The critical role of refugee teachers in the COVID-19 education response:
Supporting their continued professional contributions and leadership in displacement and durable solutions

👤 Mohamud Hure, UNHCR Education Section, Denmark
✉ Email: hure@unhcr.org

👤 Jennie Taylor, UNHCR Bureau for East, Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes (EHAGL), Kenya
✉ Email: taylorje@unhcr.org

Abstract

This paper considers the essential role refugee teachers played in the COVID-19 education response by providing education continuity and support for children during extended school closures. It focuses specifically on the situation in the Kakuma refugee camp in Northern Kenya. Despite facing severe constraints such as limited resources and connectivity, in addition to their own limited professional qualifications and a lack of recognition, the refugee teachers in Kakuma have shown remarkable commitment and creativity in responding to the crisis. The paper offers relevant policy and practice recommendations to strengthen support for refugee teachers and to meet their professional needs in the post-COVID context, including their professional qualifications and recognition.

Key Words

Refugee teachers, education continuity, recognition of teachers, COVID-19

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education on an unprecedented scale. This has exacerbated pre-existing education disparities for the most marginalised (Sayed *et al*., 2021), deepened inequalities in education access and attainment for refugees (UNHCR, 2021a), and presented a considerable threat to Sustainable Development Goal 4, which addresses education. In refugee settings, the refugee teachers bore the greatest burden in ensuring that learning continued during the school closures. Their presence in refugee communities during the pandemic made it easier for them to play a crucial role as the first responders to the education crisis. Despite immense personal, professional, and practical challenges and risks, these refugee teachers rallied to provide educational opportunities in their communities by developing and implementing their own innovative solutions (ADEA, AU/CIEFFA and APHRC, 2022). During a time of immense anxiety and fear worldwide, the role refugee teachers played in providing a sense of normalcy, life-saving messages, and psychological safety cannot be over-emphasised.

This paper considers the essential role teachers played in the response to the COVID-19 emergency, with a focus on the situation in Kakuma refugee camp in Northern Kenya. It discusses the critical role of refugee teachers in the education response, highlighting their commitment and creativity despite significant resource constraints, such as limited internet connectivity and electricity, and access to digital devices.

The study specifically investigates the following research questions:

1. What contributions did refugee teachers make to the COVID-19 response in Kenya's Kakuma refugee camp?
2. How can these contributions be leveraged to advance the inclusion agenda for displaced populations in national education systems?

Drawing from a qualitative inquiry and reflecting critically on the researchers' professional experiences, the paper offers relevant policy and practice recommendations to strengthen support for refugee teachers and to meet their professional needs in the post-COVID context, including their professional qualifications and recognition. We argue that teacher development programmes need to integrate unique skill sets that will help teachers deal with the educational challenges posed by school closures and, most importantly, will empower and recognise them as professionals who are able to respond to a crisis with contextually relevant pedagogical approaches.

Literature review

Research across stable and crisis-affected settings alike demonstrates the central role teachers play in the lives of their students (Schwille, Dembélé and Schubert, 2007). In crisis-affected contexts, teachers take on several roles and responsibilities to address their students' needs in complex educational environments (Mendenhall, Gomez and Varni, 2019). For example, teachers often act as quasi-social workers, providing psychosocial support and life skills to their students, many of whom have experienced adversity, hardship, and trauma (Kirk and Winthrop, 2013). In many cases, teachers come from the same communities as their students and are able to draw on their shared experiences to utilise culturally relevant teaching and counselling approaches (Kirk and Winthrop, 2013). Despite their central role, however, teachers receive insufficient support to carry out their work effectively (Mendenhall, Gomez and Varni, 2019). Refugee teachers feel this dearth of support most acutely, as they frequently grapple with exclusionary teacher management policies that restrict their access to teacher professional development, fair compensation, and benefits (Mendenhall, Gomez and Varni, 2019). In recognition of these challenges,

countries hosting large refugee populations, such as those in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, have made bold commitments to improve the quality of education for refugees and host communities. The Djibouti Declaration specifically provides a comprehensive framework for improving refugee teachers' recognition, compensation, and professional development (IGAD, 2017).

Many of these challenges were compounded by COVID-19. The pandemic severely disrupted in-person teaching. In most contexts, teaching and learning were suspended entirely for several months, depriving millions of students of continuity in their formal education. Teachers were expected to shift rapidly to remote teaching, to leverage existing and new technologies, and to adapt their practices and strategies to provide continuity of learning (UNESCO, 2021). Despite these new demands, teachers rarely received professional development or psychosocial support to help them navigate this new educational landscape. Research conducted by UN agencies and the World Bank found that only half of the countries surveyed provided their teachers with training in online education and distance learning, and only one-third offered teachers psychosocial support (UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank, 2020). These numbers drop dramatically for teachers working in sub-Saharan Africa, which hosts nearly one-third of the world's refugee population; only 15 percent of these countries provided specialised training during the pandemic and only 4 percent provided psychosocial support (UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank, 2020; UNESCO, 2021; UNHCR, 2021b).

Research from Africa and Latin America demonstrated that, despite government response plans, teachers working in complex conditions and environments lacked the support they needed to deliver and adapt solutions to support both student learning and their communities (Mundy et al., 2020). This research also found that, amidst this lack of support, teachers engaged in a range of activities to ensure learning continuity across both low-tech and high-tech learning environments. For example, teachers in low-tech contexts reported using social media and messaging applications to communicate with students and deliver lessons, while those in high-tech contexts reported using online platforms (Mundy et al., 2020). Many teachers also reported organising community learning circles to reach their

students, including adapting and translating learning materials to ensure that they were relevant and engaging (Mundy *et al*., 2020).

Background and context

Education for refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyei

Kakuma refugee camp and the nearby Kalobeyei integrated settlement, both located in Kenya's northwestern Turkana County, are host to more than 200,000 refugees from across East Africa. South Sudanese and Somalis make up the majority of the refugee population, but the camp also hosts refugees from Sudan, Ethiopia, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. At 74 percent, women and children constitute the majority of the population. School-age children (ages 4-17) make up half the refugee population (54 percent; UNHCR, 2020a). As of March 2020, more than 90,000 refugee children and youth were enrolled in the 19 pre-schools, 27 primary schools, and 7 secondary schools in Kakuma refugee camp and the Kalobeyei settlement.

The UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, and a host of partners provide protection and assistance to refugees, including basic education. Camp-based refugees are served by a parallel and segregated school system. While all schools deliver the Kenyan national curriculum and refugee students sit for national assessments and examinations, education coordination, planning, and implementation are carried out separately by actors outside the state system. School governance and curriculum delivery are inconsistently aligned with government policies and regulations, which potentially compromises the quality and accountability of education services (Bellino *et al*., 2018).

Refugee teachers account for 84 percent of the teaching workforce in Kakuma refugee camp and the Kalobeyei settlement, the remainder being Kenyan nationals. The teachers in the camp have diverse backgrounds, in line with the demographic distribution of the refugee population. They are usually young, most completed their secondary education in Kenya, and only 27 percent of the refugee teachers in Kakuma have recognised teaching qualifications (UNHCR, 2021c). Teacher

management (recruitment, remuneration, and training) is carried out by non-state actors and is not systematically aligned with national protocols. A low level of compensation, limited opportunities for teacher professional development, and large classes have a negative impact on teachers' professional motivation and contribute to high teacher attrition rates.

Teachers in Kakuma and Kalobeyei work in a complex, challenging educational environment. The schools are over-crowded and have limited infrastructure, which creates teacher-student ratios as high as 200 to 1. Exceptionally large classes make it challenging to monitor individual students' understanding and progress, and may cause some learners to fall behind or drop out. Teachers also struggle with multi-lingual, multi-age classrooms and acute protection concerns that have significant gendered dimensions. For example, more than 40 percent of enrolled learners are over age. While primary accelerated education programs are in place in Kakuma and Kalobeyei, they are not sufficient to meet the educational needs of such a large number of students. With so many nationalities represented among the refugee population—South Sudanese, Somali, Sudanese, Ethiopian, Burundian, Rwandese, Ugandan, and those from the Democratic Republic of Congo—the learners have different educational experiences and linguistic competencies. Girls continue to be disproportionately disadvantaged, with fewer girls than boys attending school at the upper primary and secondary levels.

The impact of COVID-19 on education for refugees

On March 16, 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Kenya closed all educational institutions, public and private, for an indefinite period. The government also put strict limitations on people's movements to slow transmission of the virus. To support the continuation of learning during the period, the Ministry of Education (MoE) developed a three-pronged approach that adhered to the international and national guidance for social distancing, quarantine, and self-isolation. The three 'prongs' were the provision of digital learning, primarily by expanding access to and strengthening the Kenya Education Cloud; the provision of educational radio and television programmes at the primary and secondary

levels; and support for students' access to textbooks and other teaching and learning materials.

While schools for refugees and other camp-based students were included in the Kenya Basic Education COVID-19 Response Plan (MoE Kenya, 2020a), UNHCR and the education working groups were responsible for ensuring that refugees were not left behind. The Kakuma education working groups, jointly led by UNHCR and the MoE at the sub-county level, developed a response plan that prioritised actions in accordance with the unique situation of the Kakuma camp and Kalobeyei settlement.

In camp settings, the inability to connect to radio lessons due to the unavailability of the national broadcast signal, along with inequitable access to internet connectivity, digital devices, and electricity, created bottlenecks for refugees attempting to access national learning interventions during the school closures. Prior to the pandemic, investments in digital learning in the camp and settlement communities were primarily in the form of centralised services in schools or community centres. These facilities were often oversubscribed, making it difficult to maintain social distancing.

Methodology

The study draws from primary and secondary data collected over a 24-month period. The focus was on the role of refugee teachers in the COVID-19 education response. The study provided an opportunity to understand teachers' contributions to the inclusion of displaced populations in the national education system. The authors of the study, who are practitioners, contributed directly to the COVID-19 response in the camp. They collected, analysed, and collated data and information for this paper from their COVID-19 education response work. Mindful of their positionality as practitioners and researchers, the authors took steps to ensure that the respondents were able to express their own views and experiences freely. Having extensive understanding of and familiarity with the local education context, establishing trust with participants, and reflecting on their own potential biases facilitated the authors' interviews and enabled them to collect authentic data.

The primary data was collected in 2020 and 2021 through three focus group discussions

(FGDs) with teachers, school administrators, and school management committees, and through semi-structured interviews with three education implementing partners in the camp and two local MoE representatives. The FGDs and interviews were conducted with the informed consent of all participants, and the confidentiality of participants was assured. The secondary data was collected from published literature, UNHCR education management information systems, and other published statistical information sources, such as rapid assessments and surveys, partner assessments reports, project progress reports, and reviews of documented best practices during the period of school closures and the immediate 12 months after schools re-opened. The primary and secondary data were thematically analysed to identify teacher practices during the COVID-19 response and challenges they faced. Conclusions were drawn about ways teachers could have been more effectively supported during the emergency educational response.

For data triangulation and validation, the FGDs and interviews were combined with an analysis of UNHCR and the education partners' regular implementation reports, assessments, and statistical data sets, such as education management information systems for schools.

Findings

Analysis of the primary and secondary data revealed that refugee teachers directly supported various response activities during the school closures. Unlike their national counterparts, the refugee teaching workforce remained in the camp during the school closures. They were supported with incentive payment from UNHCR and the education partners. Recognising their critical importance, remuneration was paid to all teachers, Kenyans and refugees alike. This proved key to teacher retention and to their participation in learning continuity interventions and in providing psychosocial support. It also supported teachers and their families during a period of immense stress and uncertainty. Nevertheless, the data analysis showed that teachers faced significant challenges, including movement restrictions and other COVID-19 mitigation measures, limited professional development opportunities, and a rising cost of living. Despite these challenges, refugee

teachers worked tirelessly to facilitate learning continuity and to provide psychosocial support to their learners.

Strategies to support learning continuity during COVID-19

Through a partnership with the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development, UNHCR and the education partners were able to broadcast the national radio education programme to children in the camps and host community via local and community radio stations (UNHCR, 2020b). The five-hour daily broadcast remained the primary strategy to reach learners during the school closures. However, analysis of the data showed that refugee teachers took the initiative to develop supplementary lessons that reached more than 50,000 primary and secondary school learners in the refugee camp and host community. While movement restrictions in and outside the camp limited their access to UN and NGO staff members, refugee teachers were able to mobilise children in their neighbourhoods and monitor their participation in radio broadcasts. It was found that the radio lessons played a crucial role in filling the educational vacuum created by the school closures. One participant mentioned that

> the radio lessons have helped me improve my listening skills and taking short notes at the same time. Learning through radio is so interesting. I listen from different teacher from different schools, and I learn both from the teacher on the radio and the teacher in my homestead. (Female student in Kakuma refugee camp)

Refugee teachers adapted lesson content provided by the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development into video and braille formats. They also developed short lesson notes based on the radio broadcasts, which were shared among learners through a WhatsApp communication tree. Teachers also followed up on the relevance and use of these lessons by making visits to students' homes.

Teachers also utilised the WhatsApp communication tree, along with offline and online digital content, to share life-saving information and important updates on the pandemic. Teachers also benefitted from virtual teacher training and mentorship. They capitalised on their presence in the communities by establishing learning circles among children residing in the same area. Each teacher supported between 5 and 10 learners within their neighbourhoods by providing critical learning and social and emotional support. They also assisted with the distribution of radios, textbooks, revision materials, personal protective equipment, and dignity kits to support learning at home and in the community learning circles. To support these actions, teachers were provided with data bundles and airtime, and they received training on remote learning methodologies, psychological first aid, and COVID-19 response and mitigation, which was delivered by a multi-agency team.

Female refugee teachers provided mentorship to vulnerable girls

In addition to academic disruption, the pandemic had a profound social and emotional effect on learners across Kenya and worldwide. There were growing mental health concerns, reports of increased violence against children, an increase in teenage pregnancy, and rising levels of chronic absenteeism and dropouts (McKinsey & Company, 2022). In Kakuma refugee camp, 62 teenage pregnancies were reported in June 2020 alone, compared with eight in the same month the previous year (IRC, 2020). A total of 651 secondary school students became pregnant during school closures. The data revealed that female refugee teachers provided crucial support and mentorship to adolescent girls, during both the school closures and upon re-opening. The international community provided support by training 30 female teachers in peer mentorship and basic psychosocial support. Each of the 30 then trained five additional teachers, which created a network of support in the blocs where the girls lived. This contributed directly to many vulnerable young girls' return to school upon re-opening. It is understood that shifting deeply ingrained cultural norms and community structures can be a difficult task and it may take a long time to show progress. It is crucial for partners to engage with both males and females to foster more inclusive and equitable learning environments. It also is important to facilitate dialogue on how certain community members can use their power and privilege to shift cultural norms and structures that are having a negative impact, such as girls' participation in education.

The role of teachers of refugees for national school re-opening

Kenya adopted a phased re-opening of schools, beginning with national examination classes in October 2020 and a resumption of all classes in January 2021. To make up for lost learning time, the academic calendar was condensed by increasing contact time through reduction of student breaks and removal of optional subjects from school time tables and reducing the number of holidays. In this context, teachers were obliged to adopt strategies to support learning loss, and to put in place the necessary capacities (skills, knowledge and attitudes) to implement the new curriculum (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development, 2019). At the same time, teachers had to navigate new requirements for social distancing, mask-wearing, and hygiene, and help learners adhere to them. Teachers, in collaboration with parents and partners in health and water sanitation and hygiene, also had to ensure that school-based health and safety measures were in place and then monitor learner compliance, which helped to lower the level of transmission in the schools.

Limited professional development and teacher remuneration

The pandemic also illuminated the urgent need to invest in teacher management in refugee settings. As the Kenyan teachers returned home during the school closures and the international community faced movement restrictions, the refugee workforce—two-thirds of whom were unqualified and were paid an incentive rather than a salary—led the learning continuity efforts. With little prior preparation and limited skill in mediating remote learning and in information, communication, and technology, refugee teachers were still the champions of the response.

Despite their critical role and the level of personal risk they faced, refugee teachers were paid an average monthly incentive of US$70. This is approximately one-fifth the average pay for a Kenyan national teacher working in the same school with a comparable level of responsibility. While humanitarian support was provided in the form of food rations, shelter, and non-food items during the extended lockdowns and reduction of informal livelihood opportunities, refugee teachers, learners,

and their families reported increased economic and social stress (Pape *et al*., 2021). Teacher salaries were supplemented during the school closures with additional internet data bundles and financial incentives for preparing radio lessons. However, this support ended when schools re-opened.

Discussion and conclusion

Implications for policy and practice

In recognition of their invaluable contribution (pre- and post-pandemic) to ensuring learning continuity during the school closures, refugee teachers must be recognised as professionals. To capitalise on the crucial pedagogical knowledge and experiences they have gained during the pandemic, their role should be mainstreamed. They should be given fair conditions of service and opportunities for capacity development that are in line with the Kenyan education reforms and that reflect the challenging educational circumstances of the refugee setting. The recommendations proposed below inform the realms of policy and practice. They aim to build human capital for refugee teachers and improve the quality of education wherever they may be teaching. The recommendations also build on the recent global shift toward the inclusion of refugee learners in national systems, which is underpinned by the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, 2017 Djibouti Declaration, 2018 Nairobi Declaration, and the Global Compact on Refugees. The refugee teacher workforce is a key pillar of the inclusion agenda, and harnessing their contributions to teaching and learning is an effective way to mitigate the learning crisis during an emergency. The Djibouti Declaration, which specifically recognises the important role refugee teachers play in providing education to refugee children, calls for their inclusion in national education systems, and for providing the support and resources they need to succeed.

It is also important to ensure appropriate conditions of service for refugee teachers that reflect their qualifications, experience, and responsibilities. A swift recognition of prior learning process for qualified refugee teachers must be implemented. Approximately one-third of refugee teachers hold accredited teaching credentials, at least 25 percent of them acquired in their countries of origin (UNHCR, 2021a). In January 2020, Kenya launched national

guidelines for the recognition of teachers' prior learning (MoE Kenya, 2020b) that make specific reference to refugees. The guidelines are anchored in progressive regional agreements, including the East Africa Qualifications Framework for Higher Education and the Djibouti Declaration.

Teacher motivation and well-being are essential to maintaining a committed and experienced workforce, and in improving teaching quality and, consequently, learning outcomes. With the overall goal of aligning pay and conditions of service across host community and refugee teachers (IGAD, 2017), immediate steps must be taken within the existing legal and policy framework to develop schemes of service for refugee teachers that factor in their qualifications, experience, and responsibilities, on a par with national teachers. The lack of sufficient and consistent financing has limited the recruitment of refugee teachers, and those who are deployed are usually on short-term, unpredictable contracts, which can lead to unnecessary stress and high turnover. In Kenya, the legal and policy framework limits the recruitment and remuneration of refugee teachers, which is not comparable to their Kenyan counterparts. Given their similar roles and the significant value refugee teachers bring to the profession, the unfair practice of unequal teacher compensation must be addressed. Predictable and consistent financing must be brokered to ensure that all teachers of refugees are provided with fair terms and decent work conditions (UNHCR, 2018). Furthermore, strategies to increase the number of female teachers must be adopted, including strengthening their participation in secondary education.

Invest in accredited teaching qualifications for refugees and support continual teacher professional development

Investing in refugee teachers' accredited teaching qualifications and supporting their continuous professional development is critical to the education of refugee children. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the resourcefulness and commitment of refugee teachers in maintaining teaching and learning. It also has highlighted the heightened need for teachers to develop new capacities, including how to operate safe schools, support learners' transition back to school, and recover lost learning

(Carvalho *et al*., 2020; UNESCO, UNICEF, and World Bank, 2020). Teacher professional development, including national development programmes, combined with regular coaching, peer mentorship, and ongoing support is imperative to improve both teacher practice and student learning. Stakeholders therefore must work together to facilitate refugee teachers' access to teacher training, preparation, and continual professional development, in line with national standards.

These recommendations must be implemented within a broader approach to build the conditions, partnerships, collaboration, and approaches that will strengthen education services for refugees, improve learning outcomes from early childhood through tertiary education, and facilitate economic inclusion.

Author Bios

Jennie Taylor is a Senior Education Officer in the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes (EAHGL) region, UNHCR, based in Nairobi, Kenya

Mohamud Hure is an Education Officer, Education Section at HQ, UNHCR based in Copenhagen, Denmark

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