

Redefining Integration: What Can We Learn from the Educational Experiences of Refugee Children in the Global South?

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The education of refugee children is of particular relevance for the theme of this special issue of *NEOS*, entitled 'Local Realities and Global Challenges: Approaches to Childhood and Youth Studies from the Global South.' As the number of refugees, half of whom are children, increases globally, understanding how refugees integrate into education systems and societies becomes critical (Meda, Sookrajh, and Maharaj 2013). At the same time, although eighty-four percent of refugees live in the Global South, our understanding of the challenges associated with the integration of refugee children is based almost entirely on studies conducted in the Global North (Pinson and Arnot 2020).

Our understanding of refugee integration is mainly based on research conducted in schools located in Global North settings with underlying cultural norms and social structures that often differ from how children are socialized in the Global South (Cheney 2010). We must develop comprehensive analytical tools to which community membership and social structures are central to understand "integration dynamics" (Spencer and Charsley 2021). This requires us to unpack local perceptions regarding children's childhood, education, and socialization towards community participation as they inevitably affect refugee children's integration (Twum-Danso Imoh, Bourdillon, and Meichsner 2019).

Integration of refugee children in schools is most often evaluated based on quantitative measurements such as their language proficiency, examination results, and employment rates alongside more qualitative processual measures such as the children's sense of well-being, belonging, and self-fulfillment (Dryden-Peterson et al. 2019). Notions of well-being are culturally dependent, and children's understanding of self-realization and belonging are directly linked to community expectations (Ager et al. 2012). How members of host societies and refugees perceive belonging, membership, and wellbeing affects how they experience and measure integration (Driel and Verkuyten 2020). Moreover, the very understanding and the importance we ascribe to indicators such as wellbeing, belonging, and self-realization are embedded in individualistic, neoliberal Western discourses (Wolffernhart, Conte, and Huddleston 2019).

My research of refugee children in primary schools in Kampala, Uganda, focused on refugee children's interactions with local children in the classroom, their experiences of everyday life in Kampala, and the influences of Uganda's open-door integration policy on their envisioned future. The research is based on condensed ethnographic fieldwork in three primary schools in Kampala and combined participatory observations of classes and other school activities and 110 semi-structured interviews, supplemented by visual data, with refugee children, parents, teachers, and workers in the public sector.

During my research, it quickly became apparent that existing integrationist discourse, primarily based on studies in the Global North, does not offer the necessary tools to analyze their experiences. The local pedagogical context and community members' expectations were critical in constructing the refugees' children's experiences and were glaringly missing in the integrationist discourse. The pedagogical styles used in the classrooms include whole-class teaching and call-in responses in which all pupils act and respond as one unit, inadvertently erasing differences between the different pupils (Wedin 2010). Additionally, children are socialized both in school and in the community differently, and as a result, they define self-realization as the ability to contribute back to their community rather than as gaining a successful career or accumulating financial capital for themselves or their children. They feel a shared sense of belonging and responsibility towards their classmates even before learning the local language because they were consistently treated and socialized as one community. This case study indicates that to understand the integration of refugee children, it is necessary to examine the local intricacies and inter-dynamics of society within localized Global South contexts.

I urge scholars to consider the local cultural-political context and the collectivist or individualistic nature of the society into which refugee children are integrated. We need to conduct more studies in the Global South to expand our definition of what integration may look and feel like and incorporate these findings into our refugee studies and education academic discourse (Bajaj and Bartlett 2017). I argue that understanding the integration of refugee children in the Global South is significant not only because of the magnitude of this phenomenon but because of the unique global insights studying refugee children can provide us regarding childhood, belonging, and community membership.

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