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BUREAUCRATIC ENCOUNTERS AND THE QUEST FOR EDUCATIONAL ACCESS AMONG COLOMBIAN REFUGEES IN ECUADOR

DIANA RODRÍGUEZ-GÓMEZ

ABSTRACT

Ecuador's innovative approach to social policy and human mobility is reflected in its education policies, specifically those pertaining to access to school. Under Ecuador's constitutional notion of universal citizenship, youth are not required to have previous academic records to enter the equivalent of K-12 education, regardless of their migratory status. Grade placement is based on a free test, and any identification documents a future student provides are officially deemed valid and sufficient for school registration. Despite these constitutional guarantees, refugee youth still have great difficulty enrolling in school in Ecuador. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with civil employees, NGO staffers, and Colombian refugees conducted in Quito, Ecuador, in 2013 and 2014, I analyze how access to school for Colombian refugee youth is shaped by the official and unofficial rules that regulate the formal education system. Situating policy as practice relative to the daily workings of the state bureaucracy, I analyze how public servants and refugees interpret and enact policy within the state's administrative structure. I argue that, in this context, the appropriation of education policy and, therefore, access to education are mediated by the workings of bureaucracy. This implies that universal definitions of access to school obscure the contingent and unpredictable character of educational access for refugees. By delving into the manifold interpretations of education policy, this analysis suggests that an inconsistent bureaucracy has the potential to amplify social inequalities among refugees.

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INTRODUCTION: THE BUREAUCRATIC DIMENSION OF EDUCATIONAL ACCESS

With a heavy dossier of 13 documents under her arm, Karla and her two children traversed Quito, Ecuador, and arrived in Tarqui, at the school registration office closest to their home. She was determined to secure school placements for both children, Daniela and Edwin. After queuing for one hour, a civil servant dismissed her application because of her migratory status as an asylum seeker—her petition for refugee status had yet to be processed. Aware of her rights and knowledgeable about current education regulations, Karla decided to change her strategy and make use of the only resource she had in abundance at that moment: time. She left the registration office, then returned and got back in the queue. After a two-hour wait, a different employee accepted her application and her two children gained access to school. However, Karla's abundant free time is a luxury employed migrants cannot afford. Although no official statistics on refugee children's access to school are available, a recent survey of 150 youth in Quito showed that more than a quarter of the sample did not attend school (Donger, Fuller, Bhabha, and Leaning 2017).

Ecuador has a long history as a sending country because of its successive economic crises, but it recently has become the Latin American country hosting the largest number of people in need of international protection. The most recent official estimates are that 145,333 persons of concern have arrived in Ecuador since the 1990s (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2019); this includes 66,288 refugees (Cancillería del Ecuador 2019), 97.6 percent of whom are Colombians fleeing the ongoing armed conflict between left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitary groups, dissident armed forces, and Colombia's national army (Cancillería del Ecuador 2019). Ecuador's dollar economy, relative political stability, and compliance with avant-garde international migration law has attracted migrants from Asia, the Caribbean, and Africa (Cancillería del Ecuador 2019). Additionally, 1,154,000 Venezuelans have arrived in Ecuador since 2015, driven there by the extreme political and economic instability in their country (UNHCR 2019).

Inspired by progressive social policies, Rafael Correa's presidency (2007-2017) undertook major institutional and state regulatory reform. According to the World Bank Worldwide Bureaucracy Indicators, Correa's transformation of the public sector moved Ecuador's government effectiveness—measured in terms of the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and its independence

from political pressures, the quality of policy design and implementation, and the government's commitment to such policies—from 40 percent to 50 percent (World Bank 2018).¹ As part of this transformation, the Correa administration adopted an education policy that, drawing from a human rights framework and emphasizing non-discrimination, established that all children, regardless of nationality or migratory status, can attend public school. The administration also overhauled the education system's administrative structure: between 2006 and 2014, the Ecuadorian state added 223,880 new civil servants, more than 10 percent of whom (26,000) were appointed to the education sector (*El Telégrafo* 2015). Public officials working in education were dispersed among 9 education zones, 140 education districts, 1,117 education circuits, and 28,590 public schools. Although there is a tendency to think that providing greater resources and more civil employees would expand school access to all students, it has not guaranteed access for those with refugee status.

The role the administrative structure of the state or bureaucracy plays in shaping school access for refugees is rarely discussed in documents produced by multilateral agencies and international organizations. One recent exception is “Turn the Tide,” a 2017 UNHCR report that presents bureaucracy as a barrier to schooling: “Not recognizing refugees’ unique situations and barring them from the next level of their education because of bureaucracy is callous and counterproductive” (25). Usually, non-political phrases such as “registration in the national education system,” “ID documents and certificates detailing previous education,” and “lack of documents” populate reports about access to school (see, for example, UNHCR 2008, 2010, 2011; Bacakova 2009; Dryden-Peterson 2009). By maintaining a “rhetoric of individual responsibility” (Preston 1991, 61) that avoids any designation of institutional or state responsibility, these expressions limit our ability to understand and engage critically with the conditions that complicate access to school for refugees. To state that this population has difficulty enrolling in school due to a lack of documents subtly reifies refugees as being in a constant state of deficiency and normalizes bureaucratic demands as the natural order of things.

This article is part of a larger ethnographic study of Colombian refugee youth living in Ecuador conducted in 2013 and 2014. In this paper, I draw attention to the processes of policy appropriation in bureaucratic environments as a potential hurdle to school access. The purpose of this paper is to highlight areas

1 As a comparative measure, neighboring Colombia and Peru reached 70 percent and 60 percent, respectively, in the same period.

of school access that are ignored by prescriptive approaches. To do so, I address the following questions:

- How does educational access for refugee children and youth become a policy issue?
- What bureaucratic practices shape access to school for this population in Quito?
- How do state agents and people with refugee status participate in and interact with the provision of access to school?
- What resources do refugees use to guarantee educational access?

In this paper, I analyze the vertical elements of policy appropriation across national, municipal, and district levels (Bartlett and Vavrus 2014, 2016), drawing from semi-structured interviews to examine how education bureaucracy unfolds and to shed light on the processes of governance and power (McCarty and Castagno 2018) that affect refugees' experiences of an alien state.

I also draw from debates in the field of education in emergencies (EiE) and anthropological studies of bureaucracy to examine how policy appropriation shapes refugee youths' access to school. I approach policy as a social practice wherein agents constantly interpret, enact, and negotiate normative content (Levinson, Winstead, and Sutton 2018; McCarty and Castagno 2018). My aim in analyzing how education stakeholders interpret and enact policy in bureaucratic settings is to foreground the roles and practices of state agents. I embrace Lipsky's (1969, 2010) definition of "street-level bureaucrats" as civil employees who interact directly with the public—both migrant and non-migrant populations—and use their own discretion to allocate state benefits and distribute resources. Rather than conceptualize access to school as a cohesive and linear sequence of procedures with universal barriers, I define it as a localized and relational process framed by spoken and unspoken rules that are negotiated between public officials and those seeking an education. From this perspective, refugees' efforts to access school emerge as a series of actions whereby non-citizens experience the state as the main regulatory authority that determines whether they will be allowed to enter school.

My main argument is that, while the Ecuadorian legal framework aims to universalize and standardize the procedures for school access for those between 5 and 18 years of age, street-level bureaucrats interpret policies in ways that create only partial and individualized opportunities for the most marginalized children

to access education. This article shows that policy appropriation in bureaucratic settings can be unpredictable and is dependent on many factors, including street-level bureaucrats' technical capacity and their own subjective desire to help others. The workings of a bureaucracy vary according to the will of civil employees, and therefore so do refugee children's and youths' opportunities to access school.

This paper suggests that the ways education policy is appropriated in bureaucratic settings mediates access to school for refugees in Quito, Ecuador, and presents three key findings to support this view. First, there is a gap between representations of the state at the highest levels and the way it actually operates on the ground, particularly in the education system. Second, given the exceptional character of the procedures that frame educational access for refugees as compared to those for other populations, education policy tends to be interpreted in unpredictable and even fragmented ways. Third, although refugee students and their families display great resilience and resort to a number of strategies to cope with the bureaucratic demands of gaining access to education, their efforts to comply with bureaucratic requirements often fall short and prevent them from gaining the desired access.

With data collected in Quito, an understudied area of the Global South, the vertical comparative component of this research across national, municipal, and district levels offers empirical evidence of the challenges refugee populations face in gaining school access amid the expansion of Ecuador's education sector. By positioning the street-level bureaucrat as a key education stakeholder and bureaucracy as a key area of concern for the EiE field, this study contributes to debates that tackle the gap between policy design and policy implementation (see Karpinska, Yarrow, and Gough 2007; UNHCR 2012; Buckner, Spencer, and Cha 2017; Mendenhall, Russell, and Buckner 2017). It shows how the social inequality refugees encounter can be produced and sustained by the state, even though it explicitly mandates universal access to school.

In this article, I first review key studies on refugee populations' access to school and introduce policy as a social practice. I then describe Ecuador's legal and institutional framework for school access, including the procedures the Ministry of Education designed for the 2013-2014 academic year. I then explain how I collected and analyzed the evidence presented. I next integrate the perspectives of individuals seeking educational access, street-level bureaucrats, and high-ranking public officials into my analysis. Finally, I discuss the research findings and present my conclusions.

ACCESS TO SCHOOL AND EDUCATION POLICIES AS A BUREAUCRATIC PRACTICE

CURRENT DEBATES ABOUT ACCESS TO SCHOOL

The fact that empirical evidence shows a correlation between out-of-school youth and conflict has positioned access to school at the core of the EiE field (Burde, Kapit, Wahl, Guven, and Skarpeteig 2017). According to Burde et al. (2017), discussions about this issue follow two trends: whereas some analyze the links between educational access and conflict (see Barakat, Karpinska, and Paulson 2008; Davies 2005, 2011; Kirk 2011; Pherali 2013; Dryden-Peterson and Mulimbi 2016), others target the barriers that prevent students from entering and staying in school (Burde, Kapit, Wahl, and Guven 2011; Dryden-Peterson 2011; Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack 2014; Bartlett 2015; Burde and Khan 2016; Zerrougui 2016; Gladwell 2019).

Building on this extended understanding of school access, the field has distinguished several barriers faced by children and youth affected by armed conflict and natural disasters. Refugees face a broad range of barriers to schooling: long distances to school, increased opportunity costs, systematic discrimination, a lack of female teachers, security threats, forced displacement and recruitment by armed groups, older students in the classrooms, latrines unsuited to girls, gender-based violence, irrelevant curricula, trauma, and overcrowded schools (O'Malley 2010; Burde et al. 2011; Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack 2014; Burde 2014; Burde and Khan 2016; Zerrougui 2016; Gladwell 2019).

Refugees are especially vulnerable to exclusion and violence at the hands of a state in which they are strangers. Although they are protected by international and regional legal instruments, such as the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, and, in Latin America, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, the disconnect between written policy and “lived” policy may reduce the practical impact of their legal status. As they adjust to a new life in unfamiliar territory, refugees are strangers who are forced to navigate unknown rules and rely on the decisions of the foreign state in which they now reside. In many cases, their non-citizen status forces them to endure poorer access to social services, compete less effectively in the marketplace, and be subjected regularly to harassment and detainment by state forces (Landau 2016), all of which expand the barriers they face in trying to access school.

Debates over school access for refugee youth mention the absence of official documents as a barrier to schooling (Bacakova 2009; Church World Service 2013; Mendenhall et al. 2017), which normalizes the role of the state as a bureaucratic authority and obscures the far more revealing issue of how refugee populations actually navigate the system. In the particular case of urban refugees and asylum seekers in the Global South, scholars have identified bureaucracy as an obstacle to school access. Studies by Grabska (2006), Karanja (2010), and Goździak and Walter (2012) argue that bureaucratic procedures have the potential to make access to school impossible. For instance, Karanja (2010) maintains that “proper documentation does not necessarily guarantee access to education by urban refugee children” (148). Based on the case of urban refugees in South Africa, Buckland (2011), Sobantu and Warriá (2013), and Meda, Sookrajh, and Maharaj (2013) argue that not having official documents, including refugee and asylum-seeker certificates, birth certificates, academic reports, and immunization cards, is an obstacle to enrolling in school. Buckner, Spencer, and Cha (2017) similarly describe how confusion over documents, procedures, and decrees have created barriers to school access for self-settled Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

In Ecuador, despite a legal framework that guarantees universal education for all, the Observatory of the Rights of Children and Adolescents (Observatorio de los Derechos de la Niñez y Adolescencia 2010), reports sponsored by the U.S. Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (Feinstein International Center 2012; Mendenhall et al. 2017), and UNHCR (Donger et al. 2017) all identify the lack of official documents as a key barrier to school access for Colombian refugees.² A study of 1,200 Colombian refugees living in Quito and Guayaquil conducted in 2010 argues that 20 percent of potential primary school students and 40 percent of potential secondary school students were not attending school because of a lack of official documents (Ospina and Santacruz 2011). More recently, Donger et al. (2017) reported that school enrollment was 65.2 percent among the 150 refugees between 15 and 19 years old that they surveyed in Quito, and that those with refugee status were more likely to enter school than those whose asylum applications were still in process or who were undocumented. Even though challenges to educational access in Ecuador’s capital have noticeably decreased in the last five years, this same report claims that “documentation requirements are a challenge for enrollment and graduation” (29).

2 “Education is a fundamental human right and it is the unavoidable and inexcusable duty of the State to guarantee the access, permanence and quality of education for the entire population without any discrimination. It is tied to international human rights instruments” (Registro Oficial: Órgano de la República del Ecuador 2011, 4).

Although these studies highlight a gap between policy and practice, they fail to provide an in-depth analysis of how bureaucratic practices shape and limit access opportunities for those with refugee status. A dearth of qualitative accounts detailing the everyday social practices of state agencies and state beneficiaries limits our current understanding of the multiple dimensions of enacting education policies. To guarantee education for all, we need to learn more about the challenges refugees and public officials face when dealing with bureaucratic requirements.

ACCESS TO SCHOOL, EDUCATION POLICY, AND BUREAUCRACY

There is a tendency in the literature to focus on administrative barriers to educational access while losing sight of the daily experiences of those who navigate the bureaucratic arena. This perspective neglects the relational dimension of access to school and the key role street-level bureaucrats play in guaranteeing refugees' right to education. I draw from studies on the anthropology of education policy and bureaucracy to define policy as a processual and interactive social practice whereby actors with different levels of agency and power define the terms in which social problems are defined, and behaviors and resources are organized and allocated (Levinson et al. 2018). In this paper, I approach social practice as the everyday activities that situate individual behaviors within broader social forces (Bourdieu 1972). From this perspective, I conceptualize refugees, street-level bureaucrats, and policy-makers as creative agents with different levels of knowledge and experience who use policy as a vehicle to secure their goals.

Even though policy as practice shapes public and private spheres of life, I focus on the bureaucratic realm of policy. Whereas Weber (1946) characterizes bureaucracy as an ordered and cohesive form of organization, I appeal to its unpredictable, indeterminate, and even irrational dimensions (Hoag 2011; Gupta 2012; Graeber 2015). Unpredictability manifests not only in the ways local bureaucracies enact policies but also in street-level bureaucrats' responses to the demands of individuals, and in the strategies those seeking access to school employ to overcome bureaucratic hurdles. In this arena, social practices are shaped by state regulations, organizational constraints, and the discretion bureaucrats have in deciding when and how to apply those regulations (Lipsky 1969, 2010; Hoag 2011; Alpes and Spire 2014; Hoag and Hull 2017). Bureaucracies thus emerge as "terrains of lived experience" (Hoag 2014, 411) mediated by habits, emotions, and personal needs that orient how individuals behave (Hoag 2011).

In contrast with the stable apparatus of Weber's ideal bureaucracy, this study demonstrates that the uses and interpretations of a given policy are contingent upon unregulated interactions among a diverse set of actors. From this perspective, an analysis of policy appropriation in bureaucratic settings provides great insight into the mechanisms by which the supremacy of the state and its public officials are constantly negotiated.

BACKGROUND: FOR A NEW FATHERLAND, A REFURBISHED EDUCATION SYSTEM

The election of Rafael Correa Delgado as president transformed Ecuador's education landscape. Before Correa's election, the country's school system was obsolete (Cevallos and Bramwell 2015). The lack of a solid public expenditure system, coupled with an outdated legal framework, meant there were insufficient funds to guarantee school access for all. The state's weak educational capacity was particularly evident in its inadequate school infrastructure, disparate school distribution across the nation, an irrelevant national curriculum, lack of accountability mechanisms, and a devalued teaching profession (Cevallos and Bramwell 2015; Baxter 2016; Schneider, Cevallos, and Bruns 2019). Access to education was simply out of reach for many Ecuadorians.

Correa's politics of redistribution, which were based on a nationalist platform, were evident in his vision for a strong education system capable of dictating and implementing policy across the nation. Taking advantage of favorable economic conditions, particularly the surge in the price of Ecuador's oil exports, Correa's political agenda prioritized education reform that positioned education as both a human right and a public service (Cevallos and Bramwell 2015; Schneider et al. 2019).

One of the first measures Correa's education team took was to endorse the *Plan Decenal*, the Ten-Year Education Plan that was the product of consultations with various civil society organizations and confirmed by popular vote in 2006 (Ministerio de Educación 2007; Luna Tamayo 2014). After decades of short-term mandates, Correa's education plan finally offered the nation a long-term vision for the sector and a new role for the Ministry of Education. With the Plan Decenal, the ministry shifted from being a mere administrator of public funds to a generator of education policy (Baxter 2016). Of the eight policies proposed in the Plan Decenal, four prioritized educational access. The public commitment to school access for all regardless of national status was added to the principle

of universal citizenship instituted in Ecuador's 2008 constitution. This created a public dialogue about the promise of educational access for all children and youth between ages five and eighteen.³ Data show that a dramatic increase in school enrollment across ethnic lines and geographic location was a direct result of the public commitment to school access (Araújo and Bramwell 2015; Schneider et al. 2019). According to Ecuador's National Survey on Employment, Unemployment, and Underemployment (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos 2017), the gross enrollment rates for primary schooling, basic education, and secondary education during Correa's presidency surged more than five percentage points each, while the average years of schooling completed rose from 9.3 to 10.17.⁴

In contrast to other countries in the region, Ecuador's constitution grants immigrants the same political rights as nationals, including access to education (Góngora-Mera, Herrera, and Müller 2014); in this context, migratory status does not create differential opportunities to enter school. This perspective on universal access to education was institutionalized through two ministerial accords signed in 2007 and refined in 2008 by then-minister of education Raúl Vallejo. The accords stated that all migrants, regardless of status, could enroll in primary, basic, and secondary education at the level corresponding to their knowledge, skills, and age (see Rodríguez-Gómez 2018). To reduce the cost of education, the 2008 accord abolished the authentication of academic report cards and stated that all bureaucratic procedures related to education should be free of charge. A child needed to provide only two documents to register: an identification card and proof of their residential address, usually a utility bill. Schools were required to grant temporary enrollment even if a potential student had no documentation.⁵

Ecuador's education system underwent an extreme reform in 2010 to modernize the education sector with a new model of education management. The main goal of the reform was to "renovate processes and automate procedures to improve the service to the public" (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador n.d.). Underpinned by principles of "efficiency, promptness, and coverage," the education ministry

3 Compulsory education in Ecuador has three levels: early childhood (from 3 to 5 years old), basic education (from 5 to 15 years old), and secondary education (from 15 to 18 years old) (Registro Oficial: Órgano de la República del Ecuador 2011).

4 In this period, the gross enrollment rates for primary education surged from 93.17 to 97.45 percent, basic education from 91.39 to 96.06 percent, and secondary education from 51.18 to 70.80 percent (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos 2017).

5 In July 2019, Ecuador's president Lenín Moreno Garcés established a new visa for Venezuelans, but this change in migratory policy has not affected education policies or procedures to access to school. To obtain a humanitarian visa, as it was coined in Presidential Decree No. 826, applicants must create an online profile before their arrival, fill out a form, provide a criminal record report, attend an interview in Caracas, Bogotá, or Lima, and pay a US\$50 fee (Registro Oficial: Órgano de la República del Ecuador 2019).

opted to decentralize education management. In the new model, public officials were distributed at four national levels: two vice ministries, five coordinators, eight sub-secretariats, and thirty-seven boards. There also were four regional and local levels: education zones, districts, circuits, and public schools. In the new model, the national level retained control of policy-making, while the zone, district, circuit, and school levels delivered education services.

Following the principles of the New Management Model launched during the 2013-2014 academic year, the enrollment process had three successive steps: registration, allocation, and verification. Understanding this sequence enables us to comprehend more fully how refugee youth and their families navigated educational access. During registration, the *Coordinación Zonal* (Zone Coordination) provided enrollment services across the country, normally at schools listed on the Ministry of Education website. This process was mandatory for all students entering the public education system for the first time, which included children ready to attend early childhood classes and the first year of basic education, those who wished to transfer from private to public institutions, those who had dropped out of school, and recently arrived migrants. Proof of residential address and identity were required; a national identity card or passport was valid identification for the children of migrants. Street-level bureaucrats were responsible for uploading students' personal information onto the system platform, which automatically assigned students to a school near their home address. Students and their families were expected to look online to find out which school they had been assigned to.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS IN CONTEXT

METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

This article draws from an extended case study (Burawoy 2009) based on 13 months of fieldwork carried out in 2013 and 2014 in two public schools and at two NGOs in Ecuador, specifically in Quito and in La Misericordia, a small town on the northern border between Colombia and Ecuador. Because of the extensive network of governmental and non-governmental organizations that provide educational access at the various levels of public administration, I focus on the data I collected in Quito. More specifically, I analyze the interviews I conducted with parents, out-of-school youth, students with diverse migratory status, and public employees from the education sector.

I chose as my site the Antonio Garzón School, a public middle and high school with capacity for 650 students, which is located on the top of a hill in central Quito and is surrounded by stunning views of the Andes. I selected this site because it was identified by government authorities and UNHCR as a school with a large number of refugees. Recognizing the high risk of dropping out of school associated with young people between ages 12 and 16, coupled with the lack of studies on this age group, I conducted in-depth interviews with students enrolled in the ninth and tenth grades who had refugee status.

Aware that interviews in a school setting would not give me information about youth who could not access school, I volunteered with two international NGOs engaged in refugee education, where I co-led two informal educational workshops for migrant and non-migrant youth. To capture multiple experiences with the education bureaucracy, I interviewed parents and youngsters of the age noted above who represented a broad range of educational backgrounds, including a lack of access to education, intermittent access to education, and access to accelerated learning programs.

To gain a better understanding of encounters between youth, their families, and street-level bureaucrats, I interviewed civil employees directly involved in educational access. At the municipal level, I interviewed the key person responsible for school access in the district that oversaw the Antonio Garzón School. At the Ministry of Education, I interviewed two education policy-makers well known for their roles in universalizing education access. In this paper, I focus on the interviews I conducted with an undocumented youth living in Quito who was born in Colombia, two Colombian youth who had applied for refugee status (asylum seekers), eight Colombian youth with refugee status, ten parents of refugee students, two street-level bureaucrats, and two policy-makers.

Before every interview, I obtained written and oral consent, showed participants how to stop the digital audio recorder if they did not feel comfortable with something they said being recorded, and put the recorder in a visible, accessible place. All names included in this article are pseudonyms, some selected by the participants. During the interviews I asked questions that would enable me to understand how different actors conceptualized and experienced access to school. In interviews with parents and youth, I gathered detailed accounts of their trips to and interactions at different bureaucratic institutions. I took time to learn about the incongruent instructions they received and the amount of time and money they invested during the process of gaining access to school. In my interviews with street-level bureaucrats, I focused on the inconsistencies between written policies

and bureaucratic practice. I also paid careful attention to the bureaucratic devices that mediated interactions between the different actors, such as certifications, stamps, letters, and the Ministry of Education's enrollment platform.

DATA ANALYSIS

I conducted all interviews in Spanish, and they were then transcribed by a native Spanish speaker and myself. During the data analysis, I established and engaged in a comparative analysis across levels (institutional, municipal, and national) and type of educational access (in school, out of school). I coded my interview transcripts in NVivo by combining the etic codes from my research proposal with the emic codes that emerged while reading my data. The focus on these two comparative dimensions throughout the analytic process was not accidental, and it reflected my own preoccupation with the tension between the promises made in written documents and the many ways individuals across the education system made use of them.

POSITIONALITY

During my time in Quito, my Colombian nationality became a salient aspect of my identity. Due to my nationality, Ecuadorians across the socioeconomic strata perceived me as a natural ally to Colombian asylum seekers and refugees, whereas adult Colombians initially approached me with distrust. My position as a researcher from an elite U.S. university emphasized the distance between my experience and the past and present experiences of Colombians living in Quito. This was evident in such things as my ability to travel back home without restrictions and to speak face-to-face with high-ranking government and UNHCR officials. Despite this profound gap, I committed myself to building trust by offering to mediate between participants and the education bureaucracy when barriers to school registration and retention emerged. To reduce this social distance, I also actively sought to establish durable relationships with participants through extended fieldwork at the three main field sites. This long-term commitment not only enhanced my understanding of participants' daily struggles but also made them feel at ease when sharing their experiences with me. The Ecuadorian interviewees, particularly principals and teachers, did not refrain from sharing their biases against Colombian students and their families. During interviews with civil employees and policy-makers, my experience as a bureaucrat in Colombia's Ministry of Education opened new avenues for exploring shared practices and struggles.

LIMITATIONS

One limitation of this study is that, during the 13 months of fieldwork, I did not meet with or seek out refugees of any nationality other than Colombian. This is because, despite the recent arrival of refugees and migrants from many countries, the Colombian refugees constituted the vast majority of Ecuador's total refugee population (Cancillería del Ecuador 2019). Whether refugees from different backgrounds might have different bureaucratic encounters is a question that deserves consideration.

Even though recent research shows that gender plays a key role in mediating interactions between street-level bureaucrats and the general public (Alkadry and Tower 2014; Goodsell 2015), none of the seven mothers or three fathers I interviewed suggested that they had experienced gender bias in their encounters with public officials. Despite efforts to include all policy levels in my fieldwork, this study prioritizes the district level because access to the Ministry of Education headquarters was highly restricted, except for high-ranking public officials. This prevented me from interviewing public officials across the seven levels mentioned, which of course is a serious limitation when discussing the many processes that mediate policy appropriation. However, this paper makes a significant contribution to understanding how bureaucratic encounters shape access to school for refugee populations.

FINDINGS

In this section, I foreground the experiences of four groups of actors—high-ranking public officials, street-level bureaucrats, and parents and youth concerned with educational access—to highlight how people interpret and use policy. Three aspects of the mundane processes of policy-making emerge: (1) the tension between bureaucrats' representation of the education system and its daily workings, (2) the random and fragmented nature of policy interpretation in bureaucratic settings, and (3) the convergence of the various strategies and resources refugees employ with respect to education policy.

ORGANIZATION CHARTS VERSUS REALITY

“Well, my responsibility was to execute the decisions that were made at the national policy level and to roll them out on the ground. I was—how would you say?—the bridge between the policy-makers and the rest of the system. I was connected

with those on top and with the rest of the system; that is, to the schools, colleges, and other educational institutions.” This is how Elías, a high-ranking official at the Ministry of Education, described his responsibilities. His response aligned well with the blue-and-white poster hanging next to the ministry headquarters’ elevator that depicted the education sector hierarchy. This vertical representation (Ferguson and Gupta 2002) showed that a high-level group does the thinking, a middle-level group creates the programs and tools to operationalize the policy, and a third group implements it.

As a result of the New Management Model, education policy was appropriated by civil employees across the aforementioned seven layers before it reached its beneficiaries. The distance between high-level policy-makers and civil employees was manifested when the former agreed that the latter should not have any trouble following the procedures of the new model. According to those at the top, access to education had not only been established as a right in the Constitution and the Organic Law of Intercultural Education (LOEI), it also was included in Ecuador’s General Education Regulations. High-ranking public officials I interviewed reported that they trusted in the power of explicit rules and training workshops to shape civil employees’ interpretation of policy content. They assumed that neoliberal managerial guidelines, which included flowcharts, standards, and indicators (Robertson 2012), could map and homogenize bureaucratic practices, yet both of the street-level bureaucrats I interviewed had little or no knowledge of the 796-page manual that condensed all the processes civil employees in the education sector were to undertake in implementing the New Management Model. Furthermore, when I read the manual, I realized that it failed to spell out the access procedures relevant to those with refugee status (see Ministerio de Educación 2013).

Faced with hierarchical demands to implement the policy without proper guidelines, street-level bureaucrats improvised when adapting their practice to the regulatory frameworks discussed at the ministry headquarters. In this context, civil employees appeared to be overwhelmed by the need to provide hasty solutions to problems they did not foresee. The perspectives of high-level public officials on how policy was put into practice contrasted with the daily struggles of civil employees and the difficulties individuals with refugee status encountered in trying to gain access to school. I highlight some of these tensions as revealed in the testimony of Camilo, the person responsible for providing school access in the district where the Antonio Garzón School was located.

Contrary to Weber's (1946) ideal model of bureaucracy, wherein officials are appointed according to strict criteria and credentials, conversations with education stakeholders showed that the expansion of the education system during Correa's presidency created a new professional path that took many teachers out of the public schools and into governmental offices. For instance, the Ministry of Education transferred Camilo from a school computer laboratory in central Quito to an education district. Even though he saw the promotion as an opportunity for professional growth, he felt frustrated by the broad range of responsibilities that fell on his shoulders and the lack of training to prepare him for the position. Camilo's office responsibilities in many ways did not map onto the processes defined by the official flowcharts that made high-ranking public officials proud. He had 84 schools and approximately 20,600 students under his jurisdiction and his daily tasks covered a broad range of activities, including fixing colleagues' computers, developing software solutions with the national team at the Ministry of Education headquarters, and helping parents register and transfer their children from one institution to another.

Camilo was knowledgeable about the general steps that were meant to guarantee access to school, as they were spelled out in the LOEI. Nevertheless, he expressed some doubt when we discussed the procedures for those with refugee status. "To be honest with you," he said, "I do not know how the situation is under the new procedures. It is a delicate procedure, given the lack of official documentation." Then, in an attempt to offer more information, he added,

but we try to allocate schools the best we can, we try to guide them, we try to help people, but the lack of documents is an inconvenience. For example, the old procedures accepted passports, but many migrants came without a passport. They only brought the refugee identification card. With the refugee identification card you cannot confirm the person's information and enroll him.

This testimony evidences a tension between Camilo's willingness and personal commitment to facilitate access to school for all and how he interacted with individuals with refugee status who did not have a passport. Even though he acknowledged his limited understanding of education policy, he did not foresee that he could be the one who prevented a potential student from entering the education system. Despite the fact that official policy allowed students to register using the refugee ID card issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Human

Mobility, Camilo felt that this ID did not establish the holder's identity and he therefore did not see it as an official document. When I asked if he had received any training in providing access to school for immigrants, he responded that he had not, which contrasted with high-ranking officials' assumptions. He acknowledged that he received some emails with instructions but did not read them.

PIECEMEAL INTERPRETATIONS OF EDUCATIONAL ACCESS POLICIES

The daily drawbacks Camilo reported align well with the experiences shared by parents in this study. Although education policies had a comprehensive approach to providing educational access, its interpretation by public officials was fragmented. Street-level bureaucrats' imprecise policy interpretations implied that the processes those with refugee status had to follow to secure access to education were costly and rarely straightforward.

In 2013, the Ministry of Education decided to carry out a massive information campaign for the broad public about gaining access to school. The campaign included broadcast media, print media, and the internet. While high-level public officials said the communications strategy was successful, parents with limited access to public media were left behind. Karla, for example, who was mentioned at the beginning of this paper, did not own a TV or radio, subscribe to newspapers, or have a computer. Since arriving from Buenaventura in the Colombian Pacific region, her family had lived in Quito in dire poverty. Their lack of knowledge about the Ecuadorian education system prevented them from accessing the list of institutions that provided reliable information about school enrollment. Instead, to obtain a place in school for both of her children, Karla learned about the intricacies of school enrollment through an unofficial source: her Colombian neighbor. This person took Karla to the school where she enrolled her own children, introduced Karla to the school principal, and helped her collect what she thought were all the necessary documents, 13 in total. With that dossier and her two children in tow, Karla went to the Ministry of Education headquarters, which her neighbor had recommended she do. When Karla arrived, the receptionist continued to put on her makeup as she informed Karla that she was at the wrong institution. In narrating what she went through, Karla emphasized that "she did not look at my face, she did not even check the documents." Karla's home address meant she had to go to the enrollment center in Tarqui, almost one hour away from the ministry headquarters. It was late in the day when Karla finally arrived in Tarqui, and the civil servants there told her she should come back the next day, as they were closing soon. Karla, who was unemployed, had spent a full day of her time and US\$10 on transportation and lunch for herself and her two children.

Karla arrived in Tarqui early the next day, again with her children. The first civil servant Karla spoke to rejected all the documents in her dossier based on her migratory status as an asylum seeker. In so doing, the employee displayed the authority of the state and diminished the value of the documents as a means to gain access to school. Aware that arguing with a civil servant would not be productive, Karla decided to take advantage of the free time her unemployment gave her and to spend as much time as necessary to enroll both of her children in school. She left the office, then returned and got in line again. On her second time through the line, another civil employee greeted her with a friendly, “Welcome to my country,” and reviewed each document she presented. This time the documents served as mediators between Karla and the Ecuadorian state and the employee recognized the documents’ validity as a means to access school. When the first employee noticed that Karla was back, he told his colleague that he could not register Karla’s children because she did not have a valid identification card. After a short dispute, the second employee told Karla not to worry, “This is just bureaucracy,” and he promised to process her paperwork that day. The tension between the two street-level bureaucrats demonstrates that access to education can depend on individuals’ discretion.

In the end, Karla noticed that the second bureaucrat used only some of the documents to enroll her children—her own asylum-seeker identification card, the children’s birth certificates and academic reports, and her paid water bill. Before issuing the document certifying that Karla’s children had been enrolled, the employee used an informal tone to ask Karla, “Which grade should we send her to?” He felt that Karla’s daughter was too tall for her age and grade level, and he decided that both children, despite the authenticity of their Colombian academic reports, had to take placement exams. In this case, the civil employee selectively obeyed different sections of the regulations, which shows the unpredictable character of encounters with civil employees.

In such encounters between civil employees and refugees, the latter are socialized as beneficiaries of the Ecuadorian state. In this context, gaining access to school implies having a series of unpredictable interactions with civil employees. In her encounters, Karla experienced indifference, negligence, solidarity, camaraderie, and distrust. Her testimony reveals not only the uncertainties she endured throughout the process but also the vertical power relations between street-level bureaucrats and the public they serve. Her case illustrates how two interpretations of the same policy can yield opposite results.

FOR ACCESS: ALL RESOURCES ARE VALID

In contrast to Karla, who only spent two days navigating the system, Octavia, the mother of two middle schoolers with refugee status, spent 13 days and about US\$50 travelling between different offices of the education system. The fact that institutions operating at the national, municipal, and district level are all found in Quito makes the procedure more confusing. Octavia's experience reveals the amount of time and money people with refugee status spend in big cities like Quito to guarantee that their children have access to school. Here is her story:

It was very hard. I was like a puppet. First I went to the school, but they couldn't give me a place because first I had to be registered. They said that that was something new, so I told them to give me the document to present, and the answer was that they couldn't do that. From the school I was sent to the district offices located in La Carolina to register. From the district office they sent me to Pomasqui, but from Pomasqui they sent me to the Ministry of Education because I was Colombian, and from the ministry I was sent back once again to Pomasqui. I spent about 13 days on that. When at Pomasqui they finally realized that they had to register me, they told me that I had to present the citizen's ID card of an Ecuadorian person to register because I was Colombian. But how was I to provide an Ecuadorian citizen's ID card if I am my daughters' representative? I have a refugee's ID card that I always use here, but the answer was no, the system does not accept it. So I went to [an NGO], and Lucero lent me her citizen's ID card number, and the issue was settled.

According to written policy, neither nationality nor migratory status should limit access to school, but in practice they do. There was a mismatch between the number of digits on the refugee identification card and the Ministry of Education's online enrollment platform, which made it difficult for refugee ID cardholders to access school. Some Ecuadorian citizens lent their ID number to individuals with refugee status so they could register their children. Octavia's experience demonstrates the consequences of poorly trained street-level bureaucrats and a non-aligned system, but it suggests most importantly that she had to put together a wide range of resources to guarantee her two daughters a place in school. This made her comfortable enough to ask an NGO staffer for the personal favor of

using her national identification number. Her testimony alludes to the time, money, and considerable amount of social capital she invested in guaranteeing her children educational access.

Of the eight parents I interviewed who had refugee status, six managed to guarantee access to school for all of their children. Carolina, an undocumented mother of two, explained that she was able to register her youngest child because the school principal helped her with the registration process but that she did not have the same luck with Juan, her eldest son. Carolina's fruitless travels to the education district made the search for a school economically unsustainable, as every journey meant forgoing earnings and incurring costs. After three months of bureaucratic roundabouts and feeling desperate about her lack of success, Carolina asked her mother in Cali, Colombia, to take Juan back from Quito to Cali so he could enter school in his hometown. Her lack of financial resources and weak support network compelled her to send him back to the same region from which they had been forcibly displaced a few months earlier.

For Milena, the mother of 16-year-old Wilson and four other children, the experience of trying to enroll her children in school was very disappointing. While she was able to enroll her three youngest, her two older sons, Wilson and Cristiano, were still without access to school after nine months in Ecuador. According to Milena, their ethnic background as Afro-Colombians and their age (both were teenagers) added layers of exclusion to the bureaucratic process. Milena agreed that street-level bureaucrats had shown little willingness to help her process their documents and also claimed that the schools did not have space to accommodate them. For migrants like Karla, Octavia, Carolina, and Milena, who have little or no experience with Ecuadorian education institutions and only modest financial resources, obtaining access to school for their children proved difficult and resource consuming.

Toward the end of my fieldwork period, I visited five registration sites established for the 2014-2015 enrollment process, accompanied by refugee parents. The civil employees we encountered answered parents' questions cordially and shared a brochure printed by the Ministry of Education and the Sub-Secretariat of the District of Quito. In contrast to the information the ministry had published on its official website for the 2013-2014 enrollment period, this brochure included the access requirements for migrants, now broadly defined as "those who had entered or returned to the country." However, the list of requirements included a report of the last academic year completed and specified that the report had to

be notarized with an official stamp. The brochure did not specify that citizens of signatory countries of the Andrés Bello Covenant—an international agreement on educational, scientific, technological, and cultural cooperation between eight countries, including Colombia—did not have to certify their academic reports (Article 166, LOEI; Registro Oficial: Órgano de la República del Ecuador 2011). One of the five public servants we talked with had advised one mother to visit a notary public to get an official signature on her son’s academic reports. He could not give any information about the cost; he suggested that she inquire directly at the Ministry of Education. This is a common example of the new bureaucratic hurdles future families with refugee status will likely face.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Policy is often defined as a set of official guidelines. By obscuring how education stakeholders understand and enact (or don’t enact) a set of rules, this definition separates policy content from policy appropriation. In this study, to avoid this fallacy and highlight the ways policy-makers, street-level bureaucrats, and those with refugee status interact with education policy, I situated policy as an everyday activity whereby actors with diverse and sometimes contradictory interests meet in bureaucratic arenas to achieve their own purposes. This study illustrates that education policy does not take shape in a social vacuum; on the contrary, it is molded at the intersection of education reform, legal frameworks and regulations, institutional arrangements, official documents, and human interests. As refugees interpret policy content and interact with street-level bureaucrats, they assess their chances of success and use a wide range of strategies to push policy in their favor.

By revealing the intricacies of gaining school access for refugees in Quito, this paper explores the gap between how high-ranking officials think the education system works and how it actually operates outside the Ministry of Education headquarters. Those at the top of these hierarchical bureaucratic systems tend to have the illusion that their guidelines will be followed down the chain, but this is not always the case. To compound the problem, the greater the distance between high-ranking officials and street-level bureaucrats, the greater the potential for misunderstandings, tensions, and incongruities. In keeping with new contributions from anthropological studies of the state, the cases of Karla, Olivia, Carolina, and Milena point out the limitations of Weber’s (1946) ideal model of bureaucracy as a highly rational entity where activities required by the state and its beneficiaries “are distributed in a fixed way as official duties” (196). The

testimonies of public officials and the four women highlight the tensions between representations of bureaucracy as a rational, neutral, and efficient apparatus and the indeterminacy, unpredictability, and opacity of its daily workings. The data presented in this paper show that the recent education reform in Ecuador is experienced in manifold ways; whereas some felt confident that the changes in policy would trickle smoothly down the tiers of the education system, testimonies from street-level bureaucrats and those in search of access to education provide evidence that they did not.

Despite Ecuador's comprehensive education policy, which promises access to school for all regardless of migratory status, at the street level this policy is not interpreted as such. Distrust of refugees was clearly manifested in school enrollment procedures; despite the regulations and procedures framing access to school, the actual scrutiny of the four women's documents was not objective or impersonal. The street-level bureaucrats, including school administrators, interpreted the documents according to their own understanding of policies and regulations. Public officials can arbitrarily prioritize some documents over others, and those from official institutions, such as the Ministry of Education, were perceived as more trustworthy than others, which directly shaped refugee children's opportunities to enter school. In addition to their lack of proper training, time constraints, and insufficient information, the discretion these bureaucrats used was mediated by their poor understanding of the reasons and conditions of forced migration, all of which limited their capacity to respond to individual cases correctly and efficiently. Therefore, migratory status and a lack of documents are not in themselves barriers to school access in Ecuador. Rather, they became barriers when high-ranking officials and those doing the work on the ground missed the opportunity to align the state's technical tools at all levels and fully implement its inclusive legal framework.

Knotty bureaucracies are costly for users in terms of time, money, and effort. Participants in this study alluded to the various resources they invested in their search for educational access, including knowledge of the system, time, money, and social relationships—resources that were not equally available to all. In using these resources, they displayed great agency in creating opportunities for their children to enter school. However, their commitment to their children's education was constrained by factors beyond their control. The data from this study illustrate that, in addition to street-level bureaucrats' discretion, factors linked to socioeconomic status (for Carolina) and age, gender, and race (for Milena) defined and limited the opportunities of young people with refugee status to enter

school. Their cases illustrate how migratory status intersects with poverty, race, age, and gender to limit educational opportunities. Clearly, the unpredictability of bureaucracies has the potential to exclude the most marginalized children from the education system.

This research has two implications for the EiE field. First, it invites practitioners and scholars to examine the actors, spaces, and practices behind the barriers to education faced by displaced children and youth. To do so, however, it is necessary to go beyond a list of obstacles and pay careful attention to the everyday bureaucratic practices that prevent children from gaining access to school. In-depth interviews are useful in this endeavor, as they interrupt assumptions of access to education as a universal path and reveal the localized and nuanced nature of efforts to enroll in school. This research also positions street-level bureaucrats as key education stakeholders and demonstrates through interviews that refugees living in Quito experienced access to school as an unpredictable space where rules were enforced according to bureaucrats' individual interpretations. In the EiE field, references to the government tend to foreground policy-makers, but this study highlights the central role street-level bureaucrats can play in the interpretation and implementation of education policy.

By analyzing different facets of state bureaucracy—education policy reform, the structure of the education system, bureaucratic documents, and, of course, street-level bureaucrats—this study illustrates how education policies that promise free access to school for all are not enough. Policy frameworks need well-aligned bureaucracies that are capable of fulfilling their promises and street-level bureaucrats who have a clear understanding of the conditions that cause forced migration and the procedures that frame access to school for this population. To achieve this, policy “check-ins,” where civil employees across multiple layers of public administration meet to verify the consistency of the procedures put in place and assess their relevance to potential state beneficiaries, including refugees, could be helpful. Laws, decrees, manuals, process maps, flowcharts, software, and public materials should all convey well-aligned information, and training programs should be mandatory for incoming and current civil employees so they can hone their judgment without jeopardizing any children's opportunity to access school. These two initiatives should be supported by strong documentation and communication practices that reach not only those in government offices but also those who, because of their life circumstances, perceive the state and the services it provides as beyond their reach.

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