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To cite this article: Jennifer Sewall, Julie A. Tippens, Helen M. Miamidian & Dulo Nyaoro (2021) Social and Structural Determinants of Urban Refugee Education in a Kenyan Context, Africa Education Review, 18:3-4, 142-163, DOI: [10.1080/18146627.2022.2151925](https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2022.2151925)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2022.2151925>



Published online: 16 Dec 2022.



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Social and Structural Determinants of Urban Refugee Education in a Kenyan Context

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Abstract

Urban refugees' educational access and achievement is shaped by structural and social factors at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. We draw on data from structured questionnaires, focus group discussions, and brief interviews in Nairobi, Kenya with refugee learners, caregivers, schoolteachers and administrators, and nongovernmental organisation (NGO) staff who work in refugee education to identify factors related to "learning out-of-place." Determinants of education for refugees included structural and systems-level factors (e.g., national refugee-hosting policies, education system differences between countries of origin and Kenya), school and community factors (e.g., school types and resources, experiences of discrimination), and household and individual factors (e.g., living conditions, parental involvement in education, exposure to trauma, language proficiency). Education is a key strategy to integrate refugees into the social and economic fabric of host communities; as such, it is crucial to identify and address the various factors that affect refugees' ability to obtain an education in countries of first asylum.

Keywords: Africa; education in emergencies; international education; social determinants; urban refugees

Introduction

While images of tents in refugee camps often accompany media stories of massive displacement, more than 60 per cent of refugees seek shelter, opportunities, and integration in urban settings (Urban Refugees, n.d.). Additionally, about 85 per cent of refugees are hosted in low- and middle-income regions (UNHCR 2020a), often indefinitely because of protracted conflicts in neighbouring countries of origin. Between 2005 and 2015, two in every five refugees were displaced for three years or longer; the current length of exile has tripled since the 1990s (Dryden-Peterson 2017). The urbanisation of refugees in tandem with the protracted nature of exile requires a rethinking of traditional short-term, emergency relief for displaced populations. This is particularly true of children and youth who spend their formative years in exile. As more than half of all refugees are children (UNHCR 2020a), it is imperative to develop approaches that address the distinct needs of refugee learners in countries of first asylum. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) educational strategy has responded to this need by concentrating on integration into national schools to improve refugees' access to education (Dryden-Peterson 2016; UNHCR 2012, 2019a, 2019b). This article focuses on urban refugee education in Nairobi, Kenya, and addresses the following question: What factors facilitate and hinder urban refugees' educational access, learning experiences, and achievement in first asylum countries?

Background

Overview of Refugee Education

Education is a key priority for refugees around the world. The right to education for refugees is clearly outlined in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees ("1951 Refugee Convention"). The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has overseen refugee education since 1967, with educational strategies evolving and responding to specific conflicts and refugee situations. The UNHCR often partners with UNICEF, UNESCO, and in-country stakeholders (e.g., nongovernmental organisations [NGOs]), giving rise to multi-sector, inter-agency collaboration to provide education for refugees. While refugee education has been implemented in practice for decades, it was solidified and shaped as a policy priority in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the World Education Forum's Dakar Framework for Action (see also "Education for All" in 2000) (UNHCR 2011). By 2003, the International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) had begun creating minimum standards for education in emergency contexts and settings, highlighting education as one of the pillars of the humanitarian assistance response. As such, refugee education has been incorporated into the broader field of Education in Emergencies (EiE), referring to quality learning opportunities for all ages, from early childhood development through higher and adult education (INEE 2018). EiE is a broad concept that can be applied to protracted refugee situations in camps as well as rural and urban areas in which refugees reside.

Kenya's Status as a Refugee-Hosting Country

Kenya has played a significant role hosting refugees from neighbouring countries since the 1970s, when Ugandans fled Idi Amin's regime. An unaccounted number of refugees arrived from Rwanda and Ethiopia during the same decade (Ndege, Kagwanja, and Odiyo 2002). Prior to 1991, refugees in Kenya were legally permitted to integrate into the country, enjoying the right to access employment and educational opportunities (Campbell 2006). The capacity of the Kenyan government to protect refugees lessened as a result of large-scale migration into the country occasioned by conflicts in bordering states in the early- and mid-1990s. This coincided with the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPS) and economic sanctions imposed by the international community, at which point the UNHCR assumed full responsibility for refugee registration throughout Kenya (UNHCR 2010).

As of March 2020, Kenya hosted nearly 495 000 registered refugees and asylum seekers, primarily from Somalia, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Ethiopia (UNHCR 2020b). Kenya is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, as well as to the Organisation of African Unity's (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa ("OAU Convention"). For the past three decades, Kenya has generally followed a *de facto* encampment model, hosting refugees in camps placed along its north-western and eastern borders; however, the implementation of the encampment policy has not been rigorous and was often *ad hoc* (Lambo 2012). The latest available estimates show that there are nearly 80 000 refugees and asylum seekers living in the capital city of Nairobi (UNHCR 2020b); however, this is a conservative estimate, with tens of thousands of individuals from refugee-like situations lacking documentation and, therefore, the ability to be counted (Tippens et al. 2017).

Although Kenya was once viewed as a possible out-of-camp model based on the country's recognition of refugees' rights (Campbell, Crisp, and Kiragu 2011), recent terrorist attacks attributed to al-Shabaab have resulted in repeated attempts by the Kenyan government to crack down on refugees, including issuing directives to limit refugees' residence to camps. While these directives have not been upheld by the High Court of Kenya, large-scale police raids targeting refugees have resulted in an inhospitable and precarious climate for refugees, particularly those living in urban settings (Tippens et al. 2021).

Refugee Education in Kenya

Signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol are responsible for the provision of public services, including education. We focus on the dynamics of how educational institutions serve as integration zones for urban refugees in host countries. The 2010 Constitution of Kenya includes the promise of the right to a basic education for all children, regardless of place of birth (Mendenhall et al. 2015). Regardless of intent, there is not yet a specific educational policy for refugee students, though the

Ministry of Education (MOE) and the UNHCR have noted intent to collaborate with other UN agencies to create inclusive education for refugees in Kenya. The Kenyan MOE created a concept note for refugee education policy, stating, “education provides children and youth with the opportunity to develop their intellectual, emotional and physical resilience for lives and careers in the camps and beyond” (MOE 2012, 1).

Education for refugees in Kenya is currently operationalised in a variety of ways. In refugee camps, the UNHCR funds 22 primary schools in Kakuma and 35 primary schools in Dadaab. International and national NGOs implement educational programming in camps, although teacher training, quality of education, and access to formal schools remain a challenge in these settings (UNHCR 2016a, 2016b). Female education is of particular concern; fewer than one in 10 girls will make it to secondary education in Kakuma refugee camp (UNHCR 2016a).

Outside of camps, refugees navigate a complex system of formal and non-formal educational systems. Formal schools, both public and private, fall under the auspices of the Kenyan MOE. Non-formal education ranges from country-, region-, or language-centric schools for primary and secondary students to vocational, skill-building, and language-learning workshops for refugee adults. Between 80 per cent and 90 per cent of primary school-aged refugees in Nairobi are enrolled in school (Mendenhall et al. 2015; UNHCR 2016a); however, this percentage does not account for disrupted education due to caregivers’ inability to pay school-related fees, children’s participation in livelihood and income-generating activities, and state-sanctioned police raids targeting refugee communities.

Theoretical Framework

Refugee learners and their families contend with unfamiliar sociocultural and educational systems and structures in countries of first asylum. The metaphor of “borderlands” offers a conceptual reshaping of boundaries in the context of forced migration and has been previously used to analyse refugees’ transnational activities and identities in Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Krupar and Prins 2016). We rely on Agier’s (2016, 58) framing of the border as highly liminal in order to capture the dynamic spaces in which refugees simultaneously emplace themselves and are emplaced:

Globalization, we conclude, has not suppressed borders: it transforms and shifts them, disassociating some borders from others ... It multiplies and expands them, while rendering them more fragile and uncertain. Then it makes them disappear beneath walls.

Central to understanding Nairobi as an urban borderland is recognising the active boundary-making that occurs by both the Kenyan government and refugees themselves. Integration into countries of first asylum is hailed as a promising durable solution by the international community; however, the Kenyan government, like many other host societies across the globe, restricts refugees’ mobility by building and maintaining

literal walls around encampment zones and erecting invisible boundaries via exclusionary and xenophobic policies. Although this precariousness of place poses unique integration challenges to urban refugees, Jaji (2014, 634) maintains that “[refugees in Nairobi] are not helpless victims of circumstances as they create counter-narratives that seek to de-legitimize politicization and criminalization of their religious and ethnic identities.” Through this lens, refugees’ identities are crafted at the intersection of the nation-state, international refugee policies, and ethno-religious community-driven narratives.

As urban schools are microcosms of broader refugee and host community interactions, school-aged refugees residing outside of camps also face challenges and opportunities pertaining to host-country integration, navigating new languages, customs, and structures. School-aged children of refugee backgrounds may have fled conflict themselves or may have been born into host countries and socialised into a borderlands identity. This age group is vulnerable to a disrupted educational trajectory as a result of pre-migration (e.g., inability to attend schools, destroyed schools), migration, and post-migration (e.g., language differences, lack of documentation to enrol in schools) factors.

To account for the complexities of educational integration among school-aged refugees, we borrow from public health to employ a multilevel social and structural determinants framework to examine factors affecting refugee learners in postmigration settings. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines the social determinants of health as “the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life” (WHO, n.d.). Applying this broader framework to education enables a holistic exploration of the sociocultural, policy, system, organisational, community, school, household/family, and individual factors that shape refugees’ educational access, experiences, and achievement.

Methods

Research Setting and Context

The study was conducted in Nairobi, Kenya between May and August 2012 and January and August 2014. Two authors (A1, A2) worked with the Xavier Project on research design, data collection and analysis, and dissemination of findings. The Xavier Project is an educational NGO and a UNICEF and UNHCR implementing partner; the organisation has been serving urban refugees in Kenya and Uganda for more than a decade. Urban refugees in Kenya are vulnerable to harassment, violence, and xenophobia (Tippens 2020b; Tippens et al. 2021). This was particularly true during the second wave of research in 2014; the Kenyan government issued a directive on 26 March 2014 which stated that refugees living outside of camps must relocate to a refugee camp. Subsequently, urban refugees were pushed deeper into Nairobi’s peripheral cracks and were subjected to months of police raids, forced relocation to camps, and deportations (Tippens et al. 2021). In addition to rendering urban refugees’

social support and income-generating activities even more tenuous, refugee children during this time were at risk for increased harassment and disruptions to schooling (Tippens 2017).

Research Design and Data Collection Procedures

This article presents the qualitative findings from a concurrent nested mixed-methods assessment of urban refugee education in Nairobi (Creswell et al. 2003). This design was selected to glean insight into the scale of urban refugee education in Nairobi while simultaneously providing a space for participants to share their experiences and insights.

Because urban refugees have precarious status in Nairobi, refugee participants (e.g., learners and caregivers) were recruited using purposive, word-of-mouth sampling through refugee research assistants on this project. Forty-two multi-lingual refugees representing seven nationalities¹ were hired as data collectors and participated in a one-day research orientation and training (e.g., research ethics, interviewing techniques) coordinated by the Xavier Project. Data collectors were paid the equivalent of \$5 USD per day by sponsoring organisations. Interviews were conducted in English, Swahili, and participants' primary languages. Participants were interviewed in schools, homes, churches, and NGO offices in Nairobi estates that host large numbers of refugees. Informed consent was obtained from participants following written documentation and a verbal explanation of the study aims and procedures. In accordance with institutional review board approval, and to protect the confidentiality of participants, we de-identified names of specific individuals, locations, and participating schools and organisations.

For the qualitative research phase presented in this article, we employed multiple methods in 2012 with head teachers, school administrators, and refugee learners and their caregivers (see also Erwin et al. 2020). Head teacher and school administrator interviews and focus group discussions centred on perceptions of factors that fostered or hindered refugee students' access to school, learning experiences, and educational achievement. Semi-structured interviews with refugee learners gleaned insight into their home and school experiences. NGO staff completed anonymous online questionnaires that consisted of open-ended questions pertaining to barriers and facilitators they faced coordinating urban refugee education activities. Finally, interviews with urban refugee families and communities as well as NGO staff in 2014 provided additional insight into how individuals, families, and communities perceived education and schools within a precarious context. Interviews conducted in 2012 were not recorded due to budget constraints and lack of audio recording devices. Instead, interviewers took notes about

1 Refugee research assistants / data collectors included individuals from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia, and South Sudan.

participants' responses, including direct quotes whenever possible. Interviews conducted in 2014 were audio recorded with participant consent.

Data Analysis

We used structural coding to analyse responses to semi-structured interviews and open-ended survey questions (Saldaña 2016). In structural coding, frequencies of the numbers of participants who mention specific themes are counted, making this an appropriate analytic technique for deductive coding focused on a priori themes developed prior to research implementation (i.e., the nested macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of the social and structural determinants framework). Indeed, Namey et al. (2008, 141) describe structural coding as well suited for theory-focused analysis because "it acts as a labeling and indexing device, allowing researchers to quickly access data likely to be relevant to a particular analysis from a larger data set." Finally, we also selected structural coding because our ability to supplement deductive analysis with inductive analysis was limited as some research assistants' interview notes contained dichotomous yes/no responses or very short phrases in response to questions. Researchers and data collectors met weekly to debrief and discuss deductive themes pertaining to facilitators/barriers to refugee education as well as to generate emergent themes as part of inductive analysis. Interview notes and transcripts were uploaded into MAXQDA version 11 (VERBI GmbH 2015) to manage data and facilitate analysis.

Research Ethics

The study was approved by the Human Subjects Protection Program at the University of Arizona, where the second author was a doctoral candidate at the time of this work. Additional ethical approval and research clearance was obtained through the Kenyan Ministry of Education. Refugee participants provided consent prior to interviews and focus group discussions; researchers explained that participation in the study was voluntary and would not affect refugee status determination. Participants were also told that de-identified results would be disseminated to academic, programme, and policy stakeholders.

Findings

Participants

Eighty-three individuals participated in the qualitative phase of this study, including refugee pupils attending primary and secondary schools (n = 37), head teachers (n = 33), school administrators (n = 7), and NGO staff (n = 6). Head teachers represented 15 public schools, 14 private schools, and four non-formal schools. School-aged refugees represented 13 nationalities; the majority were from Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Sudan, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. At the time of the interviews fewer than half of refugee participants were fully registered as refugees.

Approximately one-quarter were unregistered; the remainder either did not wish to respond to this question or were in the process of applying for refugee status.

Determinants Influencing Refugees' Education

Findings revealed that nested layers of context influence refugees' overall access to education, their experiences in classrooms, and their educational outcomes (see Figure 1). These myriad macro-, meso-, and micro-determinants of education fell within five overarching themes: (1) Economic, policy, and sociocultural determinants; (2) System and institutional determinants; (3) School and school environment determinants; (4) Household and family determinants; and (5) Individual determinants. Findings are organised by these five themes, providing specific factors and illustrative examples in each overarching category.

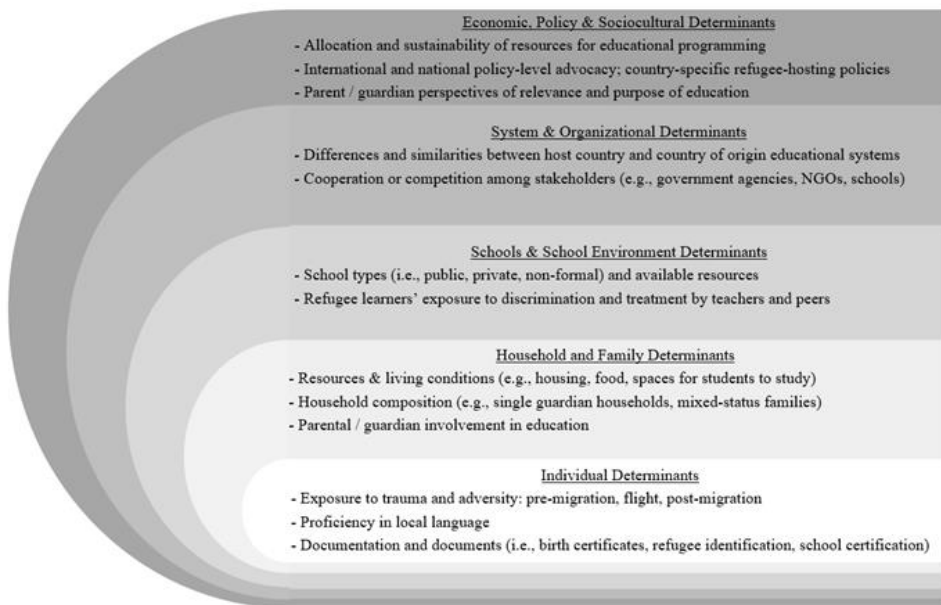


Figure 1. Social and structural determinants of urban refugee education

Economic, Policy, and Sociocultural Determinants

Economic factors. Nearly all NGO educational staff and several head teachers interviewed stated that there were limited resources available for refugee education in urban settings. Dryden-Peterson (2016, 135) highlights that the UNHCR's educational funding and activities are often constrained by host country policies and that low- and middle-income countries are "generally characterized by already overstretched education systems and often fragile political and economic institutions." In Kenya, the UNHCR funds camp-based education and the Kenyan MOE assumes responsibility for urban refugee students. This has enabled refugee children and youth in both camp and urban contexts to access education that results in Kenyan certification (Ministry of

Education 2012). Although integration of refugees into the national education system is a policy goal, implementation has proved difficult. In the devolved Kenyan system, some counties are better equipped with resources to provide quality education. For example, Bellino and Dryden-Peterson (2019) noted that the presence of Kakuma refugee camp increased access to schools among local Turkana children (Kenyan nationals). The authors, however, observed that despite increasing access among Kenyan nationals, this was an imperfect arrangement for host country nationals attending schools primarily with refugee learners.

In the urban education context in Nairobi, NGOs generally provided financial or material assistance through contributions to school-related expenses and donations of tangible items, such as desks and books. Scholarships were offered by NGOs and the UNHCR on a limited basis and on the good will of donors. In a focus group discussion, head teachers noted a particular challenge of this system: students receive scholarships for one or two years and often lose funding after this, resulting in disruptions to schooling. NGO staff also stated that scholarships were not a sustainable activity, and that more strategic solutions were needed to address these larger economic barriers to education. These statements are consistent with previous findings by Pavanello, Elhawary, and Pantuliano (2010), Dryden-Peterson (2011), and Dryden-Peterson et al. (2019). Although the lack of financial expenditure by the UNHCR in urban settings was viewed as a challenge by most participants, two staff members with international NGOs highlighted that relying on the MOE to provide refugee-inclusive education was in keeping with the broader objective of integration as a durable solution for refugees.

Policy factors. Various policies affected refugee learners in Nairobi. The policy of having private and public schools creates challenges to integration, fairness, and equity not only between Kenyans and refugees but also among Kenyans themselves. Public primary schools are often crowded and lag behind private schools in quality education. Following changes in the governance structure in the country since 2010, education is categorised as a national government function. However, schools are managed through local school boards that include parents, local leaders, and school administrators. However, these policies are not fully implemented and there is evidence to show that some public schools deliberately exclude refugees by asking for birth certificates, parents' documentation, and unspecified levies. Several NGO practitioners noted that, despite monthly meetings of a working group dedicated to urban refugee education, there was a lack of coordinated effort occurring at the national level and no national-level representation on the working group. Participants expressed concern that the working group had no mechanism to influence regional and national policies pertaining to urban refugee education. Second, national policies related to Kenya's status as a refugee-hosting country more generally had detrimental effects on refugee learners. Caregivers' inability to access formal employment resulted in high rates of truancy and out-of-school refugee youth when school-related expenses could not be met.

Such hardships were exacerbated during the Kenyan government's Operation Usalama Watch in 2014 which exemplified just how much refugee hosting policies have been securitised. For example, a single father from the DRC talked about losing his job as a mechanic during Operation Usalama Watch. He was frequently harassed by the police, and afraid to leave his apartment to look for informal work in Nairobi for fear of being sent to a camp or deported; he was unsure who would care for his children if he were taken away. As a result, his adolescent son stopped attending classes to work various informal jobs to help provide for the family. Although the son did not have documents to live outside of the camps, the family felt he "fit in" as a Kenyan because he came at a young age and did not have what his father described as a "Congolese accent" when speaking. Similarly, in the aftermath of a police raid in a different neighbourhood, several Congolese parents discussed a strong desire to keep children out of school to ensure families were not separated in potential future raids. As insecurity worsened, some families did keep children out of school, which was distressing for caregivers and children. Parents and children cited fear of falling behind in school or not being able to take national exams; younger children expressed sadness about missing social interactions with school friends.

Sociocultural factors. It has been acknowledged that the goals of education as imagined by state actors may not always be aligned with the desires of refugee learners and caregivers who may have different imagined futures for themselves (Dryden-Peterson et al. 2019). This was apparent in our research in Kenya. Familial expectations of the relevance of education for young refugees cannot be overstated. For example, in response to a question about his school experiences, a first-grade student stated, "My parents said that we are waiting for peace in Somalia. Once there is peace, I will go home for a proper education." This sentiment was echoed by caregivers, learners, and administrators of non-formal schools in both the 2012 and 2014 data collection; yet it is unlikely for individuals and families from protracted refugee situations to return to their countries of origin.

At times different expectations created tensions between school representatives and refugee learners and caregivers. During a focus group discussion, teachers at a public secondary school noted higher truancy and dropout rates among Sudanese students, repeatedly using the term "cultural reasons" as a derogatory phrase indicating Sudanese students and caregivers do not value education. Some teachers said that Sudanese were more interested in marriage than in obtaining a degree, a stereotype that also extended to Somali refugees. However, it should be noted that this focus group was conducted shortly after the independence of South Sudan, a time when many Sudanese families were leaving neighbouring states to return to their country of origin. Some communities and families addressed sociocultural expectations of education by enrolling children in non-formal schools that emphasised instruction that would be suited to return to countries of origin.

System and Organisational Determinants

Educational system. Kenya's 8-4-4 educational system differs from that of several refugee populations' countries of origin, including Somalia (6-2-4), Burundi (6-4-3), and Ethiopia (8-2-2) (EPDC 2012). According to reports by head teachers and NGO staff, these variances in structures resulted in challenges to enrolling students without recognised certification in schools. However, in 2018, as part of the Nairobi Declaration, African states committed to aiming for a Continental Education Strategy for Africa with goals to agree on common frameworks as well as strengthen national and regional learning assessments (UNESCO, African Union, and Government of Kenya 2018). Whilst this will not alleviate the structural challenges of education systems in the short-term, it may aid in providing quality education for all learners at national and transnational levels in the future.

Stakeholder coordination and competition. NGO practitioners generally agreed that limited resources created a competitive atmosphere, with one participant stating: "To put it in simple terms, it is [every organisation] out for themselves, especially for organisations that are not funded by the UNHCR." Other respondents mentioned that agencies place too much focus on activities (e.g., donations, school fees) because these are achievable and therefore appealing to donors. The prospect of focusing on outcomes for refugee learners or for policy change was too daunting an endeavour for agencies relying on short-term funding, resulting in what one participant termed a "Band-Aid approach' to refugee education." Despite this broader assessment, four NGO practitioners noted that there was improved communication and a renewed focus on outcomes over activities, largely because of participation in the urban working group.

Community and School Determinants

School types, curricula, and resources. Refugee learners accounted for approximately 10 per cent of public-school students, apart from one school in which an administrator reported that 99 per cent of the students were Somali refugees. Head teachers at public schools stated that student to teacher ratios ranged from 20:1 to 100:1, though typically fell in the range of 45:1. Private schools, which varied in terms of student body composition, had smaller ratios of around 20:1. Teachers at non-formal schools similarly reported that the average student to teacher ratios in both primary and secondary were 20:1; in one non-formal school, this was stated to be 4:1. Due to student to teacher ratios and what was perceived by parents and guardians as more individualised attention, refugee parents who could afford fees to send their children to private or non-formal schools often did so, particularly to some of the less expensive private schools. Refugee learners in private schools also described higher levels of satisfaction with their peers, teachers, and curricula than those in public school settings. Specifically, learners in private schools described a greater sense of belonging compared with students in public schools who reported harassment and xenophobia.

The perceptions of caregivers and students in this study focus primarily on *quality* of education, whether a student feels they are participating in an inclusive or exclusive educational system. Access to “free” education (e.g., public or sponsored private schooling) does not necessarily translate to quality education. For some refugee learners, national private and public schools were perceived as places of inclusion if they were able to assimilate, but as places of exclusion when they were unable to afford necessities (e.g., school fees, desks, uniforms, teacher supplements, lunches). Strained resources, in addition to class size in already crowded public schools, were shown to be a source of frustration for teachers, parents, and refugee learners.

Administrators, head teachers, and caregivers who were affiliated with non-formal schools stated that communities see these schools as pathways to eventual return to countries of origin, and community members were often involved in fundraising efforts to help offset school fees. Although non-formal schools were highly valued by families that utilised this option, they are not without challenges. The principal of a non-formal Francophone primary school with a primarily Burundian and Congolese student body highlighted two major areas of concern. First, he stated that funding such as rent and teachers’ salaries was supported by school fees and community donations, which guardians and communities were not always able to afford. Second, the principal noted challenges for students wishing to transition to secondary and higher education without Kenyan educational certificates. NGO staff focused on education advocated for refugee-inclusive schools (public and private), which participants stated served broader purposes of integrating both refugee learners and their families into the national system.

Experiences of discrimination. Although most students reported satisfaction with school, several refugee learners said peers and teachers “teased” them. Many learners stated that they were taunted because their uniforms were in poor condition and their families were unable to pay for school materials and lunches. The sociopolitical landscape in Kenya also trickled into school environments, challenging integration capabilities among refugee students. For example, shortly after an attack in Kenya by the Somalia-based terror group al-Shabaab, a Somali first-grader told interviewers that his teacher called him a terrorist and told him to return to Somalia with his family. Such experiences of xenophobia reinforce refugees’ need to shield their own identity as a protective measure, which is consistent with Bellino and Dryden-Peterson’s (2019) description of a Somali refugee pupil in a Kenyan public school asserting a Somali-Kenyan national identity in order to increase her social acceptance among classmates.

Several Somali students and their families, who predominantly practice Islam, expressed concern about lack of prayer time during school, students being forced to enrol in compulsory Christian Religious Education (CRE), and the absence of Islamic religious education. Kronick (2013) reported that Muslim caregivers understood that the purpose of CRE was not to indoctrinate students but rather to ensure they passed the Kenyan Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE). We believe these differences may be due to the timing of our data collection; although the Kenyan government has a history

of anti-Somali practices (Jaji 2013; Lochery 2012), this was exacerbated during Operation Usalama Watch and it is possible that participants expressed heightened distress against all institutions during this time.

In focus group discussions with head teachers representing various public schools, primary and secondary teachers held unfavourable views of refugee learners. Several teachers described refugee students using the following words: “violent,” “dirty,” “rebellious,” “aggressive” (male learners), “having low self-esteem,” “lacking discipline,” and “without resources” (e.g., food, learning materials, money). Teachers also criticised high dropout rates among refugees. During an interview, a head teacher at a private school posited that refugee girls, particularly from Somalia and South Sudan, often drop out because of “forced early marriages” and “early pregnancies,” respectively. One teacher said that Sudanese women and girls have “a culture of having husbands care for them.”

Despite these negative statements, head teachers also noted several positive aspects of refugee-inclusive classrooms. Some participants described refugee students as “prosocial” and noted how they were “willing to help other students” in classes. Several teachers also said that the refugee learners in their classrooms were high-achieving students, which fostered a school environment that improved general achievement among both refugees and Kenyans. This is consistent with Kronick’s (2013) finding that although teachers noted challenges, many also had positive experiences with refugee-inclusive curricula.

Household and Family Determinants

Resources and living conditions. More than one-third of students knew of peers who were not enrolled in school at the time of their interview. The primary reason listed for truancy by refugee learner participants was school-related fees, including the cost of uniforms and educational materials. A 14-year-old Rwandan female explained why she and her brother had missed classes: “My brother is not in [secondary] school due to a lack of school fees and birth certificate. My father passed away and my mother is a casual labourer.” A secondary school-aged Ethiopian refugee said that he dropped out to support his family when they experienced financial difficulties, simply noting, “Do you think I can go to school without eating?” An additional oft-cited reason for not attending school or for poor educational achievement was students’ living conditions. Several participants mentioned “living rough,” a term that encompassed anything from frequent moving (due to inability to pay rent or neighbourhood insecurity) to squalid housing to homelessness. One Sudanese pupil reported difficulty completing her homework when her caregivers were unable to pay for electricity: there was no place she could study under light.

Household composition. Household composition was also described as affecting students’ access to primary and secondary education as well as educational attainment. Refugee learners in single-caregiver-headed households were more likely to report

needing to contribute to the household financially or as caregivers. Households with multiple adults contributing financially to the household or who were able to serve in caregiving roles for children, older adults, or sick family members did not face these same barriers.

Unregistered and mixed-registration status families were particularly vulnerable during the 2014 police raids, with several parents reporting keeping children out of school out of fear of family separation. In cases of family separation resulting in unaccompanied minors, neighbours and other community members became unanticipated guardians of children left behind in the aftermath of raids. One Congolese woman discussed taking in two young girls whose parents were arrested by the Kenyan police and forcibly relocated to a refugee camp. Since she was not the legal guardian of these children, she expressed frustration because she was not eligible for educational assistance for school-related fees. Similarly, Tippens (2020a) found that urban Congolese refugees who were not registered or did not have documentation to live outside of refugee camps faced challenges enrolling their children in Tanzanian schools.

Children were not immune to the stress surrounding precarious dwelling in Nairobi during the police raids. One primary school-aged Congolese girl cried as she told interviewers how she once excelled in school but was receiving poor marks because she could not concentrate in classes because of fear of family separation. This demonstrated gap reveals a need for organisations and schools working with urban refugees to be prepared to address the distinct needs of mixed-status families in post-migration settings.

Parental and caregiver involvement. Head teachers expressed frustration at not being able to communicate with refugee parents and further stated that parents were frequently unable to provide basic needs and neglected children (who were often described as “unkempt” by teachers). Teachers also said that caregivers failed to communicate with schools regarding absences and left children with relatives without notifying schools. Despite these frustrations, most head teachers noted that caregivers of refugee learners attended parent-teacher association (PTA) meetings, a sharp contrast with participants’ claims of parental and caregiver disinterest in children’s education. Several teachers said that language was a barrier to communicating with caregivers and guardians.

Individual Determinants

Exposure to trauma and adversity. Head teachers identified what they perceived to be violent and aggressive behaviour, particularly among male refugee learners, as a challenge in their classrooms. This is consistent with literature suggesting that disruptive behaviours or tendencies among refugees in schools may in fact be the result of exposure to trauma (see Rousseau, Drapeau, and Corin 1996; Derluyn, Broekaert, and Schuyten 2008). Many head teachers in this assessment expressed a desire for training to identify mental health needs among refugee students, as well as for school-based resources (e.g., counsellors) to address behavioural issues.

Proficiency in local languages. Refugee learners who lacked comfort with English language instruction reported embarrassment at being placed in age-inappropriate classrooms, as most school administrators described the lack of resources for English language learner programmes. Over-age class placement also occurred when students were put in lower grades due to disrupted education (e.g., lack of educational infrastructure in countries of origin, migration). Teachers stated that language was the biggest barrier to successful integration of refugee students, both in terms of learning new content and interacting with peers. Campbell, Crisp, and Kiragu (2011) recommended that the UNHCR address both additional English language training and teacher training on refugee issues. Some of the implementing NGOs in this assessment conduct supplementary English language training at various Nairobi schools. One organisation developed a teachers' training programme on refugee issues and the psychosocial needs of refugee learners, which has been used with schools with large numbers of refugee pupils.

Documentation and documents. Finally, students' refugee status, national identification, and school certification influenced how they moved through the educational system in Kenya. Students' lack of identification resulted in precarious living circumstances both inside and outside the classroom. Students lacking birth certificates, refugee identification, and proof of prior educational attainment had challenges enrolling in schools, particularly refugee learners in secondary settings. Distress over not being able to obtain such documentation was heightened during the 2014 data collection (Operation Usalama Watch), when urban refugee registration was halted to force refugees to relocate to camps or countries of origin.

Discussion

This study incorporated the perspectives of refugee pupils, caregivers, head teachers and school administrators, and NGO practitioners to provide a framework for understanding the social and structural determinants of refugee education. By highlighting the nested layers of context that affect educational access, experiences, and attainment among children with refugee backgrounds, we identified possible intervention areas for diverse stakeholders. Specifically, we identified five key levels of educational determinants for future research and action: (1) economic, policy, and sociocultural factors; (2) systemic and organisational factors; (3) community and school factors; (4) household and family factors; and (5) individual determinants.

Funding was identified as a challenge by refugees, educators, and NGO staff. At the household level, school-related fees competed with necessary expenses such as food and housing. At the macro- and meso-levels, sustainability of funding was mentioned as a key barrier to refugee education by participants. Mendenhall (2014, 76) identified similar economic threats to educational programming in her research on organisations working in the relief-to-development transition:

... the erratic and unpredictable nature of funding in these contexts can greatly affect the sustainability of education programs ... Whereas the global donor community endeavours to streamline financial assistance provided for humanitarian and development work, the amount of aid allocated for education is still a concern ... In short, financial realities deeply affect the sustainability of education programs.

After funding, the type of school was a debated issue among participants. NGO participants stated that non-formal, community-based schools posed a challenge to refugees' integration into the host community. In contrast, guardians and communities saw value in these institutions as instilling cultural values in exiled children and youth as well as a potential path to eventual repatriation. Mendenhall (2014) found that non-formal schools posed a threat to the sustainability of educational programming for refugees, as these institutions established parallel systems that operate outside of the auspices of host country governments. Grossman, Kippels, and Zhang (2013), however, caution not to dismiss community-based educational programmes, providing an example of non-formal complementary programming in Kampala, Uganda that has demonstrated successes in addressing language disparities between refugee learners and the host population. Karanja's (2010) study on a Sudanese refugee community school in Nairobi demonstrated that despite infrastructural challenges and poor school conditions, the community school provided a welcoming and secure environment for Sudanese pupils. She recommended improving local urban community education through collaborations among the UNHCR, the Kenyan government, and refugee communities. At the regional level, systems-level disparities could be partially addressed through tripartite mechanisms among the Kenyan government, the UNHCR, and regional governments. For example, although the tripartite agreement of Tanzania, the UNHCR, and Burundi to address the needs and eventual return of Burundians in exile has had some bureaucratic challenges (Sesnan et al. 2013), the mechanism was hailed by participants as a promising step forward.

Refugee learners, teachers, and school administrators faced various challenges in school and classroom settings. Refugee students contended with discrimination from teachers and peers as well as with learning challenges due to limited English and Swahili proficiency. Teachers and administrators expressed frustration at not having the skills to educate students they described as having behavioural issues. As we described earlier, such behaviours may be related to trauma exposure and post-traumatic stress; in such instances, traditional disciplinary measures would be ineffective and possibly harmful. Indeed, Kronick (2013) found that Kenyan teachers in Nairobi schools were unsure how to discipline refugee students and often opted to speak to refugee learners about negative behaviours instead of relying on corporal punishment. Students' frustrations with language proficiency is not a new finding; Kronick (2013) found that teachers in Nairobi occasionally relied on students to interpret for refugees, and therefore could not be certain of refugee pupils' comprehension of learning materials.

Scholars such as Sesnan et al. (2013) and Mendenhall et al. (2015) have discussed how refugee teachers can support pupils from refugee backgrounds. Mendenhall et al. (2015)

discussed shared languages and experiences as enhancing rapport between learners and teachers with refugee backgrounds and offered ways to provide support to these teachers (e.g., diploma programmes, language support). Recruiting refugee teachers as well as providing all teachers with professional development opportunities in trauma-informed educational practices in tandem with school-based interpretation, counselling, and peer support may help offset two critical individual-level barriers: exposure to trauma along the migration continuum and language proficiency and learning.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this study adds to previous research showing the misalignment of the *purposes* of education for refugee children and youth (see Dryden-Peterson 2017). Emergency and development actors have begun to show the need to focus beyond one future and to embrace multiple potential futures for refugees. Caregivers and pupils in this study expressed a desire to return home or to be resettled elsewhere, as first asylum settings sometimes represent a liminal in-betweenness. Yet, as we face current global challenges, integration into a first asylum country is becoming a greater priority. Poor access to educational opportunities and low-quality education for refugees pose barriers to refugees experiencing a prosperous, fulfilling integration. It is critical for education policies and practices to be tailored to competencies for life and work in order to foster resilient, sustainable, healthy, and peaceful societies in an interconnected global world (UNESCO, African Union, and Government of Kenya 2018). The aspirations of the Nairobi Declaration are urgent: "... making our educational systems more responsive, flexible and resilience to include refugees and internally displaced people and increasing investment for Education in Emergencies and Crises" (UNESCO et al. 2018, 2).

Study Strengths and Limitations

Several limitations to this study must be noted. Purposive sampling was used to reach urban refugee pupils; as such, the voices of out-of-school youth with disrupted educational trajectories are largely missing from this study. Additionally, several open-ended interview guides were returned incomplete or with dichotomous yes/no responses or very short phrases, which limited our data analysis options. This may indicate a need for more in-depth interview training for research assistants who are used to conducting surveys and not semi-structured interviews. Nonetheless, this assessment contributes contextualised information to the limited literature pertaining to urban refugee education in low- and middle-income country settings (see Dryden-Peterson 2016).

Conclusion

This study explored factors that facilitate and hinder urban refugees' educational access, learning experiences, and achievement in first asylum countries. In its latest strategy, the UNHCR states that education of refugees should emphasise "inclusion in equitable quality education in national systems [to] contribute to resilience, prepare children and youth for participation in cohesive societies and is the best policy option for refugees

... and their hosting communities” (UNHCR 2019, 6). We build upon this and advocate for a more inclusive education landscape that involves actors from multiple sectors. Such an approach that focuses on refugee integration more broadly—including multi-sector cooperation to address barriers such as financing, regional differences in educational systems, school discrimination and psychosocial wellbeing, teachers’ professional development, and support for refugee communities—is critical to ensuring successful outcomes for school-aged refugee youth.

Urban refugees navigate and negotiate complex sociocultural, legal, and economic landscapes in countries of first asylum. These symbolic borderlands represent a protracted yet continuously-shifting bedrock upon which refugee learners piece together an educational foundation to serve what Dryden-Peterson (2017) termed “unknowable futures.” It is critical to identify the macro-, meso-, and micro-factors affecting what we term “learning out of place” in order to augment the social and structural environments in which displaced students explore their current identities and future trajectories.

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