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Interrogating the agency and education of refugee children with disabilities in Northern Uganda: A critical capability approach

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Abstract

This paper draws on empirical evidence from a 3-year research project in Northern Uganda examining the educational experiences of refugees with disabilities. The authors present the compounded and interrelated challenges children with disabilities and their families face as they navigate their educational experiences and seek out opportunities to live well. The authors seek to make a contribution towards improving educational experiences by first highlighting compounding challenges faced by refugee children living with disabilities and their families and related policy gaps that have ramifications for refugee children's access to education in particular, and second by expanding discourse about refugee children with disabilities agency in relation to these liminal gaps and the impact the gaps have for accessing education. The authors use Powell and McGrath's (in *Skills for human development: Transforming vocational education and training*, Routledge, 2019; *Handbook of vocational education and training*, Springer, 2019) concept of critical capabilities and relationality, to expand Klocker's (in *Global perspectives on rural childhood and youth: Young rural lives*, Routledge, 2007) notions of thick and thin

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agency and to interrogate refugee children living with disabilities' agency in relation to education opportunities and rights.

KEYWORDS
children, disability, education, refugees, relational agency

INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2021, over 82.4 million persons were forcibly displaced worldwide, of these, 42% were children below 18 years of age (UNHCR, 2021a). Sustainable Development Goal Four (SDG4) calls for quality education for all, however, access to quality education remains elusive for many refugee children, particularly those who have a disability and who are girls. Refugee and disability provision tends to be separate, with minimal evidence that either considers the impact of the compounding experience of being both a refugee and a person with disability (Walton et al., 2020). Refugee children with disabilities are a minority, and they have been described as 'forgotten or invisible' (Crock et al., 2017, p. 3) and 'among the most socially and economically disadvantaged' (King et al., 2010, p. 180).

Too often research about refugees in settlement countries focusses on majority experiences (Subasi Singh et al., 2023) and refugee children's agency, voice and rights need consideration. There is a need for more work that engages with the interconnectedness of children's voice and rights, particularly in the Global South (Collins et al., 2021). We argue along with Chataika and McKenzie (2013) that such work needs to be situated in the ontological and epistemological (African) contexts, which emphasise relationality and interconnectedness. This ontological context calls for deeper exploration of perceived opportunities to contribute to society. Thus, there is also a need for attention to perceived life opportunities and pathways when considering agency and participation. Bacakova (2023) for example argues that a lack of viable educational pathways for refugees limits the hope and capacity of participating in society. A number of studies advocate for more attention to longer term opportunities for refugees (Awidi & Quan-Baffour, 2021; Dryden-Petersen, 2017). Attention to perceived life opportunities is integral to the critical capabilities approach to understanding agency and development (DeJaeghere, 2020; Powell & McGrath, 2019a, 2019b). In this article, we call attention to the compounding and structural barriers that limit educational and livelihood opportunities and consequently agency for refugee children with disabilities living in Uganda. We offer a discussion on agency and education through a critical capabilities lens reflecting the experiences of refugee children with disabilities in Northern Uganda.

CONTEXT

The research is situated in refugee settlements in Northern Uganda. As of November 2021, Uganda hosts the third largest population of refugees in the world and is a key site of South–South migration with 66.8% of refugees coming from South Sudan (UNHCR, 2022a). Uganda has the unique approach of integrating refugees in settlements, alongside host communities and allowing them a certain degree of free mobility, within and outside the

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gazetted settlements, in the country as they choose, rather than segregating them to camps (UNHCR, 2022b). The South Sudanese refugees are mainly settled in the northern part of Uganda, bordering South Sudan to the south. West Nile districts including Adjumani, Obongi and Lamwo (the sites of this research) in the Acoli subregion are located in the northern parts of Uganda, on the southern border of South Sudan. The communities on both sides of the border have some similarities in cultural practices and language. Ethnic similarity enhances settlement and adaptation of the migrant population (Fielden, 2008). 80% of the refugee population are women and children (UNHCR, 2022a). The available data show that over 18 000 refugees have disability-specific needs, with girls more affected (Disability Rights Fund, 2018; UNHCR, 2022a). Research by Owiny and Nagujja (2014) provides an account of some of the challenges faced by refugees with disabilities in Uganda, both in and out of settlements. They record mobility and resultant access to services as a major problem for people with disabilities and their families, documenting long distances to travel, poor footpaths and no means of private or public transportation. In terms of education provision for refugees in Uganda, Mugerwa-Sekawabe (2022) indicates that there are not enough schools and that schools are too expensive, resulting in high dropout rates. Likewise, Tulibaleka (2022) highlights overcrowding in schools and high school fees as major reasons for 57% of school age refugee children in Uganda not being in school, also emphasising that there is almost no provision for education beyond primary school.

The massive influx of refugees in the Northern region of Uganda has resulted in environmental degradation and conflict over land use (Berke & Larsen, 2022). A study by Bernard et al. (2022) claims that allocated settlement areas are not large enough for the dense population. They explain that land is being cleared for settlement and cultivated for food. Trees are also used for firewood, and water is becoming less available. Bernard et al. (2022) demonstrate that wetlands and woodlands are decreasing exponentially, causing land conflict and long-term impact on the environment. They call for urgent action. The situation is compounded for women, who represent the highest proportion of adult refugees, and who also have traditional roles of collecting water and firewood and farming (Berke & Larsen, 2022). Mwenyango (2023) explains that travelling further distances not only adds to their work, but also places them at higher risk of gender-based violence and sexual harassment. The situation is again more challenging for refugee children with disabilities and their families who are more vulnerable.

UGANDAN POLICY AND RIGHTS

Uganda is a signatory to the Global Compact on refugees; a demonstration of political will, responsibility and burden to share the management of the social-economics of displacement (UNHCR, 2022b). The 2006 Refugee Policy of Uganda and the refugee regulatory framework fit within this agenda as far as commitment to the protection of refugees is concerned (Government of Uganda, 2006). Within this policy, Uganda upholds key rights including freedom of movement and access to social services such as education. The educational access for all children, including refugee children are enshrined in the Constitution of Uganda and in the Education Act (Government of Uganda, 1995; Uganda Government Gazette, 2008). Uganda has also ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (UN, 2008), binding itself to its international commitments in relation to inclusive education for all. The Education Response Plan for Refugees (ERPR) (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2018) is the main implementation guideline for refugee children's educational access in Uganda. The ERPR

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mandates local governments and education partners to set up and operate schools in refugee settlements in Uganda.

The challenge to upholding universal rights is that, without explicit attention to integrating minority rights and opportunities, there is a chance that minority rights get lost (Walton et al., 2020). This is why Collins et al. (2021) call for an integrated approach to understanding children's rights. In Uganda, refugee children with disabilities' ability to access quality education is impacted by policy gaps, because the policies do not adequately capture the particular, multiple and interconnected needs of refugee children with disabilities (Owiny & Nagujja, 2014). For example, rights related to services such as education and health are included in refugee policy; however, people with disabilities' rights are enshrined in separate policy on disability, with little mention of people with disabilities in the refugee policy. Likewise, when it comes to education and health policy, there is generally little to no provision to either the specific status of refugee or disability, and yet the national education and health policies are the legal frameworks that provide for rights for all citizens and residents (inclusive of refugees and people with disabilities). Similarly, policy on Vocational Education and Training has no specific reference to either refugees or people with disabilities, it briefly mentions inclusive education but does not break it down. Furthermore, there is little connection made in any of the policy documents about the interrelatedness of challenges. Yet, our research demonstrates that the challenges are very connected. For example, someone with hearing loss cannot access quality education without a hearing aid, which they cannot afford to pay for privately. Health policy does not recognise the link between quality education and providing a hearing aid. Education policy does not provide for health issues. The family therefore may be sent back and forth between service points as they try to access their right to quality education. We note that Ugandan children with disabilities, many of whom are also recovering from the recent civil war themselves, also fall through these policy gaps (as documented by Muyinda & Whyte, 2022 for example). However, statistics indicate that the conditions are significantly more acute for refugees with disabilities, who are generally living in more dire and vulnerable circumstances (UNHCR, 2021b). Refugees with disabilities have fewer social safety nets, less access to land and are mostly single caregiver (mother, aunt and sister) headed households. They are more reliant on donor aid, do not always know how to navigate systems and have additional universal policy gaps that they fall through (i.e. health care and education policy do not mention refugees specifically). Thus, in this paper, we call attention to the liminal spaces between policy and related policy implementation that have very real consequences on the lives of refugee children with disabilities. Our research, and this paper, is oriented towards educational experiences. We recognise, however, that accessing quality education is hindered by a host of interconnected factors. These factors exclude many refugee children with disabilities from meaningful participation in their communities and from quality education. In order to foreground the liminality of refugee children with disabilities' lives, we centre their agentic capacity. In this next section, we explain why.

AGENCY AND CRITICAL CAPABILITIES

Societies are culturally diverse and composed of complex ways of understanding children and childhood with implications for shaping children's migration and sociospatial experiences (Meda, 2017; Punch, 2001; van Blerk & Ansell, 2006). Punch (2001) argues that while it is important to acknowledge children as social actors, there is also a need to understand the extent to which structures of adult society tend to limit children's opportunities for exercising their

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agency. In their work on child migration in Africa, Hashim and Thorsen (2011) show that the African family, informed by the cultural values of *Ubuntu*, is a social institution which is constituted by different kinship and social relationships, and sits at odds with the western notions of family restricted to the household setting. *Ubuntu* is an African philosophy and form of humanism, premised on a collectivist culture and norms of interdependence, compassion and caring for others. In this regard, Hashim and Thorsen (2011) identify that children are accountable not only to their immediate family but also to other extended family members as well, who act like fathers and mothers, including having claims on and obligations to children at the different levels of their migration. It is through this interpersonal culture that children learn how it feels to be valued, loved and cared for, thereby imparting similar values in them (Mokhutso, 2022). In this way, the social fabric of intrahousehold relations shape children's agency, identity, sense of belonging and migratory experiences in significant ways.

We find Klocker's (2007) description of agency of girls in rural Tanzanian useful to interpret the relational, *Ubuntu*, context of refugee children with disabilities in Uganda. Klocker suggests that agency can be thought of in terms of power, age, sex, and, importantly, structures. Klocker uses the term thin agency to describe structural conditions that create boundaries for viable alternatives and limit choices. In contrast, thick agency refers to a latitude and freedom of decision-making opportunities. Klocker contends that contextual and structural constraints act to thin the agency of vulnerable girls in rural Tanzania. Here, we seek to expand Klocker's thick and thin agency, particularly the structural thinning, by integrating feminist and critical capabilities approaches (Powell & McGrath, 2019a) with agency. This demonstrates how barriers that exclude refugees with disabilities from learning opportunities and viable life pathways have a compounding impact on children's hope for the future.

The critical capabilities approach builds on the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 2005), which attends to equality in development through a comparative lens of individual opportunity. According to Nussbaum (2000), empowerment is central to agency and freedom and can be measured according to capabilities, which are broken down into functionings. Functionings are not just about access, but rather they are real opportunity sets that individuals can act on to achieve their personal well-being. Relating agency to vulnerable youth and learning opportunities in South Africa, Powell (2014) and Powell and McGrath (2019a, 2019b) expand the capabilities theoretical approach to consider the capacity to dream and aspire to future well-being as a core functioning. The critical capabilities approach calls for evaluation of functionings and agency to focus primarily on the extent and ways in which institutions and systems support the flourishing of learners and systemic constraints that reduce application of functionings and realisation of capacities. Structures embedded in societies and relationships can act to reduce a capability even where a functioning exists. In the case of hopes and aspirations, the functioning is likely to be dimmed as well if the capability is not realised. Thus, a critical capabilities approach insists on addressing structure and power (criticality) while accounting for social relations and communal aspects of agency. The critical capability approach has a strong focus both on the need to give considerable attention to young people's voices in articulating their aspirations for meaningful work and lives, and on their experiences of marginalisation and disempowerment (McGrath et al., 2020). In contrast to the orthodox view of 'aspirations' as a deficit of poor people that needs fixing, a critical capabilities approach understands aspirations as forward-looking 'life projects' in which individuals attempt to respond to their structural obstacles and their endowments of various resources in order to imagine and achieve better lives (Powell, 2014).

In terms of agency, the capacity to aspire requires being able to imagine a future and a viable pathway to get there. DeJaeghere (2017) focusses on intersectional inequalities of girls in

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her contributions to critical capabilities. She also emphasises that, especially in African settings, capabilities are related to social agency and the capacity to feel valued and able to contribute to society. Therefore, 'enhancing capability sets also requires changing the social structures and environment in which an individual's life takes shape' (DeJaeghere, 2017 p. 2). That is, 'if a young woman is able to critically analyse her social reality or use her voice to reveal processes that marginalise, and the structures that restrict her from realising her valued wellbeing do not substantively change, then her capabilities do not redress the social inequalities she faces (p. 4)'. Here, Dejaeghere highlights the difference and connection between functionings and capabilities in the relational context. The young woman may have the functioning to speak out, but the capability is not there because of structural conditions that marginalise her. Over time, it is likely that the functioning will also dim. This is why the capacity to aspire and hope is so important in agency and in realising life projects. In terms of participating in school, this means understanding the complex social practices, structures and (often hidden) pedagogies that can inhibit or enhance children and young people's authentic participation and related capability to aspire to realisable futures, both in and out of school. The functionings of aspiration and relationality identified by critical capability theory expand the understanding of agentic thickness and thinness as described by Klocker (2007).

We draw attention to critical capabilities, in particular the aspects of relationality and capacity to aspire, because we see these capacities as fundamental to understanding the life potentialities as well as the compounding structural barriers to education and agency. It provides a framework to interrogate both agency and education in the context of compounded challenges faced by refugee children with disabilities in this African context. Importantly for this study, critical capabilities broadens conceptions of education beyond primary and secondary school to include lifelong learning and life pathways in relation to culture and economics. Furthermore, Collins et al. (2021) reference liberatory and empowering frameworks for agency based in the radical adult critical lenses in their rights-based concern for child agency. An example is Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), which emphasises education that conscientizes people to their positionality and power in society. Freire foregrounds hope in education as an ontological need (Freire, 2021). In all of his work, he is concerned with power and participation in society. This connects strongly with the empowering and critical aspects of critical capabilities. The critical capabilities approach is useful to document structural barriers by reflecting the capabilities in relation to specific functionings of people. Born from the Freirian critical tradition, three important expansions that the critical capabilities approach provides to understanding agency are (1) a focus on compounding structural barriers, which reflect the interconnections of rights emphasised by Collins et al. (2021); (2) the importance of hope (capacity to aspire) as an essential functioning; and (3) an emphasis on the links of feeling valued and contributing to society and the possibility of hope.

METHODS

The research we report on here is based on a 3-year exploratory case study of the educational experiences of refugee children with disabilities in Northern Uganda. The research is part of a wider project that seeks to understand the dynamics of educational inclusion and exclusion of refugee students with disabilities in three African countries: Uganda, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

In Uganda, the lead researcher was a White cisgender man, employed at a university in Uganda. He worked closely with a full-time Ugandan cisgender woman research assistant.

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Together they established a core team of seven research advisors (four women and three men) who were integrally involved in all aspects of the research, including fieldwork and analysis. The advisory team is composed of people from government, academia, refugee children with disability parent associations, and NGOs working with refugees with disability. The team was selected based on their expertise, experience and influence in working with refugees and students with disabilities in Uganda. Two had visible disabilities and two had children with disabilities. No others disclosed a disability. All but one are Ugandan citizens. None were refugees; however, we worked with some refugees as translators and included them in reflexive sessions. The team made important and diverse contributions in terms of connections, analysis and language translation (including sign language).

The participants were spread over three settlements in Northern Uganda and their environs, with the majority from one larger settlement. We worked with NGO partners in the field to identify translators and participants. We also worked with a disability parent's association with identify families not reached by NGO programmes. We conducted 63 interviews with 103 participants including 43 refugee students with disabilities and their families, 14 of the participants were families from Ugandan communities. We did not differentiate between types of disability in the selection of participants nor did we enquire about the nature or extent of disability. Ethical clearance for this research—Disabled Refugees Included and Visible in Education (DRIVE)—was granted by Nottingham University and Gulu University Regional Ethics Council. Informed consent was obtained, and transcripts were anonymised and securely stored. Elsewhere (Monk, 2022), we have documented reflections on ethics and accountability in our research in relation to voice, participation, relationships and impact.

At the centre of the research, this article is an attempt to centre the perspective of the core stakeholders: the students and their families. In their literature review on child agency from a rights based perspective, Collins et al. (2021) remarked that 'the voice of children barely appear, except as quotes to complement adult research (p. 305)'. We focussed our data generation on eliciting the lifewide stories of refugee children with disabilities and their families, although we also conducted interviews and focus groups with teachers, NGOs working directly with refugee children with disabilities, Ugandan education officials and policy-makers. Our interview questions were crafted with the advisory board following site visits and consultations with a broader range of stakeholders. Restrictions related to COVID-19 did not allow us to initially involve the children and their families; however, eventually, we were able to access the field. The research was a recursive process of interviews (using pictures and stories), collaborative reflection and analysis sessions, followed by adapting interviews and people being interviewed. We explicitly asked participants what else, and who else we should be asking. The majority of children we spoke with were girls and women. One observation that we made in the course of the research was that most of the power holders and decision-makers (District Education Officials, NGO staff, community representatives) were men, and most of the households were led by girls and women. In our own research, we had to adjust and even redo some interviews because we noticed that when men interacted with women and girls there was a different dynamic than if there was a woman from our team conducting the interview.

The research was set to begin just as COVID-19 hit Uganda. In an earlier edition of *Children and Society*, Datzberger et al. (2023) have outlined multiple and diverse impacts that exceptionally long school closures had on education in Uganda. COVID-19 impacted our research by first delaying primary data generation in the field. Prior to COVID-19, our research team in Uganda had already conducted initial site visits with an advisory group to introduce the research and the research team and help to set the parameters for the Ugandan case. This was useful, because we

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were able to start the secondary data generation during lockdowns via phone and video conferencing with teachers, relevant NGOs and education officials. When we were given permission to enter the settlement areas, the schools were still closed, and we had to be careful to differentiate if accounts of school attendance were related to COVID 19 or otherwise. We were able to conduct in person interviews.

Coding and thematic analysis were performed collaboratively and were ongoing through iterative and reflexive sessions with the advisory committee. When the data generation was completed, we asked our advisors to go through anonymised transcripts to generate themes collectively. These were placed in a shared excel file and we had a series of reflective discussions based on the themes generated. We used a jam board to group and analyse the themes according to the various research participants' perspectives. Finally, the research assistant and the co-investigator used the generated themes compiled to analyse the data according to the research questions and produce a general final report. These data have also been analysed more deeply according to specific themes such as the one in this article. A representative group of all participants were invited to a policy brief and research dissemination forum to verify, reflect on (and add to) the research findings. This forum instigated the development of a new bachelors programme in Inclusive education at the university where the research was generated. Additional funding was also obtained for engagement and training workshops related to refugees with disabilities experiences in Vocational Education and Training.

FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The critical capabilities approach focusses on education as a means for participating in society, which it considers entwined in longer term life projects, and visible future opportunities with pathways to realise them. Consequently, the approach is useful to consider both for education and for agency. The results of not participating in education or having viable opportunities to participate in society, which participants regard as a fundamental functioning for future success, act to thin agency and have implications for the future of the child. A combined focus on intersecting and compounding structural barriers, the importance of hope and capacity to aspire and the feeling of being valued and contributing to society offers an understanding of refugee children with disabilities', particularly girls, agential barriers and possibilities. In what follows we share the education experiences of refugee children with disabilities and their related life goals. We foreground the voice of one participant, psuedonymised as Alobo, to represent the issues that emerged in our research. We supplement Alobo's story with related anecdotes from other refugee children with disabilities to foreground the structural challenges and demonstrate how important it is for these children to be able to imagine their value for society.

Alobo is a young woman of about 15. We interviewed her with her grandmother in Arabic, through a translator. Despite clearly being a particularly bright and determined young woman-a force to be reckoned with, Alobo was not attending school but stayed at home taking care of the compound and raising chickens to sell. While Alobo is making significant contributions to the homestead, her capacity to imagine a pathway outside of her homestead is significantly thinned. She had a dream to continue her education '*up to senior and university*', however, she has evaluated the barriers and decided that, '*because of the sickness I cannot now continue*'.

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Compounding barriers to educational access

There are a number of reasons why refugee children with disabilities do not attend school and these reasons clearly demonstrate the prevalence of a number of barriers, including lack of health care, travel and transport, school provision, sexual harassment and poverty (Tulibaleka, 2022; Walton et al., 2020). We want to emphasise that these issues may be faced by Ugandan children with disabilities and by refugee children, but refugee children with disabilities, especially girls, experience these with compounded impact (UNHCR, 2021b).

Healthcare provision

A major barrier to accessing education and being safe at school is a lack of provision of adequate medicine and health care. Inadequate provision of disability-specific health care for refugees is well-documented (Pearce, 2015) and is confirmed by Alobo's grandmother who explains that Alobo '*cannot be handled by someone else apart from us, especially if the malaria starts*'. She points out that it was the school that directed her to keep Alobo at home: '*At that time, even the teachers said she would not continue with her study because the malaria was so much disturbing*'. Note that here, 'malaria', is in fact code for 'epilepsy'. It was one of our translators who pointed this out when we inquired why so many people were referring to Malaria. A number of studies (e.g. Ngoungou et al., 2006) indicate that cerebral malaria is a possible cause of epilepsy. Without medicine for her epilepsy and without schools with healthcare facilities to support her, it is not safe for Alobo to attend school. The grandmother feels that she is the most trained healthcare agent available. Other caregivers also explain the lack of health care: '*It is very hard to take care of [name]...Frequent attacks on [name] makes it hard to get medication....*' One participant, Anena, has not left her bed for years, and her caregiver explains she had been chasing doctors, '*I was every time in the hospital*' and had been promised that a specialist would visit but, '*no doctor came to her*'. She also emphasises that '*no teacher came*' either. This draws attention to the imbrications of medical and schooling provisions that should be in place to enable educational access for refugee students with disabilities, and the importance of policy links between various social providers. Additionally, many participants indicated that lack of needed devices for getting to the classroom (i.e. wheelchairs) and for learning in the classroom (i.e. glasses and hearing aids) were hindering participation in school. For example, an education official points out, '*Because of the gadgets that are not there many special needs students are not accessing schools*'. Likewise, a caregiver explains that she was '*Requesting for special help so that my daughter can study*'. These issues are interrelated with issues of school provision, distance and travel, and poverty; however, it remains ambiguous where the service should be accessed. What is not ambiguous is that the student is not able to participate in learning.

Distance and travel

Another barrier to educational access is the distance to school, which may be a concern for a number of children, but is felt acutely by those who have a disability. It is also a factor that Crock et al. (2017) identify as a reason for refugee students with disabilities' nonenrolment in school. In our study, one student explains to us (through a translator so copied in third person from the transcript) that, '*She can't walk, so that's why she's not in school*'. This is a compounded result of poor infrastructure (very muddy roads), no schools close enough to potential students (not enough schools), no means of transportation (like

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a bus) and no assistive devices (such as wheelchairs, which would not work in the mud anyway). To give some context, in our fieldwork, we usually had to access peoples' homes using footpaths and motorbikes. In some cases, we had to leave the motorbike behind because of large ditches which the bike could not pass. We did not come across a home with a motorbike let alone a car in our fieldwork. This has similar implications for access to other services such as health and livelihoods. The case of Anena above accentuates the challenges involved in moving long distances to find healthcare services. In our fieldwork, we regularly had to set appointments through neighbours or older children and return and return again because the caregiver (usually a woman) had travelled somewhere far (by foot) to access some service (health care and farming were the most common reasons we did not find someone home). Travelling long distances to access school also placed students with disabilities at risk of bullying. One caregiver explains '*They are always abusing him and sometimes they steal his things*'.

School provision

Overcrowded schools limit the support that is available to students with disabilities. A caregiver says, '*I think that if the pupils were small in class, the teachers could manage and [name] will become a lawyer*'. In this case, the caregiver recognised that the student required learning assistance, which teachers simply were not able to provide because of class numbers. School-based factors are known to hinder access by refugees with disabilities, and other studies note issues that include teacher preparedness, infrastructure and curriculum (Crock et al., 2017; Reilly, 2010). For the students who have access to inclusive primary education through NGO sponsorship, the structural barriers described above are less apparent because of the support they received. However, even these supported students live in liminality with futures uncertain beyond primary school, and pathways conditional to unpredictable sponsorship. One mother expresses this concern about the unpredictability of her daughter's future education by saying, '*I just need help from [NGO] to help her in payment of school fees*'. Problems with school infrastructure were also a compounding factor for children with disabilities, particularly when it came to toilets, as a teacher indicates, '*we also have few latrines, some of the latrines do not have rooms for the disabled*'.

Sexual harassment

For girls, there was the added injustice of sexual harassment. Both travelling to school where they are very vulnerable, and at school. Caregivers and teachers explained that girls were kept home for fear of sexual harassment. NGO workers suggested that girls at home were more at risk to sexual harassment than at school. In the case of Alobo, her grandmother is afraid of sending her to the market because '*people will take advantage of her*'. This is well-documented in the literature (Collins et al., 2021; Pearce, 2015; Walton et al., 2020; UNHCR 2021b) as a compounded challenge for refugee children with disabilities, and girls in particular, who are at high risk both at home and at school. This plays a significant role in limiting their opportunity to participate in society.

Poverty

The compounding challenges described above are all underpinned and textured by poverty. The gendered experience of (rural) poverty in Uganda must be located in wider histories and current

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realities of economic oppression (Tikly, 2020). We are concerned not to let individual stories occlude the role that the global north plays in producing and maintaining poverty through debt, climate change, proxy wars, extraction of resources and exploitative trade deals. The ultimate effects of these actions, though, are keenly felt by individual families. A caregiver explains, '*There are other challenges apart from the bad roads, payment in school and other requirements. Here in the settlement, there is limited farmland. We depend on the food ratio given*'. A UNHCR (2021b) study indicates that the majority of refugee families in Uganda were food insecure, and these families were primarily focussed on finding food. Money to pay school fees was a secondary concern. School fees however are seen as a major barrier both by UNHCR and our own research. Livelihood challenges were compounded by the majority of homes having a single caregiver, usually a woman, taking care of a large extended family. Balancing finding ways of earning money and taking care of the family was a challenge. One caregiver (through a Translator) explains: '*What she wanted to tell you right now is as a single mother it is not easy to send a child to school alone, now she is requesting with the mercy from God if it may be possible with little support so that the boy can be sent to school. Because right now after seeing the results of the boy that day she was very happy but at night she started reflecting on how she will handle the boy's study ahead. I am giving time for your coming to save us*'. Another caregiver explains the struggle of getting a yield from crops to raise money for school costs as follows, '*I struggled to do little farming where I sold the produce and used the money to enrol my daughter to school but currently there is not good yield and like you see when you arrived, I was harvesting groundnuts and I am worried whether I will get the amount of groundnut to be sold to get my daughter to school*'. Alobo did not have sponsorship and her father did not want to pay tuition fees. Her grandmother admits, '*right now I am at home facing challenges. If I ask for some money from the dad, the dad would deny that there is money*'.

Thus far, we have described some of the many barriers for learners to access education. We have highlighted the interconnection of the barriers to demonstrate the compounding effect they have on families, and the gaps in service provision that exist in the spaces between. It is evident that refugee students with disabilities and their families clearly understand the intersecting barriers that limit their participation in education and in society. They see scant opportunities for learning, or indeed quality learning, within the options available to them, and so they explain that their children cannot learn. And they are correct. In these circumstances, they cannot, and their right to education is being denied. The danger here is that hesitancy to attend school might be interpreted and/or portrayed as a choice by refugees with disabilities and their families related to stigma around disability and learning. Such a narrative is not only unjust to the refugees with disabilities and their families, but also provides a convenient excuse to ignore the structural conditions that are actually preventing opportunities for education. Instead, in the section that follows, we show how they express aspirations for their lives and futures.

Aspirations and education

A flourishing, or normal future for Alobo was connected to her current opportunities for education. She explains that, '*in future I want to be like others, but because of my status I cannot go back to school*'. In this statement, we can read that (a) she thinks it is only her disability (not the school and health care) that is the limiting factor, and (b) she sees a normal life as tied to school. It was the same with most of the people with whom we spoke, whether they were in school or not. All participants tie future prospects to education opportunities. One boy, for example, explains '*They also said if I study I may also change the situation in my country and may even stop the war*

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in [home country]'. This is important for agency because it demonstrates the importance of perceived future educational opportunities to participation in society. Without the opportunity for quality education, the capacity to dream is diminished.

We also see a loss of hope, a failure to see the future, and a sense of hopelessness in answers to questions about actual conditions, for example, why a child is not in school. Alobo's grandmother explains, '*There is nothing else she can do. Even if you send her to sell in the market, people will just cheat her. Even the sewing machine she is crying for needs the mind, you need to cut*'. One mother stated, '*if I had power I would have taken her to specialised care*'. Another caregiver explains, '*I just need help from [NGO] to help her in payment of school fees*'.

Being out of school reduced the perceived capacity to participate in society, not just because of future education and livelihood opportunities, but also in the present. Isolation from other children their age is a key factor that limits relational agency. In writing about disabled childhoods, McLaughlin et al. (2016, p. 175) emphasise the 'everyday relational agency that children are capable of having in their everyday lives', and the importance of the presence of young people in communities. By contrast, Alobo had become quite isolated from the community and misses her schoolfriends, saying, '*They (friends) now only come to greet and go*'. This demonstrates the important role that schools play in terms of socialising (Pearce, 2015). One child through a translator explains, (Translator using third person) '*he feels bad and offended when he might be seeing some of his friends, progressing with their studies but for him he is not at school*'.A caregiver for another child explains that her son, '*feels bad and offended when he might be seeing some of his friends, progressing with their studies but for him he is not at school*'.

Even for students who are in school, there is a significant level of uncertainty. For example one boy stated, '*In my secondary school, I am not sure where I will go and the support required together with my other colleagues with disabilities*'. The reality is that there are no pathways mapped out for students with disabilities beyond primary school. The hidden message this sets is that there are no expectations for disabled refugee students to make a meaningful contribution to society. The dialogues we had with refugee students with disabilities and their families demonstrate very clearly that they are acutely aware of these lowered expectations and related additional challenges they must overcome.

The perceived capacity to participate in society for disabled refugee students is clearly connected to their educational possibilities and related life trajectories. In her work on transitions for disabled refugees, Bacakova (2023), accentuates that within the existing instability and uncertain futures of disabled refugees, focussing on educational pathways and transitions is imperative. Bacakova points out that refugees live outside their home countries for protracted periods of time, and provisions for their well-being must be long term as well. In the case of Uganda, policies and laws that welcome refugees to move freely, help to nudge forward a mindset of integration rather than 'visitor'; however, provision for transitions and pathways for refugees with disabilities is a major gap (Awidi & Quan-Baffour, 2021; Dryden-Petersen, 2017). Refugees are in a constant state of transition, they have been displaced from their homes, they have uncertain futures, and disabled refugees (compounded again for girls) face additional and very particular barriers. In the context of this seemingly eternal transition, one potential constant—education of children—that could offer some continuity and hope for the future is being taken away.

Understanding agency as relational expands the contextual realities of thinning, introduces hope as relational, and both highlights education and decentres it to a component or tool of life and life trajectories. This provides clarity for the interconnected requirements for hope and education, while expanding agency to be inclusive of lifelong learning opportunities and the

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interrelation between essentializing narratives, current opportunities, and the capacity to imagine future possibilities as deeply intertwined. This has implications for both understanding children's agency, and upholding their rights.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have drawn attention to the compounding barriers and their intersections that keep children out of school. We have made reference to the thinning impact this has on agency. We have argued that agency must be considered in relation to perceived opportunities available to participate in society, which in turn catalyses hope and potential stability through continuity of experience. We suggest that Critical Capabilities Approach offers an important framework from which to understand the importance of hope in a social and life wide learning context. We also have argued that education and educational pathways are directly connected to hope-full futures. Agency starts with perceived opportunities for quality education, and perceived opportunities for quality education starts with agency. Absent viable opportunity for dreaming, agency is thinned and hope is dimmed. Refugees and their families are quick to recognise the intersecting and compounded barriers that are preventing them from being successful through education. Enhancing their agency is a useful starting point to properly build viable future opportunities and invite their contribution towards stronger communities, because they are needed. Maybe, as one participant dreams, they will '*even stop the war*'. Certainly, of all the people in this world, our research participant Alobo would be the most capable person for the endeavour, if only there were not so many barriers in her way.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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