



Title of Project

Language for an Unknowable Future: How Language Shapes the Lives of Refugee Children

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TIRF Research Topic Investigated

Migrants and Refugees: Teaching and Assessing English

Project Summary

We are facing the greatest refugee crisis in history, with millions of children displaced from their home countries and attending school in English, an unfamiliar language. Nowhere is this challenge more evident than in Uganda, an English-speaking, linguistically diverse country hosting the largest refugee population in Africa and the third largest in the world, and the site of my dissertation. My research explores the role that English medium of instruction (MOI) policies play for refugee children's learning, identity development, and sense of belonging. Despite growing populations of refugee children navigating English MOI policies in unfamiliar setting, there is little research about the linguistic implications of displacement for refugee children, their families, and the schools that host them.

To address this critical gap, I conducted 101 interviews with refugee children and families in Kampala, their teachers, and policymakers intervening in refugee education. I complemented these with 100 hours of ethnographic observations across three schools and five NGO/government convenings related to refugee education and language. Emerging findings reveal tensions related to language and refugee status: refugee children are expected by educational authorities to leave behind home languages and achieve membership in exile through English, the language of power in the region. Refugee families seek safety and opportunity through linguistic assimilation, often at the expense of languages that are central to children's relationships with family left behind. However, findings also reveal school and family practices that can mitigate the loss of language, culture, and home that refugee families face, enabling more inclusive, multilingual futures, with theoretical, empirical, and policy implications for the education of millions of refugee children.