

To: Graham Pike, Dean, International Education  
From: Caroline Burnley, Director, Resilience Research Lab  
Re: Report (Travel and Study Abroad Grant issued Nov 2011)  
Title: Understanding resilience in AIDS orphans and their caregiver grandmothers in rural Uganda

In February and March 2012, I worked in Nyakagyezi, Uganda with the Nyaka AIDS Orphans Project. Nyaka has provided two schools in rural Uganda for children who have been orphaned due to AIDS, supports their caregivers and the local communities as well. The goal of my work was twofold: the first was to build upon my understanding of the contextual nature of resilience by investigating how children, who have been orphaned due to AIDS, and their grandmothers are managing not only to survive but to thrive under conditions of poverty and stigma. The second goal of my work, which was at the request of the Nyaka organization, was to assist in developing recommendations on the current needs of these grandmothers and their families.

Prior to my arrival in Nyakagyezi, I received ethical approval from the VIU REB to conduct a series of interviews, using a standardized protocol, with the caregivers. The Nyaka organization arranged for me to interview grandmothers who were interested in volunteering to speak with me. I partnered with a community nurse and a local teacher to ease the process of contact and provide translation services during the interview as many of the grandmothers did not speak English and I did not speak Lugandan. Upon completion of the meetings, the interviews were transcribed and a content analysis of the data was conducted. This analysis led to identification of a number of consistent, key themes from the interviews which identified the supports the caregivers and the children were receiving and the current needs which were not being met. These themes are being synthesized in a report with information gleaned from discussions with various members of the community (teachers, farmers, storekeepers) as well as discussions with grandmothers from a grandmother group. This report will be submitted to the Nyaka organization, VIU and other organizations that have interests in supporting these children and their caregivers.

Two key recommendations are currently being pursued. One has to do with a basic need of the grandmothers themselves. The main source of food for these families comes from their own gardens or local community gardens. While this self-sufficiency is an important part of their survival and is to be commended, many of these grandmothers are becoming physically weaker because of aging bodies and age-related health issues. Their families depend upon them to sow, hoe and harvest and the physical labour of subsistence farming is becoming more and more difficult for these grandmothers. As the Nyaka organization and the Stephen Lewis Foundation do support the grandmothers in various ways, one of the proposals, currently being investigated, involves hiring local young people (which would help to alleviate some of the high rates of unemployment in the community) to assist the grandmothers with their farming responsibilities. These women are very proud and hardworking. When this idea was discussed with the grandmothers, they said they would agree to such an arrangement only if they could contribute by preparing a lunch or dinner for the worker. This would be beneficial for the grandmothers, their families and the wider community as well.

Another recommendation was based on a discussions with the grandmothers and the local community nurse. AIDS has devastated this community. Over half the population is under the age

of 16 and many of those children have lost one or both parents to AIDS. As most in this community are just trying to survive, there is very little assistance beyond support for basic physical needs (food, clothing and in some cases shelter) which comes from various non-profit organizations, including Nyaka. However one clear need that was identified is support for psychological needs, such as dealing with the loss of a child, parent or sibling. Beyond a formal recognition of their loss and emotional support during a church service, there is very little else that occurs after the death. The community nurse has identified that both the children and the grandmothers would benefit from grief counseling. We have recommended that the organization look into sending one of the community nurses to receive grief counseling training and then that nurse might also be able to share some of that knowledge with local teachers willing to take on that role as well. We are currently exploring the possibility of one of Nanaimo's local organizations assisting with this recommendation.

When we hear of AIDS in Africa, the numbers overwhelm us; it seems like an insurmountable problem. However, partnering with organizations, such as the Nyaka AIDS orphans project, the Stephen Lewis Foundation and local community groups, helps us to gain an understanding into how small actions can help communities affected by AIDS. Coming back with stories of strength and resilience will assist in showing these are not just statistics but real people who are living with the AIDS crisis and we have a role to play in helping these communities affected by AIDS. A 2010 meeting of over 500 grandmothers (in Swaziland), led to a call for "more training in critical areas such as home-based care, HIV/AIDS education, on parenting orphaned children and adolescents, health care, literacy and financial management" (Manzini Statement, 2010). The recommendations of this research are based on direct feedback from the grandmothers and others that live and work in a community heavily affected by AIDS and reflect the issues identified in the Manzini statement. There are many people, at VIU, who are knowledgeable in these critical areas and I think international experiences, such as the one described above, will encourage them to see that there are many places around the world that could use their skills.

Beyond using our skills, we also have opportunities to grow both professionally and personally when we conduct research and work in different cultures. As director of the Resilience Research Lab, I have had opportunities to broaden my understanding of the cultural and contextual understanding of resilience by studying resilience in different populations. Conducting research always presents its own sets of challenges. Conducting research in a different culture or country adds to those research challenges. Living and working in a rural environment without many amenities we take for granted (e.g. running water and electricity), being a very visible minority, primarily communicating via a translator, learning cultural meanings of nonverbal communication, asking the community to identify the problems and working with them to develop solutions (rather than making assumptions about their problems), and understanding development, resilience and grief within a cultural context were all challenges that provided great learning opportunities. Those challenges and the lessons learned will inform my teaching especially in my research methods courses, social psychology courses, and in my research lab. In addition, working with people from other disciplines (nursing and education) reinforced my commitment to find interdisciplinary solutions to simple and complex issues.