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EDITORIAL NOTE

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In 2024, 295 million school-age children worldwide lived in conflict-affected and fragile countries, and more than 103 million children were unable to attend school—an increase of 31 million since 2023 (Save the Children 2024). As of December 2024, children made up an estimated 40 percent of the global refugee population and 49 percent of internally displaced people (UNICEF 2024). With the intensification of conflict, poverty, and environmental disasters, it is expected that displacement will continue to increase. This will aggravate the education crisis and leave many more displaced children without access to school, while those who are in school will continue to struggle to meet basic learning standards. These statistics underscore the deepening crises affecting children worldwide while stressing the need for immediate, targeted interventions to safeguard their right to an education. Despite the overwhelming challenges—growing education gaps, increased violence and exploitation—many global efforts on the part of policymakers, program planners, scholars, and advocates remain focused on finding solutions and providing hope.

The *Journal on Education in Emergencies (JEiE)*, now in its tenth year of publication, continues to offer free, open-access, peer-reviewed discussions of the education challenges facing students and other stakeholders worldwide, and of programs and policies that may support their learning, development, wellbeing, and future livelihoods.

The five research articles, two field notes, and three book reviews presented in *JEiE* Volume 10, Number 1 explore questions about displacement, identity, and the right to belong in Jordan, Nigeria, Palestine, and the United States. They review initiatives in Colombia and Ethiopia that focus on teachers' wellbeing, training, and professionalization, as well as the opportunities and challenges of refining and scaling-up play-based learning for refugee and host communities in Ethiopia, Lebanon, Tanzania, and Uganda. The authors featured in this issue also provide new insights into the displacement, migration, and resettlement experiences of populations from Iraq, South Sudan, Somalia, Syria, and beyond, and join debates centered on the agency, power, and deservingness of vulnerable, marginalized, and crisis-affected groups.

These debates are particularly important as US President Donald Trump begins his second administration and political tensions increase around such issues as internationalism and isolationism, migration and belonging. Meanwhile, the recent wave of rejections of incumbent leaders and political parties worldwide has exacerbated the uncertainty of the global political landscape. Against this backdrop, the scholars who contributed to this issue examine urgent and ongoing questions about how to ensure safe, effective, and quality education for all students amid political and social forces that may be antithetical

to this pursuit. In Syria, for example, the former members of the paramilitary now in the transitional government have moved quickly to revise the country's curriculum and textbooks—with no apparent consultation with educators or a transparent public process for instituting the changes (Abdulrahim 2025). Such abrupt, unilateral decisionmaking at the top of an education system may undermine teachers' sense of professional identity and their motivation, both of which Coetzee and her coauthors (2025) suggest in this issue are critical elements of teachers' wellbeing and their ability to foster an effective educational environment.

Occupation and war also undermine attention to vulnerable students and their communities. Children in Gaza and Ukraine face increasingly desperate conditions this winter. They are forced to confront the cold and darkness with only meager shelter and minimal access to humanitarian aid. The impact on education systems in these regions has been particularly devastating. Gaza has experienced significant destruction of its education infrastructure: 57 incidents of attacks on education were recorded in Gaza in October 2024 alone, including forced evacuations, airstrikes, and arson (INEE 2025). In Ukraine, the war and ongoing energy crisis have seriously disrupted education (UN OHCHR 2024). These parallel crises that are depriving children of essential, quality education are affecting a generation of children in both regions.

Some international nongovernmental organizations are responding to this displacement and destruction of infrastructure by bringing lower-tech education programming directly into the homes of displaced children and their families, and by building caregivers' and parents' capacity and confidence to provide young learners with education continuity (see Abdulrazzak et al. 2025, in this issue). Others are addressing this issue by emphasizing the importance of place-based education as a way to build students' awareness of their cultural heritage, which, they argue, is fundamental to their identity formation (see Wagemakers 2025, in this issue).

The research and field work featured in this issue of *JEiE* highlight the need for education that responds to context. Taken together, these articles underscore the need for education systems that are flexible, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse cultural and sociopolitical conditions in which they operate. Creating such systems will help to bridge divides and foster understanding, compassion, and the provision of effective education in an increasingly polarized and violent world.

The first two research articles in this issue explore attitudes toward play-based learning and its implementation in East Africa and Lebanon. In "Understanding Perspectives and Practices of 'Learning through Play' in East African Refugee and Host-Country Schools," Abraha Asfaw, Silvia Diazgranados, Betty Akullu Ezati, Jonathan Kwok, Christina Raphael, Anne Smiley, and Peter Ssenkusu consider existing play-based learning practices in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda and discuss how to sensitize education stakeholders to the value of incorporating evidence-based learning through play (LtP) practices into their

teaching. Drawing from observations, interviews, and focus group discussions with 205 teachers, parents, and head teachers and 160 students, Asfaw and his coauthors observed that, although these stakeholders recognized the developmental benefits of play, many of them saw play and formal learning as mutually exclusive. The data suggests that several practices in use at the research sites, including guided play and games, storytelling and role-play, and energizers, either met the criteria for LtP or were LtP adjacent, although more teacher-centered practices were also common. Having referenced these practices against constructivist pedagogies and the literature on play-based learning, the authors then develop a typology of classroom-based LtP activities, their aim being to encourage policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to strengthen the ability of education systems to promote LtP. They encourage education decisionmakers to invest in targeted support that will enable teachers to identify practices proximal to LtP and to gradually increase their implementation of quality LtP practices. Asfaw et al. suggest that supportive school-based leadership, enabling school policies, parental involvement, teacher professional development, addressing the capacity and structural limitations for teachers in refugee-hosting contexts, and framing LtP as connected to active learning methods are among the factors that may support the robust implementation of LtP.

The next research article, "Navigating Remote Early Childhood Education in Hard-to-Access Settings: A Qualitative Study of Caregivers' and Teachers' Experiences in Lebanon," by Somaia Abdulrazzak, Duja Michael, Jamile Youssef, Lina Torossian, Ola Kheir, Diala Hajal, and Kate Schwartz, extends the notion of the vital role parents, caregivers, and teachers play in realizing the potential of play-based learning. The authors review the qualitative factors that may have contributed to the effectiveness of a remote early learning program (RELP) and of Ahlan Simsim Families (ASF), a parenting support intervention, for Syrian refugees in Lebanon during the country's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the August 2020 Beirut port explosion.[1] In July 2022 and January 2023, after the RELP and ASF interventions, Abdulrazzak et al. analyzed data from 71 interviews and 9 focus group discussions in order to understand the experiences of teachers, early childhood development facilitators, and caregivers. Based on these data, the authors theorize that teachers' and caregivers' adaptability, their commitment to early childhood education, and flexible programming that accommodated family schedules promoted the success of RELP and ASF. The caregivers' recognition of the two programs' value and their willingness to embrace play-based learning drove their engagement. The study highlights the importance of program design, teacher training, and collaboration in meeting families' diverse needs. Abdulrazzak and her coauthors, applying Weisner's (2002) ecocultural framework, conclude that programming that is flexible and responsive to families' needs can have a positive impact, even in the absence of established routines or when routines are undermined by conflict, instability, or crisis.

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1   See Schwartz et al. (2024) for details on the RELP and ASF impact study.

The next research article also evokes the challenges of addressing teacher capacity and training among hard-to-reach populations. In "'It Would Help If We Actually Knew about the Initiative': The Barriers Female Refugees Face in Accessing Incentive Teacher Training in Ethiopia," Andie Reynolds identifies program-specific and structural challenges that curtailed refugee girls' participation and retention in a teacher training initiative in Ethiopia. Longstanding investments in training refugees to become teachers who deliver primary education to refugees in Ethiopia were bolstered when, in 2018, the Ethiopian government, supported by international funders, began to offer scholarships to refugees so they could study to become qualified primary school teachers at teacher training colleges. The initiative has faced major challenges in recruiting participants, particularly female refugees. In February and March 2020, Reynolds led a situational needs assessment at 14 refugee camps in Ethiopia, which included input from 685 participants in the form of survey data, focus group discussions, and semistructured interviews. Reynolds lays out the design and rollout issues related to the initiative itself, including poor recruitment, a lack of awareness of the initiative among adolescent refugee girls, and delays in training and scholarships due to funding shortfalls. Meanwhile, the low incentive payment (most of these teachers received the equivalent of US$12-$14 per month), a low supply of teachers, limited opportunities for career progression, and a scarcity of eligible refugee girls situate the initiative in the ongoing structural issues facing refugee education in Ethiopia. Reynolds provides participant-driven recommendations to address these barriers. The article begs reflection on the invisibility of these refugee girls: if upper primary refugee girls living in refugee camps are to serve as teachers for the lower grades in the very camps they reside in, what support do they deserve to continue their own education after primary school? Why have they been overlooked in the coordination and implementation of a teacher training initiative that needs their labor?

The final two research articles in this issue use innovative qualitative methods to shed light on intergroup contact, belonging, and social hierarchy. In "'America Will Educate Me Now': What Do Iraqi Refugees with Special Immigrant Visas Deserve and Who Decides?" Jill Koyama examines how notions of deservingness and worthiness shape Iraqi refugees' higher education experiences and investigates what these refugees feel they are owed after having served with the Allied Forces during the Iraq War. Koyama draws from ethnographic observation and interviews she conducted while working as a researcher and educator in Wayside, New York. In order to understand and frame the college-going experiences of 13 Special Immigrant Visa holders from Iraq who resettled in Wayside, Koyama unpacks the colonial relationships implied in the assimilation of refugees and their preparation for economic productivity through higher education degree programs. She finds that, because of these refugees' ambition to earn advanced degrees, combined with their previous service to the country in which they now reside, they position themselves as deserving of—and even owed—a higher education. Koyama reflects on how this conclusion resonated with residents of Wayside amid national discourses that were hostile to newcomers during the years of her study (2011-2018), which culminated in President Trump's executive order to enforce a ban on immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries. With her emphasis

on the political mobilization of deservingness and the effect of crisis on those it has touched, even across the buffers of time and geographic distance, Koyama makes an important contribution to the education in emergencies (EiE) field.

In the final research article in this issue, "Schools as Sites of Social Reproduction: Student Interactions in Diverse Secondary Schools in Nigeria," Marlana Salmon-Letelier and S. Garnett Russell present a comprehensive mixed methods study in which they explore student friendships and interactions in diverse secondary schools in Nigeria over the course of one academic year. Salmon-Letelier and Russell highlight students' perspectives within Nigeria's ethnically, religiously, and linguistically divided society through survey data, analyses of students' social networks, and individual student interviews. The study considers how academic spaces—classrooms, for example—and nonacademic areas—dormitories, common areas, and spaces for religious observance—in Nigeria's Federal Unity Colleges create an environment in which students can enact their ethnic and religious identities in relationship to other students of the same or a different background. Salmon-Letelier and Russell find that incidents of separation or exclusion often involve at least one identity marker, although these markers often intersect and overlap, as suggested by the fact that the Hausa Muslim students experience more instances of ostracization and exhibit more insular friendship networks. Finally, they find that students who are in their final year at the Federal Unity Colleges and thus have had the most exposure to this diverse space may have more flexible boundaries when interacting across identity groups and more moderate opinions toward students who are unlike them than the students who are in their first year at these colleges.

Our field notes section begins with a critical reflection on a program that also centers on belonging and placemaking in a divided region. In his field note, "Cultural Heritage and Education: A Place-Based Educational Project in Jericho, Palestine," Bart Wagemakers argues for the importance of children's awareness of their cultural heritage to their identity-formation, particularly in conflict-affected areas. Wagemakers describes the Cultural Heritage and Education-Jericho (CHE-J) project's aim to increase young learners' appreciation of their heritage, of cultural artifacts and places of significance to their shared histories, and of their sense of belonging and ownership over these artifacts, sites, and histories. He reviews the purpose, design, and adaptation of the CHE-J project, as well as constraints on its implementation during the program pilot in the West Bank, Palestine, in December 2021. The five CHE-J activity modules address learning outcomes related to geography, archaeology, and history, among other themes. The CHE-J pilot in the Ein el-Sultan refugee camp in Jericho included an excursion for students and teachers to the Hisham's Palace archaeological site, and culminated in a final assignment to create an exhibit or perform a play in which students brought to life their personal relationship with their city. Wagemakers positions the CHE-J project as a potentially promising approach to cultural heritage education in other conflict-affected settings, provided it is adapted to the specific conditions of those contexts.

The authors of our second field note also provide a proof of concept for a modular intervention that can be adapted to a variety of EiE settings. In "Coaching-Observing-Reflecting-Engaging: An Intervention for the Development of Teacher Wellbeing," April R. Coetzee, Felicity L. Brown, Vania Alves, J. Lawrence Aber, Juliana Córdoba, and Mark J. D. Jordans introduce the CORE intervention. CORE, which stands for Coaching-Observing-Reflecting-Engaging, provides teachers with the skills and knowledge they need to create a classroom environment that supports learning. It does so in part by helping teachers hone their social-emotional competencies and improve their own wellbeing. Coetzee et al. outline the theory of change underpinning the development, field-testing, and adaptation of the CORE intervention in Chocó, Colombia. CORE draws from acceptance and commitment therapy and from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning social-emotional framework to address the structural, professional, and situational challenges facing teachers in EiE settings. The authors detail the wellbeing workshops and the cycle of mentorship modules and support that mobilize the CORE principles. Finally, Coetzee et al. review the perceptions of the relevance, acceptability, and feasibility of CORE among the educators who participated in the pilot, thus informing the CORE programming team's approach to consolidating the intervention for future adaptation, adoption, and scaling.

We complete this issue with three book reviews that again touch on the themes of belonging and connection to place, especially in the refugee experience, as well as the ability of students and their communities to claim agency and stake out their future. In the first book review, Farzanah Darwish reviews Sarah Dryden-Peterson's book *Right Where We Belong: How Refugee Teachers and Students Are Changing the Future of Education*. Dryden-Peterson draws from more than 600 interviews and 15 years of ethnographic case study research across 23 countries, including Uganda, Somalia, Lebanon, and South Africa, to shed light on the innovative, community-driven approaches to supporting refugees' integration, resilience, and belonging that are being implemented in these countries. She blends the intimate, humanizing stories of refugees she has encountered in her research with actionable, evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and educators alike. She emphasizes the importance of flexible forms of education grounded in mental health support, community engagement, and culturally relevant curricula and educational materials. Darwish writes that readers of *JEiE* will appreciate the book's exploration of the power of refugee-led education to drive local solutions and cultivate refugees' agency in shaping the trajectory of their education, their lives, and their communities.

The next piece in this section is Ozen Guven's review of *Citizen Identity Formation of Domestic Students and Syrian Refugee Youth in Jordan: Centering Student Voice and Arab-Islamic Ontologies* by Patricia K. Kubow. Focus group discussions with Syrian refugee and Jordanian students who attend double-shift schools in Amman form the backbone of Kubow's investigation of how these students construct their social and civic identities, and the role of curricula and school-based interactions in that process. Guven highlights Kubow's finding that the Syrian and Jordanian students center their shared language, religion, history, and geography in reporting how they navigate the inclusion of newcomers

in Jordan's state education system. Kubow tracks these students' experiences with global trends in refugee education policy in which refugee students are increasingly included in host-country education systems, albeit frequently in a segregated way, such as enrolling them in double-shift schools rather than making the school systems more fully integrated. Guven points to Kubow's application of an ontological philosophical inquiry, where the students and their environment are in a constant dynamic process of "becoming," as contributing to the book's innovative ability to bridge citizenship education and EiE.

In his review of *Laboratories of Learning: Social Movements, Education and Knowledge-Making in the Global South* by Mario Novelli, Birgül Kutan, Patrick Kane, Adnan Çelik, Tejendra Pherali, and Saranel Benjamin, João Souto-Maior extends the discussion of the transformative role of education, communities claiming agency and taking power, and looking to the future. Novelli and his coauthors contribute to social movement theory by looking at the fine-grained innerworkings and relationships of four grassroots social movement institutions in Colombia, Türkiye, South Africa, and Nepal. Souto-Maior notes that the authors shed structural and functionalist perspectives toward social movement institutions and instead adopt the position that social movements are the product of dynamic, internal microlevel processes, including the knowledge-making that happens in the process of these institutions fighting for a better future. This learning can be explicitly pedagogical (e.g., teach-ins) or informal, incidental or experiential, and can occur through actions and encounters with others involved in the movement. Souto-Maior lays out Novelli et al.'s observation that much of the process of making meaning in social movements in the Global South is based in building and mobilizing diverse coalitions, framing social movements in endogenous knowledge of historical power relationships (e.g., with the Global North), and setting locally relevant, practical agendas for capitalizing on newfound power. Souto-Maior writes that the book is a must-read for those in the EiE sector who work on issues of social justice or human rights—which without a doubt includes many readers of *JEiE* Volume 10, Number 1.

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UNDERSTANDING PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES OF "LEARNING THROUGH PLAY" IN EAST AFRICAN REFUGEE AND HOST-COUNTRY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we investigate understandings and practices of learning through play (LtP) in refugee and host-country contexts in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda. This is an area in which international donors have increased their investments in recent years. We used a positive deviance approach to select 12 best practice preprimary and primary schools. We used ethnographic methods to study these schools for 14-20 days in order to learn from their existing play-based teaching and learning practices. Our findings draw from the research team's observations, visually stimulated interviews, and focus group discussions with 205 teachers, parents, and head teachers, and 160 students. The findings reveal that most of these education stakeholders (teachers, students, and parents) understood play and formal learning to be mutually exclusive but also recognized the developmental benefits of play. The findings also describe various LtP and LtP-adjacent learning activities, such as guided play and games, storytelling and role-play, energizers, and structured playful learning. The factors found to be critical to the school-based implementation of LtP include supportive policies, school leadership, and parental support, professional development and support for teachers, and addressing schools' capacity and structural limitations. Based on these findings, we recommend that LtP proponents frame LtP as connected to active learning methods in terms of definition, conceptualization, and advocacy for its integration into policy frameworks. We built on the extant constructivist pedagogy and play literature to develop a typology of classroom-based LtP activities with the aim of encouraging policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to strengthen education systems' ability to provide targeted support for teachers that will enable them to gradually increase their implementation of quality LtP practices across typology zones.

EDUCATION QUALITY IN EAST AFRICA

One important way that children develop is through play. There is growing evidence that integrating play-based teaching methods into schooling can improve children's physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and creative skills (Dore, Smith, and Lillard 2015; Tominey and McClelland 2011; Toub et al. 2016; Zosh et al. 2017). The evidence also demonstrates that structured playful activities done with trusted adults can help mitigate the effects of toxic stress among children in situations of adversity, including refugees (Shonkoff 2012). This suggests that integrating play-based methods into schooling in conflict-affected settings, including refugee contexts, can improve children's holistic learning and psychosocial wellbeing. Education resources are currently scarce in most refugee contexts, including in East Africa. The teaching methods used in these settings tend to be didactic and to depend on teachers who are over extended and under supported to deliver the curricular content (Altinyelken 2010; Mendenhall, Gomez, and Varni 2018; Kiriuki and Angoye 2018). Learning outcomes among these children are extremely low, and many children leave the education system entirely (UNESCO 2018).

Learning through play (LtP) used in education settings has been understood as a teaching and learning method that builds on constructivist pedagogies to ensure the provision of quality education across education levels. An evidence review conducted by LEGO Foundation suggests that LtP features five characteristics that make learning activities joyful, actively engaging, meaningful, iterative, and socially interactive. Most of the extant research on LtP is from stable contexts (Zosh et al. 2017). Therefore, to understand LtP in contexts of conflict and crisis, we conducted a cross-country study in 12 case-study schools in refugee and host-community contexts in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda. We selected the schools using a positive deviance approach, which is an asset-based method that recognizes positive deviants who exhibit desirable behaviors despite the many challenges they face, to identify culturally relevant and scalable programming (Cohen et al. 2019). School actors, teachers in particular, exhibited desirable LtP behaviors in the case-study schools without the support of any intervention. The behaviors, which were operationalized through active learning, were guided by the five characteristics of play referred to above.

In this study, we employed ethnographic methods to answer our main research question: How is LtP understood and implemented in early childhood development (ECD) centers and primary schools in low-resource and humanitarian contexts in East Africa? We explore conceptualizations of LtP, plot LtP practices on an emergent typology, and discuss barriers to and enablers of LtP practices. We draw from the extant literature on active learning to offer recommendations that will enable policymakers and practitioners to implement effective active and playful learning methods in ECD and primary classrooms. This study took place in three East African refugee and host-country contexts, but it is relevant to other low-resource and crisis-affected settings.

LEARNING THROUGH PLAY IN EAST AFRICA

The definition of play has been theorized and debated for decades, with no consensus achieved as yet (Bergen 2014; Pyle and Danniels 2017). Play is often conceptualized as a continuum consisting of constructs like role, agency, and initiation, although these continuums often emerge from contexts in the Global North (Pyle and Danniels 2017; Miller and Almon 2009; UNICEF 2018; Zosh et al. 2017, 2018). These continuums use terms like "free play," "guided play," "structured play/games," and "direct instruction," although these categories are not mutually exclusive. In free play, children initiate and direct play activities without adult involvement. During guided play, adults provide play materials, time, and/or space, and may provide feedback to the children. Structured play, such as games and sports, is bound by rules. Direct instruction refers to teacher-centered instructional practices, such as choral recitation. Research from the United States suggests that "brain breaks," particularly those involving play and energizers, can be valuable to children's learning by providing an opportunity to rest, process, and acquire new information (Godwin et al. 2016). Activities across the continuum are complementary to children's holistic skills development. However, offering one in isolation should not be viewed as a panacea for the delivery of quality education (Parker and Thomsen 2019). Among such instructional activities, Godwin et al. (2016) identified three types of time-off-task behaviors—distractions in the classroom environment, peers, and self-distraction—that hinder children's engagement in learning, despite their being present in a learning environment.

Evidence suggests that children learn best when they are actively engaged in meaningful, iterative, socially interactive, and joyful activities (Parker and Thomsen 2019; Yogman et al. 2018; Zosh et al. 2017). These five characteristics of play align with constructivist teaching methodologies, such as active learning and student-centered learning that is guided by adults around specific objectives (Zosh et al. 2018). Play, its connection to existing constructivist teaching methodologies, and its role in education are interpreted differently across contexts and stakeholders, globally and in East Africa (Gaskins, Haight, and Lancy 2007; Mendenhall et al. 2021). Evidence from diverse low-resource and humanitarian contexts shows that parents have positive perceptions of the cognitive and developmental benefits of play for young children (Foulds 2022), but that they question the role of play in classroom learning (Kabay, Wolf, and Yoshikawa 2017). This poses challenges to the integration of LtP into education systems. Despite the varied perceptions of play expressed by education stakeholders around the globe, there is only minimal systematic documentation of their perspectives on LtP in contexts of conflict and crisis.

While all play is important for children's development and should be encouraged, conceptualizations of classroom-based LtP may benefit from a shift from free play toward guided play, which is characterized by adult-led or adult-initiated activities centered around learning objectives. This conceptualization is what we adopted for this study.

This shift aligns LtP with active learning methodologies that are already integrated into education policies. It builds on accepted understandings of the purpose of education and cultural beliefs about teachers' and students' roles, in this case in East Africa in particular. However, neither LtP nor active learning is a silver bullet that guarantees quality education (Mendenhall et al. 2021; Sakata, Oketch, and Candappa 2021; Tabulawa 2013). Although there is scant evidence on culturally relevant LtP practices in crisis-affected settings, such as refugee communities, research from Ghana, Kenya, and Malawi highlights how cultural practices such as songs, dance, and storytelling can provide a foundation for LtP (Croft 2002; Dzamesi and van Heerden 2020; Freshwater, Sherwood, and Mbugua 2008).

Schweisfurth (2013) conceptualized learner-centered pedagogy across axes with a "minimum standard" of quality implementation, which suggests that LtP practices also occur on a spectrum of implementation quality and standards. Global research on learner-centered instructional practices reveal a lack of coherence between reported and observed practices. For example, teachers may attempt to implement student-centered activities but ultimately co-opt materials or strategies from Malawi and Namibia, or they many adopt didactic ways of using student-centered methods (Mtika and Gates 2010; O'Sullivan 2004). Sakata, Oketch, and Candappa (2021) found that teachers in Tanzania were aligned conceptually with a learner-centered pedagogy, but they struggled to implement these practices due to structural barriers and were thus unable to implement quality learner-centered pedagogy. Moland (2017) found that teachers in Nigeria had limited capacity to use the materials provided for their intended purpose, which led them to co-opt the LtP materials and use them in more teacher-centered ways like rote recitation. Altinyelken (2010) found similarly that teachers in Uganda reported implementing child-centered practices, yet classroom observations revealed that they actually used a "hybrid of traditional and reform-oriented practices" (162). Teachers' attempts to provide student-centered learning or to use co-opted student-centered methods may not fully embody active learning, but their attempts do represent a step toward improved quality, which can be leveraged and supported to achieve higher quality particularly in contexts with extreme structural barriers or limited capacity (Bartlett and Mogusu 2013).

Incremental change in LtP practices or teacher practices in general should also be considered within Vavrus' (2009) conception of "contingent constructivism." She argues that, given teachers' sociocultural positions and the structural factors they encounter, constructivist pedagogy needs to be adapted to recognize the multifaceted contexts in which teachers work. In their evidence review of teacher professional development (TPD) on LtP in East Africa, Mendenhall et al. (2021) highlight the importance of understanding the cultural and systemic factors that influence the implementation of LtP, such as quality TPD and time. Rather than being an inflexible pedagogical panacea, LtP enables teachers to adopt and adapt constructivist methods that are relevant to their contexts. Thus, building teachers' skills, motivation, and resources to navigate complex classroom contexts can mitigate their co-opting of LtP methods, and can lead to the incremental implementation of contextualized LtP that aims to achieve a minimum standard of quality.

The existing research primarily uses a deficit approach, which highlights the gaps in other approaches while showing little understanding of the contextual factors that facilitate the implementation of LtP. This study is situated within unique country contexts that feature complex education systems, as described below.

LEARNING THROUGH PLAY IN ETHIOPIA, TANZANIA, AND UGANDA

Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda are host to more than 4.5 million refugees (UNHCR 2022). Ethiopia and Uganda have made a commitment through the Djibouti Declaration (IGAD 2017) to include refugee children in their national education systems. Tanzania, however, is not a signatory to the Djibouti Declaration or the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, and education services in that country are administered by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Limited resources, financing, and teacher capacity in refugee and host-country education systems remain a challenge in providing equitable access to quality education in all three countries (Mendenhall, Gomez, and Varni 2018).

LtP and student-centered learning are not new to East Africa (Mendenhall et al. 2015). In Ethiopia, teacher training policies and the national curriculum framework "adopt[ed] the principles of active learning" (MoE 1994; 2009, 1). The Tanzanian curricula for preprimary and primary education emphasize the use of play and active learning approaches, respectively, as the primary pedagogical approaches (MoEST 2019). In Uganda, the ECD and primary curricula and teacher training policies recommend using active learning and play-based approaches to learning (MoES 2012, 2016).

Despite these policies, research on the implementation of active learning reveals gaps in practice in Ethiopia (Keski-Mäenpää 2018; Serbessa 2006), Tanzania (Kejo 2017), and Uganda (Schulte and Kasirye 2019; Ssentanda and Andema 2019). The key challenges to its implementation include curriculum structure, test-oriented instructional processes, large classes, and scarce teaching and learning materials (TLMs). Moreover, the teachers in refugee settings may be incentive teachers, meaning that their qualifications, training, and pedagogical knowledge are more limited than those of the host-community teachers, which compounds the challenges faced in refugee schools. Both incentive and national teachers reported that they have received only limited professional development on active learning, despite some ad-hoc training organized by international and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (Bengtsson et al. 2020).

METHODOLOGY

In this study, we apply a positive deviance case-study approach and use ethnographic methods to answer the main question: How is LtP understood and implemented in ECD centers and primary schools in low-resource and humanitarian contexts in East Africa? We also pose three subquestions:

1. What does LtP mean to children, teachers, and parents in the case-study schools?

2. What does LtP look like in the case-study schools?

3. What barriers and opportunities challenge or facilitate the engagement of children, teachers, and parents with LtP at school?

Positive deviance is an asset-based approach that recognizes positive deviants who exhibit desired behaviors in challenging or constrained environments. Positive deviants in this case were the schools that used LtP, despite having limited resources. This approach identifies contextually relevant and sustainable practices that have potential to scale (Cohen et al. 2019; Singhal and Svenkerud 2019).

Sample

Our criteria for selecting positive deviant case-study schools included (i) experience implementing LtP methods that are operationalized as student-centered learning and guided by the five characteristics of play; (ii) being non-fee-based private schools; (iii) not receiving external funding; and (iv) being refugee and/or low-resource host-community schools.

We collaborated with International Rescue Committee (IRC) field staff members and education officials to identify promising schools. Implementing LtP as initially defined—that is, by the five characteristics of play—was challenging and required that it be operationalized as student-centered learning. Additional snowball sampling and outreach to NGOs widely known to implement LtP helped us to identify additional potential schools. COVID-19-related school closures and the positive deviant nature of our site selection made it necessary to conduct multiple rounds of sampling. We gathered descriptive data from a range of schools in order to find the schools with best practices and quality active learning pedagogy. Many refugee schools were excluded, due to the limited LtP practices observed during the preliminary site selection. Site visits for the final selection ensured that schools met the criteria. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants.

Table 1: Sample by Participant Category

Country	Schools			Individual Participants			
	Primary	ECD	Combined	Head Teachers	Teachers	Parents	Children
Ethiopia	2	2	0	4	15	62	61
Tanzania	0	1	3	4	17	38	52
Uganda	2	2	0	4	17	44	47
TOTAL	4	5	3	12	49	144	160

Instruments

Observations

The researchers observed teachers' practices, the classroom environments, and children engaging in LtP activities. They also observed indoor and outdoor free play at the case-study schools. They took photographs and videos, wrote field notes, and used a semistructured observation tool that focused on the presence of the five characteristics of play. The tool was written in English, as all the researchers were fluent speakers.

Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

Audiovisual data of LtP activities that were captured in the first few days of data collection were used as stimuli for the key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) we conducted. The KIIs and FGDs enabled the participants to describe their interpretations of the LtP activities depicted in the audiovisual data, which served to complement, deepen, and challenge the researchers' initial interpretations (Richard and Lahman 2015). The teachers and head teachers participated in three KIIs throughout the data-collection period, whereas the parents and children participated in one FGD. The researchers at some primary-level study sites prompted the children to draw a picture of a playful learning activity, after which they held a reflective dialogue session to discuss the drawings with the students. The KII and FGD protocols were developed in English and translated into Kiswahili in Tanzania and Amharic in Ethiopia.

Procedures

The cross-national research team, which included four national university-based researchers per country (one principal investigator and three coinvestigators) and three IRC research staff members, codeveloped the research questions, methods, and instruments. These items were not piloted before the data collection, due to COVID-19-related guidelines and access constraints. The principal investigators trained the research assistants, and pairs of researchers then spent 14-20 days in each case-study school to collect data. Each FGD and lesson observation lasted approximately 45 minutes, and each interview lasted approximately 1.5 hours. The data was collected in English where appropriate, and in the local languages by native speakers or with a translator when necessary. Translation discrepancies were mitigated by conducting multiple KIIs and using visual-stimulation methods. The country research teams conducted daily debriefings between and within countries via WhatsApp.

All the children provided informed oral assent per our Institutional Review Board protocol, and the adults, including the children's parents/caregivers, provided informed consent. This study received ethical approval from the IRC's Institutional Review Board (EDU.100.021); the Ethiopian Society of Sociologists, Social Workers and Anthropologists (003/2022); the University of Dar es Salaam (DUCE-22140); and the Makerere University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (MUSSS-2022-100). Given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we observed safety protocols as we collected data between March and May 2022.

Data Analysis

For our data analysis, we used an iterative coding framework on Dedoose using emic and etic codes. For the preliminary analysis, we developed a core cross-national codebook from the lines of inquiry (understandings of LtP, examples of LtP, barriers and opportunities to LtP). Therefore, the findings are applicable to all three countries, unless explicitly attributed to one or two. We used an exploratory open-coding approach for our deeper contextual analysis of the first and third subquestions. For subquestion 2, we coded examples of LtP using emic codes aligned with the literature, including free play, guided play, energizers, co-opted play, and student-centered learning. Following the preliminary analysis, we iterated the coding process using five thematic codes that emerged from the data, which were based on the presence of an explicit learning objective and of playful characteristics. The thematic codes were the LtP Practice Zone (good LtP practice), the LtP Proximal Zone (progressive LtP practice), the Passive Learning Zone (didactic methods), the Recreational Zone (free play), and the Non-Learning Zone (time off task). The country research teams contextualized the codebook based on themes that emerged from the data and held regular meetings to ensure intercoder reliability. Following the initial analysis, the cross-national research team converged to conduct a cross-national analysis.

FINDINGS

Meanings and Understandings of LtP

The findings we present below describe participants' reported understandings of LtP, which deepened definitions of LtP in East Africa.

"Play Means Joy and Physical Activity"

When asked about their understanding of play and LtP, the participants explicitly and implicitly conveyed a perception and understanding of play as free play. The participants at the ECD and primary levels and all participant groups—students, teachers, head teachers, and parents—described play as physical and pleasurable activities. One Ethiopian parent explained during an FGD that "play means joy and physical activity." When prompted in class to draw pictures of their favorite LtP activities, the children primarily drew pictures of free play and games like chess and football—activities not generally connected to classroom learning (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Ugandan Primary School Students' Drawing of Play

Some teachers and head teachers also described LtP as free play or as energizers organized to reengage students during a lesson, as a Ugandan primary school teacher explained in a KII: "When a child becomes bored, you bring in play so that it refreshes the mind of the child, then after that you can continue teaching so that the child learns very well." This indicates a conflation between free play and LtP. Other teachers understood play and learning as two separate processes, rather than seeing LtP as a methodology that enhances learning experiences.

"Play Is a Motivator for Learning"

Some teachers viewed LtP as a teaching method and described how structured playful learning can enhance children's learning. One Ethiopian head teacher considered LtP to be "a motivator for learning." A Tanzanian teacher described it similarly: "[Children] cannot forget because they remember that a certain game was played with their teacher, it becomes easy for them to remember compared to when a teacher speaks only without these participatory methods." The teacher used the terms "games" and "LtP" interchangeably, which underscores a general understanding of games as a core activity of LtP. While some teachers understood LtP as free play, others understood the value of integrating play into learning activities, which revealed their mixed understandings of LtP.

Play Supports Holistic Skills Development

Although the participants' meanings of LtP primarily converged around free play and games, participants across all categories recognized the myriad benefits of play and LtP for children's holistic development and wellbeing. For example, a Ugandan teacher reflected, "When you use a play method to deliver a lesson, the child may not forget that content. They will acquire and even retain that knowledge for the rest of their lives…so play is very necessary in the teaching and learning process." A head teacher in Ethiopia described another benefit: "When children play together, they develop communication and social skills." Another Tanzanian teacher highlighted the value of using physical movements to teach mathematics: "Maybe I want to teach addition, you can introduce the game of jumping by counting steps; for example, they jump 3 steps, leave a space, and jump 3 steps…then you tell them where there is a space, put an addition sign." These quotations elucidate the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical benefits of LtP. The participants also believed that LtP supports creativity, problem-solving, stress relief, and joy. Interestingly, participants in Tanzania most frequently reported the cognitive benefits of LtP, followed by social-emotional development. They reported physical development less frequently, despite its prominence in their understanding of LtP.

Play Is for Younger Children

While the participants widely recognized the benefits of play, they expressed that LtP was more appropriate as a pedagogy for ECD children than for those at the primary level. One reported challenge was the curriculum: play-based approaches are more explicit in ECD curricula, as one ECD teacher in Tanzania elaborated: "The curriculum supports the use of play when teaching." Teachers reported that primary-level curricula overwhelm them, and many of them view LtP as time-intensive activities rather than as a beneficial method of delivering the curriculum. Teachers also reported feeling the pressure of tight timetables to focus on the subjects that are

assessed by the national system. As one Ugandan head teacher described, "Using play can also take a lot of time…but if it's a short play, it can fit within that time allocated on the timetable." This pressure increased due to the extended school closures related to COVID-19, which left many teachers struggling to implement the curriculum with only limited support or time.

Another explanation for participants' view of LtP as more appropriate for ECD than for the primary levels, particularly among those who understood LtP as free play, was a perceived lack of seriousness in play. Play was perceived as developmentally appropriate for younger children, but participants described having the expectation that children will become more serious as they grow older. As one teacher in Ethiopia explained, "When I was a small child, I used to play different cultural plays with my age mates. Yet as I grew up, work and study took precedence. Every adult discouraged me from playing and [said] to concentrate on the rather serious business of life." Parents and children alike, particularly at the primary level, were clear in their delineation between play, which they saw as a distraction, and academic learning. They felt that play is inappropriate in primary classrooms.

The participants also discussed boys and girls having equal opportunities to engage in school-based LtP. Teachers reported that they involved children of both genders equally in their classes and that LtP is an inclusive teaching methodology, which the researchers confirmed through their classroom observations. The researchers did observe physical separation between the two genders in the Somali region of Ethiopia, but both groups had equal opportunities to participate in classroom activities. This indicates that external gendered experiences of play do not extend into the classroom context.

LtP Practices

The classroom practices reported by participants and observed by researchers (e.g., guided play and games, storytelling and role-play, energizers, student-centered learning, teacher-centered learning) were organized using a typology of classroom-based LtP methods, as shown in Figure 2. We developed this typology based on whether the activity has an explicit learning objective (in the X-axis), and whether it exhibits characteristics of play (in the Y-axis). We located the activities in fives zones, although they are not fixed. Learning objectives and playful characteristics may be introduced or removed from activities to shift between the five zones.

The LtP Practice Zone encompasses LtP activities that are facilitated by adults, include an explicit learning objective, and exhibit playful characteristics. When used with the intention of deepening learning, these activities are characterized by student-centered instructional practices and may include guided play and games, storytelling and role-play, and energizers.

The LtP Proximal Zone includes activities that exhibit playful characteristics but are not strategically implemented to deepen learning (guided play and games, storytelling and role-play, and energizers), as well as co-opted learning activities (use of student-centered methods in didactic ways). These activities are close or proximal to LtP practice but not fully characterized as LtP. This zone includes cocurricular physical education that is overseen by teachers. Such activities are important for children's holistic development and should be retained in school timetables, but they would not be considered LtP unless the teacher explicitly scaffolded curricular concepts onto physical education. This was not observed or reported.

This emerging typology includes three additional zones: the Passive Learning Zone, the Recreational Zone, and the Non-Learning Zone. Our line of inquiry focused on observing LtP practices, but we noted other classroom activities that did not exhibit playful characteristics.

Figure 2: Typology for Categorizing Classroom-Based LtP Methods
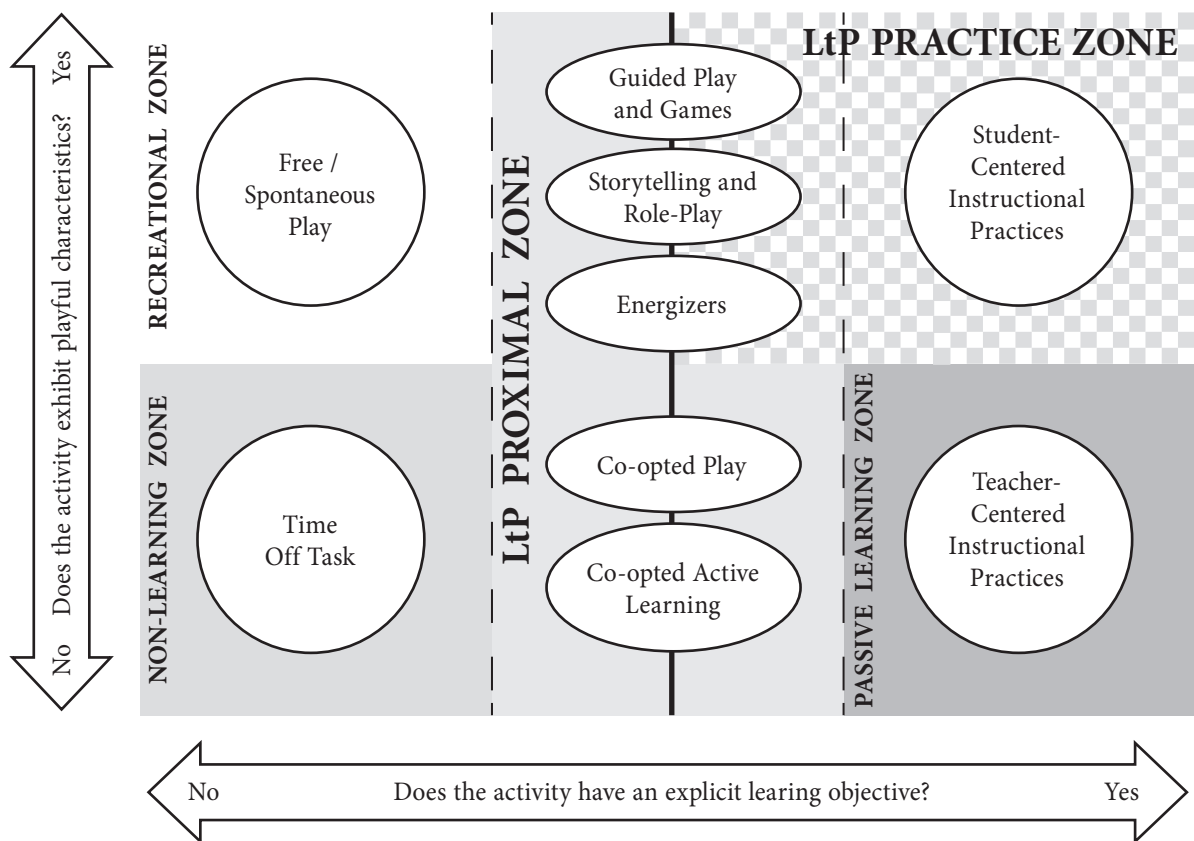
LtP Practice Zone

Student-centered and active learning instructional practices include activities that are led by the teacher and have a clear learning objective. These practices primarily involve social interactions and/or the use of TLMs. Social interactions were occasionally observed, often in group work or pair work. In Tanzania, for example, the researchers observed a grammar lesson in which children straddled a line that separated the room in two, with one side representing present tense and the other representing past tense. Each child held a card with a sentence written on it, read the sentence aloud, and announced the tense of the sentence. Other group members supported the correct answer.

A more prominent student-centered practice involved using TLMs and the school and classroom environments, as a Ugandan teacher explained: "When I am teaching [health habits], I take the children outside the classroom and teach them how to sweep, pick up the garbage, and dump it correctly." One Tanzanian teacher used everyday objects to model various processes: "If I want to teach children how to do laundry, I ask children to bring from home some common items like…soap, dirty clothes, and sneakers." A Ugandan teacher described using TLMs to concretize abstract concepts: "I use empty bottles and make children fill the bottles with water. This helps them to learn the concept of volume, as the water level continues to increase until the bottle gets full." The teachers in Uganda most commonly used models and drawings as an active teaching strategy, which was present in every lesson observed. Other TLMs commonly used in all three countries were flash cards made from cut-up folders, and locally available materials, such as those shown in Figure 3, which were used as manipulatives.

Figure 3: TLMs Used in Tanzania—Plastic Bottles, Fruit, and Corncobs

Other LtP Practice Zone activities were guided play and games that were connected to explicit learning objectives. Adults were sometimes directly involved, such as by facilitating a game, or indirectly involved by providing children with specific play materials. For example, one head teacher in Tanzania described using the game musical chairs in a mathematics lesson "so [children] will definitely understand the concept of subtraction more easily."

In Ethiopia, Learning Corners were an example of guided play in ECD centers. This was one of the most frequently observed ECD-level activities (see Figure 4). Learning Corners were stations the teachers created throughout the classroom that had selected learning materials for children to engage with. This enabled the children to engage in hands-on learning while focused on thematic or curricular topics. The teachers circulated around the room, intervening if necessary, but otherwise making sure the learning materials were in good order.

Figure 4: Children in Ethiopia Engaged in Learning Corners

Teachers also facilitated LtP activities by drawing from a tradition of storytelling and role-play to reinforce learning objectives. The participating teachers commonly used stories to teach concepts and ethics, generally at the primary level, as a way to scaffold learning. One primary teacher in Tanzania explained: "If you are teaching mathematics, you can use any fiction to catch [students'] attention…For example, by generating a story like, 'While you are at home, your grandmother sent you to get a certain number of items'; your main point as a teacher is addition. By starting with a narrative like this, students become more attentive to the lesson."

The teachers, primarily the Ethiopian primary teachers, also used role-play to fully engage students in stories. One primary school teacher in Uganda engaged children in role-play during an English language lesson about a local legend. The role-playing strengthened the children's learning by drawing from their prior knowledge (see Figure 5). The teacher guided the children to utilize their physical environment.

Figure 5: Primary School Children in Uganda Role-Playing Outdoors

The researchers frequently observed teachers using energizers during lessons. The energizers were understood and observed to be a way to introduce lessons, to give children a break during a lesson, or to reengage distracted students in the lesson. The following quote reveals how a teacher in Uganda introduced a lesson in an energizing and playful way: "When I am singing for them, I don't just sing anyhow…When I am introducing sanitation, I just compose a song concerning sanitation. When I sing for them, they get information about sanitation from the song." The teacher playfully connected the song's content to the curricular content.

LtP Proximal Zone

While some energizers observed by the researchers had an explicit learning objective, especially at the ECD level, most were not connected to the lesson content and were instead used primarily as a "brain break." These energizers included chants, singing and clapping, and body movements, such as sitting up and down. These playful activities are critical for children's holistic development and engagement and should be encouraged, but without intentional planning by teachers, they do not inherently achieve learning objectives.

Co-opted play and co-opted active learning were frequently observed, particularly in the use of pair or group techniques. For example, researchers observed one Ugandan ECD classroom where students were seated in groups at tables, but all the activities were completed as a full class. Another example was the use of storytelling in a language lesson in an Ethiopian primary classroom that was unrelated to the learning objective. The researchers frequently observed that, when the teachers attempted to implement LtP, they could have enhanced the quality of the learning experience by adjusting their lesson planning and delivery by connecting activities to the learning objectives or planning playful learning activities.

Other Zones

Teachers in the Passive Learning Zone frequently had explicit learning objectives, but their planned activities did not include playful characteristics. Teachers in every case-study school exhibited positive LtP practices, but teacher-centered instructional practices such as "chalk-and-talk" and choral recitation were still dominant in many classrooms. One teacher in Ethiopia explained that, while "the [education] policy supports participatory teaching methods, [in] practice teachers focus on the whole class question-and-answer method." This was confirmed by classroom observations, during which most of the instructional time involved teacher-centered practices. While direct instruction and lectures can be appropriate teaching methods, the researchers observed an overreliance on this method. In the case-study schools, teachers' understanding of LtP and their capacity to implement play-based and active methods influenced how LtP was practiced in the classroom.

Activities implemented in the Recreational Zone exhibited playful characteristics but lacked explicit learning objectives. This represents many stakeholders' predominant view of LtP: that it involves recreational play and physical activity. These activities were frequently observed during recess and break times, and also during instructional time. While these activities can support children's holistic skills development, planned physical education is often omitted from the school timetable, so these activities tend to take place on an ad hoc basis during instructional time.

Activities in the Non-Learning Zone were neither playful nor directed toward learning objectives. This time off task reduces the time available to pursue meaningful learning objectives. It occurs for a variety of reasons, including confusion among the students, time-consuming logistical processes like the distribution of books, or a teacher's intense engagement with a select group of students. This was observed primarily during lengthy times of transition, spontaneous lesson preparation, and large classes.

Opportunities for and Barriers to LtP

This study elucidates opportunities for and barriers to the successful integration of LtP in the case-study schools that lack explicit support for implementing LtP that is based on the positive deviant design. This indicates that there are opportunities for policymakers and practitioners to leverage or mitigate, respectively, to strengthen systemic support for teachers' delivery of LtP.

Opportunities

Supportive Policy Environment

While not explicitly named or defined as LtP, student-centered learning, active learning, and other similar constructivist pedagogies already exist in curricula and in education policies. Policy support for these practices can also be found at the subnational level, as one teacher in Ethiopia explained: "The regional education bureau and the city education office often advocate [for a] policy of play-based education."

Supportive School Leadership

School leaders play a critical role in implementing school-based policies that are supportive of LtP. The teachers in our study frequently cited supportive school leadership as key to the success of LtP. The head teachers who supported LtP set a timetable that was inclusive of LtP, and used discretionary funds to provide teachers with necessary TLMs, as described by one Tanzanian ECD teacher: "The school management is very supportive. The college management buys manila papers, ropes, marker pens…and so forth" for implementing LtP. The head teachers also provided pedagogical support and supportive supervision, as explained by one ECD teacher in Uganda: "Sometimes she also goes and sits in the class and monitors what we are teaching and advises us

on how to integrate LtP." School leaders also found opportunities to motivate teachers and engage parents and community members meaningfully in LtP.

Engagement of Parents and Community Members

Supportive and engaged parents positively influenced the uptake of LtP. Parents who participated in our study confirmed that they have a role in the school activities and in LtP, as one Tanzanian parent noted in an FGD: "I am a member of the school committee and a chair of the parents, in that accord I am obliged to have a role in promoting LtP." Some teachers in Tanzania and Uganda also reported collaborating with parents to procure play materials, despite the parents' limited personal resources, as a Ugandan teacher described: "Parents encourage us to teach using play because they know children can only study well through play. Even some parents have testified that their children force them to bring them here because of play materials in this school."

Barriers

Perceptions That Play and Schooling Are Not Compatible

One of the biggest barriers identified in this study is the word "play" itself. Many participants said they perceived play as not serious enough for learning and not appropriate in classrooms where students should be focused more on rote forms of learning. A Ugandan ECD parent described this in an FGD: "Playing is destructive—once children concentrate on play, they cannot learn." Many teachers and other stakeholders perceived play to mean only free play, and they did not see this as having value in the classroom. However, once prompted, they could see that play can be a useful method for active learning. Some teachers felt that LtP was not integrated well into the curriculum, particularly at the primary level, which indicated incoherence between policy and the realities of curriculum implementation. Parents who believed that academic learning is discrete from play could pressure teachers to limit their implementation of LtP.

Insufficient Teacher Training and Support

The teachers reported they did not receive enough training and support to implement LtP, even in the positive deviant schools. Teachers who viewed LtP as creating additional work or as recreation often struggled to implement LtP. Teachers who were aware of gaps in their capacity said they wanted more training on LtP, as one Ethiopian teacher explained: "I don't have enough knowledge and skill to teach through participatory methods. If there is training, I would be glad to receive it to enhance my capacity." Without sufficient support and training, teachers can be discouraged from practicing LtP. A Ugandan primary teacher explained: "One of the things I have found discouraging…is that I don't have knowledge on how to include some of the play activities to some particular content." While education policies encourage active learning methods, additional training is needed to strengthen teachers' capacity and confidence in implementing LtP.

Structural Constraints

Even teachers who had the capacity and motivation to implement LtP faced structural constraints that inhibited their practice. The perceived challenges included time to plan lessons that integrated LtP, especially those requiring specific materials, and time to implement lessons, as described by a Tanzanian teacher: "It consumes a lot of time to prepare for lessons through play because it involves thinking and finding material for teaching, but when you are teaching without games it doesn't consume time." Many also perceived LtP as a stand-alone activity that takes time from the allotted classroom and curriculum timetables, as one Ethiopian teacher stated: "The timetable is also overcrowded and we have to rush to cover contents, there is no space for flexible programming." Teachers who lacked the support they needed to integrate LtP into lesson planning and delivery viewed LtP as an overwhelming challenge.

Unsafe, Overcrowded, and Underresourced Classrooms

Effective LtP requires a safe environment in which children can engage with their teachers and peers. The use of corporal punishment and other hierarchical classroom management practices can be a barrier to LtP. For example, teachers in an ECD center in Uganda noted that students witnessed corporal punishment in the adjacent primary school, after which they expressed their fears about leaving the perceived safety of the ECD center to attend the primary school.

Safety issues are compounded in overcrowded classrooms, as highlighted by one teacher in Ethiopia: "The big number of children in one classroom, for example, around 60 students in a class, is a challenge for one teacher. When I deal with a group of children, some others engage in some unnecessary activities." The teachers struggled to identify LtP practices and positive classroom management strategies that could be used effectively in overcrowded classrooms. Underresourcing is another major concern. An ECD teacher in Uganda described what happens when there are not sufficient materials for large classes: "We also want to be provided with more play materials so that our children stop fighting over the few available materials." Establishing a school environment that provides teachers with adequate resources and time is critical to ensuring that they have access to the resources needed to implement LtP.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we describe perceptions of LtP and how it is practiced in schools in parts of East Africa that are affected by conflict and crisis. The findings reflect the importance of defining LtP within existing active learning methods and of positioning teachers within their sociocultural contexts in order to understand the factors that affect their teaching practice. We also share our typology of LtP practices that are grounded in East African realities, relative to active learning. We close by offering recommendations for research, policy, and practice.

Framing LtP for Acceptance

The study participants' divergent conceptualizations of the definition of play echo debates in the literature (Bergen 2014; Fung and Cheng 2012). A clear definition of LtP for practical application is needed in order to mitigate misunderstandings between education stakeholders that limit the implementation of LtP (Kabay, Wolf, and Yoshikawa 2017; Mendenhall et al. 2021). For example, some teachers reported receiving complaints from parents about playful classroom practices, which reflects the fact that some key stakeholders understood LtP as unsuitable for use in classrooms. Play and the purpose of education are highly contextual, and the study participants perceived them as mutually exclusive (Kabay, Wolf, and Yoshikawa 2017). This required LtP proponents to either critically reexamine the epistemological rationale of school-based LtP or to redefine LtP in a way that aligned with accepted perceptions of quality education.

Defining LtP as being aligned with active learning methods rather than as a novel approach can dispel myths around the value of play in education (Tabulawa 2013). Moreover, defining LtP as an active teaching and learning method can help teachers understand LtP as a curriculum delivery method. This could reduce any ambiguity in teachers' perspectives on and motivation to implement LtP and reduce their perceptions of LtP as an additional time-intensive activity or something to do at recess (Ssentanda and Andema 2019).

Moving toward a Deeper Understanding of LtP Practices

Existing LtP continuums contain many categories to describe play experiences (e.g. "free play," "guided play," "structured play/games," "direct instruction"), which focus primarily on the spectrum of play and the learning opportunities inherent in each category. However, LtP continuums are disconnected from the active learning literature and not specific to the classroom context (UNICEF 2018; Zosh et al. 2018). While such continuums are valuable in recognizing the myriad benefits of different types of play, they perpetuate misperceptions that conflate free play and adult-led classroom-based LtP. Figure 2 presents our emerging typology of classroom-based LtP methods, which is the

first to situate LtP practices within the reality of low-resource classroom contexts and the active learning literature. To create this typology, we synthesized existing frameworks on play-based learning, Zosh et al.'s (2017) characteristics of playful learning, quality classroom pedagogy that includes an explicit learning objective (Mendenhall et al. 2015), and an inductive analysis of the practices identified in this study. This typology also applies Schweisfurth's (2013) "minimum standard" of learner-centered pedagogy to create an ideal LtP Practice Zone and an associated LtP Proximal Zone.

Experienced LtP teachers are likely to operate in the LtP Practice Zone. They incorporate LtP experiences into their lessons, which are strategically designed to exhibit playful characteristics and have clear, intentional learning objectives. Meanwhile, teachers who are newer to LtP or facing ongoing structural barriers are more likely to practice in the LtP Proximal Zone, meaning that they attempt new methods and could move into the LtP Practice Zone with additional support, but have not yet reached this level of performance. For example, a teacher who seats children in small groups but continues to conduct whole-class teaching could, with additional training or support, integrate meaningful group work to move this formerly "co-opted active learning" activity into the LtP Practice Zone. These zones demonstrate that certain LtP-adjacent practices should be encouraged for making progress toward LtP practices. This builds on the idea that co-opted play is on a spectrum that is incrementally closer to LtP (Bartlett and Mogusu 2013). Targeted support for teachers in the LtP Proximal Zone capitalizes on teachers' reported enthusiasm and desire to implement LtP. This framework, and LtP in general, is not a guarantee of education quality or children's holistic development. Teachers can design relevant activities that draw from their pedagogical repertoire to achieve their learning objectives. They may still exhibit activities in the Non-Learning Zone through time-off-task moments; in the Recreational Zone that are aligned with free play; and in the Passive Learning Zone via didactic teaching methods (Parker and Thomsen 2019; Vavrus 2009).

SYSTEMS' APPROACHES TO SUPPORTING TEACHERS

Teachers do not operate in isolation, and pedagogical interventions have been implemented in East Africa to improve education quality. Defining LtP within the broader active learning literature presents an opportunity to harness systems-based approaches to help teachers make incremental changes that will move them into the LtP Practice Zone. The existing research on implementing prior active learning interventions can mitigate the reproduction of mistakes and provide insights into promising opportunities. Structural barriers such as large classes, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of TLMs are known to limit the implementation of learner-centered pedagogy (Altinyelken 2010; Keski-Mäenpää 2018; Sakata, et al. 2021). This study found similar challenges, but it also identified promising solutions that arise from teachers' inventiveness and the benefits of systemwide support from parents and head teachers. This study reveals that all education stakeholders play a pivotal role in the implementation of LtP, such as

head teachers who allocate resources to procure TLMs and parents who provide locally available recycled TLMs and exhibit a desire to be engaged.

The teachers expressed a desire for quality TPD on LtP that so far has been lacking, which is indicative of the complex challenges teachers face in moving into the LtP Practice Zone. The teachers said they want practical, hands-on training to address gaps in their knowledge and viewed school leaders as a critical component of continuous TPD. Engaging and training stakeholders who have a mandate to be pedagogical leaders can influence teachers' classroom practices (Mendenhall et al. 2021). The supportive supervision and coaching they provide supports teachers' pedagogical practices and enables them to reflect, understand, and make varied and incremental shifts toward the LtP Practice Zone.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

LtP advocates should connect it to the existing active learning policies and interventions. They also should build on the synergies between LtP and active learning in an effort to engage all education stakeholders. Drawing from the existing active learning evidence base can focus limited resources on promoting effective TPD approaches and modalities.

Teachers whose work puts them in the LtP Proximal Zone need support so they can build on their existing practices by connecting classroom activities to learning objectives in order to enhance students' learning experiences. Incremental adoption of LtP practices should be celebrated so that teachers feel motivated and their ongoing development is reinforced. Education systems, particularly continuous professional development structures, should be strengthened by incorporating LtP and providing ongoing monitoring and support for teachers. Increasing the availability of child-level TLMs should be an explicit focus of LtP interventions, including guidance on developing locally available learning materials. Teachers also need explicit support to create safe and inclusive learning spaces. This should include training in positive discipline methods and strategies for using LtP methods effectively with large and overcrowded classes. Further research should focus on effective strategies and modalities that will enable teachers to move from the LtP Proximal Zone to the LtP Practice Zone, particularly from a systems perspective.

Finally, all stakeholders—school leaders, teachers, parents, and children—need to be sensitized to the importance and potential of using active and playful learning methods in classrooms. Rather than seeing play as an additional activity, they should be oriented to see LtP as a way to teach the curriculum and prepare students for examinations. Demonstrating that LtP improves children's holistic learning and wellbeing through continuous assessments and rigorous research will build confidence and trust in this approach.

CONCLUSION

The word "play" itself may invoke resistance among some education stakeholders in low-resource contexts and in those affected by conflict and crisis, but many stakeholders see the value of active and playful teaching methods. In fact, teachers in these contexts are already practicing playful teaching methods to some degree. Celebrating the steps teachers have made toward using playful methods while also addressing systemic barriers should allow more space for practicing playful teaching and learning in classrooms. LtP is a relatively new active learning method, and local schools and existing practices can offer clear lessons that can inform contextual LtP approaches and overcome barriers in project design and implementation, in East Africa and in other crisis-affected contexts. Some teachers already view play as foundational to learning, which demonstrates the potential of LtP to improve education quality in some of the most poorly resourced and challenging contexts.

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NAVIGATING REMOTE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN HARD-TO-ACCESS SETTINGS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CAREGIVERS' AND TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN LEBANON

Somaia Abdulrazzak, Duja Michael, Jamile Youssef, Lina Torossian, Ola Kheir, Diala Hajal, and Kate Schwartz

ABSTRACT

In this qualitative research article, we examine the feasibility and perceptions of a remote early learning program and the Ahlan Simsim Families parenting program in hard-to-access areas of Lebanon. Our research targets Syrian refugee families dealing with the economic aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the resulting social tensions and a recovering education system. We explore the experiences of teachers, facilitators, and caregivers in order to identify the key factors that contributed to the two programs' success. Data from 71 postintervention interviews and 9 focus groups conducted in July 2022 and January 2023 reveal that remote programs are viable in contexts with limited in-person access. Despite some challenges, both teachers and caregivers demonstrated their adaptability and commitment. Flexible programming that accommodated family schedules proved essential. The caregivers' engagement was driven by their recognition of the programs' value and embracing of play-based learning. Using Weisner's (2002) ecocultural framework, the study challenges the notion that education programs must align with family routines. It presents evidence from the Ahlan Simsim intervention that this program can have a positive effect, even in the absence of established daily routines. The study highlights the importance of program design, teacher training, and collaboration in meeting families' diverse needs, which has implications for creating flexible, engaging, remote early childhood education programs.

INTRODUCTION

Recognizing the importance of early childhood education (ECE), the United Nations included Target 4.2 in the Sustainable Development Goals (Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development and Sustainable Development Solutions Network 2014), which aims to ensure that all children have access to ECE by 2030. Despite global efforts, achieving this goal remains challenging, especially in low-income and conflict-affected areas, where 80 percent of children lack access to ECE (Muroga et al. 2020) due to limited resources, safety concerns, and difficulties in serving mobile populations (Dryden-Peterson 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the situation and increased existing disparities, particularly for children from poor families, and for those in rural areas and economically disadvantaged countries (Muroga et al. 2020; UNESCO 2023). The pandemic nevertheless offered an opportunity to reshape education. Two technology-driven approaches—phone call tutorials (Angrist et al. 2023) and calls combined with SMS messages (Angrist, Bergman, and Matsheng 2022)—showed promising results, including significant learning gains among primary-age students.

Several studies have examined the implementation and effectiveness of remote learning for students in the Middle East, especially in higher education (Weber 2019; Tamim 2017). They highlight the region's growing interest in remote education while emphasizing the need for more research (Weber 2019). Other studies point to the potential of remote programming to provide quality education to Middle East refugees (Tobin and Hieker 2021), but few studies focus on remote programming for preprimary-age refugee children (Issa et al. 2023).

Remote education solutions are often deemed implausible for preprimary children, due to their shorter attention spans and still-developing regulatory skills (Morpeth et al. 2009). However, these solutions are critical to expanding access in hard-to-serve areas that lack in-person ECE options. Thus, designing, developing, and evaluating remote ECE programs has the potential to increase access to ECE in a cost-effective manner during pandemics and natural disasters, in violent contexts, and with hard-to-reach populations (Bassett and Bradley 2023).

In this qualitative study, we examine the experiences of teachers, facilitators, and caregivers in two remote early childhood programs started in Lebanon in 2020: the Remote Early Learning Program (RELP) and the Ahlan Simsim Families (ASF) parenting program. Both programs were delivered by caregivers in the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdowns and subsequent severe financial crisis (World Bank 2021). We then propose context-relevant strategies to overcome the challenges they faced. The beneficiaries were Syrian refugee families (96% of program participants) in hard-to-access areas of the Lebanese governorates of the Bekaa, Baalbek-Hermel, the North (Tripoli), and Akkar. The children, who were five and six years old, had no prior ECE experience. A three-armed randomized controlled trial found that both the RELP alone and the RELP combined with the ASF program had a sizable

and significant positive impact on the children's development and learning interactions. The effect sizes were comparable to those achieved by nine-month in-person preschool programs (see Schwartz et al. 2024). In our quantitative paper, we quantified the programs' impact and drew from this study to interpret some of the findings, whereas in this article we delve into the qualitative data to explore how caregiver and teacher behaviors, contexts, and motives influenced the programs' effectiveness in the challenging context. While we focus primarily on the RELP, we include valuable insights from the ASF program that inform the challenges and opportunities of remote programming in emergency settings.

We begin with an introduction to the Lebanese context, including the status of ECE provision in that country, and provide information about the two programs. We then introduce a brief theoretical framework, which we used to think about the challenges and effects of remote early childhood programming in this context. We follow with a description of our methodology and a report of the findings, and close with a discussion of the findings and their implications.

The Lebanese Economic, Social, and Political Context

Lebanon, once an upper-middle-income country (World Bank 2022), has long grappled with governance challenges. This has led to high unemployment rates and inadequate public services, especially electricity, infrastructure, and education (Yacoubian 2021; Majzoub, Root, and Simet 2023). The influx of more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees since 2011 has exacerbated Lebanon's fragile infrastructure and governance struggles (UNHCR 2023; Alami 2020).

The country has been dealing with a triple crisis since 2019 (see Figure 1): a financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a devastating port explosion in 2020 (BBC News 2019; World Bank 2021). The financial crisis, triggered by widespread protests against corruption, caused soaring inflation and a drastic decline in per-capita GDP (World Bank 2021). The onset of COVID-19 in early 2020 worsened economic pressures, especially for the vulnerable daily workers affected by restrictions on movement (Kebede, Stave, and Kattaa 2020). The subsequent national lockdown also exacerbated education challenges, including distance-learning efforts that were hindered by longstanding infrastructure issues, such as power cuts (Moghli and Shuayb 2020). By June 2020, the already weak electricity sector faced intensified challenges, including daily blackouts lasting more than 22 hours (Ben Hassen 2020; Majzoub 2020).

In August 2020, Beirut was rocked by a catastrophic explosion in the port, which further strained the city's already troubled economic, social, and health sectors (El Zahran et al. 2022; WFP 2020). These shocks plunged much of the population into poverty and exacerbated shortages of essential goods, such as bread, medicine, and fuel (UNESCWA 2021).

Figure 1: Major Systemic Shocks in Lebanon
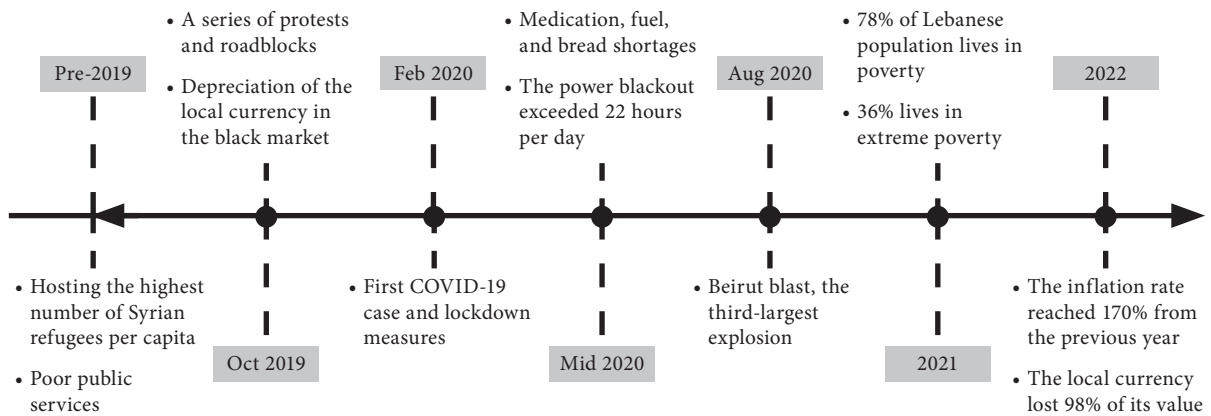
ECE Provision in Lebanon: Discrepancy between Lebanese and Syrian Children

Lebanon lacks a comprehensive national policy for ECE. While various ministries have overseen different aspects of ECE since 2003, there is no unified regulatory framework that ensures consistent access, quality, and implementation (Anís and Chlela 2022). In 2023, the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and other agencies working in early childhood development, care, and education, established the National Group for Early Childhood Development to coordinate efforts and update the national strategy (ANECD n.d.). Despite this effort, up-to-date data and literature on the developmental challenges of preschool children or access to ECE remains scarce (World Bank 2021). It is evident, however, that Syrian refugee children are much less likely to attend ECE or to start preschool at between three and five years of age, which puts them at a distinct disadvantage relative to their Lebanese peers (UNICEF 2020). Recent reports show that the share of Syrian children attending preprimary was only 11 percent (UNHCR 2022), and only one in ten 5- and 6-year-old Syrian children in Bekaa and other governorates was attending kindergarten. In addition, most of the families who used ECE services relied on those provided by nongovernmental organizations and international organizations (UNICEF 2020; Anís and Chlela 2022).

International Rescue Committee Services and the Pivot to Remote Delivery

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has been operating in Lebanon since 2012, where it provides aid to Syrian refugees and Lebanese communities in the form of economic support, legal services, and education, including preprimary education. Their early childhood programs and services focus on holistic child development and incorporate early literacy, numeracy, social-emotional skills, and motor skills. These efforts aim to enhance the children's school readiness through structured lesson plans and play-based activities, to foster their wellbeing, and to help them establish positive social relationships. Before the pandemic, the IRC preschool program ran three days a week for three or four hours a day. Monitoring data on that program showed promising improvements in various child development domains (Murphy 2022).

The Remote Early Learning Program

To ensure continuity in ECE services during the pandemic lockdown, the IRC began delivering remote services via WhatsApp in March 2020. Adapting the in-person program for remote delivery involved leveraging the technical team's experience, global insights on remote service delivery, and insights gained in interviews with teachers and caregivers. Adaptations included increasing session frequency, enhancing teacher training, and implementing caregiver-focused follow-up and support systems. These efforts led to the creation of the RELP.

The RELP is an 11-week play-based program for children ages five and six. Participants are sent a home learning kit at the beginning of the program, and they attend sessions in virtual classrooms via WhatsApp group calls. These sessions include five or six families, each with one caregiver and one child, and each teacher works with 10-12 such classrooms. There are three sessions per week, and each one introduces four or five activities that last 35-40 minutes (see Table 1). At the beginning of each call, the teacher greets the children for five minutes, recaps the previous session's content, and then introduces the new content. During the session, teachers guide the caregivers with links, direct them to the relevant worksheets, and help them engage successfully with their child through the learning activities.

Caregivers are asked to photograph and/or videotape their children doing the activities and to share the images on the group chat. They are provided with phone recharge cards (for calls and internet) to avoid an undue financial burden. A total of 1,015 families participated in this intervention, 96 percent of whom are Syrian refugees who live in hard-to-access areas of Lebanon that offer few ECE opportunities. The study targeted four governorates in Lebanon: the Bekaa, Baalbek-Hermel, the North (Tripoli), and Akkar.

The RELP also created resources for teachers, including lesson scripts and training materials focused on learning through play, child protection, remote teaching techniques, and child-focused multimedia materials. These multimedia materials include 43 learning videos, 8 read-aloud storybooks, and 7 songs from an ECE television show. The home learning kits include stationery, materials for hands-on learning, play, and art, and worksheets. These resources aim to help caregivers facilitate consistent formative interactions with their children, and to foster the children's comfort, security, and confidence in learning.

Teachers undergo a two-day preservice training program that focuses on working with young children, play-based learning, communication, and remote teaching skills. They also receive ongoing in-service training, including mentorship and feedback from supervisors. In addition, supervisors hold regular meetings with the teachers to address emerging challenges, provide direction, and answer questions.

Ahlan Simsim Families

Remote ECE makes caregivers the children's primary educators. To support caregivers in this role, the IRC adapted and delivered a parenting support program they had originally designed for conflict settings. This program, designed to be accessible for caregivers with low literacy levels and limited education, focuses on psychosocial support, the importance of early childhood development, positive parenting skills, coping strategies, mental wellbeing, safety knowledge, responsive relationships, and early learning practices. The ASF program, which is an add-on to the RELP, consists of 11 weekly sessions lasting 25-30 minutes each, which are delivered remotely by an early childhood development facilitator via WhatsApp calls. The ASF materials include 15 instructional videos, six informational booklets, and a poster. While the RELP and the ASF program contents are complementary, the ASF program is a general parenting support program not specifically aimed at enhancing caregivers' skill in delivering ECE.

Table 1: Comparison between the RELP and the ASF Program

	RELP	ASF
Focus	Early learning	Parenting
Modality	WhatsApp audio calls	WhatsApp audio calls
Total sessions	31 sessions	11 sessions (3 optional)
Frequency	Three times per week	Once per week
Session's duration	35-40 min per session	25-30 min per session
Attendance/session	5-6 caregivers-children	5-6 caregivers-children

The impact of the RELP and the ASF program was quantitatively assessed in a paper published separately by our research team (Schwartz et al. 2024). To gain a more comprehensive understanding of this impact, this study employs the ecocultural framework (Weisner 2002) to explore the experiences of the teachers, facilitators, and caregivers involved in the two programs in Lebanon. We specifically seek to understand how these stakeholders navigated remote programming in hard-to-access settings, and during a pandemic. We also identify the key challenges these educators and caregivers encountered throughout the process. Finally, we examine which elements caregivers, teachers, and facilitators deemed critical to the success of remote education programming, particularly in emergency settings. To provide a comprehensive analysis, the following section delves deeper into the ecocultural framework and its application to our qualitative findings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, we draw from Weisner's (2002) ecocultural framework of children's development in order to understand how caregivers integrated the RELP into their lives. The framework emphasizes the interaction between individuals and their environment and incorporates cultural dimensions like parenting styles and education norms (Weisner 2002; Bernheimer and Weisner 2007). Activities like family rituals crystallize culture in children's everyday experiences, which shapes their development by promoting positive values, goals, relationships, and emotions (Weisner 2002). Furthermore, the framework considers broader aspects of the environment beyond the immediate family, including neighborhood dynamics, societal structures, cultural norms, and available resources (Weisner 2002; Bernheimer and Weisner 2007).

While researchers from many disciplines have utilized Weisner's ecocultural framework, no study to date has applied it to remote learning for preprimary-age refugee children. Studies in various social and educational contexts, however, have highlighted family resilience, environmental factors, and social policies as important factors in child development and successful education programming (Bernheimer and Weisner 2007; Yoshikawa, Weisner, and Lowe 2006; Maynard and Martini 2005). One study on families of children with developmental delays argues that many interventions fail because they are not adequately integrated into the families' daily routines (Bernheimer and Weisner 2007). An intervention may fail because it is not aligned with a family's cultural norms or the concerns that shape their daily routines, which can lead to an unexpected disruption of the balance of competing priorities, family goals, or the predictability of daily life (Weisner et al. 2005). Moreover, a study by Lowe and Weisner (2004) concerning program-based child care among

low-income families reveals that many of the families had established routines, but their routines changed over time due to evolving circumstances. Lowe and Weisner conclude that programs that fail to acknowledge the inherent instability of the lives of low-income families often exacerbate the uncertainty. This is particularly relevant to families in humanitarian contexts.

The ecocultural framework is relevant to understanding caregivers' experiences with remote ECE in addressing challenges and accessing resources and support, and in informing culturally sensitive interventions. It also applies to teachers, due to the role their ecoculture plays in program success (Maynard and Martini 2005; Schwartz, Cappella, and Aber 2019). These studies demonstrate the model's versatility in examining the relationships between teachers, environment, and children's learning outcomes.

METHODS

Sample

We collected data from teachers and caregivers at various stages: during the program design, after implementation, and after analyzing the quantitative data (see Figure 2). We interviewed a total of 140 caregivers and 55 teachers for this work. However, this paper is primarily focused on the postimplementation data, including 24 interviews with RELP teachers (all participants in the evaluation cycle), four of the five ASF program facilitators, and a random subsample of 43 caregivers (about 5% of program participants), which we grouped by program treatment and attendance level. The teachers and facilitators were Lebanese women with at least one year of prior ECE experience, while most of the caregivers were Syrian refugee mothers. The caregivers were assigned randomly to the interviewers to mitigate potential bias. The sample consisted of 13 caregivers from the RELP alone and 18 total from the two programs; 12 of the caregivers interviewed had a low level of engagement with the program (less than 70% attendance). The interviews with caregivers who exhibited low-level engagement didn't yield new or significant insights, hence we did not address them separately.

Figure 2: Timeline of Data Collection Pre- and Postprogram Implementation

Preprogram qualitative data collection*	Program feedback	Findings co-interpretation
Interviews (phone calls) with teachers, teaching aides, and caregivers	Interviews (phone calls)	FGDs (in person)

Program feedback — Interviews (phone calls)

24 teachers	
4 facilitators	
31 caregivers (RELP arm, RELP+ASF arm)	15 minutes
12 caregivers—low attendance	

Findings co-interpretation — FGDs (in person)

6 with caregivers (RELP arm, RELP+ASF arm, and control arm)	
2 with teachers	75 minutes
1 with facilitators	

Remote ECE | RELP/ASF

03/20   03/21   03/22   07/22   01/23

Note: * This dataset is not included in the findings of this paper, as it pertains to teachers and caregivers who did not engage in the RELP or the ASF program.

To contextualize and enhance our understanding of the findings, the research team also conducted eight in-person focus group discussions (FGDs) with 14 teachers and 53 caregivers (by treatment group), and one remote session (using Microsoft Teams) with three facilitators. We chose FGDs for their ability to accommodate time constraints, promote diverse opinions, and enhance the credibility of the evaluations. The sessions took place in two regions where the program participants resided (Bekaa and North); transportation was provided. All teachers and assistants were invited, along with a random sample of caregivers who had a good attendance record (70% or higher).

Procedures

Trained interviewers who were hired by the IRC for this study conducted all the interviews via audio calls. The interviewers underwent a comprehensive two-day training program that encompassed a study orientation, ethical guidelines, and an in-depth overview of data-collection and transcription protocols. The interviews took place around four weeks after the completion of the program. The FGDs were facilitated by lead researchers from the IRC, in collaboration with researchers from the Global TIES for Children Center. The in-person FGDs took place in Lebanon six months after the program was completed, during a weeklong workshop where the preliminary findings were shared with the key partners and beneficiaries, and some of the program teachers, facilitators, and caregivers. The FGDs were held at the IRC offices in the Bekaa and Akkar regions, and at a local school building in Bekaa that was closer to the refugee camps than the IRC offices.

The research team included five Arab women from the Levant region (including two mothers) and a Syrian lead researcher (first author) with firsthand experience of the crisis. All five were native Arabic speakers, which was key to the analysis. The data collection in Lebanon was led by three analysts from the IRC, whose shared language, contextual familiarity, and social position as Arab women were a distinct advantage.

Measures

All research protocols were designed with semistructured questions; however, the interviewers underwent comprehensive training on how to engage participants effectively, with emphasis on how to probe deeper when necessary. This training, which covered interview techniques and ethical considerations, also aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the study.

The interview protocols for the teachers and facilitators were adapted from those developed by Schwartz, Cappella, and Aber (2019) to investigate their experiences amid crises and remote learning challenges. These protocols focused on gaining insights into program delivery, on how to gauge perceptions of success, and on identifying areas needing improvement. The caregiver interview protocols, which were grounded in Weisner's (2002) ecocultural framework, investigated the intricate dynamics of child development within cultural and environmental contexts. With these protocols, we studied teachers' and caregivers' daily routines, the challenges faced during program implementation, and the programs' perceived influence on parent-child interactions. Meanwhile, the FGD protocols provided a platform for the participants to share their experiences, to offer suggestions for enhancing the programs, and to collaboratively interpret the preliminary quantitative findings that we shared to guide the FGD.

Data Analysis

In this study we employ thematic analysis, a qualitative research method commonly used to uncover patterns and interpret data, which facilitated our in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and the challenges they faced in an inductive yet systematic manner (Kiger and Varpio 2020).

During the analysis, the analysts (five of them Arabic speakers) read a subset of the transcripts to identify themes and codes.[1] An initial codebook was developed after the analysts were sure that the themes identified were relevant to the study objectives and research questions. They used descriptive codes, which aligned directly with the research protocol. Examples of the codes used in the caregiver interviews include "biggest daily challenge" and "parent-child interaction after program." Examples from

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1   The FGD analysis relied on synthesizing field notes and transcripts without strictly following the aforementioned process, due to the limited number of transcripts. All researchers either attended the sessions or read the full transcripts.

the teacher interviews include "program feedback-efficient aspects" and "program challenges." With a codebook at hand, the researchers used Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software, and its inter-rater reliability testing feature to achieve a good level of agreement between coders (with a predetermined cutoff of 0.80). Each coder then independently coded a different subset of interviews. The software was also used to code and analyze the transcripts (all of which were in Arabic). Only the quotations used in this article were translated into English.

Limitations

The presence of social desirability bias in our data cannot be ruled out, as it was collected by the IRC, which was operating in the same geographic areas prior to the programs' implementation and may have had existing relationships with some participants. Measures were taken to mitigate this bias as much as possible, such as training interviewers to avoid making judgments and to encourage honest responses by asking open-ended questions.

Recall bias may also be present, particularly in data from the FGDs, which were held several months after the programs ended, making it likely that participants over- or underestimated certain events. To minimize this, the participants were reminded of the programs and shown relevant content before the discussions began. Data triangulation from multiple sources and at different timepoints helped reduce recall bias, but it could persist to some degree.

There are also a number of methodological limitations, including sample homogeneity within the remote Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon, which possibly limits the broader applicability of our findings. Moreover, recruiting and collecting data from only one caregiver per family, as dictated by the program design, limits our view of changes in overall family dynamics, particularly when multiple caregivers are involved.

Lastly, it seems hard to separate the feedback in our findings on the RELP and the ASF program, since all participants in the ASF program also took part in the RELP. The two programs were delivered simultaneously, which added to the difficulty in differentiating program-specific feedback. Furthermore, the participants perceived the delivery of both programs to be similar in terms of the quality of communication and the level of professionalism and flexibility, which made it difficult for the research team to distinguish between the two. For future studies, having an ASF-only arm or conducting ASF-dedicated data collection before starting the RELP could be valuable and could help uncover program-specific learnings.

FINDINGS

In this section, we present the important themes that emerged from our analysis. The findings come from postintervention data, and some interpretations draw from the FGDs with caregivers, teachers, and facilitators.

Program Benefits and Concerns

The first research question investigates how teachers, facilitators, and caregivers in Lebanon experienced the RELP and the ASF program. Our data shows that the participants observed improvements in children's literacy, numeracy, and communication skills, and that the caregivers appreciated the parenting program for providing a supportive space. However, some concerns were raised about the negative effects increased screen time would have on the children's wellbeing.

The caregivers, who observed significant improvements in their children's literacy, numeracy, and communication skills, reported that they spent more time on learning activities with their children during and after participating in the programs. Many caregivers felt that the RELP nurtured a love for learning in their children, which helped them become more organized and responsible. One caregiver shared their experience, highlighting the remarkable progress in their child's learning: "Before the program, [child's name] didn't know anything whatsoever. Now, he is capable of counting from one to ten, recognizing the letter *"Alef"* [first letter in the Arabic alphabet], vertical lines, and circular shapes" (caregiver, postintervention interview).

Moreover, caregivers reported that the programs enhanced their communication with their children and provided relief from daily challenges by offering support on parenting and education. They attributed this improvement to the programs equipping them with ideas and tools for teaching their children. Four caregivers also noticed an improvement in their overall relationships with their children after the program. Some reported spending more quality time together and becoming more engaged in their children's daily activities. One caregiver shared her experience: "I spend more time now with [child's name]. Before [the program experience], I used to come home to feed them [her children] and give them a shower. I wouldn't even sit down to eat with them. I would rather finish house chores in the meantime" (mother, postintervention interview).

Teachers also observed changes in the children's performance during the RELP. Almost all the teachers noticed improvements in children's literacy and numeracy skills, which they interpreted as a measure of their professional success, as one teacher explained: "A lot of the children showed remarkable improvement…They previously struggled with reading, writing, and holding a pen" (RELP teacher, FGD). Many teachers saw the RELP as a good choice for school readiness programs, especially in emergency settings

or when there wasn't enough space in the public classrooms. They also felt that the program was particularly helpful for families in hard-to-access settings who did not have other options for educating their kids.

Moreover, some teachers said that working with both the children and the caregivers while the caregivers were the primary implementers of ECE made the RELP even more effective, as one teacher expressed in an interview:

> Something I liked about this program is that we gave parents all the responsibility; we are leaving the child in the most trustworthy hands. When the mother starts to play with him [her child], she realizes that her child is capable, and he starts to love her back. Yesterday, I gave them an activity to draw a person they love, and a child drew his mother. (teacher, postintervention interview)

Some teachers liked the RELP's focus on building character, communication skills, and social-emotional learning, which they identified as critical for children at a younger age and in a displacement context. They also valued the opportunity to show the refugees that they care about them, and they offer love and respect. In addition, some teachers noted that both programs brought children and parents closer together, leading to more positive interactions at home. As a result, they witnessed a reduction in parents' violent and aggressive behavior toward their children.

Importantly, the quantitative data showed that the RELP has a positive effect on children's learning and development, regardless of the caregivers' education or literacy levels (Schwartz et al. 2024). It was apparent in the interviews with teachers and facilitators that they were especially happy that the program worked for children whose caregivers were perceived as illiterate. One teacher shared an inspiring experience: "There was one parent who needed to learn first in order to be able to educate her child. This was the biggest challenge during the program and the one I liked the most. She [the caregiver] told me: 'I am very happy; I am now taking literacy courses myself.' Do you understand how amazing this is?!" (teacher, postintervention interview)

While the program provided valuable educational opportunities, some caregivers had concerns about their children's increased screen time and expressed a preference for in-person programming when possible. Many of these children did not have access to a smart device before engaging in the program. In some cases, the device was not owned by the parent but borrowed from an extended family member specifically for program participation, which made access to it limited and particularly important. As a result, a few caregivers were apprehensive that the remote program increased their child's screen time or heightened their interest in using phones. One caregiver explained:

> He [the child] only wants to play and doesn't want to participate [in the RELP]. Using the phone for education doesn't yield results. The phone affects their [children's] concentration…I prefer that my son goes to school to be around other children. They get jealous of each other and eventually engage in drawing and other learning activities. (mother, FGD)

On another note, caregivers' comments about the ASF program included that they found solace and a safe space within the program. While the quantitative results (Schwartz et al. 2024) indicate that the RELP alone improved child outcomes more effectively than in combination with the ASF program, the FGD data indicates that the caregivers, mostly mothers, who also participated in the ASF program found that the sessions gave them a space in which to discuss their mental health and their feelings about the challenges they encountered. One caregiver described her experience: "Personally, I found the parenting sessions even more helpful. A space to vent and talk and take care of yourself. You feel valued and cherished" (caregiver, FGD).

The facilitators who delivered the ASF program confirmed receiving positive feedback from the caregivers, who shared that they found the program highly beneficial. Some caregivers even invited family and community members to join the sessions, as they perceived them to be valuable. One facilitator shared that the "parents were really happy. A caregiver used to tell me that he attends the session with his spouse, relatives, and neighbors; he would say that there were 5-6 of them sitting together and listening to me" (facilitator, FGD).

Contextual Challenges in Remote Programming in Lebanon

The second research question explores the primary challenges various stakeholders encountered during remote programming. The caregivers, teachers, and facilitators highlighted significant contextual barriers, such as the effects of Lebanon's economic crisis, unreliable internet connection, and frequent power outages, all of which hindered their participation. Despite these difficulties, many participants showed resilience by striving to adapt and find solutions; their success did vary across contexts.

Lebanon's economic crisis prompted shifts in caregivers' daily routines. This is consistent with Weisner's (2002) ecocultural framework, which emphasizes families' adaptation to environmental constraints. In contexts of displacement, these adjustments meant that other family members or siblings had to assume the program responsibilities when the primary caregivers were unable to participate. Many caregivers explained that the economic hardships often left them unable to fulfill their children's basic needs, let alone to support their learning. One caregiver shared her personal experience on this matter during the program implementation:

> [The child] becomes frustrated when he asks for things that I cannot provide for him. When I invite him to join the session with me, he starts demanding specific things. When I explain to him that we are unable to afford those things and even struggle to get bread, he responds by threatening me, saying, "I don't want to attend the session." (caregiver, postintervention interview)

Challenges related to poor internet connectivity and electricity outages were considerable for the caregivers, teachers, and facilitators, and they came up in nearly every interview. As one caregiver commented, "Some days [are] without internet, and other days without electricity, and if there is internet, there is no electricity, and if there is electricity, there is no internet" (caregiver, postintervention interview). Many caregivers mentioned that these technical difficulties hindered their participation in the program in several ways, including making it difficult to attend the virtual session calls, download learning materials, or share videos and images of their children's work. Some caregivers even had to travel to nearby villages to charge their phone batteries, due to the frequent and worsening power outages. Moreover, although the IRC provided recharge cards, many caregivers found them inadequate and resorted to alternative measures, such as relying on their neighbors' wifi.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, the caregivers were strongly determined to engage fully in the program and to demonstrate their commitment to their children's education. Some went to great lengths to secure the necessary resources and connectivity to support their children's learning. As one parent put it, "In my case, I do not have wifi. I must stay beside the window or climb on something high to get a signal and be able to teach my daughter. And now I have battery issues because I do not have a generator; I must put my phone to recharge its battery at someone else's home" (caregiver, postintervention interview).

As a result of these technical challenges, many caregivers had to miss some sessions, which led to nearly half (46%) of the teachers and facilitators conducting one-on-one or group follow-up sessions. To ensure that parents who missed sessions didn't miss out on crucial content, the teachers had to follow up with them throughout the day and evening, or whenever electricity and the internet were available. As one teacher explained:

> The biggest challenge was reaching parents at the appointed [session's] time. For example, I would have a session at 2 PM, but not everyone would be able to join. I may have to reschedule for a second and possibly a third time due to internet issues, conflicts with work schedules, or not having a phone at home, and then we wait for the spouse to be back from work at 7 PM to take the call. (teacher, postintervention interview)

It is worth noting that, even though remote delivery posed challenges for the teachers and facilitators, some of them appreciated its advantages, especially those who were also parents. These advantages included spending more time with their children, and avoiding the high transportation costs and early morning commutes to the learning center.

Key Enablers of Success in the Remote Program

The third research question focuses on the key elements perceived to be crucial to the success of remote programming in emergency settings. The participants highly valued the programs' flexibility in meeting caregivers' needs, the strong teacher-caregiver relationships, and the programs' thoughtful pedagogy and materials, such as the RELP home learning kits. These components were seen as instrumental in fostering positive engagement and learning outcomes.

Caregivers expressed their satisfaction with the teachers, including their interaction with the children and their detailed and patient explanations of how to introduce learning materials to children. Caregivers also reported that the teachers and facilitators interacted in a loving, caring, and professional manner, as one parent shared: "The teacher is very kind and understanding, which means that she doesn't have a problem with repeating for you once, twice, or even ten times, as long as you're following along with her" (parent, postintervention interview).

A large proportion of the caregivers were content with the pedagogical techniques employed in the program, explicitly citing the efficacy of play-based learning. One parent shared how the RELP program was informative:

> Now that the teacher explained it, I know how to communicate things to my son. For example, when I wanted to teach him his name [before], I used to write it down and tell him, "Here, learn it." With the [RELP] teacher…I now know that I have to make shapes, maybe use some flour or playdough. I am now able to communicate better with my son. (mother, postintervention interview)

One teacher shared a similar observation:

> At the beginning of the program, parents thought that play is irrelevant to education, they used to say that we [the teachers] don't know how to teach children, we only know how to play…They thought that if a child wants to learn, we have to give him a pen, a paper, and teach him lessons, but they eventually discovered that you can actually teach children through play. (teacher, postintervention interview)

Caregivers also expressed a strong appreciation for the RELP content in various subject areas, including math, language, and social-emotional learning. They particularly enjoyed the engaging way the materials were presented, such as through activities, songs, and other interactive content. A caregiver said that the "math [content] was excellent, for example, the drawing [activities] and the videos that explain to children what to do or what to make…The lessons were explained through videos; what we have taken today and what is expected of us to do" (caregiver, postintervention interview).

Many caregivers reported that receiving the RELP home learning kit, which included physical materials, instilled a sense of pride and ownership in their children. This in turn fostered a positive attitude toward learning and motivated the children to engage with the program activities. A parent described her child's experience: "When she [the child] received the bag [the home learning kit] from the teacher, she wanted to jump off the car and kiss the teacher. She was very happy with the bag. She told her siblings, 'I have a bag now!'" (mother, postintervention interview).

One caregiver mentioned how their children would use the crayons and paper from the home learning kit outside the designed program activities as a way to seek refuge from the challenges and difficult emotions they were experiencing daily:

> Sometimes he [the child] would play with his friends and they would make fun of his clothes and that he didn't have sandals. He would sit and cry. But now, when he feels a little upset, he asks me to give him colors and a notebook to draw or do something…He sits on his bag [kit] and starts scribbling on it, coloring things. (caregiver, postintervention interview)

On the downside, since the materials were intended for one child, their use sometimes sparked jealousy among siblings and other children in the household, leading to conflicts and competition for access to the limited resources.

Initially, the teachers doubted that the RELP was going to influence children's outcomes because it was designed as a remote program and was targeting young children who had very limited access to resources: "At the beginning, I didn't expect much of myself. I mean, how am I going to teach 5-year-olds without seeing them?" (teacher, FGD). The teachers overcame their initial skepticism about remote ECE and, along with the facilitators, successfully employed an understanding approach that accommodated the caregivers' unique needs by building strong relationships with them and by providing supportive training and mentoring.

When the teachers first started to deliver the RELP, they found another reason to question its effectiveness: the program was designed to be delivered to caregivers, not directly to children, and this posed a potential challenge. During the program's first week, the teachers noticed that some caregivers were uneducated or illiterate, and some were skeptical of the play-based approach. According to the teachers, it took them a couple of weeks to convince the caregivers that the program was valuable and that it could work for them. Eventually, the teachers and the facilitators began to notice a positive change in the caregivers' engagement with the programs, which in turn led to the children's improvement. One teacher described this experience: "I used to believe that only educated mothers are capable of educating their children, but now I have discovered that this is not true; you can build a generation even when parents aren't educated" (teacher, postintervention interview).

Over time, the teachers and facilitators overcame such challenges by gaining a better understanding of the caregivers' circumstances and preferences, learning from their peers' experiences, and demonstrating the programs' value in increasing the caregivers' commitment. Teachers and facilitators mentioned that they did their best to simplify the content and be attentive to the unique needs of each caregiver. For example, they provided support to illiterate caregivers through WhatsApp voice messages, and they recapped the main lessons at several points throughout and after the sessions to maintain the caregivers' attention.

The teachers attributed the success of the RELP to the cooperation and involvement of the caregivers, who were open to learning and implementing new methods to support their children's development:

> I felt that the communication between me and the parents was very positive. I built a good relationship with the children even though I didn't meet them in person…I was able to communicate the goals to the parents in a good way, so the parents knew all the activities they needed to explain to their children. I witnessed significant progress in the children. This is a success to me, and I am proud of it. (teacher, postintervention interview)

The training services the teachers and facilitators received from the IRC were another element that helped them overcome their initial doubts about the programs and the contextual challenges they faced. All teachers and facilitators reported finding the preservice training very useful, and some saw it as essential preparation for the job. Although all teachers had at least one year of previous ECE experience, they found the training very beneficial, particularly the recommendations on how to tailor the information delivery to caregivers, who in turn would teach their own children. Some reported that they learned tricks and tips on how to contact caregivers and children and keep them engaged during the program:

> The training sessions were very helpful. They helped us understand how we can achieve our goals with and through the parents, especially in remote teaching. My [previous] work was primarily in person, and I didn't have experience in remote teaching. The techniques that they taught us during the training improved the quality of our work, in my opinion. (teacher, postintervention interview)

The teachers also said that they valued the feedback and in-service support they received from their supervisors and reported learning from one another's experiences through ongoing communication and regular meet-ups. One teacher shared: "As a team, we benefited from each other's experiences, and we learned from each other. I observed another teacher's approach and used the same method later on. It was a very nice experience." The same teacher later added: "When we [the teachers] had a problem, we would agree to talk to the supervisor, and they were very responsive. They told us not to hesitate to ask any questions, even at night, and they would really respond right away" (teacher, FGD).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, using our study on the RELP and the ASF program, we offer insights into the feasibility and effectiveness of remote ECE and parenting programs in hard-to-access settings. While the current situation in Lebanon is unique, it has many parallels with other emergency contexts in the region and around the world. The findings suggest that, despite a myriad of challenges, remote programming is a viable solution for contexts where sufficient in-person delivery is not feasible. They also provide insights into the lengths that teachers, facilitators, and caregivers who participated in the two programs went to make them a success, despite the challenging context. This clearly indicates the value such programs hold for them.

Program Adaptability in Challenging Contexts

The economic pressures and inflation experienced in Lebanon during this study created highly stressful daily routines for the participating caregivers, which were compounded by the pressures created by having to schedule and attend the remote program sessions. Despite these challenges, the caregivers made extra efforts to engage their children in the RELP activities. They were motivated by their strong belief in the importance of this educational opportunity, and by the results they saw throughout the program. The program also brought about a positive change in caregivers' perceptions of play-based learning, which made them challenge existing cultural norms about the academic content of preschools (Kabay, Wolf, and Yoshikawa 2017). The ecocultural model provides a framework for dynamic cultural change, including changes in parental beliefs (Weisner 2002). Although evidence of parental beliefs about something as fundamental as how

learning occurs is rarely reported in the literature (Kärtner, Holodynski, and Wörmann 2013), this type of change appears to have occurred for some caregivers through their engagement in the RELP.

Despite the expectation established in the theoretical section—that the success of an intervention relies on fitting the program into participants' daily routines (Lowe and Weisner 2004; Weisner et al. 2005)—the programs highlighted in this study demonstrated their adaptability and success despite the disruptions in participants' daily lives. The researchers identified a range of common activities that families engage in daily or weekly (see Figure 3), but our findings revealed a notable absence of structured routines or predictable order in families carrying out these activities. Economic, religious, and sociocultural factors all required teachers to be flexible when delivering the program. Ramadan, for instance, a Muslim celebration that entails a month of fasting and significant restructuring of daily routines, occurred in the middle of the intervention. This brought further changes in families' daily routines that required scheduling adjustments and adaptations. Lowe and Weisner (2004) assert that families' routines and circumstances evolve over time, and that instability affects many low-income households. While this perspective is relevant to our study, the frequency and impact of changes in the daily lives of displaced and refugee families may be even more pronounced.

Figure 3: Specifications of Activities Observed in Family Routines
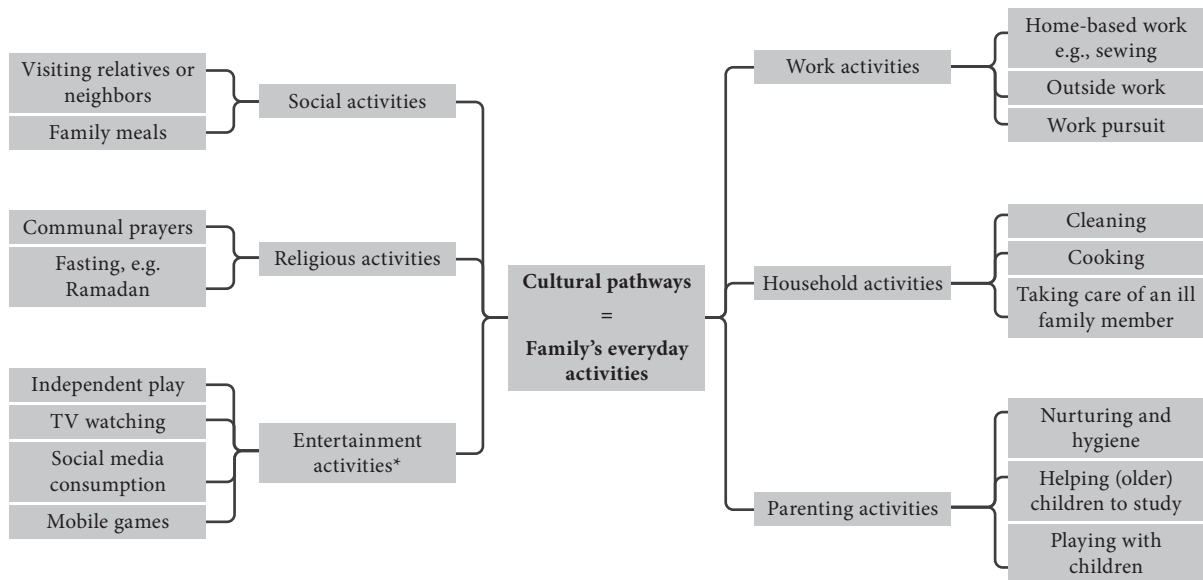
Note: * Mentioned primarily for children in the household

The teachers in our study were initially skeptical about remote ECE, a phenomenon we analyzed through Weisner's (2002) ecocultural framework, which highlights the influence cultural beliefs have on perceptions of education. The teachers adopted an empathetic approach in addressing caregivers' specific needs, which was supported by the training they received, as well as the robust relationships among the 28 teachers and facilitators, and between them and caregivers. Many of the teachers operated within an ecocultural frame that emphasized conventional in-person learning, which made it challenging for them to perceive the efficacy of remote modalities, especially for young children with limited resources. However, as they engaged with the program and observed the positive outcomes, their perceptions began to shift, which indicates that fostering strong relationships and providing tailored support are essential when implementing innovative educational strategies.

Program Design Insights and Effectiveness

This study explored several themes related to the RELP's and the ASF program's roles in influencing child development, and how the ASF program contributed to mitigating RELP's effects on child development, as highlighted by the qualitative findings (Schwartz et al. 2024). One possible explanation for the observed growth in children's skills pertains to the significance caregivers ascribed to the RELP in educating young children. Most notably, as the researchers observed during the FGDs, caregivers viewed the program as "school"—that is, a serious official educational opportunity for their children— which motivated them to participate actively. This occurred in the context of the Syrian families' limited access to ECE in Lebanon (UNICEF 2020). The involvement of trained and certified preschool teachers in delivering the program marked a significant shift for the community, providing caregivers with access to quality early education and playing a crucial role in engaging them. The home learning kits were enthusiastically received and used by the children and the caregivers, which also contributed to their perception of the program as school. That said, the interviews indicated that the kits also created competition for access to the materials among the children in the households.

An additional aspect to consider is the content and teacher support that were built into the RELP. The program pedagogy drew from the IRC's extensive experience in providing holistic ECE services for families in Lebanon. This experience was supplemented by educational media content that was integrated into the curriculum, with an emphasis on language, numeracy, social-emotional skills, and motor development. The children engaged with the program media content, and their caregivers reported that the children were watching the content months after the program ended. This indicates that the RELP could have longer-term effects, which could be the subject of future empirical investigations. In addition, preservice training and in-service mentoring and collaboration were crucial to equipping the teachers and facilitators and supporting their ability to implement the programs effectively in the difficult Lebanese context.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM DESIGN

These findings have several implications for future program design and practice. One key implication is the importance of designing remote programs to be flexible and adaptable. Teacher training, mentoring, supervision, and collaboration are also crucial to a program's success. These elements can help ensure that a program can be adjusted to meet the specific needs and circumstances of the targeted households and communities. That said, flexibility in offering to run sessions outside of working hours has implications for sustainability and teacher burnout. Exploring these factors further in future research could provide valuable insights into how to balance flexibility with the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of remote learning programs delivered in emergency settings.

Another notable trend seen in the data is the fact that the RELP introduced some young children to smartphones. This included borrowing a phone from a relative when one was not available at home. According to one caregiver, this exposure to smartphones may have fostered a perceived need or sense of entitlement among the children, some of whom continued using the phones after the program ended. Some eventually began gaming or browsing social media. The low frequency with which this concern appeared in the data limited our ability to explore it in this article. This finding is nevertheless important for future research, as it highlights the potential long-term effects of early exposure to smartphones on the digital habits and development of young refugee children.

Finally, future programs need to explore how older siblings and other family members can support the learning of younger children while also adding to their own. This can be achieved by incorporating siblings into the program calls and activities, even those who are not the primary participants. This could be done by providing additional materials or resources tailored to different ages, which could accelerate learning for all children in a household (Bolisetty et al. 2022). By fostering a collaborative learning environment that includes the entire family, programs can maximize educational outcomes and strengthen family bonds, thereby ensuring growth and development for all children involved.

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"IT WOULD HELP IF WE ACTUALLY KNEW ABOUT THE INITIATIVE": THE BARRIERS FEMALE REFUGEES FACE IN ACCESSING INCENTIVE TEACHER TRAINING IN ETHIOPIA

ANDIE REYNOLDS

ABSTRACT

Since the early 2000s, the Ethiopian government and global actors in education in emergencies have made significant investments in training refugees to become primary school teachers who deliver education to refugees in Ethiopia. These investments include an incentive teacher training initiative in the country's refugee-hosting regions. This initiative was enhanced in 2018, when the Ethiopian government, supported by global education funding, began offering scholarships to refugees so they could study at teacher training colleges to become qualified primary school teachers. The initiative has faced major challenges in recruiting participants, particularly female refugees. In February and March 2020, a team of 22 researchers conducted a situational needs assessment at 14 refugee camps in Ethiopia. The assessment included focus groups, surveys, and semistructured interviews that were used to collect data from 685 participants. We identified three initiative-specific barriers and four associated structural barriers that were hindering the participation of female refugees. Initiative-specific issues included poor recruitment, a lack of awareness of the initiative among female refugees, and delays in training and scholarships due to funding shortfalls. Structural barriers included the low incentive payment, a shortage of national teachers, limited opportunities for career progression, and a scarcity of eligible refugee girls. My aim in this article is to increase female refugees' participation in the initiative and improve retention rates for both trainees and teachers by providing evidence-based and participant-driven recommendations to address these barriers.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a key component of humanitarian support for refugees. It aligns with UN Sustainable Development Goal 4, which addresses the delivery of inclusive and quality education for all. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2020a) estimates that fewer than half of the eligible refugee children in Ethiopia are attending primary school. Refugee girls are more likely than refugee boys to drop out of primary (Lashford and Malik 2019; Nigusie and Carver 2019) and secondary school (Carvalho 2022). To address supply-side issues stemming in part from low enrollment and high dropout rates among refugees in primary education, several global funders and bilateral and multilateral agencies have worked increasingly over the last two decades, in partnership with the Ethiopian government, to develop and invest financially in a teacher training initiative for refugees. The aim of the initiative was to train refugees in all of Ethiopia's refugee-hosting regions to become primary school teachers (World Bank 2021), with those teaching in refugee primary schools to receive a monthly "incentive" payment from the UNHCR (Carver 2020). To date, little has been documented about the scale and scope of this initiative, or about its recruitment and communication strategies for targeting potential refugee participants.

In this article, I explore the development of this incentive teacher training initiative in Ethiopia, including a 2018 upgrade, when the Ethiopian government, supported by global education funding, began to award scholarships to eligible refugees to study at teacher training colleges (TTCs) and prepare to become accredited primary teachers. I also critically examine the administration and implementation of the initiative to determine why it experienced a major challenge in recruiting female refugees and consider whether lowering the minimum entrance criteria would result in greater female participation. Utilizing a situational needs analysis that collected data from 685 participants in 14 refugee camps in Ethiopia in 2020, this research exposed both initiative-specific and other associated structural barriers that impeded the participation of female refugees. Finally, I offer evidence-based and participant-driven recommendations to overcome these barriers.

REFUGEE EDUCATION IN ETHIOPIA

Refugee Populations

Ethiopia is the second largest refugee-hosting country in Africa. It maintains an open-door policy toward refugees seeking to enter the country and allows access to humanitarian aid and protection for those seeking asylum (UNHCR 2020b). The number of refugees in Ethiopia has risen sharply in recent years. In 2023, the UNHCR (2023) reported that Ethiopia hosts 926,471 people, of whom 922,428 are refugees and 4,043 are asylum-seekers. This is an increase of 54,561 refugees and asylum-seekers over the 2022 figures (UNHCR 2022a).

Most refugees in Ethiopia are currently located in four regions of Ethiopia: Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, and Somali. Until 2020, the Tigray region had hosted the largest number of refugees in Ethiopia (UNHCR 2020b), but due to the 2020-2022 civil war between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front, most refugees in Tigray were relocated to the Afar region (UNHCR 2022b). Vemuru et al. (2020, 2) claim that these refugee-hosting regions "are the least developed regions in Ethiopia, characterized by harsh weather conditions, poor infrastructure, low administrative capacity, a high level of poverty and poor development indicators."

Just under half of all refugees in Ethiopia are South Sudanese; the remaining refugee population comes predominantly from Somalia, Eritrea, and Sudan (UNHCR 2020b). The factors driving these populations to seek refuge in Ethiopia include the conflicts in South Sudan and Sudan, the prevailing political environment in Eritrea, and conflict and drought in Somalia (UNHCR 2022a). Evaluations of education access and quality in these countries consistently find both to be compromised and/or inconsistent; this is particularly true in Somalia, where the education system completely collapsed decades ago (Wolhouter 2014).

Policy, Administration, and Delivery

Ethiopia's adoption of the UNHCR's Global Education Strategy 2012-2016 has resulted in some key changes in refugee education programming. This includes increased staffing for refugee education planning and programming at key bodies and organizations in Ethiopia, including UNHCR and the Refugee and Returnees Service (RRS). It also led to the development of the Ethiopia 2015-2018 Refugee Education Strategy, with the aim of adapting and contextualizing the Global Education Strategy to the Ethiopian context and to improve refugee access to high-quality education (UNHCR 2015).

Ethiopia has also adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and its annex, the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, and signed the Djibouti Declaration and the Global Compact for Refugees in 2017-2018. To comply with these agreements, the Ethiopian government pledged to achieve full enrollment of refugees in primary school, and greater access to and integration of refugees into secondary and postsecondary education (Austin 2024). Due to the Ethiopian government's move from a humanitarian to a responsibility-sharing approach to refugee education (Carvalho and Dryden-Peterson 2024), refugee education in Ethiopia is now funded by multiple sources. The UNHCR still funds most of the day-to-day refugee education system, including the RRS and other partners. The World Bank has become more involved in refugee education policies and practices in Ethiopia and recently funded several programs operating there (Carvalho and Dryden-Peterson 2024), including additional financing for the General Educational Quality Improvement Program for Equity for Refugee Integration (World Bank 2021). Other donors that fund refugee education programs in Ethiopia include Education Cannot Wait (ECW 2020), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF Ethiopia 2018),

and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (World Bank 2021). There are approximately 13 international and local nongovernmental organizations (I/NGOs) actively involved in implementing early childhood care and education, as well as primary and secondary education in refugee camps and host communities. Additional organizations, such as Plan International, provide support through accelerated learning, as well as technical and vocational education and training (Lashford and Malik 2019).

The administration and management of education in Ethiopia is decentralized. Ethiopia has nine national regional states and two city administrations. Each has its own bureau of education that has primary responsibility for administering and managing education systems. These bureaus are administratively and financially responsible for delivering education, but they receive some additional financial support from the federal government "in support of general education, technical vocational training and teacher training colleges that operate in their respective States" (UNHCR 2015, 8). To help implement national education, the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Ethiopia focuses on policies and guidelines that are based on research and policy analysis. The regional education bureaus tend to be left to their own devices to devise and implement education policy in accordance with their regional needs and realities (Lashford and Malik 2019). They largely leave the policy development and delivery of refugee education to the RRS (Nigusie and Carver 2019). Of the 61 refugee primary schools in Ethiopia, 56 are operated by the RRS; the remainder are expected to transfer to the RRS by 2025 (World Bank 2021).

Since 2015, the curriculum for refugee education has predominantly followed the national curriculum (Nigusie and Carver 2019; UNHCR 2015). Primary education is divided into lower primary, grades 1-4, for children 7-10 years old, and upper primary, grades 5-8, for adolescents 11-14 years old (UNHCR 2015). Completion of primary school is followed by two years of general secondary education in grades 9-10, for young people age 15-16, then by preparatory secondary education in grades 11-12, for young people age 17-18. Regional examinations are administered at the end of grade 8, national examinations at the end of grades 10 and 12 (UNHCR 2015). The curriculum for refugee education is typically delivered in the lower primary grades in the refugee students' mother tongue, and then it changes to Amharic or English for upper primary and secondary school (Nigusie and Carter 2019; Demissie and Boru 2023). There has been a tendency to use the curriculum from students' countries of origin in the lower primary grades, "despite the difficulties of acquiring materials, assuring teacher training or monitoring quality" (UNHCR 2015, 12). For refugee students who begin with the home-country curriculum, the shift in language and to the host-country curriculum in grade 5 can be problematic, and it is cited as a factor contributing to school dropout (UNHCR 2015; Demissie and Boru 2023).

Two types of teachers deliver primary school education to refugees: qualified or eligible "incentive" teachers who are refugees, and Ethiopian national teachers. National teachers who deliver refugee education receive a salary of approximately 6,275 Birr (US$89) per month (Bengtsson et al. 2020), while incentive teachers receive a monthly payment—

an incentive—estimated to be between 700 and 800 Birr (US$12-US$14) (Carver 2020). Refugee schools are typically staffed by the incentive teachers in the lower primary grades, and by the national teachers from upper primary onward (Lashford and Malik 2019).

Studies show that teachers in Ethiopia are often regarded as low-status professionals (Abebe and Woldehanna 2013), and the entry requirements for teacher training programs are among the lowest for all professions in Ethiopia (UNESCO 2019). Teacher training in Ethiopia is delivered through technical and vocational education and training (Austin 2024). The Education Sector Development Programme framework stipulates that primary teacher trainees must have obtained "a minimum of Grade 10 general education" plus a TTC certificate to teach in lower primary, and a TTC diploma for upper primary, which takes 3-4 years to complete (Abebe and Woldehanna 2013, 6). A survey of 305 student teachers in Ethiopia found that many had "joined the teaching profession because of lack of other options," which included entry-level qualifications to access higher education or other professional training (Kasa 2014, 53). A key recommendation from the study was that the MoE, the regional education bureaus, and the TTCs "should promote…the relevance of the profession and being a teacher…to improve attitude towards teaching professionals" (Kasa 2014, 44). These factors have contributed to a shortage of qualified teachers for refugee operations (Abebe and Woldehanna 2013; Bengtsson et al. 2020; Kasa 2014) and an increase in the number of incentive teachers (ECW 2020; Austin 2024) across refugee-hosting regions in Ethiopia.

Female Students and Teachers

The Ethiopian MoE seeks to increase the enrollment of refugee students at all education levels, which is in keeping with the pledges made in the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, Djibouti Declaration, and Global Compact for Refugees to deliver quality education and provide equal access to education for refugees. Nevertheless, the gross enrollment rate for primary education is 47 percent for refugees, which compares to the national average of 95 percent; secondary education enrollment for refugees is 13 percent, which compares to 42 percent for nationals (UNHCR 2022a). These numbers for refugees are low, and the challenges behind the low numbers persist. Refugee girls, for example, are less likely than refugee boys to enroll in primary and secondary school (Carvalho 2022; Lashford and Malik 2019) and are more likely to drop out (Carvalho 2022; Lashford and Malik 2019; Nigusie and Carver 2019). Available statistics indicate that only 12 percent of refugee girls and 38 percent of refugee boys in Ethiopia complete primary school, and that the gross enrollment rate in secondary school is 6.9 percent for refugee girls, 19.2 percent for refugee boys (Ethiopian MoE 2020). This suggests that completing primary school and making the transition from primary to secondary school is a challenge for refugees, especially for refugee girls (cf. Carvalho 2022).

Like many African countries, the teaching profession in Ethiopia is largely dominated by males, and male teachers outnumber female teachers. In the national primary schools, an estimated 39 percent of teachers are female (UNICEF Ethiopia 2018); in refugee primary schools, the male-to-female teacher ratio is approximately 10:1 (Nigusie and Carver 2019). Academics, practitioners, and policymakers recommend recruiting more female teachers to serve as role models for female students, in the hope of improving the recruitment, retention, and academic performance of young girls in both primary and secondary school (Kane 2005; Stromquist 2017; Winthrop and Kirk 2005). Existing studies confirm that female teachers improve female students' outcomes across four domains: access, support, learning, and protection. Female teachers are perceived to attract girls to attend school (Kane 2005), to support girls in class, which increases retention (Winthrop and Kirk 2005), and to promote increased knowledge gains for female students (Morley 2019). Having female teachers also helps create a safer learning environment for young girls by reducing sexual harassment and violence in the classroom (Stromquist 2017). While refugee education policy and strategy in Ethiopia stipulate that "extra efforts will be made to ensure a gender responsive education system" (UNHCR 2015, 22), gender parity among teachers remains low, as do female enrollment and school completion.

INCENTIVE TEACHER TRAINING INITIATIVE

The qualifications incentive teachers currently require to teach lower primary education align with the national Education Sector Development Programme framework (Abebe and Woldehanna 2013). However, these teachers often do not have qualifications equivalent to those of the countries they have fled, which often have suffered years of conflict and instability that interfered with the education system (UNHCR 2015). Female refugees also tend to have fewer qualifications than their male counterparts (Liebig and Tronstad 2018). Due to these factors and the shortage of qualified teachers in refugee operations (Abebe and Woldehanna 2013; Kasa 2014), refugees who are not qualified teachers often deliver primary education in refugee schools (UNHCR 2015). In addition to working as teachers, they often also are upper primary students or first-cycle secondary students. At RRS primary schools that have two daily shifts, it is possible to see unqualified refugees teaching lower primary classes in the morning and attending upper primary classes as students in the afternoon (UNESCO 2019). In 2020, Education Cannot Wait (2020) estimated that only 245,959—approximately 47 percent—out of all grade 1-8 teachers in Ethiopia are adequately qualified. This percentage is estimated to be significantly lower for incentive teachers (Bengtsson et al. 2020).

Due to these unsatisfactory numbers, the Ethiopian government, supported by global education funding, has made significant investments in training and qualifying incentive teachers so they can effectively teach the children in the refugee camps (World Bank 2021). However, there is a paucity of research that has examined the development and implementation of this incentive teacher training initiative beyond the anecdotal (Nicolai

et al. 2020). The foundations of the initiative can be traced to the early 2000s, when the International Rescue Committee introduced regular in-service teacher training for RRS primary teachers in the Tigray region. Most of these teachers were (1) male, (2) nominated by their community, (3) the most educated of the refugee community, although not necessarily secondary education graduates, and (4) receiving a UNHCR-funded incentive payment of approximately US$30 per month (Kirk 2010). To facilitate the recruitment of female teachers into their primary schools, the RRS lowered the minimum requirement for incentive teachers to having completed primary school (grade 8) (Kirk and Winthrop 2013). In 2009, this requirement was increased to grade 10, in keeping with the Education Sector Development Programme national framework (Assefa et al. 2021).

This initiative has since expanded to all refugee-hosting regions in Ethiopia. Unfortunately, this has occurred unevenly, due to disparities in funding streams across the regions and to training being delivered by different, and in some regions multiple, providers (Eschete 2022; Tsegaye 2023). For example, training providers in the Gambella region have included the International Rescue Committee, British Council, Plan International, and Save the Children (Refugee Education Working Group 2018, cited in Austin 2024). Beyond the funds primarily provided by UNICEF, UNHCR, and the Ethiopian MoE, these organizations have struggled to source sustainable funding to provide multiyear training for incentive teachers so they can gain skills that mirror the TTC certificate training for national teachers (Refugee Education Working Group 2018, cited in Austin 2024). To ameliorate this, TTCs in Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, and Somali expanded their summer training courses for national teachers to make space for a limited number of incentive teachers (UNHCR 2017; West and Ring 2015). However, it has proven difficult to standardize all available training to meet a set curriculum (Refugee Education Working Group 2018, cited in Austin 2024; Tsegaye 2023), and the incentive teachers have reported duplication in their training programs (Nicolai et al. 2020).

Since 2016, the Ethiopian government has secured financing from additional funders—including Education Cannot Wait, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the World Bank—to develop and implement a more comprehensive and standardized approach to refugee education management and delivery (World Bank 2021). This has included financing for TTCs and scholarships for refugees, which will enable refugees to study alongside national teacher trainees and to earn a TTC certificate (ECW 2020; UNHCR 2017; World Bank 2021).[1] The TTCs are located in the capital cities of all regions that host refugees and they deliver the certificate training in English (Assefa et al. 2021). It costs approximately US$1,500 to train and provide a scholarship for each incentive teacher (ECW 2020). In 2018, this upgraded initiative was piloted with 343 incentive teachers in the Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz regions (Westfall 2018), the plan being to expand it across all refugee-hosting regions (Ethiopian MoE 2020).

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1   This includes funding streams of US$15 million from Education Cannot Wait for 2017-2020 (ECW 2020) and US$10 million from the Building Self-Reliance Project, which is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (UNHCR 2017).

However, for reasons already identified, refugees rarely complete grade 10, so the number of refugees recruited to train at the TTCs has not matched the numbers needed. Female participation has been particularly low (Bengtsson et al. 2020; Nicolai et al. 2020).

UNICEF shared these concerns about the female refugees' limited participation in the initiative and directly funded this research project to (1) examine what prevents female refugees from taking part in the initiative, and (2) contemplate whether lowering the entrance criteria to grade 8 for females—as the RRS did in the Tigray region two decades ago—would increase the participation of female refugees.

METHODOLOGY

UNICEF commissioned this research to conduct a situational needs assessment across all 26 refugee camps that were operational in Ethiopia in early 2020. All 26 camps were included to ensure that we captured the uniqueness of each refugee camp and the factors that were influencing the female refugees' participation, or lack thereof. However, our initial discussions with RRS officials revealed that 12 of the camps were inaccessible on security grounds. We therefore conducted research at the 14 accessible camps, which were in five regions: Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Somali, and Tigray. We accessed and collected data at all 14 camps between February and March 2020.

To incorporate the views of all stakeholders, a team of 22 researchers undertook the data collection with nine groups of participants in refugee camps across all five regions. These groups included

- adolescent girls age 12-16 who were eligible, or soon to be eligible, to become incentive teachers;[2]

- former incentive teachers who had left the primary teaching profession;

- incentive and national teachers in refugee primary schools;

- parents;

- religious leaders;

- camp leaders, including Refugee Central Committee leaders;

- TTC educators;

- refugee education specialists from I/NGOs; and

- government specialists, including RRS officials.

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2   The lower end of this age range (12-14) was to assist our investigation in determining the factors that can affect the female refugee dropout rate for primary school.

The research team was composed of 11 women and 11 men; 20 were Ethiopian nationals, and the remaining two were from the UK and Ireland. More than half the research team members had previous experience working in Ethiopian refugee camps as researchers, teachers, or INGO workers. Our situational needs assessment applied a mixed methods approach, which used multiple data-collection tools to make the needs assessment as accessible as possible for participant groups that were difficult to reach (Robson and McCartan 2016). The semistructured interviews were selected as data-collection methods for all the participant groups, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with three of the participant groups, and survey questionnaires (SQs) were offered as an alternative for some participant groups. The SQs and the key informant interviews (KIIs) for each research participant group were purposely designed to extract the same qualitative and quantitative data.[3] Where possible, the participant groups were given a choice as to how the data was to be collected—that is, which data-collection tool the researchers would use. For example, filling out a survey may have seemed less intrusive for some than participating in a face-to-face interview or FGD (Emden and Smith 2004). Table 1 illustrates the primary data-collection methods available to each participant group.

Table 1: Data-Collection Methods Available to Each Participant Group

Participant Group	KII	FGD	SQ
Adolescent girls	X	√	X
Former incentive teachers	√	X	√
Incentive and national teachers	√	√	√
Parents	√	√	X
Religious leaders	√	X	X
Camp leaders	√	X	X
TTC educators	√	X	√
I/NGOs	√	X	√
Refugee and Return Service officials	√	X	√

Key: √=used; X=not used

FGDs were specifically chosen for their ability to generate a rich understanding of participants' experiences, beliefs, and values; they also are effective in reflecting majority views (Prior et al. 2020). We designed the FGD schedules for three participant groups (adolescent girls, incentive and national teachers in refugee primary schools, and parents),

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3   The quantitative data we collected included sociodemographic data on the participants, languages spoken, number of students in primary school classrooms, male-to-female student and teacher ratios in primary schools, and the student dropout rate (male and female) in primary schools.

REYNOLDS

with the aim of uncovering the barriers that were affecting female refugees' access to teacher training. We integrated four participatory tools to enrich these discussions: body mapping, the problem tree, the bridge tool, and fishbone analysis. These tools empowered participants to collaboratively explore complex context-specific issues, to identify the root causes of low female refugee participation in teacher training, and to generate effective solutions (Henderson et al. 2023; Snowdon et al. 2008; VSO 2012). This approach ensured that participant-driven solutions were captured accurately in the findings and recommendations, which sets this study apart from previous research (cf. Nigusie and Carver 2019; Lashford and Malik 2019). Table 2 summarizes the number of KIIs, FGDs, and SQs undertaken at the 14 sampled refugee camps.

Table 2: Data Collection Undertaken in 14 Refugee Camps

Region	Camp	Total FGDs	Participants (FGDs)	Total KIIs/SQs	Participants (KIIs/SQs)	Total
Tigray	Adi-Harush	4	Adolescent girls Parents	11	Former teachers Religious leaders Camp leaders I/NGOs RRS	57
	Mai-Ani	4	Adolescent girls Incentive and national teachers Parents	7	Religious leaders Camp leaders I/NGOs RRS	47
	Hitsats	4	Adolescent girls Parents	10	Incentive and national teachers Religious leaders Camp leaders TTC educators I/NGOs RRS	56

Region	Camp	Total FGDs	Participants (FGDs)	Total KIIs/SQs	Participants (KIIs/SQs)	Total
Gambella	Kule	3	Adolescent girls Incentive and national teachers Parents	5	Religious leaders Camp leaders RRS	29
	Jewi	5	Adolescent girls Parents	5	Religious leaders Camp leaders I/NGOs RRS	57
	Nygenyiel	4	Adolescent girls Parents	5	Religious leaders Camp leaders TTC educators I/NGOs RRS	51
	Tierkidi	2	Adolescent girls Parents	8	Religious leaders Camp leaders I/NGOs RRS	28
Somali	Awbarre	4	Adolescent girls Parents	7	Religious leaders Camp leaders I/NGOs RRS	53
	Sheder	3	Adolescent girls Parents	8	Former teachers Incentive and national teachers Religious leaders Camp leaders TTC educators I/NGOs RRS	42
	Kebribeyah	4	Adolescent girls Parents	10	Former teachers Incentive and national teachers Religious leaders Camp leaders I/NGOs	56

Region	Camp	Total FGDs	Participants (FGDs)	Total KIIs/SQs	Participants (KIIs/SQs)	Total
Afar	Barahle	5	Adolescent girls Incentive and national teachers Parents	5	Religious leaders Camp leaders TTC educators I/NGOs RRS	57
	Aysaita	4	Adolescent girls Parents	5	Religious leaders Camp leaders I/NGOs RRS	52
Benishangul-Gumuz	Tsore	3	Adolescent girls Parents	6	Incentive and national teachers Religious leaders Camp leaders RRS	55
	Sherkole	4	Adolescent girls Incentive and national teachers Parents	5	Religious leaders Camp leaders I/NGOs RRS	45
					TOTAL	**685**

Consent was requested from all the participants to use the data they provided. Consent forms and information sheets outlining the study's aims and objectives were provided in multiple languages, including English, French, Arabic, and Amharic, to match the languages of curriculum delivery in the camps. When in the camps, we hired people to translate these documents into the local languages where needed. Parents were asked to provide consent for us to interview children under age 18. All participants were given the option of ending their participation at any time. None of the participants chose to withdraw during the data-collection process.

Three research team members then analyzed the data using inductive thematic analysis. We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis but, due to the large amount of data collected, we added a pilot stage to test our generation of initial codes and emerging themes.[4] This pilot stage involved all three analysts individually undertaking the first three phases of thematic analysis on the data collected from one refugee camp (Adi-Harush). We met to share our initial codes and the emerging core themes and subthemes, reviewed and deliberated on them, and then collectively generated an emerging thematic map (Braun and Clarke 2006). We used this map to

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4   These phases are (1) familiarizing yourself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing the themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

inform, but not lead, the remaining data analysis. Once the pilot was completed, we compared and refined our emerging themes, and then generated and mapped the final core themes and subthemes. We selected quotes that summarized the data relevant to each theme and included them so that an analytical "story" emerged (Robson and McCartan 2016). This informed the structure of our findings and the subsequent recommendations of this study.

We collected most of the data in English, some in Amharic and Arabic. A limitation of this study is that we had planned for most of the data to be collected in Amharic and, accordingly, all but two of the researchers were native Amharic speakers. Six members of the research team did not have B2 level competency in English, and they acknowledged that they collected much less data in English than in in Amharic. Some of the participants spoke local languages, particularly the adolescent girls, parents, and religious leaders, and we used translators to help us with the data collection in these cases; we recognize that some meaning and nuance may have been lost in translation.

FINDINGS

Our situational needs assessment found that the incentive teacher training initiative contributes to positive outcomes in refugee primary education, including higher enrollment of female students in primary schools, more female teachers who are qualified and confident to teach, and more inclusive education for female students. Nevertheless, our findings uncovered three initiative-specific barriers and four associated structural barriers in refugee education that impeded the female refugees' participation in the initiative. This section outlines and critically discusses all seven barriers.

Initiative-Specific Barriers

While the level of awareness about the initiative varied across camps, there was a pattern in terms of who was aware of it. RRS officials, camp leaders, and incentive teachers were those most aware, whereas the adolescent refugee girls were frequently least aware: "There is a lack of awareness among the adolescent girls themselves and in the community, more generally. Most adolescent girls and the community are not aware of the incentive teaching initiative" (religious leader, KII, Gambella).

Even when adolescent girls had heard of the initiative, they could only describe it sketchily: "We heard rumors, but we don't know much about incentive teaching" (adolescent girl, FGD, Gambella). Some parents also seemed unaware of the initiative. This was problematic, as parents are influential in shaping their children's aspirations (incentive teacher, KII, Benishangul-Gumuz; Soong et al. 2022). One parent commented that "female incentive teachers are not in this camp because adolescent girls are not

aware of teaching jobs" (parent, FGD, Afar). This suggests that parents and female incentive teachers are critical in making adolescent girls aware of the initiative.

Some female incentive teachers we interviewed remarked that they had not heard of this initiative before getting involved. Three of the female incentive teachers had visited the TTC in Asosa, Benishangul-Gumuz, to enquire how they could train to become teachers. No one had informed them that there was an incentive teacher training initiative available to them in the camps, which these teachers called "a significant barrier faced by women in the camp." A former male incentive teacher in Somali told a similar story in an interview. He had enquired at the primary schools in his camp about how to become a teacher and was sent to the TTC in Jijiga, but there was no mention at the schools of incentive teaching or of an initiative already in place.

Recruitment

The initiative recruitment strategy was also vague and it differed across regions. In Gambella, RRS officials posted about vacancies for primary school teachers in the primary schools and RRS offices, but some adolescent refugee girls said they had never seen these postings. One RRS official in Somali stated that, "when vacancies are posted there is no criteria to include more adolescent girls." In Tigray, an RRS official directly approached certain refugees based on their profiles:

> We have data of the refugee teachers here. How many of them have graduated from universities in Ethiopia. How many of them were teachers or other professionals in their homeland. Based on their data, we try to identify these refugees. And they apply, based on their skills… So, we use their data to recruit them. (KII)

The RRS officials involved in our study have access to the education data on the refugees in each camp. They reported that refugee men were more likely to arrive in refugee camps with "certificates on teaching training" (RRS official, KII, Gambella); that female refugees typically have "not undertaken teaching training in their country of origin" (RRS official, KII, Gambella); and that female refugees were more likely than males to drop out of school (RRS officials, KIIs, Tigray and Somali). This is consistent with the existing literature, which states that female refugees have fewer qualifications than male refugees (Liebig and Tronstad 2018) and that female refugees in Ethiopia have higher rates of school dropout than males (Nigusie and Carver 2019; Lashford and Malik 2019). The literature also offers a rationale as to why UNICEF was interested in further lowering the entrance requirement for girls to grade 8—that is, to "catch" adolescent refugee girls before they drop out of school.

Our study found few female incentive teachers working in the RRS primary schools. At least one camp in every region studied had no female incentive teachers. Where female incentive teachers were employed, they were considerably fewer in number than their male counterparts. Our data indicates that the male-to-female teacher ratio was more than 10:1.[5] Providing and facilitating training opportunities specifically for females in the camps was frequently cited as a way to attract female refugees to the initiative (adolescent girls, FGDs, Gambella and Somali). Our research identified female-only spaces created by INGOs and NGOs in most of the camps that the initiative could use for such training.

Despite the lack of female incentive teachers, some adolescent girls were interested in becoming teachers, saying "I want to support students," "I want to get money," and "I want to support my family" (adolescent girls, FGDs, Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz). But most of the refugee girls didn't know about the initiative or whether they were eligible: "We are interested to become incentive teachers even though we don't know if we are qualified for it" (adolescent girl, FGD, Gambella).

Again, awareness of the initiative and the current recruitment strategy need to be reviewed in each camp, especially as relates to adolescent girls. Years have passed since the aspiring incentive teachers from Benishangul-Gumuz and Somali inquired at the TTCs how they could become teachers. There is little evidence that the outcome of their situation would not be the same for adolescent girls in the refugee camps today—that is, they would likely first have to inquire directly at the TTCs to find out about the initiative and then be recruited.

Training and Scholarships

There was concern in all the camps that adolescent girls did not have the level of English language skill required to become incentive teacher candidates, as the language of instruction in the TTCs is English (Assefa et al. 2021). Existing research confirms that refugees in postsecondary education often struggle with English, which is the language of instruction in Ethiopia at that level (Austin 2024; Tamrat 2022). Although INGOs were adding English courses in most of the camps to help the trainee and incentive teachers improve their language skills, there apparently was no additional English language support for adolescent girls or aspiring female incentive teachers to help them prepare for the language of instruction in the TTCs. The RRS in one camp had set up volunteer-run English schools for students "that have not passed their examinations… to learn communicative skills, writing skills, the basic skills in English. So they will be able to get jobs" (camp leader, KII, Benishangul-Gumuz). However, the research is inconclusive as to whether these schools had a positive impact on the number of female refugees enrolling in the initiative.

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5   The 10:1 male-female ratio was considered the average in similar and recent studies in Ethiopian refugee camps (cf. Nigusie and Carver 2019).

A related criticism concerned gaps in the initiative's adaptation to refugee education: "The courses prepared for the incentive teachers [are] not demand-driven and not specific for the refugee community" (NGO worker, KII, Afar). Our research concurs with this criticism. As previously discussed, the training was specifically designed for Ethiopian national teachers to teach primarily in nonrefugee schools. Incentive teachers were only invited to attend classes with the national teacher trainees at the TTCs, and the training they received there was largely perceived as not having been adapted or modified to meet the initiative teachers' needs.

The TTC educators we interviewed in four regions reported that, at the time of our research, they had delivered the teacher training component of the initiative to refugees. However, one of our key findings was that the TTC educators were still relying on I/NGOs to provide some of the training in the camps. This reportedly was due to unforeseen delays and/or shortfalls in funding the TTCs and scholarships for refugees, findings that were also identified in related research (cf. Austin 2024; Bengtsson et al. 2020; World Bank 2021). Moreover, when we visited the TTCs, we asked to see all official documentation concerning the initiative, including the training manuals the incentive teachers had received, but they were not available. This echoed claims the incentive teachers had made during our discussions—that is, that they never received these materials during their training. When we asked the TTC educators for the name of someone from whom we could obtain these training materials, a common response was that "there is no such focal person [in charge of the initiative]" (TTC educator, KII, Afar). These factors suggest that the initiative had not yet been fully implemented at the time we conducted our research.

Some incentive teachers told us that they had not received any training. One disclosed that she hadn't received any training despite having worked at the RRS school for more than six months and having been told she would receive some training "in the first month" (incentive teacher, KII, Somali). Two female incentive teachers in Gambella told us in an FGD that they had also started teaching without any training, due to a lack of scholarships available for them to attend the training.

Associated Structural Barriers

National Teacher Supply

Official policy limits the incentive teachers to providing instruction in the lower primary classes, while the national teachers with diplomas teach the upper primary classes (Lashford and Malik 2019). However, due to a national teacher shortage, incentive teachers in all five regions often teach at both levels. They reported covering upper primary classes for months or being officially assigned to these classes (incentive teachers, KIIs, Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz). At the upper level, instruction is in either English or Amharic, and our research found that several incentive teachers lacked

proficiency in these languages. On three occasions—twice in Benishangul-Gumuz—translators proficient in the local languages were needed so we could collect meaningful data from the KIIs and FGDs conducted with incentive teachers in English or Amharic. Adolescent girls in Benishangul-Gumuz described some incentive teachers as difficult to understand (adolescent girls, FGD, Benishangul-Gumuz), and their parents echoed this concern: "The quality of education is poor because the teachers don't understand Amharic or English" (parent, FGD, Benishangul-Gumuz).

When incentive teachers were teaching upper primary classes, the lower primary classes were often merged. This created larger classes and, therefore, additional stress and a greater workload for the incentive teachers who taught the lower primary students. Most of the incentive and national teachers we interviewed indicated that lower and upper primary classes were overcrowded (incentive teacher, KII, Benishangul-Gumuz; national teacher, KII, Somali) and that, as a result, "it is difficult for teachers to manage students" (camp leader, KII, Gambella). Our teachers reported that most classrooms were only built for 30-40 students, yet they typically taught between 70 and 120 students; one incentive teacher in Gambella (SQ) reported having 148 students (84 boys and 64 girls) in their class.

Incentive teachers having an excessive number of students and heavy workloads corroborates existing findings (Bengtsson et al. 2020; UNHCR 2015). In light of these circumstances, the women who were eligible for the initiative but were married and/or had domestic/familial responsibilities were cited as "preferring other duties than incentive teaching as they don't want to be stressed by their work" (incentive teacher, KII, Somali). Former incentive teachers we interviewed also cited this as a factor in their leaving the profession: "There are just too many students and not enough teachers" (former teacher, KII, Somali).

Incentive Payment

In this study, the most pressing structural barrier affecting the recruitment and retention of incentive teachers was the low incentive payment. The existing literature states that incentive workers are paid a maximum of 800 Birr (US$14), which is "legally acceptable under refugee law" (Carver 2020, 17), whereas our research revealed that incentive teachers are paid 720-920 Birr per month, depending on the region. However, even this pay range was widely perceived to be insufficient to support even the most basic standard of living. RRS officials acknowledged that the current level of remuneration was insufficient for incentive teachers: "They are economically poor and the salary is not enough" (RRS official, KII, Gambella). Other participant groups expressed similar views: "They hardly survive due to the low salary rate" (religious leader, KII, Afar); "The salary rate is insufficient" (camp leader, KII, Gambella); "The incentives to teach in the schools are not enough" (NGO worker, SQ, Gambella).

Some incentive teachers we interviewed could not afford to eat breakfast and were going to school hungry: "The main problem is my salary. I cannot cover my basic needs…To teach grade 1-6, you need energy, [but] we come here sometimes without breakfast" (incentive teacher, FGD, Afar). This was verified by other participant groups: "The salary is not enough for incentive teachers…it does not meet the teachers' basic needs and they are not eating breakfast" (camp leader, KII, Gambella).

Incentive teachers also remarked that the "financial incentive [805 Birr] is not sufficient for [the] size of the workload" (incentive teacher, FGD, Gambella). Considering the low pay incentive teachers received, many adolescent girls with an already high domestic workload considered the profession unattractive: "The salaries of incentive teachers are small…To spend time as an incentive teacher is losing time because she has responsibility for home chores" (adolescent girl, FGD, Gambella).

It was speculated that, with such a meagre salary, adolescent girls with qualifications would look for more lucrative work: "If they are qualified…they often go to other NGOs or they search for a position in the host community…They are not interested in working for 800 Birr" (RRS official, KII, Gambella). The adolescent girls themselves asserted that only rich women can afford to be incentive teachers: "If she is rich she may want to [be an] incentive teacher because the salary of incentive teacher is [only] 805 Birr per month" (adolescent girls, FGD, Gambella).

According to the parents, who are key in terms of encouraging their adolescent daughters to become teachers (Soong et al. 2022), poor remuneration was a disincentive: "Teachers have families, and the salary is not enough to feed the family. So they drop the teaching jobs and engage in other jobs" (parent, FGD, Gambella). Poor pay is also an impediment to families giving girls permission to become incentive teachers: "If the salary [were] much higher, her husband or her family [would] allow her to engage in incentive teaching" (adolescent girls, FGD, Gambella). Male partners—who usually are the principal decisionmakers in the family (Geleta et al. 2015)—may only give permission to teach if it is financially viable: "Her husband will be happy if she is able to bring more money"; "The payment the incentive teachers are getting is really poor so it's better to stay at home and take care of the house. Her husband also believes it's better to take care of the house instead of the incentive money" (adolescent girls, FGDs, Gambella).

The four former incentive teachers we interviewed all cited low pay as the key factor in their decision to leave the profession, especially when the incentive payment was compared to Ethiopian national teachers' salary:

> National teachers take high salaries, incentive teachers don't. Even if the incentive teachers had a diploma, their payment didn't change. There was no justice. We were doing the same thing, doing the same job. The national teachers have a diploma and they get more money. But I am an incentive teacher and I have a diploma, but I don't get the same payment. (former teacher, KII, Somali)

The existing literature confirms that national teachers working in refugee and host-country primary schools often earn "figures seven times higher than refugee teachers" (Bengtsson et al. 2020, 77). The assumption behind this discrepancy in payment is that "refugees receive benefits including shelter, access to health services, food, education and other services from UNHCR and its partners" (Bengtsson et al. 2020, 77). The incentive payment is therefore deemed sufficient. However, participants in our study claimed that national teachers also receive a benefits package (camp leader, KII, Somali), including free accommodation in the nearby host community, to attract them to teach refugees. In our review of the literature, we could not find data to support the existence of a benefits package for national teachers, but the rumors on top of the discrepant pay were clearly creating barriers to the recruitment and retention of incentive teachers.

Career Progression

The certificate refugees are awarded when they complete their teacher training has little value outside the refugee camp, as the incentive teachers who earn these certificates are only allowed to work in the camps—that is, not in the Ethiopian communities (Bengtsson et al. 2020; Nigusie and Carver 2019). This qualification is also not internationally accredited. Therefore, there is no guarantee that an Ethiopian teaching qualification would be recognized when an incentive teacher returns home or migrates to a third country. In our interviews and FGDs, refugees often perceived their stay in Ethiopia as being "for now" (parent, FGD, Gambella), not for the long term. The poor incentive pay was also static, so the incentive teachers could not earn more in the camps even if they earned a certificate or diploma. Our study found that, with no career progression in sight, former incentive teachers were approaching private schools and/or I/NGOs operating in the camps to earn more money: "I work at another school. It's a local language school. [The salary] is better than the RRS salary…The salary is a problem. The incentive teachers need to have the same salary as the national teachers. Especially if they have a diploma" (former teacher, KII, Somali).

Another former teacher related that she went to a local NGO to ask for teacher training and ended up working for that NGO because it offered a better salary and less stress (former teacher, KII, Somali). It was reported across the camps that I/NGOs and private schools in the camps offered a better salary (former teacher, KII, Tigray): "[The salary] is better than the RRS salary" (former teacher, KII, Somali). This was attractive to the adolescent girls: "Some of the girls who completed primary and/or secondary are recruited into other implementing partner organizations" (camp leader, KII, Gambella). This payment discrepancy was also cited as a barrier in attracting adolescent female refugees to the initiative: "Adolescent girls aspire to join NGOs as social workers rather than take part in the incentive teaching initiative" (camp leader, KII, Tigray).

Pool of Eligible Girls

Since 2009, all female candidates for the incentive teacher training must have completed at least grade 10 to qualify for entrance to the initiative. The literature is clear that refugee girls are more likely than boys to drop out of refugee primary schools (Lashford and Malik 2019), which our findings support. A consensus across the camps and participant groups was that the pool of suitably qualified refugee girls was small and that this was an associated structural barrier affecting their participation in and the success of the initiative: "[There is a] limited number of adolescent girls who completed primary and/or secondary school" (camp leader, KII, Gambella); "The eligibility problem…means [adolescent girls] don't fulfill the educational criteria to be a teacher" (parent, FGD, Gambella).

But not all adolescent refugee girls in Ethiopia drop out of primary school (Carver 2022; Lashford and Malik 2019). We interviewed parents who encourage their daughters to go to school and finish their education. However, several eligible adolescent girls and other participant groups pointed out that enrolling in the initiative in grade 10 or even in grade 8 could mean that they do not progress to or participate in postprimary education: "[The adolescent girls] said that when they become an incentive teacher, they may have to drop out of their school. So, they were not interested in becoming an incentive teacher. They want to complete school" (interview notes, adolescent girls, FGD, Gambella); "There is not anything that motivates adolescent girls to take advantage of this incentive initiative; there is not additional training [or] higher education opportunities" (camp leader, KII, Somali).

For girls who are invested in their education, leaving secondary education to enroll in the initiative appeared counterintuitive, especially as they had gotten quite far despite the many odds against them. Several adolescent girls we interviewed had future aspirations, including undertaking a postsecondary education in order to enter more prestigious professions: "A girl wants to be a doctor not a teacher"; "She doesn't want to be a teacher, she wants to be a midwife" (adolescent girls, FGDs, Gambella). While refugee girls with

high educational aspirations were likely not the intended beneficiaries of the initiative, the program does compete with other available education pathways.

Research indicates that the school dropout rate for refugee girls increases with age. Specifically, refugee girls are less likely than both refugee boys and host community girls to enroll in and complete secondary school (Carvalho 2022; Zubairi and Rose 2016). For refugee girls who have educational aspirations but had to drop out of secondary school, the incentive teacher training initiative offers a pathway back into education and training. Lowering the entrance criteria for girls to having completed grade 8 could help adolescent refugee girls who finished primary education but did not transition to secondary school.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To meet the pledges made by signing the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, Djibouti Declaration, and Global Compact for Refugees, the Ethiopian government has increased its partnerships with global funders and organizations to develop an incentive teacher training initiative to train refugees to become primary school teachers. The aim of the initiative is to increase the enrollment and retention of refugees in primary schools and address the shortage of qualified teachers in refugee operations. The initiative's roots can be traced back to the early 2000s, when the International Rescue Committee introduced regular in-service training for RRS primary teachers in the Tigray region. These teachers were mostly male, nominated by their community, and unqualified. The initiative has expanded unevenly across Ethiopia's refugee-hosting regions over the last two decades, mainly due to disparities in the funding streams and to training being delivered by multiple providers. An enhanced initiative was launched in 2018 to ameliorate these issues by providing financial support for refugees who wanted to study alongside the national teacher trainees at TTCs and earn an accredited TTC certificate. Despite this support, only a limited number of female refugees enrolled in the initiative, a situation that persists. The research team operationalized a situational needs assessment to examine what prevents female refugees from taking part in the initiative and contemplated whether further lowering the entrance criteria to grade 8 for girls, as the RRS did in the Tigray region two decades ago, could increase the participation of female refugees.

While the TTCs across all refugee-hosting regions were delivering the incentive teacher training for refugees, the findings indicate that the initiative had not been fully implemented at the time this research was conducted. However, the findings suggest that the elements of the initiative that were implemented had the potential to produce positive outcomes for refugee primary education in Ethiopia.

The research identified three initiative-specific and four associated structural barriers in refugee education that impede the participation of eligible adolescent girls. Recruitment into and awareness of the initiative were poor, and the adolescent refugee girls we interviewed were the least likely of all the participant groups to know about the initiative. I recommend that the initiative be upgraded to provide a more cohesive and sustainably funded program that is clearly embedded in the refugee education policy frameworks and strategies in Ethiopia. The design of this program should include the voices of female refugees to ensure that it meets their needs. This program could be launched in conjunction with a dedicated awareness-raising campaign across all refugee-hosting regions. This study found that parents and existing female incentive teachers were the key influencers of adolescent girls, and that increasing these groups' awareness of the initiative could help them direct more adolescent refugee girls to the initiative.

Not all the incentive teacher trainees who participated in our study had access to the training and scholarships offered by the initiative. Moreover, none of the trained and former incentive teachers we interviewed had received official teacher training manuals, which left them without essential pedagogical resources when they began to teach. These issues warrant further research, which should focus on differences in how the training and scholarships are administered in each refugee-hosting region.

Recruiting national teachers to teach in refugee schools urgently needs to be reassessed, as the low number of national teachers affects the recruitment and retention of incentive teachers. The incentive teachers in our study frequently covered upper primary classes, due to the shortage of national teachers, but they often were not proficient in English or Amharic, which made it difficult for them to teach the upper-level classes, especially in one region. With incentive teachers now covering upper primary classes, the lower primary classes were merged, and the resulting larger classes were increasing the stress, workload, and attrition of incentive teachers across all regions. I found that this was a disincentive for eligible, or soon-to-be eligible, adolescent girls.

Following Kasa's (2014) recommendation, I strongly urge the Ethiopian MoE, regional education bureaus, and the TTCs to work together to enhance the status of the teaching profession in Ethiopia, and to attract more national teachers to refugee education. Incentive teachers also need pathways for career development. In keeping with the UNHCR (2015) strategy for refugee education in Ethiopia, I recommend upscaling the initiative by providing an incentive payment that "takes into account education qualification, years of experience, and performance of teachers" (UNHCR 2015, 15). Like Bengtsson et al. (2020), I advocate for a standardized incentive scale based on merit, which would eliminate the current blanket scale for incentive payments. Incentive and former teachers who participated in this study reflected that this could provide enough of an incentive to increase the recruitment and retention of eligible adolescent girls in the initiative. A related recommendation is to award an international teaching

certificate through the initiative for refugees. This could be achieved by consulting with the Ethiopian MoE and its counterparts in neighboring countries (Keevy et al. 2014).

I also recommend providing separate training for female incentive trainees in the refugee camps. The research identified female-only spaces created by I/NGOs in most camps that could be used for training. Moreover, if the entrance criteria were lowered to grade 8, the initiative could recruit adolescent females who had dropped out of primary school. This would enable them to complete their primary school education in these female-only spaces, and then to enroll in the initiative. These efforts could begin to address female refugees' high primary school dropout rate and be used as a pilot for ways to re-engage female refugees in education.

I highlight the crucial need for free English language classes in all the refugee camps in Ethiopia. Eligible adolescent girls and female incentive teachers need additional English support so they can transition to English as the language of instruction in the TTCs, and so they can benefit fully from the training available. The RRS should collaborate with their affiliated I/NGOs in each camp to provide English courses for these groups and should fund them as part of the initiative.

Finally, I recommend lowering the eligibility criteria for female refugees to grade 8. This study shows that the number of refugee girls who are qualified at grade 10 is small, which affects female participation in the initiative. To address concerns that grade 8 students would lack the English proficiency needed for the teacher training, I urge that free English courses be part of the initiative. Moreover, because few female refugees who complete primary school enroll in secondary education (Ethiopian MoE 2020; Carvalho 2022), lowering the initiative's entrance criteria and providing free English classes could provide adolescent refugee girls, who don't pursue secondary education, with a much-needed pathway to continue their education and gain professional training.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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"AMERICA WILL EDUCATE ME NOW": WHAT DO IRAQI REFUGEES WITH SPECIAL IMMIGRANT VISAS DESERVE AND WHO DECIDES?

Jill Koyama

ABSTRACT

Although thousands of Iraqi refugees who worked with the Allied Forces during the Iraq war have been resettled in the United States, little is known about their experiences. In the aggregate, they are a well-educated, multilingual subset of refugees who aspire to earn college and higher education degrees. In this article, I draw from a series of interviews conducted between 2011 and 2018 with 13 of these Iraqi refugees. My aim is to more fully understand and document their college-going experiences in the US. Framed by notions of deservingness and coloniality in education, this study is driven by two questions: In what ways and by whom are Iraqi refugees with Special Immigrant Visas positioned with regard to deservingness and worthiness in higher education? How do they position themselves? I explore how notions and discourses of deservingness, and their practical and political application, affect the resettlement experiences of these Iraqi refugees. The findings indicate that, because of their Special Immigrant Visa designation and their work with the Allied Forces, these refugees are positioned, and position themselves, not only as deserving but sometimes as being owed a college education. The study offers insights into the long-term effects crisis has on the education of those who are far removed, both geographically and temporally, from a crisis-affected area where they once lived.

INTRODUCTION

As has been well documented by Vine (2019), the United States has been continually fighting or explicitly involved in wars in the Middle East since its 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. These wars, which often bring physical brutality, massive destruction, occupation, and ongoing inhumane sanctions by the US and international governing bodies, are embedded in coloniality. Coloniality refers to the lasting power dynamics that emerged from colonialism and its relative, American imperialism, which is the purposeful extension by the US of its political, economic, and social control. These recent wars have altered the geopolitical landscape and they have affected, if not directly caused, the destruction and distortion of societies and cultures and the displacement of millions of people. In her ethnographic study of Iraqi refugees who resettled in the US, Bonet (2022) draws attention "to the role that the United States played in the displacement of Iraqi refugees who can trace their forced migration directly to the American imperialistic military ventures in their country" (4). In her work, Bonet demonstrates that coloniality and American imperialism shaped not only these refugees' initial displacement and migration but also their experiences and opportunities once they resettled in the US.

Despite the absence of direct US colonial rule, Iraqi refugees are bound to their colonial history and to the current geopolitical factors through which colonial relationships are retained (Grosfoguel 2004). Under coloniality, "racialisation may operate on grounds other than bodily stigmatisation, adding such factors as immigration and religion," wherein the immigrant category can be substituted for race (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991, 20). Labels like "refugee" become part of the racialized discrimination of the Other, which places those labeled along a continuum of deserved supports and resources, and of who is worthy of what opportunities.

Patel (2015) states that "deservingness fundamentally conveys how the state confers and delimits legitimacy as well as how it asserts its own existence as arbiter of racialized rights" (12). Refugees often are "used as geopolitical strategic tools, and…the international legal definition of refugee privilege[s] some forms of violation and delegitimizes other" (Hamlin 2021, 5). Kisiara (2015) argues that the refugee label pathologizes people by denoting their need and deprivation, whereas Tang (2015) calls attention to "refugee exceptionalism," which situates refugees in the US as more deserving, because of their need, than African Americans and Latinos, who are treated as the "undeserving poor, 'domestic minorities'" (14-15). However, these scholars agree that situating refugees discursively in these ways looks past the systemic inequalities, racism, and violence embedded in refugee resettlement.

In this article, I explore how notions and discourses of deservingness, as well as their practical application and political enactment, affect the resettlement experiences of Iraqi refugees who, because they worked with the US or Allied Forces during the Iraq War, were resettled through either the Direct Access Program or the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) process. Like other refugees and immigrants (Bonet 2021; Leo 2021), these Iraqi refugees aspire to be further educated in the United States. As Arar notes (2021), the opportunity to get an education, including a higher education, may even determine which country refugees want to be resettled in. However, only 3 percent of refugees globally are able to access higher education.

The 13 Iraqi refugees who participated in this study are among that 3 percent. I draw from their experiences to explore the ways they are discursively and ideologically positioned as they access and enroll in colleges and universities, and sometimes complete degrees. I examine how and by whom Iraqi refugees with SIVs are positioned in higher education in terms of their deservingness and worthiness, and how they position themselves. The findings demonstrate that the refugees are variably situated variably along a continuum of deserving higher education, based on the complex interactions between their legal status, their visas, their previous education experiences, and their nationalities. I also show that the refugees resist being positioned as unworthy and underprepared, especially by college and university staff members, and instead situate themselves as deserving of college opportunities as part of the debt the US owes to those who served its military during the war.

This paper broadly contributes to what is known about education in emergencies (EiE) by expanding understanding of refugee crises and emergencies. This includes the need for relief, assistance, and support in providing adult education for refugees after their resettlement in a third country. The EiE literature tends to focus on the challenges and issues that affect access to education, and on the programs that aim to address them. The findings in that body of literature are centered on outcomes (Burde et al. 2017).

Furthermore, while our attention in the EiE arena has rightly been drawn to the need for university partnerships to provide higher education in refugee camps (Giles 2018), less empirical attention has been paid to the ways refugees experience education in host countries. This is due to the importance of higher education for refugees that is supported by the humanitarian community (Abu-Amsha et al. 2019), and to the power of governments to provide refugees with access to higher education (Al-Mabuk and Alrebh 2018; Skjerven and Chao Jr. 2018). Policies and practices in higher education, such as competitive admissions, English-language proficiency entrance exams, and a disregard for credits and degrees from other countries, reify what scholars (Mignolo 2007; Quijano 2000) refer to as the coloniality matrix of power—the ways that colonial power structures and systems of oppression endure in societies after colonization, thus reproducing normalized institutionalized forms of subjugation and oppression. In this paper, I use the framing of coloniality and deservingness to highlight the experiences of

an understudied subset of refugees and to document the effects a protracted emergency—the US war in Iraq—has had on broader considerations of what the US owes to those it has displaced and those who served the US military.

The Iraq War

The Iraq War, which Bonet (2022) refers to as the ongoing war on terror, was initiated during the G. W. Bush administration, which "tied Saddam Hussein—and by proxy Iraqis in general—with Osama bin Laden and the global 'axis of evil'" (4). The Iraq War was waged as part of a post-9/11 strategy that, as Vine (2019) points out, dramatically increased the US military presence across the entire Middle East in the form of bases and troops. Begun with the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Iraq War expanded to include the ongoing fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, often known as ISIS. This war has resulted in immeasurable devastation, destruction, and death.[1] It initially caused 6 million Iraqis to flee from areas of intense fighting (IOM 2018), and an estimated 9.2 million Iraqis eventually became internally displaced or were labeled as refugees. Many who left Iraq at that time still live in the neighboring countries of Syria and Jordan in protracted displacement. By 2023, five million internally displaced Iraqi refugees had returned to live in Iraq, most of them in substandard living conditions, and some are still living in isolated resettlement camps or private shelters where they have no access to formal higher education or self-sustaining employment (Zeus 2011).[2]

Between 2006, when the US made a formal commitment to assist Iraqi refugees, and 2018, the last year of my study, 160,771 Iraqi refugees were resettled in the US (RPC 2018).[3] The majority of these refugees had entered the US through the standard Refugee Admissions Program. However, 18,130 Iraqi refugees had been issued SIVs under the Special Immigrant Visas for Iraqi and Afghan Translators/Interpreters program, and 47,331 entered through the Direct Access Program that was established by Congress to assist Iraqis and Afghanis who were previously employed by or on behalf of the US government during the Iraq and Afghan wars (Christoff 2010; Jakes 2019; RPC 2017, 2018; US Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs 2016a, 2016b). In New York, the study context, 4,819 Iraqi refugees have been resettled; of these, 454 were admitted with SIVs (RPC 2018). Santana (2023) writes that "thousands of Iraqis, many of whom risked their lives by working closely with Americans during the war and its aftermath, [are still] trying to enter the US." Delays in admitting these Iraqis have been caused by COVID-related backups, an electronic hack of the immigration system, and the substantial reduction in the number of refugees admitted to the US, due to an anti-Muslim executive order issued during the Trump administration.

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1   See Bonet (2022) for a critical and nuanced examination of the effects of the US invasion of Iraq.

2   The data is from https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/iraq/, last accessed September 22, 2024.

3   In 2016, Muslim refugees, including those from Iraq, accounted for nearly half of the 85,000 refugees who entered the United States (Connor 2016). President Trump's Executive Order 13769, "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States," went into effect in January 2017.

Adult Iraqi Refugees

Many adult Iraqi refugees suffer from emotional and physical trauma, injury, and illness, and have difficulty finding employment (Kira et al. 2007). Most are struggling economically.[4] However, Iraqi refugees are not a homogenous group, and there is evidence that the psychological distress experienced by Iraqis varies by ethnicity and religion. For instance, Muslim Iraqi refugees resettled in the US may experience more distress than Christian refugees, due to the different stressors they deal with in Iraq and the US, and their individual resilience (Arfken et al. 2018, 4).[5] In its 2012 annual report to Congress, the Office of Refugee Resettlement reported that 22.6 percent of Iraqi adult refugees in the US were unemployed, 58 percent were receiving some form of cash assistance, and 82 percent were receiving formal food assistance. Sixty percent were on Medicaid or Refugee Medical Assistance, and 36 percent were getting Supplemental Security Income. Similar data focused exclusively on adult Iraqi refugees with SIVs is not available, but we do know that these Iraqi refugees tend to have a high level of education and speak multiple languages, often including English (Christoff 2010). Once resettled in the US, however, they have been excluded from employment with the federal government, even as interpreters, because they do not hold US citizenship and thus cannot pass the government background investigations. Furthermore, guided by the US Refugee Act of 1980, whose aim is to enable refugees to quickly become economically self-sufficient and to reduce their reliance on government public assistance, resettlement agencies steer refugees, including Iraqis with SIVs, toward low-wage, entry-level positions that have little if any opportunity for advancement (Koyama 2013).

In its 2012-2016 Education Strategy plan, which includes specific considerations for adult refugees who have been affected by the crises in Syria and Iraq, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2012) cited tertiary education as a basic human right. However, provision of postsecondary education for refugees is uneven, in part because, as Morrice (2021) notes in her review of lifelong education for refugees, adult education is sometimes seen as taking resources away from primary education. In addition, access to higher education is not often prioritized by the policies and practices of the associations and agencies associated with refugee resettlement. To comply with the US Refugee Act of 1980, refugee resettlement agencies in the US offer basic adult education, which usually includes a combination of English-language and workforce training classes. These formal adult refugee education programs are often supplemented by ESL courses offered by local religious and community groups, and by education opportunities the refugee communities create for their own (Sinclair 2001).

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4   It might be more accurate to follow Hamlin (2021) in using the term "refugee/(im)migrant" in recognition of the interrelated, racialized, and marginalized fates of individuals born outside (or in some cases even inside but perceived as having been born outside) the US who move to the US. It is also an imperfect term for capturing complexity and variability. In this paper, nearly all the cited material uses the term "refugee," as do I.

5   In Iraq, 95-98 percent of the population is Muslim, 1 percent is Christian.

REFUGEES AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Nearly all the refugees who have completed secondary school aspire to attend college (Stevenson and Willott 2007), but we still have much to learn about their college-going experiences. We do know that, as the number of refugees has increased globally, the demand for higher education for refugees has also risen (Giles 2018; Gladwell et al. 2016). According to Leo (2021), "although highly diverse in their demographic composition, immigrants and refugees overall enroll in college at high rates" (436). However, only 7 percent of refugees have access to higher education globally (UNHCR 2020). This likely reflects the pattern documented by Dryden-Peterson and Giles (2010), wherein refugees' access to formal education drops dramatically as they move from primary to secondary school. Dryden-Peterson and Giles argue that "the extended nature of displacement and the lack of possibilities for education in exile mean that most refugees miss out on their one chance for school-based learning" (3). Females fare much worse than males, as they have much less access to education prior to, during, and after being forcibly displaced (Dryden-Peterson 2010). These gendered patterns in refugees' home countries or in refugee camps in adjacent countries begin in the primary grades and continue through college. The multiple reasons for this pattern of declining female participation include cultural, religious, and gendered norms, trauma, and a lack of wellbeing, but, more generally, immigration and education policy can hinder engagement for all refugees.

Arar's (2021) review of studies on refugees and higher education highlights current understandings of how policy and practices combine to both support and limit refugees' access to and opportunities in higher education. Arar also reports on the potential challenges faced by refugees who wish to access higher education. He states that, although refugees resettled in the US should have an advantage in accessing higher education, they often do not complete their degrees because their specific needs are not addressed in either federal policy or by the institutions they attend. Arar notes that even refugees who are able to access higher education encounter multiple challenges. The first challenge often is that admissions and higher education policies vary and do not explicitly address the needs of refugees. Luu and Blanco (2021) confirm this as they focus on the discursive power of policy to limit refugees' postsecondary education experiences. They find that, because there are no specific policies for supporting refugees in higher education, refugees become invisible and fail to receive the resources and supports they need. Refugees' experiences in this sense are similar to those of other learners who are culturally and linguistically diverse, and those who have been historically marginalized in higher education spaces.

Even attempting to enter higher education can be challenging for refugees. They often are seen as lacking "accredited qualifications that can be used to demonstrate the content and level of any prior learning" (Kanno and Harklau 2012; Zeus 2011, 263), and thus are labeled ineligible. Understandably, due to their forced displacement and resettlement, many refugees have not been able to keep their education records with them. However, even those who do have their education records often find that their previous schooling may not be recognized by the colleges in their country of resettlement. For instance, in their study of education opportunities for refugees in one US city, Perry and Mallozzi (2011) found that, even "when refugees already have a diploma, certification, or prior coursework from their home countries, institutions may not accept these credentials or course credit" (260). Others may be excluded due to admissions criteria that do not consider the assets of diverse learners (Hannah 1999). The refugees in this study encountered both scenarios. Arar (2021) points to other studies, including several by Unangst and colleagues (Unangst 2019; Unangst and Crea 2020), that suggest that changing admissions criteria, adding language supports, and creating support services for refugees could help refugees stay enrolled and be successful in higher education.

Abu-Amsha et al. (2019) point specifically to the costs of higher education, including tuition and associated fees, supplies and books, and lost paid work time. Shakya et al. (2012) found in their research on newcomer Burmese, Sudanese, and Afghan refugees in Canada that the increased family responsibilities refugee youth must take on is also a strong barrier to their attending college. In his study of 32 first-generation immigrant and refugee students attending community college in the US, Leo (2021) found that they also face multiple challenges and barriers.

Acknowledging these barriers, Dryden-Peterson and Giles (2010) state that "access to higher education for refugees is even more limited than at the primary and secondary levels" (4). At the postsecondary level, additional institutional barriers emerge. In a study on refugees' access to and experience with colleges in Sydney, Australia, Hannah (1999) found no formal models or practices that increased refugee participation in higher education. In fact, she found college and university academic staff members to be culturally unaware and not offering additional supports for refugees. In their study of immigrant and refugee ESL students in a US public university, Kanno and Varghese (2010) demonstrated that, in addition to the challenges of language and limited financial resources, refugee students tended to "self-eliminate" when facing structural constraints, including the requirement that applicants have four years of high school English—a requirement that pertained only to ESL students. Ferede (2010) demonstrated that first-generation refugees in Canada face multiple institutional barriers, including being tracked onto a noncollege track in high school and thus not meeting college eligibility criteria. Streitwieser et al. (2019), who examined a range of interventions aimed at reducing the barriers refugees face in accessing higher education in Europe and North America, identified multiple gaps in the interventions. They argue that more concerted, sustainable, and humanistic efforts are needed to meet the needs of most refugees.

Undergirding the call in the literature for refugees in higher education to have better academic and social supports, flexible admissions criteria, and more affordable tuition is the belief that they should have access to higher education. Like other students from historically excluded and marginalized populations, refugees deserve, and have the right to, a college education. This could be framed as an equity issue, but I use the conceptual resources labeling theory (Zetter 1991, 2007), along with that of deservingness, through a lens of coloniality in education (Patel 2015). I explore how refugees with SIVs are positioned by caseworkers, college staff members, veterans, and other refugees, and by themselves, along a continuum of deservingness in higher education.

Labeling is a designation process used by those in positions of bureaucratic authority and political power. Zetter (1991) demonstrates that the refugee label is inextricably bound to bureaucratic processes, national sovereignty, global politics, regional institutional policies, and a host of symbolic interpretations. Zetter (2007) also argues that, due to "the need to manage globalized [and complex] processes and patterns of migration and forced migration in particular" (172), the refugee label has been transformed by "institutional fractioning" and, as governments become more involved, has become increasingly politicized. Governments use labels as tools of control to dole out rights and resources, and to place duties and responsibilities, such as producing evidence of prior education in home countries, on "others" in socially inequitable and hierarchical contexts, such as the US higher education system.

In her examination of the labels put on border crossers, Hamlin (2021) shows how these labels—and the discourses embedded in, generated by, and surrounding them—create hierarchies of deservingness. Further, as Patel (2015) writes, "in nation/states built on stratification, deservingness acts as a discourse of racialization, narrating across racially minoritized groups to re-instantiate the benefits for the racially majoritized" (11). Among those benefits are access to and control over the production and distribution of knowledge in higher education. In this study, I examine how the positioning of Iraqi refugees who have SIVs affects their negotiation of the processes and policies associated with accessing and participating in higher education, which are firmly embedded in realities that are undergirded by coloniality. I also show how refugees assert their right to education and refuse to be labeled as undeserving, not legitimate, and unworthy.

METHODS: FOLLOWING THE DATA

Between 2011 and 2015, I conducted an ethnography on refugee networks in Wayside, a midsize city in western New York State. A large number of refugees resettled in Wayside because of the town's relatively cheap housing and need for low-skilled labor. Moreover, at the time of the study, there already was a well-established community of former refugees from Iraq. In Wayside, I interviewed 128 adult refugees, 50 of whom were from Iraq. Through those interviews, I became interested in the experiences

of adult male Iraqi refugees who had served alongside the Allied Forces in the Iraq War, and who had entered the United States on SIVs. It became clear that these men's experiences in Wayside were unique. In the town, they had connections with Iraq War veterans, military subcontractors, and college admissions counselors and recruiters. By the end of December 2015, I had reinterviewed 28 Iraqi refugees, 13 of whom were resettled with SIVs and 15 who were not. I also had interviewed 14 American-born men who were veterans of the Iraq War, five former employees of military subcontracting companies, and three college admissions counselors. Between 2016 and 2018, in which time Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, multiple executive orders were issued that limited the migration of refugees into the country; those from Muslim-majority countries were considered undeserving of refugee status in the US. I conducted follow-up interviews via Skype with 21 Iraqi refugees—13 with SIVs and 8 with standard visas—who had enrolled in a college, university, or vocational school. In this paper, I rely heavily on the nearly 340 pages of transcripts from the three or four interviews I conducted with each of with the 13 refugees with SIVs. I use the ethnographic data I collected to contextualize the interviews, including interviews with Iraq War veterans, advisors and staff members of resettlement agencies, employers, and other refugees. The data also include documents from individual resettlement agencies and support organizations that work with refugees in New York; global, national, state, and regional refugee and education policies and reports; and digital materials from global refugee associations and veterans' organizations.

Table 1: Participants' Education Histories and Enrollments during Study

	Refugees with SIVs	Refugees with General Visas
Enrolled in Higher Education during Study	13/27 total	8/15 total
Professional & Technical Program	3*	2*
Community College	3*	5 (2*)
University: Undergraduate	5 (3*)	1*
University: Graduate	2	0
Highest Education Level Prior to Resettlement		
Graduate Degree	3/13	0
Undergraduate Degree	2/13	0
Professional & Technical Certificate	5/13	3/8
High School Equivalent	3/13	5/8

Note: * degree earned

I made audio or video recordings of the interviews and then transcribed them. I managed, coded, and analyzed all the data collected using the software program NVivo 8.0 or, later, NVivo 10.0. I did the first-level coding according to an a priori general code list, which was inclusive of codes to denote descriptive identifying information, such as demographic information and the names of documents. It also included codes that reflected the categories used by global refugee agencies across the refugees' spheres of experience—home, education, work, and government. The secondary and tertiary coding of the data centered on the refugees' knowledge and information associated with higher education. I tested the codes and thematic topics on three interviews with two other ethnographers who were not part of my research. I applied fifteen primary codes to three other interview transcripts, with an 83 percent coder agreement.

In 2013, I lived and worked as a university faculty member in Wayside. I led a team of doctoral students who were working on related research projects aimed at documenting the experiences of refugees in or near Wayside. The Iraqi refugees in the study often commented that they spoke to me because, as a faculty member, I could help them get into college. While I sometimes accompanied the Iraqi refugees to their appointments at colleges and universities, I have no evidence that my presence helped them. I do not recall ever telling the refugees that I was a first-generation college graduate and that I often felt I didn't deserve to go to college, but I did tell them that, because of my immigrant family's background, I often felt that I was expected to go to college. Throughout the study, I was a volunteer adult ESL teacher at two of the refugee resettlement organizations, and I served on the board of another community organization that assisted refugees and asylum-seekers. I met some of the Iraqi refugees who participated in my study through these volunteer positions, and they introduced me to others. After I moved away from Wayside, I continued to collaborate with one of the doctoral students and, through 2015, I made several trips annually to Wayside to interview participants. After 2015, my communication with the study participants shifted from in person to Skype, email, and, later, WhatsApp.

Had I remained in Wayside throughout the study, I would have been able to collect additional data and to interact more consistently with the refugees. The study also would have been strengthened if I had extended it beyond one city and into the surrounding region. The study focuses only on male refugees' trajectories to college, but this limitation may not have been avoidable. All the Iraqi refugees in the study identified as male, as did all the military veterans and military subcontractors in the larger ethnographic study. Only two female refugee participants in the ethnography—one from Bhutan and one from the Democratic Republic of the Congo—attended college. These gender disparities result from multiple factors, including gender bias and norms that prevented female refugees from getting an education in their home countries, and the reification of gendered roles through the practices and policy of the resettlement agencies, which funnel adult female refugees into programs centered on sewing, food preparation, and childcare. These patterns should be further studied.

FINDINGS: GOING TO COLLEGE

> Going to college in America is dream, big dream…I will get America degree. I will get respect and job, and people see how I am like them…College is my American Dream. I always think this in the war: When war ends, I get to America to go to college. (interview with Marik, August 1, 2015)

When talking about his goals in the US, Marik, who had worked with the Allied Forces, shared his dream of going to college. He was not alone. Nearly all the Iraqi refugees in the study, both those with standard visas and SIVs, said they wanted to attend college. However, this was far from guaranteed; one resettlement advisor even referred to a college degree as "part of the American dream that even most Americans don't earn" (field note, August 13, 2013). Below I focus on the experiences of Marik and the other 12 refugees with SIVS who attended college or vocational training during the study.

WHO DESERVES TO ATTEND COLLEGE?

The refugees from Iraq were publicly welcomed in Wayside, but prejudice and fears about Iraqi or, more generally, Muslim refugees were voiced by a handful of Wayside residents and one local politician. Between 2016 and 2018, half of the refugees interviewed expressed concerns about anti-Muslim sentiments related to then President Trump's executive order that essentially banned migrants from Muslim-majority countries from entering the US. This was the first time since the study began that they had shared such concerns. Throughout the study, the refugees were situated in multiple ways in the national public discourse, including as suspicious and dangerous. They were not situated as potential college students or college goers. In fact, some American-born Wayside residents feared that refugees might take "American" jobs if they were able to go to college.

Iraqi refugees with SIVs were eligible, as were other refugees, for resettlement assistance and public benefits that covered basic housing, food, and help accessing services during their first 30-90 days. All adult refugees, including Iraqi refugees with SIVs, had access to free English language courses and job-training programs, and they received individual assistance with finding employment. I found no documents from the federal or state government or from any resettlement agency explicitly stating that refugees with SIVs should be prioritized for college admission; in fact, the resettlement agencies in the study had few formal processes associated with refugees going to college. Guiding an adult refugee toward college was not the resettlement agencies' primary responsibility or objective.

These agencies' primary responsibility was economic adaptation. Integrating refugees into the labor market is a cornerstone of US resettlement policy, and UNHCR (2009) states that stable employment is one of the essential indicators of successful refugee integration. Research (Anderson 2020; Dustmann et al. 2017) shows that refugees are often situated as addressing domestic worker shortages, even as they are portrayed by some as endangering Americans' jobs. Refugees in the US are quickly recast from people in need of humanitarian intervention to those who have economic utility (Koyama 2024). The goal of getting refugees employed quickly can be understood within a frame of coloniality. Narayan (1995) writes that "inducting the colonized into the economic infrastructures of colonialism was seen as conferring the material benefits of western science, technology and economic progress, the cultural benefits of western education, and the moral benefits of the work ethic" (133-34). Despite the resettlement agencies' push to secure employment for the refugees, the Iraqi participants in this study said they believed they "deserved" more. They wanted to go to college to avoid a long employment in the low-wage service positions the refugee resettlement agencies initially placed them in. Several refugee resettlement agency staff members stated that the refugees should be thankful for any job, thus implying that the low-wage jobs were what the refugees deserved upon resettlement.

Having failed to receive assistance from the resettlement agencies, some refugees with SIVs turned to their relationships with veterans and other military personnel for help in accessing college. In their interactions with the veterans, the refugees portrayed themselves as potential US college students. All 13 refugees with SIVs expressed that they were, of course, deserving of a college education. Ten said specifically that, because they had served with the US during the war, they deserved to attend college in the US more than other refugees, thus placing themselves farther along the deservingness continuum. Like Samah, an Iraqi refugee Bonet (2021) features in her work, the refugees in this study "viewed higher education—a lifelong dream—as a route to career achievement" (162). They saw it as the route to a better life for them and their families. Unlike the refugees in Bonet's work (2021, 2022), however, many of the refugees in this study saw access to higher education as a promised right—one they had earned by working for the Allied Forces, and because the US-led war had destroyed their previous lives in Iraq. Remarkably, 12 of the 13 Iraqi refugees with SIVs stated that they had been "promised" or "guaranteed" future access to US colleges when they agreed to work for the coalition forces in Iraq.

Akram, a refugee, explained:

> All the time, I thought about going to college, getting job to make my family…No one knew if he was going to be lived. Many, many died: my neighbors, my friends…children, strangers, Christians like me, Shia…so many…If I make it out, I go to college. I work for the American Army… they give me college. (interview, December 16, 2012)

Although none of the military personnel in the ethnography stated that the refugees had been promised college as part of their work contracts, they agreed that the refugees deserved to attend college. As one veteran put it, the refugees who worked with the Allied Forces are "those who deserve it, those who've earned it" (field note, August 1, 2015). To the veterans, the SIV label positioned the refugees who served as more deserving than other refugees who did not. Several veterans suggested that independent contractors had offered some possibility of going to college when recruiting Iraqis to work with the military, but I could not confirm this.

Seven of the refugees interviewed were more explicit about what the US owed them. One of them, Yusuf, explained: "If the US didn't destroy us, my country, me, my wife, my children would be there living a happy life. I had good job…I have, had no other choice when I knew what was happening…work for the Americans and then follow the American Dream…Follow out the Americans" (interview, January 7, 2015). Others concurred, asserting that they now had no country because of the US and that, because of the destruction of their country, the US owed them at least an education so they could rebuild their lives. Samir gave a more nuanced explanation: "My country gave me a good education. I am educated man. Now my country is America. America will educate me now. It is what they must do" (field notes, March 5, 2013). In Samir's and Yusuf's telling, the US owed them an education because they had served alongside the Allied Forces, but they also acknowledged that it was work they did because the US had destroyed their livelihoods in Iraq. Samir believed that, if one serves their country well, the country should provide an education so that they "can be part of the country and better the country." In his view, it was a two-way commitment: he and the other refugees had committed to the US during the war, and now the US had committed to them by resettling them in America. They argued that the US is responsible for its inhabitants, and the inhabitants are simultaneously responsible for contributing to the country. Samir felt that the refugees needed an advanced education in order to meet their side of this commitment. The Iraqi refugees in the study who had SIVs were in fact set apart and set themselves apart—and in some cases above—other refugees who had not worked with the US military or the Allied Forces because their visa status represented their commitment to the US.

The ranking of deservingness is part and parcel of how coloniality works in stratified societies like the United States. It is not separate from the social, political, and historical context of the Iraq War, or of the realities of resettlement. These realities informed the refugees' positioning as worthy by veterans, case workers, employers, and community activists. The larger national and international discourses were also reflective of the Wayside context, where refugees often were welcome but in limited (and limiting) ways. The practice of labeling, positioning, interacting, and mobilizing refugees with SIVs as "special" was inextricably bound to the discourse about refugees, about migrants, about Muslims, and about how some refugees in the US deserve more than others.

Who and What Supports College Access?

Several groups formed by US veterans of the Iraq and Afghan wars, including the Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project, the Allied Freedom Project, and No One Left Behind, have pressured the US government to take more responsibility toward Iraqis who risked their lives, and the lives of their family members, to assist the US military. These groups have argued that the refugees are "comrades" and "brothers" who deserve to live in the US. They have focused primarily on increasing the number of SIVs available for Iraqis and on streamlining the application process, which was scheduled to end in 2013 but continues to the present. The veterans groups also lobbied for, and gained, additional benefits for the refugees. Beginning in 2010, Iraqi refugees with SIVs could apply to receive additional US assistance through public benefits for up to seven years, a dramatic extension of the previous eight-month timeframe. Some veterans have also become directly involved in petitioning for special status for refugees and in assisting them after resettlement.

Throughout the study, veterans, members of the military, friends, and caseworkers helped the Iraqi refugees compile, complete, and submit the documents required for the college admissions process. Refugees with SIVs often added letters of support from veterans, and some produced the contracts they had had with the military. The results varied; four were accepted by their colleges of choice, six were initially rejected but later admitted to different colleges, and three were conditionally admitted to their colleges of choice.

Awad was initially accepted with a one-year probationary period. He challenged the probationary condition, which was removed. Awad explained: "I knew it wasn't correct because Fahad was admitted with no problem and I have better papers than he does. I have credentials. I'm SIV. He isn't. I just showed them my SIV and I got it, no probation… I've got more than *those others*" (emphasis added, personal communication, August 9, 2015). By using the term "those others," Awad sets himself as apart from Fahad and other Iraqi refugees who have standard visas. His SIV label, which represents his service to the US during the war, makes him more deserving of attending college than Fahad, even though Fahad had graduated from a top university in Iraq, had a higher grade point average, and had retained all his original transcripts. The way Awad positioned himself was embedded in multiple policies, such as the 1980 Refugee Act and programs that construct the variable and ranked paths to resettlement, including the Direct Access Program. Awad had completed 39 credits toward a degree in engineering by 2016, and by 2018 he needed fewer than 10 credits more to graduate. Reflecting on his time in the United States and in college, Awad said, "When I didn't get in [to college], I was scared. I knew I could do it, but I doubted too…Now, I am almost done and I am working on my citizenship…my wife too…We need that because your *new* president doesn't like us" (emphasis added, interview, January 16, 2018). Awad pointed out what had become part of the political discourse at that time: that President Trump found Muslim refugees, even

if they served with the US military, suspect and untrustworthy. Discourse within this framing, as Khasanova (2024) argues, often conflates terrorism, migration, and Islam. Awad followed the news closely and placed himself in the interview at some distance to me, a US citizen with a president who is unreliable, if not actually dangerous.

Nayan is another Iraqi refugee with an SIV who was admitted to a community college. However, he did not earn his degree. Nayan was placed in a pre-100-level remedial English class in his first semester, even though he had scored 95/120 on the Test of English as a Foreign Language, the standardized examination colleges use to assess non-native English speakers who enroll in English-speaking universities. Nayan's score was 20 points above the cut score for admissions at the college, but he was told that all international students needed to take at least one of the pre-100-level courses (field notes, August 2, 2012). Nayan was angry and told me that he was not "at risk," a label he had seen written on his college transcripts. Furthermore, he felt that he was "smarter than most of the people in the college" (field notes, August 2, 2012). Nayan's experience reflects how coloniality in education regulates the formation, production, measurement, and distribution of knowledge, which often delegitimizes indigenous and colonized cultures' ways of knowing (Koyama and Turan 2023).

Nayan filed a complaint with the college, but he did not receive a waiver for the pre-100-level course. He attended the course, but when I interviewed him in 2017, he told me that he had become too frustrated with "those low-level classes" and had stopped attending college without earning a degree. He was working as an Uber driver when we last spoke in 2018, and he confided in me that he wanted to take his family to Canada because he feared that the Trump administration would send him back to Iraq. Like Awad, Nayan recognized that much of the ongoing political and public discourse positioned him as not belonging, as someone to be feared. His loyalty and service to the US was now possibly not enough for him to deserve a sense of safety, let alone a college degree. Nayan, who aimed to position himself as deserving, was instead forced to take 100-level courses and he was now being labeled in the political rhetoric as suspicious and potentially dangerous. To him, this seemed to override his SIV status.

CONCLUSION: DESERVINGNESS DEFINED THROUGH PRACTICE, NOT POLICY

Unlike refugees in other studies (Kanno and Harklau 2012), the Iraqi refugees with SIVs did not lack adequate academic preparation or the English skills needed to be admitted to college. However, having an SIV did not appear to substantially change the percentage of Iraqi refugees admitted. During the study, nine of the thirteen refugees with SIVs enrolled in higher education and earned college degrees; five of the eight refugees with standard visas who were enrolled in college also earned degrees. Nevertheless,

refugees who, like Awad, had SIVs had constructed a storyline that positioned them apart from, and often more deserving than, other refugees. This positioning reflected the wording of the Direct Access and SIV programs, wherein Iraqi refugees who aided the US military during the Iraq War were said to be "of special humanitarian concern" and thus worthy of special consideration for admission to the United States. However, the study also demonstrates how, in a changing social and political context such as the one Nayan experienced during the Trump administration, the understanding and enactment of one's position also changes. Nayan's changed from finding safety in the US after fleeing Iraq to feeling increasingly unsafe and uncertain.

The control the dominant population had over the variable ways the refugees were positioned and labeled and what they deserved reflects their ability to exercise their power through enduring hierarchical colonial structures and institutions, including politics. It also illuminates the challenges faced by scholars who, like me, work in the EiE field and the related subfields of critical refugee studies and human rights education. How do we interrogate and probe such structures in ways that do not lead solely to discussions of what refugees need and their sense of belonging? I find that these discussions reify paternalistic deficit framings by focusing on what we in the resettlement countries can offer refugees (to make up for what they don't have) so that they can be integrated successfully into our societies. Interrogating discourse and enactments of deservingness offers an alternative. As Patel (2015) argues, "Rhetoric, policy, and debate about immigration and immigrants are saturated with the trope of deservingness" (11). Looking carefully at the ways deservingness turns the lens back on those who are in a position to wield it and who can, as seen in this study, bring the agency of refugees to the fore.

Refugees can, within certain constraints, position themselves. Dei and Asgharzadeh (2001) remind us that those who are colonized or otherwise positioned as inferior have "the power to question, challenge, and subsequently subvert the oppressive structures of power and privilege" (300). In other words, they can exercise agency. However, agency is "an enactment, not something that someone or something has" (Barad 2007) or something that is distributed across relationships and interactions. As an enactment, agency becomes a matter of "making iterative changes to particular practices through the dynamics of intra-activity," as opposed to interactivity that presupposes independent entities (Barad 2007). We can consider and account for the complex and multiple ways refugees' experiences in resettlement countries are filled with intra-actions that, once they are identified and explored, unfold to inform the future policies and practices that will shape their education. Finally, this study reminds us that EiE extends well beyond primary and secondary education, where much attention in the field is understandably placed. It also draws our attention to the reality that responses to the need for education can indeed be made during acute crises and emergencies, but that we also can study and understand EiE to include proactive decisions and policymaking outside of crisis-affected areas.

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SCHOOLS AS SITES OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION:
STUDENT INTERACTIONS IN DIVERSE SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we explore intergroup relations and student interactions in eight diverse secondary schools in Nigeria over one academic year. We use mixed methods and a social network analysis of these interactions and relationships to highlight the perspectives of students within a divided society. We analyze data from student interviews we conducted and social network data from our student surveys to explore the ways students exhibit ethnic and religious relations in a school setting. This study finds that Hausa Muslims are the most segregated group within Federal Unity Colleges in Nigeria, driven by the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and language. Religion emerges as a stronger social boundary than ethnicity. Our findings also point to the importance of both academic and nonacademic spaces (such as dormitories, where students can separate into groups) in mediating student interactions. Our work contributes to the discourse in the fields of education, conflict, and peacebuilding and, more broadly, to discussions in comparative education about the role schools play in mitigating or exacerbating intergroup conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Schools play a powerful role as socializing institutions (Abowitz and Harnish 2006; Hess and Torney-Purta 2005; Russell and Bajaj 2015) that teach young people how to engage with their identities in relation to one another. Research on education and conflict has explored how schooling can exacerbate intergroup inequalities and, conversely, how it can lead to positive outcomes in various contexts (Bush and Saltarelli 2000; Salmon-Letelier 2022b). Other studies have examined the construction of racial/ethnic identities and related power asymmetries in school settings in postconflict

and divided societies, such as South Africa and Cyprus (Ferreira 2016; Zembylas 2010). While several studies have investigated the relationship between religion and educational outcomes (Alesina et al. 2023; Manglos-Weber 2017; Dev, Mberu, and Pongou 2016), few have considered how religion coincides with ethnic identity to shape the experiences of students at school (for exceptions, see Abu El-Haj 2015; Branford 2021; Komatsu 2019; Wang 2018). In this study, however, we examine the intersection of religion and ethnic identity and the compounded influence they have on students' school experiences and intergroup friendships. Because students grapple with their cultural and societal identities during adolescence (Erikson 1968), we focus specifically on the intergroup dynamics among secondary students from different ethnic and religious groups, through which conflict in the school context either manifests or is tempered (Esses et al. 2005).

In this study, we focus on federal unity colleges (FUCs), which are integrated secondary boarding schools in Nigeria whose students are from different ethnic and religious groups. Nigeria, a nation with more than 250 ethnic groups, has a history of colonization that has resulted in instability, conflict, and complex political group categorizations that overlap across ethnic, religious, regional, and socioeconomic lines (Mamdani 1996; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). We also refer to state schools, which are neither boarding schools nor intentionally designed to integrate students from diverse backgrounds.[1]

The data used in this article come from a mixed methods research study based on extensive fieldwork in eight secondary schools in Nigeria—six FUCs and two state schools—over one academic year. We analyze data from interviews and surveys we conducted to explore the ways students exhibit their ethnic and religious relations in a school setting. While we collected data in both state schools and FUCs, we focus on the latter, given their boarding school environment and their mandate to ensure an ethnically and religiously diverse student population. The aim of this mandate is to foster positive interactions among diverse students outside school hours. We ask the following questions: How do students' ethnic and religious identities shape their interactions with other students? How do students understand the role of ethnic and religious identity in their school experiences? To what extent do certain ethnic and religious groups experience greater exclusion and/or discrimination than others?

This paper presents students' viewpoints on their interactions with other students, and their intergroup interactions and relationships within their school environment in a divided society. Our findings point to the importance of student identity and of academic and nonacademic school practices and spaces—classrooms, school dormitories, religious spaces, common areas—in influencing the extent to which students feel either included or excluded. Our findings also underscore the significance

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1   While we briefly reference state schools for context, it is important to note that a more comprehensive analysis of this comparison can be found in other papers (Salmon-Letelier 2022a, 2022b).

of these school spaces in mediating student interactions by privileging certain aspects of ethnic, religious, and linguistic identity (Salmon-Letelier 2022a). This research contributes to the discourse in the fields of education, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding, and enriches the broader conversation in comparative education by shedding light on the pivotal role schools play in mitigating or exacerbating intergroup conflict.

We begin this article with a review of the literature on diverse schools in conflict settings, followed by an extensive exploration of the Nigerian context. We then introduce a conceptual framework that combines self-categorization and social reproduction theories, which provides the foundation for our subsequent discussions of our methods, findings, and conclusions.

DIVERSE SCHOOLS IN CONFLICT SETTINGS

Schools with ethnically and religiously diverse populations have a unique influence on their students' interactions (Knifsend, Bell, and Juvonen 2017; Malsbary 2016). Kokkonen, Esaiasson, and Gilljam (2010) describe schools as "social laboratories" in which daily interactions among diverse students reflect broader intergroup relations. Integrated schools, in which students from historically conflicted groups study in one setting, are considered a positive intervention for improving intergroup social relations (Stringer et al. 2009). Schools with a diverse and integrated student body offer a lens through which to examine the role education plays in contexts of intergroup conflict.

Studies on integrated schools emphasize the benefits these schools provide, including academic advantages (Lucker et al. 1976); preparation for postschooling diversity, such as increased comfort in diverse settings (Holme, Wells, and Revilla 2005); positive effects on identity, intergroup attitudes, forgiveness, and reconciliation (McGlynn et al. 2004); and promotion of interracial relationships (Burns 2012; Holtman et al. 2005). In a qualitative study conducted in a Serb-majority school in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Komatsu (2019) found that Bosniak Muslim students recognized the value studying in an integrated learning environment had on forming friendships and intergroup trust with Serbian students. Several studies have examined the racial, religious, and linguistic integration of schools in postapartheid South Africa (Soudien and Sayed 2003; Soudien 2010; Holtman et al. 2005). Holtman et al. (2005) conducted a survey of students from different racial groups in formerly segregated schools in Cape Town. They found that an increase in both in-school and out-of-school contact with students from different racial groups was associated with positive attitudes toward other groups.

While many of these studies point to the positive benefits of diversity and integrated schools, other studies have critiqued the assumption of positive benefits. Irwin (1991) challenged the notion that integrated schooling is universally positive, noting that positive social integration is more difficult in certain contexts because of societal and cultural factors and school policies. Kokkonen, Esaiasson, and Gilljam (2010) confirmed Irwin's notion in their analysis of the IEA 1999 Civic Education Study data, in which they explored 3,000 Swedish high school students' attitudes toward ethnic diversity and civic knowledge. They found that, while ethnic diversity is negatively related to students' civic knowledge overall, ethnic diversity at school is positively related to immigrant students' attitudes on group rights.

Organizational structures, school policies, and school practices around integration and discrimination can influence how students understand their relationship to others in both positive and negative ways. Scholars discuss the importance of integrating schools strategically and note that integration is not an inevitable solution for improving social relations (Gurin, Nagda, and Lopez 2004). For example, McGlynn and Bekerman's (2007) study of diverse schools in Israel and Northern Ireland found that students have issues with learning about and recognizing diverse groups in the school setting. While diversity is often assumed to improve students' attitudes and views toward other groups (Chang 2002), it also may contribute to further division, especially in schools in conflict settings, where intergroup relations may already be contentious (Andreouli, Howarth, and Sonn 2014; McLaren 1995). Bekerman and Nir (2006) also observed these tensions in Palestinian-Jewish schools that attempted to balance the celebration of historical days that Jewish students widely viewed as positive, while Palestinian students memorialized them as violent. Tolomelli (2015) explored discriminatory school practices in Bosnia and Herzegovina that were born of conflict and continued to cause division among ethnic and religious groups.

It is important to take context into account when considering how to integrate students effectively (Janmaat 2012). For example, Janmaat (2012) used data from the IEA 1999 Civic Education Study to explore the relations between ethnic and racial diversity in classrooms, tolerance related to ethnicity, and political participation in Germany, Sweden, and England. The study found that increased ethnic tolerance is related to classroom diversity in Germany and Sweden but not in England. The authors suggest that practices within the school and contextual factors outside, such as a country's history of immigration or cultural norms around liberalism and multiculturalism, may shape the effects diverse education settings have on students. Soudien and Sayed's (2003) study of inclusion in 12 South African schools found that the way schools address inclusion at the institutional policy level—such as language policy and school governance—also influences how students experience inclusion or exclusion in terms of race, language, and social class.

Social psychologists argue that intergroup contact like that in integrated schools reduces prejudice across groups (Burns 2012; Ellison and Powers 1994; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Williams Jr. 1947). In their study of a diverse group of South African students, Holtman et al. (2005) found that intergroup contact among the students both in and outside of school was an important factor in improved intergroup attitudes. In Nigeria, intergroup contact has been found to reduce discriminatory behaviors but not deeply held prejudices among young men in a short-term vocational training program (Scacco and Warren 2018). Intergroup contact can promote positive relations, but only under certain conditions, including between groups of equal status in a given situation, shared goals, intergroup cooperation, and support from authorities, such as teachers (Allport 1954; Kokkonen, Esaiasson, and Gilljam 2010; Pettigrew 1998; Thijs and Verkuyten 2014). Moreover, the degree of diversity may influence the effectiveness of intergroup contact in improving social relations (Spivak et al. 2015).

Our study explores the perspective of students in Nigeria who lived together during two formative periods—the first year and final year in a boarding school setting. Our mixed methods study, which includes the perspectives of the students we interviewed and surveyed, builds on existing research on the relations between education and religion, ethnicity, and school integration. We highlight multiple factors that overlap in education settings—ethnicity, religion, and language—and how these factors can influence exclusion or inclusion among student groups. These factors are not well explored in the existing literature.

THE NIGERIAN CASE

One of Africa's most deeply divided nations, Nigeria has grappled with profound challenges related to national unity, democratization, and stability (Moland 2015; Mustapha 1986; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). The country is characterized by three major ethnic groups—the Hausa-Fulani (27%), Yoruba (14%), and Igbo (14%), each of which is marked by significant internal diversity (CIA 2018)—plus more than 250 smaller ethnic groups. Nigeria has an almost equal proportion of Christians and Muslims. Neither holds a clear majority, which generates concern among citizens that one group may gain dominance over the other (Campbell 2013; Paden 2008). Throughout Nigeria's history, the potential for one ethnic or religious group to dominate others has ignited conflicts, such as the Biafran War in the late 1960s, the effects of which continue to reverberate today (Mustapha 2004).

Nigeria's current multistate federalism has fostered intergroup instability and conflict between the northern and southern regions of the country. Longstanding economic and educational disparities between the regions are exacerbated by the government's reliance on oil revenues and resources (Mustapha 1986; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). These factors have deepened ethnoreligious tensions and undermined

efforts to promote national "unity," a term frequently invoked by politicians, education institutions, and the media (Moland 2015; Paden 2008). Since 1999, Nigeria has lost at least 13,500 lives in ethnoreligious conflicts (Campbell 2013). In 2018 alone, the extremist group Boko Haram killed more than 1,200 people and displaced more than 200,000 in northeastern Nigeria (Human Rights Watch 2018).

Britain's colonial policy, which partitioned the country into three primary ethnic groups and regions, contributed to the present-day socioeconomic and educational disparities between the north and south. The predominantly Hausa population in the northern regions often lags behind the more affluent and better educated Igbo population in the southern regions (Fafunwa 1974; Mamdani 1996; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). For example, the south has more economic and cultural connections with the West and higher-quality education (Mustapha 1986; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). This has created an imbalanced tripartite federal structure that, coupled with inconsistent policies across the regions, has fueled ethnoregional polarization and a "bi-polar north-south confrontation" (Osaghae and Suberu 2005, 16).

Colonial policy also shaped the present-day overlapping of ethnic and religious identities that correspond with geographic regions (Mustapha 1986; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). The Hausa, for example, are predominantly Muslim and live in the north, whereas the predominantly Christian Igbos reside mainly in the southeast. The Yoruba, who live primarily in the southwest, are both Christian and Muslim. This more flexible connection between their ethnic and religious affiliations enables Yoruba students to serve as intermediaries between the polarized Igbo and Hausa students.

Federal Unity Colleges

Nigeria's Federal Unity Colleges were of particular interest when we chose the location for this research. The FUCs were originally established in 1964 with the aim of uniting Nigerians in the midst of political tensions across ethnic, religious, and regional divides (Okoro 2015). The stated goal of these schools is to promote "national unity and integration of students and staff of diverse cultures and religions of Nigeria" ("Unity Spotlight" 2013, 4). FUCs are federally run secondary boarding schools that use entrance exams and a nationwide quota system to select an ethnically representative student body.[2] The quota system allows students from states with fewer educational opportunities to enter FUCs with lower than required scores. This approach shapes the ethnoreligious composition of the student body. In contrast, state secondary schools were not designed with the same intention and do not use a quota system, and the state schools included in this study were not boarding schools. There are currently 104 FUCs across Nigeria, including at least one all-boy and one all-girl FUC in each state. Unity is not the main motivator for students who apply

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2   The quota system allows a certain number of students from each state to enter the schools.

to the FUCs. For one thing, the fees are partly subsidized by the government, which makes them more desirable than the state schools. Some FUCs are considered more prestigious than others, which also motivates many students to apply.

Due to the current security issues caused by Boko Haram, not all FUC student bodies accurately reflect the regions' diverse ethnic groups, as many parents are hesitant to send their children to schools in areas experiencing frequent violence or those too far from home. However, schools in Abuja and Lagos are desirable and well-integrated in terms of ethnicity, region, and religion.

Positioning our research in the context of schools that are striving to embrace diverse student bodies in a historically divided nation gave us a valuable opportunity to delve into the students' experiences in a distinctive environment. Although using a quota system for purposes of inclusion is not a prevalent practice in other conflict and postconflict settings, it does offer a unique window into the dynamics at play in diverse schools. This perspective enables us to explore how students navigate diversity, could influence how FUCs and other diverse schools are structured, and, ultimately, could promote positive interactions among diverse groups.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: SELF-CATEGORIZATION AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION THEORIES

We draw from self-categorization and social reproduction theory to gain an understanding of the intergroup dynamics in a diverse school setting. Self-categorization theory involves assumptions and hypotheses about one's self-conception vis-á-vis other people—that is, a social interaction. It expands on the more simplistic notion of intergroup contact by considering the psychological formation of groups and the influence group membership has on behavior (Turner et al. 1987). Turner et al. (1987) define these self-categorizations as the "cognitive groups of oneself and some class of stimuli as the same (identical, similar, equivalent, interchangeable, and so on) in contrast to some other class of stimuli" (p. 44). When students from various ethnic and religious groups are brought together in a new setting, they will engage in a self-categorization process based on perceived similarities and differences, many of which have been formed in the students' homes, communities, and friendship circles. School interventions that seek to either unite these groups (e.g., citizenship or national unity education practices) or increase their mutual appreciation (e.g., multicultural education practices) can influence their self-categorizations. Practices such as inclusive interreligious prayers that shape how students view various in-groups and out-groups can alter their attraction to an entire group or how connected they feel to Nigeria as a nation (Holtman et al. 1998).

This issue of how groups interact and how this shapes their ties to the nation becomes particularly important in a nation like Nigeria, where strong ethnic and religious categories make it easy for students to self-categorize into groups with strong ethnic/religious boundaries that shape the way they identify with being "Nigerian" (Fanon 1963; Mamdani 1996; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). When an individual self-categorizes into various groups, their perceptions of the groups will interact with each other (Turner et al. 1987). For example, if a person is strongly tied to a particular ethnicity, it might interfere with their self-categorization as Nigerian. In secondary schools with mixed ethnic and religious populations, the salience of these categories could inhibit school unity and magnify nationwide group categorizations (Bekerman and Maoz 2005; Carter 2012; Donnelly 2004). Conversely, ethnically and religiously integrated schools present an opportunity to reform self-categorizations or to restructure what it means psychologically to be a part of the in-group or the out-group (McGlynn et al. 2004).

Students must learn to navigate where they place themselves within a diverse student population. This means they have to confront their own prejudices and the possibly conflicting messages about their school's efforts to encourage national unity and appreciation of diversity (Turner et al. 1987). Changes in students' identity formation that result from these efforts could affect how they relate to one another and shift their self-perceptions as being within or outside of various groups. This kind of change in students' perceptions could lead to multiple outcomes, such as friendships with those from other religious groups or positive interactions with those of other ethnicities. We give this further consideration as a part of this study (Pettigrew 1998).

Identity formation and self-categorizations can persist or change in response to external influences, such as school. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) view education as a means of reproducing existing social structures, such as intergroup relationships and hierarchies, through the curriculum, school practices, and informal interactions. Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of habitus (ingrained social habits and perceptions) and field (spaces of interaction) suggest the potential to bring about social transformation by disrupting existing structures and intergroup relations (Bush and Saltarelli 2000). This can occur, intentionally or not, via the formal and informal school curriculum and practices, and through the creation of new understandings and relationships by the students and school personnel. At the FUCs, whose quota system brings together students with historically tense relations in the intimate living conditions of a boarding school, normal social situations have already been disrupted. They have been replaced by situations in which students, teachers, and administrators can engage in ways that either reinforce the existing habitus, such as groups self-segregating in the dormitories, or shape a new habitus that fosters social transformation, such as the development of intergroup friendships and crossing ethnic lines to bond over shared interests. In this article, we focus primarily on divisions within the school by exploring their implications and how the school can be reshaped to address them.

In this research, we view students as active participants in formal and informal school practices—school activities, dormitory assignments, disciplinary practices, and so on. These practices influence the ways students navigate boundaries. Changes in student perceptions can lead to various outcomes, including both social reproduction and social transformation (Pettigrew 1998). We argue that the compound effects of ethnicity, religion, and student perceptions are shaped within the school setting and that these multiple dynamics play a key role in marginalizing certain groups while keeping others in positions of power.

METHODS

To explore the ways identity formation and self-categorization shape relationships between students, we engage in mixed methods research involving interviews and surveys that gather social network analysis data on students from eight secondary schools (6 FUCs and 2 state) in Nigeria over one academic year (2017-2018). Lower secondary school includes the junior sections, JS1, JS2, and JS3; senior secondary school includes the senior sections, SS1, SS2, and SS3.[3] Due to limited time and resources, we could not follow JS1 students for the full six years of secondary school, so we instead surveyed first- and final-year students at the start and end of one academic year. Our aim was to understand how the students changed in terms of friendships and their views of various groups throughout the year. We compared the first-year students to the final-year students, who had been in the integrated school setting for a longer time. This provided a snapshot of the students' development within a short timeframe.

In this paper, we focus our analysis on the FUCs, due to their immersive boarding school environment, but we also briefly mention the state schools for contextual and comparative purposes. The interview data captures the students' perspectives on intergroup interactions during their identity formation process, while the social network analysis provides a practical representation of the way these relationships map visually.

This research involved a purposive selection of eight schools: six FUCs and two state secondary schools. Due to the current security situation in Nigeria, the FUCs are not all representative of the variety of ethnic groups in that nation. Moreover, many parents do not want to send their kids to school in areas that are experiencing active violence or are far away from home. This research was conducted in two areas where the student bodies are highly diverse: Nigeria's capital, Abuja, and its largest city, Lagos. Both cities have three FUCs, one each all female, all male, and mixed sex.

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3   These are approximately equivalent to grades 7-12 in the United States.

We conducted the research at these six schools and at one mixed-sex state secondary school in each area, which provided a comparison.

This study uses pseudonyms and identification numbers to protect the names of participants and to mask information that could reveal their identities. All participants signed an informed consent form, as approved by the Institutional Review Board at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Survey and Social Network Analysis

We used a paper survey to gather data on students' tolerance, friendship networks, national/ethnic/religious identity, and relationship to the school. In this article, we focus on the friendship network portion of the survey, which enabled us to map the students' social networks. The first author surveyed the same JS1 (first-year) and SS3 (final-year) students at each school in the first and final months of the school year. A total of 643 students took the survey, including 502 FUC students and 141 state secondary school students. This included 309 SS3 students and 334 JS1 students, or approximately 40 SS3 and 40 JS1 students per school. Only 622 of the surveys were included in the analysis, due to missing information on important questions. See Table 1 for a description of the survey sample. The surveys were conducted separately within each classroom to facilitate its administration, the tracking of students over time, and the social network analysis.

Using the data analysis program R, the first author began the social network analysis by asking the students to write down the names of their five closest friends in the classroom. We asked this question at the beginning and the end of the school year in order to track any changes in patterns over time, which enabled us to conduct a detailed social network analysis that we tracked by classroom. Social network theory hypothesizes that an actor's position in a network can help to predict outcomes for that individual, including their behavior and beliefs, and that what happens to a group is partly a result of the way its members are connected with each other (Borgatti, Everett, and Johnson 2018). Social network analysis enables an in-depth examination of interpersonal relationships within a classroom while providing a means to triangulate and visually represent the social networks and relationships discussed during the interviews.

Table 1: Description of Survey Sample (N=622)

	Unity (n=483)	State (n=139)
Sex (%)		
Female	56.73	50.36
Male	43.27	49.64
Ethnicity (%)		
Yoruba	28.99	46.76
Hausa	7.25	4.32
Igbo	41.41	27.34
Other	22.35	21.58
Religion (%)		
Muslim	17.39	28.78
Christian	82.61	71.22
Traditional Religion	0	0
No Religion	0	0
Grade (%)		
JS1	50.52	57.55
SS3	49.48	42.45
Age (mean, in years)		
Age (9-22)	12.84	13.52
Location (%)		
Abuja	48.03	48.20
Lagos	51.97	51.80

INTERVIEWS

Based on the survey results, five or six JS1 and six SS3 students at each school were purposively chosen to ensure ethnic and religious diversity in our sample. The selection was based on the tolerance scores (low, medium, and high) of students from three FUCs (one all male, one all female, and one mixed sex) and one state secondary school. We then interviewed the students in groups, which resulted in a total of eight group interviews, two at each school. The interview participants, who were chosen to include a diversity of perspectives, ethnicities, and religions, demonstrated varying tolerance levels, as measured by the survey. The group interviews, which included a total of 47 students, approximately 12 per school, were conducted separately with the JS1 and SS3 students (2 groups of 6) to capture the varied experiences and perspectives of the first- and final-year students. From the 12 participants in the group interviews at each of the four schools, three JS1 and three SS3 students, six from each school, were invited for individual interviews, for a total of 24. We conducted these semistructured

group and individual interviews, which lasted 45 minutes to an hour, with the same students at the beginning and the end of the school year. See Table 2 for a summary of the participants by method type.

Table 2: Overview of Participants by Method Type

	Number of Participants	**Organization**	**Site**	**Timing**
Survey (Social Network Analysis)	643 students	Approx. 40 JS1 and approx. 40 SS3 students at each of the 8 schools	All 8 schools (6 FUCs and 2 state secondary schools)	Pre (September/ October 2017) and post (April/May/ June 2018)
Student Group Interviews	47 students	8 pre/post group interviews with 47 students: 5-6 JS1 and 6 SS3 students at each of the 4 schools	4 schools (one all-male FUC, one all-female FUC, one mixed-sex FUC, and one state secondary school)	Pre (October/ November 2017) and post (April/ May/ June 2018)
Student Individual Interviews	24 students	24 pre/post individual interviews chosen from those interviewed in groups: 3 JS1 and 3 SS3 students at each of the 4 schools	4 schools (one all-male FUC, one all-female FUC, one mixed-sex FUC, and one state secondary school)	Pre (October/ November 2017) and post (April/ May/ June 2018)

We posed questions to capture the students' viewpoints on several issues, including their overall perceptions of the school, their experiences with friendships and intergroup relations, their encounters within a diverse student population, and how the school influenced these connections. To gain insights into the students' ongoing identity formation, we also inquired about their experiences and perceptions of various ethnic and religious groups, and about their national, ethnic, and religious identities. We used the interviews to explore how students formulate their own categorizations and interpret their experiences that relate to their ethnic and religious identities. This understanding brings depth to the results of the social network analysis survey.

We used NVivo to analyze the interviews. We created codes according to the conceptual framework using etic codes such as "ethnic identity," "religious identity," "national identity," "intergroup interactions," and "tolerance"; emic codes such as "skin color," "discrimination," and "Boko Haram" also emerged (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). The lead author, a white woman from the United States, recognizes that her identity and background influenced her research relationships in Nigeria. In some cases, they facilitated access, but in others her positionality may have limited what her contacts

and the participants felt comfortable discussing or sharing. As an outsider, she regularly reflected on how her positionality shaped her interactions with the participants and she approached the work with a commitment to learn alongside the participants and to practice self-reflexivity. For more than two years before conducting the 10-month study, she worked to build trust with education leaders at the national and school levels. She also prioritized making connections across ethnic and religious lines and gathering the perspectives of participants at all levels, including in the classroom, all while fostering open, respectful relationships.

Limitations

While FUCs aim to enroll students from across Nigeria, this study revealed that a significant portion of the student population resides in urban regions. Although these students identified with specific states, their urban experiences may have shaped their attitudes, including making them more tolerant, due to their exposure to diverse environments. This self-selection introduces a limitation, as the findings may not be generalizable to the wider population, particularly to those from smaller cities or nonurban areas. Additionally, the study's short time frame may have limited our engagement with the participants and our ability to capture long-term trends or nuances in their attitudes and behaviors. We conducted the surveys and interviews in English, the language of instruction in Nigerian secondary schools, and while most students were proficient, it is possible that conducting the research in a non-native language affected some participants' ability to express themselves fully. Despite these limitations, the FUCs' use of a quota system to ensure that their students come from diverse backgrounds helped us gain insights that were central to this research.

FINDINGS

We now provide an overview of the main findings from the social network analysis we conducted to understand friendship patterns across groups. We subsequently explain why we see such patterns, using examples from the interview data.

Social Network Analysis

On the survey, we asked students to name their five closest friends in the classroom. One striking pattern in the friendship networks we identified is that Hausa Muslim students appear to have fewer connections within the classroom network than other ethno-religious groups; this was true at the beginning and the end of the school year. In the Class E (SS3 all-boys unity school) network shown in Figure 1, we see that the Igbo Christians exhibit the highest eigenvector centrality—that is, they are highly connected to other highly connected individuals and more central in the friendship network. In contrast, Hausa Muslim students have a lower eigenvector centrality—that is, they are

not closely connected to highly connected individuals. As discussed earlier, this division is likely a result of the ethnic, linguistic, and religious divisions and hierarchies that have been historically shaped within Nigeria (Osaghae and Suberu 2005).[4]

Figure 1: Friendship Network Showing Division of Students in FUC
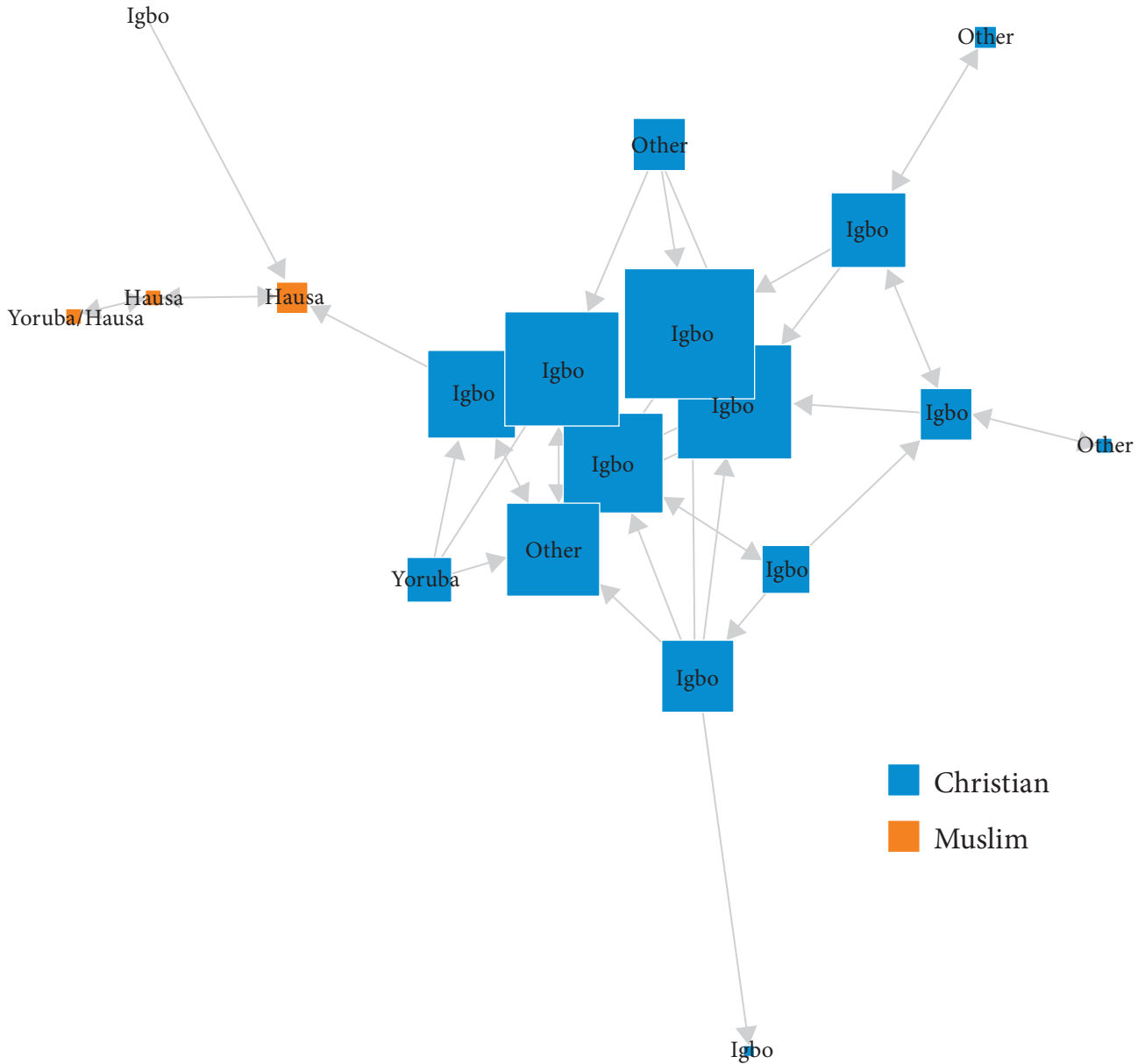
Interestingly, as Figure 1 shows, the social networks indicating that Hausa and Muslim students are more integrated into the friendship network were more common in the SS3 classrooms than the JS1 classrooms. All but one JS1 classroom—an all-girls class, shown in Figure 2—showed ethnic or religious divisions at either the beginning or end of the year.[5]

Figure 2: Friendship Network Showing Example of Student Integration in FUC

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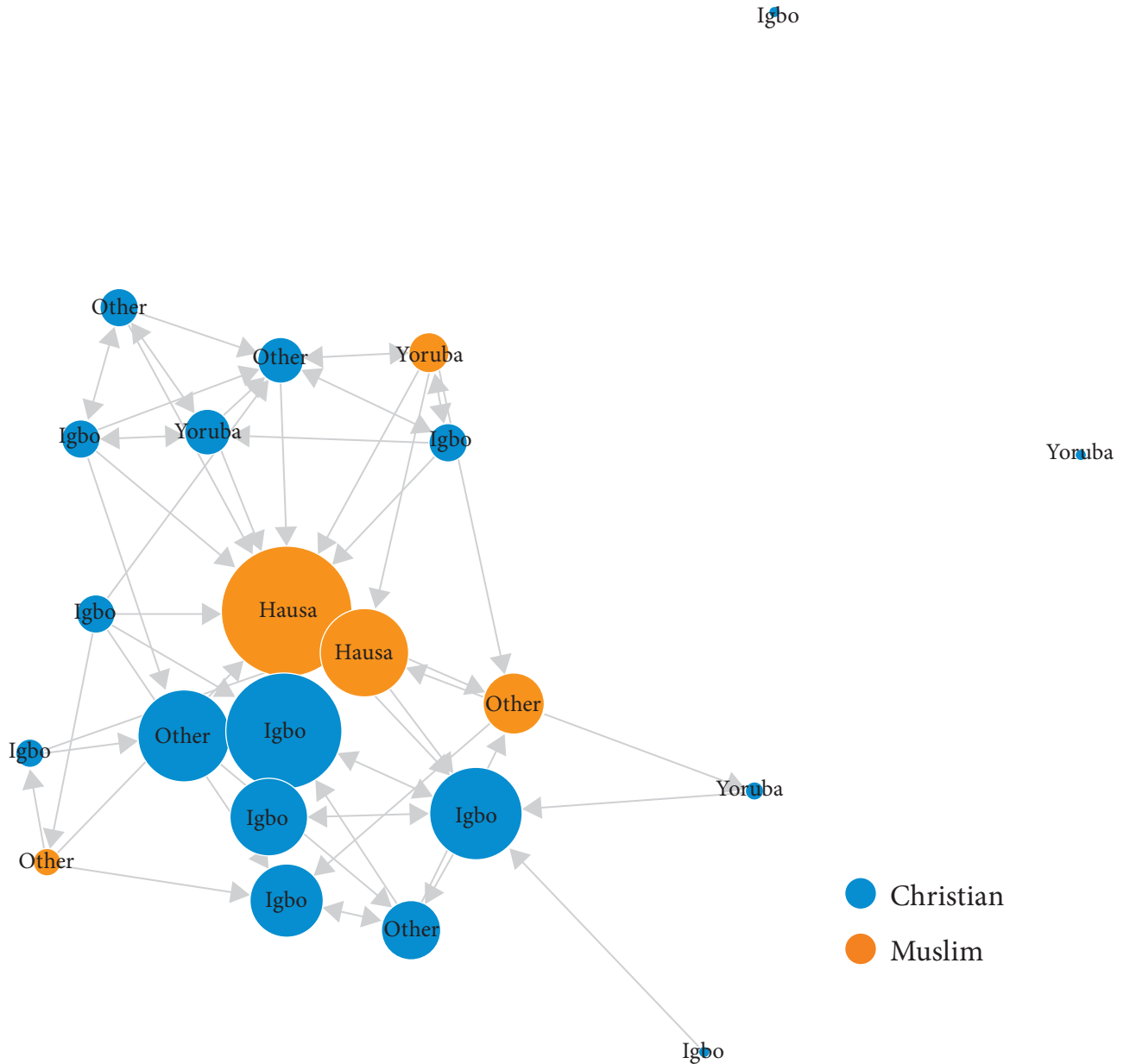
5   Three SS3 classrooms (1 all female, 1 all male, 1 mixed sex) showed no division by ethnicity or religion at any point during the year.

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Student Individual and Group Interviews

We identified some common friendship patterns through the social network analysis, but we were curious as to why and through what means certain students were separating from others. In this section, we use examples from the individual and the group interviews to explore these friendship network findings further. While the school populations were diverse, separation persisted by religion, ethnicity, and language in the nonformal spaces and practices, such as when students chose beds in the dormitory near others in their religious group.[6] The students discussed the ways overlapping religious, ethnic, and linguistic identities influenced their relationships.

Religion

In many cases, students talked about having ethnically and religiously diverse friendships and positive intergroup interactions. However, several students discussed being separated by religion, particularly in the unity schools. For example, one student at an all-male unity school talked about having more friends from his own religion (Islam) because they do more things together throughout the day, like going to pray. While he did mention that he also has Christian friends, later in the interview he noted that Christian students tend to have more Christian friends. This suggests that the student has a strong sense of self-identification with the Muslim group and less perceived overlap with those he considers part of the Christian group:

> **Bizo:** I feel…because we are sharing the same religion, I feel more closer.
>
> **Interviewer:** Why do you feel more closer?
>
> **Bizo:** We do things the same, like when we are going to pray, we do it together. When it comes to the fasting months, we fast, everything we do it together.
>
> (school 3, unity, individual student interview, SS3 male Hausa Muslim, October 12, 2017)

In another instance, an SS3 Hausa Muslim student from a mixed-sex unity school discussed her choice to separate by religion in the dormitories where the students live, including sleeping in a corner near her Muslim friends. She attributes this to the convenience it offers in practicing their religion together. She emphasizes that the separation of religious practices and spaces in the unity schools due to their boarding school nature contributes notably to the division of groups along religious lines. This strengthens their self-categorization into respective religious groups and hinders a restructuring of self-categorization that could encourage friendships across religious lines. This example demonstrates how intergroup

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6   In Nigeria, ethnicity and language overlap almost perfectly, although the level of fluency in the language associated with one's ethnic group varies.

separation can occur in nonacademic spaces like a dormitory, where administration and staff have fewer controls in place. This contrasts with a classroom, where a teacher can have students sit next to and engage with a diverse group of peers. Students in the dormitory were left to choose their own locations, which enabled existing social relationships and self-categorizations to influence their choices. The schools thus missed an opportunity to encourage students to occupy areas where they could expand and shift perceived identities and develop cross-group friendships.

It was not uncommon for students—both male and female, JS1 and SS3, Muslim and Christian—to discuss separation by religion. Participants did not necessarily refer to separation by religion as a rule that students followed all the time but as a trend toward which many students gravitated. In one SS3 group interview in a mixed-sex unity school, students mentioned a unique situation in which teachers reinforced the religious divisions among students. They described how the female Christian students used hijabs—a Muslim head covering—to hide their identity and deliberately deflect the blame for sneaking out of the dorms to meet their boyfriends. The students described how the Christian teachers intervened on behalf of the Christian students and protected them from severe punishment. They said this occurred at a particularly heated time between Muslim and Christian students. While the students recognized that this situation was not normal, it points to the underlying tensions among the students and teachers that are often avoided and suppressed. The Christian students' casual use of a key identity marker for Muslims not only showed disrespect for their schoolmates but also could have unjustly implicated their Muslim peers. Even the teachers aligned themselves with the students along religious lines instead of uniting to advocate for impartial disciplinary measures, which reflects the significance of religious identity in Nigeria. This experience reinforced group boundaries and intensified students' self-categorizations within their respective groups. The divide between the groups widened as a result.

Having separate religious spaces within the school setting appeared to maintain the schism between Christian and Muslim students and became a physical representation of that separation. The students seemed to gain a sense of ownership around the spaces assigned to them because of their religious identity, which strengthened group categorizations in ways that excluded others. The unity school students discussed the unequal dedication of physical structures and resources to the different religious groups and how it leads to arguments between groups. One student described how the students use the separate religious spaces within the school to exclude and control resources:

> **Debare:** They fight about tribes sometimes, like in the Mosque, that don't allow Christians enter the Mosque and it very frustrating and there is water there. Sometimes if water stop flowing in this school, the only place water will be flowing is in the Mosque and they will not allow anybody to enter.
>
> (school 3, unity, individual student interview, JS1 male Igbo Christian, May 16, 2018)

These tensions further solidified the boundaries between religious groups, as religious identity came to be associated with receiving unequal treatment and of students' varying levels of perceived value within the school environment.

ETHNICITY/LANGUAGE

Religion was not the only means of separation in the schools. The participants also discussed separation and strong self-categorization by ethnic group and language, which closely overlap. Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo are the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria and their languages are the ones spoken by the most people. The separation by ethnic group shown in the following excerpt from a JS1 group interview at an all-female unity school reveals an actual distinction in interactions by ethnic group:

> **Cynthia (Ijaw student):** There is one Yoruba girl, when anyone speaks Igbo she will say, stop speaking that nonsense language. She will say Hausas are black (*dudu*), and this is not true because my uncle is Hausa and he is fair.
>
> **Isioma (Igbo student):** They say Igbo people are wicked because they wanted to divide the country with Biafra. I was mopping, and the tidiness captain temporarily borrowed the mop to clean a special place, and Jessica who is Yoruba took the mop and said she is supposed to use it, and it started a quarrel and Ayansola resolved it.
>
> **Interviewer:** What about this Ayansola?
>
> **Adaeze (Hausa/Igbo student):** She cheats us in the dining, she gives more food to her tribe, the Yorubas.
>
> **Interviewer:** What does it mean to be from a particular ethnic group?
>
> **Isioma (Igbo student):** Like Yorubas are friends with themselves so that they can speak their language.
>
> (school 4, unity, group student interview, JS1 all female, November 16, 2017)

Here the students referenced language as both a reason for and a means of separation by ethnic group, as was common in several of the interviews.

In many of the interviews, students discussed instances of separation and arguments centering on ethnicity. In the next excerpt, a JS1 Hausa Muslim student from an all-male unity school talked about how Hausas sometimes stay separate from others:

> **Abbas:** The Igbos think the Hausas are not kind.
>
> **Interviewer:** What about the Yorubas?
>
> **Abbas:** I don't make friends with Yoruba.
>
> **Interviewer:** Really? Why?
>
> **Abbas:** I'm just like that.
>
> **Interviewer:** But why?
>
> **Abbas:** I hate Yorubas.
>
> **Interviewer:** Did you hate them before you came to this school?
>
> **Abbas:** No.
>
> **Interviewer:** You started hating them here?
>
> **Abbas:** Yes ma.
>
> **Interviewer:** What made you hate them?
>
> **Abbas:** They are careless, they don't take care of their things, they will shit and they will not flush it.
>
> (school 3, unity, individual student interview, JS1 male Hausa Muslim, May 16, 2018)

This student recognized the disdain he had developed for Yoruba students specifically, which he did not have before living with a diverse group of students. This suggests that, as others have found, if proper interventions are not implemented, a diverse school environment can worsen social relations by reinforcing perceived self-categorizations, with less overlap between groups (Irwin 1991; Spivak et al. 2015).

Language is one mode of separation between groups in the schools, which is not unexpected, considering the historical use of language to erect boundaries between groups (Ahmad and Widén 2015; Piller 2001). During the interviews, students provided many examples of language as a marker of groups and a means of separation between groups. One SS3 student from a unity school was from another country and thus offered

the perspective of one who did not identify with a Nigerian ethnic group. She talked about feeling left out when around the Hausa students, who often were speaking Hausa:

> **Beatrice:** They'll gather in one place and be speaking their language, and if you come you won't understand what they're saying and [will] be feeling left out, so you'll just have to leave and go talk to another person, something like that.
>
> **Interviewer:** And do other tribes do that?
>
> **Beatrice:** No.
>
> (school 4, unity, individual student interview, SS3 non-Nigerian female Christian, April 25, 2018)

Another Hausa Muslim SS3 student in a mixed-sex unity school talked about the Hausa students separating into different groups. She noted that many of them do not speak English well—part of the legacy of unequal education—so they often congregate and speak to one another in their own language. She said she chooses not to socialize exclusively with the Hausas because she came to the school to learn:

> **Kadija:** I think the most reason that make them to do such—because most of them in this school, they do normally speak their Hausa together, but some of them they don't even know how to speak correct English, so if they mingle with their Hausa people, they will be speaking language together and it will lead them not to go further in their education.
>
> (school 2, unity, individual student interview, SS3 female Hausa Muslim, October 19, 2017)

Again, this indicates a situation where language underlines inequalities between groups. This applies to Hausa students in particular, especially those who come from parts of the country with lower socioeconomic and educational status, as they are less likely to speak English fluently (Fafunwa 1974). Without appropriate school interventions and practices, this may further solidify students' existing self-categorizations and limit opportunities to develop broader perceived group categorizations that bridge ethnicity and religion. It may particularly reinforce the ethno-religious separation of Hausa Muslim students.

Some students in the study said these language divisions create fear, envy, and suspicion among groups. Even though many of the schools in the study, particularly the unity schools, explicitly tell their students to speak English except when in language classes, students from many groups continue to speak their own ethnic languages.

Intergroup Marriage

We also asked about intergroup marriage. According to Bogardus (1959), who created the social distance scale, marriage is the most intimate form of social connection and is considered an indicator of the highest level of intergroup tolerance. Of the 19 unity school students interviewed, 13 expressed that, by the end of the year, they wanted to marry within their religion.[7] This suggests that students continue to value having relationships with others from the same religious group. Our findings also suggest that religion often creates a stricter boundary than ethnicity in friendships at the unity schools.

It is notable that Hausa was the only ethnic group that non-Hausa students said they would not marry into. Six of the 25 (24%) state and unity school students individually interviewed at the end of the year said they would not marry a Hausa.[8] Of these six students, half were Muslim and half Christian; three were Igbo, two Yoruba, and one Yoruba/Igbo; four attended unity schools, the other two state schools. This singling out of Hausa students as an excluded group mirrors the findings already presented. At the end of the year, 60 percent of the students interviewed from state schools and 28 percent from unity schools expressed a need to marry within their ethnicity. This implies that unity school students are more open to interethnic marriage than those from state schools.[9] While unity schools appear to promote more diverse interethnic friendships and marriages, religion remains a point of division among their students. This suggests that unity schools do provide pathways to bridge ethnic categorizations but less so for bridging religious group categorizations.

The Influence of Overlapping Identities on Student Relations

What emerged in the interviews as particularly important was the separation of Hausa students, especially the Hausa Muslim students. Many students again referenced language as a reason why the Hausa Muslims remain separate. Other studies have pointed to language as a means of group exclusion within schools, such as in South Africa (Soudien and Sayed 2003; Soudien 2010) and Bosnia Herzegovina (Tolomelli 2015). While many students seemed to know words and phrases in languages other than those associated with their ethnic group (not including English), it was rare to find a student who actively used a language other than English or the language associated with their ethnic group to communicate regularly. A Hausa Muslim SS3 student at an all-male unity school said in an interview that students separate by ethnic group. He noted that he preferred

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7   This includes one extra interview that I conducted with a volunteer head student only at the end of the year.

8   This includes one extra interview that I conducted with a volunteer head unity school student only at the end of the year. One of these students did say they would marry a Hausa if they understood English—again pointing to a linguistic division among ethnic groups.

9   This could relate to the type of parents who put their children in unity schools, as they may be open to their children marrying outside their ethnic group.

to spend more time with other Hausa students because it makes him "feel like [he's] home." He again pointed out the separation between Hausa and Igbo students:

> **Hamza:** Before when you are with them, you feel more comfortable, like I'm with Hausa people most times because I feel like I'm home.
>
> **Interviewer:** Is there one group they don't mix with as much, like Igbo, Yoruba, Igala, Tiv?
>
> **Hamza:** Yes, Igbo.
>
> **Hamza:** All Hausa stay together, the three ethnic groups interact, but sometimes when it comes to doing things we group ourselves.
>
> (school 3, unity, individual student interview, SS3 male Hausa Muslim, June 5, 2018)

While this excerpt does not identify Hausa Muslims specifically as a separated ethno-religious group, many of the interviews did point to this particular distinction. This separation points to a mirroring of Nigerian ethno-religious division in student interactions. In the following excerpt, a Yoruba Christian female SS3 student in a unity school discusses how Hausa Muslims separate, again emphasizing language as a way to maintain boundaries:

> **Hope:** Like they are Muslim from Muslims. They stay, they don't want to associate with anybody, they don't even like staying in the same, in the room, they always like to stay in the same corner, the same room, do everything together, wash, eat together, go to dining, go to Mosque, and if you are following them, you'll be confused as if they are going to sell you because they always talk Hausa.
>
> **Interviewer:** Hmmm.
>
> **Hope:** They don't speak English.
>
> (school 2, unity, individual student interview, SS3 female Yoruba Christian, October 13, 2017)

Earlier in the interview, this student talked about having Muslim friends, including some Hausas, so discrimination on her part did not appear to be shaping her dialogue.

Some unity school students did recognize that the religious divide, which is especially prominent in their schools, declined over time. One Muslim head student at a unity school described how students argue and divide over religion when they first come to the school—particularly Igbos and Hausas. The interviewee speculated that this division arises from the fact that most Igbos are Christian while most Hausas are Muslim, which reveals the overlap of differences in both tribe and religion. This overlap contributes to deeper rifts and more rigid self-categorizations, resulting in fewer students adopting a more inclusive categorization that might foster cross-group friendships. The student noted that Yoruba students are "quite cool," and this may be because it is common for Yoruba people to practice either Islam or Christianity. This phenomenon was mentioned in many of the interviews. The head student we interviewed just once did recognize that this division changes over time in his unity school because the school provides a means of interaction for people who would not normally interact regularly in society:

> **Ayisha:** I believe that with your exposure here, we don't really see that [referring to marrying within ethnic group] as important like their parents would have seen it. I really think that unity schools are really great and I am happy I came here.
>
> (school, religion, and ethnicity undisclosed for purposes of confidentiality, Unity, individual student interview, April 25, 2018)

This also indicates that unity schools provide an opportunity for students to change their views on other groups and their overlapping categorizations of groups over time, and even to alter views that have been sustained across generations.

CONCLUSION

Through our social network analysis and interview data, we find that Hausa Muslims are the ethno-religious group most separated and stigmatized within the FUCs. The compounding of religion, ethnicity, and language seems to contribute to the specific separation of Hausa Muslim students, particularly in light of the intergroup differences, social boundaries, and hierarchies that exist in Nigeria (Blommaert 2010; Risager 2012). Our findings indicate that religion creates a higher boundary than ethnicity, which may stem from the perception that conflicts are driven by religious differences. Religion is also a pervasive aspect of life for many Nigerians, especially in the public sphere, and unlike ethnicity, it may be seen as a divide too deep and sacred to cross—particularly when it comes to marriage, which holds significant social and religious importance in Nigerian society.

Our findings also highlight the compounding effects of ethnicity and religion that lead to exclusion in student intergroup relations in the school setting. This particular form of stigmatization and inequality has roots in colonial history, which created socioeconomic and educational disparities between those in the north (primarily Hausa Muslims) and those in the south (Fafunwa 1974; Mamdani 1996; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). The current conflict in Nigeria between Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen also tends to be associated with Hausas, Muslims, and those from the north. This creates a hierarchy wherein the overlapping identities of Hausa and Muslim are at the bottom. These social relations are magnified in the FUCs, where the Hausa Muslim students' religious practices and language overlap to mark their group as separate. Thus, the larger patterns of stigmatization in society align with current and historic patterns of conflict and are mirrored in the schools. These patterns are maintained amid an illusion of unity and the failure to use the negative intergroup relations as an opportunity to have students learn from the conflict.

Our findings also point to the importance of language as a form of both connection and exclusion in the school context. When language is seen as a symbol of one's ethnicity or social group, it is more likely to be a defining factor in one's relationship with others (Ahmad and Widén 2015; Irvine and Gal 2000). When a person views language as representative of a particular social group, communicating with others who speak that language can connect them with people who are likely to have shared values and perspectives (Ahmad and Widén 2015). Language, which may overlap with other identities, such as ethnicity, can also reinforce existing inequalities and hierarchies within a society (Blommaert 2010; Risager 2012).

We find that the older students we interviewed had more integrated friendship networks than the students we interviewed in their first year, which points to the role schools can play in building intergroup tolerance. While students may be open to friendships with those from other groups, views on intergroup marriage, particularly between religions, may be more difficult to shift (Bogardus 1933). Being unwilling to marry across ethnic or religious lines should not be viewed as a total lack of tolerance but as a reflection of whether students have a particular level of tolerance. Recognizing how students self-categorize themselves and other groups has important implications within a school context. For example, although language in some contexts can be a means of separation (Soudien and Sayed 2003), it also can be an expression of social solidarity that should not be discounted (Ahmad and Widén 2015). It could instead be used to create positive intergroup interactions in school and opportunities for interethnic learning and unity (Paris 2012).

While integrated schools have the power to shift deeply held mindsets about religion, ethnicity, and language, their practices and attitudes can also reproduce and harden existing social inequities that mirror those in the broader society. Our findings point to the importance of school structure and sustained contact among students in both

academic and nonacademic spaces in shifting attitudes across groups (see also Warikoo 2010). Diversity alone will not improve social relations. What is needed are sustained intergroup interactions, critical discussions of racial and ethnic identity, intergroup contacts, and friendships in both academic and nonacademic contexts that will shape the way students interact with one another (Janmaat 2012). Students and other school actors can interact in ways that strengthen the existing habitus (social reproduction) or shape a new habitus (social transformation). The separation of groups and stigmatization within a school is a reflection of society, and without the proper interventions it will detract from the goals of intergroup unity within diverse school contexts (Irwin 1991; Spivak et al. 2015). Without discounting the richness in students' diverse languages and groups, an approach that encourages intergroup peer-to-peer teaching and learning could foster intergroup unity—which is the goal of the unity schools (Paris 2012). Teachers and school leaders play important roles in fostering inclusion and open discussion, particularly around sensitive topics related to identity (Kuppens and Langer 2016). With a deeper understanding of students' perspectives, they could address challenges more effectively and create more positive experiences within the school environment.

In this article, we have presented empirical insights into students' perspectives on intergroup relations in a school environment that is affected by conflict. Our findings point to the importance of overlapping and compounding identity markers such as ethnicity, language, and religion. Our research contributes important insights into how out-groups can be doubly stigmatized, and into how schools can foster intergroup friendships. The findings help to increase understanding of diverse schools in Nigeria and other global contexts, specifically the dynamics of diverse student interactions.

Our findings also contribute to the broader discourse in the fields of comparative education and education in emergencies on the role schools play in either fostering positive intergroup relations or exacerbating existing tensions. Furthermore, our approach to this topic—the students' perspectives—offers a distinctive viewpoint in the current research landscape, which is complemented by our analysis of their friendship networks using both quantitative and qualitative data.

Future research should aim to increase understanding of students' experiences and their perspectives on interacting with a diverse population, and investigate how physical spaces and formal practices overlap with identity to shape student interactions. The role of educators as facilitators and mediators in diverse schools could also be investigated. This would bolster the extensive existing research on the way curriculum shapes identity (Luna, Evans, and Davis 2015; Walton et al. 2018) by including other important aspects of school life.

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CULTURAL HERITAGE AND EDUCATION: A PLACE-BASED EDUCATIONAL PROJECT IN JERICHO, PALESTINE

Bart Wagemakers

ABSTRACT

Many efforts are under way around the world to make children aware of their cultural heritage, as stated in the 2018-2021 strategy of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2017). One reason children should have awareness of their heritage is that, in combination with a sense of place, it can play an important role in their process of identity-building (Crocetti et al. 2024; Ashworth and Graham 2017; Spiridon, Kosic, and Tuci 2014). Education can be an important way to involve children in their local cultural heritage, but education systems in unstable and conflict-affected areas are repeatedly under pressure, due to the ongoing tension and violence that endanger cultural heritage (Gallagher et al. 2018; UNHCR 2016). In this field note, I argue that a place-based education project to increase children's awareness of the significance of cultural heritage and of their sense of place may be a promising approach to take in conflict-affected areas. I demonstrate this thesis through the Cultural Heritage and Education-Jericho project, which was carried out in the West Bank, Palestine, in December 2021. In this field note, I describe the project's intention, explain how the project team customized the place-based educational approach to the specific circumstances, and discuss the constraints that emerged from the pilot.

INTRODUCTION

The process of identity-building is unequivocally related to acquiring a sense of place (Locke 2023). "Place" can be defined for an individual as being "geographically located, emerging in a specific context through meaningful social interactions, and consisting of a bidirectional process by which the individual gives meaning to place and place gives meaning to the individual" (Akesson 2012, 248). Children need their lived environment to give meaning to place, as their local settings provide them with a set of affordances that complement individual identity-building, including awareness of environmental features and their functional meaning (Heft 1988; Akesson 2012).

Cultural heritage also plays a key role in giving children a sense of place and helping them build an identity; it is what makes them unique.[1] It manifests in their way of perceiving the world and enables them to express their capacity for cultural creativity (Bleibleh and Awad 2020). Understanding their cultural heritage also strengthens children's awareness of their roots and of their cultural and social identity. Official sites teach us about the beliefs, values, and knowledge of the peoples and civilizations that created them or interacted with them (UNESCO 2002). The cultural heritage and collective memory of each locality or community are irreplaceable, as they provide an important foundation for development in both the present and the future. This serves to connect people's heritage to their commitment to place and to their identity.

Education provides a way to involve children in their local environment and cultural heritage. However, in unstable and conflict-affected areas where the education system is repeatedly under pressure due to ongoing tension and violence, youngsters' lives are full of uncertainty and their cultural heritage often is endangered (Gallagher et al. 2018; UNHCR 2016). This is the case in Palestine, as I will point out briefly.

Endangered Cultural Heritage in Palestine

Over the last two decades, as archaeologists and experts in Palestinian heritage have been fostering awareness and spreading knowledge about this cultural heritage, local Palestinian communities and people of Palestinian descent have shown a growing interest in their origins. Archaeology and heritage are now increasingly viewed as a means of documenting and sharing stories that reflect local and national narratives, which local communities in turn are recounting to the world (Taha and Saca 2022; Sayej 2019).

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1   Cultural heritage can be defined as the legacy of physical artifacts (monuments, groups of buildings, and sites) and as the intangible attributes of a group or society that are of outstanding universal value in terms of history, art, science, aesthetics, ethnology, and/or anthropology (UNESCO 1972).

Despite this growing interest, the preservation of Palestine's cultural heritage is still endangered by politically and ideologically motivated violence. As noted elsewhere, the occupying power appears to use archaeology to contest concepts of cultural heritage and, consequently, people's identities (e.g., Abu El-Haj 2001). Scholarship has shown that collaboration among the Israeli army, border guard, police, and archeological survey teams allowed for enhanced claims to territory (Stokes 2021). This resulted in the selective preservation of certain heritage sites and the lack of protection—and thus the erasure—of others (Stokes 2021; Hammond 2020, 5; Sayej 2019; Greenberg and Keinan 2009). As heritage represents the history and identity of a people and of a territory, it is significant in the process of nation-building (Taha and Saca 2022). Violence against cultural heritage, therefore, can be interpreted as an attempt to erase connections between a people and their land (Bleibleh and Awad 2020). The removal, destruction, and neglect of Palestinian archaeological cultural heritage has been used to delegitimize Palestinians' precedence in the land, as well as their political agency in efforts to achieve national self-determination (Stokes 2021; Bleibleh and Awad 2020).

Educational Challenges in Palestine

The ongoing tension and violence in Palestine also affect education, teachers, and students. Days of schooling are lost due to restricted access, checkpoints, and curfews; teachers and students are attacked and arrested; and schools are closed, demolished, or taken over for military use (Occupied Palestinian Territories-Education Cluster 2020; Naser-Najjab and Pappe 2019; UNICEF 2018; Ramahi 2015; Nicolai 2007). Some Palestinians in the West Bank even consider attending school and becoming educated individuals to be a nonphysical form of resistance to the occupying power and a way to support their communities (Akesson 2015).

For a long time, the conflict in Palestine has hindered the educational objective of making Palestinian children aware of their cultural identity. From 1967 to 1994, the Israeli administration placed strict limitations on teaching certain subjects, such as history and geography, and censored Palestinian schoolbooks that contained any reference to Palestinian heritage (Nicolai 2007). Since the founding of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, Palestinian teachers have been allowed to teach about their culture and their cultural heritage. One guiding principle of the Palestinian curriculum and the textbooks introduced since 2001 implies that Palestinian national and cultural identity must be fostered and developed through education (Bernard and Maître 2006).

Cultural Heritage and Education-Jericho

Palestine's children are living under extremely tense conditions. Due to the violence against their cultural heritage and the constraints the education system in Palestine is facing, there is an urgent need for education programs that engage children in their community, including cultural heritage, and stimulate a sense of place. Community-based

education is one such program (Taha and Saca 2022; Sayej 2010). The Cultural Heritage and Education-Jericho (CHE-J) project is a community-based education program for children ages 11 to 14.[2] By incorporating familiar and (hopefully) accessible themes into these children's school experiences, the CHE-J project helps them see what is valuable in their home communities (Smith and Sobel 2010). The purpose of this process is to support the children's understanding of their commitment to place, to their cultural heritage, and, subsequently, to their identity.

In this field note, I first address the concept of place-based education, then describe the project design and the content of the project. Finally, I discuss my reflections on the pilot.

PLACE-BASED EDUCATION

The culture children are familiar with helps to enlarge, diminish, shape, or transform the place they live in. However, before children's sense of belonging to a place can be linked to their emotions and a sense of commitment, they first must come to fully know it and embrace it (Read 1996). Several studies (e.g., Semken and Freeman 2008; Smith and Sobel 2010) have shown that place-based education is an effective approach for letting children explore their lived environment and to stimulate a sense of belonging between children and a place. Place-based education is a learning process that uses the local community and environment as a starting point for teaching concepts in subjects across the curriculum. This educational approach also emphasizes hands-on and real-world learning experiences and helps students to acquire, practice, and apply subject-matter knowledge and skills, which creates stronger ties between the children and their community (Melaville, Berg, and Blank 2006; Sobel 2004).

CHE-J elaborates on this concept of place-based education. It considers the local community and environment to be the basis of a learning process that relates to several topics across the curriculum and includes a special role for cultural heritage. This learning approach enables students to get to know and understand their place and, subsequently, to develop a sense of belonging to it. The hope at CHE-J is that having a sense of belonging will give the children an awareness of the significance of their Palestinian cultural heritage and the importance of preserving it. This awareness is not only important now; it also will be a crucial foundation stone in the building of a historic landscape in any future Palestinian state (Stokes 2021).

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2   The project focuses on the Jericho Oasis, situated in the West Bank. Jericho is considered one of the oldest cities in the world, and the Jericho Oasis houses numerous components of this cultural heritage. Therefore, this location was a suitable case study for this project.

THE PROJECT DESIGN

Palestinian heritage expert Hamdan Taha and I were jointly responsible for supervision of the project team, which consisted of 32 students who designed the project. These students were affiliated with four institutes in Utrecht, the Netherlands, and were pursuing degrees in teacher education, graphic design, and digital media. In order to develop a balanced and feasible curriculum, the project team collaborated intensively with Palestinian and international experts. Accordingly, before and throughout the design process, the team had both face-to-face and online meetings with representatives of the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and with the students and staff members of schools in Jericho. The key questions considered in these meetings were what and how the students wanted to learn about their lived environment. We processed the subject-related and pedagogical requests put forward by the students about nature, climate change, heritage sites, implementing assignments, and information and communication technology (ICT) tools.

The CHE-J project's standards generally are centered on place-based education principles, as defined by Vander Ark, Liebtag, and McClennen (2020). This means that the community is considered an extension of the classroom, and the inquiry-based elements in the program are meant to stimulate curiosity, encourage critical thinking, promote awareness of civic participation, and enable students to express their opinions and discuss them in a constructive way. CHE-J also challenges the participants not only to learn about, discuss, and reflect on local matters but to make connections with phenomena at the regional and global level every now and then. Finally, the project has an interdisciplinary nature, which features modules in the fields of geography, archaeology, history, and cultural heritage.

We added one more standard to the principles defined by Vander Ark, Liebtag, and McClennen (2020). Since teachers and students in conflict-sensitive areas are frequently prevented from teaching or attending school in a normal way, we created an online platform that offers the complete project.[3] By offering an online platform along with the hard-copy version of the program, CHE-J guarantees access to schooling even when schools are closed or difficult to access, such as during curfews, air strikes, or pandemics. Distance learning and e-learning platforms have already produced positive results under these circumstances (Occupied Palestinian Territories-Education Cluster 2020; Traxler 2018).

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3   The platform is available at www.culturalheritageeducation.hu.nl.

The Curriculum

While executing the program, students in grades 6 to 9, who generally are age 11 to 14, will encounter the Jericho Oasis from several perspectives and at different time periods.[4] The Jericho Oasis, which includes Jericho, one of the oldest cities in the world, houses numerous components of Palestinian cultural heritage. By approaching the students' lived environment from different perspectives, in conjunction with shifts from the present to the past and to the future, we hope to stimulate their engagement with place. As one might expect of a place-based educational project, the program includes activities that can be performed on and off the school grounds. The curriculum aims to achieve 36 learning outcomes, including specific knowledge, skills, insights, experiences, and levels of awareness. A description of the learning outcomes can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: A Selection of the CHE-J Learning Outcomes

Module	Learning Outcomes
Geography	The student is able to interpret maps, graphics, and elevation profiles.
	The student is aware of the importance of the presence of water in an arid region.
	The student can formulate and exchange his/her own opinion about climate change and the consequences for the Jericho Oasis.
Archaeology	The student knows what archaeologists do and for what reason.
	The student understands the archaeological methods and techniques used in the excavations of Tell es-Sultan and Khirbet al Mafjar, such as stratigraphy, absolute and relative dating, and interpreting artifacts.
	The student is able to create a scale model of a local heritage site.
History	The student knows about the way of life of the first cultures in the Jericho Oasis.
	The student is aware of the importance of the Jericho Oasis for the development of human civilization in the distant past.
	The student is able to make pottery and to create his/her own mosaic floor.
Cultural Heritage	The student is able to describe the different kinds of cultural heritage.
	The student is aware of the current dangers to cultural heritage and the techniques for how to preserve cultural heritage for the future.
	The student is aware of the relation between cultural heritage, his/her environment, and himself/herself.
Excursion	The student has visited an archaeological park.
	The student is aware of the fact that an archaeological park protects and preserves cultural heritage.
	The student is familiar with aspects of daily palace life in the Umayyad period.
Applicable to All Modules	The student has experience with collaborative learning, transforming macro processes into personal views, and underpinning his/her views.

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4   The project focuses on this age group because the teacher education students in Utrecht who designed the program have been trained to educate children of this age.

A school can consider CHE-J an extracurricular project and organize a project week in which the entire program is completed. An alternative is to spread the individual modules (see "Setup of the Project," below) over the school year and link them to the school subjects that are most suitable, such as geography, history, and English (the project is bilingual, Arabic-English).[5] When teaching these subjects, teachers can add appropriate assignments from the CHE-J program to their lesson plan.

As teachers at the school are responsible for executing the project, the project team provides a teachers' handbook. This handbook includes background information, the project's objectives, and lesson plans. A workbook for each module has been developed for the students, who can process the information and do the exercises and challenges in the workbooks by themselves or in learning teams. The teacher can have a guiding role. Students also use an activity book that offers various activating assignments related to the modules, such as baking a cake, creating a scale model, and experiencing the past with the help of a virtual reality application.

Setup of the Project

CHE-J consists of three phases (see Figure 1). Phase one includes two short animated videos that aim to stimulate the students and explain the project to them at the same time. The first video introduces the general project, and the second highlights several features of the Jericho Oasis.

The second phase, the core of the project, is designed within a framework that includes five modules. Each module deals with a particular aspect of the Jericho Oasis. The geography module zooms in on geological features, flora and fauna, and related current issues, such as climate change. The significance of local archaeological research in terms of providing data on the past and the way to deal with artifacts is addressed in the archaeology module. The history module looks at the way people used to live in the Jericho Oasis. The cultural heritage module deals with different kinds of heritage, the ways they are being endangered today, and how they can be protected and preserved for future generations.[6] Experience is key in the fifth module, which includes an excursion to the local cultural heritage site, Hisham's Palace.

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5   The time spent on the separate modules varies from 2.5 to 4 hours per module.

6   In the program, we indicated two types of cultural heritage: tangible (physical artifacts that are important for a community, such as historic buildings) and intangible (the practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills of a community). We also paid attention to natural heritage, the unique elements of biodiversity, including flora and fauna, ecosystems, and geological structures.

Phase three of the project is the final assignment, which combines the students' acquired knowledge, skills, and competencies. As part of this assignment, students prepare a theater production and/or exhibit about *their* Jericho. This final product gives them the opportunity to present their views on, and how they belong to, their place in the present, past, and future.

Figure 1: The Three Phases of Cultural Heritage and Education-Jericho
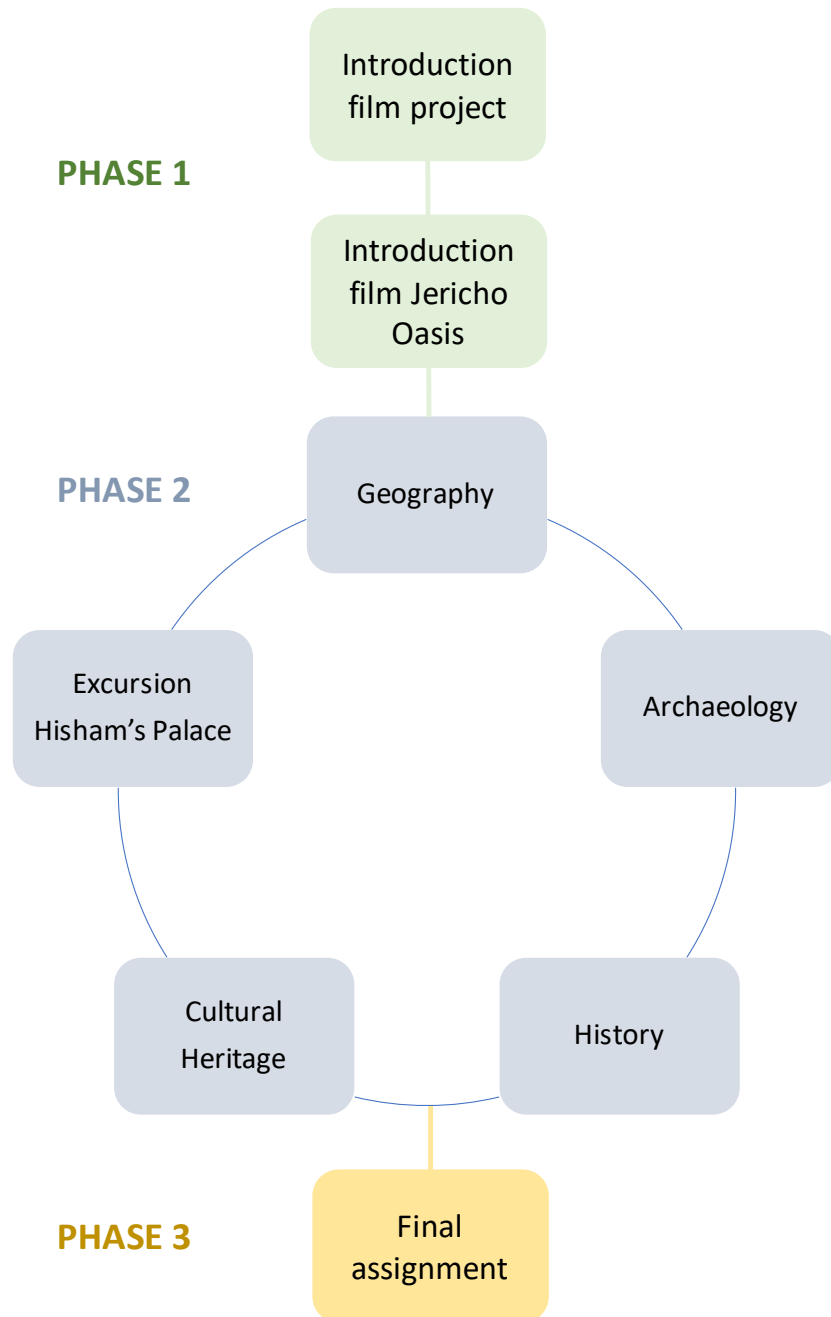
PILOT

Between December 5 and 16, 2021, the project team, in cooperation with the UNRWA Education Department of the West Bank and the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, organized a pilot at Ein el-Sultan refugee camp in Jericho (Figure 2).[7] The project was offered as an extracurricular activity at the Ein el-Sultan Coeducational School, which has about 40 employees and offers education from grades 1 through 9. With more than one thousand students, it is one of the largest UNRWA schools in the West Bank, and is also one of the few UNRWA coeducational schools (UNRWA 2015). Since most of the students were born in Ein el-Sultan refugee camp or in the area surrounding Jericho, they consider Jericho their city, which fits the project's target group well.

Figure 2: A Project Banner Created by the School, Showing the Activities Performed during the CHE-J Project

Source: UNRWA

For the purpose of the pilot, two experienced Palestinian teachers at the Ein el-Sultan Coeducational School volunteered to run the project. At the request of the project team, the teachers formed a mixed group of 30 students, 16 girls and 14 boys, who were in grades 7 to 9. The parents or guardians of all students selected signed a consent form giving the students permission to join the pilot, including an excursion to a cultural heritage site in Jericho.

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7   There the school had to take into account the exams for the students that were already scheduled, so UNRWA's staff members decided to spread the project over a period of 11 days.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the project team was not able to participate in the pilot in Jericho in person. Therefore, they set up a guidance program for the two teachers, which included lesson plans that provided a clear overview of the steps to be taken while executing the modules, as well as tutorials for the most complicated assignments. The lesson plans and tutorials were available in both Arabic and English. Furthermore, prior to the start of the pilot, the project team organized conference calls held via Microsoft Teams to discuss the complete project.[8] The online meetings were attended by members of the project team, the two teachers, and by staff members of the UNRWA Professional Development and Curriculum Unit in the West Bank. When ambiguities or questions arose throughout the pilot, the full team got in touch with each other via WhatsApp. The teachers documented the progress of the pilot with photos and videos. All communication took place in Arabic and in English.

During the pilot, the students—under the guidance of the Palestinian teachers—executed all the assignments for the four modules and went on an excursion to the eighth-century Umayyad Hisham's Palace. They completed the pilot by doing the final assignment, for which the students either performed their own play and/or presented an exhibit about *their* Jericho (Figure 3). This event was attended by teachers, parents, and staff members of the UNRWA Professional Development and Curriculum Unit in the West Bank.

Figure 3: Students Posing at Their Exhibition Table Showing a Scale Model, Ceramics, and Flyers

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8   By choosing Microsoft Teams, the supervisors are following their institutional guidelines, which consider it a secure platform.

The pilot's objective was twofold. First, we wanted to find out whether the students' awareness of and commitment to their place—including the local cultural heritage—had increased. Second, the pilot was intended to indicate which features of the project did and did not work in the way we had in mind.

Since the project team could not attend the pilot due to the pandemic and a physical field study was therefore not an option, we decided to base the results of the pilot on online focus group interviews. The interviews were also organized via Microsoft Teams, and they were conducted in Arabic after the project had been completed. There was one interview with the two teachers and one with eight students, who were selected by the teachers and were a good representation of CHE-J's target group: five girls and three boys attending grades 7 (n=2), 8 (n=5), and 9 (n=1). One staff member of the UNRWA Professional Development and Curriculum Unit who observed the pilot submitted an evaluation by email. The respondents provided their written consent for their participation in this evaluation and the way it was conducted.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PILOT

Although the pilot is not an evaluation, it does offer valuable insights into the potential of the CHE-J project. The teachers and students were mainly positive about their participation in the project. The teachers felt that the education program aligned well with the students' interests and perceptions. The students, meanwhile, had acquired knowledge, learned a variety of skills, and developed several competencies. The practical and activating assignments in particular got a positive response. These were assignments that required the students to apply their acquired knowledge, which indicates that the students seemed to prefer learning by doing. The cultural field trip to the Hisham's Palace Archaeological Park impressed them the most of all the activities (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Students Making Assignments at Hisham's Palace Archaeological Park

Based on the reflections of the participating students, teachers, and the UNRWA staff member who observed the pilot in Jericho, we suggest that the CHE-J project has made a positive contribution to these children's awareness of their living environment, the significance of cultural heritage, and their sense of place. The project even had a positive influence on the process of identity-building. The observing staff member concluded that the project gave the students experiences that "enriched them, developed their personalities, and enhanced their citizenship competencies…The students also reflected good knowledge on the geographical, historical, architectural, and environmental context they are living in. Their perceptions were very positive and serious on stressing their role to preserve these as well" (personal communication with the author, March 4, 2022).

The focus group interview held with the students made it clear that they had become more aware of the presence and significance of local cultural heritage and that they felt more responsible for its preservation. The students stated that they appreciate living in Jericho more than they did before participating in the project. Because of that, some students were motivated to share their experiences and discuss topics related to the Jericho Oasis with fellow students, friends, and family. The examples these students provided during the interview made it clear that they have inspired their fellow citizens to value the unique features of the Jericho Oasis.

Although the pilot demonstrates the potential of the project, attention must be paid to the challenges encountered in the pilot. The main bottlenecks in the pilot were caused by a discrepancy between the pedagogical assumptions the project team made and the current educational and technological circumstances in Palestine. For example, based on the signals we received in meetings with students and school managers in Jericho prior to the start of the project, we erroneously assumed that the staff had extensive experience with student-centered pedagogy and competency-based education. However, during the pilot it became clear that the teachers had mainly been trained to practice teacher-centered education and were prone to focus on cognitive skills. Another challenge seemed to be education technology, the use of ICT in the classroom specifically. After completing the pilot, the participating teachers indicated that their students were not yet skilled enough to work with digital tools by themselves. With the students not able to execute by themselves, the teachers had to demonstrate ICT-based assignments to the entire group.

Consequently, the project asked a lot of the teachers' time and energy. They had to discuss most of the content with the entire class, instead of guiding the individual student learning teams to process the subject matter and proceed with the reading and the ICT assignments independently. This finding led to the insight that, in the future, the program's expectations in terms of the intended student-centered pedagogy and students' ICT skills must be tailored more accurately to the actual situation prior to the start of the inception phase.

CONCLUSION

Overall, we feel confident about the success of the CHE-J pilot. Although the project could have been better aligned with the current teacher training and the level of educational technology available in Palestine, the students still gained knowledge and noncognitive skills and competencies. That was achieved through a combination of lesson materials, activating assignments from the activity book, and a variety of tools, and through the participating teachers' hard work. Furthermore, the place-based educational project is paying off; by studying and experiencing their living environment from various perspectives, the students acquired a more comprehensive view of their place and its unique features—including cultural heritage—and became more aware of their commitment to it and responsibility for it. This awareness of local heritage and appreciation of a sense of place may play a considerable role in the students' process of identity-building over the long term (Crocetti et al. 2024; Ashworth and Graham 2017; Spiridon et al. 2014).

However, one should also take into account some serious points of attention when implementing this kind of education in conflict settings. While place-based education considers the community an extension of the classroom and stimulates teachers and students to explore their surroundings (Vander Ark et al. 2020), the circumstances in conflict-affected areas can be too hazardous for inhabitants to move about freely and without risk. Military barriers or travel restrictions can also hinder field trips (Akesson 2015). Second, the implementation of this type of pedagogy requires a lot of time, effort, and resources (Yemini, Engel, and Ben Simon 2023), which can be a challenge for education systems in conflict-affected areas, which are frequently under extreme pressure.

As the UNRWA Education Department of the West Bank acknowledges the project's value to students' development, the organization has decided to integrate CHE-J into the curriculum of their schools in Jericho in the near future. The department will pay attention to the areas of concern that arose from the pilot. For instance, the pressure on the curriculum will be reduced by spreading the project modules out over the school year and connecting them to matching subjects in the curriculum. Now that UNRWA has decided to adopt CHE-J, it is up to this place-based project to support Palestinian teenagers as they explore their place by stimulating their sense of belonging and encouraging their process of identity-building.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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COACHING-OBSERVING-REFLECTING-ENGAGING: AN INTERVENTION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHER WELLBEING

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ABSTRACT

Support to improve teacher wellbeing is scarce in almost all contexts, but especially so in low- and middle-income settings in which teachers face both professional and personal challenges (Kirk and Winthrop 2007; Mendenhall, Gomez, and Varni 2018). In this field note, we discuss War Child's development of Coaching-Observing-Reflecting-Engaging (CORE) for Teachers, an intervention that focuses on improving teachers' wellbeing. CORE is grounded in acceptance and commitment therapy and in the social-emotional framework of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. It also draws from current research, including Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) prosocial classroom model. CORE aims to have a positive influence on classroom climate by providing teachers with the skills and knowledge they need to create an enabling, impactful, and safe learning environment for their students. In this field note, we outline the background on the development of the CORE intervention, including a literature review, the development of a theory of change, and field testing conducted in Chocó, Colombia. Having been field tested and adapted, CORE now is ready for further studies to determine its feasibility and effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

Violence weakens education systems, which subsequently require restoration and investment in replacing or creating new infrastructure. Without competent and emotionally healthy teachers, implementing changes to an education system will be less effective and could limit children's opportunity to learn, thrive, and heal (Mendenhall, Gomez, and Varni 2018; Winthrop and Kirk 2005; Akresh and de Walque 2008). Increased attention is being paid to the human and economic costs of deprioritizing

support for teachers' wellbeing and their social-emotional competencies (SECs), not only for the teachers but for the children in their classrooms (Wolf et al. 2015; Hoglund, Klingle, and Hosan 2015).

In this field note, we discuss the development, testing, and adaptation of Coaching-Observing-Reflecting-Engaging (CORE) for Teachers, an intervention that focuses on teacher wellbeing by helping teachers manage their emotions, reduce stress, identify self-care strategies, and build SECs. We detail the literature-informed background on teacher wellbeing, consultations with teachers, the outcome of a field test conducted in Chocó, Colombia, and the modifications we made to the intervention.

RATIONALE FOR AND DEVELOPMENT OF CORE

Stress can have a significant impact on teachers' physical and mental wellbeing. When combined with familial and other external pressures, it can reduce teachers' cognitive and emotional capabilities. This is particularly prevalent among novice educators, as is evident in their attendance and attrition rates, pedagogy quality, and classroom environments. It also affects student outcomes and education systems overall (Falk et al. 2019). The SECs teachers develop are a key element in improving their wellbeing. Their ability to manage emotions and stress can result in a better classroom environment, positive social-emotional role modelling, and improved cognitive, social, and emotional support for their students (Sharp and Jennings 2016; Wolf et al. 2015; Jennings and Greenberg 2009). Teachers in crisis-affected contexts often face challenging environments that include poor resources, overcrowding, community breakdown, and traumatized children. Well-planned support for teachers' wellbeing is crucial to mitigate these issues and retain a healthy workforce that provides quality education.

While there is a growing body of evidence in high-income countries on the importance of support for teacher wellbeing (Hascher and Waber 2021), this has yet to be replicated to any extent in low- and middle-income countries, or in contexts affected by crisis and conflict. Many of the few teacher wellbeing interventions that have been evaluated in low- and middle-income countries were included as modules within a more expansive teacher professional development effort (D'Angelo, Mansour, and Walker 2021). War Child developed the CORE intervention to address the limitations of existing wellbeing initiatives, which often prioritize pedagogy over teacher wellbeing. This unique intervention is specifically tailored to address teacher wellbeing in contexts affected by conflict and crisis, and to ensure that teachers receive ongoing mentoring and support.

Background on the Development of CORE

Development of the CORE intervention was informed by current research, as noted above, and drew from best practices in teacher professional development (Burns and Lawrie 2015), wellbeing (Jennings et al. 2013), and coaching (Pas et al. 2015; Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan 2018). A recent analysis of the teacher wellbeing gap (D'Angelo et al. 2021) detailed the gaps in both quality interventions and in the research in this area. A number of key points were of particular relevance: the importance of teachers' involvement in their own growth and wellbeing, and the recognition that teachers do not exist in a vacuum and are part of their communities outside the school. The analysis emphasized the need for teacher wellbeing methodologies specifically tailored to address the needs of teachers, and for teacher coaching that is focused on enhancing teachers' self-efficacy and on enabling them to implement new ideas and skills independently.

CORE is informed by the theoretical underpinnings of acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes et al. 2013) and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning framework for social-emotional learning (Goleman 1994). Acceptance and commitment therapy promotes psychological flexibility through acceptance, mindfulness, commitment, and behavior-change strategies that enhance teachers' overall wellbeing. It focuses on living in the present moment, clarifying personal values, and taking committed action. Social-emotional learning can contribute to a safe and healthy school environment, one that has good student-teacher relationships, job satisfaction, and less teacher burnout (Jones and Kahn 2017). Acceptance and commitment therapy also helps teachers to lower stress, anxiety, and depression, to improve their cognitive and emotional functioning, and to identify their personal values, especially those related to being a teacher. By helping to improve teachers' SECs, the Collaborative's framework enables them to take committed action to create an enabling classroom climate.

CORE is designed to be delivered by nonspecialist coaches who are from the local intervention area, are qualified teachers, and have at least two years' teaching experience. The coaches are trained and supervised by War Child to provide teachers with full-time, intensive, in-school support. Coaching as an instructional and pedagogical practice has been proven to be effective in improving instruction quality and student academic outcomes in high-income countries (Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan 2018; Wehby et al. 2012), but evidence of its impact in crisis- and conflict-affected contexts is scarce.

Methodology Development

Development of the Theory of Change

Our theory of change was developed through the following process: (1) we conducted intervention development workshops with 20 teachers in Colombia, (2) we held two technical workshops with education and mental health specialists, and (3) we offered a workshop after the field test to review and incorporate feedback from the participants in Colombia.

Figure 1 shows War Child's theory of change for the CORE intervention. It shows the proposed relational pathway between the activities for teachers leading to impact, as outlined by the primary and secondary outcomes. While we theorize that there is a direct link between and effect on these outcomes if the teachers' activities are completed, we also propose the idea of four mediators—teachers show reduced levels of distress, teachers show increased self-efficacy, teachers show increased psychological flexibility, and teachers show increased classroom management efficacy. If shown to have changed teachers, these mediators will enhance the impact on the primary and secondary outcomes. While the purpose of this field note is to draw attention to these likely meaningful pathways, we also see the need to study these effects rigorously through future research.

Figure 1: War Child's Theory of Change for CORE
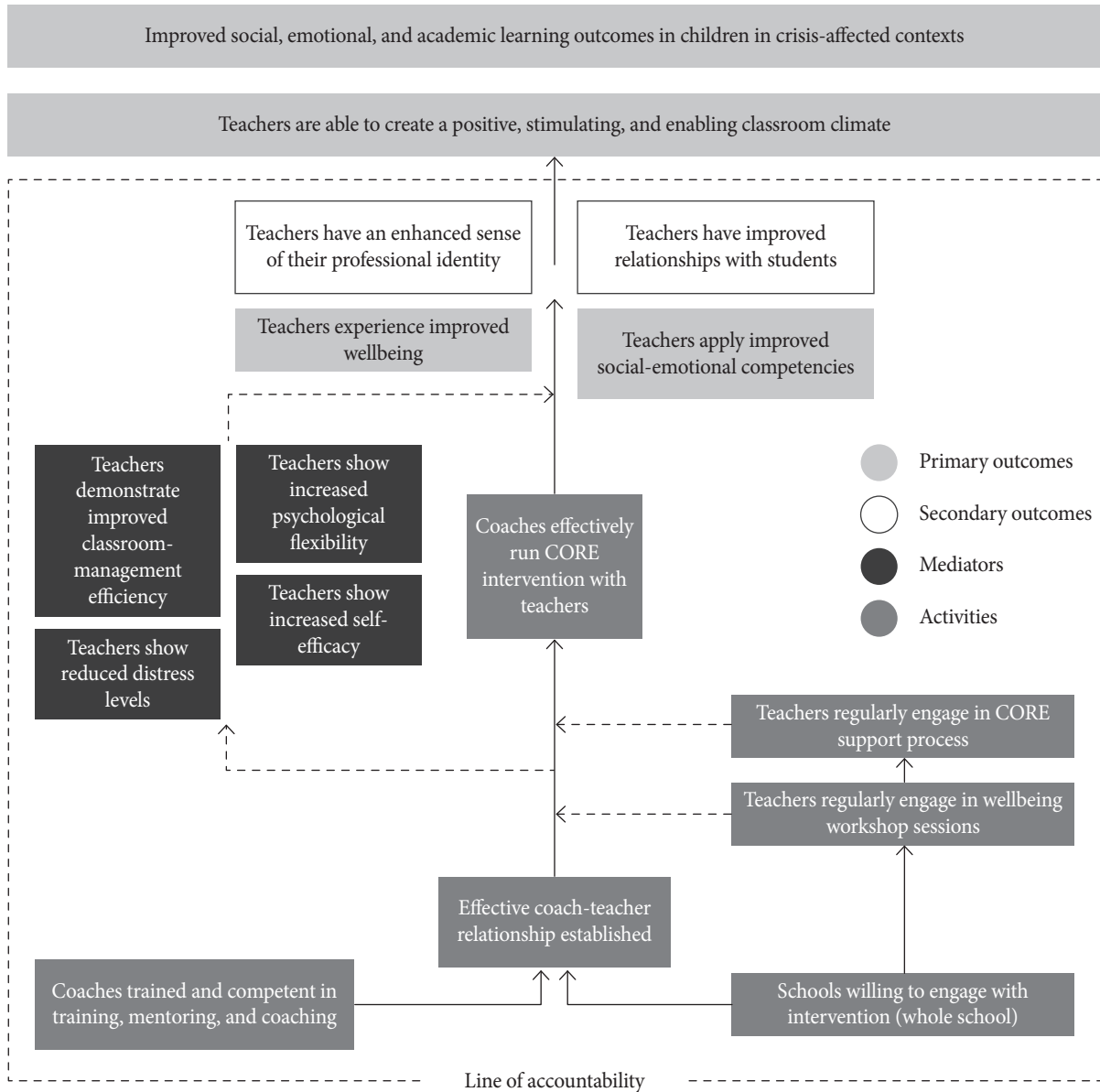
Development of the CORE Intervention

The CORE intervention was developed over 12 months through a collaboration between education, mental health, and psychosocial support specialists from five countries—Colombia, Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Uganda, and the Netherlands. Workshops exploring stress and wellbeing issues were held for 20 teachers in Chocó, Colombia. The participants provided feedback after the workshops to ensure the intervention's technical quality and theoretical coherence, to identify what adaptations were needed to ensure that the intervention was contextually relevant, and to make implementation more feasible.

The initial CORE intervention consisted of six group-based wellbeing sessions of two hours each that focused on managing stress and self-care, dealing with difficult thoughts and feelings, and resolving conflicts. This was followed by the in-school CORE support cycle made up of six modules, each lasting two weeks. The modules focused on building SECs and on implementing stress-reduction and self-care strategies in the school environment. Teachers participated in an iterative process of learning, implementing SEC activities, attending sessions on personal reflection, and being observed by the coaches in their classroom.

FIELD TEST OF CORE

A three-month field test was completed in Chocó, a town in western Colombia where War Child was already established in the schools. Chocó is an area of economic fragility, high internal displacement, and a population living with the consequences of more than 50 years of conflict between the Colombian government, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and gangs centered around the drug trade. Teachers in Chocó are working with some of the most vulnerable communities in Colombia, operating within an education system that is highly divided economically and racially, and facing escalating threats of violence. War Child believed that CORE would be able to support the teachers to improve their emotional regulation, reduce stress, and create a conducive learning environment.

We implemented three elements—the coaches' training, the wellbeing workshop, and in-school modules—to gain a preliminary assessment of the relevance, acceptability, and feasibility of the methodology. We recruited three coaches, who were offered short-term contracts funded by War Child. They all had a teaching background and personal experience teaching in Chocó for at least two years, which gave them a unique understanding of the local teachers' stressors and wellbeing needs.

Phase one of the intervention was the three-week training for the coaches. This was followed by phase two, a monthlong in-school CORE support cycle that was held in three schools with 18 teachers. Each coach focused on two modules, which allowed us to test all six modules. During phase three, all the teachers from phase one engaged in the six-session wellbeing workshop, which was held over three weeks.

The coaches kept daily and weekly diaries to record their reflections and provide feedback on the process, their feelings of preparedness, and their engagement with the teachers. Their reflections were self-reported in Spanish and translated into English. The focus group discussions and interviews facilitated by the Colombian education specialist were recorded and translated verbatim from Spanish into English.

Figure 2 outlines the qualitative data collected and the constructs measured. We used the qualitative data collected from the teachers, head teachers, and coaches to assess the effectiveness of the training, the fidelity of the implementation, the coaches' confidence, the feasibility of the intervention, and the end users' perceptions of the methodology's relevance in meeting the professional and wellbeing needs of the teachers in Chocó.

Figure 2: Overview of Data Collected
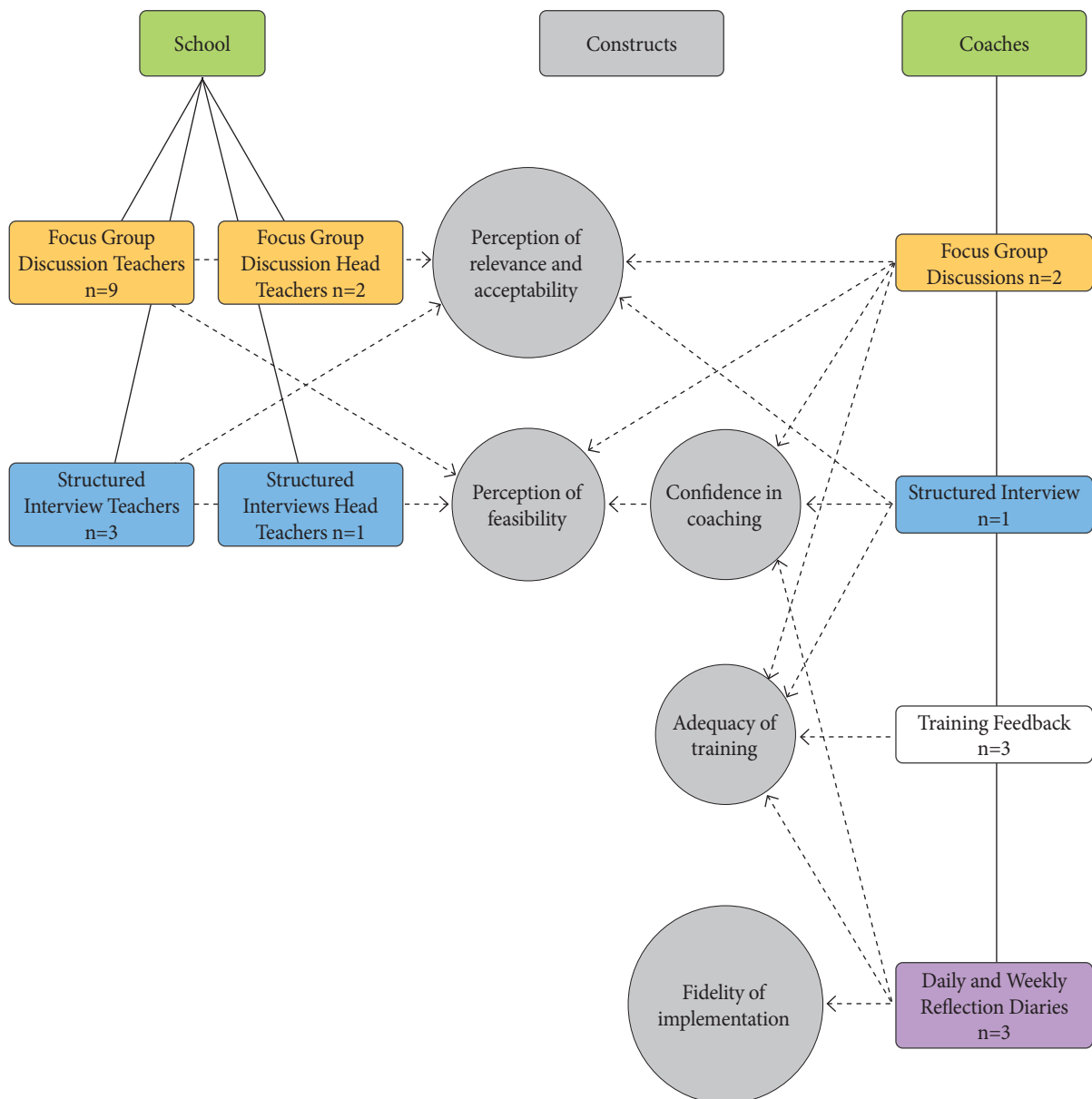
Two independent coders used inductive and deductive thematic framework analysis (Gale et al. 2013) to analyze the information gathered during the field test. Once this was completed, specialists in education, mental health, and psychosocial support from five countries attended a three-day workshop, where they reviewed the methodology, content, and process of CORE, based on the data from the field test. This resulted in recommendations for adapting CORE.

RELEVANCE, ACCEPTABILITY, AND FEASIBILITY OF CORE

RELEVANCE

The teachers recognized the importance of emotional regulation, stress management, and positive self-care strategies. The wellbeing workshop provided a space for them to learn and practice these skills. The activities focused on the teachers' personal needs, rather than on how to use the activities with the children in their classrooms:

> The [wellbeing] workshop has been really important, very beneficial, for me because I have been through some quite difficult times, and when I went to the workshop, when they chose me for the training, well I felt like one of the luckiest, because at this time I was going through quite a hard and difficult time, and it was like I was drowning, and it was like, I was ill from the stress, the exhaustion…Now I can say that I feel more relaxed and calmer. (teacher, female)

ACCEPTABILITY

The field test for CORE was crucial in assessing the teachers' acceptance of the methodology, including content such as mindfulness, the language used, and working with the coaches. The teachers valued school support for everyday issues and to minimize their burdens. Only one out of 18 teachers dropped out, due to his reluctance to be coached by a female. Most of the teachers appreciated the coach-teacher relationship, decisionmaking, and identifying teachers' specific needs:

> One of the most striking key factors is the teachers' attendance at the sessions. This demonstrates their interest in and commitment to the methodology, showing their openness to learning new techniques to achieve the proposed objectives in a personal and professional context. (coach, female)

Feasibility

The coaches' training used various methodologies that enhanced their learning and their engagement in the coach training itself. The coaches expressed their positive reactions to the training, intervention content, and methodology, and the coach trainers in turn reported that the coaches were fully engaged in the training sessions. There was some difficulty about the amount of material they needed to master, but the coaches displayed a generally high level of confidence in their ability to implement the CORE intervention. They admitted facing some challenges during the implementation, such as having issues with some teachers, managing their time, and implementing all the activities within the school day. However, they also reported being able to mitigate these issues and to get support for how to handle them during the fortnightly group supervision sessions:

> Coming up against these situations that you hadn't expected to be in—that makes you feel something. It makes you nervous. For me it seems like a valid reaction, yeah, it's normal to face those challenges and in the end, it's gratifying to have succeeded, and I did, and it felt good. (coach, female)

The teachers' reactions to the field test were mixed; most of them completed the wellbeing workshop and school support cycle. Some faced logistical challenges, such as transportation costs and child care, while others wanted more time to study or found the amount of time needed to engage in CORE too onerous alongside their other teaching commitments. The lack of a staff room or other quiet area made it difficult for the teachers to practice the stress-reduction techniques in a private and safe space, as reflected in these comments: "For me, the only negative was the time" (teacher, female). "We couldn't do breathing exercises. This is another challenge. There is no area for the teachers to have peace and quiet" (teacher, female).

REFINEMENT OF THE FINAL CORE MODEL AND CONTENT

We made four key adaptations to the CORE intervention, which were built on recommendations made in the post-field-test workshop:

1. Limiting the wellbeing workshop to five sessions to reduce the demand on the teachers

2. Improving the coaches' training in building relationships and working with teachers who do not wish to engage

3. Adding a module-specific training for the coaches before the start of each module to focus on content of the module and provide a space for group supervision and peer-support efforts

4. Discussing logistical issues, such as creating private spaces for wellbeing sessions

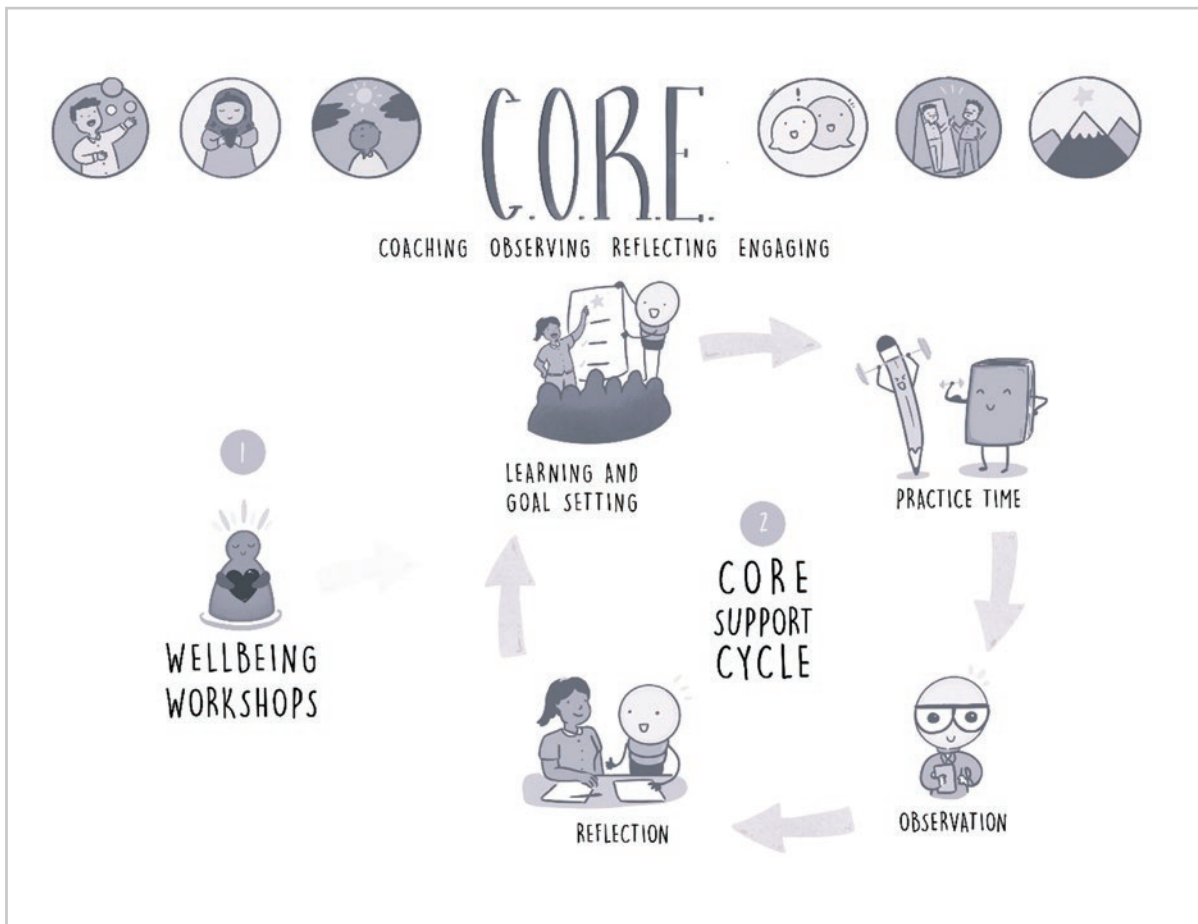*Figure 3:* Overview of the Final CORE Model

Figure 3 shows the final model of the CORE intervention, wherein all elements are delivered by the coaches. The intervention begins with a five-session wellbeing workshop that is focused on group-building, stress management, self-care, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution. The content is integrated into the iterative in-school CORE support cycle, which enables teachers to implement stress-reduction and self-care strategies in the classroom while also creating a positive learning environment to build their own and students' SECs. Table 1 describes the process by providing a detailed description of the CORE elements, from the group workshop to the modules implemented in the CORE support cycle. Although head teachers are not directly involved in the sessions, ongoing communication between them and the coaches is crucial for collaboration and sustainability.

Table 1: Overview of the CORE Components

Phase	Activity	Time
Wellbeing Workshop	Group workshop in which teachers explore stress-management and self-care strategies, and identify personal values	Five 2-hour sessions, outside of school hours
CORE Support Cycle (repeats for each module)	Module-specific learning and goal-setting session to enable teachers to understand social-emotional competencies and identify learning	1.5 hours every two weeks, outside of school hours
	Activity practice time	8 days, during school hours
	Coach observation session, in which coaches focus in particular on teachers' social-emotional competencies	Two observations, during school hours
	Reflection session, in which the coach and teachers reflect on the module	20-30 minutes at the end of each module, outside of school hours

Table 2 details the content of the six two-week modules implemented during the in-school CORE support cycle, and their links to SECs. The CORE intervention is seen as a catalyst for providing teachers with skills and knowledge that will enhance their SECs. Each module focuses on key attributes related to a particular competency.

Table 2: Overview of the CORE Modules and SECs

Module	Description	Social-Emotional Competencies and Key Attributes
Module One: Stress Management and Positive Decisionmaking	Focus on different types of stress and burnout, and the impact on the teachers, their practice, and interactions in the school	**Self-Awareness:** Successfully regulate thoughts and behaviors in different situations **Self-Management:** Recognize strengths and limitations, situational demands, and opportunities, and use problem-solving to identify and use stress-management strategies **Responsible Decisionmaking:** Evaluating the consequences of actions, achieve goals and aspirations
Module Two: Self-Care and Respectful Engagement	Focus on self-care strategies to prevent and address stress and burnout, and on building relationships	**Self-Awareness:** Take initiative, show concern for the feelings of others **Social-Awareness:** Seek or offer support and help when needed, problem-solving
Module Three: Emotional Management and Improved Self-Confidence	Manage emotions more effectively by promoting a positive emotional environment in the classroom	**Social Awareness:** Linking feelings, values, and thoughts **Self-Management:** Manage emotions, build a sense of confidence, reflect on role in promoting personal, family, and school wellbeing
Module Four: Conflict Resolution and Relationship-Building	Address conflicts, engage positively with staff and classroom children, and foster respectful interactions	**Social-Awareness:** Identify and understand one's own values, how they influence behavior **Relationship Skills:** Establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships, demonstrate empathy and compassion
Module Five: Building Self-Belief and a Reflective Mindset	Reflect on personal practice and values and their impact on the teachers, their classroom environment, and student/staff engagement	**Self-Awareness:** Link feelings, values, and thoughts, consider others' perspectives, sense of confidence **Relationship Skills:** Examine prejudices and biases, cooperate with others, and work collaboratively
Module Six: Optimism, Motivation, and Goal-Setting	Help teachers overcome fears and adapt their behavior based on the situation and their own value system	**Responsible Decisionmaking:** Communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate, anticipate and evaluate the consequences of one's actions, achieve one's goals and aspirations

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As this field note describes, CORE was developed through an iterative approach that incorporated valuable insights from multiple contexts and stakeholders. This included teachers who voiced their need for wellbeing support, especially support focused on their needs alone. During the focus group discussions, the teachers said they felt that many of the CORE elements addressed those needs, the coaches said they felt well-equipped to translate their training into effective practice in the schools, and both teachers and coaches said they felt their relationships were positive.

Our experience rolling out CORE in Chocó, Colombia, suggests that it has the potential to address the gap in wellbeing support for teachers in settings affected by crisis and conflict. Future evaluations of CORE can add to the evidence on its effectiveness and may inform the work of researchers in the field of implementation science who study teacher wellbeing. The teachers' positive response to the coaches' role in terms of both quality and relationships indicates the need to continue to invest substantially in training and support that increases the capacity of nonspecialist coaches to support the implementation of CORE. The field test and the reflections of the teachers who participated in CORE show how important it was that they were the primary focus of CORE and their wellbeing the main outcome. To promote children's improved learning and wellbeing outcomes, it is imperative to establish a robust foundation in schools and to foster an enabling classroom environment. This requires healthy teachers and a culture that normalizes the importance of teacher wellbeing. After being developed, field tested, and adapted, CORE now is ready for a feasibility study and effectiveness evaluation. Future testing will be needed to determine its effectiveness and make the necessary adjustments. The information gained through the field test primarily reflected the teachers', head teachers', and coaches' voices, opinions, emotions, and lived experience of taking part in some elements of CORE. The small sample size of the pilot test and the lack of representation of teachers, head teachers, and coaches in the adaptation workshop is seen to be a limitation in the final development of CORE. Future studies will address these issues by involving both teachers and school leaders in identifying the adaptations needed so they will be able to create school environments that promote contextually relevant teacher wellbeing.

In order to foster their personal and professional growth, teachers and coaches need support when they are implementing new strategies and navigating challenges. As War Child proceeds with testing and adapting the CORE intervention, it will be crucial to explore how to expand school leaders' roles while maintaining a personal approach, and how to protect confidentiality when addressing stress, self-care, and wellness issues. Issues surrounding the quality and sustainability of the teaching workforce, as well as the impact and scope of education in emergency programs, are relevant to education institutions, policymakers, governments, and donors. If proven

effective, CORE could be implemented in a multitude of education environments and diverse education systems. We believe that this makes CORE well-suited to provide centralized supervision and management in large-scale education systems. It is assumed that investing in teachers' wellbeing and SECs will have a positive effect on the quality of teaching and on teacher satisfaction, retention, and recruitment, and will ultimately enhance learning opportunities for vulnerable children.

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BOOK REVIEW

In *Right Where We Belong: How Refugee Teachers and Students Are Changing the Future of Education,* Sarah Dryden-Peterson highlights the innovative and resilient approaches taken by refugee teachers and students to overcome the educational challenges posed by displacement. Supported by 15 years of ethnographic observation, Dryden-Peterson's research blends rigorous qualitative methods with compelling narratives, gathered through more than 600 interviews conducted in 23 countries, that document the experiences of refugee teachers and students. Her methodology, which includes extensive field observations, ensures that the findings are grounded in diverse experiences and that they capture how policy has shaped the refugees' educational journeys. By linking individual stories to broader education and social theories, Dryden-Peterson effectively illustrates how refugee-led initiatives are transforming education in emergencies (EiE) and providing stability and hope for displaced communities.

Dryden-Peterson's broad study sample is drawn from conflict-affected countries including Uganda, Somalia, Lebanon, and South Africa. She explores how grassroots education practices challenge traditional top-down models and advocate for more inclusive and community-driven approaches. Dryden-Peterson highlights the value of flexible education frameworks that can be adapted to refugee students' varying levels of prior education and calls for the decentralization of education systems to promote localized decisionmaking. She examines how schools can serve as sanctuaries that provide stability and identity for refugee students while addressing power dynamics, building self-reliance, and incorporating refugees' experiences into the curricula. Her analysis reveals how policy decisions about school placement, language of instruction, and curricular frameworks can shape refugee students' integration and success, and how these policies influence their academic outcomes and their sense of identity and belonging.

Dryden-Peterson highlights the agency and leadership of refugee teachers and students. Her grassroots perspective reveals the innovative solutions that are emerging from refugee communities and focuses a unique lens on how EiE can be shaped by those most affected. Dryden-Peterson's approach, which centers on local agency, demonstrates the potential of community-driven education practices to address the challenges of displacement and to foster resilience and adaptability in ways that external interventions might not be able to. Her approach contributes meaningfully to the discourse on refugee education and emphasizes the importance of empowering refugees to lead their own educational journeys.

The theme of *Right Where We Belong,* which is organized into thematic chapters on sanctuary, power, purpose, and learning, aligns with and builds on current EiE research and practices. By emphasizing the need for education systems to be flexible and responsive to the unique needs of displaced populations, Dryden-Peterson supports the growing number of scholars who advocate for holistic refugee education models, including Dana Burde, Joanna McIntyre, and Fran Abrams. The EiE literature increasingly calls for innovative forms of education that reflect refugees' lived experiences rather than replicating pre-crisis learning models, and that integrate mental health support, community involvement, and culturally relevant curricula into refugee education programs (Burde 2014; McIntyre and Abrams 2021).

In addition to presenting innovative practices, *Right Where We Belong* is closely aligned with current research trends in EiE. Readers of the *Journal on Education in Emergencies* will find Dryden-Peterson's book particularly relevant due to its alignment with the journal's focus on innovative education responses to crisis. She offers practical examples and theoretical insights that can inform future EiE research, policy, and practice. Her emphasis on refugee educators' and students' agency offers a fresh perspective that is both inspiring and instructive.

Right Where We Belong pairs well with *Refugee Education: Theorising Practice in Schools* by Joanna McIntyre and Fran Abrams (2021), which takes an interdisciplinary approach that emphasizes social justice and offers a framework for creating inclusive educational environments. While Dryden-Peterson highlights how refugee communities shape their own education practices, McIntyre and Abrams focus on policy recommendations for fostering inclusive education. Together these works provide a comprehensive view of refugee education and offer a balance of practical strategies with a deep understanding of community-driven approaches. Both books are essential reads for those committed to improving education for displaced populations.

The primary merit of *Right Where We Belong* lies in its ability to humanize the refugee education crisis through detailed personal stories, while also providing actionable insights for policymakers and educators. For instance, Dryden-Peterson emphasizes the importance of community-driven education initiatives and encourages policymakers to support refugee-led schools and programs that are adaptable to the specific needs of displaced populations. She advocates for the integration of mental health services, culturally relevant curricula, and community-driven education practices. By advocating for the involvement of refugees in decisionmaking processes and for providing platforms for their voices, Dryden-Peterson highlights the need for policies that prioritize sustainable education systems and address the unique social and emotional needs of displaced learners.

While Dryden-Peterson's qualitative approach offers valuable insights, there are areas where *Right Where We Belong* could benefit from a more nuanced analysis. One such area is the role of language in refugee education. Dryden-Peterson acknowledges the challenges refugees face in learning new languages, but she could have delved deeper into how language policies influence both academic success and cultural identity. For many refugees, losing their native language in educational settings can feel like cultural erasure. A closer examination of multilingual education models that balance the preservation of refugees' native languages with teaching in the host-country language could provide richer insights into fostering both academic success and a sense of belonging.

Another area that merits further exploration is the sustainability of community-driven education practices in different refugee contexts. While Dryden-Peterson highlights grassroots initiatives, she could have given more attention to the challenges refugees face in sustaining these efforts, particularly when refugee-led initiatives encounter limited resources or local political tensions. Addressing these obstacles would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how community-driven practices can succeed over the long term.

Right Where We Belong is a valuable resource for anyone involved in EiE—from practitioners and policymakers to academics and students—because it offers both theoretical insights and practical applications. Dryden-Peterson's extensive research, combined with real-world examples of successful refugee-led initiatives, provides a comprehensive toolkit for those working to improve educational outcomes for displaced populations. Her recommendations on community involvement, flexible policies, and the integration of emotional and social support make the book an essential guide for shaping more inclusive and effective education practices in refugee settings.

My experiences as a teacher in Afghanistan, a student in India, and now a professional in the United States resonate with the depiction in *Right Where We Belong* of having to navigate diverse education systems to support students in conflict-affected regions. The book is a valuable addition to the EiE literature, as it offers a nuanced view of how refugee-led education fosters inclusive and resilient education systems. It highlights the challenges faced by refugee students and teachers while celebrating their innovative contributions. Drawing from my own experiences, I can affirm that this work captures the essence of striving for stability and success amid adversity. It is an inspiring read for anyone involved in education or humanitarian work, and it underscores the critical role community-led education initiatives play in shaping the future of displaced populations.

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BOOK REVIEW

Citizen Identity Formation of Domestic Students and Syrian Refugee Youth in Jordan:
Centering Student Voice and Arab-Islamic Ontologies
by Patricia K. Kubow
Routledge, 2023. vii + 160 pages
$43.99 (e-book), $144.00 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-0-367-69783-9

Education in the Middle East, and across the world, is a key arena in which to address societal divisions and exert governmental control by constructing certain visions of identity and citizenship. Refugee education in particular creates an interesting paradox for the refugee-hosting countries in the region. Many refugees—Syrian refugees in Jordan and Türkiye, for example, and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon—are exposed to identity formation through the host-country curricula while lacking citizenship and without any foreseeable pathway toward such legal status. In *Citizen Identity Formation of Domestic Students and Syrian Refugee Youth in Jordan: Centering Student Voice and Arab-Islamic Ontologies,* Patricia K. Kubow contributes to our understanding of constructions of citizen identity and a sense of belonging by exploring the perspectives and experiences of both refugee and host-country students in Jordan.

Kubow's primary objectives in *Citizen Identity Formation* are to understand more fully how school-age Arab youth view their social and civic identities in contexts of protracted displacement, and what role formal schooling plays in forming and transforming these identities. Kubow specifically addresses four questions: "(1) What are the professed citizen identities of school-aged Syrian refugees and Jordanian girls and boys? (2) What role does public schooling play in fostering particular citizen identities? (3) In what ways do the students' citizen ontologies converge or diverge by gender and/or by country of origin? and, (4) How does the narrative (i.e., collective assemblage of child/youth enunciation) affirm or contest dominant citizenship discourses in Jordan?" (pp. 29-30). Kubow explores these questions by applying process philosophy, a philosophical approach "centered on ontology and concerned with the dynamic sense of being as becoming or occurrence" (p. 2). In keeping with this approach, she focuses on social interactions and on how youths' citizen identity is constructed within their social world. To center youth voices and experience in the study, Kubow conducted focus groups with Jordanian students and Syrian refugees who attend public double-shift schools in Amman, Jordan.[1] The students are in grades 5-11 and range in age from 10 to 18. She conducted separate focus groups with the Jordanian students and the Syrian students, during which she

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1   In these schools, Jordanian students attend school in the morning, refugee students in the afternoon. Jordanian teachers teach the national curriculum in both shifts.

asked them to share their views on identity, sense of belonging, and the role of schools in citizen identity formation.

The book consists of seven chapters. The first two chapters focus on the study context and methods used, followed by five chapters that examine the findings. Chapters 3-6 present findings from the separate groups of students: chapter 3 focuses on Syrian refugee boys (grades 6-10), chapter 4 on Syrian refugee girls and Jordanian girls (grades 7-10), chapter 5 on Jordanian boys (grades 6-9), and chapter 6 on Jordanian girls (grades 5-8) and Syrian refugee girls (grades 8-11). Each of these four chapters addresses the same research questions and explores numerous thematic areas, including sense of belonging, negotiating multiple identities, inclusion and exclusion for refugees, civic duties and loyalties, and gender as a signifier of identity. Finally, chapter 7 synthesizes the findings across the sampled groups and discusses where the students' views on identity, citizenship, and schooling converge and diverge.

Overall, the findings indicate that both Jordanian and Syrian students consider an Arab-Islamic identity to be central to their civic identities and sense of belonging. Many of these students have built their civic identities around Islamic values and talked about their desire for a pan-Arab Islamic unity fostered by a shared language, shared religion, and shared history and geography. In addition to their Arab-Islamic identities, the Jordanian students expressed allegiance to their Jordanian identity and the state. Kubow argues that the Jordanian students' constructions of civic identity largely align with the school curriculum, which is focused on Jordanian identity, Arab unity, and Islamic values. Syrian students, on the other hand, feel "marginalized and alienated" in the segregated double-shift schools, and they struggle with having a sense of inclusion in Jordanian society (p. 153).

Kubow's book is a timely and important contribution to the fields of education in emergencies and refugee studies, as there is currently a strong global policy shift toward including forcibly displaced children and youth in host-country education systems. Rather than providing parallel informal education pathways, this policy promotes refugees' access to publicly funded education institutions and national services on the same basis as the children of the host community (UNHCR 2012). While there is great variation in the ways inclusion in national systems is understood and implemented, it generally occurs in two ways: (1) refugees and nationals learn side by side in the same classrooms in national schools; and (2) refugees and nationals study in separate spaces, but refugees follow the host-state curriculum, take the host-state national examinations, and receive certification from the host country (Dryden-Peterson et al. 2019).

In many contexts where refugees are included in the national system, they continue to attend segregated schools or classrooms, which is shown in this book through the case of Syrian refugees attending Jordan's double-shift schools. Although the author does not explicitly address refugee inclusion versus integration in the book, the findings

support the literature stating that physical or structural access to national systems (i.e., inclusion) may not translate into integration—meaning in this case refugees' identity transformation and their sense of belonging in the host community (Bellino and Dryden-Peterson 2019; Dryden-Peterson et al. 2019). As this book also shows, refugee integration may not occur through their structural inclusion in national systems if they are not offered any future opportunities (e.g., sociocultural or economic integration) or a pathway toward citizenship. Despite efforts to include them in national education systems, refugee students may continue to feel marginalized and to struggle for acceptance and a sense of belonging.

Citizen Identity Formation has two main limitations to consider when drawing conclusions from the findings of Kubow's study. First, although the book identifies the role of schooling in citizen identity formation as a key area of focus, it offers limited insights into how social and civic identities are presented in the curricula and instruction. The author attempts to provide this information using the student focus group data and the existing literature, rather than, for example, conducting curriculum analyses or teacher observations. This is a valid approach; however, both the literature presented and the students' reflections on their schooling fail to provide a full picture of how identity and citizenship are formed within Jordan's education system. Without a better understanding of identity formation in Jordan's public schools, it is difficult to conclude whether or to what extent the schools play a role in fostering the identities the students discussed in the focus groups.

Second, given that identity formation is at the center of the study, a more detailed description of the sample, with a focus on students' backgrounds, would have significantly enhanced the interpretation of the findings. The book only provides information about students' national identities (Jordanian or Syrian) and gender, their age, their schools, and their grade levels. We do not learn facts about their life histories, which are critical to their identity formation, such as how many of the Jordanian students are of Palestinian origin; how many of the Syrian students were born and raised in Jordan and how many come from Syria; and where the Syrian students came from in Syria and when. For example, one key finding is how salient the Arab Islamic identity, as promoted in Jordanian schools, is to the students, including both Jordanian and Syrian students. However, without any information on the students' backgrounds, it is difficult to argue that the Jordanian schools played a key role in this outcome, at least for the Syrian students, because Sunni Muslims—the central constituents in Syria—have been historically devout, and Arab nationalism has long played a key role in Syrian politics and social life, including in education (Guven 2018; Phillips 2015). As such, it would have been helpful to understand these students' constructions of identity, both in the present and in relation to the past.

Kubow's book is a valuable resource for scholars of citizenship education and those who make policy on refugee inclusion. Although the Middle East has grappled with humanitarian crises and protracted displacement for decades, there is still scarce evidence on how refugees' civic identities and sense of belonging are being altered (or not) in the host countries, especially through education. This book makes an important contribution to building this evidence base for the region, while also revealing an important disconnect between refugee inclusion and refugee integration for a broader audience.

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BOOK REVIEW

Laboratories of Learning:
Social Movements, Education and Knowledge-Making in
the Global South
by Mario Novelli, Birgül Kutan, Patrick Kane, Adnan Çelik,
Tejendra Pherali, and Saranel Benjamin
Pluto Press, 2024. xii + 235 pages
no-cost open access (pdf and epub),[1] $25.95 (paperback)
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Laboratories of Learning: Social Movements, Education and Knowledge-Making in the Global South provides an in-depth description and analysis of the knowledge-making processes that occur within social movements. Through their examination of grassroots social movement institutions in the Global South, the authors offer a microlevel perspective on how social movements can serve as spaces for learning.

This work makes four central contributions to the fields of education in emergencies and comparative education. First, as the authors argue, the existing literature overlooks the extent to which social movements constitute spaces of knowledge production. By focusing on this domain of analysis, the authors highlight the role of learning in structuring and shaping social change, particularly in emergency contexts. They contribute more broadly to our understanding of the dynamics of learning and knowledge production in society. Second, this work offers a collection of qualitative studies that provide rich, novel data on the microlevel processes that take place within social movements. Third, by focusing on the Global South, a geographic location that has been traditionally understudied, this work adds to the increasing number of studies of countries that exist at the margins of the global economy. Finally, from a methodological perspective, by documenting close collaboration between researchers and social movements, the book details the successful use of a participatory research approach. This makes it a valuable reference for education in emergencies scholars who are interested in conducting studies that rely on strong partnerships with those directly related to the subject of interest.

Laboratories of Learning starts with two introductory chapters. The first provides background on social movement theory, while the second contextualizes the four social movements that guide the qualitative studies. Then, through rich description of these unique case studies, the authors present their findings, divided into three main chapters. First, they explore how learning occurs within social movements. The results show, as readers would expect, that members of these institutions can

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learn in spaces explicitly structured around pedagogical purposes (e.g., workshops). That said, these investigations show, perhaps surprisingly, that much of the learning actually takes place through informal education (i.e., through social interaction) and incidental learning (i.e., through experiences). Second, the authors discuss what kinds of learning take place within movements and identify four common themes: (1) while it is known that earlier movements in the Global South often looked at the Global North as a central source of knowledge and inspiration, movements today tend to put greater value on "endogenous knowledge" (p. 90), including their own locally informed frameworks, to make sense of inequality, and they look at other movements in the Global South as sources of inspiration; (2) movements increasingly adapt their frameworks to incorporate diversity; (3) movements increasingly incorporate gender inequality into their central agendas; and (4) movements have shifted their attention away from utopian aspirations and toward more pragmatic and preset-oriented changes. Third, the authors analyze the effects of such knowledge-making and show how learning transforms the lives of these institutions' members, shapes how countries make sense of their histories, affects movements' internal practices, and influences the extent to which movements promote social transformation.

The richness of the data provided is central to the book. It is difficult to access data about what happens within social movements, which often are in conflict with powerful actors and facing strong resistance and repression. Therefore, perhaps for good reason, actors within social movements can be reluctant to share information with researchers about their daily processes. However, the authors of this book, because of their existing ties with the movements of interest, were able to implement a participatory approach and gain unique access to information about within-movement dynamics. In the book they report on four case studies of grassroots social movement institutions in the Global South. They first present a case study of NOMADESC, a human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO) based in Cali, Colombia. This NGO advises social movements on various areas, including capacity-building, legal support, and strategy development. For instance, the organization supports the Intercultural University of the Peoples (*Universidad Intercultural de los Pueblos*), an institution that provides pedagogy-oriented support to its partner social movements. The second case study centers on the People's Democratic Congress (*Halkarm Demokratik Kongresi*), a peace- and social justice-oriented organization based in Türkiye. With its congress-type structure—that is, a horizontal, pluralist, and consensus-based structure that deviates from more traditional hierarchical structures—this umbrella organization brings together a variety of different social movements and organizations in Türkiye that have the common goal of supporting minoritized groups in the country. Soon after its foundation, the People's Democratic Congress created its own political party, the Peoples' Democratic Party. While this organization has often faced strong repression, it has, due to electoral successes, established a central role in Türkiye's political landscape. In the third case study, readers learn about the Housing Assembly, a human rights institution based in Cape

Town, South Africa, that advocates for adequate housing for homeless families and those who live under precarious housing conditions. Finally, the authors present a case study of the Nepal Madhes Foundation, an NGO based in Nepal. The Nepal Madhes Foundation acts on two fronts to support the Madhesi communities. First, it mobilizes activists to promote the Madhes movement and, second, it receives and manages external funding to develop the social and economic conditions of the Madhesi communities. These case studies are informed by a rich data-collection process that includes various in-depth interviews, focus groups, and workshops, as well as a review of the documents produced by these movements. This data collection was guided by a "systematisation of experiences" approach that consists of "a collective research process which seeks to deepen understanding and improve practice through collective reflection and analysis of experience" (p. 12).

A noteworthy strength of *Laboratories of Learning* is its contribution to social movement theory. Much of the thinking around social movements is still informed by a structural or functionalist perspective, which is the desire to explain movements' purposes, structures, successes, and failures in terms of broad social structures and macrolevel social conditions (Jasper 2010). In contrast, the fine-grained evidence presented in *Laboratories of Learning* empirically demonstrates that movements are, in fact, the products of complex microlevel processes. The book explains that, because their members are constantly involved in knowledge-making processes, social movements constitute dynamic institutions that change over time and adapt to varying social contexts. Therefore, in its alignment with microlevel models of social movement dynamics (e.g., Kim and Bearman 1997; Hedström, Sandell, and Stern 2000), this work provides strong evidence of the roles individual agency and microfoundations play in social movement theory.

That said, the book has an important shortcoming, in that its rich empirical findings are occasionally mixed with reflections and conclusions that are not fully backed by the empirical analysis provided. This is most evident when the authors attempt to establish a connection between knowledge-making within social movements and social transformation—that is, in discussions around the "the effects that these experiments in organizing had on the contexts that they were engaged in" (p. 189). The authors try to distance their claims from traditional causal frameworks, yet the notion of a tangible effect is often implied. Given that the data presented in the book relates to within-movement dynamics with little reference to possible determinants of societal changes, such proposed "societal effects" (p. 143) would be better articulated as theoretical hypotheses rather than actual effects. I fear that such occasional deviations from the data at hand might distract the reader from the book's rich empirical contributions.

Laboratories of Learning is clearly a valuable resource for education in emergencies and social movement scholars, and for anyone interested in or involved with human rights and social justice movements.

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The views expressed here are the author's and do not represent Stanford University.

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IN MEMORIAM

JULIANA CÓRDOBA CONTO (October 3, 1985–November 19, 2019) dedicated her life to providing quality education, to teaching her students values such as camaraderie, solidarity, and justice, and to helping them become productive human beings. Her first major effort was the creation of the Arroz con Leche Foundation, which offered school reinforcement to the sons and daughters of sex workers, who faced difficulties in caring for their children. Later, as a teacher with Enseña por Colombia in Urabá Antioqueño, Colombia, she promoted critical thinking among high school students. Her work in the Ministry of Education enabled her to learn about the reality of the country's schools and understand more deeply the needs of children affected by the enduring armed conflict in Colombia. Juliana left a lasting mark at War Child with her work on teacher wellbeing through CORE, and by creating the theoretical and methodological bases for an intervention focused on peace education. We offer her our thanks for her sense of justice and social commitment.

JOURNAL ON EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

The *Journal on Education in Emergencies (JEiE),* a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal, aims to fill gaps in education in emergencies (EiE) research and policy. Building on the tradition of collaboration between practitioners and academics in the EiE field, *JEiE*'s purpose is to improve learning in and across service-delivery, policymaking, and academic institutions by providing a space where scholars and practitioners can publish rigorous quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research articles, and robust and compelling field notes that both inform policy and practice and stir debate. *JEiE* provides access to the ideas and evidence needed to inform sound EiE programming, policymaking, funding decisions, academic program curricula, and future research.

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To achieve these goals, *JEiE* seeks articles from scholars and practitioners who work across disciplines and sectors on a range of questions related to education in countries and regions affected by crisis and conflict. *JEiE* is part of and works closely with the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)—an open global network of more than 22,000 individual members who are affiliated with more than 4,000 organizations and institutions in 190 countries—to collect new research articles and field note submissions and to distribute high-quality published work. This large global partnership of activists, academics, policymakers, and practitioners in education enables *JEiE* to make a unique and powerful contribution.

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Dana Burde,
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