

Educating the Future Amidst Displacement: Refugee Teachers in Kakuma Refugee Camp

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Abstract:

The role of teachers working in protracted crises, which transcends the humanitarian and international development spectrum, is critical. Teachers in these settings teach numeracy and literacy skills to children with interrupted education, restore psychosocial well-being caused by conflict, foster peacebuilding and educate children for the future. While most photos of teachers in refugee contexts are limited to the challenging circumstances they face (i.e. under-resourced, overcrowded classrooms), the images in this photo essay reconsider these challenges as opportunities for improvement and perseverance. The images speak to the opportunities for collaboration, community building, and camaraderie that are rarely if ever discussed among teachers in crisis contexts. These images capture teachers' resilience and their dedication to becoming better teachers despite the barriers they confront every day.

Keywords: Refugee education; teachers; Kakuma refugee camp; Kenya

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank the many teachers in Kakuma refugee camp with whom we have worked on the Teachers for Teachers project. Your commitment to education and the futures of the children you teach is both humbling and inspiring. Thank you.

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Education for children and youth affected by crisis and displacement has historically fallen in a precarious gap between humanitarian and development assistance. For many years, it remained the responsibility of development actors, often absent in times of immediate crisis or emergency, while the humanitarian sector addressed needs pertaining to food, water, housing and health (Kirk and Winthrop, 2007; Sinclair, Crisp, Talbot, & Cipollone, 2001). More recently, education has garnered attention in the humanitarian sector; however, it still accounts for less than two percent of the global humanitarian budget (UNESCO, 2015).

The protracted and complex nature of today's crises demand that humanitarian responses not only consider, but also prioritize education for the millions of children and adolescents displaced from their homes, and ensure that national education authorities and partner organizations are able to provide the long-term, sustainable support that is needed to provide quality education. It is pertinent for humanitarian and development actors to work collaboratively to ensure that the right to education, a right enshrined in human rights laws and conventions, is protected in times of emergency and conflict (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Kirk and Winthrop, 2007; Nicolai and Triplehorn, 2003). The inclusion of *quality education* on the international development agenda demands that we move away from short term interventions that have been prevalent in both development and humanitarian contexts and instead turn our efforts to supporting the number one predictor of student learning - the teacher (Schwille, Dembélé and Schubert, 2007; Sinclair, 2001).

Teachers are at the heart of learning—whether they teach in a building, a tent, or a space under a tree—and they can provide life-saving information and skills that promise an alternative to child labor, early marriage, or recruitment into armed forces. Perhaps most important, teachers can bring a sense of stability and hope and disrupt the cycle of violence by equipping learners with the skills to heal, grow, and participate in the peaceful reconstruction of their communities. Providing relevant and substantial support to teachers is a critical component of quality education and enacts the fundamental right of refugee teachers and students (Kirk and Winthrop, 2007). In 2009, the United Nations Refugee Agency's education policy underwent a major shift to acknowledge teachers and their professional development needs as paramount in promoting the student learning process for refugees (Mendenhall et al., 2015). However, there remains a paucity of professional development opportunities for teachers working in crisis contexts (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2013; Mendenhall et al., 2015). The professional development that is available is “episodic, its quality variable, its duration limited and support or follow-up for teachers almost non-existent” (Burns and Lawrie, 2015, p.7). Compounding this disjuncture, many teachers in emergency settings are often new to the profession with little to no formal (or informal) training (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2013).

Responding to this teacher support gap, and amidst the failure of short-term educational interventions, Teachers College, Columbia University has launched the *Teachers for Teachers*¹ initiative in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya. The initiative was created to develop and implement a continuous and integrated teacher professional development model for refugee teachers that engenders a positive sense of teacher identity by enhancing their knowledge and skills and that ultimately contributes to improved student learning. Our solution integrates teacher training, peer coaching, and mobile mentoring. It is a multi-layered and staged

¹ For more information about Teachers for Teachers, please see: <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/refugeeeducation/teachers-for-teachers/>

approach that unfolds over time, allowing teachers time to digest what they have learned in the classroom, to test and adopt new strategies, and ultimately provides teachers the space and network -- both inside and outside of the camp -- that foster communities of practice and collaboration that are at the heart of sustainable support.

We believe that in reconsidering education in both the humanitarian and development spheres, we must reconsider the role of the teacher, which extends far beyond the walls of the classroom, and the type of support they require to deliver the quality education needed to impact the lives of their students. The photographs in this essay reflect the myriad roles teachers take on, the multitude of challenges they regularly encounter, and their incredible resilience and dedication to bettering education in Kakuma. Taken by both the *Teachers for Teachers* team and the teachers themselves, the photographs represent the collaboration and global community of practice that teachers in Kakuma refugee camp have formed through our initiative.

While most photos of teachers in refugee contexts are limited to the challenging circumstances they face (i.e. visuals of under-resourced, overcrowded classrooms), the images we are submitting reconsider these challenges as opportunities for improvement, creativity, and perseverance. While an overcrowded classroom inevitably represents the daunting task of teaching 200 primary school learners at once as well as the policy and structural factors that permitted its occurrence to begin with, schooling continues and teachers are required to think creatively about teaching strategies that engage all learners. The images we have submitted also represent innovations and provide opportunities for teachers to celebrate and emulate effective teaching. We see teachers as innovators, problem solvers, collaborators, and role models. Our decision to use photographs to convey this is because we, like Kirova and Emme (2008), see photography as a form of capturing and communicating the “unspeakable”. We share Weidel’s (1995) and Fasoli’s (2003) view that photographs “have a power that words often lack” (Weidel, 1995, p. 76), and that we can use photography “to understand nuances of interaction, presentation of self, and relations among people to their material environment” (Harper, 1998, p. 61). *The photographs capture both the interactions between teachers and their students and among teachers and their colleagues in thinking through solutions to challenges or celebrating successes.*

Through our selection of photos we aim to move away from the reductive images taken in refugee camps that *only* show overcrowded classrooms and under-supported teachers because in this way “not only do photographs not capture the whole story but ... they do not capture ‘reality’ either” (Kirova and Emme p.37). Photographs presented in our essay were taken by the training facilitators and the participating teachers to capture different dimensions of collaboration among teachers, and thus paint a fuller picture of the role and identity of a teacher in Kakuma Refugee Camp. We document collaboration between teachers actively engaging with one another in the training workshops and peer coaching activities, as well as photos that have been shared *between* teachers virtually over WhatsApp through the mobile mentoring that prompts collaboration and action. Thus photography here captures an otherwise unseen role of teacher collaboration as it “naturally unfolds” in a crisis context (Harper, 1998).

Photos

In Kakuma Refugee Camp, the motivation to educate children who face what Dryden-Peterson (2017) calls “unknowable futures” seems unimaginable. Yet, it exists in the resilience of refugee teachers whose devotion emerges from the personal reflections and photographs shared here. Through the following images we aim to reconsider the role of refugee teachers and reveal their experiences as collaborative, resilient, and supportive professionals who persevere through extraordinary circumstances to create opportunities for their students every day.



Primary school teacher working with her students

Photo credit: ©Teachers College/Peter Bjorklund



Primary school teachers after completing the Peer Coaching training

Photo credit: ©Teachers College/Danielle Falk



Primary school teachers collaborating on a training workshop exercise

Photo credit: ©Teachers College/Sophia Collas



Teachers collaborating during a Teacher Learning Circle (TLC)

Photo credit: © UNHCR/Tony Karumba



Primary school teachers engaging in an exercise about teacher's well-being

Photo credit: ©Teachers College/Sophia Collas

The following images were taken by refugee teachers themselves and reveal, from their perspectives, the everyday joys, challenges, and realities of their work.



Primary school teacher marking his students' work during break time
Photo credit: David Matiop



Students and teachers line up for an afterschool football game
Photo credit: Jonah Abraham Bashir



Students gather for morning assembly

Photo credit: Ali Mathias



Students pose with budding seeds they planted in science class

Photo credit: Eunice Achege



Teachers take a selfie at the end of a Teacher Learning Circle

Photo credit: Omar Anatole Ndabemeye

“Realizing where I failed my class last time, I also pick from my colleagues, go, and try the same way. My colleagues do the same - they pick from me. And then that bit of exchange of experience, sharing ideas that actually became very, very critical to meet...the success you wanted to realize in classes.”

-Luka, South Sudanese refugee, Head Teacher

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