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HOPING AGAINST THE ODDS: UNDERSTANDING REFUGEE YOUTHS' ASPIRATIONS FOR GAINING OVERSEAS SCHOLARSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Why do young refugees in the Dadaab camps in Kenya aspire to gain resettlement-based scholarships for tertiary education when the odds of getting them are minimal? The existing literature sheds light on the strong educational aspirations of refugee youth. However, our understanding is obscure of why they persistently pursue lofty educational goals when the chances of achieving them is not optimistic, especially through emergency education programs. This study contributes to our understanding of this puzzle, theoretically and empirically. In the study, I draw from ethnographic research, including semistructured interviews and future aspiration mapping exercises with Form One students, as well as interviews with their teachers. I then present several interconnected explanations that address the research question. First, students believe that success in education is a way for them to get out of the camps. Second, they imagine that getting an overseas scholarship will resolve their difficult economic conditions and academic restrictions. Third, they believe that, by working hard to succeed and being motivated by the dream of getting an education abroad, their chances for other tertiary education will increase. In this study, I argue that the cultural logic of hoping to achieve a better future through education sustains young people's motivation to pursue overseas scholarships, which outweighs the low odds of attaining them.

INTRODUCTION

Faisal, 22 years old, was born and raised in the Ifo camp, one of the refugee camps in the Dadaab camp complex in Kenya. When I collected the data for this article in the second half of 2019, Faisal was a Form One student at Gedi Secondary School, one of the fee-paying private secondary schools in Ifo camp.[1] Faisal's parents returned to Somalia in 2013 when he was in the third grade of primary school. After he insisted that he wanted to continue his education and his school principal intervened to convince his parents, they agreed to leave him behind with relatives. Faisal hopes to succeed in his education and to be able to transform his life, as well as the lives of his parents, his community, and his nation. He aims to receive an *A* grade when he sits for the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE)—the final secondary school examination. In the first year of high school, his average grade has been swinging between a *B+* and an *A-,* which gives him confidence that he will receive a good grade on the national exam. After that, he hopes to apply for the prestigious and competitive scholarship of the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) to study medicine in that country. Faisal dreams of returning to his homeland, Somalia, when he graduates from university so that he can participate in the rebuilding and development of his country.

Like Faisal, most of the high school students in the Dadaab camps, whether they are performing well or not, pursue the WUSC scholarship program in earnest. However, when the hope of getting good grades fails, young people may become frustrated and experience psychological strain. Research from various displacement contexts across the world has shown that education and schooling give young people increased capacity to adjust psychologically, as well as a sense of security, normalcy, stability, and structure in the midst of crises (Burde et al. 2017; Shohel 2022). Emerging research from across the world has also documented the strong educational aspirations of young refugees, and their ambitions to pursue tertiary education as a pathway to achieving spatial, social, economic, and cognitive mobility and to contribute to nation-building in their war-torn countries (Morrice et al. 2020; Molla 2019; Dryden-Peterson 2017; Bellino 2018). Research also has shown that young people's educational aspirations are often frustrated by global and local structural challenges. These challenges include limited access to crucial education resources and opportunities, a lack of effective policies to address the challenges affecting refugee education, and exclusion from the right

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1   Form One, equivalent to ninth grade in the United States, is the first year of high school in the Kenyan education system.

and freedom to translate their acquired knowledge and skills into meaningful economic value (Bellino 2021; Abamosa 2021; Morrice et al. 2020).

The research referred to above provides us with insight into some similarities between what young refugees aspire to achieve with their education and the challenges confronting them as they pursue their valued goals. However, it does not help us understand explicitly why young refugees, particularly those living in protracted emergency contexts, may persist in pursuing difficult-to-achieve educational goals, even when the obstacles are insurmountable and failure may lead to hopelessness and psychological strain. With this study, I aim to broaden our understanding of this puzzle, conceptually and empirically. I do so by addressing the question, Why do young refugees in the Dadaab camps of Kenya aspire to gain resettlement-based scholarships for tertiary education when the odds of getting one are minimal? Addressing this question will help us understand what logics sustain young refugees' motivation to pursue their educational aspirations when facing a complex web of constraints. I draw from ethnographic research, including semistructured interviews and future aspirations mapping exercises with Form One students, as well as semistructured interviews with their teachers.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first research study to examine the phenomenon of young refugees' aspiration to earn resettlement-based scholarships for tertiary education from the students' perspectives. For several reasons, understanding their aspirations from their own perspectives and from the context of their protracted experience in refugee camps is pertinent. First, it will demonstrate the imaginative power of these young refugees—their capacity to visualize and prepare for the future despite uncertainty, precarity, and exclusion from citizenship rights and freedoms. As such, it will broaden our understanding of the young refugees' sense of agency and resilience. Appreciating their agency and resilience conceptually and practically challenges the institutionalized global discourse and practices that present young refugees from a deficit-based perspective. Others often perceive refugee youth, and refugees in general, through a deficit lens in victim narratives wherein they lack agency and control, regardless of whether they are seeking academic success, economic assistance, or asylum. The tendency to stress the negative aspects of the refugee experience may lead to an internalization of the deficit narrative, thus creating an assumption that refugees' vulnerability is permanent, which is far from reality (Symons and Ponzio 2019; Ryu and Tuvilla 2018). Second, broadening our understanding of young people's experiences across spatial, social, and cultural contexts may enable effective policy and practice interventions to support young people more effectively as they pursue their valued educational aspirations.

Refugee Youths' Educational Aspirations
and Structural Marginalization

A growing body of research has demonstrated young refugees' strong aspirations for their education and their hope to leverage a tertiary education to achieve various mobilities. Research in contexts of protracted displacement, where the refugees' future prospects are often characterized by uncertainty, has shown that young refugees view education as a tool to achieve spatial, social, economic, cognitive, and temporal mobility (Dryden-Peterson 2017; Bellino 2018; Dryden-Peterson 2021). Michelle Bellino (2018) explores the educational aspirations of young refugees in Kenya's Kakuma camp and the challenges they face after they graduate from high school. Bellino demonstrates that young refugees see education as a means to achieve social, economic, and spatial mobility and to fulfill their civic responsibility to contribute to nation-building. She also notes that young refugees see being educated as a way to gain symbolic capital that will affirm their value in a society that has systemically undervalued and excluded them, first in their home country and later as refugees.

Refugee youths' aspirations to achieve various mobilities through education are often described as a navigational strategy to overcome the future uncertainties they face (Chopra 2020; Dryden-Peterson 2017; Bellino 2021; Dryden-Peterson 2021). Drawing from the experiences of Congolese and Somali youth in Uganda and in Kenya's Dadaab camps, respectively, Sarah Dryden-Peterson (2017) argues that, in the face of uncertainty, young refugees envision that their education might enable them to achieve physical and cognitive mobility. Cognitive mobility refers to their ability to apply their education across time and space. In her most recent work, Dryden-Peterson (2021) describes how the experience of uncertainty situates young refugees at the juncture of future-building and placemaking. In the face of uncertainty, the future young refugees envision is bound not by geography but by the opportunity to achieve their valued aspirations (Chopra 2020).

Despite the normative values young refugees attach to their education, as noncitizens their education does not often guarantee them meaningful economic and social value or the freedom of physical mobility, particularly in countries in the Global South. Even when refugees have access to inclusive, good quality education and tertiary education opportunities, their ability to translate the knowledge and skills they acquire into valued mobilities is often constrained by their lack of citizenship rights and freedoms. The legal conundrum confronting refugees' ability to convert education into mobilities remains a central paradox in young refugees' schooling in exile, especially in the Global South (Bellino and

Dryden-Peterson 2018; Zeus 2018; Kiwan 2021; Bellino 2018). While the kind of future refugee youth imagine they will achieve through education and the broader structural challenges confronting them is similar across contexts in the Global North and South, the legal barriers to translating education into social and economic value are a unique challenge for refugees in the Global South.

Framing Hope against the Odds

In this study, I rely on hope theory as the analytical lens through which to interpret the empirical data. "Hope" is understood as people's perceived ability to develop meaningful goals, envision a pathway to achieve those goals, and motivate themselves to strive toward those goals. "Hoping" is a positive motivational state in which one has an optimistic view of the future and is grounded in a sense of having successful agency (goal-directed energy) and pathways (plans to meet goals) (Snyder 2002, 250). Goals, pathways, and agency thus form the foundation of hope theory.

Based on a sociological and anthropological perspective on hope, rather than on the more individualized perspective found in the psychology literature, I understand hope as a relational and historical phenomenon that consists of valuative processes that provide values to the social world, especially in times of crisis (Jansen 2016). Hope has existed across time and cultures, and has been relied on in imagining and pursuing both individual and collective goals (Cohen-Chen and Van Zomeren 2018). Hope may emerge as a result of hardship or in conjunction with societal endeavors, such as those aimed at creating "promising spaces" and conditions for better lives and futures (e.g., humanitarian actions) (Sliwinski 2016); through financial aid programs for college studies (Dynarski 2000); and through resettlement opportunities for refugees experiencing protracted camp situations and other precarious conditions (Horst 2006). Hope is thus shaped, sustained, facilitated, or frustrated by the social and cultural circumstances in which people are embedded, whether local, global, or interactions between the two.

A large body of research in the social and medical sciences demonstrates the benefits of hopefulness. Hope is associated with and used to predict a variety of positive outcomes, including mental and physical wellbeing, self-satisfaction, self-worth, and academic and scholastic achievements (Marques, Lopez, and Pais-Ribeiro 2011; Snyder 2002). On the other hand, hopelessness or a lack of hope is associated with negative outcomes such as mental health problems: stress, substance abuse, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Hopelessness negatively affects

how people perceive themselves, their own situations, other people, and even the world (Malmberg et al. 2010; Zhang et al. 2013).

Having high hopes is a more desirable cognitive process than having little hope. "High-hopers" tend to be more effective in pursuing and achieving their goals. As a result, they are more likely to experience more positive emotions than those with little hope, who tend to struggle to overcome hurdles along the way and are more likely to fail to achieve their goals and to experience negative emotions (Snyder 2002). Having high hopes can give people a sense of power to influence their future, as well as a sense of meaning in life during times of crisis. People with high hopes draw from the positive illusion that influences their perceptions of reality but do not indulge in a significantly distorted reality or delusions. As Snyder et al. (2002, 1,005) point out, high-hopers deal with the constraints of reality but they marginally bias that reality in a positive sense. Positive illusions are associated with positive psychological adjustment and a sense of agency. People who view themselves and their world positively often feel they have the power to influence changes in their world (Wells and Iyengar 2005). In situations of crisis and during traumatic experiences, for example, people with high hopes find benefits and meaning in having a positive illusion of their ability to adjust psychologically and to enhance their wellbeing (Wright, Crawford, and Sebastian 2007).

While hope may be a universal principle indicating human strength that everyone can access and develop, how people use and understand it varies across cultures. Due to humans' diverse experiences, people's goals differ in size, value, importance, specificity, and time frame (Rand and Touza 2020; Ægisdóttir, Gerstein, and Çinarbaş 2008). What is a valuable goal to one group may be irrelevant or inappropriate to another. For example, refugees who lack the right to free movement may have a strong desire for it, while such a desire is irrelevant to people who already enjoy this right.

While individuals from various social and cultural groups may face similar challenges, such as fear, lack of courage, and lack of support, some challenges, such as lack of access to social, economic, and cultural capital, are unique to groups that are marginalized by society on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, disability, gender, and other identity markers (Lopez et al. 2000; Appadurai 2004). These social and cultural adversities, however, do not fully frustrate people's hopes. Even when adversity appears insurmountable, hopeful people can maintain a sense of optimism about the future while acknowledging the magnitude of the problems they are facing. For example, research has shown that resilient students may succeed in their educational aspirations despite the odds against them (Floyd 1996;

O'Connor 2002; Lethale and Pillay 2013). Against this background of knowledge, and using perspectives of hope theory as a starting point, I now offer an analysis of the rationales behind the Dadaab refugee youths' sustained aspirations and motivation to pursue and win a resettlement-based scholarship, despite their poor odds of receiving one.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The Dadaab refugee complex is in the northeastern part of Kenya and is comprised of three camps: Ifo, Dagahaley, and Hagadera. The first two camps are in Dadaab subcounty, while Hagadera is in the neighboring Fafi subcounty; both subcounties are part of Garissa County. At the end of August 2021, the Dadaab complex was host to 228,308 registered refugees and asylum seekers (REACH Initiative 2022). Children under age 18 account for 57 percent of the camps' population. The camps were established in 1991 as temporary settlements for Somali refugees fleeing the civil war in Somalia. Sadly, the Dadaab camps turned into permanent settlements, due to the protracted conflicts in Eastern and Central Africa, where most of the refugees had been displaced. While the majority of these refugees are Somalis, the camp also hosts Ethiopian, Ugandan, Eritrean, Congolese, Burundi, Tanzanian, Yemeni, Rwandese, and South Sudanese people (UNHCR 2021). Formally accredited education in the Dadaab camps takes place in two settings, the public and private schools.

This article is based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted between May and November 2019 at two secondary schools in the Dadaab camps, one private secondary school and one public. During my fieldwork, I lived on a block in the Ifo camp, visited the schools daily, and observed lessons in the Form One class. I interacted with students during breaks and also with teachers in the staff room. I also visited some of the students' homes in the evenings to observe them as they did their evening homework. Despite the insecurity in the camps, and in the entire northeastern region of Kenya, I was able to live in the Ifo camp because I regard Dadaab as my native hometown. Ifo is the camp where I spent the first 20 years of my formative life and where I attended primary and secondary school. I was also fortunate to serve as a teacher in both primary and secondary schools for two years before being offered an opportunity to resettle in Sweden. I lived in Sweden for eight years before returning to conduct this research. I still have a large number of relatives and friends in the camps.

I share a culture, nationality, and language with the Somali community, which makes up most of the refugee population in the Dadaab camps and is the primary focus of my research. These features, taken together, gave me the confidence to live among the refugees and to conduct my research with relative freedom. My firsthand knowledge about the evolution of education in the Dadaab camps as a student, a teacher, and now as a researcher gives me a longitudinal perspective and the potential to bring new insights to our understanding of refugee youths' educational aspirations and experiences (Chavez 2008). Furthermore, my cultural and linguistic connection with the key informants gives me a distinct advantage, in that it contributes to a more authentic interpretation of the research data.

I draw from semistructured interviews I conducted with 19 ethnic Somali Form One students (n=39), and from mapping exercises (n=19) on students' future aspirations and relationships. I also draw from the in-depth (n=14) semistructured interviews I conducted with teachers. The age range of the students interviewed is 18 to 25 years. This age bracket is very high for Form One students, considering that the entry age for secondary school in the Kenyan education system is 14 or 15. One explanation for the delay in refugee students' formal schooling is that most of the parents prioritized Islamic education for their children over secular education during their foundational years. As a result, many children remained in Quranic schools until they completed or memorized the Quran—a process that can take five to ten years.

With most of the students, I conducted a three-phase series of interviews. The first phase focused on students' educational trajectory, experiences with education, and life in the camps. The second phase focused on their future aspirations, perceptions of the value of education and the role it can play in their future, their envisioned future opportunities, and the challenges they will face when striving to succeed in their education and fulfill their aspirations. During the second phase, I also conducted mapping exercises of students' future aspirations, in which they reflected on the future—where they hope to be in ten years and what plans and actions they have been undertaking or are planning to undertake to get there. In the third phase, I focused on the students' relationships in order to find out how they either support or constrain their education. In this phase, I also conducted relationship mapping exercises, wherein students reflected on the forms of support and type of constraints their social relationships posed in terms of their education and future aspirations.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study took place in two phases, during and after my fieldwork. While in the field, I gradually reviewed my fieldwork notes, listened to interview recordings, and read interview transcripts and the students' mapping exercises. I appreciated the data analysis conducted in this phase for two reasons. First, it enabled me to feed new insights into the interview protocols, to seek answers from informants in subsequent interviews, and to do follow-up interviews with previous informants. Second, as someone undertaking ethnographic research where I grew up and in a school where I studied and taught, I was able to critically question my perceptions, experiences, and beliefs about life and education in the Dadaab camps.

The data analysis in the post-fieldwork phase proceeded in several stages. First, all the interviews conducted in Somali were transcribed and then translated into English. The interviews conducted in English were also transcribed. Some of the transcription and translation of interviews was done by research assistants. Second, I reviewed the transcripts to make sure they were accurately translated and transcribed. During this review process, I took notes on emerging themes and interesting quotations. Third, themes I identified in the review process were used to create a codebook, which later was used to develop NVivo codes (themes). The codebook gave me the foundation on which to systematically code all the interviews using NVivo software. Coding interviews with NVivo enabled me to manage the data efficiently, access information quickly, identify key themes in the data, and cross-compare different themes. Although the initial development of the codebook served as a building block, I continued to change the overall framework of codes for the major themes and subthemes in the coding process.

After completing the coding process, I began preparing for this article by doing several rounds of reading through the themes relevant to this study, and taking notes about my reflections on and interpretation of the information. This study's overarching theme of interest was coded as "future aspirations," which included the subthemes of higher education, work and career, family and marriage, resettlement, return, and other aspirations. While the future aspirations theme is central to this study, writing this paper was also informed by my analysis of several other connected major themes, such as challenges, relationships, and coping mechanisms. The writing process involved progressive interpretation of the data.

Research Limitations

Some of the shortcomings in this study stem from certain aspects of the research methodology. Like most ethnographic research, this study focuses on a single case (Dadaab camps), a single ethnic group (Somalis), and one school level (Form One). The study's focus is on Ifo camp and Form One students at Ifo Secondary School and Gedi Secondary School. It could be claimed that, because of the small number of cases, the study findings are not representative of the aspirations and experiences of students at other levels. For example, Form Four students, who are about to graduate, may have a different vision of the future than they did when in Form One. They may be influenced positively or negatively by previous graduates, and by their own performance trajectory over the four-year period. Nevertheless, my aim in this study is not for generalizability based on "sample-to-population logic" (Yin 2013, 325). I suggest that analytical generalization, which implies abstraction based on conceptual ideas that can be relevant to other cases (Yin 2013), is a suitable logic here, rather than case- and population-based generalization.

RESETTLEMENT-BASED SCHOLARSHIPS

Based on my interactions and interviews with secondary school students in the Dadaab camps, the research data revealed that most of the young people aspire to receive a resettlement-based scholarship in order to pursue their tertiary education overseas. This is true for students across the public and private secondary schools, whether or not they are performing well. Students most often refer to the WUSC program. Some students expressed their general desire to study in Canada, while others mentioned specific universities, such as the University of Toronto and the University of Calgary.

The WUSC scholarship program combines a tertiary education with an opportunity to secure a permanent residency permit, which enables recipients to live in Canada with the prospect of becoming citizens. This program has been the only consistent resettlement-based scholarship available to students in the Dadaab camps. The WUSC program, which is the only one of its kind in the world, is a joint effort of students and faculty/staff members across universities and colleges in Canada, who work together to mobilize the financial, human, and material resources needed to facilitate refugee students' resettlement process in Canada (Peterson 2010). The WUSC program supplements the resettlement programs that the UN High Commissioner for Refugees coordinates with resettlement countries to provide lasting solutions for refugees.

The refugee students' pursuit of the WUSC scholarship is often a cumbersome and challenging journey, as the number of positions available annually is limited and the eligibility grades are incredibly high (Peterson 2010). At present, the standard for refugee candidates in Kenya is a mean grade on the KCSE exam of *B+* and above for boys, and a *B* and above for girls. These grades are often difficult to attain because of the refugees' poor quality education, which results in their poor performance on the KCSE exams. These intertwined issues often are due to numerous challenges, such as overcrowded classes, scarce learning facilities, limited trained teachers, and overreliance on untrained secondary school graduates to teach in the secondary schools. Since 2007, besides students' poor performance, schools in the Dadaab camps have been experiencing frequent recurrent cancellation of students' KCSE results, due to exam irregularities. The cancellation of their KCSE results not only forces students to retake the exam, it also discourages them from investing as much energy in it as they did the first time.

Understanding the Aspiration to Earn a Resettlement-Based Scholarship

One of the reasons behind the Dadaab youths' aspiration to receive a resettlement-based scholarship is the belief that success in education will grant them an "exit license" from the confines of the camp. The young people describe life in the camps as "humiliating," "not having a good future," and "not being free."

Kowsar is a 20-year-old student who was raised by and lives with her elderly grandmother. Her family moved to Dadaab in 2011, due to the recurring war in her hometown of Kismayo, the port city in the southern Lower Juba region of Somalia. Kowsar does not foresee any prospect of returning to her hometown or even to Somalia because of the enduring insecurity and political instability. The Al-Shabaab terrorist group still controls a vast area of the region they fled from. Nevertheless, Kowsar believes that, if she continues to put enough effort into her schoolwork, she will be able to get an overseas scholarship to study and live in Canada. This belief in her ability, which stems from her success in her primary school studies, reinforces her hope and expectation of earning the eligibility grade for the WUSC program. When Kowsar was in primary school, she was an exceptionally high-performing pupil. As a result of her extraordinary talent, she had skipped two grades, second and fourth. Missing out on two foundational school years did not compromise her performance in the subsequent grades, and she ended up earning the second highest grade on the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) in her school. While discussing her experiences with refugee life and her aspiration to receive an overseas scholarship, Kowsar said this:

> Living in a foreign country and being a refugee motivates me,
> and that my country, my people, and my relatives need me…
> The name of this place we are living in is a humiliating one.
> We are called refugees. If someone asks you, "Where do you
> live?" You will answer, "Kenya and specifically in a refugee
> camp," which is a humiliating name…This encourages me to
> work hard so as to get out of this place…I know that there are
> grades that if any student gets, they will be taken to Canada. If
> I work hard and get these grades, then I will get the chance to
> go as well.

Indeed, a belief in hard work and the sheer determination to succeed in and
through education is embedded firmly in the educational culture of the young
people in the Dadaab camps. These young people are made to believe that, if all
other things fail them, education will not. Consequently, they persistently strive to
succeed, despite all the hurdles in their path. The inspiration to invest in education
is conveyed through their parents, siblings, and teachers, and through their peers.
This is well illustrated by the story of Kabi, a 19-year-old student who was born
and raised in the Dadaab camps. Kabi started his schooling in 2011 at Horyaal
Primary School in the Ifo camp, where he was admitted in grade one. From first
grade up to the sixth grade, Kabi's examination marks were low because of his
lack of effort. On one end-of-term exam he took in sixth grade, Kabi had the
lowest mark in his class. On that day, as students happily interacted and shared
the good news of their grades with each other, Kabi was grieving and sad. He
was approached by a girl, a classmate, who had emerged as the best student in his
class. The girl consoled him and advised him to put more effort into his learning;
she also promised that she would help him as much as she could. From that day
on, with the help of this girl, Kabi started reviewing all his subjects from grade
one through the sixth grade. After two years of hard work, Kabi was able to pass
the KCPE with good marks. One of his teachers in the primary school tried to
motivate him to work harder by offering him rewards, even though he was not
among the top-performing students who were supposed to receive prizes.

When Kabi joined Form One, he started to fall back into his old habits and began
to disregard his school activities because of the influence of his peers, whom he
describes as "troublesome backbenchers." Through the entire first school term,
he was sloppy when writing notes, and as a result he scored a *C+* on the first
end-of-term exam. Kabi had a positive reaction to this poor performance, and
at the beginning of the second term he decided to move to the front desks, next
to the two highest performing students. His new friends occasionally advised

him to concentrate on his readings when other students were storytelling, and they helped him recover from his poor performance in the previous term. At the end of the second term, Kabi scored an *A-* on the final exam—a substantial improvement in a short period of time. Encouraged by newfound confidence in his ability to perform well if he made a sustained effort, Kabi believed that he would be able to score at least an *A-* on the KCSE. Kabi was also hopeful and optimistic that success in school would give him and his classmates a pathway out of the hardship and suffering in the camps. While discussing his life in the camps and his hopes of creating a sustainable future through success in education, Kabi said:

> Life in the camps is tough. There is not sufficient food, and you hear that all the medicine has been stopped. The only thing that keeps people here is education…If there were no education, we would not have stayed here. Previously, people used to stay in the camps for resettlement purposes, but such opportunities are not as they were before…To get resettlement and live a beautiful life, one needs to get a higher grade [on the examination]…I am also hoping to get a good grade, and I seek help from God to achieve it. Because I do not think there are other ways to get out of the refugee life other than through succeeding in my education.

In some instances, even when students make a sustained effort and have been performing well on the school-based examinations, when they receive the KCSE results their grades often turn out to be far lower than what they had been expecting. The KCSE is almost in the same format as school-based examinations; the only difference is that independent examiners grade them. In such circumstances, some young people refuse to accept first-time failure as an actual failure and sustain their determination to succeed. They attempt the KCSE for a second time, or a third, or even more. Some succeed the second time around, others in the third, and some others never make it, no matter how many times they sit the KCSE.

Yusuf (a pseudonym) is a 23-year-old assistant refugee teacher. Yusuf told me that he registered for the KCSE for the third time in 2019, and he was hoping to succeed this time around. Sadly, based on the information I received after leaving the field, none of the students in the class of 2019 in all three camps were able to earn the eligibility grades for the WUSC scholarships.

Abdisamad, another Form One student who is 18 years old, told me that one of his elder brothers who scored a *C* on the 2018 KCSE decided to register for a second time in 2019, in order to boost his grades for the WUSC program. He also has a cousin who failed the KCPE in the past but decided not to give up, and in the second attempt he not only passed but scored good marks, which earned him a full scholarship to study for free in a private secondary school outside the camps. When the same cousin did his KCSE, he scored a high grade on the first attempt and got a WUSC scholarship, and he now studies in Canada. Abdisamad himself received a full scholarship for his secondary education from one of the private secondary schools in the Ifo camp, after emerging as the highest performing pupil from the Abdul-Aziz Primary School on the 2018 KCPE. Abdisamad believes in the power of hard work, persistence, and being well organized to put one on the pathway to success. Abdisamad discussed his future goals:

> When I received the scholarship to study at Gedi Secondary School, I set goals for myself that I should be better organized to attain a good grade in the KCSE and to seek a scholarship to study in Canada. My hope is to receive a good education in Canada, study well, and go on to have a good life.

Considering the different experiences of the young people presented above, it is fair to suggest that, while hard work, motivation, and the sheer determination to succeed are crucial, they are insufficient if students lack the capacity to identify the causes of their failure and to address them effectively.

Resolving Precarious Economic Conditions and Academic Unfreedom

Other interconnected factors that ground students' persistent pursuit of overseas scholarships is the hope that receiving a scholarship will give them opportunities to access a good quality tertiary education and the chance to pursue their desired career, and will put them on the pathway to translate their acquired knowledge and skills into meaningful economic value.

Saido is a 20-year-old student who hopes to study engineering with a specialization in oil engineering. Like some of her peers, Saido believes that the opportunity to access good-quality programs such as engineering and medicine are not possible in Africa, particularly in Kenya. While discussing her aspiration to earn a WUSC scholarship, she said:

> I was inspired when the WUSC candidates visited our school last time. They encouraged us to put more effort into our education…so that we can get the WUSC scholarship. And I am determined to achieve it…The scholarship will help me study any course I want. In Africa, you cannot get any course you want to study, but outside of Africa, you can.

Libaan is an 18-year-old student who aspires to study medicine in Canada. When I asked him why he wants to study there, he said, "It is essential for me because the quality of universities in Canada is much better than those in Africa, especially in Kenya, where I live. That is why I want to study my university education in Canada."

Indeed, refugees' access to good-quality tertiary education is not a matter of its availability in Kenya but a matter of access to the desired programs, which are often expensive to offer, due to the limited funding available for refugees' tertiary education. Moreover, even when refugees are able to access their desired career path when they graduate, they are confronted by a strict citizenship regime that denies them the possibility to convert acquired knowledge and skills into meaningful economic value, as they lack the right to hold wage-paying jobs.

Hussein is a 30-year-old refugee teacher who is trained as a secondary school teacher. He obtained his bachelor's degree in education through funding from the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees project. Hussein expressed his frustration at not being able to reap the rewards of his struggle and hard work to get an education:

> I am now working as an incentive refugee teacher. When I look at my job class level, it is a bachelor's degree, but the salary I am paid is not close to the salary a Kenyan teacher receives. It is not fair that a teacher like me is paid 70,000 KSh while I am paid 10,000 KSh. You may sometimes think of giving up, but I always reflect on how incentive teachers, like me, taught me when I was younger. So, I always consider this as a service I am delivering to my society and not the money. If I today go back to Somalia, I am a very skilled man who can do a lot of things.

Like Hussein, many graduates in the Dadaab camps remain trapped in incentive-paying voluntary jobs, rather than actual salaried jobs. The incentive payment is strictly regulated by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the Kenyan government harmonization policy, which establishes the minimum and maximum incentive wages refugees can receive, based on their skills and work experience. In Dadaab camp, the incentive scale is set between US$30 and US$120 monthly, while in Kakuma it is US$30-US$90 monthly (Morris and Voon 2014, 32).

Enhancing Chances for Other Tertiary Education Opportunities

Students believe that, by working hard to get a good grade on the KCSE and being motivated by their dreams of an overseas tertiary education, their chances of getting local tertiary education opportunities that require lower grades will improve. When I asked students about their contingency plans in the event that they are not awarded a WUSC scholarship, many of them were optimistic about the prospect of getting a DAFI scholarship from the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative Fund, which offers refugees in the Global South opportunities to study at the local universities in their host countries.

For example, when I asked 18-year-old student Libaan what his next actions would be if his aspiration to receive a WUSC scholarship failed to materialize, he explained his contingency plans:

> I expect that not to happen, *Insha'Allah*. But if it happens, my next plan will be to study at a university in Kenya. If someone gets a good grade but does not qualify for WUSC, there are always other chances available like the DAFI scholarship, which is funded by organizations, and that will be my next plan. If I do not get either scholarship, I will stop school there and go back to my homeland [Somalia] and look for a job there, maybe physical work.

The DAFI program offers a hope-reviving opportunity for many young people whose aspiration to get an overseas scholarship is thwarted. It serves as an alternative "exit license" from the camp, because those with DAFI scholarships relocate to Nairobi, as their programs are full time and often require in-person attendance. Earning a DAFI scholarship is a more plausible possibility than a WUSC scholarship. However, we cannot disregard the possibility that some of the young people who initially aspired to earn an overseas scholarship may fail to achieve eligibility grades for either scholarship. Getting into the DAFI program

provides young people with a sense of comfort and relief after many years of being locked up in the camps—often without the opportunity to socialize with people or experience life outside the camps. Through this program, refugees can achieve de facto integration—an informal opportunity to participate in the social and economic activities in Kenya. The de facto integration may sometimes create opportunities for de jure integration, such as gaining naturalization by marrying a Kenyan national. In fact, the DAFI-sponsored graduates hardly ever return to the camps to live and seek incentive jobs. Instead, they negotiate their way, formally or informally, and establish themselves in Nairobi through self-employment or by finding employment through their network of family and friends.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this study, I examined the rationale behind Dadaab refugee youths' persistent pursuit of resettlement-based scholarships for tertiary education, even when the odds of getting one are minimal. I identified several interconnected reasons for this: (1) students believe that success in education is the pathway to an "exit license" out of the camps; (2) they imagine that getting an overseas scholarship will resolve their precarious economic condition and the academic unfreedom they experience; (3) they believe that, by working hard to succeed and being motivated by the dream of a tertiary education abroad, their chances of accessing other tertiary education opportunities will increase. These findings suggest several empirically and conceptually significant issues. First, using the hope theory perspective, the educational aspirations and challenges confronting refugee youth in the Dadaab camps reveal some features similar to and some different from other refugee and nonrefugee youth worldwide. The Dadaab youth, like other youth, seek a higher education as a means to achieve social and economic upward mobility and other valued freedoms (Bhabha, Giles, and Mahomed 2020; Marginson 2016). However, complex structural and cultural barriers, which are beyond the young people's power to influence, limit their ability to achieve their goals (Morrice et al. 2020; Bellino 2018; Franceschelli and Keating 2018).

Across the world, and especially in the Global South, young people face a significant disjuncture between the historic possibilities ascribed to education and the current opportunities available to them, due to structural barriers such as limited employment opportunities. Structural challenges that cause such tensions often have a disproportionate effect on the aspirations of young people from marginalized socioeconomic backgrounds, such as refugees, indigenous peoples,

and racial and ethnic minorities (Abamosa 2021; Bhabha, Giles, and Mahomed 2020, 2; Zipin et al. 2015).

Second, on the conceptual front, the Dadaab refugee youths' aspirations to earn an overseas scholarship are shaped and in some ways sustained by the refugee experience of precarity, unfreedom, and humiliation, and by the cultural logic that education is a pathway to prosperity. The narrative of the transformational power of education is prevalent among refugees in the Dadaab camps and the Somali community. Young people have been made to believe that, by excelling academically and getting a WUSC scholarship, they will be able to secure a better and more sustainable future for themselves and their families, and for their larger community. Young people quite commonly use the logic of having responsibility for their family and the greater community to sustain their desire for an overseas scholarship. The use of collectivist cultural logic as a motivation to continue learning and working toward valued goals has been shown to be a common feature among refugee youth across numerous cultures, including Somali, South Sudanese, and Congolese communities (Dryden-Peterson 2017; Bellino 2021). Young people also rely on their rich cultural strengths as a resource that enables them to confront and negotiate obstacles, often by seeking support through familial connections, role models, peer-to-peer support systems, and formal institutional support systems (Abu-Amsha and Armstrong 2018; Dahya and Dryden-Peterson 2017).

Third, the logic of hard work and sheer determination as the path to success against all odds is integral to the educational culture of the young refugees in the Dadaab camps. As reflected in the findings, some of the young people in the Dadaab camps do not regard failing the national examinations (the KCPE and the KCSE) on the first attempt as a failure but as a stepping stone in their strategy to do better on subsequent attempts. These crucial cultural capacities are transferred from one generation of students to the next through the stories of peers who have achieved remarkable success. Again, the culture of hard work as the path to success against all odds is not unique to Somalis and the refugee youth in the Dadaab camps. As Bellino (2020) notes, hard work is also common among students from numerous cultures in Kenya's Kakuma camps. Arguably, the cultural logic of hoping to achieve a better and more sustainable future through education shapes and sustains young people's motivation to pursue overseas scholarships, which outweighs the poor odds of attaining them.

The young people's capacity to pursue lofty educational goals is a strength, not a weakness, because through this endeavor they can gain crucial cultural skill sets, such as effective planning, risk management, coping skills, and a strong sense of resilience (Snyder 2002). Nevertheless, it is equally important to recognize that, while young people may pursue their educational aspirations with great tenacity, their ability to deploy effective strategies to succeed and to manage failure is a treasure that is unevenly awarded to them. Such differential capacity might make some of them experience a "more brittle horizon of aspirations" (Appadurai 2004, 69), which often forces them to adjust their goals to what is feasible. Others may encounter failure without any social or structural resources or the psychological ability to manage it. Some young people who experience such a startling and acute encounter with failure may lose the "capacity to have any hope about anything" (Berlant 2011, 24). Moreover, due to the lack of professional support for effective grief management in the camps, experiencing failure may cause some of the youth to suffer from toxic psychological strain—an antecedent of suicidal behavior (Zhang et al. 2013). In fact, on May 29, 2019, during the third week of my fieldwork trip to the Dadaab camps, a student who was a second-time candidate for the KCSE committed a harrowing and heartbreaking act of suicide. His teachers believe that the student was overwhelmed by stress as a result of failing to achieve the expected grade, combined with his inability to manage the situation.

The story of young people in the Dadaab camps and their educational aspirations suggests two extreme ends and the double-edged effects of having high hopes. At the completion of secondary school, one student might have phenomenal success that defies the odds, while another might face extreme failure, which can lead to hopelessness, depression, and suicidal thoughts. However, these two extremes are rare, as most of the students find themselves in the middle at the end of the secondary school journey.

In conclusion, I argue that marginalized youth having high aspirations—while powerful and important to their wellbeing and in providing value to the social world—is not sufficient to ensure that they will have a meaningful future. It is crucial that structural and cultural constraints do not block these young people's hopes, and that they are fostered or guided through dedicated programs. Future studies may consider examining the navigational capacities of young people across different protracted emergency settings, which would help us understand further how young people work to achieve their educational aspirations and what strategies they adopt to negotiate and navigate everyday hurdles related to their schooling.

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