance and making clear links between play, learning and academic goals helps counter perceptions of play as unproductive and allows a growth-mindset around the value of play.
- **Play-based learning** –With a recognition of and commitment to the importance of play as a tool for learning, play is central, allowing children to explore independently and through guided activities
- **Community volunteers as educators and trainers**– Communities identify appropriate local individuals to become cluster group educators. COTE provide training in play-based ECE and as a result children learn in their own language, in a familiar culture, with trusted adults

through purposeful play. Educators receive stipends and small business loans. More experienced educators become ToTs (Train the Trainer) having responsibilities for cluster groups across the settlement. ToTs provide ongoing training and mentorship for new and existing educators. National qualified teachers are employed as Education Officers who oversee the whole CLA. They travel hours every week from across Uganda, leaving their own families, to work in the settlement. They gain status through the role and are paid a salary.

- **Ratios** – COTE insist upon ratios of 1 adult to 15 children to ensure child safety, effective learning, and overall well-being. COTE never turn children away, their 'learning for all' philosophy is clear; when the ratio rises, another caregiver is found. This practice is not common, some organisations work in ratios of 1:50 and above.

Ultimately, the CLA provides opportunities for children and communities to thrive through empowerment and value. Children develop foundational knowledge, attitudes and skills that help them navigate primary school and beyond. With the training of community educators, parental engagement and community ownership, the CLA will be sustainable with communities managing ECE independently without COTE support enabling COTE to focus elsewhere. The CLA is an innovative, simple, cost-effective model which breaks down barriers to early years learning, ensuring education is accessible for children who may otherwise be cut off from support at the most vital stage of their development.

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