



## Refugee REACH ROUNDS

Harvard Graduate School of Education

### Access or Quality? Decision-Making on Priorities in Refugee Education<sup>1</sup>

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Photo Credit: Jesuit Refugee Services

**Refugee REACH ROUNDS** aim to foster discussions on common dilemmas of practice experienced by researchers, policymakers, and educators working in settings of migration and displacement. Our hope is that through dialogue and debate on really challenging questions and dilemmas in our field, together we can advance our collective understanding and find ways to promote quality education and welcoming communities for all in settings of migration and displacement. Please read more about our work at [www.reach.gse.harvard.edu](http://www.reach.gse.harvard.edu)

## Dilemma Definition: Ensuring Access and Quality of Education for Refugees

Education is a human right, and refugees' right to education is enshrined in the Universal Declaration for Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the 1951 Refugee Convention. Yet refugee children and young people face many obstacles in accessing primary and secondary education. Refugees are far more likely to be out of school than other children globally. Only 77 percent of refugee children access primary school compared to 92 percent of children globally; and only 31 percent of refugee young people access secondary school compared to 84 percent of young people globally.<sup>2</sup>

These access rates mask large variation within nation-states and for groups marginalized along lines of race, class, caste, gender, and language, among other factors. They also hide the quality of education refugees have access to. Whether students are learning is a critical but often unanswered question. Specification of the "essential features" of the right to education include the "4 As": education must be *available* in sufficient quality for all; be *accessible* to all, without discrimination; be *acceptable*, meaning relevant, of good quality, and culturally appropriate; and *adaptable* to meet changing needs of society.<sup>3</sup> These features of education, in theory, apply to "all persons of school age residing in the territory of a State party, including non-nationals, and irrespective of their legal status."<sup>4</sup>

The right to education, with these essential features, is a social right and, according to human rights instruments, is to be progressively realized through actions by governments, allocation of public resources, and enforcement mechanisms. Since 2012, in most refugee hosting countries, refugees have been included in national education systems, meaning that they follow the national curriculum, using national languages of instruction, within national examination and certification systems. Yet the responsibility for supporting the education of refugees within national education systems is unclear. Eighty six percent of refugees globally live in countries classified as 'developing countries,' settings where adequate resources for education of long-time resident populations is also challenging. Global funding for refugee education, while growing, is limited and typically only allocated over short time horizons, even though 80 percent of refugees are displaced for over five years and 20 percent for over 20 years.<sup>5</sup>

Given these constraints, what principles do you think should guide decision-making about priorities of access and of quality in refugee education?



## Dilemma in Practice

Farakh was the Education Coordinator for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. Established in 1992 for refugees fleeing civil war in what was then Sudan, Kakuma has been open continuously since. Currently, almost 200,000 refugees live in Kakuma, mostly having fled South Sudan, but also from Somalia, DRC, Burundi, Ethiopia, Sudan, Rwanda, and Uganda. Access to education in Kakuma had increased over the time Farakh had been working there but was still very low, with only half of primary school children enrolled in school. According to his numbers, there were over 40,000 primary school students, and only four secondary schools.

Farakh was also losing sleep over whether even those children who were enrolled in school were learning. On a recent visit to one of the camp primary schools, Farakh couldn't believe his eyes. Just weeks after splitting primary classes at all camp schools into morning and afternoon sessions in order to reduce class size, there were 126 students crammed across the wobbly benches in each classroom. A few weeks ago, the number would not have surprised him, but the goal of the "double shift" was to reduce class size to no more than 50 pupils per teacher. Farakh had hoped that restructuring classes would increase the quality of students' learning and their opportunities for the future. Had word spread this quickly that classes were smaller, that teaching was better, that school had become a more comfortable, more personable space?

The teacher, a small Congolese man, entered, greeting the class and their visitor. He wrote on the board in large letters. Farakh walked to the back of the room to see what the students seated in the farthest benches could see and hear. It wasn't much. The sun glared on the board, despite the teacher's efforts to write in large handwriting and occasionally spell words aloud. Four or five students shared the narrow benches, even the smallest students scrunching their shoulders together to take up less space. Noise seemed to travel from the front of the room to the sides, out the windows and into the courtyard, rather than to the back of the classroom. When Farakh stood against the thin wall at the back of the room, he could hear the teacher on the other side guiding students in her own chorus of questions and answers. He thought he could even feel her hands writing on the chalkboard. Farakh had thought that the new double shift strategy would allow schools to focus on teacher development and student achievement, but now he found himself returning to the drawing board.



*From the Research:*

*Learning outcomes are low in refugee camps*

The first literacy census in a refugee camp was conducted in Kakuma in 2019, using the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA). The EGRA is used in more than 60 countries to assess levels of literacy among early primary students and as a tool to generate suggestions for improvement based on the outcomes. Benjamin Piper, lead author on this study, describes the outcomes in Kakuma as “heartbreakingly bad.” Grade 2 students answered only two percent of reading comprehension questions correctly for a simple passage, both in Kiswahili and in English, the languages of instruction in their schools. In these comprehension skills, which are critical predictors of later academic success, Grade 3 students in Kakuma scored substantially below Grade 2 Kenyan students, with only 4.7 percent and 22.0 percent correct respectively, even though the refugee students were almost one full instructional year ahead in school. Literacy outcomes among refugee children in Kakuma were some of the lowest seen in any study in low- and middle-income countries.<sup>6</sup>



*From the Research:*

*Students perceive that the quality of their education is low*

Policies to include refugees in national education systems, in theory, support access to increased quality of education, in particular through established curricula, trained teachers, and national examination and certification structures. Yet not all national schools are created equal. In his ethnography of schooling in Rwanda, Tim Williams finds that “delivering education to the poor” often consists of “delivering poor education.”<sup>7</sup> In Lebanon, less than one third of Lebanese nationals enroll in public schools, the schools that refugees have access to, reflecting a prevalent belief that the public education system provides a poor quality of education.<sup>8</sup>

In the Turkana region of Kenya, where Kakuma is located, only 11 percent of young people have access to secondary school compared to 48 percent in Kenya as a whole,<sup>9</sup> and Turkana ranks 45<sup>th</sup> of the 47 counties in Kenya in learning outcomes at the end of lower primary school.<sup>10</sup> Students in Kakuma find that inclusion in national schools in the camp involves a process of “integrating down” into a lack of opportunities rather than a chance for “integrating up” into economic, civic, and political opportunities in Kenya. Nasra, a participant in Michelle J. Bellino

and Sarah Dryden-Peterson’s study in Kakuma, said of her school, “The syllabus is the same, but the education is not the same.”<sup>11</sup>



*From the Research:*

*Refugees’ education experiences often misalign with their future goals*

When asked about the purposes of education, refugee children and families are clear and consistent in their responses: the purposes of education are to help them build their futures. These futures are both short-term and long-term and connect educational experiences with opportunities. These opportunities include, among others, access to further education, economic livelihoods, civic participation.

Attending national schools, following the national curriculum, sitting for national exams, and obtaining national certification feels to many refugees like a promise of being able to use those experiences, skills, and credentials to pursue opportunities in a host country.<sup>12</sup> Yet in most refugee-hosting countries, refugees do not have the right to work, to own property, to accrue capital, or to move freely.<sup>13</sup> The purposes of attending and persisting in school, then, come to feel misaligned with the unrequited promises of future opportunities. While many refugees seek to use their education toward goals of rebuilding their countries of origin,<sup>14</sup> these opportunities can also often remain closed given protracted conflict and displacement.

While education has the potential to create longer term opportunities, translate to security, and address inequalities, it often works counter to these purposes. School attendance does not ensure that children and youth are learning or that there are opportunities to be had afterward. In many cases, neither safety nor mobility is guaranteed based on students’ schooling alone. Assuming that education is an equalizer can perpetuate disparity by treating enrollment itself as the realization of the right to education, leaving students on the margins with overcrowded classrooms and few opportunities for continued study, work, or alternative pathways.

Registering students for school checks off the theoretical “education” box on a list of service provision, but many questions stand between education as it is imagined and education as it is delivered. In Kakuma, for example, although children access education, their scores show disproportionately low achievement. For these students, the value of their schooling is unclear. At extremely low quality, is their access to education meaningful? Limited resources and infrastructure in settings like Kakuma can compromise the purposes of education, even exacerbating inequalities and existing conflict. When the purposes of education are unrealized in practice, something needs to change—but what?



## Dilemma Revisited: Dilemma in Practice

As Farakh weighed these factors, he asked himself how he might improve the quality of education in Kakuma and bring students closer to these futures they and their families imagined. He had doubled the number of secondary schools in Kakuma from two to four. He had tried a “double shift” to accommodate double the number of students in smaller classes. He had invested in teacher training. The patchwork of funding for education in Kakuma was made up of intermittent, piecemeal support, with limited, unpredictable budgets and short-term vision. Donors were often far removed from the context. It was common for support to be discontinued with little or no warning, even when educational programs were fulfilling requirements. Without a massive influx of new resources, what options did he have?

He had a new idea, but he was unsure how popular it might be and if it would even work. The national policy in Kenya was 100% transition to secondary school, regardless of what score a student received on the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE). This kind of “open door” policy seemed right for primary school. But what if he adopted a different policy in Kakuma for secondary school, one of “selective entry”? By allowing only students who scored above a certain cut score to enroll in secondary school, he could ensure smaller class sizes and invest more money in teacher training, with possible improvements to the quality of learning and the kinds of skills that students could use to create future opportunities, either in Kenya or in their countries of origin.

As he considered a “selective entry” policy for enrollment in secondary school, Farakh wondered what the purposes of education in Kakuma really were and how he could define policies that supported as many young people as possible to realize these purposes. In asking this question, Farakh navigated tensions among global and national policies, local needs and resource constraints, and the future opportunities he hoped that education would enable his students to build.



## Questions to Consider Ahead of Discussion

- At what quality is education a meaningful human right in settings with limited resources and infrastructure?
- What bearing does education's range of quality have on its
  - Potential as an equalizer?
  - Characterization as a human right?
- What are the purposes of education? How do refugees' experiences in exile influence these purposes over the short-term and long-term? With what implications for equity?
- What is the intention of implementing a "selective entry" policy for secondary school entry? What are the benefits and drawbacks of this policy? What problems would this policy solve or create?
- If you were Farakh, what course of action might you pursue?



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This brief draws on work by Michelle J. Bellino and Sarah Dryden-Peterson. Please see Bellino, M. and S. Dryden-Peterson (2016). [Access or quality? Decision-making on education in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya](#). [Teaching Cases](#). Cambridge, MA, Harvard Education Press. The dilemma that Farakh faces is not fictionalized; it is based on data collected in Kakuma in 2014.

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR (2020). [Coming Together for Refugee Education](#). Geneva, UNHCR, page 9; UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2020). [Inclusion and education: all means all](#). Paris, UNESCO, page 213.

<sup>3</sup> Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), 'General Comment No 13: The Right to Education', UN doc E/C.12/1999/10 (8 December 1999) para 6.

<sup>4</sup> i Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), 'General Comment No 13: The Right to Education', UN doc E/C.12/1999/10 (8 December 1999) para 34.

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR (2020). [Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019](#). Geneva, UNHCR.

<sup>6</sup> Piper, B., et al. (2020). "Are Refugees Learning? Early Grade Literacy Outcomes in a Refugee Camp in Kenya." [Journal on Education in Emergencies](#) 5(2).

<sup>7</sup> Williams, T. P. (2017). "The Political Economy of Primary Education: Lessons from Rwanda." [World Development](#) **96**: 550-561.

<sup>8</sup> MEHE (2017). RACE Lebanon: Presentation to Education Partners Meeting. Beirut, Lebanon, Ministry of Education and Higher Education.

<sup>9</sup> UNICEF. (2017). [Turkana Social Sector Budget Brief \(2013–2014 to 2015–2016\)](#)'

<sup>10</sup> Uwezo (2016). Are Our Children Learning? Uwezo Kenya Sixth Learning Assessment Report. Nairobi, Twaweza East Africa.

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- <sup>11</sup> Bellino, M.J., and Sarah Dryden-Peterson. 2018. Inclusion and Exclusion within a Policy of National Integration: Refugee Education in Kenya's Kakuma Refugee Camp. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 40, no. 2: 222-38.
- <sup>12</sup> Dryden-Peterson, S., Adelman, E., Bellino, M. J., & Chopra, V. (2019). The Purposes of Refugee Education: Policy and Practice of Including Refugees in National Education Systems. *Sociology of Education*, 92(4), 346-366. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040719863054>
- <sup>13</sup> Zetter, R. and H. I. s. Ruadel (2016). Refugees' Right to Work and Access to Labor Markets – An Assessment. KNOMAD Working Paper and Study Series. Washington, DC, Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD).
- <sup>14</sup> Dryden-Peterson, S., et al. (2017). "Pathways to Educational Success Among Refugees: Connecting Locally and Globally Situated Resources." *American Educational Research Journal*; Chopra, V. (2018). *Learning to Belong, Belonging to Learn: Syrian Refugee Youths' Pursuits of Education, Membership and Stability in Lebanon*. Harvard Graduate School of Education. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University.