Can the quality of a school be greater than the quality of its teachers? A case of early grade reading skills in Uganda's refugee context

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Reading levels in Uganda's refugee and host communities are way below the national average. For instance, the Uwezo Annual Learning Assessment data showed that, only 28% of assessed refugee pupils in Primary 3 to Primary 7 could read and comprehend a Primary 2 story and only 2 out of 10 refugee pupils (21%) had attained full competences in literacy. In addition, it was revealed that learning

outcomes are equally low for refugee and host community children where more than 90% are unable to read and comprehend a story (Uwezo, 2018). These findings imply that a substantial number of children continue to complete primary education without having ever acquired the basic reading competencies critical to their further learning, day-to-day communication and therefore more likely to struggle with life in the future. Adding to the magnitude of this tragedy is the fact that Uganda is the third largest refugee hosting country in the world, after Turkey and Pakistan, receiving refugees from South Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Rwanda, Somalia and Sudan, among others (UNHCR, 2019).

Furthermore, in refugee settlements there are many mother-tongue languages spoken depending on the place of origin of the refugees and it is difficult to identify a uniform 'mother-tongue' for teaching (Hicks & Maina, 2018). The complex language situation in this context has led many teachers, headteachers, schools, and partners to select English as the target language for Primary 1 to Primary 3 without a clear way to teach it.

Uganda is characterised by teacher-centred pedagogy with lectures as a central feature, and heavy reliance on factual questions. This pedagogical style continues in refugee settlements as stated by Dryden-Peterson (2016), despite research evidences and policies that place a high value on child-centred, participatory teaching methods and active learning approaches. Indeed, an education system that relies heavily on traditional methods such as repetition, memorization and copying work, worsen the complex situation exposed above in refugee settlements. Moreover, there are teachers who are not fully prepared, especially in reading instruction methodology, to handle the challenges involved

in the teaching of reading (Uganda National Examinations Board [UNEB], 2014, UNEB, 2018). Some teachers in Uganda also present weak performance in oral reading implying that, they themselves might not have comprehended the reading skills (Kyeyune, 2012; UNEB, 2011).

Since the persistent poor performance of learners in reading might reside with the finding that many teachers themselves lack an understanding of the linguistic constructs. We thought to verify the 'Peter Effect' hypothesis in understanding the problem refugee children face. The Peter Effect claims that one cannot be expected to give what they do not possess (Applegate & Applegate, 2004). This hypothesis is linked with the facts that are always found in educational research that is to say, a direct relationship between low student achievement and the skills and competence of teachers.

We investigated the hypothesis linked to the Peter Effect while addressing the question: *Can the quality of a school be greater than the quality of its teachers?* In other words, if the teachers participating in the professional development intervention have a better understanding of basic language constructs, do their

learners also possess better reading skills (in the areas of letter sound knowledge, segmenting, nonword decoding, oral passage reading and English vocabulary) than their counterparts? This investigation was done through a 4-months evidence-based teachers' intervention following a quasi-experimental design with a pre-program/post-program design, involving 2 schools with 24 teachers (12 teachers per group) and 297 learners (157 from treatment and 140 from control) from Palabek (Uganda) refugee settlement.

Over this period, our study revealed that, the percentage of learners who could: (i) reproduce correctly the sound of at least 1 letter per minute in the control school increased by 9% (from 17% at baseline) whereas those in the treatment school increased by 76% (from 11% at baseline); (ii) correctly reproduce all the sounds of one or more words in the control school increased by 7% (from 6% at baseline) whereas those in the treatment school increased by 71% (from 3% at baseline); (iii) read correctly at least 1 word per minute in the control school increased by 2% (from 4% at baseline) whereas those in the treatment school increased by 15% (from 2% at baseline); (iv) read correctly at least 1 word per

minute in the control school increased by 12% (from 2% at baseline) whereas those in the treatment school increased by 15% (from 0% at baseline); and (v) identify at least 50% of the English vocabulary words in the control school increased by 10% (from 54% at baseline) whereas those in the treatment school increased by 24% (from 63% at baseline).

The improvements in learners' reading scores associated with the impact of professional development intervention, though small in some subtask areas such as oral passage reading, still seem to have practical significance. The study therefore supported the Peter Effect hypothesis applied to teachers-learners in primary education. This study also nullifies the misconception that minimal preparation is necessary to teach children to read and it has raised a need for the Ministry of Education and Sports to mandate sufficient and informed training of teachers.

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