



Refugee higher education: Contextual challenges and implications for program design, delivery, and accompaniment



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ABSTRACT

Refugees experience limited access to adequate education at all levels but opportunities for higher education are especially lacking. This study explores the perspectives of 122 students involved in a pilot program of higher education in two refugee camps and one urban setting. Students reported gratitude for the experience but uncertainty about the future, and widely different contextual challenges to pursuing education. In a forced migration context, higher education may constitute a psychosocial intervention as much as an educational program. This unique dynamic begs the need for systemic thinking, with implications for program planning and delivery as a means of accompaniment.

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1. Introduction

Millions of forced migrants currently are trapped in protracted refugee situations and placed in long-term encampments (UNHCR, 2013). These individuals experience limited access to adequate education at all levels, but opportunities for higher education are especially lacking (Wright and Plasterer, 2010) in spite of a documented interest in pursuing post-secondary education (Dryden-Peterson and Giles, 2010). Education can be seen as a means of personal empowerment and efficacy, by providing a sense of purpose amidst the “uprootedness” of refugee status and being indefinitely contained in a camp-like setting (Kirk, 2010; Zeus, 2011).

Yet, the resource constrained contexts of refugee camps present significant challenges (Steel et al., 2011) to refugees who wish to pursue educational activities, and to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in terms of implementing educational programs (Hoff and Hickling-Hudson, 2011). Given various funding streams behind NGO activities, educational and other initiatives are often stand-alone (i.e., vertical) interventions lacking integration with other services or opportunities. The field of global health has long debated the need for horizontal integration of vertical interventions to provide a more holistic set of supports for vulnerable populations (Oliviera-Cruz et al., 2003), and more recently this conversation has shifted to encompass systems strengthening

(Kim et al., 2013). Non-health related fields, however, have lagged in adopting a systems framework, despite the need for more integrated social service delivery (Davis et al., 2012). In the absence of such a systems framework and thinking, and in a context of highly vulnerable people such as forced migrants, participants in a higher education program may find themselves better educated, but lacking work opportunities and pathways to participate in the “vocation of being human” (McGrath, 2012, p. 630).

The purpose of the current study is to document and explore the perspectives of refugees who were students in the pilot phase of a higher education program, Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins (JC:HEM). Using a postcolonial perspective (Hoff and Hickling-Hudson, 2011), this study relies heavily on a grounded theory of refugees' experiences with higher education within the context of their displacement. We also examine survey data collected from these students related to their quality of life, and compare these data with their assessments of higher education as a means of exploring the context of their education.

1.1. Refugee education as a source of resilience

Access to higher education can play a critical role in facilitating transitions for refugees by providing skills that increase social capital and are transferable in different contexts (Taylor and Sidhu, 2012; Wright and Plasterer, 2010). Given the lack of tertiary education opportunities typically available in refugee camps, most of the existing literature focuses on refugees who have resettled to another country. Existing research has found links between access

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to education, increased quality of life, expanded livelihood opportunities (Cron Dahl and Eklund, 2012), and improvements in mental health (Mitschke et al., 2013).

Educational opportunities may buffer some negative aspects of forced migration. Refugees in protracted situations often experience a loss of dignity when their level of education or former position are no longer valued by the community, which in turn contributes to lower reported quality of life (Vries and Van Heck, 1994). Long-term displacement also depletes the resources available to refugees at individual, family, socio-economic, and cultural levels, and leads to mental distress (Horn, 2010). In this context, higher education can help refugees develop a “critical consciousness” by providing students with a voice in their communities and empowering them to create change (Dryden-Peterson and Giles, 2010). Access to higher education may help refugees serve as role models within their homes and communities and inspire younger generations to become active participants within their schools and society (Wright and Plasterer, 2010).

The development of a future orientation for refugees, and particularly younger refugees, can be an important facet of educational opportunities. Absent these opportunities, refugees are at heightened risk for adopting political or ethnic ideologies that give them a sense of purpose and meaning (Hart, 2008). For those living amidst war and political violence, having ideological commitments could serve as a protective factor, as identifying with a particular political side is related to survival (Pumanaki, 1996). Those who have experienced traumatic and unjust events are better able to reframe the meaning of these events if they possess an ideological lens that erases the concept of “victim” and replaces it with that of “fighter” (Dawes, 1990; Pumanaki, 1996). Yet, those who live in refugee camps have been forced to participate in systems that teach them to identify as “vulnerable” in order to receive resources and services (Hart, 2008). In this regard, educational programs hold the key to reframing this dichotomy, such that students can “fight” to further their knowledge, education, sense of self-efficacy and quality of life – and in so doing, mitigate the need to identify with violent and sectarian ideologies to which they may otherwise be vulnerable (El Jack, 2010). Research on Sudanese refugees has shown education to be a powerful means of reconstructing lives and identities which enhances equality and independence, while providing youth a sense of hope that reduces their risk of militarization (El Jack, 2010).

Within refugee camps, issues of language, history, gender and religion can become sources of contention. Yet, education may help bridge these issues by fostering a sense of belonging within the community (Waters and LeBlanc, 2005; Makhoul et al., 2012) by modeling inclusionary practices and hope (Betancourt, 2005). In Kakuma camp in Kenya, for example, adult English as a Second Language (ESL) programs have become an important tool for conflict resolution and have aided in dispute settlements between rival tribes that previously lacked a common language (Wright and Plasterer, 2010). More generally, refugees often see education as key to securing their futures, and a mechanism through which to preserve cultural traditions (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011). Education can also encourage inclusion and lessen exclusionary practices for particular groups of learners (Oh and van der Stouwe, 2008).

1.2. Challenges facing refugee higher education

Despite the documented benefits of refugee education in building resilience, significant obstacles exist to providing high quality education to refugees at any level. Even refugees with prior educational qualifications may face barriers to furthering their education, including lack of economic resources, differing requirements of institutions, inability to access educational and identification documentation (Dryden-Peterson and Giles, 2010), lack of

proficiency in the local language, and structural barriers around gender and culture (Watkins et al., 2012). Many educational programs within camps are not accredited or recognized by other institutions, making it difficult to continue education after leaving the camp (Zeus, 2011). In addition, the cost of attending university is very high, and refugee students usually must rely on limited scholarship opportunities which often do not cover all expenses (Anselme and Hands, 2010).

Furthermore, higher education is not typically viewed by development donors as a priority. Humanitarian agencies prioritize food, water and health expenditures over spending on education. Even within education, primary education receives the majority of funding, with secondary education receiving significantly less, and tertiary education receiving few, if any funds (Wright and Plasterer, 2010). Tertiary education is seen as an ‘elite’ or ‘privileged’ resource where the wealthy seem to benefit exclusively, and the higher costs of higher education seem to outweigh the benefits (Dryden-Peterson and Giles, 2010). Camps also often lack adequate primary education, creating a barrier for students to qualify for higher education opportunities (Wright and Plasterer, 2010). Even in camps where higher education is provided, educators and curriculum designers are challenged to design content and pedagogical methods that are relevant to refugee populations (Purkey, 2010; Dryden-Peterson and Giles, 2010). More research is therefore needed that focuses on refugees’ perspectives, especially related to educational and other needs, such that curriculum materials and pedagogy meet refugees’ immediate as well as long term needs (Purkey, 2010; Waters and LeBlanc, 2005).

1.3. Contextual challenges and systems thinking

Aside from the quality of education, refugees are often faced with an enduring lack of work opportunities in camps after receiving higher education. Higher education graduates in Daadab camp, Kenya, for example, are not allowed work permits and are thus able to work only as incentive employees, a situation which is common to other locations, and which may create a sense of frustration (Wright and Plasterer, 2010). As students will likely remain in camps long after graduation, educational activities need to be integrated more closely with post-educational work opportunities.

Global health and development experts increasingly are aware that strengthening the systems through which stand-alone initiatives are implemented is critical to ensuring the sustainability of improved outcomes over the long term (Kim et al., 2013). However, in the field of education and development, less attention has been paid to the integration of social and educational interventions, such that stand-alone programs – such as providing higher education to refugees – tend to operate independently of other services and needs within the local context. Using such a systems orientation could be useful in identifying pathways for students as they complete their education and use their skills in their immediate contexts. Yet, such an orientation demands an acknowledgment that programs must be well-designed and articulated, and adaptive to local conditions and needs. The current study examines refugees’ experiences in higher education, in light of this perspective.

1.4. The current study

This study is informed by the need to gather refugees’ own perspectives on higher education (Purkey, 2010; Waters and LeBlanc, 2005) and examine the extent to which refugees’ believe their educational efforts are helpful in the current context of their lives. Data were collected from refugees who were former or current students of the JC:HEM program in Kakuma camp, Kenya; Dzaleka camp, Malawi; or Amman, Jordan. The study is guided by three research questions:

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