



Article

Concerted Community Engagement: Refugee Education and Parents' Daily Acts of Resistance

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Abstract: Around the world, millions of young people and their families navigate education in settings of conflict and displacement. Despite the growing number of refugee families seeking educational opportunities outside their countries of origin, there is scant research on the efforts families undertake to ensure and improve this education. In this study, I seek to understand how families participate in refugee children's education in displacement. Drawing on interviews with 16 refugee parents and caregivers living in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya, I find that caregivers actively engage in their children's schooling. Through what I am calling *concerted community engagement*, families choose, monitor, and supplement schools, working to ensure that refugee children benefit from the education they receive in exile as they build lives in the present and for the future.

Keywords: refugee education; refugee parents; Kenya; Kakuma Refugee Camp; language

1. Introduction

Azeena¹ lives in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya with her young cousins, Tracy and Jacqueline. Azeena fled war in South Sudan and resettled in Kakuma in 2017, reuniting with her cousins, who all attend school in the camp. Although Azeena is only in the eighth grade herself, she sees it as her role to monitor and supplement the schooling her cousins receive, as she is their primary caregiver. Her cousins attend school in English and Kiswahili, as was the practice across some schools in Kakuma at the time of data collection, but they struggle to understand what the teacher is saying in either language. To support them, Azeena encourages her cousins to focus on basic skills, such as the ABCs and how to respond to foundational questions like "How old are you?" Azeena regularly asks them what they have learned; she asks one of her cousins to repeat what was taught in class and "corrects her if it is wrong", hoping to give them a nudge toward understanding at school. This support is not without its challenges: like many families in Kakuma, Azeena's family does not have electricity at home in the evenings, so she helps her cousins with their schoolwork during the weekends instead.

A primary focus of Azeena's efforts is supporting her cousins' language skills, as she believes that their ability to develop proficiency in English and Kiswahili is key to their success in Kakuma. Azeena teaches them English-language songs and the ABCs, and sometimes speaks with them in English. "They are improving", she explains, noticing that they are beginning to greet her in English, asking her, "How are you?" They can also say their ABCs and count to twenty in English. Azeena draws on their shared knowledge of Arabic for this support: as she corrects their English, she translates and explains the corrections in Arabic so they can fully understand.

However, English is not Azeena's only focus. She also tries to teach them some Kiswahili based on what her own friends in eighth grade have taught her, and she then asks a friend to come and correct them all as they learn together. A friend will translate from Kiswahili to English to explain how to say things or point out the mistakes they make, and Azeena then translates for her cousins into Arabic, marshaling her many languages to



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support them. Nonetheless, Tracy, in particular, is hesitant at school, where she “will just keep quiet until she returns home; then she will open her mouth”. In response, Azeena encourages her: “You have to be fearless, you have to play with others, you have to interact with the teacher, you have to learn much about English”. Azeena is trying to ensure that, despite the challenges they face at school in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Tracy and Jacqueline have a chance at success.

Azeena’s experience is echoed throughout the 16 interviews with parents and caregivers² of refugee young people living in Kakuma Refugee Camp. I find that parents resist the constraints on educational opportunities that they and their children confront in exile, exerting agency as they navigate and support their children’s schooling. Their everyday acts of protest against the constraints of displacement fall along a continuum: parents *choose* schools, *monitor* these schools, and *supplement* what they offer. They exert agency in *choosing* where to send their children, making huge sacrifices to leave their countries of origin for the educational opportunities available in Kakuma Refugee Camp and selecting specific schools once they arrive. Parents also actively *monitor* their children’s schooling by visiting schools and speaking to teachers, as well as by checking their children’s work when they return home. In some cases, this process of monitoring results in parents deciding to move their children from one school to another, often prompting the third type of engagement, *supplementing* school. Refugee parents supplement what often feels like inadequate educational opportunities through private tutorials, access to technology, and homework routines. Together, I find that these actions constitute what I am calling *concerted community engagement*, as refugee adults work together to ensure that their children benefit from the education they receive in exile.

In some cases, however, parents feel constrained in their ability to engage. Often, parents work around their own limitations in terms of language or school experience by calling on older children to support the younger ones. In other instances, limited resources and uncertainty about whether they are welcome at their children’s school undermine their efforts to resist subpar educational opportunities that they wish they could improve.

In the following sections, I first provide background information about refugee education broadly and about Kakuma Refugee Camp specifically. I then propose a framework for understanding refugee parents’ and families’ engagement with their children’s education in exile—what I am calling concerted community engagement. From there, I share the research methods of the study and its key findings, and discuss implications for policy, practice, and research in refugee education.

2. Education in Exile

Currently, over 35 million people live as refugees, seeking safety and opportunity outside their countries of origin. Among these, 40% are children of school-going age, many of whom pursue education in unfamiliar and often unwelcoming contexts (UNHCR 2024). Across settings, approaches to refugee education vary: in some places, such as Uganda, refugee young people are permitted to attend national schools alongside host country classmates. In other contexts, such as Egypt, refugee communities must develop and run their own schools, as refugees are not permitted to attend national schools (Bonet 2021; Dryden-Peterson et al. 2019).

In Kenya, most refugees continue to access school in one of two camps, Dadaab and Kakuma Refugee Camps. Kakuma Refugee Camp, the focus of this study, was originally established in an arid, rural part of northwest Kenya in 1992 in response to war and displacement in Sudan (Dryden-Peterson 2022). Located in Turkana County, it was initially intended as a temporary solution to a short-term conflict. Since then, it has grown to host 185,000 people, nearly 80% of whom are women and children (UNHCR 2023). Periodically, the Kenyan government threatens to close the camp, citing violence and instability among refugee populations, but each time, these plans are abandoned (The Sentinel Project 2021). Kakuma Refugee Camp, despite its original role as a temporary place of safety for refugees, has become a permanent fixture.

Today, refugees from South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Ethiopia, and other countries live in the camp. Their children attend public schools scattered throughout the camp that are run by the Kenyan Ministry of Education in partnership with international non-governmental organizations, or one of the many small private schools that dot the landscape.

There are not nearly enough educational resources in Kakuma Refugee Camp to meet the needs and aspirations of the nearly 100,000 young people who live there and seek opportunity. Schools are overcrowded, with as many as 200 children in a classroom with just one teacher, and literacy rates among refugee young people attending school in the camp are well below those of their Kenyan neighbors. Among refugee children attending third grade in Kakuma, for example, only 8.6% met second-grade benchmarks in English and Kiswahili reading fluency, the languages used in schools in Kakuma and throughout Kenya (Piper et al. 2020).

Nonetheless, as Cha (2020) explains, refugee children in Kakuma “are academically motivated and eager to pursue an education, despite having access only to under-resourced, overcrowded schools in an isolated refugee camp” (p. 109). As students progress through elementary school, opportunities wane, as there are far fewer seats for secondary school students than for elementary. As a result, young people in Kakuma must navigate a deeply unequal and exclusionary education system, often fluctuating between acknowledging the limitations of the opportunity structure they face and placing increasing pressure on themselves to succeed (Bellino 2021). Amidst these competing narratives, however, refugees’ academic motivation is buttressed by the feeling of being “accepted, respected, and supported in school” (Cha 2020, p. 132), experiences that educators, families, and students work to create together.

Across settings of displacement and forced migration—including Kakuma Refugee Camp—community members seek and develop schooling models to meet the needs of refugee young people. In Egypt, for example, families have created refugee-led schools in response to policies that bar refugees from the public education system (Bonet 2021). In Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya, refugee-led schools offer both the Kenyan curriculum and Islamic religious education, providing “students and their parents the chance to receive both types of education in an integrated way” (Horst and Aden 2021, p. 4), often outperforming other schools in the region. Among Rohingya refugees living in Myanmar, community-led networks of educators work to create spaces for formal education, fearing that “the lack of formal education in the camps is creating a ‘lost generation’ of youth” (Peace Research Institute Oslo 2019, p. 7) and working together to counteract this troubling trend.

Within these constrained environments, teachers, tasked with the daily work of education, struggle to enable hope and academic opportunities for their students while also contending with the reality that refugee youth face profoundly limited futures (Bellino 2021; Adelman 2019; Bonet 2021). In Jordan, teachers of Syrian refugees “use their classroom spaces and relationships to protect students from the surrounding uncertainty, hardship, and socio-political dynamics of exile” (Salem and Dryden-Peterson 2022, p. 75), working to ensure that students experience the safety necessary for learning at school. Refugee teachers—those who are themselves displaced and working as teachers in exile—also face profound uncertainty about their futures, even as they strive to enact security and structure for their students (Mendenhall and Falk 2023). For national teachers, including those in Kenya working in Kakuma Refugee Camp, limited training or formal support for their work with refugees profoundly constrains their pedagogical approaches (Reddick 2024). There is a growing understanding that refugee teachers are central to refugee education efforts; that their work deserves dedicated funding and support; and that their voices and insights must be integral to these efforts (NORRAG 2023).

Refugee parents and families, on the other hand, are almost entirely missing from research on refugee education in Global South contexts. This is striking, given the vital role that families across contexts play in navigating migration, education, and opportunity (e.g., [Yosso 2005](#); [Horst and Aden 2021](#)). Research has demonstrated that educational strategies targeting both refugee parents and children can be beneficial for family wellbeing, buttressing stress ([Foulds 2022](#)), but there remains a significant gap in research regarding parents' roles in refugee settings. However, we have considerable research on the experiences of refugee caregivers in Global North settings, which provides important insights into areas of inquiry and policy reform for the majority of refugee families—those who live in the Global South.

We know that refugee parents in the Global North can face significant post-migration stress ([Eltanamly et al. 2023](#)) and that language barriers and limited formal opportunities for engagement in their children's schooling often limit the extent to which parents feel involved ([Cun 2020](#)). Refugee parents living in Sweden have reflected on the challenges of parenting their children in a new setting. Facing new cultural expectations and little economic or social capital in their new settings, parents described a sense of disempowerment and growing distance between themselves and their children ([Baghdasaryan et al. 2021](#)). Migrant mothers in Finland reported the increased care work and isolation they experienced during the COVID-19 shutdowns, which compounded pre-existing inequalities in their domestic responsibilities ([Heino et al. 2024](#)). Through ethnographic fieldwork in refugee camps in Greece, [Sarikoudi and Apostolidou \(2020\)](#) demonstrate how refugee parents overcome the many disempowering aspects of their positions in exile, taking on the role of "educational caretakers and agents for their children", and finding "educational and mediating roles that grant them a greater sense of control over their families' present and future being" (p. 47). Across the literature on contexts of resettlement and asylum, refugee families face profound challenges but find ways to resist and respond to these constraints as they find their feet.

Quite apart from parents' efforts, educational structures and segregation in Global North resettlement contexts, such as the U.S., often also undermine the opportunities that refugee children and their families seek ([Dryden-Peterson and Reddick 2017](#); [Koyama and Chang 2019](#)). In response to these limitations, schools can adopt targeted strategies to support the wellbeing and future-building of refugee youth attending school in the U.S., including those related to rigorous curriculum, additive language approaches, and supportive relationship-building ([Bajaj and Bartlett 2017](#); [Bajaj et al. 2022](#)). This paper draws insights from research on refugee caregivers and their experiences navigating their children's education in the Global North, offering a new perspective on these efforts in Global South settings of exile, where refugee families live and seek safety in countries neighboring those they have fled.

3. Theorizing Concerted Community Engagement

As I shift the lens in this paper from the experiences of refugee children and their teachers toward the strategies that refugee families employ to enable their children's education, I also shift to a desire-based research framework ([Tuck 2009](#)) to understand the strategies refugee parents undertake to support their children's futures. Following [Choi and Cha \(2023\)](#), I orient toward refugee families' "capabilities, aspirations, and agency" (p. 2), identifying how refugee families influence their children's educational trajectories despite the profound constraints of doing so in Kakuma Refugee Camp.

In her 'Letter to Communities', [Tuck \(2009\)](#) questions what she calls a "damage-centered" orientation to research, in which the ills and suffering of oppressed communities are highlighted to spur change. She argues that researchers have long focused on what is not working, what is unjust, and what is oppressive—in large part in the hopes of catalyzing structural reform. However, in Tuck's assessment, this has only reinforced the idea that some places, and some people, are damaged. As she explains, "the danger in

damage-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community" (Tuck 2009, p. 413). She urges researchers instead to orient toward a 'desire-based research framework' that is "concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (p. 416). This research framework understands the ubiquity of contrast and contradiction in lives shaped by unjust circumstances and highlights the importance of context and agency in illuminating these lives.

Yosso's (2005) foundational concept of Community Cultural Wealth similarly orients toward the riches and forms of capital that historically marginalized communities—including millions of refugees globally—create and draw on to navigate difficulty. The six types of capital that Yosso (2005) highlights—encompassing the wealth of family and community relationships; of resistance and aspiration; and of the skills of navigating challenges, especially across languages—are visible in the efforts of refugee parents living in Kakuma. Relational wellbeing (Kohli et al. 2024) similarly highlights the role that a mutual sense of responsibility to others can have in facilitating a sense of 'having enough,' 'being connected,' and 'feeling good.' This framework highlights "the ways interaction and relationality mediate the experiences of becoming and being a refugee" (Kohli et al. 2024), an understanding of relationships and community that is desire-based even in the face of displacement.

Finally, sociologist Annette Lareau analyzes the different parenting approaches of families in the United States. She draws a distinction between poor and working-class families' 'achievement of natural growth' and middle-class families' 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau 2011). While refugee families in Kakuma cannot access the resources and opportunities that are core to the 'concerted cultivation' that middle-class families in the U.S. employ, I argue that refugee parents do take concerted and extraordinary efforts to secure their children's opportunities through education. As I describe in detail in the findings section below, all 16 refugee families in the sample are engaged with their children's schooling. Among other strategies, they engage directly in their children's learning; they supplement it through activities at home; and they move their children from one school to another if they are concerned about quality. Despite constraints, including financial barriers and a sense of being unwelcome at school, refugee families in Kakuma do not leave their children's education to chance. Instead, they demonstrate a context-specific concerted engagement—and even cultivation—of their children through the choices they make about school.

Through a desire-based research framework, I bring together the concepts of community cultural wealth, relational wellbeing, and concerted cultivation to theorize refugee families' engagement with school. I offer a new way of understanding refugee parents' agentic work to influence their children's educational opportunities within the profound constraints of living in a refugee camp: through *concerted community engagement*, refugee families work together to support their children to thrive through education (see Figure 1). They choose, monitor, and supplement the schools their children attend. They often do so by drawing on extended kin networks, including involving younger siblings, cousins, and aunts and uncles in this work. Parents also point to financial and relational barriers to parental engagement, and to opportunities for schools to better engage with families. To my knowledge, this paper offers one of the first analyses of refugee parents' and caregivers' engagement with school in a Global South setting of exile, with important implications for educational practice, policy, and research in refugee education.

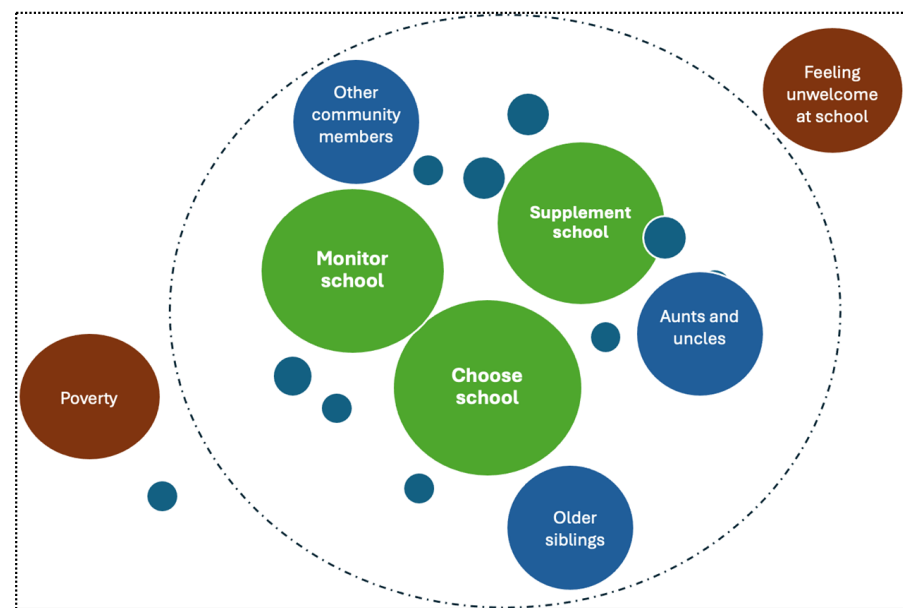


Figure 1. Concerted community engagement of refugee parents and caregivers.

4. Research Methods

4.1. Overview and Research Question

This paper emerged from a larger study focused on the language of instruction in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya (Piper et al. 2020). During the course of data analysis for that study, a theme surfaced related to the efforts of parents in facilitating their children's schooling. This was not the focus of the original data collection or analysis, which centered on language use at school, but it emerged as a resounding topic that merited further exploration. This paper, therefore, zooms in on data from interviews with 16 refugee parents whose children attend school in Kakuma Refugee Camp. It seeks to answer the research question: How do refugee parents in Kakuma Refugee Camp engage with their children's schooling?

4.2. Sampling and Data Collection

In 2018, we conducted interviews with 16 refugee parents whose children were in Grades 1, 2, and 3, purposefully selecting parents with different linguistic backgrounds to represent the ethnic and linguistic diversity of Kakuma Refugee Camp. With the help of translators, we interviewed a Burundian parent ($n = 1$), Congolese parents ($n = 6$), Somali parents ($n = 4$), and South Sudanese parents ($n = 5$) (see Table 1). Based on our goal for a linguistically diverse sample, the Head Teacher (principal) of each of the four schools in the sample selected the parents for us, contacting them by phone or sending a note home through their child the day before the interview. We conducted all interviews in person and recorded them. The interviews varied in length, with the shortest lasting 21 min and the longest 60 min. Because these interviews were originally conducted to understand the language of instruction preferences among parents, the theme of language emerges throughout them, an emphasis that may be an artifact of this original study design. Nonetheless, despite this topical focus, the strategies of engagement that parents describe offer a more general framework for understanding and supporting refugee parent involvement in school.

Table 1. Interview participants.

Name	Place of Origin
Claudine	Burundi
Eddie	Democratic Republic of Congo
Tina	Democratic Republic of Congo
Elizabeth	Democratic Republic of Congo
Sunda	Democratic Republic of Congo
Mbazi	Democratic Republic of Congo
Devina	Democratic Republic of Congo
Ayaan	Somalia
Abdullahi	Somalia
Ahmed	Somalia
Faduma	Somalia
Juliet	South Sudan
Philip	South Sudan
Abuk	South Sudan
Grace	South Sudan
Azeena	South Sudan

4.3. Data Analysis

The process of analysis has been ongoing and iterative. During initial data collection in 2018, members of the research team regularly discussed emerging findings from the original project together, using both written memos and conversations for this collaborative analysis. Following each interview, we listened to the recording and took detailed thematic notes about the participants' main ideas, transcribed verbatim quotes, and began identifying emerging themes within the interview. These "listening notes" provided the written data that we subsequently coded for the larger study (Piper et al. 2020; Seidman 2019).

From there, I identified 13 additional inductive, emergent codes across the caregiver interviews (Charmaz 2006). These included the ways that parents and caregivers are engaged in their children's schooling (e.g., Parent engagement—monitor school; Parent engagement—visit school; Parent engagement—siblings) and barriers to engagement (e.g., Barrier to engagement—resources; Barrier to engagement—own schooling). I created synthetic, analytic memos on the relevant codes for this analysis to identify emerging patterns in the data related to the research question. I shared these emerging ideas with members of the research team, as well as drafts of the analysis and all writing, for feedback and incorporated their suggested revisions.

5. Findings: The Role of Concerted Community Engagement in Refugee Education

I find that parents and other caregivers of refugees engage in their children's schooling in three key ways: (1) by making choices about which schools their children attend; (2) by monitoring these schools and their children's learning within them; and (3) by supplementing what the school has to offer. These processes were often intertwined and iterative. In many cases, parents also encountered significant challenges in engaging with schools due to limited resources and the absence of explicit invitations to do so from schools. Sometimes, older children or the parents' own siblings played the primary role in supporting young refugee children at school. Together, this matrix of engagement—and strategies to overcome barriers—forms what I call *concerted community engagement*, a united effort by refugee parents and families not only to get children into school but to ensure that the schooling they receive is as productive and meaningful as possible (see Figure 1).

5.1. Choosing School

For some refugee mothers, choosing a school for their children means making a choice for the entire family. Ayaan was not able to attend school in Somalia, and this experience now motivates her to ensure that her children have this opportunity in Kakuma. Ayaan's husband wants to take the children back to Somalia, but she refuses. She points to her own

experience—having never had the chance to attend school herself—and notes that there are no educational opportunities now in Somalia, which makes it an untenable place for her family. Faduma's family also resisted leaving Somalia for Kakuma, but she insisted that they come to secure a better future for the children through education. The choice she wishes she could make, though, is to move to a third country—not Somalia, not Kenya, but somewhere else where the children will “learn something”. This, she feels, would allow her children to benefit from better jobs and salaries, enabling them to help her and other family members to get by.

Juliet has also resisted her husband's desire for the children to return home, in their case to South Sudan. Juliet's steadfast commitment to educational opportunities for her children has required multiple migrations. Her children were in school in Kakuma from 2013 to 2014, where they played and learned in Kiswahili and English. In 2014, her husband called them back to South Sudan, where they began speaking Arabic, which Juliet felt “was not good for them”. In her estimation, “Arabic is not that important”, and instead she wants her children to have access to English and Kiswahili in Kenya, which might give them a chance to work as translators in other contexts, she explained. She chose to move the family back to Kakuma from South Sudan so the children could attend school there.

In other cases, parents do not have to navigate decisions about whether to live in Kakuma or not, but instead make choices about schools within the camp. Elizabeth, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo, chose to move her children from a small private school in Kakuma to one of the public schools available in the camp. Part of this choice involved registering them in lower grades. Although they were old enough to attend the fifth grade, she decided to register them in the third grade, as she noticed that they had not learned enough at their previous school to make their way without being held back.

Abdullahi made a similar decision. When he first came to Kakuma from Somalia, he enrolled his five children in a small elementary school in the camp. However, when the management of the school changed, he felt that the children were not being appropriately controlled and managed, so he moved them to a private school. They were there for a year, and he felt confident they were learning. But as one year rolled into two, he noticed that the children who attended that school were running around the community rather than focusing on their studies, and so he decided to move his children to a public elementary school. Abdullahi explained his opinion that “in private schools, they are not controlling children; they are not checking what they learn because they are interested only in money”. Moving to a public school, where he felt more confident about their learning, required his children to be held back two grades—entering second grade rather than fourth—but for Abdullahi, this sacrifice was worth it as he felt confident, they would receive a better education at this school.

5.2. Monitoring School

Like Abdullahi, many parents monitor the quality of their children's schooling. Even though Elizabeth has never been to school herself, she tests her children on their reading; she asks them to read Kiswahili and English sentences aloud and can hear that they are improving as they practice. They all know Kiswahili and “also English, they are trying”. She gives them the text in Kiswahili and then asks them to translate it into English, as she understands English “kidogo, kidogo—small, small”. Unlike many other parents who are reticent about encroaching on the school, Elizabeth visits the school often to meet the teachers and see how the children are progressing.

Faduma's commitment to her children's schooling is motivated by the fact that she never attended school herself, and she does not get too hung up on this when it comes to double-checking that they are learning. While she cannot read what her children write in their books and on the blackboard she bought to help them review at home, she can see that they are able to write. Her older children confirm that the younger ones are writing correctly and learning something at school. Faduma's older children also share information about school that helps her monitor its quality. They explain that in the public school her

children attend, there are books available—resources that, according to her children, are not available in private schools. When Faduma was once asked to speak with a teacher about one of her younger children’s performance, her older child joined the conversation to translate from Kiswahili.

Like Faduma, many parents described strategies for monitoring their children’s schoolwork despite language barriers. In Juliet’s case, although she does not understand Kiswahili and English, she is sure her children are learning because they read books in Kiswahili and English, the languages of school. They also often translate for her, proving that they are beginning to understand the languages. Similarly, Mbazi’s children read from their schoolbooks at home, showing her that they have learned something since arriving from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Abdullahi also knows that his children in second grade are learning English and Kiswahili because, when their teacher gives them a few words, he asks them to read aloud and corrects them if they read incorrectly. He also asks them to write down the words or material from their notebooks, testing their learning in this way.

Eddie spends Saturdays with his child, asking him to identify the words for certain items that he points to in his exercise book. “What is this? What is this?” he asks aloud. When his child is unable to answer, he explained, “I try to help him understand in English”. Eddie arrived in Kakuma from the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2016, having grown up speaking Kibembe, Kiswahili and French. He often struggles with language in Kakuma, finding himself unable to help his son because his own English is limited. In these instances, he goes to school to ask the teacher about specific ideas or concepts in particular lessons, as there is no one else in the community to monitor and support his son’s learning.

Although Eddie does not feel he can turn to others to help with his children’s schooling, in many instances, parents who feel they do not have the skills to support their youngest children do turn to others in the community. In these cases, they often look to their older children or their own siblings to help buttress their children’s learning. For example, Sunda turns to her brother Patrick, who works with a non-profit in the camp. When the children come home from school, they tell him what they have not understood, and Patrick explains the school content to them in French and Kiswahili. Patrick visits the children’s school, using English to talk to the teacher and, at times, to ask why she has assigned homework that the children do not understand. Sunda’s older kids also help the younger ones with schoolwork, especially focusing on English, the subject they find hardest.

5.3. Supplementing School

Parents often supplement what their children receive at school, unsure that what they get during the school day is sufficient. For example, many parents supplement their children’s language skills at home to better prepare them for school, as children are often confronted with English and Kiswahili for the first time in Kakuma’s schools. Ahmed, for example, speaks Kiswahili with his children at home—a language he cannot read or write—so that they may feel more comfortable with it once they reach school. Eddie is similarly focused on supporting his children with language. “I am teaching them the little that I know”, he explains, speaking to them in Kiswahili and English rather than Kibembe, which he grew up speaking. Mbazi also focuses on language as he helps his child with homework. He explains and reviews the lesson taught in class, using first Kiswahili and then English. Sometimes, he also speaks French because his child understands the language, and Mbazi feels it may be important for him if he returns to the DRC.

Sometimes, older siblings take on the work of supplementing younger children’s learning. Tina explained that she is not able to support her son’s learning because she is raising her children on her own. As a result, the older children help her youngest son; her son in seventh grade was in Uganda and learned more English than the younger ones speak, so he tries to help them. Similarly relying on a family network, if Juliet’s children have trouble with something from school, they ask their cousins who are in fifth, seventh, and eighth grades to come help.

Where resources permit, parents also invest financially in opportunities to supplement their children's schooling and deepen their learning. Abdullahi, for example, has enrolled his children in an afterschool program to learn the Koran, testing whether they will be able to manage both their new public school and this school dedicated to their religious education, or if they will need to choose just one. Faduma's children ask her if they can attend afterschool tutoring sessions and encourage her to attend English classes for mothers. Time and resources have been tight for Faduma, but she sees the value in this extra teaching and learning time. Her youngest child also reviews what he has learned at school when he gets home, taking out a blackboard she bought for her children, copying the material from his books, and checking his math answers using the calculator on her phone. Sunda uses technology to support her children's language learning as well. She buys 50 shillings worth of data every day, and her children watch conversations with characters asking questions in Kiswahili and responding in English, and read material written in English.

In Ayaan's case, she has found a way to supplement her children's learning without huge expense. She invited a South Sudanese person with strong English language skills to live with her family, and in return, he offers private lessons, which her children and her husband attend. Ayaan does not have to pay for this; instead, she sometimes buys clothing for the teacher to show her appreciation, and he lives with the family. During the regular school day, there are over 100 students in any one class, and the children cannot hear the teacher's voice. However, in private tutorials at home, her children learn in a smaller setting with few distractions.

With this arrangement, they have made steady progress. Ayaan feels confident that this smaller, more targeted environment will help them "become the first or the second" in their class. Her children used to perform poorly, but since starting these lessons at home, they have been getting 95% in math and English exams. While this strategy is not hugely expensive, it does require time and focus, and Ayaan and her husband are very involved in the lessons. They decide what to teach, asking the teacher to focus on reading, writing, and dictation. Ayaan also monitors the class, encouraging the children by rewarding the top performers with sweets.

5.4. Barriers

Although refugee families across the sample found many ways to engage with their children's schooling, they also faced barriers in doing so. Poverty was a major hurdle. Grace, for example, felt completely disconnected from her daughter's school and had never met her daughter's teacher. When the Head Teacher wanted to invite Grace for our interview, she was unable to be reached because Grace does not have a cell phone. Instead, her daughter had to leave school and run all the way home to deliver the message.

Philip also wanted to make a real choice about his niece's schooling, wishing he could move her to a private school where he would feel more confident about her learning, but he does not have the resources to do so. Instead, he feels he has to send her to a public school in Kakuma that he does not fully trust because "we don't have power to take her to another". He and his sister are without work, so paying for school is impossible for them.

At times, poverty is not what stands in the way of making decisions about school; parents simply do not feel welcome. The letter inviting Abuk to the school for the interview with our team, for example, was the first invitation to visit the school that he had ever received. Because of this, he was worried and scared when he received the letter, wondering what might have happened to his child. His response highlights the importance of inviting parents to join in their children's schooling, normalizing this experience, and seeing parents as partners in their children's education.

Because visiting school is not normalized, parents often feel uncertain about what is happening at school. Azeena feels that the school keeps her in the dark—although she knows her niece's teachers, they do not discuss Tracy's and Jacqueline's learning with her. Similarly, Abuk knew little about the reading and language program being rolled out at his child's school. While Philip is sure that his niece Irene is flagging academically, he has not

felt comfortable asking her teachers about it. He explained, “Even Irene now, right now, she don’t [doesn’t] know how to read this ABCD up to end”. Philip is not sure whether this challenge can be blamed on her schooling in South Sudan or in Kakuma, but he has not felt entitled to ask because he is a refugee and a newcomer in Kakuma. This feeling began to shift, he explained, when he was invited to the school for our team’s conversation with him: “I came here [to Kakuma] new, I am a visitor here, so I didn’t ask that [how Irene is performing]. So, right now, I will be comfortable to ask”. Just the experience of being invited to the school shifted Philip’s feelings about what he could ask and how he could support Irene’s education.

6. Discussion

As refugee families navigate life in displacement, they undertake diverse strategies to ensure that their children’s education is as productive and fruitful as it can be, and that children learn what they need for the futures that await them. Refugee parents enact *concerted community engagement* as they make decisions about their children’s schooling, often drawing on extended family to do so. This engagement takes place in three primary ways: (1) parents and caregivers choose schools for their children, (2) they monitor these schools, and (3) they supplement them as needed. In some cases, parents make the decision to leave their countries of origin, where their children have few educational opportunities, in the hope that schools in Kakuma might serve them better. For example, Ayaan and Juliet, have resisted their husbands’ urgings to return to Somalia and South Sudan, respectively, citing the limited educational opportunities available there. Even within the camp, parents make choices about schooling; Abdullahi, for instance, initially selected a private school in Kakuma for his children but later decided to move them to a public school—even though this meant holding them back two grades—because he believed the quality of education would be stronger there.

Parents also monitor the quality of their children’s schooling, even when they themselves have had few educational opportunities or face language barriers. Mbazi and Elizabeth, both from the Democratic Republic of Congo, ask their children to practice reading in English when they come home. Although neither had the opportunity to learn English growing up, this does not stand in their way as they monitor their children’s progress. Other parents rely on their siblings or older children to help them monitor the quality of education that their younger children receive and their performance at school. For example, Ahmed did not learn English in Somalia, but his younger brother, who also lives in the camp and speaks English, takes on the task of checking the children’s performance. Similarly, Sunda’s brother Patrick works for a non-profit organization in the camp and has stronger English skills than she does, so he helps Sunda’s children with their homework and checks in with their teachers.

Finally, refugee parents find ways to supplement their children’s education, trying to fill gaps in what they are learning. This takes place in a variety of ways. Some parents focus on providing language support at home, knowing that their children are confronting English and Kiswahili for the first time at school and wanting to help them navigate this challenge. Older children in the family are often better equipped to do this, and so cousins and siblings take on the role of supplementing younger children’s language exposure. In other cases, parents supplement their children’s learning by investing in technology and after-school opportunities. For example, Sunda buys internet credit for her phone so that her children can access videos and materials in English and Kiswahili, while Ayaan coordinates small-group tutorials at home. Refugee parents cultivate opportunities for their children that are not otherwise available, working to ensure that they learn what they need to thrive.

Although refugee parents are largely absent from research on education in contexts of forced migration, this study reveals the active and engaged ways in which they work to cultivate their children’s educational opportunities. This effort is not without considerable challenges, including language barriers, financial limitations, and a general sense of not be-

ing welcome at school. Language poses a formidable barrier to many parents' engagement in their children's schooling. Faduma, for example, feels that she could better understand and support her children at school if she learned English, a language she had not had the chance to study due to the demands of childcare. Eddie tries to help his children using his limited English skills but often turns to the teacher for extra support. In many cases, parents overcome the language barrier by relying on their own siblings or older children to help the younger ones.

Financial hurdles also limit the engagement parents can mount related to their children's schooling. Even when parents wish to move their children to a different school or enroll them in additional opportunities, the resources to do so are often missing. Philip, for example, does not feel confident about the public school that his niece attends, but he also lacks the resources to move her. Grace came to school for the interview with her newborn baby after her daughter ran home to ask her to come; she does not own a cell phone, so she had not been reachable by the school, and she has significant responsibilities at home that she cannot pay others to help her with, and that make it difficult for her to be present at school as well.

While language and financial resources make engagement at school difficult, the biggest barrier is the feeling of not being welcome at school or being unsure of how best to engage. In many instances, the invitation to come to school for an interview was the first explicit outreach from the school to parents, and it went a long way toward making them feel entitled to engage. As Philip explained, "No one called me before like you have been calling me here". Philip was unable to read the note that the school sent in English, so a neighbor read it and translated it into Arabic for him. Abuk, too, had never been invited to the school; when he received the note, written in English, to come for the interview, he felt worried about what might have happened. Although Azeena knows her children's teachers, she still feels they are not forthcoming with her about her children's learning, which undermines her ability to act as a partner in their schooling.

7. Conclusions

This paper reveals the many ways that refugee parents actively engage with their children's schooling, cultivating the best opportunities they can despite the many challenges they face. Parents draw on the extensive community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005) they have at their disposal through their relationships with family in the camp, their linguistic skills, and the navigational capital they have developed through years of migration and hardship. They manage to exert agency and choice through relationships that are central to wellbeing among refugee communities navigating uncertainty (Dryden-Peterson et al. 2017), creating context-specific spaces of cultivation (Lareau 2011) and engagement in their children's schooling. The concerted community engagement that parents undertake has three primary elements: first, the hard work of making choices about school—including decisions to migrate—amidst very limited options. Once children are in school, parents monitor their progress, checking their reading and language development, even when parents themselves have not had a chance to attend school. Finally, they work to supplement school where possible, cultivating opportunities that the schools cannot provide.

This framework of *concerted community engagement* helps to shed light on the work of parents and also provides a roadmap for how schools and other education stakeholders can work with refugee parents to improve the quality of refugee education. Many parents mentioned that they had never been invited by their children's schools to visit or engage, yet the data shows that refugee parents are yearning for this invitation. By explicitly inviting parents and encouraging the kinds of outreach that facilitate productive partnerships, schools serving refugee children can build bridges to families (Bajaj et al. 2022). This framework also shows that parents are following what happens in schools, and in some instances, they choose to opt out of a particular school or to supplement what the school can offer. Schools can capitalize on these insights, working collaboratively with parents to better understand what their children need to thrive and to fill these gaps together. Finally,

we also see that schools must address the significant barriers of language and resources for refugee parents; a first step in this is prioritizing that communication from schools is disseminated in multiple languages. Educational organizations outside of schools can also work to identify parents who cannot engage with school due to financial constraints that limit access to cell phones, childcare, or transportation, and work to cover these costs to improve engagement.

The desire-based framework of community concerted engagement, which encapsulates the commitments of refugee parents to their children's schooling—achieved collectively with others—is not intended to idealize the experience of parents in some of the most challenging circumstances globally. As Tuck (2009) reminds us, “desire is the song about walking through the storm, a song that recognizes rather than denies that pain doubtlessly lies ahead” (p. 419). For refugee families navigating education in Kakuma Refugee Camp, this broader context of marginalization is vital to understanding the significance of parents' actions. Refugee parents work to respond to and resist the immense constraints they face in exile through the educational choices they make for their children and their children's futures.

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Notes

- ¹ All names throughout the manuscript are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of research participants. The pseudonyms reflect the actual names of participants; for participants with names of Christian or Arabic origin, for example, pseudonyms have similar etymology, as do names with other origins.
- ² Throughout the manuscript, ‘parent’ refers broadly to family members who take responsibility for the children. When data is presented about a particular family, the actual family relationship between child and adult is clarified.

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