Development and Psychopathology **29** (2017), 69–70

doi:10.1017/S0954579416001140

Commentary on Aber et al.

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Aber et al.'s study of "Learning to Read in a Healing Classroom," a school-based universal education program in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), comes at a time when the need for practical, rigorous research about how to provide quality education for children in conflict-affected countries has never been more urgent. The number of displaced people around the world is 65.3 million—the highest number ever recorded (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016). In addition, there are 62.5 million out of school children living in 32 conflict-affected countries (UNESCO Institute for Statistics & UNESCO, 2016). Most of these children will never set foot in a classroom; and, even among those who do attend school, 250 million will complete fifth grade without basic literacy and numeracy skills (UNESCO, 2014).

The eastern regions of the DRC have experienced recurring conflict for nearly two decades. An estimated 4.4 million children are out of school, and half of all children who do attend will drop out before graduating. As the authors note, when the government of the DRC, the International Rescue Committee, and partners launched the USAID-funded Opportunities for Equitable Access to Quality Basic Education project in 2011, 91% of primary school children in Grades 2–4 could not correctly respond to one reading comprehension question, 68% were unable to read a single word of a simple text, and most children reported being late or absent from school (Aber, Torrente, Annan, Bundervoet, & Shivshanker, 2012).

Aber et al.'s research provides an important contribution to understanding how to reach children with quality education in one of the most challenging educational landscapes in the world. It offers policymakers and practitioners insights into the particular pathways to change children's academic skills and social–emotional functioning and is a compelling example of examining not only the distal outcomes of a program but also the contextual distinctions and proximal processes that will help us best understand what works, how, and why.

Understanding the Pathways to Change

The study's results, showing positive impact on some outcomes (children's reading and math scores and perceptions of how caring and supportive schools and teachers are); no change in other outcomes (mental health and victimization); and negative impact on other outcomes (perceptions of predictable and cooperative school environments) are important and useful for us as practitioners. This program model is being implemented in 15 countries, and observing its impact in DRC provides a foundation to build from and test elsewhere. The research presented in the monograph extends these findings and provides new insights into the pathways of change directing us to *how* these outcomes may have transpired. Understanding these pathways is essential for policymakers and practitioners: if we understand not only that the program had an impact but also which processes, in this case, children's perceptions of their school environment as caring and supportive or predictable and cooperative, may have been the reason for those impacts, we can more squarely focus our intervention on those processes.

Future research and investments should allow for an even more complete study of implementation processes. Specifically, the study here helped us zero in on the following processes requiring additional exploration:

- the frequency and quality of teachers participation in Teacher Learning Circles;
- teachers' classroom practices and behaviors and how these are delivered differently to different children, such as low performers and extremely poor children; and
- teachers' own social–emotional well-being and experiences of violence and displacement.

Understanding these processes better and how they are connected to child outcomes would give us an even better picture of how and why the program had an impact. The study is unique in its focus in terms of social–emotional outcomes such as students' perceptions of their school environment, victimization, and mental health. These outcomes are rarely integrated into reading- and math-focused programs; and despite being very relevant for conflict-affected children, little is known about how they relate to academic outcomes in these contexts. We also need to understand these constructs better. Research into children's own definitions of constructs such as victimization would provide a deeper understanding of their experiences and how those experiences connect to distal

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outcomes. For example, a child in the DRC may consider it more "victimizing" to be labeled a particular ethnic group than to be called "a bad name." In other words, discerning the qualities that children themselves associate with a concept like victimization enhances the validity of the measure and provides a more complete picture of the experiences to be analyzed.

Conclusions

As practitioners, we attempt to balance our humanitarian commitment to act immediately with a commitment to learning through rigorous study to improve our actions in the future. Aber et al.'s article provides a critical first contribution to experimentally test a school-based program aimed to promote both social–emotional and academic outcomes in a conflict-affected setting. It shows promise that improving the caring and supportive environment for children helps to improve their learning. The study is valuable not only for its results but also for its call to action for more evidence in conflict-affected settings, where there is disproportionate need and a significant evidence gap. A substantial investment is needed to test interventions to find the most effective pathways for improving both academic and social–emotional well-being, given their influence on later life outcomes. More studies like this one are needed. To optimize learning that can be applied in meaningful ways, it is critical that studies move beyond a sole focus on outcomes to also examine the pathways and mechanisms that lead to change; implementation factors and costs for achieving outcomes; and contextual factors that affect both implementation and measurement.

Of course, we know from other settings that improved evidence is only one piece of the change that is needed. It provides answers about what we should do but does not get it done. To make real strides in improving the learning outcomes and social–emotional well-being of the hundreds of millions of children living in conflict settings, we also need political will, leadership, and financial investment in the policies and programs that have rigorous research underpinning them.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579416001140 Published online by Cambridge University Press