

Behind Barbed Wire Fences: Higher Education and Twenty-first Century Teaching in Dadaab, Kenya

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I. Introduction

Since the independence movements of the 1960s, educators concerned about the aims of education in Africa have urged African governments to reform formal education systems inherited from European colonizers. The contention here is that colonial education devalued African “traditional epistemology and philosophies” (Abdi, A. A. 2012) and that newly independent African countries need to adopt “indigenous approaches to education” if education is to bring about sustainable development (Owuor 2012). Teachers and teacher education programs are at the center of this project as they are seen as the “hub of transformational education” (Nsamenang and Tchombe 2011). However, this “Africanization” project has failed because “the institutional framework established by colonial governments was left largely intact” (Nungu 2012) and teacher education in many parts of Africa is currently in crisis (Sifuna and Sawamura 2010). Thus, Musembi Nungu (2012) calls for teacher education that is grounded in African epistemology, and the “re-culturing” of teacher education in Africa.

This article focuses on a teacher education program offered to refugees and local Kenyan nationals in Dadaab, Kenya by a consortium of Canadian and Kenyan universities. Education for refugees brings new challenges to the discourse about the relevance of education in Africa. The nature of refugee education is such that it puts the schooling of those displaced in the hands of global actors. The reality is that for the 3.7 million African refugees displaced in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNHCR

2014), the conversation about formal education often shifts from the return to traditional African ways of knowing, to getting access to basic education as a basic human right. Nonetheless, the mere presence of refugees and refugee camps in Africa makes the examination of the aims and purposes of education in African countries ever more important. Drawing on interviews with nineteen Somali refugee students in a teacher education program delivered under the umbrella of the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) project, the article explores the opportunities and challenges the teacher education program presents for the student-teachers. The article pays particular attention to how refugee education, including the teacher education program offered through BHER, builds not only the students' skills for employability but also how these programs prepare the Somali students for new forms of citizenship in Somalia.

The data used in this article draws on research conducted for my doctoral dissertation, which explores the role of education in post-conflict societies, such as that of Somalia, in bringing about sustainable peace and justice. As an educator and researcher who grew up in a relatively peaceful Somalia, I am haunted by questions about how education can be used as a vehicle to reimagine peace and unity in my homeland. As such, this article employs Critical Pedagogy as the method of data analysis. Critical Pedagogy "encourages educators to imagine, dream, struggle towards building the foundations of a new democratic society" (Farahmandpur 2009: 114). Joan Wink adds that Critical Pedagogy "is a prism that reflects the complexities of the interaction between teaching and learning" (Wink 2011: 50). The fieldwork for this study took place in August 2014 and August 2015 while I was teaching courses to teachers in training in Dadaab. The research is qualitative in nature and uses semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observations and written notes.

The article is organized as follows. First, I give an overview of the research site—Dadaab refugee camps and the BHER Learning Centre. Secondly, I describe the education context in Dadaab. Thirdly, I discuss the findings of the research. And finally, I provide concluding remarks.

II. An Overview of the Research Site: Dadaab Refugee Camps

The year 2016 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Kenyan refugee camp complex known as Dadaab. Established in 1991 for 90,000

Somalis fleeing the civil war in Somalia, the five camps that currently make up the complex (Dagahaley; Hagadera; Ifo; Ifo II and Kam-bios) house nearly 350,000 inhabitants, of whom 98 per cent are from Somalia (UNHCR and UNICEF 2012). The remaining 2 per cent are refugees from Uganda, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and Burundi. The students of BHER are also made up of this demographic with more than 80 per cent being ethnic Somalis from the refugee camps and the local community. Living conditions in the camps are harsh. According to Laura-Ashley Wright and Robyn Plasterer, 43 per cent of the population lack adequate dwellings, 82 per cent were lacking household latrines, and almost all were being affected by water shortages at the time of their research (Wright and Plasterer 2010: 45). Present conditions are much the same but the most important facet of the scene in Dadaab, in my view, is the security situation and the challenges that situation creates for students and educators, especially when educators are affiliated with western learning institutions.

The first of its kind, the BHER project in Dadaab offers an unprecedented number of students, (400 over a two-year period) their first postsecondary education for free. Some of the best higher education institutions in Canada and Kenya came together to train teachers and offer opportunities for further studies. However, the security restrictions imposed on faculty and students created difficult learning and teaching conditions.

Built in 2013, the BHER Learning Centre shares a campus with Kenyatta University's ODEL Learning Centre. The campus is partially surrounded by barbed wire fences and has armed guards whose job is to search students as they arrive. Several armed guards also roam the campus while inside the classrooms and computer labs, students participate in learning experiences designed to equip them with innovative teaching methods often used in Canadian schools. However, faculty willing to spend more time with students to help them grasp new concepts they are learning have been unable to stay beyond instruction time. While the safety of everyone involved should be the number one priority, the daily scene of being searched and safeguarded by armed police can be disturbing to the psyche of students and educators alike. The paradox of student-teachers engaging with courses designed to equip them with 21st century teaching and learning skills which incorporate human rights and social justice into the pedagogy on the one hand, is sharply contrasted by the need for armed protection on the

other hand. This dichotomy inspired the title of this article but also provokes questions concerning the complex nature of delivering education in contexts of volatile security conditions.

III. The Current Context of Teaching and Learning in Dadaab

A qualified teaching workforce is crucial for the effective functioning of any education system. However, the Kenyan Ministry of Education recognizes only 5 per cent of the 1,183 teaching staff in Dadaab as qualified teachers (UNHCR 2015: 5). Ninety percent of the teachers in Dadaab are incentive teachers recruited from the camps who “completed at least secondary school but with very low pass rates and are ineligible for admission to higher education institutions in Kenya” (Hall 2015: 25). Incentive teachers receive no formal teacher training. Literature on refugee education most often attributes the poor quality of the teaching workforce in Dadaab to three main causes: an overall lack of funding for educational programs in an emergency context; a lack of prioritization of higher education programs by humanitarian aid organizations; and the cultural values of refugees. The third cause—namely Somali cultural values—is said to discourage formal education, which in turn impacts the availability of quality teachers in general and female teachers in particular (see Wright and Plasterer 2010; Save the Children 2013; Hall 2015; Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010; Buck and Silver 2012).

It is widely reported that higher education, which can provide effective teacher training, is not a priority in humanitarian aid, as mentioned before. UNESCO (2011: 3) reports that “Education accounts for just 2% of humanitarian aid.” The Global Education Cluster (2013) reported a decrease of aid allocated for education from 2.4 per cent in 2011 to 1.4 per cent in 2012 which caused an estimated thirteen million people in twenty countries, most of whom were children, to miss out on opportunities for vital education interventions. The focus of international frameworks for education—such as Education for All (AFL) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG)—on primary education jeopardizes investment in higher education programs, which are vital for the economic and political development of refugees. The notion that refugee camps are temporary settlements further contributes to the lack of prioritization in higher education programs in protracted refugee camps such as Dadaab. Although these two factors together impede effective educational programming and create a loop of unqualified teachers producing the next generation of unqualified

incentive teachers, Somali cultural norms are often criticized for the low enrolment and retention rates as well as other poor outcomes of education in the camps.

The education of children in general, and the education of females in particular, is a point of contention between Somalis residing in Dadaab and the aid organizations in charge of their education. Wright and Plasterer (2010: 45) found that “in Dadaab, girls’ educational attainment steadily decreases with age, such that by secondary school only 67 of the 394 students were girls.” While the numbers are indisputable, most of the research in Dadaab reduces the reasons for the lower presence of female students and teachers in schools to cultural barriers in which females are expected to “do house chores” and “get married early.” My view is that the issue of gender disparity in education is far more complex than any available research is able to explain. Both research and anecdotal evidence outside Dadaab camps show that female Somali students have higher achievement rates than Somali males (Omar 2009; Abdi, F. 2012). This puts to question the idea that culture is the source of the problem. However, it is outside the scope of this article to engage in critical analysis of the root causes of the gender disparity in education.

Teachers in Dadaab face harsh teaching conditions: classrooms in the camps are overcrowded, textbooks are scarce, and other resources are lacking. While the Inter-agency Network of Education in Emergency (INEE) recommends a teacher-student ratio of 1:40, the ratio in classrooms in Dadaab is often 1:80 and has reached 1:110 at times of increased arrivals (MacKinnon 2014: 7). The textbook to student ratio is 1:30 (Hall 2015: 23) as opposed to the UNHCR recommended ratio of 1:3 (UNHCR 2012: 12). Teaching aids such as computers, projectors, and science labs which could enhance teaching are almost absent from the environment and with such large class sizes and teachers’ limited training, it would be difficult to utilize, even if available. In addition to these difficult teaching conditions, the incentive teachers are paid 10 per cent of what a Kenyan national teacher would earn (MacKinnon 2014) because they are refugees and are legally forbidden to work elsewhere in Kenya. These conditions lead to teacher burnout and high turnover rates, which in turn impact retention and enrollment rates in the camps. In 2012, primary school enrollment in Dadaab was at 42.7 per cent and secondary school enrollment was at a much lower rate of 8.4 per cent (Norwegian Refugee Council 2012). MacKinnon (2014) reported that the Dadaab secondary school enrollment rate was at 5

per cent in 2011. Furthermore, female enrollment and graduation rates were notably lower (Dippo et al. 2012; Wright and Plasterer 2010).

Teachers and students also encounter challenges stemming from the curriculum. Education in the refugee context should support durable solutions (Crisp et al. 2001), yet neither the quality nor the scope of education in Dadaab effectively supports durable solutions, whether it is repatriation, resettlement or local integration. Education that supports repatriation as a durable solution “should normally be based on the curriculum and languages of study of the area of origin” (Crisp et al. 2001: 1). However, the Dadaab education system is based on the Kenyan curriculum and thus uses English as the medium of instruction. Hall (2015) observes that Somali teachers often speak Somali language to students who do not have sufficient English language skills. Jeff Crisp, Christopher Talbot and Daina B. Cipollone (2001: 188) also note that because of the mandated Kenyan curriculum in Dadaab, “Geography classes consequently teach students about the Rift Valley and other notable Kenyan features. Students learn about the Kenyan political system and Kenyan history.” While the choice of language of instruction might be practical since there are other language speakers in Dadaab (however small the number), the curriculum is void of content that could familiarize the refugees with important political, cultural and historical events in their homelands.

Somali refugees in Dadaab are also generally deprived of opportunities to pursue higher education. Although higher education is proven to yield benefits both for individuals and societies of the host country and the country of origin, opportunities for higher education are extremely limited in Dadaab (Dryden-Peterson 2011; Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010; Wright and Plasterer 2010). Attending university is not an option for the majority of students in Dadaab. Notable exceptions are the World University Services of Canada (WUSC), which provides scholarships to twenty Dadaab students and secures enrollment to universities across Canada for these students each year, and other smaller scale scholarships such as DAFI. However, refugees who complete secondary school, including Somali refugees, express a strong desire to continue their education (Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010; Norwegian Refugee Council 2012). It is in this context that the Executive Director of Windle Trust Kenya—the organization in charge of secondary education in Dadaab—approached York University in Toronto about bringing higher education with a focus on teacher training to the camp population.

IV. Training Dadaab Teachers for Twenty-first Century Teaching and Learning

After a year-long feasibility study, York University (Toronto, Canada), University of British Columbia (Vancouver, Canada), Kenyatta University (Nairobi, Kenya) and Moi University (Eldoret, Kenya) launched secondary and primary teacher education programs at the BHER Learning Centre. The project was launched in August 2014 with York University and Kenyatta University delivering the primary teacher-training program and University of British Columbia and Moi University delivering the secondary training programs.

The objective of the universities is to build the capacity of teachers in the camps and to equip them with recognized university credits that they can transfer to various higher education institutions in the event of repatriation or resettlement to another country (Dippo et al. 2012). In addition to the expected long-term impact of the BHER courses, the consortium—particularly the Canadian universities involved in the delivery of courses—aims to bring innovative, twenty-first century teaching and learning skills to the student-teachers with the goal of improving teaching practices and the overall quality of education in the camps. Twenty-first century skills include “collaboration, communication, ICT (Information Communication and Technology) literacy, and social/cultural skills, along with skills such as civic participation, creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving” (Ahonen and Kinnunen 2015: 345). John I. Wilson asserts that in order for twenty-first century learning to be effective, the right infrastructure must be in place for the teachers to “incorporate these skills into the classroom” (Wilson 2006: 1).

The effective application of twenty-first century skills in the classrooms also requires that teachers take a learner-centered approach to their teaching. The learner-centered approach, sometimes referred to as child-centered approach or student-centered approach, includes “students being active in the process of learning, taking on a greater responsibility and autonomy for their learning, and a greater interdependence and equality between the teacher and learner” (Jordan et al. 2014: 13). Taking a learner-centered approach can be complicated in a context such as Dadaab where, not unlike other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, teaching approaches are most often teacher-centered. Unlike the learner-centered approach, this method of teaching is deeply rooted in memorization and rote learning and it tips the power scale

towards the teacher (Hardman et al. 2009: 69). Nungu (2012) argues that in traditional African epistemology there exists a system that is far superior to both learner-centered and teacher-centered approaches. Nungu further asserts that in traditional African notions of community, “knowledge emanates from the community and is passed from ancestors to the elders and to the community” to indicate that traditional African epistemologies have their roots in communal learning and that this communal concept puts both the learner and the teacher in the center. In Nungu’s line of thinking both the student-centered and teacher-centered methodologies limit the notions of community building in the classroom and thus limit African ways of learning.

The rationale for bringing twenty-first century teaching skills to Dadaab is twofold: the Canadian faculty aim to transfer the skills they use in their own classrooms to Dadaab teachers; and courses are designed to be “portable.” In the event that the student-teachers return to Somalia or resettle in another country, they will be required to familiarize themselves with the technology and the independent learning skills required for online learning. While access to the university courses in the refugee camps or outside of Kenya presents a unique opportunity for Somali students in Dadaab, two important questions arise from the introduction of what in “first-world” classrooms are termed “twenty-first century teaching and learning skills.”

- 1) How can twenty-first century skills be applied in Dadaab schools that lack the basic infrastructure required for such skills?
- 2) What relevance do the learner-centered pedagogies that we (the Canadian instructors) aim to impart on our student-teachers have for an education system which is accustomed to a completely different approach to teaching and learning?

In surveying the findings of seventy-two articles discussing the implementation of learner-centered education in “third world” countries, Michele Schweisfurth found that “the history of the implementation of LCE (Learner Centered Education) in different contexts is riddled with stories of failures grand and small.” Furthermore, Schweisfurth (2011: 19, 419) raises the question “about how teaching and learning are understood in different contexts, and about whether LCE is ultimately a ‘western’ construct inappropriate for application in all societies and classrooms.” Paul Thompson (2013) contests the view that learner-centered methods might not have relevance for the learning

needs of “third world countries.” He states, “Although LCE clearly is a western product, it can have relevance in the developing world if promoted effectively in potentially suitable settings” (Thompson 2013: 57). I agree with Thompson’s position that with the right conditions, learner-centered education can provide meaningful learning for students. However, for this method of teaching to enhance learning in the context of Dadaab, the pedagogy has to be accompanied by curriculum that is just as purposeful in raising critical consciousness in students. As Nungu (2012) argues, African epistemologies are based on communal learning. Therefore, it is most beneficial to include students in their own learning in a culturally relevant curriculum.

V. Being Trained as a Teacher: What Opportunities and Challenges Do Student-Teachers Think Their Training Affords Them?

In addition to the skill gap of existing teachers, in Dadaab, there is about a 35 per cent shortfall of the quantity of teachers needed to meet the demands of 179,578 school-age children (MacKinnon 2014). What’s more, there is a gender disparity in the current teaching force. Training female teachers is linked to not only increasing the capacity of female teachers and balancing gender equity in the schools, but also to improving the enrollment and the retention rates of female students in Dadaab (UNHCR and UNICEF 2011; Kariuki et al. 2008). The participants of this study expressed several ways the teacher-training program benefits them and their community. Suleekha, a 26-year-old Somali female respondent explains what the teacher training means to her:

I never get such an opportunity to be trained as a teacher. Since I finished secondary in 2009, I just finished small programs like diploma in counseling psychology, but I never got such a chance to be trained as a teacher and I am really glad and happy to have this moment because in our locale here in Dadaab refugee camps, the number of ladies teaching at school, the numbers are very low compare to men. Why? Because you find most ladies are not engaged in schools because they have not undergone teacher trainings and this is a great opportunity to us—indeed we are very appreciating (Suleekha).

Warsame, a 27-year-old male Somali respondent asserts:

If we complete our training we can teach better. I believe teachers are respected in the community—I know because when I see some of the parents in the market they say that is Mo’alimu (teacher) and they listen to me when I give them advice about their child... I believe this education will give me higher status and is better for my future (Warsame).

The student-teachers also thought that access to university courses not only increases their capacity to influence the quality of education in Dadaab but that it will also enable them to bring much needed skills to Somalia upon their return. According to Barbara Zeus (2011: 271), higher education programs can unleash the “immense human potential” which exists amongst the refugees. Cigaal, Guhaad, and Hibo, are all in their twenties and came to the camps between the ages of 3 and 7. Although they barely remember Somalia, they are convinced that they will go back to rebuild Somalia at some point in their lifetime.

The education we are getting will have an effect on us now and in the future. One, it will qualify us a well-paying job—maybe in the future. Most of us are not expecting to stay in these camps forever, we are planning to go back to our country and this knowledge—these skills of teaching—is highly needed in Somalia and we already have the experience (Cigaal).

I believe education can help me become a better person—a better citizen—a productive member of society. When I go back to Somalia, I will bring my education to my people and help educate the young generation... I am a teacher and will always be a teacher. My dream is to educate children so what happened to us will not happen again (Guhaad).

Most people want to be resettled in Europe or America, I don’t want to go to another country. I am needed in my country. The area of Somalia I am from has nothing. I want to go back and help my people (Hibo).

In addition to the participants expressing the ways in which their teaching skills can help their community in Dadaab and in Somalia, as well as their professional development, the students also extensively commented on the opportunities and challenges they encountered with the classroom pedagogies we (their Canadian instructors) were using. On the one hand the students were very enthusiastic about the exposure to blended-learning which consisted of instruction time and online learning, participating in classroom activities and discussions, as well as writing critical reflections of their work, but on the

other hand they were acutely aware of the difficulty of transferring such teaching skills to their own classrooms in the camps. The following comments are representations of participants' views in relation to classroom pedagogy.

I think the way we are learning now and the way we learned before, it is very different. The teachers [Dadaab teachers] are using chalk and now we can see the projectors and computers—I have never seen. But as a teacher I know—teachers [in Dadaab] don't have all these things. I teach standard five [grade five] and I have 120 students in my class sometimes. They are a lot. Some of them sit on the floor. Plus, we don't have many textbooks so it is not very possible to make groups like Madam X [a York University instructor] and all our instructors make when we are reading [learning] with them. I think it is not possible (Qasim).

We don't have computer or projector and internet. It is very, very hard to use the way the professor teaches here in my school. We only have blackboard (Suleekha).

The students' reflections about their experiences speak to the complexities of engaging with new ways of learning. Their thoughts can help guide educators in refugee contexts when planning their own curriculums.

VI. Conclusion

There is considerable consensus that teachers are the most vital part in any education system. In the context of refugee camps, trained teachers can strengthen the education in the camps (Dippo et al. 2012). Upon their return to their countries, trained teachers can "fill the gap" and provide urgently needed services (see Coffie 2014). Teachers' role in post-conflict societies, such as that of Somalia, cannot be overestimated. Jackie Kirk argues that "teachers can be agents of change within the education sector and broader society by rethinking what students need to learn in schools, and how and by whom this information should be taught" (cited in Shepler 2011: 200). However, the quality of work teachers can do depends heavily on the type of formal education they receive not just in teacher training colleges or programs but also throughout their schooling career. In this article, I discussed the state of education in Dadaab refugee camps. From the perspective of Critical Pedagogy, I located the educational experiences of the refu-

gee teachers in the larger context of education in Africa. Furthermore, the article illustrated the particular challenges that face the students in the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees project and also the unique opportunities the program brings to the students given their lack of access to postsecondary education.

The overarching purpose of the article is to open a dialogue about ways to link the purposes of refugee education to the long-term agenda of education being a transformative tool for societies who experienced civil wars such as Somalia. In such societies “education stands as the natural vehicle through which social cohesion can be pursued over the long haul” (Johnson 2007). However, the current state of refugee education was described as “education for ultimate disappointment” both by top UNHCR staff members and refugees (Dryden-Peterson 2011). For education to be meaningful for refugees and their countries of origin, the provision of education for refugees must expand its focus to include curriculum and pedagogy, which can be used to address and transform the conditions that created their situation in the first place. Teachers should be placed in the center of this transformational process and thus be provided with proper training. The teacher education programs offered through the BHER program I used as a point of discussion here made efforts to tailor curriculum to the needs of the students by introducing materials that were deemed relevant to the students’ context. For example, one class offered reading of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, another introduced culturally relevant mathematics activities, and a science class introduced ways to conduct science experiments without the availability of science labs. However, the program also introduced classroom pedagogies that can be difficult to implement in Dadaab schools. Such pedagogies include: blended-learning, online learning and learner-centered activities, which rely on technology, group activities and reading resources. My comments here only serve the purpose of starting conversations about the students’ experiences with the BHER teacher education program and its relevance for the larger project of education for societal transformation. The full impact of the training, both in the camps and wherever else the participants end up teaching, will need to be further researched.

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