

Generating evidence for adolescent girls' programming: Using formative research to adapt a proven program

Researchers: Esau Tugume, Jenna Grzeslo, & Mander Dorcas Agatha

Location: Uganda - Mubende and Mityana Districts

Introduction

BRAC's Empowerment and Livelihoods for Adolescents (ELA) program was launched in Uganda in 2006. ELA engages adolescent girls and young women (AGYW), many of whom are out of school, through life skills, livelihood training and mentorship. Through the creation of safe spaces, AGYW come together with a near-peer mentor to receive training on topics such as sexual and reproductive health, trust-building, and saving and investing, to name a few.

Evidence generated through rigorous randomized control trials (RCTs) shows that ELA works. The 2008-2012 ELA RCT conducted in Uganda identified village-wide gains for both ELA club participants and non-participants. Positive impacts of the program

include a drop in teen pregnancy (34% village-wide) and an increase in income-generating activities (48% village-wide).¹ These findings suggest that the presence of an ELA club can have transformative effects on the girls in that community, even if they are not enrolled in the club.

Although ELA has been studied through several impact evaluations in various contexts, the ELA content has since been updated and the program's strategy has been revamped. Now, BRAC is looking at new pathways to scale the program, such as through technical advisory services. Recently, BRAC was presented with an opportunity to explore the potential to adapt the ELA program to an after-school setting in Uganda, with the ambitious goal of eventually scaling through the school system.

¹Bandiera, O., Buehren, N., Burgess, R., Goldstein, M., Selim Gulesci, S., Rasul, I., & Sulaiman, M. (2020). Women's Empowerment in Action: Evidence from a randomized control trial in Africa. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 12(1), 210-259. <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20170416>

Background

The Ugandan education system includes seven years of primary school and six years of secondary, with four years of lower secondary (S1 - S4) and two years of upper secondary (S5 - S6) education. According to the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (2018), the education gap between boys and girls widens between primary and secondary school, with a greater share of school-aged boys enrolled in secondary school. Only about 20% of adolescent girls and boys attend secondary school.² While there are barriers to education that are shared by both girls and boys, girls experience additional barriers such as a lack of safe spaces, inadequate sports programs, and inadequate menstrual hygiene resources, to

name a few.³ Programs that provide mentoring can help keep girls in school.⁴

Since ELA is traditionally a community-based program, BRAC needed to learn more about working in Ugandan schools in order to pursue this adaptation of ELA. To that end, extensive desk research, programmatic consultations, and formative research were conducted. Many questions drove the research design including: Do the Ministry of Education and Sport (MoES), schools, and teachers support this model? What programmatic changes are needed to adapt the program to an after-school setting? Would teachers be willing to serve as mentors? If so, how does working with teacher-mentors differ from near-peer mentors?

²Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) and ICF DHS Program. (2018). *Uganda Demographic and Health Survey*. <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR333/FR333.pdf>

³Psaki, S., Haberland, N., Kozak, M., and Woyczynski, L. (2021). *Girls' Education Roadmap: 2021 Report*. EGER. https://egeresource.org/documents/4/Girls_Education_Roadmap_2021_Report.pdf

⁴Plourde, K. F., Ippoliti, N.B., Nanda, G., & McCarraher, D.R. (2017). *Mentoring interventions and the impact of protective assets on the reproductive health of adolescent girls and young women*. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 61(2), 131-139. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.03.002>

ELA in Uganda



48%

increase in likelihood to engage in income-generating activities



62%

decrease in early entry into marriage or cohabitation



34%

reduction in teen pregnancy rates



1/3

decline in the share of girls reporting sex against their will

Study design

In order to understand the context and to identify practical considerations for adapting the ELA program to an after-school setting, the Independent Evaluation and Research Cell in collaboration with BRAC Uganda conducted formative research using a qualitative approach. Interviews were conducted with teachers, headmasters, and NGO experts. In addition, focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with girls and parents in the Mubende and Mityana districts of Uganda. Purposive sampling was utilized, relying on key criteria for participants. Recruitment strategies varied by population. We recruited participants using a variety of methods, including leveraging relationships made by other BRAC programs, developing connections with school districts, and utilizing snowball sampling. In total, 184 individuals were interviewed. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with teachers and headteachers, key informant interview guides for youth development and education experts, and FGDs for girls and parents respectively. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and data were managed and analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

Findings and discussion

Using a combination of open and closed coding, themes emerged through a thematic analysis of the data. Below we present three key themes and their relevance to BRAC's program development.

Teacher training and support

Throughout the formative stage, whether through consultations with BRAC staff or through formal interviews, support for the program from the MoES, district officials, and teachers has shown to be strong, provided the organization can work within the mandates set by the Ministry. Interviews with teachers and head teachers revealed that they are generally enthusiastic about the potential to include a program like this in their schools as they saw an immediate need to engage youth as soon as they returned from the COVID-19 lockdown. With that said, we saw that teachers may face challenges leading an after-school program. Though these challenges are not insurmountable, the program will need to make an intentional effort to overcome them. Teachers face a variety of daily challenges that are well-documented in the literature, including

Table 1: Summary of Data Collected

Population	Methodology	Sample size	Description of sample
Teachers	Semi-structured interviews	40	20 interviews with teachers in Mubende 20 interviews with teachers in Mityana
Head teachers	Semi-structured interviews	20	10 interviews with headmasters in Mubende 10 interviews with headmasters in Mityana
NGO experts	Key informant interviews	10	Individuals with experience implementing and/or studying youth empowerment programs
Girls	Focus group discussions	51	2 focus groups with girls in S1 - S3 6 focus groups with girls in S5
Parents and community members	Focus group discussions	60	4 focus group discussions with parents & community members in Mubende 4 focus group discussions with parents & community members in Mityana
MoES	Key informant interviews	3	3 key informant interviews with representatives from the MoES

large class sizes, lack of resources, busy school days with little time to rest, and inconsistent pay schedules.⁵ Through semi-structured interviews with teachers and headteachers in Mubende and Mityana, we sought to better understand what a typical workday is like for a teacher and what additional challenges they may face if also tasked to lead an after-school program. The challenges may include the availability of time, given their already demanding schedules, and transportation home from the clubs after their duties are completed. The latter may entail an additional protection risk for female teachers. Concern was raised, even during the interviews with the MoES, that teachers often work at more than one school, juggling multiple commitments.

Safe spaces in schools

A key component of ELA is creating safe spaces for girls where they can gather, engage in discussions, and socialize. Research suggests that violence in schools perpetrated by school staff is widespread.⁶ Among teachers

in Uganda, experiencing violence is associated with using violence against students, which suggests that violence is a cycle of abuse.⁷ Interviews and FGDs revealed that creating safe spaces in schools will be a challenge. Even teacher respondents indicated that some teachers create an unsafe environment for students. While this finding was not surprising, it was valuable to gauge insights from teachers, parents, and girls themselves into how to make schools safer places for youth.

Engaging adolescent boys and young men

Various stakeholders suggested that BRAC should also engage adolescent boys and young men (ABYM). Moreover, there is emerging evidence that suggests that engaging boys can have positive effects on girls. Shah and Seager conducted an RCT in Tanzania that layered additional interventions onto the core ELA platform (namely, goal-setting exercises for girls and an educational program targeting their boyfriends) and found that both resulted in a reduction in intimate partner violence.⁸

⁵ Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sport & UNESCO IIEP Dakar Africa Office. (2014). *Teacher Issues in Uganda: A shared vision for an effective teachers policy*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000229777>

⁶ Devries, K. M., Child, J. C., Allen, E., Walakira, E., Parkes, J., & Naker, D. (2014). School violence, mental health, and educational performance in Uganda. *Pediatrics*, 133(1), e129–e137. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2013-2007>

⁷ Merrill, K.G., Knight, L., Glynn, J.R., Allen, E., Naker, D., Devries, K. (2017). School staff perpetration of physical violence against students in Uganda: a multilevel analysis of risk factors. *BMJ Open*, 7(8), e015567. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2016-015567>

⁸ Shah, M. & Seager, J. (2021). *Goal-setting and including males: Improving sexual and reproductive health for female adolescents and young men*. UCLA Luskin Global Lab for Research in Action. <https://global-lab.luskin.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2021/02/Tanzania-Research-Brief-1.pdf>



Girls in an ELA club in Uganda play games and socialize.

Mobilizing findings and implications

The findings from the formative research were used to inform a prototype of the ELA in Schools (or ELAS) program in eight schools in Mubende and Mityana, which is being implemented from April to October 2021. Noting the findings from the research, BRAC has created feedback loops for teachers to record programmatic updates and request support, integrated

trainings with school administrators to work towards making schools more inclusive and safer spaces for youth, and set up boys clubs in six of the eight schools in the prototype. Research findings were thereby mobilized to inform an evolving program. Extensive research is being conducted on the ELAS prototype, and the findings will be published in early 2022.

Esau Tugume is a Research Associate at the Independent Evaluation and Research Cell (Kampala, Uganda), Jenna Grzeslo is the Program Manager, Research and Learning, at BRAC USA (New York, USA), and Mandera Dorcas Agatha is a Field Supervisor at the Independent Evaluation and Research Cell (Kampala, Uganda).

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A mentor with a member of an ELA club in Uganda.