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FEATURE

**Teaching in Extreme Conditions: A Study of
Refugee Teachers in Central Africa**

Safary Wa-Mbaleka

***Abstract.** This paper briefly synthesizes the literature on refugee education around the world and especially in Central Africa. It then focuses on preliminary results of a recent study in a refugee camp in Central Africa. Based on the findings, the presentation introduces some practical recommendations needed to increase sustainable educational access and quality in refugee camps. Recommendations are given for the international community in general and specifically to people who believe in promoting human rights through education for the Central African region. The paper also presents additional research opportunities.*

It has been more than a decade since the number of people living in refugee camps reached several million (Penz, 2004) due to wars, ethnic conflicts, and/or natural calamities. Many of these refugees are school-age children and young people. Just like everyone living under normal conditions, refugees have the right to access quality education (Drechsler, Munsch, & Wintermeier, 2005; Hek, 2005; Kirk & Cassity, 2007; Lin, Suyemoto, & Kiang, 2009). However, because conditions in refugee camps are different from those living under normal circumstances, teachers for refugee learners have to deal with challenges that are uncommon in mainstream education (Kirk & Cassity, 2007).

Due to several civil wars that have plagued the Central African region, over 2 million people currently live in refugee camps or camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), and many have been there for a long period of time (Bearak & Crossette, 2001; Geisler & De Sousa, 2001; Penz, 2004; Refugees International, 2009). Refugees are people who seek asylum in another country while IDPs are those who seek refuge in another location within their home country. Table 1 synthesizes current statistics on refugees and IDPs in Central African countries as reported in August 2012 by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

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Table 1
Statistics on Refugees in Central Africa

	Refugees	Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)	Total Number
Burundi	35,659	78,798	114,457
Cameroon	100,373	0	100,373
Central African Republic	16,730	105,206	121,936
Democratic Republic of Congo	152,749	1,709,278	1,862,027
Equatorial Guinea	0	0	0
Gabon	1,773	0	1,773
Republic of Congo	141,232	0	141,232
Sao Tome & Principe	0	0	0
Rwanda	55,325	0	55,325
Tanzania*	131,243	0	131,243
Uganda*	139,448	23,453	162,901
Total**	774,532	1,916,735	2,691,267

*Note. Although not part of Central Africa, Uganda and Tanzania have been added to this table because they host large numbers of refugees from Central African nations. Therefore, they are directly affected by the issue under discussion. (Data from UNHCR, 2012).

Table 1 demonstrates the importance of the issue of refugees and IDPs in the Central African region. Particularly, the Great Lakes region (Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC], Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda) is currently hosting the majority of refugees and IDPs. These statistics reflect closely the result of civil wars and inter-ethnic conflicts that have plagued the region since the mid-1990s. Many of these refugees need some type of education either to accomplish their long-term educational goals or some type of skills-based education to address their basic needs, such as food, health, and safety (Refugees International, 2009; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008; World Refugee Survey, 2009). Teachers working in the camps are expected not only to provide education, but also to play several additional roles in the educational system for refugee learners, such as providing counseling services, and surrogate parenting. Sometimes, they are also security

guards, problem solvers, librarians, agricultural or business advisers, or even counselors for the parents, etc.

Challenges in Refugee and IDP Camps

The issue of providing education to refugees and IDPs is a complex one because it involves economic, social, political, psychological, and environmental perspectives. The violence due to war in Central Africa has already affected millions of people (Ogata, 2000). The Central African region has experienced persistent conflict, which has caused the massive movements of millions of refugees and IDPs. This region includes primarily seven countries that are torn with closely linked conflicts: Uganda, Sudan, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly known as Zaire), Burundi, and Angola (Ogata, 2000). The conflict in these countries is generally over the control of mineral and natural resources or ethnic cleansing. This is generally linked to the control of power (Aluanga, 2008; Lin et al., 2009; Marwaha, 2008; McBrien, 2005; Newbury, 2005; Tadesse, 2007; Waters, 1999; Waters & Leblanc, 2005).

Refugee/IDP General Challenges

Survivors of different conflicts and wars face serious challenges that are hard to bear. These challenges are not only important on a personal level, but they have an impact on the learning process of refugee/IDP learners (Drechsler et al., 2005; Hek, 2005; Kanu, 2008; Kirk & Cassity, 2007; Kirk & Winthrop, 2007), and therefore, must be taken into consideration. These challenges include, but are not limited to, economic challenges; security challenges; health and social challenges; and behavioral problems (Drechsler et al., 2005; Duong & Morgan, 2001; Hek, 2005; Kirk & Winthrop, 2007; Matthews, 2008; McBrien, 2005; Newbury, 2005; Ogata, 2000; Salisbury, 2006; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008; Szente, Hoot, & Taylor, 2006; Tadesse, 2007). Economically, refugee learners face significant hardships on a daily basis just to be able to meet their very basic needs, especially food, clean water and shelter. In some instances, some men have taken advantage of and sexually abused women facing hunger. Having enough food for all the refugees/IDPs in a camp is a serious challenge due to both limited resources available from the host countries and non-government organizations, and also because of security risks that people face in the camps (Kaiser, 2006; Szente et al., 2006; Thom, 2010; Tillman, 2001; Waters, 1999; Waters & Leblanc, 2005; Westhoff et al., 2008; World Refugee Survey, 2009).

Additionally, refugees and IDPs are in camps because they are running from insecurity. Ironically, while in these camps, these people still live in fear for their lives. In a refugee camp, night hours usually bring fear to the inhabitants. Some reports have presented evidence that in some refugee/IDP camps, there have been massacres, systematic rapes, kidnappings for the purposes of increasing the

number of soldiers, child soldiers, and sex slaves (Global Witness, 2009; United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2010; United Nations Security Council, 2010). All these are contrary to the goal of sustainable development in the Central African region.

Refugee learners also need access to health care to prevent outbreaks of epidemics common to overcrowded settings with poor hygiene, as refugee camps almost always are. While most of these seem like issues that should be easily addressed, they are complex in refugee camps in Central African countries, due primarily to accessibility issues, availability of financial resources, and the large number of people who live in these camps (Global Security, 2010; Global Witness, 2009). Safe water and food present a major challenge due to limited resources available for the millions of refugees and IDPs in Central Africa.

Refugee/IDP Educational Challenges

In addition to basic physical and safety concerns, there are educational issues in refugee camps that go far beyond what most teachers face in classrooms. Strekalova and Hoot (2008) analyzed six major obstacles that refugee/IDP children face that make education in refugee/IDP camps especially difficult: living with traumatic experiences; gender-based violence; language diversity; parental resistance to education; cultural identity issues; behavioral problems, discrimination; and socio-economic challenges. These challenges add to the complexity of the planning and delivery of refugee/IDP education, and should not be ignored in planning for effective education under these extreme circumstances.

Due to these general challenges and the expectations that everyone has from education (Geisler & De Sousa, 2001; Hek, 2005; Kanu, 2008), educators need to consider some factors while working in refugee/IDP camps. These include, but are not limited to disparities in access to financial support; a large number of learners; limited educational facilities; limited teacher preparation; curriculum selection; limited access to marketable skills; and negative attitudes towards female education. Education is often seen as the best solution to all problems, even though it cannot possibly solve many of these issues.

Greeely and Rose (2006) suggested that educational administrations should create a specific curriculum that can be effective for all refugee learners. Some experts have recommended that refugee students receive the curriculum of their country of origin (Dumbrill, 2009; Kaiser, 2006; Kirk & Winthrop, 2007). The challenge with this idea is that some refugee learners may stay in the host country for several years until they reach college age. Others have, therefore, promoted the curriculum of the host country.

Educational Expectations and Opportunities

While education does not cause war, it is expected to help solve many of the ills that result from war (Kaiser, 2006). Buckland (2006) suggests that good investment in children's education in refugee/IDP camps could be one of the most sustainable solutions to peace because education provides means to prevent conflict while promoting peace, reconciliation, and reconstruction. One may ask "why and how refugee children should be educated when by definition they are excluded from full participation in the activities of any national body politic" (Waters & Leblanc, 2005, p. 132). Maybe one of the best answers to this question is provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (United Nations Security Council, 2000). This organization has stated that education has the goal of helping rebuild the lives of refugee children. This goal is supposedly achieved through social interaction and the development of knowledge and skills needed for these children's future lives.

People expect education to "heal psychosocial wounds of war, solve youth unemployment, deliver . . . democracy, build peace and promote economic and social development" (Buckland, 2006, p. 7). School is a place where students are expected to receive counseling services, a place where young people can develop marketable, vocational skills, and learn how to resolve conflicts peacefully (Tillman, 2001). While this is a noble goal, unfortunately, the infrastructure, instructional, and human resources required to accomplish this are not available to support it.

To plan and deliver quality education in refugee camps, many factors need to be taken into consideration, as can be seen from the literature presented above. Given the difficulties that continue to take place in refugee camps, although much has been written about refugee education, more research must continue with refugee teachers. These teachers are in a good position to analyze what is truly needed to promote quality education for refugee learners. Learning more about their training and their experience can help educators better understand what kind of support is most needed. In this preliminary phase of a larger study, two leading research questions are addressed. (1) How do teachers in refugee camps learn how to teach? (2) What experiences do refugee teachers face?

Methodology

This qualitative, phenomenological study focuses on the lived experiences of teachers who have taught in refugee educational programs. The part of the study that is reported here was conducted in one refugee camp based in Uganda. The study is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with four educators who were teaching in the refugee camp in August 2011. For triangulation purposes, some documents were collected in addition to the interviews. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested that artifacts such as lesson plans should be collected

and analyzed to obtain a more complete data set. I personally conducted the interviews in the refugee camp using an interview protocol, while conducting participant observation in the camp, asking pertinent questions to community leaders, church leaders, and government officials in charge of refugee programs. Research participants were recruited from the camp to participate voluntarily in the study. They had at least one year of experience teaching in a refugee camp. None of the interviewees had ever previously met the researcher.

Research Setting

The research setting was the Nakivale Resettlement Camp, located on the southwestern side of Uganda, bordering both the Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania. During the time of the study, the camp had a little over 50,000 refugees, mainly from seven countries: Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia, and South Sudan. Some refugees reported having lived in this camp Uganda for as little as three months and others, for as much as 20 years. Almost 20% of the refugees were registered as students from nursery school through high school (9,549 learners), although some of these students were Ugandans from socio-economically challenged villages surrounding the camp. A large number of school-aged students were reported not to be in school for varied reasons such as lack of motivation, involvement in household chores, and biological age being significantly higher than academic age.

The Nakivale Camp was reported to have 36 nursery schools (534 learners), 11 elementary schools (8,365 learners), and only two high schools (545 learners). The drop in the number of learners between elementary and high school may be explained by the high dropout rate that was reported in the refugee camp and the significantly reduced number of available high schools (only two). Other than a few Ugandan teachers, most teachers are themselves refugees from other countries. Together, there were 310 part-time and full-time teachers. The Ugandan government employed 61 teachers, while other teachers worked with different non-government organizations.

Research Participants

The research participants reported in this preliminary study were teaching various subjects at one elementary school that had about 1,400 students taught by 16 teachers. This school had grades 1 through 4. The research participants included three men and one woman. A quick look at the faculty in the refugee camp showed significantly more male than female teachers. All of the four teachers interviewed in this study were refugees. None of them was Ugandan. They had experienced being refugees before they became teachers of refugee learners.

Table 2
Characteristics of Participants

	Gender	Age	Education*	Refugee Teaching Experience (years)
Participant 1	Male	22	1 yr college	3
Participant 2	Male	49	MA	3
Participant 3	Male	28	AA	2.5
Participant 4	Female	40	AA	15

*Education: AA (Associate degree, 2 years of college training in teaching), MA (Master's of Arts in Management)

Results

The preliminary data from the four interviews, together with the information gathered through observation and informal conversation with refugees, refugee community leaders, and government officials reveals six major themes: learners' untreated traumatic experiences, learners' physiological needs, lack of adequate training for refugee teachers, learners' age, learning environment needs, and teachers' sense of fulfillment.

Learners' Untreated Traumatic Experiences

Participant 3 used the word "problem" 58 times during the 50-minute interview. Most of the occurrences of the word were connected to the challenges of learners or the ways of dealing with them. The lack of counseling assistance to children who have gone through traumatic experiences can lead to serious learning challenges, as seen in the excerpts below.

And I came to realize also that those children, they don't have games to play apart from beating each other. They beat each other, beat each other, making noise; one is crying here another one is crying there, it's just a big challenge. (Participant 3)

Maybe you know, we used to call those (experiences) flashbacks. What happened in their country, you know? . . . You can put an exercise on the blackboard, for instance, it's addition. You take someone, "you come and make this exercise." Instead of making his addition, he starts making his subtraction. (When such a student is told the answer is incorrect, he would say) . . . no, no, no, sorry, sorry teacher. I was not here (meaning, the student's mind was somewhere else). (Participant 3)

When you talk to them, they are afraid. They just don't want to work. And when you want to talk to them, they challenge you by doing other things. They don't concentrate on things, on their work. Like today they are in class and another day you find that a boy is outside the class. You ask, today you're not going to school? He has no idea what time to go. (Participant 4)

Maybe even more than students in mainstream classrooms, refugee learners' psychological needs must be met. In their teacher college training, the research participants were taught not to "befriend" their students. In fact, meeting learners' social needs could result in losing a teaching job. And yet, according to the excerpts below, refugee learners need some personal attention at school. When asked how his teaching was meeting the needs of his learners, one teacher stated:

And you know, after the war, there are some traumas. Some of them don't have parents, some have lost one, two, or three of their relatives, and when they are in this kind of education, they just think about what happened to them, and it can also be a challenge to their education. Now, me as a teacher and as a parent, in the counseling that I have for refugee students, I tell them that we are not supposed to mind so much about what happened to us. But we are supposed to have much more interest in our future. So, we have to forget our past and put the future in our mind because our past will not assist us. But our future is what we need to focus on. (Participant 2)

Through different interviews, it became obvious that encouragement like this has helped many refugee learners in their healing process from traumatic experience. Unfortunately, this task is generally left to the teacher. Allocating resources specifically for counseling services for refugee learners, however, could yield better results and leave more time for teachers to focus on instructional activities.

Learners' Physiological Needs

Poverty is a serious challenge in refugee camps. The camp described in this study is no exception. Poverty affects students and their academic achievement. In addition to psychological needs, learners' physiological needs are challenging, and affect their education.

Yes, some are still digging [farming]. Others are coming (to class). . . . Others are coming without food. They are very hungry, reaching the classroom, they are too tired and maybe they did not get lunch. (Participant 1)

Here in the refugee camp about 75% [of people] are poor. When you do farming, the production is poor. And we have discovered that from morning to lunchtime, students can understand. When they are in class, they can reach 120, but by evening time, they are about 80. Others did not come because of those problems. Maybe they reach home and there is no food and they have to go back, no, they decide to stay. (Participant 3)

From Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs, it is evident that learners who do not have enough food to eat cannot even begin to focus on much higher needs such as self-actualization that may be the result of going to school. Part of improving the quality of education of refugee learners would therefore require solving food problems. Learners with empty stomachs cannot really concentrate on their learning.

Lack of Adequate Training for Refugee Teachers

The research participants were asked about the academic training that they received in preparation for refugee teaching. Two of them had two years of teacher college training and a few workshops. One had a Master's degree in management, but not in teaching. One of the four never actually completed any college degree. He just had an intensive year of general teaching training. None of the interviewees had any special training specifically to prepare for refugee teaching, although most had attended a few optional workshops offered in the refugee camp.

One workshop was planned and delivered by a group of university students who were conducting research in the refugee camp. The workshop was optional, even though it could have been a great opportunity for all the teachers to learn how to effectively meet the needs of refugee students. This training provided participants with instructional strategies such as the use of instructional games in teaching refugee learners (Participant 3).

Proper training in how to teach refugee learners could make some difference. Participant 3 was concerned with his students' experience of failure. He decided to ask other teachers (who obviously had not attended any workshop on how to deal with refugee learners) how effective their teaching was. These teachers simply blamed students. They said,

These students are not wise; you see. It's because nowadays they did not attend school. I say, no, no, no. These are refugees. They are refugees. They have different background, different experiences. I have dealt with them in that way. (Participant 3)

There seems to be no school that offers any college degree in the teaching of refugee learners. The very least that can be provided would be access to some specialized workshops that focus on effective instructional strategies needed in refugee teaching. Such workshops should not be simply optional; they should be required. An experimental study using such strategies could help investigate specifically their impact on refugee learners' educational experience.

Learners' Age

Due to different factors such as wars and poverty over the years, some refugee students begin school very late. Sometimes, by the time they achieve high school graduation age, they are still in elementary school. They may become discouraged because they are ashamed of studying with much younger learners, or they might want to challenge their teachers to cover up their age. Some of them, especially girls, are forced into household chores to help their mothers.

Like these refugees, most of them are women; when she has children at home, they will force the older one to go with them to the farm then send the younger ones to school. Those who go to school are those who can't do anything at home. So, girls dig and dig and dig, and they are growing. After, that they marry; they remain the same just like their mothers. (Participant 4)

Sometimes she is there only, sometimes you know we have lady [female] teachers, sometimes abused, with exchange of words together with teachers. You see, that's a big problem. It's a big problem. Sometimes we can come, but she says, no you cannot do anything. I am also a woman. And even more beautiful than you. (Participant 3)

The student in the above discussion is evidently a teenager who is struggling with self-perception issues that lead her to challenge female teachers by comparing her beauty to theirs, when they try to give her any type of advice. In the classrooms with male teachers, she is absent-minded, although physically present. She seems to have other unresolved issues that are affecting her class participation.

Learning Environment Needs

Schools are scarce in this refugee camp, as presented above. The research participants were working in a school that had about 1,400 students studying in only 7 classrooms. Those 7 classrooms had to host grades one through four. Each classroom was built to hold about 30 students under normal conditions. All four of the research participants were teaching more than a hundred students per classroom. There are only two high schools: one inside and another outside the refugee camp, about 8 km away. Students who go to that school have to walk 16 km every day to attend school. The schools that I visited had some basic infrastructure in place: a teacher's desk and chair, some old student desks, and some very old blackboards. Doors could hardly close while window frames had no windows. Tin roofs were rusted and holes could be clearly seen once inside the classrooms. Improving the quality of education would have to include making the classrooms more livable and more accessible to all students.

Teacher's Sense of Fulfillment

The last theme, that is in contrast with all the other themes presented above, is that all the research participants expressed a sense of joy, of fulfillment, in their teaching work. This sense of fulfillment was not due to a secure job or large salary. It was due to being able to make a difference in the learners' lives. It was also due to the fact that the teachers were themselves refugees and could easily identify and sympathize with their students. The teachers said things like

When you teach and you see that they are doing what you have taught them, and you find out that someone did not know anything before but today he's ready to read and write, you will be very happy. And to express it, you will end up laughing, that's why it is very nice. (Participant 1)

I was teaching Ugandans. But when I came to work with these refugees, I find myself as a parent teaching his own children. So, myself to be a refugee, I feel that I am in a family. (Participant 2)

I feel happy when I go out and meet my [former] students, like the years I have finished teaching here, there are some girls who are mature now. When I meet them they say, "Teacher, how are you? I am now in Senior 6. I am now at the university." Some of them I can't even remember. (Participant 4)

Conclusion

Millions living in refugee camps in Central Africa cannot effectively contribute to their sustainable development. They live in conditions that are not conducive to personal self-actualization. Education is expected to be the best solution to prepare young refugees/IDPs for a better future. However, educators are facing challenges that must be remedied if they are to provide quality education. In this study, two research questions led to this preliminary study. (1) How do teachers in refugee camps learn to teach? (2) What experiences do refugee teachers face?

From the interviews, there are three major ways refugee educators learn how to teach: teacher college training, some fairly unstructured and unpredictable workshops, and personal teaching experience. The teacher college program is general teacher training. This training has no specialization about teaching refugee learners. Therefore, although it may be adequate for general teaching, it is not likely to prepare teachers to be effective for refugee learners. The workshops that are offered to refugee teachers are optional, even though some of them are important in handling refugee learners' needs. Although not documented, refugee-teaching experience seems to be the only real way of learning how to teach refugee students. According to this study, the refugee teachers' experiences are

characterized by uncertainty in handling traumatized refugee learners, frustrations of handling large numbers of students at the same time, and yet, a sense of fulfillment because they are making a difference in learners' lives.

Three recommendations can be given from this exploration. First, academic knowledge is not enough to meet the needs of refugee learners. Two important factors stood out during the interviews: meeting learners' psychological and physiological needs. Students who have gone through traumatic experiences must receive proper counseling intervention. Students who are hungry or live with untreated effects of past traumatic experiences cannot learn well. Without enough healthy food, refugee learners may not concentrate well on their academic endeavor. However, looking at the bigger picture from the interview, participant observations, and document analysis, a more holistic consideration is needed that includes mental, physical, social, spiritual and emotional perspectives. The balance of these different perspectives could yield much better results.

Second, teachers should receive some specialized training in how to teach refugee students, in addition to their basic teacher college training. Refugee learners cannot just be taught like any other learners. They have special needs, which require special attention from the teacher. This type of training is not provided in general teacher colleges that are accessible in Uganda.

Finally, more investment should be made in instructional infrastructure and resources. Refugee teachers cannot provide quality education without a decent learning setting and instructional materials that are conducive to learning. Several classrooms that were visited during this study were worn out, with holes in the floor, walls, and even the roof. Student chairs and desks were old and not sturdy. Lighting was limited.

Further research opportunities include exploring education from the perspective of the refugee learners and school administrators. Second, a study should be conducted to document practical strategies of teaching refugee students based on teachers' experiences and recommendations. Additionally, a systematic experimental study should be conducted to investigate the actual effect of special refugee teacher training on classroom teaching in refugee camps. Last, a Delphi study or an appreciative inquiry study could be beneficial in analyzing what has worked well in other refugee camps around the world to develop a model that can be used to improve refugee education in all camps.

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Safary Wa-Mbaleka, EdD
Associate Professor, Education Department
Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies
Silang, Cavite, Philippines