Secondary School Students' Educational Perceptions and Experiences in Nyarugusu Refugee Camp

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Abstract
In Tanzania's Nyarugusu Camp, one of the world's largest and most protracted refugee camps, only 7% of youth are enrolled in secondary school. These rates are surprising, especially considering that primary school enrollment rates stand at nearly 80% (UNHCR, 2017 March 31). This study, which is in-progress, explores the question of what it means to be a secondary school student in Nyarugusu Camp. Much of the literature on refugee education has focused almost exclusively on organizational aspects of planning and monitoring education (Kirk & Winthrop, 2008), and much of the research that has been done on student and community perspectives in relation to education tends to be conducted by stakeholders (eg/ UNICEF, UNESCO, UNHCR, International Rescue Committee), which has significant potential to be undertaken for certain objectives (Pottier, 1996). Therefore, this study uses a symbolic interactionist framework and grounded theory methods, including written responses, individual interviews, and observation. The intent of this research is to gain more of an understanding of the youth's experiences and perceptions, so grounded theory is appropriate, as it gives voice to the constructions that youth make of their situation and experiences (Woodgate, 2000). I will employ grounded theory in an attempt to build a theory that helps to explain how this aspect, secondary education, "works" or functions in Nyarugusu Camp. Whether or not that theory might be substantive, or transferable to other refugee camp settings, remains to be unseen. This study has been approved by Lakehead University's Research Ethics Board and data collection is currently underway.

Keywords: refugee youth, refugee camp, education, sociology of education

Introduction

In Nyarugusu Camp, a protracted refugee camp situation located in Northwestern Tanzania, International Rescue Committee (IRC) reports that despite their target of having 50% of youth (who they define as 15-18 years of age) enrolled in school, only 7% were actually enrolled in secondary school (UNHCR, 2017 March 31). It is therefore important to be concerned about the educational opportunities available to young people in this particular camp, as many of them would be spending a greater part of their school-age years here.

Many different factors come into play when providing education in emergencies, and thus, it is important to both hear and incorporate refugee voices and perspectives when creating policies and programming (Winthrop & Kirk, 2008). However, Winthrop and Kirk (2008) note that when exploring the relationship between refugee students' well-being and schooling, researchers tend to adopt one of two approaches: (1) the *educationalist* approach, where the focus is on education systems, and refugee perspectives are most often not heard; or (2) the *child protection* approach, in which researchers focus on children's experiences of conflict, eliciting their perspectives, but only in relation to the conflict, not to their schooling (p. 640). Winthrop and Kirk (2008) conducted their own study in an attempt to incorporate the voices of refugee students themselves, but this study focused on primary school student perspectives, which in fact, is true of most studies in the field of education in emergencies. This particular priority on primary schooling and primary students ignores the importance of secondary schooling, especially in protracted refugee situations. It also ignores the status of education, specifically secondary education, as a fundamental human right.

In the context of education, refugee communities often emphasize the importance of education, but enrollment and completion statistics paint a different picture. There are numerous studies in which refugee communities discuss the importance and value of education (Affolter & Allaf, 2011; Ali, Briskman, & Fiske, 2016; Clark-Kazak, 2011; El Jack, 2011; Waters & Leblanc, 2005), but the reality is that enrolment and completion rates are very low (Crea & McFarland, 2015; Montjourides, 2013; Oh & van der Stouwe, 2008). Given that only 7% of the population that is eligible for secondary school is actually enrolled in Nyarugusu Camp, this 7% is the phenomenon, especially considering that targets are being met at the primary school level. UNHCR (31 March, 2017) has set a target of 75% of primary-aged children in school, and they report having actually achieved 79% enrollment. Therefore, at the secondary school level, I want to understand what sets this group, this 7%, apart, or perhaps gives them the advantage, over the 93% of their peers that are not in secondary school. I want to consider how their perceptions of and experiences with education have led them to this point, to be enrolled in secondary school in Nyarugusu Camp, while so many of their peers are not enrolled. Specifically, this study asks:

1. What do students perceive to be the purpose and function of education?
2. How do students' perceptions of the purpose and function of education develop?
3. How do students feel about access to and availability of educational opportunities?
4. What types of interactions do students experience while in the school setting?

5. What do students identify as being positive and negative experiences in the school setting?
6. How do these experiences make students feel?

Theoretical Framework

This study, and grounded theory as a whole, is underpinned by symbolic interactionism. According to Benzies and Allen (2001) symbolic interactionism emphasizes the importance of individual understandings of their world and what they believe is important. In this study, as outlined in my research questions, the meanings that youth make within the context of education are a focus of the research, which means that symbolic interactionism is important in understanding how youth interpret meanings and act in specific contexts and settings (Benzies & Allen, 2001). Symbolic interactionism recognizes that truth is not absolute because context and situations can cause meanings to change (Benzies & Allen, 2001).

Methodology

For this study, I have chosen to use grounded theory, and more specifically, constructivist grounded theory, as I am most interested in exploring youth's perceptions and experiences with education in Nyarugusu Camp, including how youth make sense of their experience and which factors they identify as influencing, enhancing, or impeding their educational experiences. While there is some research on education in refugee camps, many participant voices are missing, especially those of youth and secondary-school students. As such, I will use an inductive research approach, as I cannot begin to hypothesize or predict what participants' experiences may have been or what their perceptions may be. Grounded theory will be used in an attempt to develop a substantive theory that furthers understandings of these youth, an area where little research has been conducted (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986). Mills et al. (2007) state that grounded theory is a useful research approach because it seeks to discover issues of importance in participants' lives. These are things that, as an outsider, one may not recognize or identify. As Clarke (2005) points out, grounded theory is useful because it relies on post-modern perspectives and acknowledges the researcher as a participant, rather than an 'all-knowing analyst.' Because the intent of this research is to gain more of an understanding of the youth's experiences and perceptions, grounded theory is appropriate, as it gives voice to the constructions that youth make of their situation and experiences (Woodgate, 2000).

A constructivist research paradigm assumes that there are multiple realities and that understandings are created between the participant and the researcher, making both a part of the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The idea of the researcher and participants co-constructing knowledge and understandings is an aspect of constructivist grounded theory that also differs from classic grounded theory. Classic grounded theory claims that the researcher is separate from the data and from any theory that emerges from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967); however, constructivist grounded theory recognizes the researcher's "past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). Constructivist grounded theory also acknowledges that what the researcher brings to the data influences what they see within it (Charmaz, 2006, p. 15). For example, in the case of this study, I acknowledge that my professional experiences and my

worldviews influence my research interests and choice of research area. These things do not happen in a vacuum; a researcher always has some type of background in an area prior to undertaking research.

Methods

Interviews.

Although data will be collected in other forms, interviews will be central to data collection in my study (Creswell, 2007). Grounded theory relies on the collection of data that is rich and detailed (Charmaz, 1990). To gather this kind of rich data, I will use the Active Interview developed by Holstein and Gubrium (1995). This way of interviewing explores the realities of research participants and, in accordance with constructivist grounded theory beliefs, acknowledges that both the interviewer and respondent are active participants in the interview process (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). They see the interview not as a "pipeline for transmitting information," but as a "social encounter" (p. 3). This means that both interview and respondent are involved in a collaborative conversation and are viewed as co-constructors of knowledge. The interview becomes dynamic and connections between experiences and information is made in the moment; there is no sense that there is a 'right answer' (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Instead, according to Holstein and Gubrium, the participant "constructs his or her experiential history as the interview unfolds, in collaboration with the active interviewer" (1995, p. 32). The participant is able to provide complex descriptions of his or her experiences as they tell their story. By using active interview methods, I will be able to better "incite or encourage respondents' narratives" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 77). This allows them to consider and reflect on the *hows* and *whats* of experience (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

A grounded theory study typically consists of 20-60 interviews with individuals, but usually more like 20-30 interviews are required to develop theory (Creswell, 2007). Based on these recommendations, I intend to interview at least 20 participants. I anticipate that interviews will last approximately 60-90 minutes; however, given the reflective nature of interviews and the fact that there may be translation involved, the length of interviews may vary greatly. In a refugee camp context, it is important to maintain high levels of participant confidentiality and safety. Given that mobile phones are extremely prevalent in this particular camp (GSMA 2017), I feel that conducting interviews by phone is most appropriate in this context.

Written accounts.

Given the nature of the refugee camp situation, and the politics and power dynamics involved, I feel that anonymous written accounts may be able to provide data that I may not otherwise gather in a phone interview (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007). In addition, written accounts have the potential of being more reflective than oral accounts (Handy & Ross, 2005), as participants have more time to consider the question, think about, and even change their answer. The questions will be constructed and presented as they would in an oral interview, and I will ask participants to answer them as briefly or as fully as they would like.

Observations.

Charmaz (2006) notes that grounded theory allows for a researcher to discover "what our research participants take for granted or do not state, as well as what they say and do" (p. 19). Of course, interviews will allow me, as the researcher, to discover what participants say, and do not say. To discover what they do, I will also rely on observations.

Memo Writing.

A final form of data collection will occur in the form of memos, which are important in grounded theory studies as they capture the researcher's thoughts, ideas, comparisons, and questions regarding the research; essentially, the memo exists as a way for the researcher to have a conversation with him/herself (Charmaz, 2006). These memos not only keep the researcher involved in constant analysis, but also assist in defining relationships and bringing new levels of abstraction to your ideas and concepts (Bryant, 2017; Charmaz, 2006). They also provide a way for the research to retain ideas and thoughts before they are forgotten (Glaser, 1978). It is important to note that while memos can be written at each stage of the research process, they are not written directly within data sources, such as transcriptions, because it can blur the lines between the participants' comments and the researchers' interpretations (Glaser, 1978). Instead, data from transcripts and fieldnotes can be included into memos.

Memo writing is similar to journal writing (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). They can vary in length and content, including abstract or concrete ideas, the use of diagrams or flowcharts, for example (Creswell, 2012). Charmaz (2006) presents an entire chapter on memo-writing in *Constructing Grounded Theory,* and poses helpful questions to consider at different stages of the research process. I intend to use many of her useful suggestions when writing early and more advanced memos.

Ethical Considerations

This study has been approved by Lakehead University's Research Ethics Board, but I want to highlight some of the ethical considerations undertaken in developing this study. First of all, I acknowledge that can be many vulnerabilities experienced by a refugee, who has fled conflict and persecution, and now finds themselves in a state of limbo. Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway (2007) claim that this vulnerability is one of the most challenging aspects of conducting refugee research; however, Block, Riggs, Haslam (2013) note that "deeming whole populations or categories of people as vulnerable lacks sensitivity to context and fails to consider what a person might be vulnerable *to*" (p. 6). Instead, Coleman (2009) highlights the importance of three specific vulnerabilities in refugee communities: risk-based vulnerability, consent-based vulnerability, and justice-based vulnerability, which I used to help design my study.

Risk-based Vulnerability.

Confidentiality is an important factor in my research study. I will collect anonymous written accounts or answers, but individual interviews are obviously not anonymous. Besides conducting individual interviews by phone, to help protect participants' safety and confidentiality, I will also do a few other things. First, I will conduct two separate educational sessions, outside of school hours but at the school, during my time in Nyarugusu Camp. These sessions will have many purposes: to enable me to

get to know some of the students better; to give something back to the community; and to provide a place to safely and privately provide written responses, should students choose to participate in the written interview component of the study. Those who have consented to participate in a phone interview will be assigned a pseudonym to use in the interview. The pseudonym will be assigned to the participant prior to the phone interview being recorded, so that only the researcher knows which pseudonym corresponds to which participant. In this way, participants can use the pseudonym when the phone interview begins, and the translator will not know the participant's true identity.

In a further effort to maintain safety and confidentiality, I will bring an English-Kiswahili translator with me, from outside of the camp and from outside of the local area. I feel that this is important because participants will not have to worry about sharing their thoughts and experiences with someone who may work for the humanitarian agency that is, largely, in control of their livelihood in the camp.

Finally, and importantly, in terms of risk, it is necessary to consider the fact that many people living in Nyarugusu Camp have experienced past, and sometimes present, trauma. While I have attempted to structure my interview questions in a way that bypasses discussions of conflict and war, or their reasons for being in Nyarugusu Camp, these are topics that can still easily find their way into our conversations. I will provide participants with a list of resources that are available in the camp and ensure that they know how to access these resources, should they need to access any services, counselling or otherwise, following our interview sessions.

Justice-based Vulnerability

Mackenzie et al. (2007) note that "protracted displacement situations can undermine people's sense of their own identity, their sense of self-worth, as well as their trust in themselves, thereby impairing, at least to some degree, their capacities for self-determination" (p. 303). At the same time, Gifford (2013) argues that the refugee label should not assume vulnerability and that we need to respect the fact that refugees are still "capable of determining their own life and making their own decisions" (p. 50). In a setting such as Nyarugusu, respect and reflection on the nature of power relationships need to be acknowledged and addressed. In a refugee camp, refugees largely find themselves at the mercy of others, and these one-way relationships can have an impact on my own relationships with participants and community members. It is important for me to continuously reflect on my identities (academic, woman, White, Canadian, etc.) and how they may be at play during the informed consent, data collection, and analysis processes, as well as in my relationships with potential participants and community members.

There may also be increased levels of mistrust in the community (Mackenzie et al., 2007). This is another reason why it is extremely important for me to build relationships with community members and potential participants prior to data collection and to ensure that appropriate member-checking takes place once data collection has begun. Member-checking is a way for participants to validate that what has been transcribed, and potentially translated in some cases, is accurate and resonates with the thoughts and experiences that they were trying to convey (Birts et al., 2016). It is important that participants feel that their thoughts and words are being

accurately presented, and I will outline in my consent form the processes for member-checking.

It is also important that the purpose of my research is clear and that participants clearly understand that I have no affiliation with the agencies and organizations overseeing services in Nyarugusu Camp, and that their participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time, without any penalty.

The use of translators can result in the possibility of poor translation (Mackenzie et al., 2007). To combat some of these potential issues, there will be careful translation and back-translation. For example, in this study, back-translation might look like this: English question – question translated to Swahili – participant answers in Swahili – translator translates participant answer to English – I summarize what the participant has said – translator provides my understanding back to the participant in Swahili. Discussions with participants about the interview's main themes and codes will also take place, in order to ensure that their meanings and ideas are most clearly and accurately presented.

Consent-based Vulnerability.

In this particular study, where I am spending time in Nyarugusu Camp, informed consent will be more of an ongoing and dynamic process, rather than just a single event where participants read and sign a form (George, 2015; Kadam, 2017; Kirby et al., 2012). This is important because in working with a population with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and possibly different experiences with research, sufficient time needs to be allowed to increase understanding and emphasize voluntariness (Gillam, 2013; Kirby et al., 2012

In addition to allowing time to help all parties understand the study and the consent process, many scholars highlight the importance of consent procedures that are culturally appropriate (Block et al., 2012; Ellis et al., 2007; Ford et al., 2008). Taking into consideration potential differences in understandings of adulthood or ages of consent, I have chosen only include participants under the age of 18 years if they also have consent from a parent or legal guardian. This results in a potential power dynamic, as someone else is providing consent, so it is very important that participants understand their rights as a participant and that the student also provide written consent.

To help increase the likelihood of truly informed consent, study information sheets and consent forms need to be linguistically appropriate (Benitez, Devaux, & Dausset, 2002; Kadam, 2017; Nakkash, et al., 2009; Ruiz-Casares & Thompson, 2016). For example, Kadam (2017) suggests using short, simple words, to keep sentences under 12 words, and to keep paragraphs under seven lines. Similarly, Nakkash et al. (2009) recommend reducing difficult, technical language. All study information sheets and consent forms will be provided in English, Swahili, and French, so that potential participants can choose the language(s) in which they feel most comfortable. These forms will also follow the recommendations of using simpler, less technical language and maintaining short sentence and paragraph lengths. In addition to providing sufficient time to read and discuss the forms, I will also go over these forms verbally at the start of individual interviews, to ensure that participants understand their rights and do not have any further questions. Because individual interviews will be audio-

recorded, I also plan to record this process, using Tilley's (2016) suggestion of audio-recording the process of consent.

Conclusion

This paper has presented the background for, and the need for, exploration into the perceptions of and experiences with education among Congolese youth in Nyarugusu Refugee Camp. As much of the literature on refugee education has focused almost exclusively on organizational aspects of planning and monitoring education (Kirk & Winthrop, 2008), and much of the research that has been done on student and community perspectives in relation to education tends to be conducted by stakeholders (eg/ UNICEF, UNESCO, UNHCR, International Rescue Committee), this study has been designed with the intent to gain more of an understanding of youth's experiences and perceptions, in their own words. By exploring refugee youths' perceptions of education in Nyarugusu Camp, those responsible for planning and delivering educational programming may have a better idea of both what encourages them to attend school and what discourages them from attending. Having a stronger understanding of these factors may work to promote higher rates of enrollment and completion at the secondary school level. In this way, the findings may have the potential to benefit both educational administrators and teachers, but also more importantly, the students and communities, as education has the potential to be linked with positive personal life outcomes.

I have also highlighted the importance of ethical considerations in conducting such a study. These considerations are many, and while refugees are frequently referred to as extremely vulnerable, they are also the most important voices in conversations about what is going on in their lives. It is important to give voice to the constructions that youth make of both their situation and their experiences when it comes to secondary education. Overall, this study will add to the small, but growing, body of research on the experiences of youth living in refugee camp situations.

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