What Works in Education in Emergencies: Co-Researching and Co-Authoring

Staci B. Martin
Portland State University, mar24@pdx.edu

Vestine L. Umubyeyi
Kakuma Refugee Camp

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.
Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/socwork_fac
Part of the Social Work Commons, and the Special Education and Teaching Commons
Introduction

When applying a community-based action approach, research not only needs to include participants in the research process, but also in the writing, presenting, and authorship of the research (Martin, 2018; Martin et al., 2018). The purpose of this paper is to explore how community-based action research that includes co-researching, co-authoring, and co-presenting with vulnerable communities deepens our understanding of ‘what works’ in education in emergencies (EiE).

A community-based action is an approach where the community identifies a problem, the research is designed around that problem, and the community uses the research to decide and inform them on the steps to take to resolve the problem (Martin, 2018; Openjuru, Jaitli, Tandon & Hall, 2015; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Co-researching supports individuals in their self-determination, agency and creates space for them to speak for themselves, something that is often missing in research. Our hope is that by researching and writing together—i.e. Staci Martin as the researcher and Vestine Lajustine as the participant co-researcher—we are co-creating spaces in which participants have choices and contribute their voice and solutions to complex problems that impact them.

Methodology

Figure 1: PPBE Course Cycle
Our initial partnership started when Staci implemented her Psychosocial Peace-Building Educational (PPBE) course in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya. The course tested a proof of concept in three other countries (e.g. South Africa, Jamaica, and Nepal). The PPBE course trains teachers, youth, and community members to facilitate conversations based on a collaborative inquiry that strengthens critical thinking, cultural identity, voice, and the vision of the community. The core elements of the course include 1) book-making/journaling; 2) creating an artifact; 3) story-making/story-telling; and 4) co-creating solutions (Martin, 2018; see Figure 1). Vestine was a co-facilitator of Staci’s course and then became one of the co-researchers.

For this paper, we worked in an iterative manner, corresponding back and forth while asking critical questions of each other to deepen our exchange. As our exchange deepened, so did our understanding of what it means to co-research and the ramifications and possibilities of our work together.

Results
We share our experiences and research process in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya so that we can offer a co-researching perspective. We will discuss what we learned and how the process changed how we saw ourselves. Since Vestine’s voice is key, she leads with Kinyarwanda (not edited) to bring her language to the forefront and then provides her own summary in English. Staci follows with an explanation of the research that supports Vestine’s insights.

Co-Researching: Vestine’s Perspective


Summary in English: First when I was asked to co-research, I was hesitant because the kind of researchers that come to Kakuma are people that come and go. They don’t offer feedback or tell you the impact of their research. It disappointed me. I was not sure if I was going to participate in any more research for fear I was wasting my time again. I decided to join the first meeting to see what was going to happen. Unlike the other researchers, Staci was friendly and accessible. I remember the first meeting, we were having so much fun that we forgot about lunch. The most exciting part was when Staci asked for volunteers who were willing and wanted to continue to implement the course and co-research with her in our communities. I felt happy because I could see the benefit of that kind of research through our story sharing.

Co-Researching: Staci’s Perspective

Most researchers research on and not with community members. As researchers, we come temporarily and stay for moments in refugees’ lives as we collect our data. Research fatigue can settle in as refugees are literally a captive, over-researched audience. Sukarieh and Tannock (2013) explain, “research may be seen as benefiting the lives and careers of researchers, but leaving the lives of those being researched unimproved in any significant way, regardless of the time, energy and resources they have contributed to the research effort” (p. 4). In other words, participants receive little acknowledgement of the work they have supported and their voices are often muted in the academic language that talks about them. This is not just an issue in refugee camps; it applies to underserved, undervalued, and vulnerable populations across the research spectrum.

Too often in academic research vulnerable communities, in particular refugees, do not see themselves as creators of research, rather they see themselves as research subjects (Martin, 2018). In the past decade, participatory methodologies have gained momentum in research (Bergold & Thomas, 2012), particularly in the humanitarian field (Ager, Stark, Sparling & Ager, 2011). However, how much a community or individual actually participate in the research is unknown unless the researcher explicitly notes it.

Vestine’s Knowledge and Expertise


Ubwo nongeraga kobona amahirwe yo gukora na Staci, twakoresheje uburwo bwo guhagarama imbonankubone na Skype. Natunguwe no kobona ko nabasha Guha amahugurwa abantu bantine ubumenyi buruta ubwanjye. Gukorana ubushakashatsi byamfunguye mu mutwe ku rundi rwego.

**Summary in English:** I learned why research is important. When we conducted the psychosocial peacebuilding education trainings, we got to identify the groups we wanted to work with. I wanted to work with the mamas. Then, we implemented the course and made notes about what we heard and learned. I learned that giving participants the space to ask questions and support each other offered a place to hope together. I observed that these communities began to see themselves as capable to change their situation, instead of waiting for an outside person or organization, these communities could offer their own solutions. I could see the benefit in their faces.

Co-researching increased my self-confidence because I did something valuable for my community. Whenever I saw researchers, I always thought that they are the only ones meant to do research because they studied for that. I never thought that I can also contribute by doing research. I thought my contribution was always limited to giving the information. I didn’t think this could happen actually being a co-researcher with someone in universities from the U.S. and being in Kakuma Refugee Camp. I thought this is something that I was not able to do.

When I got another chance to work with Staci in a workshop, we used Skype video call and I was surprised to realize that I could do a presentation to people who have a higher education than I do. Co-researching opened my mind to another level.

**Staci’s Knowledge and Expertise**

When doing participatory methodologies, it is essential that researchers communicate their expectations and intentions from the outset. As researchers, we may not be able to control the restricted situation, but we can work alongside and learn from the impacted communities. Often our research can leave participants feeling used by the researcher. Abdi, a co-researcher, explained the sentiment this way,

> You know I have met 26 researchers in my 27 years of life. You are my 26th. You did your research with us. You said you would return to write a paper with us. You returned. All the researchers, I have met want something from me, translation, interpretation, and/or connection to my community (Abdi, personal communication, 9 June 2017).

Co-authoring papers and co-presenting at conferences offer space for co-researchers to talk with the people in the field that is often talking about them. Writing papers together also offers time to question the researcher’s complicity in maintaining the status quo and to do something about it.

There are limitations in co-researching as the co-researchers may not appear objective or have expertise. However, their opinion, positionality, and lived experiences may offer a clearer cultural context and a more realistic representation of what works in their community than an outside observer, like myself, who only lived in the community temporarily. For example, some participants often go to particular community leaders, rather than non-governmental organizations (NGOs), when there is a shortage of food or goods.

**Shared Knowledge, Responsibility, and Hope in Kakuma Refugee Camp**


**Summary in English:** When we got to implement the program in our community, I think it changed how our community saw us. Another co-researcher used to be seen as a “volunteer” interpreter and translator but when he facilitated the course, they saw him as a teacher and leader.

I used to keep to myself, my church, and my community. As I had a chance to facilitate the course, I got to know more people outside of my community. Before, I thought it was not safe to engage with people that I did not know or those who could not speak my language. After this experience, I learned that I can communicate and have meaningful dialogues regardless of language or culture.

**Shared Knowledge, Responsibility, and Hope Globally**

Community-based action research that includes co-researching, co-authoring, and co-presenting with vulnerable communities not only values the participants’ lived experiences and expertise, but it can also support our understanding of ‘what works’ in EIE. With technology such as Skype and audio and video recordings, we are able to co-create spaces for all of our
voices to be heard and engage in empathic actions that produce shared knowledge and solutions, which in turn strengthen academic papers (Martin, et al., 2018) and conferences (Martin & Teferra, 2017; Martin & Umubyeyi, 2018; Martin & Teferra, 2018).

References


Endnotes

1. Permission was given to use this quotation and to be named.