Systematic education Challenges facing refugees' children in Urban Centers in Kenya

Kennedy Monari, *International Centre for Action Research and Development (ICARD)*

DOI : 10.51186/journals/ed.2026.16-1.e1889

Abstract

Refugee children faced war, violence, and trauma in their home countries before fleeing, and they continue to face unprecedented challenges once they arrive in their new country. They must adjust to a new political, economic, and cultural environment, as well as new education systems, customs, and language once they arrive in the host country. Most of the refugees are still encamped, while others have found ways to relocate to cities. A growing body of evidence suggests that education for refugees is less sustainable, frequently of lower quality, less accountable to families and children, and has fewer mechanisms in place for learners' formal completion or certification. Despite the existence of a draft Education Policy for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers (2019) and the government's efforts to expand educational opportunities for refugee children by allowing refugee children to enroll in public schools, most urban refugees face numerous barriers to integration into mainstream education. This study employed a qualitative case study design using semi-structured interviews with 20 teachers, 10 school administrators, three education officers and focus group discussions with 100 learners, complemented by document analysis. The data show that, while refugee access and retention have improved, many refugee children drop out of school, with many never enrolling in school. The main findings highlighted several challenges, such as a lack of teacher preparedness to work with refugee children, difficulties in using the language of instruction, and the impact of hidden costs, as well as learning outcomes and expectations in the classroom.

Keywords: access, education challenges, Kenya, systemic barriers, urban refugees

Résumé

Les enfants réfugié-es ont été confronté-es à la guerre, à la violence et à des traumatismes dans leur pays d'origine avant de fuir, et elles/ils continuent à faire face à des défis sans précédent une fois arrivé-es dans leur nouveau pays. Elles/ils réfugié-es doivent s'adapter à un nouvel environnement politique, économique et culturel, ainsi qu'à de nouveaux systèmes éducatifs, coutumes et langues une fois arrivé-es dans le pays d'accueil. La plupart des réfugié-es vivent encore dans des camps, tandis que d'autres ont trouvé le moyen de s'installer dans des villes. De plus en plus de données suggèrent que l'éducation des réfugié-

es est moins durable, souvent de moindre qualité, moins redevable envers les familles et les enfants, et dispose de moins de mécanismes pour permettre aux apprenant-es d'obtenir un diplôme ou une certification officielle. Malgré l'existence d'un projet de politique éducative pour les réfugié-es et les demandeur-es d'asile (2019) et les efforts du gouvernement pour élargir les possibilités d'éducation des enfants réfugié-es en leur permettant de s'inscrire dans les écoles publiques, la plupart des réfugié-es urbain-es sont confronté-es à de nombreux obstacles à leur intégration dans l'enseignement général. Cette étude a utilisé une méthodologie qualitative basée sur des entretiens semi-structurés avec 20 enseignant-es, 10 administrateurs/trices scolaires, trois responsables de l'éducation et des discussions de groupe avec 100 apprenant-es, complétées par une analyse documentaire. Les données montrent que, si l'accès et la rétention des réfugiés se sont améliorés, de nombreux enfants réfugié-es abandonnent l'école, et beaucoup ne s'inscrivent jamais à l'école. Les principales conclusions ont mis en évidence plusieurs défis, tels que le manque de préparation des enseignant-es à travailler avec des enfants réfugié-es, les difficultés liées à l'utilisation de la langue d'enseignement et l'impact des coûts cachés, ainsi que les résultats et les attentes en matière d'apprentissage en classe.

Mots-clés : accès, défis éducatifs, Kenya, obstacles systémiques, réfugié-es urbain-es

INTRODUCTION

Urban refugee children face interrelated and multi-layered barriers to accessing and integrating into primary education. While global statistics on displacement indicate that more than 84.2 million people are currently displaced, with over 30 million classified as refugees, a significant shift has occurred: nearly half of these refugees now live in urban areas, compared to one third in camps (UNHCR, 2019). The "urbanization of displacement" raises several policy and programmatic questions about the adequacy of policies and programs currently designed for camp settings. The reliance on a camp-centric approach to aid, particularly in terms of educational services, places urban refugees in a perilous position that frequently falls outside the purview of established support structures. Education policies and frameworks have yet to be well developed to deal with the specific challenges that urban refugee children face; their integration into host education systems remains a thorny issue (Dryden-Peterson, 2010).

Refugee crises in Africa have been worsened by regional conflicts, political instability, and natural disasters, resulting in an ever-changing and often overwhelming humanitarian landscape. While Kenya has emerged as a key destination for refugees, its encampment policy reinforces the marginalization of urban refugees. Refugees living outside designated camps, such as Nairobi's Eastleigh, Kawangware, and Kasarani neighborhoods, face systemic exclusion, as humanitarian assistance and government programs prioritize camp populations (Derese, 2018; UNHCR, 2019). This has created a worrying paradox: whereas cities provide refugees with prospects for education, employment, and integration, the

restrictive policies serve as a deterrent to urban settlement. The lack of clear strategies to support urban refugees results in fragmented and inconsistent access to education, leaving refugee children to navigate a host of challenges with very limited institutional support (Karanja, 2010).

The difficulties which have confronted urban refugee children concerning educational access are multi-layered. The lack of preparedness to work with refugee learners among teachers is already chronic, compounded by linguistic challenges, since the instruction is in English or Kiswahili and not in the native languages of refugees (OECD, 2019). Moreover, the hidden costs of education, such as uniforms, transportation, and learning materials, render even "free" primary education inaccessible to many (Chen, 2019). These challenges are worsened by refugees' broader socioeconomic vulnerabilities, such as poverty, unstable housing, and limited legal safeguards, which impede their capacity to enroll, retain, and succeed in school (UNESCO, 2019).

The psychosocial impact of displacement further complicates the integration of refugee children into education. Many urban refugee pupils experience social withdrawal, maladaptive grief, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of their displacement experiences (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). These needs are not addressed by the often poorly equipped host education systems, with many refugee children resulting in poorer school performances and high dropout rates, according to Campbell (2006). This is particularly clear when considering that existing systems fall remarkably short in meeting specific urban refugee learner needs-an immediate gap in policy and practice.

Existing studies have also pointed out that the education of refugee children is shaped by overlapping concerns of gender and disability (Monari, 2023). Girls face more risk of exclusion in the form of cultural, economic, and security-type barriers, particularly in the context of urban residents, where education is assigned less importance than domestic work or early marriage (Dryden-Peterson, *et al.*, 2021; Halim & Myers, 2022). Refugee children with a disability are also left out of the education planning process with fewer inclusive pedagogy models or learning facilities (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Comparative studies of urban refugee education in contexts such as Uganda (Bellino & Dryden-Peterson, 2020), Germany (Crul, *et al.*, 2021), and Turkey (Aras & Yasun, 2022) show that while there might be greater educational opportunity in the urban setting, this access remains stratified along these intersectional lines. Engaging with this growing body of literature facilitates a more detailed exploration of how urban refugee children in Nairobi experience resilience and exclusion in the education system.

While education is underlined as a basic right of every human and simultaneously as a protective tool, in concrete practice, serious discrepancies between the policy discourse and the commitment to implementation were outlined (UNHCR, 2016). Education should be an integrative, resilient, and empowering factor for urban refugees; in reality, though, it is often

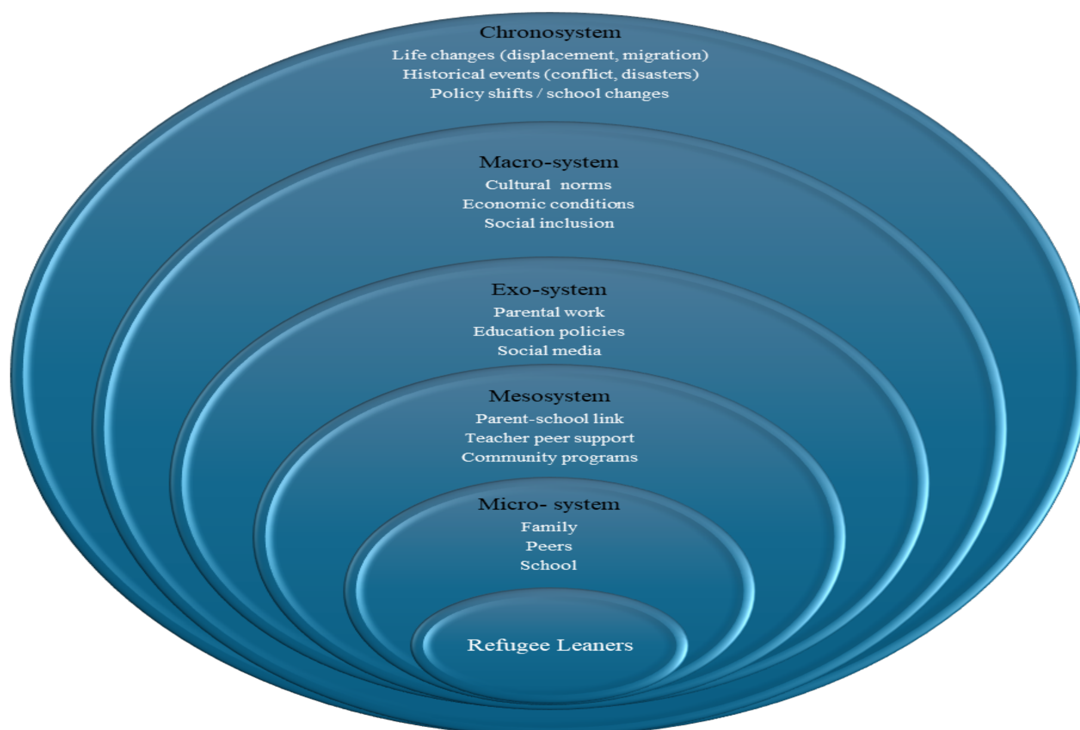
described by exclusion and inequity in the case of such refugees. Whereas frameworks like the Comprehensive Refugee Response framework (CRRF) and Kenya's Ushirika Plan exist, their implementation remains largely camp-focused. Urban refugee education continues to receive insufficient targeted policy support, leaving learners in cities to rely on under-resourced informal institutions (Crea, 2016). This paradox underlines the critical need to rethink education strategies for urban refugees, particularly in host countries like Kenya, where the policy environment remains largely camp centric.

Although education is recognized as essential for human capital development, recovery, and social cohesion, the failure to address the structural and systemic challenges urban refugees face raises critical questions about the inclusivity and effectiveness of host countries' education systems (Dryden-Peterson, 2018). For urban refugee children, the promise of education remains overshadowed by a harsh reality of barriers and exclusion, demanding urgent, innovative, and context-specific interventions to bridge these gaps.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopted Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social-ecological model to examine the educational experience of urban refugees in Nairobi.

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological model applied to refugee education



At the heart of the social-ecological model is a supposition that human development is influenced not only by individual traits but also by interaction within different environments, such as family, schools, communities, and society. Similarly, the interactions and relationships of refugee students or children are influenced by different ecological systems as they attempt to adapt and adjust to the new culture, including a new education system, language of instruction, and curriculum. A refugee child's educational transition is shaped by interaction with various stakeholders within their environment, which constitutes an ecological system comprising of microsystem, mesosystems, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

Microsystem – This is the most immediate environment in which the child lives. This includes refugee learners' daily interactions with the family, school, and peer groups with whom the child lives and acts. For instance, families under financial constraints may prioritize basic needs such as food and shelter over school supplies or teachers may not accommodate refugee learners with limited language proficiency. Activity in this environment could affect the belief, behavior and ability to adapt.

Mesosystems – This is the interaction between different microsystems in a child's life such as school, church and home. It connects the child's microsystem; for instance, how well refugee parents and teachers collaborate influences the educational experience of the learner.

Ecosystem – It is an environment in which the child has no direct and active participation but can influence their behavior in a positive or negative way. For example, education department decisions or NGO services may impact access to school, even if the child is not directly involved.

Macrosystem – This is the largest environmental system that encompasses broader cultural, political, and legal system. This system incorporates the Kenya's encampment policy, national curriculum, or societal views on refugees shape the learning environment for urban refugee children.

Chronosystem – Comprise the time dimension, historical changes and life transition with child environment. For example, policy shift, duration of displacement impact educational trajectories and integration of urban refugees over time.

This theoretical framework was critical in guiding the research, as it provided a structured lens for investigating how diverse environmental systems affect urban refugee children's educational experiences and adaptation.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a qualitative case study design to explore concrete, contextual details of systemic education challenges facing urban refugee children in primary schools within Nairobi County. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from school administrators, teachers, and education officers, while focus group discussions were conducted with refugee learners. Document reviews provided multiple data triangulation perspectives that generated codes, categories, and a conceptual framework.

Table 1. Codebook of Key Themes and Codes

Theme	Sub-Themes / Categories	Codes
1. Documentation Barriers	Bureaucratic exclusion, legal-policy gap, institutional rigidity	- Lack of birth certificates - Delayed enrollment - Policy-practice gap - Denied admission
2. Inadequate Teacher Training	Lack of trauma-informed teaching, government neglect, reliance on NGOs	- No training on refugee needs - Emotional unpreparedness - Lack of psychosocial support
3. Language Barriers	Language mismatch, low self-esteem, curriculum misalignment	- Difficulty understanding English/Swahili - Placed in lower grades - Academic disengagement
4. Financial Barriers	Hidden costs, poverty, exclusion through affordability	- Cost of uniforms/books - Food vs school trade-offs - Fee-related dropout
5.Gender-based barriers	Parental prioritization of boys' education Early withdrawal of girls	- Preferential treatment of boys - Early dropout school dropout
6.Disability-based barriers	Lack of inclusive capacity in schools Inaccessible infrastructure	- No special education training - Lack of inclusive learning environments

2.1. Sampling Strategy

The study employed purposive sampling to select 10 urban public primary schools with a high proportion of refugee learners (defined as at least 10% of the school population). Participants included teachers (n=20) and school administrators (n=10), selected for their direct interaction with refugee pupils. Additionally, education officers (n=3) were purposively chosen to provide insights into policy and implementation regarding refugee inclusion in education. Refugee learners (n=100) were selected with the assistance of school staff, ensuring representation across age, gender, and country of origin to capture the diversity within the refugee student population.

2.2. Methods of Data Collection

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 33 respondents, comprising 10 school administrators, 20 teachers and three education officers. The interviews provided insights into key structural barriers affecting refugee children's access to primary education. Using a semi-structured format allowed for a more in-depth exploration of emerging topics while maintaining logical coherence around key thematic areas. This facilitated a collection of rich information on participants' attitudes, experiences, and viewpoints.

Focus Group Discussions

A total of 12 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were conducted, each with six-eight refugee learners across different schools in Nairobi to explore their perspectives on the educational challenges they encounter. Open-ended questions guided the discussions, allowing participants to express their views freely. A trained moderator facilitated the sessions in a language familiar and comfortable to participants, ensuring inclusivity and effective engagement. This method provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of refugee children, enriching the study's findings with first-hand accounts.

Documentary Analysis

Document analysis supplemented the collection of primary data to get contextual insights through relevant policies, reports, and institutional records. Reviewed key documents, including national education policy, refugee education policies, school enrollment records, academic performance data, and reports from NGOs concerning refugee education. Inclusion criteria focused on documents that directly addressed refugee education in Kenya, such as national policies, UNHCR reports, and NGO publications from 2018 to 2023. Excluded were documents unrelated to urban settings or those without verifiable data or relevance to primary education. The dual approach not only made it possible to gain insight

into the policy environment and institutional responses to urban refugees' needs for education but also allowed the triangulation of the data that were collected from the interviews and focus groups, hence enhancing the study's validity and reliability.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was inductive, allowing codes and categories to emerge from the data without imposing predefined themes. All interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim. Data were then analyzed case by case through thematic analysis and later by cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006) grouping patterns and emergent issues. Constant comparative method ensured rigor in conducting comparisons within and across data sets, specifically, between interviews and focus group discussions, and between individual data segments and their respective codes and categories. Findings from the document review were thematically coded to include contextual insights with primary data. Such triangulation of sources – interviews, focus groups, and document analysis enhanced the reliability of the findings and contributed to a holistic view of systemic challenges in education that urban refugee children face in Nairobi, Kenya.

3. FINDINGS, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION

The following results were obtained based on the semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis, highlighting the main themes and sub-themes related to systematic education challenges facing urban refugees in primary education. The main themes generated include documentation barriers, inadequate teacher training, language barrier and financial barrier. Pseudonyms were assigned to give the anonymity of the schools and participants who participated in the study.

3.1. Education challenges

Documentation barriers

The majority of the respondents highlighted that the biggest obstacle to education for urban refugee children in Kenya is the demand for official documents, which are generally hard to get, such as refugee registration cards or birth certificates. A headteacher of one of the primary schools explained, "it's very hard for our children to start school because we don't have the required papers. Even when we have the documents, it takes too long to get them" (Female headteacher – School A, March 15, 2021).

These delays epitomize general inefficiencies in the bureaucratic procedures concerning refugee documentation. While families go through all this trouble in securing required papers, children wait at home and miss important years in school. This is a contradiction of the Kenya Education Act that requires all children, irrespective of background, to be integrated into the

system. However, such legal provisions often do not get translated into practice due to administrative bottlenecks that disproportionately affect marginalized groups like refugees (Buchanan, 2020). This was reinforced by reviewed documents including national policy drafts and NGO reports, which highlight gaps in policy intent and actual implementation. For instance, UNHCR 2023 report notes that while the frameworks exist on paper, bureaucratic delays disproportionately hinder refugees' access to basic services, including education. Similarly, Kanyinga (2019, in his analysis of refugee education policy in Kenya, pointed out that, while there are policies allowing refugees to have access to education, the practice is defective, with gaps that allow for the exclusion of refugees from education. According to Hynie (2018), these inefficiencies are not just logistical failures but part of the deeper neglect of marginalized populations within the greater governance framework. This negligence encourages the educational marginalization of refugee children, creating barriers that limit even their access to basic education. These barriers, therefore, deny the concept of inclusion, as put forward by national and international frameworks, such as the Global Compact on Refugees, which calls for equitable access to education.

The barriers in documentation catalyze social exclusion and stigmatization. Every time refugee children are denied admission due to a lack of proper identification, it essentially means they are implicitly branded as outsiders, thereby securing their marginal status within the host community. One of the teachers in Nairobi put it this way:

> Sometimes we want to admit these children, but the system requires papers, and without them, our hands are tied. This clearly shows how the frontliners in education themselves are much hindered – with little authority and flexibility to admit undocumented students. (Male Administrator – School D. March 15, 2021)

Literature on refugee education points out that institutional support is an important determinant in overcoming these barriers and that the existence of inclusive policies must be followed with practical actions to eliminate systemic barriers (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Unless these institutional barriers in documentation are tackled, refugee children will continue to face insurmountable obstacles to exercising their right to education.

The consequences of these barriers, however, are not confined to individual families; they impact the larger process of the refugee community's integration into Kenyan society. Education is one of the most essential ways toward social and economic movement and keeping refugee children away from schools destroys their chance for stability in life. This lack of documentation results not only in delayed enrollment but also in the vicious circle of exclusion and poverty, which, in turn, reinforces the notion that such barriers to education facing refugees mirror broader structural inequalities impeding the meaningful integration of these immigrants (Wright, 2017). What this calls for, then, is an approach that simplifies documentation processes but at the same time allows schools the flexibility to accommodate the most marginalized children.

Inadequate teacher training to handle refugee children

Most respondents highlighted that one of the most significant challenges to integrating refugee learners into the Kenyan education system is the lack of specialized training among teachers. The majority of teachers are unprepared to address the unique needs of refugee students, particularly those who have experienced trauma and displacement. A participant from the Ministry of Education highlighted,

> The teachers are not provided with enough pre-service or in-service training in managing how to support refugees in the classroom. Workshops and in-service training can help in their understanding of the issues facing refugee children, ways of working with refugee children, identification, and support of traumatized children. (Female Education Officer 1, March 16, 2021)

These findings are consistent with Dryden-Peterson's (2015) observations that schoolteachers usually lack the necessary context-specific competencies to address the academic and psychosocial needs of their learners in refugee settings. Without proper preparation, teachers cannot create an inclusive, friendly, and supportive learning environment that would help refugee children attain their full potential. Lean and Dunn (2016) indicate that teacher education programs usually bypass multicultural education, thus rendering teachers unfit to manage the challenges of a refugee classroom. The educational system continues to perpetuate inequity among some of the most vulnerable learners due to the lack of priority on teacher training that would address refugee needs. A teacher in a refugee-hosting school stated, "I struggle to provide academic and emotional support due to a lack of necessary training. We do our best, but many of us are unprepared to deal with trauma-related behaviors in the classroom" (Male Teacher, Grade 5 – School B, March 16, 2021).

The reliance on external actors to fill gaps in training underlines the deficiency in government support for refugee education. Hynie (2018) underlines that sustainable solutions must come from systemic change, not from temporary interventions. Without integrating refugee-focused training into national teacher development programs, the education system cannot ensure consistent high-quality support for refugee learners. Furthermore, the lack of recognition for NGO-driven initiatives discourages teachers from fully embracing such opportunities and further exacerbates the gap in skills. Besides academic support, teachers need to ensure that the psychosocial needs of refugee children are taken care of because they have faced trauma and displacement. However, most teachers have not undergone the training that is needed in identifying and supporting traumatized learners. According to Dryden-Peterson (2015), it is important to ensure that teachers build competencies in constructing safe and supportive classrooms that help nurture healing and build resilience. Participant A shared, "the key role of the teacher is to understand psychosocial needs of the traumatized child and commit themselves to the psychosocial protection of war-affected children for their growth and healthy development" (Female Teacher, Grade 7 – School A, March 17, 2021).

This hardly happens, since little, if any, structured training is provided with trauma-informed teaching. Teachers need special training in identifying signs of trauma in students and in helping students deal with their emotional disturbances.

The findings demonstrate that inadequate teacher preparation is a systemic issue that prevents refugees from fully integrating and succeeding in Kenyan schools. Some even demonstrate a willingness to assist these learners while highlighting substantial resource limits and related training possibilities. The difficulty is exacerbated by a lack of national policies governing refugee-specific training. According to Mendenhall, Gomez and Varni (2018), professional development tailored to the specific requirements of refugee learners fosters inclusive classroom environments and ensures equal educational outcomes. The government should, therefore, give priority attention to integrating refugee-related content into the curricula of teacher education. Through investing in teacher training, Kenya can create an education system that meets the various needs of all students, including refugees.

3.2 Language barriers

The language barrier constitutes a significant obstacle for refugee children to adjust to Kenyan schools. Most of the refugee children are from countries like Somalia, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, whose languages are far different from the English and Swahili languages of instruction in Kenyan schools. A refugee community respondent explained, "our pupils do not understand either English or Swahili, hence, they have problems in class. Even if the teacher tries, it's hard to follow" (Male Teacher, Grade 7 – School C, March 17, 2021).

This not only causes problems in children's learning but also leads to high dropout rates, as children struggle to keep up with the curriculum. Most urban refugees have limited formal education, and transitioning to a new system taught in foreign languages exacerbates their difficulties. Language hurdles have been extensively documented in refugee education literature, with students from conflict-affected regions having major difficulties adjusting to a new school setting (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Moreover, such barriers reinforce the cycle of poverty and marginalization, as refugee children are less likely to perform well academically or complete their education (Wright, 2017).

These challenges present systemic flaws within the Kenyan education system, especially in culturally responsive pedagogy. While policies have been laid to ensure inclusion, there is a lack of institutional support to help solve the unique problems that refugee learners present. For instance, UNICEF (2020) postulates that "without adequate language support systems, refugee children are at a higher risk of exclusion, since they struggle not only with the language of instruction but also the usually irrelevant curriculum" (Male Education Officer 1, March 18, 2021).

In many schools in Nairobi, the language barrier compels refugee children to be placed in lower grades than their age or cognitive ability merit. This practice, intended to help students learn the language of instruction, often stigmatizes them and undermines their academic progress. A teacher explained, "we are sometimes forced to place the majority of refugee children in lower grades so that they can learn the language of instruction. For refugee children, learning English and Kiswahili as an additional language is very crucial to their academic success" (Male Teacher, Grade 7 – School E, March 18, 2021).

However, this approach often creates a negative feedback loop, where refugee children feel demoralized and disengaged, leading to high dropout rates. According to Allen and Parameshwaran (2016), educational systems should not merely stop at simplistic integration but rather encompass inclusive strategies that take prior knowledge and linguistic competencies into account. In the absence of such reform, refugee children continue to lag behind and never attain their complete potential due to the lack of systemic elasticity and scarcity of resources. This can only be addressed through transitional language programs in schools that will help refugee students learn the language of the host country as they keep up with studies at appropriate academic levels.

Experiences shared by refugee children bring to the fore how well a language barrier affects the educational journey of refugee children. One student said,

> My parents arrived in Kenya when I was 12 years old, and now I am 16 years old. I was enrolled in primary school in 2014. At first, I had some difficulties adapting, since every subject we learn at school is taught in English. I struggled at first to participate in class because I received all of my previous schooling in French while in the DRC. (Male Learner, Age 14 – School A (FGD1), March 18, 2021)

Similar stories highlight how it has been a double burden to get used to the new education system and learn a new language simultaneously. Even with such challenges, the research also found that, when adequately supported, many refugee children adapt and grow well in their new milieus. Teachers and schools that prioritize language support play a critical role in this process. For instance, Pupil A expressed gratitude for their teachers' assistance, noting that it enabled them to gain confidence and actively participate in class. These findings align with Hynie (2018), who emphasizes that language acquisition is not merely a technical skill but a social process that requires consistent engagement and support. Schools are thus supposed to ensure an inclusive environment that would make refugee children feel comfortable in their linguistic and academic development.

While governments and NGOs have tried to introduce programs to support the education of refugees, most of them fall short of ensuring that urban refugee children receive the required specific language needs. Field data showed that introductory language programs, where implemented, have a great possibility of improving refugee students' integration into the

system. A respondent observed, "Learning English and Kiswahili as additional languages is key to our success, but we need more programs that teach us step by step" (Participant 'F,' School Y, March 19, 2021). However, most of these programs are underfunded and inconsistently implemented, thus leaving many refugee students without the necessary assistance to succeed.

This challenge reflects a larger systemic issue: the under prioritization of inclusive education in national policy frameworks. As UNICEF (2020) observes, effective integration requires not only language instruction but also culturally responsive curricula that reflect the diversity of refugee students' backgrounds. The literature further points out that language support alone is not effective without addressing other structural barriers, including access to trained teachers and relevant instructional materials (Allen & Parameshwaran, 2016). In so doing, Kenya can invest in comprehensive language programs and inclusive pedagogies that will ensure the realization of an education system committed to providing equitable education for all children, including refugees.

3.3. Financial barriers

Financial barriers remain a significant challenge for urban refugees' access to education. While public school is free or tuition might be minimal in private schools, costs for things like uniforms, textbooks, and examination fees keep refugees out of school. One of the refugee pupils explained: "We may not have to pay tuition, but everything else costs, and sometimes my parent has to choose between sending me and my siblings to school and feeding the family" (FGD 4 – Mixed Gender, Ages 12–14, School C).

For refugee families—often working in low-paying and informal jobs with little financial security – these costs prove all the more insurmountable. These fees result in most children being withdrawn from school or failing to attend at all. According to UNHCR (2021), globally, hidden education costs are the biggest barrier that families face in accessing quality education among refugees, which has caused the broken promise of free education and created a disadvantage for the world's most vulnerable population. Various studies show that hidden education costs often cause students to either drop out or underperform at school (Hynie, 2018). This is in line with the UNHCR (2021) report, which affirms that the financial burden remains a significant challenge faced by refugee families that education policies fail to address despite policy and legal frameworks for free education.

This financial burden underlines one of the key failings in the inclusivity framework within Kenya's education system. Though there are efforts put forth by the government to make education more available, most of them have dismissed the financial realities present in the lives of the marginalized. It is at this point that the inability to afford supplemental educational costs has served as the source of a gap between policy intent and its real application on the ground for families of refugees. One of the education officers stated: "Policies that promote

free education but do not address ancillary costs are inherently exclusionary, as they do not take into consideration the realities of the most vulnerable populations" (Male Education Officer 2, March 24, 2021).

This was further emphasized by one of the teachers, who claimed: "Students with refugee backgrounds are not able to meet the rising cost of educational materials, especially school supplies, which jeopardizes their potential to complete their education" (Male Teacher, Grade 7 – School D, March 18, 2021).

This disconnection creates the need for more holistic strategies that will address the comprehensive needs of refugee children, including mechanisms for financial support. The dual burden of documentation and financial constraints creates an environment where education remains inaccessible to many refugee families. Such compounding struggles are symptoms of broader system failures in facilitating equal access to education among populations that have been displaced (Karanja, 2010).

According to the majority of the respondents, the financial challenges must be pursued at levels higher than just tuition fees being waived. It is in this regard that international organizations and local organizations play a critical role in addressing these gaps with targeted financial assistance for refugee families. In this way, integration of the mechanisms for financial support within the framework of the national education policy protects against exclusion due to economic hardship. The findings concur with Wright (2017), who argued that the education system must consider the needs of marginal groups, while access to education is not just a right but a means that leads to social and economic empowerment. Addressing the financial challenges faced by refugee families, Kenya will have taken a big step toward fulfilling its commitment to providing inclusive and equitable education to all children.

3.4. Gender and disability-based barriers

Though this study did not specifically aim to examine gender or disability as primary factors, these dimensions emerged persistently in interview and focus group data, showing the need for careful attention. Both axes cut across displacement in ways that compound educational exclusion and call for greater policy and pedagogical consideration. Gender expectations powerfully shape girls' abilities to access and maintain schooling within refugee communities in urban areas. Teachers frequently mentioned that girls discontinue schooling early because parents are concerned about safety and household chores : "Most girls from refugee families in this area are withdrawn from school by the age of 13 or 14. Parents either fear for their safety or need them to help at home" (Female deputy teacher, – School D, March 24, 2021).

This was also reflected in focus group discussions with female refugee students, where several reported sociocultural expectations and economic constraints within family settings

delayed or deprioritized their schooling in favor of their male siblings: "I had to wait for my brother to complete school so that I can be taken to school since my father had not enough money to support all my siblings in school" (FGD 4 – Mixed Gender, Ages 12–14, School C).

These accounts align with the findings by Kirk and Winthrop (2007), and Dryden-Peterson (2016), which highlight that adolescent females in refugee settings are disproportionately at risk of early school leaving, often driven by a coincidence between poverty, gendered cultural values, and sexual violence phobias. These also illustrate how economic scarcity and patriarchal decision-making intersect, reinforcing education inequality in already marginalized refugee populations (Unterhalter, 2017). Girls' education becomes conditional, secondary to that of male siblings, illustrating how access to education is rationed on a gendered scale. The obstacles are even more acute for children with disabilities. Many are entirely outside the formal education system. Several teachers admitted that their schools were neither trained nor equipped to cater to children with special needs: "We don't have special education teachers. So even if a child comes with a disability, we're not prepared to support them" (Male Teacher, Grade 8 – School D, March 18, 2021).

Observations indicated that none of the schools visited had inclusive pedagogical materials, accessible classrooms, or teachers trained in inclusive pedagogy. Due to this, children with physical, intellectual, or sensory disabilities are left behind, figuratively and literally. These narratives illustrate that girls and children with disabilities face dual challenges, both from refugee specific marginalization and systemic neglect of special education. While inclusive education is programmatically embedded in international tools, like the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Minimum Standards, implementation on the ground remains rare, especially in low-resource urban settings.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research demonstrate some of the significant challenges urban refugee pupils face in integration into primary education in Kenya. In 2012, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees first endorsed the 2012-2016 Education Strategy, which relies on host nations' education systems to achieve refugee education goals. Even though there are clear policy justifications for integrating refugees into education, there are still significant gaps in understanding the systematic challenges urban refugee children face to access and succeed in education. The difficulties that urban refugee pupils confront impede their educational aspirations, even though refugee children regard education as crucial for their integration into Kenya and their home countries following repatriation. Barriers such as a lack of teacher preparedness to work with refugee children, difficulties in using the language of instruction, and the impact of hidden costs appear to impact both the integration of urban refugee children in primary education and learning outcomes. The barriers are even more pronounced for girls and children with disabilities, who are often excluded from the formal

education system due to a lack of infrastructure and teacher training needed to support inclusive education for urban refugee children. Most urban refugees in Kenya are adolescents who require education for a sustainable future. There is a need for coordinated effort and collaboration between the many actors, including the government of Kenya, UNHCR, NGOs, civil society organizations, and host communities, to address the challenges facing urban refugee education in Kenya.

REFERENCES

Aras, B., & Yasun, S. (2016). *The educational opportunities and challenges of Syrian refugee students in Turkey: Temporary education centers and beyond*. Istanbul: Istanbul Policy Center. https://www.academia.edu/32419509

Campbell, E. H. (2006). Urban refugees in Nairobi: Problems of protection, mechanisms of survival, and possibilities for integration. *Journal of refugee studies*, *19*(3), 396-413.

Crea, T. M. (2016). Refugee higher education: Contextual challenges and implications for program design, delivery, and accompaniment. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 46, 12-22.

Chen, Y. (2009). Language support for emergent bilinguals in English mainstream schools: An observational study. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, *22*(1), 57-70.

Kassa, D. G. (2018). *Refugee spaces and urban citizenship in Nairobi: Africa's sanctuary city*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Dryden-Peterson, S., Adelman, E., Alvarado, S., Anderson, K., Bellino, M., Brooks, R., & Suzuki, E. (2018*). Inclusion of refugees in national education systems*. Paris: UNESCO.

Dryden-Peterson, S. (2015). *The educational experiences of refugee children in countries of first asylum*. Washington, DC: British Columbia Teachers' Federation.

Dryden-Peterson, S. (2010). *Barriers of Accessing Primary Education in Conflict-Affected States: Literature Review*. London: Save the Children. https://resourcecentre.savethe-children.net/document/barriers-accessing-primary-education-conflict-affected-fragile-states-final-report

Dryden-Peterson, S., & Adelman, E., Bellino, M., & 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.

Dijk, D. V. (2022). Working toward aspirations: How higher education learning-working trajectories for refugees in the Netherlands support work-related capabilities. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, *14*(2), 917-929.

Human Rights Watch. (2021, Apr 1). Ethiopia: Tigray Schools Occupied, Looted. Retrieved from https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/28/ethiopia-tigray-schools-occupied-looted

Hynie, M. (2017). The social determinants of refugee mental health in the post-migration context: A critical review. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, *63*(5), 297-303.

Hunt, L., Aleghfeli, Y. K., McIntyre, J., & Stone, C. (2023). Refugees' gendered experiences of education in Europe since 2015: A scoping review. *Review of Education*, *11*(3), e3441. https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3441

Karanja, L. (2010). The educational pursuits and obstacles for urban refugee students in Kenya. *International Journal for Cross-Disciplinary Subjects in Education*, *1*(3), 1-9.

Kia-Keating, M., & Ellis, B. H. (2007). Belonging and connection to school in resettlement: young refugees, school belonging, and psychosocial adjustment. *Clinical child psychology and psychiatry*, *12*(1), 29-43.

Forrest, J., Lean, G., & Dunn, K. (2016). Challenging racism through schools: teacher attitudes to cultural diversity and multicultural education in Sydney, Australia. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *19*(3), 618-638. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2015.1095170

Mendenhall, M., Dryden-Peterson, S., Bartlett, S., Ndirangu, C., Imonje, R., Gakunga, D., Gichuhi, L., Nyagah, G., Okoth, U., & Tangelder, M. (2015). Quality Education for Refugees in Kenya: Pedagogy in Urban Nairobi and Kakuma Refugee Camp Settings. *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, 1(1), 92-130.

Monari, K. (2023). Towards universal education access for refugees: A critical document analysis of policy and practice supporting the integration of Rohingya refugees in education in Bangladesh. *Ecolint Institute Research Journal*, 9, 24-39. https://www.ecolint-institute.ch/en/file-download/download/public/372

OECD. (2019). *Education at a Glance OECD Education Report*. Paris: OECD.

Piper, B., Dryden-Peterson, S., Chopra, V., Reddick, C., & Oyanga, A. (2020). Are refugee children learning? Early grade literacy in a refugee camp in Kenya. *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, *5*(2), 71-107. https://doi.org/10.33682/f1wr-yk6y

UNESCO. (2019). *Global Education Monitoring Report, 2019: Inclusion and Education: All Means All*. Paris: UNESCO.

UNHCR. (2012). *UNHCR Resettlement Handbook*. Geneva: UNHCR.

UNHCR. (2016a). *Global trends: Forced displacement in 2015*. Geneva: UNHCR.

UNHCR. (2016b). *Missing out: Refugee education in crisis*. Geneva: UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/media/missing-out-refugee-education-crisis

UNHCR. (2019). *Stepping Up: Refugee Education in Crisis*. Geneva: UNHCR.

UNHCR. (2021). *Education for all refugee children is within reach: World Bank-UNHCR report*. Geneva: UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/press-releases/education-all-refugee-children-within-reach-finds-world-bank-unhcr-report

Unterhalter, E. (2017). A review of public private partnerships around girls' education in developing countries: Flicking gender equality on and off. *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy*, *33*(2), 181-199.

Wright, L.-A., & Plasterer, R. (2010). Beyond basic education: exploring opportunities for higher learning in Kenyan refugee camps. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, *27*(2), 42-56. https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.34721