

Teachers in displacement: learning from Dadaab

Mohamed Duale, Ochan Leomoi, Abdullahi Aden, Okello Oyat, Arte Dagane and Abdikadir Abikar

Despite the challenges they face, refugee teachers believe in the potential of education to transform the lives of refugee learners and communities. Their voices and needs must inform refugee education provision in order to improve access and outcomes.

The Dadaab refugee camps in north-east Kenya, which were opened in 1991 for refugees fleeing Somalia's civil war, currently host around 225,000 people. Fifty-eight per cent are under the age of 18 and are served by 35 preschool centres, 35 primary schools and six secondary schools in the camps, which are run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or are privately run, in addition to community-operated Quranic schools.¹ The poor quality of schools run by NGOs has led in recent years to a growth in the number of private schools, which charge the equivalent of US \$15 per month to attend primary school and \$30 to attend secondary school. These fees are prohibitive for most refugee families in the Dadaab camps, who rely on humanitarian assistance.

Teacher training and resources

Among the factors affecting the quality of NGO-run schools in particular is the lack of development available to refugee teachers (that is, teachers who are themselves refugees), who comprise the majority of primary and secondary school teachers in the Dadaab camps. Refugee teachers, 72% of whom have only secondary school qualifications, often have to depend on their own experience of schooling to inform their pedagogy and classroom management. They have few opportunities for training other than being briefed on the organisational policies of the NGO that is running the school. The NGOs cite inadequate funding as the reason why they do not organise formal training or employ a sufficient number of refugee teachers.

The most obvious consequence of having insufficiently trained teachers is that teachers rely heavily on memorisation and testing rather than inquiry-based learning, which undercuts creativity and critical thinking.

Learners who have gaps in knowledge, learning disabilities or behavioural issues (that may be based on underlying trauma) are not adequately supported and this contributes to absenteeism and dropouts. Teachers lack culturally relevant curricula and they also lack training on how to implement and modify curriculum resources and pedagogy. The resources that are available are often insufficient to support the numbers of learners and teachers, affecting both the quality of instruction and student achievement.

Overcrowding

Classrooms in the Dadaab camps are all significantly overcrowded, hosting 80 to



Hormud primary school in Dadaab's Ifo camp hosts over 2,000 refugee students.

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100 learners. Large class sizes affect the ways in which teachers provide daily instruction through verbal and non-verbal communication and also reduce opportunities for teachers to provide differentiated instruction and to accommodate students with differing abilities. From our experience of teaching in the Dadaab camps, we know that overcrowded classrooms in which students compete for scarce seating room contributed to increased incidences of student conflict and misbehaviour. Teachers in Dadaab often spend a disproportionate amount of time settling disputes between students, which reduces teaching time. As a result, untrained teachers sometimes come to see corporal punishment as a way of maintaining discipline. One concerned refugee teacher explained that “here in Dadaab, the stick used for punishment is often referred to as the assistant teacher”.

The use of corporal punishment can have negative psychosocial consequences for learners, reproduce existing power structures

and inequalities and imply that problems can be solved by force and obedience to authority. Studies from around the world have linked physical punishment to student absenteeism and dropout as pupils come to see school as an unfriendly environment, and it can be particularly harmful for refugee students who will have experienced trauma or seen their family and friends traumatised.

Precarious working conditions

Refugee teachers are often those who were near the top of their graduating class in secondary school, speak multiple languages, and work as a bridge between NGOs and refugee communities. However, they face numerous challenges, including a lack of coordination between education authorities and refugee registration authorities, obstacles to obtaining accreditation and employment as teachers, and hostility and exclusion from teachers’ unions.² Practical conditions are also very difficult, with refugee teachers sometimes commuting long distances within or outside of their camp, to work in large and insufficiently supported classrooms.

Most refugee teachers in Kenya are untrained and unlicensed. As refugees do not have the right to work in Kenya, refugee teachers are hired as so-called ‘incentive workers’ and paid a fixed low wage, typically a fraction of what a Kenyan national would be given for working in the same position³ – and that remuneration remains the same irrespective of whether they obtain post-secondary qualifications. Refugee teachers are not permitted to earn more than the incentive wage and are penalised if they engage in additional paid work. The disparities between refugee and non-refugee teachers has made the vocation less attractive to educated refugee professionals, particularly women, who look for less stressful work given responsibilities of care at home. UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, negotiates the refugee teachers’ wage with the Kenyan government and refugee teachers are expected to make do with incentive pay as their refugee status entitles them to in-kind shelter and food assistance. Refugee teachers are thus much more vulnerable than Kenyan national



teachers to being dismissed during funding shortfalls, demotion, being over-looked in recruitment processes and to discrimination based on legal status and ethnicity. Elsewhere in Kenya, for example, refugee teachers and headteachers in the Kakuma refugee camp were recently suddenly replaced by Kenyan teachers, at the Kenyan authorities' request.⁴

Refugee teachers are not usually consulted on matters concerning teaching and learning in the school, employment terms and conditions or curriculum implementation. Such practices undermine the professionalism of refugee teachers in general and the authority of refugee headteachers in particular. Moreover, refugee teachers still face the social, economic and political challenges of being a refugee. They are at risk of violence and extortion from police and other armed officials. They may need time off work to attend to illness or death in the family, a frequent reality in refugee camps where outbreaks of fire, violence and communicable diseases are a regular occurrence. Nonetheless, they may find that the support that is more typically available to national and international staff is difficult to access.

Towards reform

There is an inherent contradiction in organising education, which requires significant and sustained planning around an approach that stems from emergency thinking – an assumption that displacement will be short-term and temporary. To improve the quality and inclusiveness of refugee education, funders and humanitarian stakeholders should invest in the training of refugee teachers, reduce class sizes, and provide greater access to curriculum resources. NGOs should establish pay parity between nationals and highly qualified refugee teachers; this would help to both retain expertise and support the overall professional development of teachers in the camps, in particular by mentoring novice and untrained teachers.

Refugee teachers have long sought change,⁵ and humanitarian actors have recognised the need to reform refugee education,⁶ and our proposal for reform is

aligned with these perspectives. Regional systemic reviews should be carried out through consultation with key stakeholders – particularly refugee teachers, students, parents, community leaders, NGOs, donors, national educational authorities and academics – to consider long-term, fundamental reform of refugee education. Refugees, especially refugee educators, must have meaningful participation in the planning and provision of education for refugees since it is refugees, above all others, who have the most to gain from reform. Without reform, efforts to advance refugee education will ultimately be undermined by a lack of participation, reinforcing the notion of refugees as passive and governed by the humanitarian community, rather than as people with opinions about how their lives should be organised.

Mohamed Duale

Mohamed_Duale@edu.yorku.ca

Doctoral student

Ochan Leomoi anepo@my.yorku.ca

Abdullahi Aden capture@my.yorku.ca

Okello Oyat omo01@my.yorku.ca

Arte Dagane arte2007@my.yorku.ca

Abdikadir Abikar abikar14@my.yorku.ca

Master of Education students through the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) Project, and refugee teachers currently working in the Dadaab camps

Faculty of Education, York University, Canada

<https://edu.yorku.ca/>

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