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HOW DECISIONS ARE MADE: ORGANIZATIONAL ISOMORPHISM AND A FOCUS ON ENGLISH IN REFUGEE EDUCATION

CELIA REDDICK

ABSTRACT

In this article, I draw from interviews conducted with stakeholders in education in emergencies (EiE) to examine the underexplored topic of language in refugee education. I argue that organizations and government staff members who work on EiE are functioning in an institutionally defined field that has been shaped by a shared mission, formal structures of collaboration, and significant information flows in the midst of uncertainty. Given these factors, the EiE field is vulnerable to organizational isomorphism, a process through which organizations become increasingly similar to one another. These organizations and government bodies are tasked with answering big questions related to language in education but have little data or expertise to support their work. Given these significant constraints, I find that program leaders and policymakers who initially articulated ambitious goals for language in refugee education tend to shift away from these data-informed, multilingual approaches, instead defaulting to monolingual English support programs aimed at education access. Drawing from 34 in-depth interviews with individuals working in EiE, as well as participant observations across meetings and other convenings, I reveal the isomorphic tendencies in the language-related work of EiE. I also offer recommendations for how to use data more effectively when making decisions in EiE. These include hiring programmatic and policy leaders who have the appropriate training to tackle some of the most challenging questions in education, and ensuring that structures for collaboration continue to offer targeted opportunities to examine, understand, and act on data and research.

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INTRODUCTION

Lauren and I sat at a rooftop café in the Kabalagala neighborhood of Kampala, Uganda, as we discussed the shifting nature of her work. She was a leading figure in the effort to ensure that refugee children and young people were able to access school in Uganda. This role gave Lauren a bird's-eye view of the Education in Emergencies (EiE) Working Group, a collection of multilateral and nonprofit organizations and a representative from the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports, who were working together to respond to the education needs of refugees in the country (see Table 1). In 2018, when Lauren and I met, 1.15 million refugees lived in Uganda; that number has continued to climb, and as of 2026, there are nearly 2 million refugees living there (British Council 2021; UNHCR 2025). Lauren had begun to notice that few education programs for refugees explicitly addressed issues of language at school, and that language was rarely mentioned in conversations about or proposals for education programming. Nonetheless, she saw that a mismatch between the language used at school and language(s) that refugee children were familiar with seemed to contribute to gaps in education access and quality, which the working group was tasked with solving.

Table 1: Collaborative Structures of the Education in Emergencies Field in Uganda in 2018

Education in Emergencies Working Group	Includes all NGOs involved in the refugee education response, including UNICEF, UNCHR, Save the Children, Finn Church Aid, War Child Holland, among others
Uganda Education Consortium	Led by Save the Children; manages grants from Education Cannot Wait and European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Operations (ECHO), and coordinates 16 NGO programs that received funding to operationalize the Education Response Plan
Education Development Partners	Bring together donor groups, including the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO, previously Department for International Development), the World Bank, USAID, ECHO, Japan International Cooperation Agency, among others
Local Development Partners Group	Brings together local Ugandan organizations engaged in education
Basic Education Working Group	Engages issues of primary education and early childhood development; members include UNICEF, Right to Play, Save the Children, Plan International, World Vision, Windle Trust, Kyambogo University, Makerere University Education Department, among others
Psychosocial Support Working Group	Engages issues of psychosocial support, including child protection; members include UNHCR, Youth Sport Uganda, Plan International, International Rescue Committee, World Vision, among others

I conducted 34 interviews with the people creating refugee education policy and programs in Uganda, including stakeholders working for the government and for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), who expressed fraught ideas about language learning and education programs for refugees. They highlighted the importance of providing children with opportunities to develop literacy in familiar languages and referenced well-understood findings about the relationship between early literacy and children's development of additional languages. They also discussed the importance of learning English for refugee children in Uganda. Members of this EiE professional community described their ambitious aspirations for the kinds of programming they might lead on language and education, if they had sufficient resources and data. Each of these participants also recounted the challenges that limited their ability to act on these aspirations. There appeared to be few strategies to engage in data collection and to learn about the challenges at hand. In the face of these constraints and despite many individuals' hopes to design programs differently, those designing, funding, and leading the work of refugee education in Uganda ultimately defaulted to a program focused on English language skills.

At the heart of this trend is organizational isomorphism, or the process by which organizations in the same field become increasingly similar to one another. In this case, isomorphism emerged in the face of insufficient funding and a lack of sufficient expertise on issues of language. This combination pushed organizations to default to approaches to language and education that are not supported by research or further examined through locally relevant data. In this article, I demonstrate how organizations in the field of EiE orient toward English-only programming, despite individual stakeholders' aspirations to implement multilingual approaches. These aspirations are hindered by a lack of funding, data, and expertise in tackling language in refugee education. My aim with this analysis is to reveal the broader dynamics at play in the field, in the hope that identifying them can support reform. I focus not on individual organizations but across the field of EiE, where I examine local, international, large, and small organizations, as well as government bodies, in an effort to understand how structures of coherence and cooperation may undermine the use of research to respond to education in moments of crisis and conflict.

In the next section, I discuss the conceptual framework that guides this study, bringing together literature from the fields of EiE, language in education, and organizational isomorphism. I also discuss the choice of Uganda, a multilingual country and a leader in educational inclusion for refugees, as the site for this research. I then present the study research design, drawing on 34 interviews I conducted with employees of government and NGOs who engage in refugee education, as well as insights from collaborative meetings of this group. In the findings, I demonstrate first that EiE is an institutionally defined field, due to collaborative structures and hierarchies, a shared mission, and a sense of uncertainty in the face of shifting information. Second, I show that stakeholders in the EiE field experience significant tension between their aspirations for multilingual educational approaches and the constraints of low resources and limited available expertise. Given these constraints, EiE actors demonstrate an isomorphic trend toward

English language support for refugees. These trends highlight ways that collaborative structures in EiE can push organizations away from innovation and data-informed approaches and toward conformity. I conclude with recommendations for strategies to engage with locally relevant data, and to incentivize research-based responses to the challenges of education in settings of forced migration.

REFUGEE EDUCATION, LANGUAGE, AND ORGANIZATIONAL ISOMORPHISM

EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

Education in emergencies refers to a field comprising organizations that work to facilitate education in settings of crisis and conflict, including among refugees (Dryden-Peterson 2022). Given the central role these organizations play in the design and provision of mass schooling for millions of refugee children around the world, scholars have dubbed them a “pseudo-state” (Waters and LeBlanc 2005) that is tasked with facilitating education for young people who have been displaced from their countries of origin due to conflict and crisis (Dryden-Peterson 2022). The focus is increasingly on including refugee learners in national education structures, through which they can earn formal certification, engage with teachers who have experienced national teacher training initiatives, and learn alongside their nonrefugee peers (Dryden-Peterson et al. 2019). In Uganda, the site of this study, refugees are permitted to attend any of the nation’s public or private schools; however, most refugees in Uganda attend rural schools in refugee settlements, where their peers are other refugees or marginalized Ugandan young people (Hicks and Maina 2018; Hovil 2016).

LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION IN MULTILINGUAL SETTINGS

A key challenge of inclusion in refugee education relates to language in education, or the language(s) used in the school context to promote students’ learning and wellbeing. Refugee-only schools in refugee communities often use languages that are most familiar to the children and families living there. This helps to support language and literacy development but often undermines other goals for integration. In settings where governments include refugees in national schools, young people experiencing forced migration are often required to navigate unfamiliar languages with little support (Durrani, Khan, and Novelli 2025), which often causes them to flounder academically (Piper et al. 2020). In one study of refugee learners in Uganda, for example, where English is the primary language of instruction (LOI), only 34 percent of learners in grades 3 and 5 demonstrated basic word recognition skills in English, and only 35 percent demonstrated basic English language listening comprehension skills (Hicks and Maina 2018).

Broader issues beyond the classroom also affect language learning for refugee young people. In three of the top refugee-hosting settings, for example, Syrian children struggled most with the LOI when they faced segregated housing and schools, when they had limited opportunities to integrate into the wider society, and when families experienced significant financial stress, all of which undermined the refugee children's educational aspirations (Hammoud et al. 2025).

Nearly 37 percent of children in low- and middle-income settings worldwide experience a mismatch between the dominant school language and the language(s) spoken at home (World Bank 2021). This mismatch undermines literacy development and academic learning. Moreover, robust evidence reveals the value of multilingual educational approaches that draw from children's familiar language(s), which helps them develop skills in new languages, such as English (Clegg and Simpson 2016; Cummins 1981; Kim and Piper 2019). Multilingual education approaches such as pedagogical translanguaging, which enable children to use their full linguistic repertoires at school, can support academic success (García and Wei 2014). These approaches build on what children know, support bi- and multilingual skills, and avoid the severing of ties between family and home that children in monolingual, assimilative education spaces so often experience (Mtanza-Matariro and Makalela 2025; wa Thiong'o 1986). Despite a robust literature that examines the negative consequences of submerging children in unfamiliar languages at school (e.g., Benson 2012)—and the value of translanguaging pedagogy and bilingual education that treats multilingualism as an asset (Makalela 2015)—education systems across the globe often default to teaching in a dominant language, such as English, with devastating consequences for children's learning and wellbeing (Brock-Utne 2012).

UGANDA: A MULTILINGUAL CONTEXT HOSTING A LARGE REFUGEE POPULATION

English is connected to colonialism in many settings worldwide, including in Uganda, and has spread through imperialism and trade since before the 16th century (O'Regan 2021). Today, the ability to use English is referred to and “marketed” (Phillipson 2016, 321) as an apolitical basic skill. Given ideologies that link English to economic and symbolic power, many majority world countries that were formerly part of the British Empire have opted to maintain English as a primary LOI (Salomone 2021). Uganda, a multilingual country that boasts 41 languages and has worked to enact a multilingual language policy, is among these. English is required as the LOI in upper primary and secondary schools and in all grades in multilingual schools, but schools in rural, relatively linguistically homogenous communities use local “area languages” as the LOI during the first four years of schooling. In linguistically diverse refugee settlements, where most refugee children live and attend school, teachers are invited to use diverse linguistic resources but usually default to English (Hicks and Maina 2018).

Approximately 1.7 million people from South Sudan, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, among others, have sought refuge in Uganda (see Table 2). Half of these are of school-going age (UNHCR 2025). Uganda is known for its inclusion of refugees in the national school system (Ministry of Education and Sports 2023), although this relative welcome was made possible by significant outside funding, much of which is now under threat from the Trump administration (Kristof 2025). Many attending school in refugee communities have had a mixed experience with English prior to migration, and they introduce their own linguistic diversity into Ugandan schools, including languages such as Maban, Swahili, Koalib, Kakwa, Kirundi, and Kinyarwanda (Reddick forthcoming).

Table 2: Refugee Demographics in Uganda

Country of Origin	Estimated % of Total Refugee Population (1.7 million)	Languages	Conflict Dynamics, Further Details
South Sudan	~54%	English, Arabic, Maban, Koalib, Kakwa, Masalit, Dinka, Nuer, and others	Longstanding conflict; highest concentration in northern settlements
Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)	~32%	French, Lingala, Kiswahili, Arabic, and others	Escalating violence in eastern DRC, driving ongoing new arrivals
Sudan	~5-8%	Arabic, Bari, Dinka, Nuer, and others	Significant influx since the civil war began in 2023
Others	~6-9%	Kinyarwanda, Oromo, Somali, Tigrinya, Tigre, Arabic, Kirundi, and others	Includes Rwanda, Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and Burundi

ORGANIZATIONAL ISOMORPHISM

One of the many challenges of tackling language in refugee education has to do with the larger context organizations face as they undertake this work. Complex sociopolitical, ideological, and financial constraints shape the efforts of organizations working in refugee education. Neo-institutional theory provides insights into the processes by which organizations within any field—including EiE—become more and more similar to each other, often despite attempts to differentiate themselves from one another (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). These isomorphic tendencies are particularly relevant for organizations in institutionally defined fields—that is, fields that are structured, created, and reinforced through four processes: (1) regular interaction among organizations in the field; (2) the development of hierarchies and coalitions; (3) an increased amount of information confronting organizations; and (4) a mutual awareness among organizations that they are engaged in a “common enterprise” (DiMaggio 1982, cited in DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 148).

Mimetic processes are one of the mechanisms through which organizations in these defined fields become similar. These processes take place in contexts of uncertainty, such as when the technologies that organizations employ in their work are not well understood, when “goals are ambiguous, or when the environment creates symbolic uncertainty” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 151). Rather than competing with one another in these instances, organizations resolve their uncertainty by looking to others as models for how to approach pressing challenges.

Responding to issues of forced migration requires navigating uncertainty and shifting information while working toward a common enterprise—the very circumstances that lend themselves to isomorphism. In some cases, this can be beneficial to the work: in a study of gender-specific protection standards in Germany’s refugee response, for example, the NGOs engaged in this work made up an organizational field. When needs shifted, these organizations were able to make field-level changes to protect refugee women by using the existing infrastructure (Zimmermann et al. 2020). In contrast, due to the homogenizing effects of consultancies and a desire for legitimacy vis-à-vis international development organizations, NGOs in Finland have become increasingly alike (Kontinen and Onali 2017). There is as yet no research about isomorphic tendencies in organizations engaged with language in education.

Despite the strong pull toward similarity among organizations in a shared field, there are strategies to resist this. Oliver (1991) describes how organizations can deflect the demands and expectations that often drive isomorphism through what she calls manipulation, or the “attempt to co-opt, influence, or control institutional pressures and evaluations” (157). In her conceptualization, the structures that push organizations toward sameness can also be harnessed to drive reform. Decoupling form from function can also serve as a strategy to resist homogenization, as organizations attain legitimacy through their public image but maintain divergent, locally relevant practices internally (Gonzalez Benson, Routte, and Yoshihama 2024).

Within this broader context, and in the midst of ambiguity and uncertainty given fluctuating needs among refugees in Uganda (Dryden-Peterson 2022), organizations tend to focus on English in education programming for refugees. As I will demonstrate, this monolingual focus emerges as a strategy to support refugees’ access to education and inclusion, despite the government’s and stakeholders’ appreciation of the importance of a multilingual approach to education. The isomorphism toward monolingual English-language programs takes place through the institutional structures of the EiE field. Moreover, limited funding and significant gaps in expertise limit stakeholders’ ability to use relevant data and research when making decisions. In this, the first study of field-level responses to language in refugee education, I find that, as a result, these actors shift away from systemwide reforms and multilingual approaches in refugee education and toward a focus on English.

METHODOLOGY

My analysis of the field of education in emergencies in Uganda responds to recent calls to “study up”—to focus the analytic lens not on communities experiencing marginalization, as is so often the case, but on “study[ing] the powerful” (Menashy 2025, 2). I take up this methodological perspective as part of a larger comparative case study (e.g., Bartlett and Vavrus 2017), which I undertook related to language in refugee education. I ask the following question: How do government officials, NGO policymakers, and program leaders—those who create and enact education policies for refugees—make decisions about language in refugee education? While there is a growing body of research on issues of language in refugee education, in particular about the impact of language policies on learners and teachers (e.g., Reddick 2024; Piper et al. 2020), we know little about how language policies and practices are designed or prioritized. In this article, I examine this vital piece of the puzzle, which is key to improving how policies and practices in refugee education are designed. As I discuss, while these stakeholders are, in theory, the ones who create policy and practice, many describe having little real power to enact the policies and programs they prioritize, forcing questions about how the EiE field might be restructured.

My analysis is informed by 26 initial in-person, semistructured interviews I conducted with 29 stakeholders across 18 local, international, and multilateral organizations, and with employees of government departments involved in education policy and programming in Kampala. They are supplemented by eight follow-up interviews I conducted via Zoom and Skype. All interviews took place between 2018 and 2021, a time when refugee education in Uganda shifted due to increased refugee flows and pressures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Omolo 2025). All names of individuals and organizations used in the manuscript are pseudonyms; I provide an overview of the types of organizations involved in the EiE collaborative structures below (see Table 1).

I was first introduced to members of the EiE Working Group through a research mentor, and from there early contacts connected me to others, which initially enabled me to recruit interview participants through snowball sampling (Weiss 1995). Following the early interviews, I began “sampling for range” (Small 2009, 13), as I wanted to be sure to speak with individuals in a variety of organizations and in the government, as well as those involved in different aspects of the national education approach. I was able to draw from existing contacts to facilitate access to these additional participants. All the organizations represented in the interviews work on refugee education; they vary in size from large multinational organizations to small, locally led efforts. The interview participants come from a variety of places, including Uganda, countries in western Europe, and the United States. The government employees whom I interviewed—all of whom are Ugandan—were directly engaged in national education policy and practice, and in the inclusion of refugees in the national education system.

The interviews focused on organizational priorities and limitations related to refugee education, beliefs about schooling for refugees, and the role of language at school, at home, and in refugees' future-building. They were complemented by 17 hours of participant observation of group meetings and workshops that included many of these same participants, including a meeting of the EiE Working Group in Uganda and a formal workshop about language support in the education of refugees. Throughout my data collection, I shared my emerging findings with stakeholders in order to learn from their responses, and I was invited to present my research in progress.

I am a white, English-speaking UK/US national, and I began my career as an English language educator. I have since worked with international NGOs focused on education in Uganda, with a focus on language. As a result, I often had the feeling during interviews that I could have been on the other side of the table, the recorder pointed toward me. This position often opened space for wide-ranging conversations about work in education in international settings. It also may have encouraged participants to express views they might assume I'd agree with, or to otherwise find places of overlap. In these conversations, in an effort to alleviate any sense of there being a "right" answer, I was clear about my professional connection to the work and about its challenges.

These aspects of my identity also may have introduced power imbalances in my conversations with Ugandan stakeholders, who may have understood my work and my social position as being aligned with international development actors. I emphasized my prior experience working within national systems in Uganda to signal my knowledge and appreciation of the work of Ugandan education stakeholders. In general, I believe my professional proximity to the work, as well as my experience in a variety of roles in Uganda and elsewhere, enabled me to have diverse, candid conversations about the tensions between aspirations and actual efforts in education programming.

In the next section, I share findings that highlight the gap between stakeholders' aspirations for systemwide reform and the narrower focus on English that organizations—and the field of EiE in Uganda—ultimately pursue. I demonstrate that EiE is an institutionally defined field that is susceptible to isomorphic tendencies and that these tendencies—rather than data, research, or technical expertise—drive programmatic priorities. I find that, because organizations within the field are so intertwined with one another through collaborative structures, there is little divergence from this focus on English. This is the case regardless of whether stakeholders work for the Ugandan government or an organization, regardless of their size, focus, or geographic area, and regardless of whether the organization is led by Ugandan or international staff. I conclude with a discussion of efforts to resist these isomorphic trends toward a monolingual focus on English and offer my recommendations for policy and program design that can use data to meet refugee learners' needs more effectively.

FINDINGS

For Lauren and other stakeholders tasked with creating strategy, policy, and programs to facilitate refugee education in Uganda, there was considerable space between the work they aspired to do in language in education and the ultimate focus of their efforts. Across organizations and government roles, most stakeholders appreciated the importance of families' multilingualism and wanted to create opportunities for them to deepen their multilingual skills and strategies. However, in actually designing and implementing education programs and policies, these stakeholders came up against considerable barriers in terms of the material resources and expertise needed to complete the work.

The collegial structures designed to support EiE efforts in Uganda were intended to ensure efficiency and collaboration. As I describe below, however, EiE actors in Uganda were in fact members of a defined field vulnerable to organizational isomorphism. In the face of significant barriers and given the collaborative structures and uncertainty reinforcing the EiE field, organizations and government employees across the refugee response together shifted away from innovative approaches to language learning and teaching, and focused instead on the role of English at school.

In the section below, I first demonstrate that organizations engaged in EiE make up a defined field that is prone to organizational isomorphism. I then reveal the gap between what organizational leaders hoped for and what they felt was possible in refugee education when they were faced with limited funding and a lack of expertise related to language and education. Finally, I demonstrate how these constraints pushed organizational stakeholders and organizations away from research-backed innovation and opportunities to actively engage research and data, and toward a well-trod but often unsuccessful focus on English as the language of school access.

EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES AS AN INSTITUTIONALLY DEFINED FIELD

Through interviews and observations of professional gatherings, I came to understand those engaged in EiE not simply as colleagues but as members of what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) call an institutionally defined field. This is characterized by boundaries that are created and reinforced through accepted institutions, practices, and documents. Defining the EiE field, I argue, takes place in two key ways in Uganda: through a national strategy for refugee education, which provides an official roadmap for the work, and through standing committees and working groups in which members participate. Organizations engaged in these efforts work across contexts and with the government to facilitate education in settings of crisis and conflict in Uganda, including among refugee learners.

Uganda's national strategy for refugee education is articulated in the Second Education Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities in Uganda, a costed strategic document that outlines aspects of refugee education nationwide. This plan enables nonprofit and multinational organizations to target key pieces of work that have been prioritized by the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports but are not yet fully funded (Ministry of Education and Sports 2023). As interview participants noted, the creation of this document occurred through formal collaborative structures, including a steering committee for both the first and the second Education Response Plans, which was made up of nonprofit organizations, funders, and members of government, each of which had detailed roles and obligations. The first and the second Education Response Plans have guided all national refugee education programming in Uganda for nearly ten years (Ministry of Education and Sports 2018); this has required stakeholders to coordinate with each other to make things work.

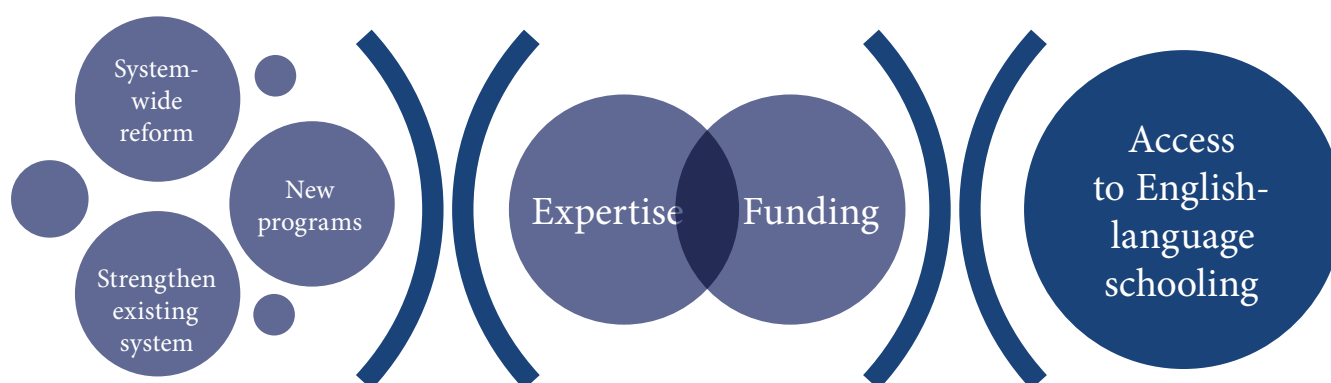
Individual organizations also coordinated with one another through local working groups, such as the EiE Working Group in Kampala (see Table 1). Numerous other standing committees and working groups enable this interorganizational coordination, all of which is premised on organizational stakeholders having the “expert authority” to make decisions on behalf of the national education system (Barnett 2013). These various structures of collaboration and communication are a key part of what defines education in emergencies as a field.

These formal structures unite the work of EiE stakeholders in Uganda, but they do not alleviate the uncertainty about how to tackle the common enterprise of refugee education (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Instead, formal structures, uncertainty, and a shared mission coalesce to create a defined field, which causes organizations within the field to become more like one another. This growing similarity takes place as these organizations look to each other for guidance on how to solve often unsolvable challenges with little data, little relevant expertise, and few resources to do so. In the particular case of how to address the immense challenge of LOI for refugee children in Ugandan schools, institutional isomorphism took over as the preferred strategy, standing in for the rigorous use of data related to language and literacy development.

TENSION BETWEEN ASPIRATIONS, CONSTRAINTS, AND RESULTING APPROACHES

In the institutionally defined field of EiE, aspirational approaches to language and education often confronted significant gaps in funding and expertise. These constraints pushed organizations away from research-backed approaches that would draw on home languages to support English language and literacy development and toward a more familiar—but generally unsupported by research—monolingual focus on English (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Language in Refugee Education Programming—Aspirations, Limiting Constraints, and Resulting Approaches



ASPIRATIONS

Across the sample, those leading the work of refugee education in Uganda described a desire to capitalize on refugee families' multilingualism. They described visions for (1) systemwide education reform; (2) new programs to support language learning within the existing system; and (3) strategies for strengthening existing programs within the existing system.

SYSTEMWIDE REFORM

Many program leaders and policymakers highlighted the need to rethink approaches to language use in the education system, including the need to move away from a monolingual focus on English and to incorporate multilingualism into the teachers' daily work. Madison, for example, shared her desire for systemwide reform. Madison was a literacy specialist working with an international education NGO. Originally from the United States, she had worked as an educator in the US and East Africa and was one of the few stakeholders who had completed graduate training in education. Madison felt that "a firm base in the first language" should be a priority in education for refugee children. Even in the face of considerable linguistic diversity, Madison saw places for systemwide reform that could support children's home language skills, despite national policies that required a focus on English. For Madison, a lack of expertise—in this case, among teachers—was a major barrier to change, but also a reason for engagement and training related to the value of multilingual educational practices. She explained that "what teachers don't understand or aren't empowered or don't know how to do, is that this [English-only policy] doesn't mean you cannot speak any other language, it means that you find ways to support using mother tongue."

In her reflections, Madison highlighted the ways teachers might use languages other than English to support children's learning—even if children ultimately would need to take tests and demonstrate that learning in English. These strategies, including pedagogical translanguaging (Benson 2012; Abiria, Early, and Kendrick 2013; García and Wei 2014), she noted, are used globally across contexts and in multilingual schools, and could be integrated into the kinds of professional development Ugandan teachers receive. As things currently stood in Uganda, however, teacher training tended not to address these issues, as Madison explained:

A lot of the global learning around the language acquisition process, I find, is not really discussed in teacher training colleges....The idea of “how do we learn, how does the brain learn, how does the brain learn language, and then what does that mean for me in the classroom?”...[I] never saw that featured anywhere, that sort of metacognitive level, like “how do I learn something?” So I think that empowering [teachers is a priority], not just training teachers but providing them with ongoing coaching on that topic, especially in those classrooms that have so many languages.

Madison highlighted the gap in understanding and expertise among teachers that relates to language and learning, as well as a related gap in the use of research to improve this knowledge. Her hope was that efforts in refugee education might draw from this research to support teachers systemically.

The importance of focusing on the languages children know best was echoed by others. Gordon, Madison's colleague and the director of education at their organization, dreamed similarly of “providing other approaches in which children can be able to learn at their pace.... I would prefer [to focus on] the local language and put English aside.” Having grown up in Uganda, Gordon knew that English was a steady priority for the national education system. Given this, he hoped that advances in the use of technology in the classroom might provide space to use languages other than English in school, although doing so would require a major reworking of the system.

Lauren similarly hoped for a comprehensive reworking of the education system in order to respond effectively to children's language and learning needs. This was no small feat, however, as she explained: “This is the setting where people really struggle... multilingual teaching as a part of regular teaching.” Lauren could imagine a system in which children's and teachers' multilingualism was integrated into the daily work of the classroom, woven into pedagogy, and seen as an asset rather than a deficit. She reiterated, however, that “this form of multilingual [teaching]...that's where we're most stuck.” Lauren felt that those involved in refugee education—teachers and organizational leaders alike—did not yet have the ability to embrace a pedagogical approach that enabled all members to draw from, strengthen, and learn using a variety of languages, not just English.

NEW APPROACHES WITHIN THE EXISTING SYSTEM

A subset of stakeholders described the kinds of programs they would develop within the existing system if they had the resources to do so. While these approaches were not as comprehensive as those described by Madison, Gordon, and Lauren, they were nonetheless not without significant financial and paradigmatic implications, such as the need to reorient away from a single focus on English, toward acknowledging the value of non-English languages in refugee education.

Sharon, for example, a deputy director of the government body that oversees education in Kampala, described the importance of children's and families' languages. Herself a Ugandan, she explained that the "mother tongue is important for many things, for instance sustainability of the culture...because they don't need to detach themselves from their culture." Sharon felt that it is important for refugee families to maintain their linguistic and cultural practices. She highlighted the role that schoolwide "culture days" could play in helping students hold onto their cultural heritage, of which language was one part. She proposed that schools could encourage students to share traditions "from their own countries, music, storytelling, drama, so they continue doing these things [and] maintain their language."

For Sharon, this was premised on the idea that showcasing diverse practices would allow refugee children to feel "appreciated.... Once they are admired by other students then it means that, you know, fitting in the community becomes easy." The orientation Sharon described was focused on a multicultural "food and festivals" approach rather than on a systematic integration of children's heritage, history, and language at school (Banks and McGee Banks 2009; Reddick 2024). But despite its limitations, Sharon's idea could send an important message about whose traditions are appropriate for public institutions like the school and what full inclusion within the existing education system might look like.

Peace was a Ugandan program leader with Amahoro, a regional NGO that offers afterschool programming to urban refugees. In her view, "everyone must speak their language fluently, understand it to the roots." Peace felt that, in order to achieve this aim, a focal organization was needed to help refugee families resist the encroachment of English and maintain their pre-migration linguistic repertoires. "I really think there should be someone to spearhead it [language maintenance], there should be someone to keep the bonds...and help them not lose that touch," she explained. She elaborated: "That requires that there is a teacher to keep teaching them [pre-migration languages] and also help parents understand why it's really important." She suggested that community meetings could focus on a different activity—something like creating arts and crafts to sell—that would help community members form relationships and, in the process, maintain their languages. Peace also stressed the importance of literacy, pointing not to school but to the home to encourage this:

I think it's not just enough to speak, you must be able to write it. So it would be good to integrate that component for instance in [the] house, we would have a teacher teach children to write Arabic, you have someone teach them to write Kirundi, Somali, whatever, so it would keep that going.

As Sharon and Peace demonstrate, some stakeholders wanted to reject a monolingual focus on English and to use new approaches that might augment the existing system. Culture Days and afterschool classes, for example, are not aimed at systematically transforming the education system, but they do reimagine the importance of non-English languages for refugee families. Sharon, Peace, and others looked toward a more expansive approach to language in refugee education through new programs within the current education system.

STRENGTHENING THE EXISTING SYSTEM

Some stakeholders were not focused on strategies to fundamentally rework the education system or reimagine programming. They instead were looking for ways to support students' access to current educational opportunities. Lisa, who is Ugandan, directs the urban refugee education response for a multilateral organization. She described the programmatic areas where she felt her organization was failing and what she wished they might offer instead. When I asked if her organization helped teachers improve their pedagogy to meet the needs of refugee students more effectively, she demurred: "I would say not directly." She said she wished there were programs and resources available to do so, and that if there were, she would focus on a few key areas:

We would have teachers who are set up with instructional material to teach in English. I would seek teachers who could give extra lessons and they are paid separately. There may be temp[orary] teachers who can come and do remedial classes for new entrants, for students who are learning to speak English.

This approach would combat the widespread practice of putting refugee children in grades far behind where they ought to be. This practice is used to deal with refugee students' limited English-language proficiency upon arrival, and it may contribute to high dropout rates. Lisa felt that having extra teachers would mean "instead of putting a 15-year-old in P2 [second grade], we can put them in P5 [fifth grade] as they are learning extra English [in separate] lessons." This would take the burden off the classroom teachers, who are already overwhelmed: "We would support them with extra teachers to do the instructional and differentiated learning," leaving classroom teachers to teach to the majority.

Henry was a consultant with various international organizations that work on issues of language. Raised in Europe, he had lived and worked in diverse settings around the world. Henry began to focus on refugee education following decades of work on language and literacy in the Global South. He knew the importance of finding the possible, rather than focusing single-mindedly on the ideal.

Henry believed that the most important interventions to buttress refugee children's learning are language supporters—people from the refugee community who are not trained teachers but who are able to communicate in both the language of school and in one of the many languages spoken by refugee children. In Henry's conceptualization, these adults would support children academically by translating key ideas to help them navigate instruction in English, and also serve as “mother figure[s]” by providing emotional support to refugee children, who often feel isolated and lost. They would receive targeted, two-week, school-based training on

how to translate without translating, if you know what I mean. If the poor child is being taught long division in English, and has only [learned] French, then you don't want direct translation, you want the language supporter to be able to summarize the concepts in French.... So you are not looking for that traditional word-for-word translation, it is just the ideas and the flow. Also giving support, giving them the feeling that “when I am totally lost there is someone I can go to and [they will] understand what I am saying.”

Henry noted that language supporters—whose stipends would be paid by international NGOs—should aim to enable refugee children to participate in school and to feel they have someone on their team. He hoped simply knowing there was somewhere to turn to might help children participate in school rather than dropping out—or, better yet, to begin the hard work of learning in English-only classrooms. Lisa, Henry, and others focused their attention on seeking linguistic support in the current school system that might enable young refugees to navigate it more successfully.

CONSTRAINTS THAT NARROW ORGANIZATIONAL PRIORITIES

These participants' diverse aspirations related to language, including systemwide reform, new programs, and small tweaks that would provide better access to English-language classrooms, faced considerable constraints. Two primary barriers emerged that limited the stakeholders' work and narrowed their organizational priorities: limited funding and a lack of expertise. The lack of expertise was among both classroom teachers (as Madison noted above) and some of the EiE decisionmakers, who themselves described challenges in addressing the scope of the challenge. Despite many of the stakeholders' ambitious aspirations and their appreciation of the importance of refugees' multilingualism, these two major constraints caused

pressure and uncertainty, which deepened isomorphic tendencies (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). In the end, organizations funneled their efforts away from the kinds of innovations that might buttress education quality and toward access, with basic English skills at the center of these efforts.

FUNDING

There simply is not enough funding, stakeholders explained, to implement comprehensive education programming for refugees that adequately addresses the challenges of language. In the previous section, Lisa described the difficulties that refugee children face when they are submerged (Benson 2012) into classrooms where English is the LOI without sufficient support. Despite the need for remedial classes to help these children make a successful transition, the funds were simply unavailable. Lisa explained:

In Ugandan schools, it is always about English. You will not find classes for primary [school] in French nor in Swahili. The refugee children will have to adapt to speaking English, they will have to struggle. They [should] be supported with remedial classes. Although I think it is important, because of the funding we don't have remedial classes for these children.

Despite her position of relative power as the director of the city's programming for urban refugees, Lisa nonetheless felt her hands were tied by finances.

Henry also pointed to the challenges of funding, in his case to pay the language supporters, as discussed in the previous section. Although the ideal would be to have numerous adults in each classroom to help refugees learn using their existing language skills as they also learned English, Henry acknowledged the challenge of paying for such support. He accepted that it might be necessary to hire only a handful of supporters, some of whom might visit classrooms just once a week. This would primarily signal to refugee children that they have an ally, rather than offering real linguistic support. Henry conceded that, if resources were really stretched, perhaps just one language supporter could be hired for a refugee settlement to target the largest language group in the community, but this would leave the children of the smaller language groups to navigate school on their own.

EXPERTISE

In addition to financial resource constraints, stakeholders also reflected on concerns related to the resources of skills and training. Across interviews, stakeholders noted a lack of expertise within the EiE field to address challenges related to language and learning among refugees. Bethany, who was part of the leadership team of a

multinational organization, explained that the kinds of skills needed for education development often weren't available among those working in refugee response contexts. Having pursued graduate training and professional positions in education development before joining the refugee response in Uganda, Bethany was an exception to this rule. She described the mismatch in terms of skills:

You get those [in the refugee response] who are very much about food drops, lifesaving missions, spending money quickly, saving lives; so because it is often so rapid...not a lot of time is really spent on understanding what local resources were in place to build on in a longer-term educational response.

Bethany explained that this orientation toward short-term goals limited the sector's ability to respond to research and to think strategically about education programming that might support more than immediate access to schooling. Lauren, who was a respected leader in refugee education in the region, described her own lack of formal training in education. She explained that she had worked in project management in humanitarian settings and with child-protection programming before coming to Uganda; her work in refugee education had prompted her to consider graduate study in education. Considering her colleagues in the field, Lauren explained that, aside from Bethany, who had training and experience in education, "I've not come across another education specialist [in the refugee response]. Many of them have fantastic expertise; to have an expertise in this area either in terms of teaching English as a second language or multilingual instruction was much rarer."

Reflecting on the difficulty of navigating issues of language effectively in refugee education, Lauren summarized her own sentiment and that of many of her colleagues: "I think from a practitioner perspective, we are all a little bit overwhelmed.... This is really complicated." Lauren felt that the field had little of the expertise it needed to take on a comprehensive response to the linguistic challenges refugee children faced in Ugandan schools.

The lack of formal training on issues related to language and education among some classroom teachers and EiE policymakers and practitioners also meant that stakeholders had many misunderstandings about the connections between language, learning, and displacement. These narratives largely misrepresented the experiences of children and teachers alike, but they nonetheless shaped the kinds of programming that were prioritized.

For example, Joseph was Ugandan and he oversaw adult education at a Kampala-based nonprofit; his understanding of language use among refugees was similar to that of many stakeholders. Joseph noted that adult refugees,

when they meet their friends who speak the same dialects, most of them start speaking their language. Also, I've noticed this at their homes; before they bring their children, they have to understand where they've come from, their curricula, and language. So, they do use their language to communicate with their children at home.

In these assertions, Joseph echoed ideas I heard throughout data collection that reflected a lack of understanding of the kinds of language loss faced by families who migrate (Zabrodskaia 2025), in particular a misunderstanding of the shifts in language use by refugees in Uganda specifically (Reddick forthcoming). While Joseph's informal impressions of language use are valuable, they leave out data and research that could support his work.

ORGANIZATIONAL ISOMORPHISM IN THE CONTEXT OF CONSTRAINTS

These primary constraints—limited funding and a lack of expertise to address issues of language in refugee education—shaped programmatic priorities across organizations and drove organizational isomorphism toward a focus on English. Below I offer an in-depth example that highlights this broader trend across the field and discuss a partnership developed by Excel, a local NGO for urban refugees, and Vulnerable Youth, an international NGO that has intervened in refugee education in Uganda.

Eric was part of the Excel leadership team. He drew from his own experience as a refugee to develop an education intervention for schools in Kampala that served refugees in the region. Central to his approach was a trilingual education intervention that prepared newly arrived refugees to attend Ugandan schools that use English as the LOI. Eric was closely attuned to the learning gaps and successes of the children he worked with:

We understood the challenge that children are facing, especially when it's come to the language.... We normally have two teachers, one from Uganda and one from the [refugee] community. The one from the community should also be a professional teacher from either Congo, Rwanda, or Burundi.... We believe we should create that transition, not jumping in new. We have to accompany these children from French or Swahili going into English.... In the program, children still have the chance to have things explained in their own languages.... As we move in, we keep on slowing the Swahili or French down so that at the end they can always speak English.

A teacher in the Excel program who was from Uganda was paired with a refugee teacher to ensure that the refugee children didn't have to "jump in new" to a foreign LOI. They instead had support during their transition from French and Swahili into English.

This program, the first of its kind to focus explicitly on the linguistic needs of refugees in Uganda, faced a funding shortfall and required additional resources to extend the work. Eric sought and found a partner, which came in the form of Vulnerable Youth, a large international organization newly working with refugees in Uganda. Together they won a grant that enabled Eric's organization to continue its education work with refugees but also required the work to shift and evolve, including leaving behind its multilingual approach.

Mary, the international staff member at the helm of Vulnerable Youth in Uganda and the architect of the new partnership, was passionate about the work and about the importance of education programming for refugees. She had a graduate degree in international development and had worked in humanitarian emergency response across multiple settings, but she had no formal training related to language learning or education. Reflecting on the language and education programming she was now helping to lead with Excel, Mary noted that few of the staff had relevant training. She saw this lack of professional expertise in issues related to language and education as a broader concern within the refugee response, as she reflected: "We probably need to get a consultant...because we can all guess but none of us are language experts.... Maybe that's one reason we haven't quite cracked it." Mary felt that there wasn't a clear system through which EiE professionals could draw from existing data related to language learning or generate new understandings, thus they had to look outward, such as to a consultant.

Mary was nonetheless committed to leveraging her expertise in international humanitarian response and economic development to tackle the challenge of language and education. Through the new partnership, she was suddenly asked to decide which aspects of Eric's existing program ought to remain and which were no longer necessary. The decision made was to largely restructure the program, as Mary explained: "We've made some edits to it so now we are making it six months because we feel that they can do it [transition to English] in six months." The partners also had to rethink class size. The original model had two teachers for thirty students, a ratio Mary felt was unrealistic, given their limited resources and the pressing need for programming at scale. For Mary, the focus was less on what the data from Eric's previous work taught or about research in language teaching and learning in general, and more about scalability of education programming with a limited budget.

Over the coming months, Excel and Vulnerable Youth implemented a revised language-in-education program in one of Uganda's rural refugee settlements. In contrast to the program's original inclusion of languages familiar to refugees, the reconfigured model focused only on English. Despite Mary's and Eric's shared appreciation of the children's multilingualism, they felt it would be simpler to implement an English-only program quickly. Given her lack of training, Mary still wondered if this was the right approach. She asked herself, "Are we doing more harm than good.... Should we be including in these programs a lesson on the local language?"

The shift away from multilingual education approaches and toward English only that took place through Excel's and Vulnerable Youth's collaboration echoed shifts across other organizations. In Madison's organization, for example, a lack of bandwidth or resources for more ambitious work shifted her focus away from multilingual approaches. Instead, Madison decided that "effectively supporting transition to English as the medium of instruction is the priority area." This move toward a monolingual focus on English was nearly uniform in the field of organizations engaged in refugee education, regardless of organizational size or type.

RESISTANCE TO ISOMORPHIC TRENDS

That said, across all the organizations I examined, there was one exception to broader isomorphic trends toward English language programming. This took place through the Language Support Program, for which Lauren laid the groundwork. Despite Lauren's lack of formal training in education, she saw the need to think about language and education differently and initiated the development of a program to attempt that.

Lauren was able to build momentum toward a different approach to language, and to "influence public perceptions" (Oliver 1991, 158) about language issues in refugee education through several efforts. First, she organized a workshop to discuss language and refugee education within the EiE field. She brought together various stakeholders, including many from the EiE Working Group, to examine the possibilities of an education approach that could build on families' multilingual resources. Lauren invited Eric to share data from his work at Excel in this workshop. I also shared emerging findings from my data collection on language and refugee education. This workshop managed to "neutralize institutional opposition" (Oliver 1991, 158) to considering education approaches that were not monolingual and encouraged participants to look at recent data and evidence, rather than at the challenges of insufficient resources and expertise the field was facing.

Second, instead of relying on accepted norms, Lauren was able to marshal funds and convince the EiE community to hire a consulting organization with expertise in language policy to look closely at the case of refugees in Uganda and to propose an alternate education model. A central part of this proposed model was offering classes

in what the consultants called “African languages” alongside lessons in English and mathematics. This would give children a linguistic and curricular foundation before they transitioned into the Ugandan school system. In this way, experts in language in education were able to make the case for approaches to language that did not focus only on English.

In important ways, then, despite being only partially realized, the Language Support Program represents a divergence from the isomorphism otherwise observed in education programming for refugees. This program aimed to help refugees learn the English language skills needed to enter schools in the national system, but did so by engaging with refugees’ other linguistic resources, distinguishing it from most efforts in Uganda’s EiE field. This strategy—drawing on emerging evaluation and research to help inform problem-solving and identifying resources to fund the work of experts and stakeholders outside the field of organizations—can be adopted across the work of EiE. Although external challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, stalled the Language Support Program, its development helped to shift conversations about what linguistic inclusion in education could mean for refugees in Uganda.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Across organizations and government bodies, stakeholders leading the work of refugee education in Uganda expressed an appreciation for refugees’ diverse linguistic repertoires. However, they consistently faced a barrage of challenges when it came to creating and implementing approaches that might reflect this appreciation. In response to ambitious, multilingual approaches to refugee education, and to simpler programs that might create space for non-English languages, stakeholders faced a variety of challenges. Those working in government, and in local, international, and multilateral organizations, confronted a lack of knowledge about how to create effective multilingual approaches, along with concerns about the limited material and human resources available to undertake such difficult work. Nearly every decisionmaker I interviewed described a gap between the programming they aspired to and what they were able to push in practice, demonstrating the power of the larger field to influence the work of individuals and organizations.

There was one exception to this trend, which emerged in the Language Support Program. There Lauren used her position of authority among EiE stakeholders to resist isomorphic trends and instead to look squarely at the question of language in refugee education. She did so by gathering data on the issue through collaboration with experts in language and literacy, and by shifting the conversation from logistical barriers to what would be possible with adequate data and expertise. Lauren was, to some extent, able to manipulate (Oliver 1991) the structures of the field to point it in a new direction.

EiE is an institutionalized field through which government staff members and organizations engage in a common enterprise—refugee education—and whose structures privilege homogenous responses to uncertainty, budget constraints, and a lack of expertise (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). In reaction to these challenges, the field of EiE demonstrates organizational isomorphism. Individual organizations funnel their efforts away from broad educational innovations in language into smaller, more focused programs that address English skills. While this study focuses on language issues, these trends are likely the case across intervention areas, given similar pressures of complexity, limited budgets and scarce human resources, and structures of collaboration. Given this, it is vital that the EiE field critically examine where structures of expediency support the work, and where they undermine it.

An orientation toward homogeneity in the EiE field is of course understandable—in doing such complex work under ever-evolving circumstances, it is necessary to make the best available choices quickly and at scale. It is not surprising that organizations look to each other to determine how to do that, particularly as funding continues to decrease despite the growing needs and demand for thoughtful education programming in emergency settings (Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies 2025). At the time of writing, global support for education in contexts of conflict and emergency has been severely reduced, a consequence of the shuttering of USAID and limits on other donor funding (Jesuit Refugee Service 2025). In the midst of a “humanitarian reset,” programs that address the immediate needs of newly arrived refugees are the priority, with few resources remaining for education (Fletcher 2025). While refugee education already faced resource constraints at the time I collected data (2018-2021), this concern is now even more acute.

The pressure toward efficiency, then, is profound, and it is likely to drive further isomorphism as organizations are forced to avoid new ideas and instead to follow trusted paths. Nevertheless, the trend toward isomorphism in language in education, which I have documented in this article, is a warning for the field of EiE and for humanitarian efforts more generally: the structures of collaboration, streamlining, and efficiency that have helped organizations engage productively with governments and other stakeholders may also lead away from innovation and responsiveness to data and toward conformity. To moderate this, as the field of EiE develops new ways of working in the face of profound funding constraints, stakeholders can use the field to incentivize and structure collaborative engagement with data and research. One way to do this is through EiE Working Group meetings that are dedicated to this kind of focused analysis, and through required data-sharing and data-informed decisionmaking cycles. These efforts can be supplemented by rapid evaluations and other efforts to capture snapshots of locally relevant questions, which will provide vital data for local leadership and “devolved” (Fletcher 2025) decisionmaking in refugee education. Such efforts, along with subject-matter expertise and continued efforts to meet strained resource needs, can create space to consider not just the most expeditious but also the

most effective responses to the challenges affecting educators, students, and families in settings of forced displacement.

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