

Stories of Hope: Toward an Inclusive Pedagogy for Relevance and a Positive Future

Alex M. Ntung¹, Jonathan M. Barnes²

¹Founder Education4diversity UK charity 1188965, UK

²Visiting Senior Research Fellow, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK

Correspondence: Jonathan Barnes, Visiting Senior Research Fellow, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK.
Email: jonathan.barnes@canterbury.ac.uk

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Abstract

There is much evidence that hope is in short supply for children in much of the world. This article reports on a 2 day project seeking to begin the restoration of hope in children a school serving a large community of refugees. In this school the majority of children have lost the hope of peace and security at home and escaped to the safety of neighbouring Uganda. The project aimed to illustrate the impact of periods of secure ‘down time’ as the first step towards addressing the trauma these children have suffered.

We wanted to know if a focus on inclusive values, the essentially wordless arts and collaborative working outdoors, would support school ambitions toward building more cohesive communities and healthy environments. Children were given many free choices within 4 strongly structured, practical, sensory activities in the school grounds. A team of volunteer evaluators were trained to document attitudes, body language, application and conversations in notes, photographs and recordings. They noted that during their activities autobiographical, often hopeful stories arose between children sharing the same language as they decided how to represent values like: compassion and fairness, respect and justice. This report describes the planning, methods and immediate outcomes of these sessions and reflects on possible wider implications. Chiefly we observed that encouraging children’s values stories, working collaboratively on tightly-framed arts activities and allowing group or personal agency appeared to generate an attitude of positivity and personal relevance – prime motivators for learning that require further and longer term research with an undifferentiated whole class.

Keywords: values, stories, arts, inclusion, refugees, emotional, social, agency, structure

1. Introduction

This report covers a short intervention in a primary school that attempted to use stories, values education and arts to prepare refugee children for deeper engagement in work on climate change and community building. It cannot claim far reaching success or sustained mind change, but it does raise a number of interesting questions for education in a time of multiple global crises. How can we make education more emotionally relevant? In what ways can we make it more social and collaborative? What is the value of the arts in education? Can values education provide a viable link across the curriculum? What is the function of the stories we tell and retell ourselves?

If we can form some tentative answers to these questions in practice in a short project in a remote school with the multiple challenges generated by proximity to a war zone, then maybe the questions are worth asking everywhere.

Our stories are often understood at levels well beneath culture. Personal narratives have arisen a common and somewhat unexpected feature of our practice and research on values and arts in education across the world over the past 10 years. We have been asking teachers in the UK and non-western countries about the key values that guide them in professional life (Barnes, 2019; Barnes, 2020; Barnes & Ntung 2024). Defining values as, *deeply held beliefs that direct the big and small decisions and actions across our lives*, we have led teachers to trace the sources of their personal beliefs and their relevance to pedagogy. Regardless of culture, when answering these questions, teachers have called up stories that they believe helped generate and sustain the values they hold most dear. They have shared stories of peace-building, unexpected goodness, unconditional love, uncompromising courage or sacrifice - stories of hope. When shared with other teachers from different cultural backgrounds, these stories were quickly understood, appreciated and in discussion, often

applied to professional life. This observation and its application to teaching aligns with the work of Wright (2012) who argued that meaningful and performed self-expression through story and other arts can encourage teachers toward deeper understandings, empathy and greater flexibility of thought.

The two authors share stories linked to our own most treasured values, including the 8 stories summarised from Alex's autobiography (Ntung, 2013) that enrich this report. *Story 1* concerns his own deep-rooted sense of identity:

Story 1: A valued name

The nomadic-pastoralist community in which I grew up in Congo strongly valued kinship systems and family genealogy. These cultural features remain central to our traditions and ethnic identity. As a child, I was taught to memorise the names of my ancestors up to twenty generations back as a way of preserving clan traditions. One of my ancestors was called Kayira. He was a king and was given the name Kayira meaning "a path to..." because travellers often asked him for directions and they trusted in him. Travellers believed they would not be harmed if they travelled via his home, that they would be safe, welcomed, and protected and his home became a central point along travellers' journeys. Over time, the name Kayira came to symbolise hospitality, safety, and welcome. This name carries deep personal significance for me. I named my eldest son Kayira, intending it to represent "a path to..." - a person to whom others can turn in times of need; someone who is approachable, cheerful, and welcoming rather than feared.

Story 1 connects a narrative from the distant past with hopes for a young son's future. Sadly, however hope is a value that can seem in short supply for many young people in a world dominated by 'fake news', the ongoing impact of COVID-19 lockdowns, as well as daily reports (or experience) of war, displacement, environmental and climate crises, anxiety, loneliness, inequality and mistrust. Within education, the scarcity of hope-generating curricula and pedagogies has been highlighted in a number of studies (for example, Yohani, 2008; Wright, 2012; Kirby, et al, 2022). The most recent World Health Organisation (WHO) *Health Behaviours of School Aged Children* (HSBC) report (WHO, 2025) documents concerning trends in children's general well-being across 44 European and central Asian countries. In 'western' European countries, the four yearly HSBC reports provide evidence of growing unhappiness, evidenced by a steady decline in adolescents' perceptions of parent, peer and teacher support. Subjective assessments of personal well-being and life satisfaction in the same area and Canada have also fallen over the last 25 years and feelings of loneliness have risen. School is not liked either. In Canada in 2022 for example 63% of girls and over 40% of boys said they felt 'pressurised' by school. Indeed in the latest HSBC report (2025) most western European 13 and 15 year olds said they disliked school. Feelings like these clearly have an impact upon general attitudes of hope for young people in these countries.

Despite plentiful evidence of declining child mental health in some of the richest countries of the world, there is little sign that education policies have been effective in addressing it through curriculum and pedagogy. This observation suggests an education for hope and relevance should be an urgent focus in every HSBC study country, but there are even stronger arguments for a hope-filled curriculum in the schools of the global south, particularly in those many low income countries hosting most of the world's refugees. Perhaps a return to pre-industrial, even ancient, approaches to hope-building and community cohesion evident in Alex's *Story 2*, is relevant to the debate.

Story 2: The importance of stories

Survival as a nomadic pastoralist in Congo's high plateau depended on equity and sustainability. Wisdom was derived from knowing one another's stories. We were taught that shared stories and experiences are what remain when a person ceases to exist physically. Because our loved ones lived and shared experiences with us, they left behind enduring memories. These memories constitute a profound legacy, providing meaning and purpose to life.

As a member of a tight-knit traditional society, Alex sees that the stories he heard as a child helped him develop a sense of meaning in his life. The values underpinning those stories have guided his decisions and indicated a direction for his life. Similarly his experience of the living arts of music, poetry, dance and vessel-making in his and other close communities, deepened his understanding of the inner world of emotion and creative collaboration.

Story 3: The power of the arts

My family was gifted in music. At day break my father would wake up and play his Umwirongi – a type of flute. The music he played was often linked to traditional poems praising cattle, heroes, herders and men of great integrity and wisdom. I loved waking up to this music because it always put me in a good mood and gave me a positive feeling about the day ahead. In the evening, after dinner we would gather round the fire in the middle of the hut and he would play one of the most beautiful instruments the Inanga (zither). Its sound was majestic and it was wonderful to watch him play and listen to his beautiful singing. It was the only moment of the day that I saw him smile, free from self-consciousness, and the burdens of being both a father and a man. I still remember vividly the songs he played. The instrument brought us closer together and made us equal.

This report summarises and discusses the way in which stories, values, arts and meaning-making were linked together in a small scale education intervention in a refugee school in Rwamwanja, Uganda. The project illustrates what we see as the very beginning of the hope-building education essential for children growing up into a world of ecological, climate, cultural, communication and economic crises. We dare suggest that provoking values-stories and the artistic and social modelling of inclusive values could provide highly transferrable starting points for building a modern, connected and relevant curriculum.

2. Geographical, Physical and Political Context

We chose a challenging setting to pilot our ideas – a primary school serving Rwamwanja, a huge refugee settlement (roughly 80,000 people) in western Uganda near the conflict-torn border of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). 60% of Rwamwanja's population are children. It has six primary schools and one secondary school. The landscape is characterised by rolling hills up to 1250 metres above sea level and a few surviving remnants of dense tropical vegetation. The area has been largely stripped of its natural vegetation of forest and turned to rough savannah and small subsistence-farmed plots cultivated by the refugees. It currently faces serious environmental problems: significant deforestation as the natural tree cover is removed for charcoal and building, and separate, severe climate change resulting in unpredictable, unprecedented rainfall, water insecurity, drought, floods and rising temperatures.

Alex's boyhood home was nearby on the DRC side of the border. *Story 4* tells of the close relationship between the natural and human life of the area.

Story 4: Traditional wisdom

My home area was a beautiful land, nourished by numerous rivers and streams, with vast open green spaces nestled between breathtaking mountains—a landscape well-suited to cattle herding. Life there was very simple, and every aspect of community life depended on what nature provided. We valued nature deeply and, in many respects, attributed human qualities to forests and rivers. Our understanding of diversity was also shaped by the diversity of plant and animal species surrounding us.

I remember one occasion when I was five or six, I saw hunters chasing a baby antelope. The frightened animal eventually hid in my grandmother's house. My grandmother refused to hand it over to the hunters. Instead, she offered them a goat of similar size and later released the baby antelope back into the forest. When I asked her why she had done this, she explained the importance of protecting weak and vulnerable beings, whether human or animal. She told me that it was inhumane to harm any creature seeking refuge in order to save its life. This experience profoundly shaped my values of compassion and my commitment to helping those in need, whether animals or human beings.

Rwamwanja Primary school serves 4000 refugee children mostly from the DRC. They have suffered internal displacement, extreme poverty, food insecurity and the deprivation of medical and education services in their home country for many years. The refugee children speak a variety of languages unfamiliar to most Ugandans. Staff shortages and the withdrawal of aid funding has meant that class sizes can be up to 200 children. Many children have witnessed extreme violence, most have lost family members in massacres and raids on their home villages, about 25% are orphaned. Alex knows the region and the threats well and provides a glimpse of the kind of horrors these children may have faced in *Story 5*.

Story 5: Unexpected hope

When I was around 15 in and returning home with friends for Christmas across dangerous territory during the genocide against my community, we were caught in a violent ambush. Hundreds of attackers carrying machetes attacked us brutally with the apparent intention of killing us. In the midst of the violence, we noticed an elderly man belonging to the attackers' community. He was barefoot, poorly clothed, and physically frail, relying on a walking stick for support. Raising his trembling arm, he spoke softly: "Please do not spill the blood of these children on our land; it will bring a curse upon us. They feel pain just as you do. They have done nothing wrong and did not choose who they are." Within moments, the attackers dispersed one by one, some even abandoning their machetes behind them. The words the old man used reminded me that my own language was not superior to that of others. The power of his courage and simple message will stay with me for ever.

We rarely hear positive stories from war zones, but hopeful stories like *Story 5* above, are often part of healing and can become agents of change. In school curriculum enrichment projects between 2019 and 2026 we focussed on the curriculum application of hopeful values like: responsibility, inclusion, respect for diversity, justice, equity, kindness and friendship (Barnes & Ntung 2024). Children's thoughtful and lively engagement in enacting such values encouraged us to test our ideas further. Evaluations like those of Yohani *et al.*, (2008) among refugees and both Gedikoglu, (2021) and Hawkes (2023) working with schools, confirm that highlighting positive values made measurable and positive differences to engagement, interaction, educational attainment, and feelings of personal and community relevance for the majority of

children. Building on this we worked with a group of Ugandan charities ¹ and teachers in Rwamwanja Primary School to develop the *Mind Frames Project*, a program designed to change students' frames of mind from low morale and passive, even negative engagement with learning towards an active, affirmative and generally hopeful interaction with education and life.

3. Planning the Pilot Project: Methods and Techniques

Ugandan charities AViAS and Aliferous Universe Foundation initiated contacts with the school via three preliminary two day projects linked to climate change and water conservation. They introduced the idea of working outside the classroom, collecting evidence of biodiversity, water in the environment and working collaboratively in small teams. Students from Makerere University and representing these charities evaluated the preliminary sessions using a simplified version of Laever's Well-being and Involvement scales (1994) and also noted the lack of arts education in the school, staff shortages, serious mental health challenges and the difficulties of multiple languages..

The *Uganda Mind Frames* pilot project team agreed that the primary aim of the intervention was to offer periods of peace and downtime to traumatised refugee children. The curriculum and pedagogy in their schools needed transformation too: more art, more collaboration, more curriculum integration and more learning beyond the classroom were needed. Because of the range of different languages we chose to use as many near-wordless activities as possible. Our approach was constructed around a simple theory of change applied to teaching and learning. The theory arises from educational neuroscience and psychology evidence collected by Barnes, (2023) claiming that learning is most successful when children are in positive – secure, relaxed, interested, confident, curious and social frames of mind. Learning is also likely to be deeper when relevant to significant personal issues (see Immordino-Yang *et al.*, 2025) The primary role for teachers working with this theory is to construct learning experiences that are positive, emotionally and socially meaningful and transferrable. Our theory rests on three ways to bring about this change:

1. Establishing in schools an ethos based upon the central African philosophy of 'Ubuntu' - the interconnected, inter-dependent nature of humanity (Ngomane, 2019). The inclusive values arising from Ubuntu are likely to generate greater interdependence and belonging for all. (Booth & Ainscow, 2021)
2. Aiming at emotional engagement in learning for all children collaborative, practical and sensory experiences in relevant contexts (Immordino-Yang, *et al.*, 2025). Such contexts might be related to: climate change, preserving and improving natural environments, peace-building, community cohesion, the fair distribution of resources and respecting diversity.
3. Using regular experience of the arts to provoke wider involvement, personal satisfaction and critical thinking and using the inherent opportunities of the arts for personal choice, creative expression, collective and individual reflection and well-being identified in the work of Fancourt & Finn, (2019).

Previous experience linking inclusive values with positive emotion and creativity, (see Barnes & Shirley, 2007; Barnes 2015) appeared to generate many physical indicators of well-being and involvement among children. When children are involved in creative arts activities many observers such as Birrell *et al* (2024) have noted the somatic characteristics highlighted three decades earlier by the 'involvement' research of Laevers (1994): happy smiling faces, spontaneous and expressive actions, relaxed, alert body language, easy interaction with others and the environment, and physical expressions self-confidence.

3.1 Methods

We worked with a class of 48 self-selected children, four teachers and six volunteer assistants. The first day was constructed around children's literal and metaphorical use of view-finder/frames in their school compound. The idea of practically isolating examples of human and natural-world interaction within a simple card viewfinder, container or framework, united four exercises designed to focus attention on values and the world.

Children were given 4 'focus exercises' to complete within the day:

1. photographically capture freeze-framed, dramatic representations of humanitarian values that would guide thinking and action concerning environment, education and community.
2. isolate and carefully observe small aspects of the natural life around the school campus by making detailed drawings of the plant and animal life confined within small card frames
3. visually record on a diagram the location and character of the human and environmental sounds around them, using the limits of their own hearing as a framework.

¹<https://aliferousuniverse.org/>; AViAS <https://www.africanvisualartistsassociates.org/>; www.education4diversity.co.uk

4. construct closed vessels from local clay, based on natural shapes found in the school environment. Short paper statements about their future hopes and present strengths were placed inside to be vapourised during the firing process.

3.1.1 Framed Values

The class began by learning a passing-game song from Ghana. Singing with and about sharing food, children rhythmically passed oranges from person to person as they sang. From there, in Swahili translation, all were encouraged to think about other values that sustained a good community and positive attitudes towards the natural world– highlighting values like: kindness, responsibility, trust, hope, justice, compassion and fairness. These words were written boldly on card frames and children were asked in groups of 5 or 6 to discuss and act out several different freeze-frame embodiments of one of these values in action. Children acted out several different scenes to capture their allocated value and recorded what they looked like in action, but equally important were the values conversations that preceded the photographic images they took and posed for. *What does it look like when people show kindness or trust or gentleness? How can we show responsibility or justice in a still photo? What other ways can we show compassion? What does hope look like in your face?*



During this activity teachers observed that many children related brief stories from their own lives as they performed these values.

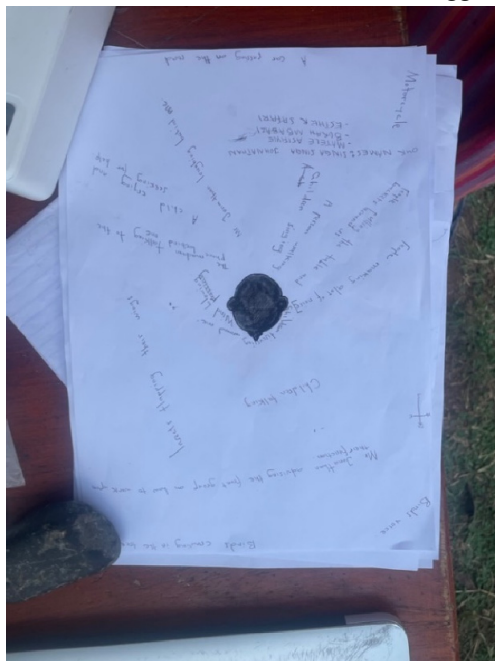
3.1.2 Drawing a Framed Section of the Environment

Every child used the blank side of the same viewfinder to isolate a small detail of nature in the school campus: grasses, plants, flower, root, leaf, fungus, grass, feather, insect, tree trunk, animal, pattern or part of an ant hill. They were asked to place the frame around their chosen spot, observe carefully and draw exactly everything within their frame. Adults circulated to observe, record, praise and focus attention. Children were surprisingly tenacious within this activity - we allowed 20 minutes for drawing, but most drew for over an hour.



3.1.3 Spatialisation, Framing the Sounds Around Us

Children were given paper frame with a bird's-eye view of their head at its centre. In groups they stood in silence for three minutes and listened carefully to the human and natural sounds around them. In discussion they decided on the location, direction, volume, character and closeness of each sound and marked them in symbols or words around the plan of their head. Adults circulated to encourage, help with instructions, offer suitable words or suggest symbols.



3.1.4 Preserving Hope in a Clay Vessel

We wanted children to use the sense of touch by making a clay vessel. They were asked to find a natural 3-dimensional object in the school grounds and make an oversized hollow model of it. Children were taught to make the model by joining two thumb pots to make a ball. The basic form was then shaped and decorated to form an egg, seedcase, insect, bird or branch. Within the hollow form children placed slips of paper on which they had written their personal strength and a personal hope for the future. Discussion of personal hopes was lively and again stories multiplied between them.



3.1.5 Evaluation

During the activities teachers and volunteers were asked to keep careful notes about what they heard children say and how they responded physically and socially. They were asked to list, photograph and record external signs of engagement. Additionally 2 students used a prepared evaluation sheet based on the work of Laevers (1994) to record Well-Being and Involvement for one child in each group of 5. These observations were to be discussed in follow-up sessions on return to the capital city Kampala., and used to inform further planning.

The follow-up sessions took two forms. Using a simple Likert scale, volunteers, teachers and children were asked to judge the degree of success in meeting the aims of the intervention. In Kampala, the charity volunteers held longer discussions on what they had learned and the challenges faced by school and children. These discussions built on the findings from the earlier preliminary visits that noted the lack of an arts curriculum, difficulties with resources and staffing, high teacher pupil ratios, high drop out and absentee rates.

A brief report was constructed to send to the Ministry of Education summarising child and school responses to what was seen by the Permanent Secretary as ‘a novel input’.



3.1.6 Day 2

The second project day led by the *Mind Frames* volunteers was aimed at teachers. Their role was to help teachers plan cross-curriculum follow-up based on the motivating and focussing activities of the previous day. The volunteers presented proposals for a 6 week enrichment module involving approximately 1 hour a day, (see Appendix) to run alongside the normal school timetable. Teaching and learning in language, mathematics, science and social studies during that hour was to be linked to the children’s experiences outside the classroom on day one. Sadly not enough time was allocated to complete this unfamiliar task and teachers agreed to develop their responses at a later staff development session.

3.1.7 Ethics

Working with any children requires serious thinking about ethics. Because most children in the school have fled from

violent and indiscriminating militia groups we needed to be especially careful about permission to use their images. The school acts in *loco parentis* for all refugee children because so many are parentless, but gave permission for children to be photographed so long as we did not indicate names. Images where children's faces were obscured were chosen unless the expressions on faces was an important feature – those children were asked additionally for permission use their photo. Teachers and volunteers were asked not to intervene in children's discussions or their decision-making. Names were obscured from drawings and no names were linked to observation notes. The photograph of the teacher with the 'Hope' frame is used with his permission.

The 8 stories from Alex Ntung, the co-author of this report, are taken from his autobiography *Not My Worst Day* published in 2013.

4. Results

The self-selected nature of the group of 48 children probably explains the high standards of drawing. However it remains true that none of these children had received any art education and their previous lives in constantly threatened villages in eastern Congo would have given little time for private study. Their enthusiasm to be part of the *Mind Frames* project is likely to explain their good behaviour. We do not claim that these attributes were the result of the project, however the following responses from teacher and volunteer notes were collected during follow up discussions and via a series of phone calls and texts. This data was then subjected to a simple thematic analysis searching for common themes and listing the properties of those themes. In summary volunteers noted:

- how choice, personal engagement and practical activity outside the classroom positively affected learning and behaviour.
- how curriculum learning in science and mathematics could be directly related to the fractals, forms and processes observed in the natural environment and how collections, observations and records could be expressed mathematically.
- ways in which the *Mind Frames* activities provoked interest in flora and fauna and their interconnections and how they might be developed within the science and social studies curriculum through focus on: pollination, reproduction, food chains, symbiosis, interdependence, environmental protection, sustainability, water, positive human impact and addressing climate change.
- examples of how language learning could be linked to real and storied experiences beyond the text book and to the lives of the children.
- ways in which children trained in the pilot project could lead the learning of those who had not participated.
- the importance of pedagogical qualities demonstrated during day 1: choice, personal relevance, teacher enthusiasm, supportive and formative feedback and clear boundaries.
- how the core values of the *Mind Frames* project could be applied more widely to school curriculum, pedagogy and ethos.

In their field notes teachers also documented what they called 'significant improvements,' in arts skills and language (both Swahili and English) when back in class. Although this undoubtedly overstates the case and was probably meant as a complement to the team, the teachers did note subsequent improvements in attendance and application, possibly as a result of choice and the highly practical, creative nature of the activities interactions. Their research notes unexpectedly evidenced many indicators of *adult* well-being noted by Ryff (1989) and Ryff & Keyes, (1995) in the behaviour of volunteers and teachers.

Two focus group sessions were organised after the Rwamwanja intervention. They showed strong agreement that the project had been successful in communicating its aims. The achievement of a period of downtime for the many traumatised children was unanimously agreed. Teachers and volunteers reported the claims for child well-being were clearly demonstrated in the peaceful, social and sustained involvement of almost every participating child. In discussion teachers commented on the calm, security and curiosity displayed by their children – positive emotions that Fredrickson (2011) suggests frequently result in broadened perceptions, thoughts and relationships and a greater propensity to reach-out in trust, creativity and hope. Several teachers commented that they saw no child misbehaving despite there being little direct adult control.

Inclusive values like community, respect, participation and trust impacted visibly on attitudes, relationships and outcomes especially in the group work. Added to the group representations of compassion, justice, friendship and courage children witnessed models of almost all of the inclusive values itemised by Booth and Ainscow (2021). Placing the value of *sharing* at the centre of the first whole group interaction established a theme for the whole day. Alex's *Story 6* illustrates the enduring influence of values truly lived.

Story 6: Lived values

In mid-1994, the Congolese government deported people from my ethnic group to Rwanda because we were Tutsi. When I arrived in Kigali, (Rwanda's capital) it was just days after the genocide had ended, there were bodies everywhere. I was welcomed by a man named Kayitare and his wife, Maman Subiru, members of a different ethnic community, who invited me to their home. On entering their house I found that it was overcrowded with orphaned children and wounded youngsters. I learned that only a short time earlier, two of Kayitare's sisters, one of his brothers, and his brother's wife had been killed, but Kayitare and his wife opened their home to all of us and treated us as members of his family, assuming responsibility for our wellbeing. My experience with this family represented the philosophy of Ubuntu¹ in practice: a profound expression of shared humanity, compassion, dignity, and collective responsibility. I have never forgotten their kindness.

4.1 Signs of Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement was well demonstrated in the body language of the children. The physical signs of involvement described by Laevers (1994) were clear: forward leaning bodies, smiling, bright-eyes, ease with physical closeness, a reluctance to stop activities, inclusive gestures, relaxed bodies and faces. The importance of emotional connection highlighted by educational neuroscientists like Damasio (2003) and Immordino-Yang (2016; 2025), are argued to be fundamental to deep, long-term learning. Such features were independently noted by observing teachers who had had little experience of learning beyond the classroom. Their surprise at the positive impact of fieldwork in the school grounds was fully confirmed in day 2 discussions. The reluctance of many children to leave the campus after the session was perhaps another sign that they had felt fully involved.

The planning team emphasised the importance of personal choice, creative expression and opportunities for personal and group reflection, but noted that the expectations of each activity were very precise and quickly understood. The concept of 'structured freedom' expanded upon by Wyse & Manyukhina (2025) perfectly describes what the Rwamwanja teachers observed and concluded during the project. The following themes emerged from a detailed analysis of written and recorded feedback after two days of the project:

- *Tenacity* – children engaged in drawing, play-acting, listening exercises and pottery for significantly longer than teacher expectation.
- *Flow* – a very high percentage (several teachers estimated 80%) of children appeared to enter what psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (2002), called 'flow' - a mental state of complete absorption and enjoyment of an activity where one is fully immersed and focussed, losing track of time and self-consciousness.
- *High standards of product* – teachers remarked on the high quality and accuracy of children's drawing and also the maturity of their thinking when involved in the values exercise.



- *Ease with interpreting and using English and Swahili* – though neither English nor Swahili was any child’s mother tongue, children quickly understood through gesture and facial expression, instructions in English and summaries by the school’s Swahili teacher. The exercises were practical and social and expectations were simple, perhaps consequently few children showed problems with understanding
- *Creativity* – there were as many drawing styles as there were children. No preferred style was communicated; each child drew in the way that satisfied them. Sustained attention on drawing produced high standards. Deep engagement and awareness of the quality of their own work further stimulated creative elaborations and developments in drawing. Many teachers remarked on the creativity of representations of values in the drama/freeze-frame exercise.
- *Reflection* – reflective conversations were common and appeared easy during the group activities. Staff and volunteers also remarked that the widespread quiet, self-controlled behaviour, calm expressions and relaxed body language could be an indication of inner reflection.
- *Relevance* –short term personal relevance generated during the focus exercises may have been evidenced by children’s highly involved body language and interpersonal interactions already documented. Feelings of relevance often come after an opportunity for reflection as illustrated by *Story 7* below:

Story 7: Enduring interests

During my early years, as a cattle-herding boy I was introduced, through storytelling, to the Central and Southern African philosophy of Ubuntu – the interconnected and inter dependent nature of humanity. At my grandmother’s house, we were reminded as children that all human beings are interconnected; every action we take has implications for those around us, and our personal identities are shaped by the past and present lives of others. Through these philosophical teachings, we learned about our shared human journey, common values, equality in social relations, interdependence, and the equal worth of all skills and talents, with poetry regarded as especially valued because of its role in preserving oral traditions and value-based narratives.

When I arrived in Switzerland as a refugee I quickly sought out cattle farms. I felt a sense of connection not only with the herders, but also with the cattle themselves, as though I recognised their behaviour and individual personalities. I could often distinguish which animals appeared calm, content, or distressed. I found it fascinating that these Swiss cows did not perceive me as a foreigner. The sounds and expressions I used to communicate with them were those I had used with my own cows in the DRC.



5. Discussion

We have suggested elsewhere, that inclusive values can shape attitudes to the natural environments in which we live as well as the people we live with (Ntung & Barnes, 2016). The stories of hope engendered by thinking about lived values may have helped sustain the interest and commitment of children observers remarked on, but we are keenly aware that a two day project mounted by the volunteers is unlikely to generate long-term and sustainable change in teaching styles and curriculum planning. A much longer period of intervention and more staff training are needed to test the wider effectiveness of the approaches we rehearsed.

Our short period of values and arts-based intervention did however raise many valuable learning points for teachers and schools. We observed how understanding of values emerges in what Pinker (2002) calls the ‘unique environment’ within which each child negotiates the world. We witnessed the ways in which emotional contact underpins and sustains learning described by Immordino-Yang & Damasio, (2007) and extended by Gotlieb, Yang & Immordino-Yang, (2022). We regularly saw the way that inanimate things that surround us can link to a unique memory, as Damasio (2003) described and that these memories may act as personal relevance-makers. This small group of children corroborated Wyse *et al*’s (2025) claims that giving them agency within a strong structure raises standards, but also provided a background against which unexpected stories of hope emerged. Experience outside the classroom was probably the catalyst for these learnings.

The degree to which short-term relevance could promote deeper, critical, long term learning should of course, be assessed through research. We plan later this year to gather evidence of any longer term impact of the *Mind Frames* approach by using the PhotoVoice approach (Wang & Burris, 1997) based on data arising from child-led conversations around photos of their involvement.

As experienced teachers we know that personally told or collaboratively acted stories can become significant starting points for learning. This values-centred, child-led but structured outdoor project in a highly challenging environment with children carrying heavy burdens, suggested a human universal in the power of stories to build hope. If storying values and applying them to the natural environment and each other, generated a brief period of calm, involvement and satisfaction, then perhaps we should use stories much more often

- A story of kindness might link to work on environmental conservation - how we could show more kindness to the natural world around us.
- A story of fairness could result in a series of mathematical exercises about fair distribution of resources or the importance of fair tests in science
- A story of involving a flower or leaf can be developed into a study of fractals in nature or the *Fibonacci* series
- A story of justice could easily relate to a civics theme on justly responding to genocide in Albania, Germany South Africa, Rwanda, Myanmar or Congo
- A story of non-violence could lead to a historical study on the impact of Ghandi or Martin Luther King and the causes and solutions of conflict
- A story of compassion for animals might link with a science module on the ‘web of life’ on which humanity and nature depends
- A story of love can be re-expressed in music or dance or drama
- A story of community related to *Ubuntu* philosophy, team sports or community action in civics or social studies

6. Conclusion

Watching these new Uganda citizens, flourish and become enabled by education suggested that Uganda’s liberal policy toward refugees could release a new and enthusiastic potential for social and economic growth. We are encouraged to go further. We plan a series of staff development sessions in the project schools and to trial longer periods of the approach initiated in Rwamwanja in schools hosting refugees across the country. We are training more volunteers to research the impact of the project.

We are aware of the limitations of this venture and of the dangers of over-claiming the effects of our work. Only prolonged and rigorous research can substantiate the successes we imagine we have experienced. We do know however that the commitment and enthusiasm of the children of Rwamwanja inspired us to ask deeper and wider questions

Story 8: Stories in traditional cultures

My life as cattle herder, genocide survivor, asylum seeker, refugee, traveller, husband, father, teacher and researcher has taught me that diversity is not only what distinguishes individuals, but also what brings them together. There is diversity both within us and between us. Physical traits alone do not define who we are; we are also part of a broader human collective bound by shared and storied experiences and aspirations.

My stories have told me it is more important to promote and celebrate our commonalities than dwell on our differences. We should avoid placing people into rigid categories so that we may live together more responsibly and inclusively. We must recognise the diversity that exists within and between all human beings and establish secure and open learning communities that value different ways of understanding. Traditional stories and poetic utterances have helped me recognise that difference is fundamental to human creativity and development. In my childhood stories helped provide me with the humanity, resilience, and collaborative skills needed to face a challenging future. From my earliest days I was taught through stories the qualities that unite humanity: emotion, collaboration, imagination, positivity, and broad understandings of intelligence.

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Author contributions

Dr. Jonathan Barnes was responsible for study design, interpretation and revisions. Illustrations were provided by AViAS and data was collected by volunteers from both Aliferous and AViAS. Dr Alex Ntung provided the illustrative stories and advice on Ubuntu and the values focus of the work with children and teachers. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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