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Dealing with learning uncertainties during COVID-19 pandemic: Reflections of alone and unaccompanied refugee children in Uganda.

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Abstract

This paper explores how alone and unaccompanied refugee children in a Ugandan refugee settlement reflected and dealt with the learning uncertainties that emerged during the coronavirus pandemic in Uganda. In the emergence of COVID-19, these refugee children from South Sudan once again found themselves amidst uncertainty regarding their future, especially their education, as they found themselves out of school for nearly two years due to the pandemic. This disruption was particularly challenging for unaccompanied refugee children who relied heavily on education as a pathway to pursue their life ambitions, and also to provide them with a sense of stability. Having experienced over five years of their childhoods as refugees in Ugandan settlements, children demonstrated their resilience mechanisms. Notable among these was the ability to

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be absorbed into foster family systems, and the manufacture of new relations and re-connection with learning through the Ugandan education system. With such levels of childhood resilience, refugee children revealed that once again they were able to build dreams of a greater life ahead of them, which they learning through the Ugandan education system. levels of childhood resilience, refugee children revealed that once again they were able to build dreams of a greater life ahead of them, which they believed stretched beyond their refugee status

Further, the children revealed different ways they negotiated their learning uncertainties; while some adapted to self-learning mechanisms and anticipated that schools would reopen soon, others believed that skipping a class or two was a way of recovering the lost school time.

Keywords: refugee childhood, COVID-19, learning, agency

Résumé

Cet article explore la manière dont les enfants réfugiés seuls et non accompagnés d'un camp de réfugiés ougandais ont réfléchi et fait face aux incertitudes d'apprentissage qui sont apparues pendant la pandémie de coronavirus en Ouganda. Lors de l'émergence de la COVID-19, ces enfants réfugiés du Soudan du Sud se sont retrouvés une fois de plus dans l'incertitude quant à leur avenir, en particulier leur éducation, étant privés d'école pendant près de deux ans en raison de la pandémie. Cette perturbation a été particulièrement difficile à vivre pour les enfants réfugiés non accompagnés, qui comptaient beaucoup sur l'éducation pour poursuivre leurs projets de vie et

leur donner un sentiment de stabilité. Après avoir passé plus de cinq ans de leur enfance en tant que réfugiés dans des campements ougandais, les enfants ont démontré leurs mécanismes de résilience. Ils ont notamment réussi à s'intégrer dans des familles d'accueil, à nouer de nouvelles relations et à renouer avec l'apprentissage par le biais du système éducatif ougandais. Avec de tels niveaux de résilience, les enfants réfugiés ont révélé qu'une fois de plus, ils étaient capables de rêver à une vie meilleure qui, selon eux, s'étendait au-delà de leur statut de réfugié. En outre, les enfants ont révélé différentes façons de négocier leurs incertitudes en matière d'apprentissage; certains se sont adaptés aux mécanismes d'auto-apprentissage et s'attendaient à ce que les écoles rouvrent bientôt, alors que d'autres pensaient que sauter une ou deux classes était un moyen de rattraper le temps scolaire perdu.

Mots clés: enfance réfugiée, COVID-19, apprentissage, agence

Introduction

On 30th March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the outbreak of the corona virus disease, also known as COVID-19, a global pandemic (Beier, 2021; Sserwanja et al., 2021). The new virus is highly infectious and transmits by respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes. As of August 2020, nearly all the countries in the world had been affected (Cuevas-Parra, 2020), including Uganda, where the first case was reported on 21 March (Sserwanja et al., 2021). As a result, the country went into a phased lockdown that included the closure of all schools and

other institutions of learning.[1] Schools experienced almost two years of closure, only reopening fully in January of 2022 after being shut down from mid-March 2020. Attempts to have a phased reopening of schools in April of 2021 resulted in high COVID-19 infections in schools barely a month after their opening. This forced the Government of Uganda to indefinitely close schools and suspend face-to-face learning as the country entered a full blown second wave of the pandemic.

While several children in Uganda found themselves out of physical school for an extended period, other children, especially in the urban areas, were enrolled in homeschooling programmes that were conducted through online platforms such as Zoom and the Next Learning Platform, among others. Of note, most children in Uganda, especially those in the semi-urban and rural areas, completely paused schooling with no sustainable mechanisms for continuing to learn during the lockdown. Issues such as the cost of learning devices like smart phones, tablets, or computers, reliable data and monthly subscription fees hindered several potential learners from enrolling on the alternative learning platforms (Niba Rawlings et al., 2022; Tumwesige, 2020). Such were the circumstances in which alone[2] and unaccompanied refugee children found themselves during the lockdown.

Whilst the research from which this paper is developed was interested in exploring the forced migratory experiences of alone and unaccompanied refugee children in Uganda, it emphasised inductive and epistemological approaches to exploring children's social reality. These allowed children to

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[1] At the time of writing this paper, most COVID restrictions, including the lockdowns, had been relaxed and schools and other institutions of learning had been reopened.

[2] Alone refugee children in this paper are defined as minors who arrived in Uganda with a caring adult but for reasons such as death or return of parent or caring adult to their home country, were living on their own in the refugee settlements.

formulate and set the agenda for discussion. It is worth noting that learning uncertainties in relation to COVID-19, the main subject of this paper, emerged from children's reflections of their present life experiences in a Ugandan refugee settlement.

Next in this exploration of how unaccompanied refugee children in Ugandan settlements resiliently navigated learning disruptions and uncertainties during the COVID-19 pandemic is a consideration of the methodology and theoretical framework. The child-centered research approaches and sociology of childhood perspective the paper adopts forwards children's agency, highlighting their resilience and crisis learning approaches. The paper then turns to presenting the children's perspectives, including their coping mechanisms such as self-learning and building friendships, all of which supported the children in adapting to the pandemic's learning uncertainties. The paper concludes by emphasizing that unaccompanied refugee children in Uganda demonstrated resilience and agency in navigating learning uncertainties during the COVID-19 pandemic. It challenges the perception of these children as solely vulnerable, highlighting their ability to adapt and maintain hope for a better future through education and other learning approaches, even in difficult circumstances.

Methodology and theory

This paper stems from research that was spurred by a blend of significant theoretical and child-focused methodology to forward children's agenda. The paper's theoretical center is the New Sociology of Childhood which arguably provides for an interpretive frame of understanding and analyzing childhood (Prout & James, 1990a). This paradigm shift of viewing children is also known as the Social Studies of childhood, as it situates childhood as a social construct (James et al., 1998; Prout & James, 1990b). It argues that childhood is an outcome

of our constructive practices from the different social realities that children live in (James et al., 1998). It is thus prudent to emphasize that this notion challenges the universalization of childhood, arguing that childhood is varied across time and space and should be studied and analysed from this varied lens.

Since most approaches and studies related to humanitarian situations like forced migration often construct children as vulnerable groups (Chase et al., 2019), there is a tendency to prioritize children's protection needs over other needs like participation. The focus of this research was to accommodate both the protection and participatory needs of refugee children (Caputo 2017 in Cuevas-Parra, 2020). In doing so, child agency took a central stage throughout this work with children. Of importance to me was situating alone and unaccompanied refugee children as active agents in the construction and determination of their everyday social reality and that of those around them, including the societies (Ugandan refugee settlements) in which they lived everyday (Jenks, 2005; O'Kane, 2000; Prout & James, 1990b). Doing this meant appreciating that refugee childhoods are not comprised of passive childhoods but rather active beings who espouse emotions and opinions (Alderson & Tamaki, 2016; Lems et al., 2020). These child focused approaches, particularly, with unaccompanied and alone refugee children can further be viewed as part of the fast growing debates within childhood research that demand for ethnographic approaches to understanding unaccompanied and alone children's lived experiences as exemplified by Wernesjö (2012), Chase (2013) and Bryan and Denov (2011).

In exploring how alone and unaccompanied children were constructed, experienced and negotiated emerging learning uncertainties in the wake of COVID19 in Uganda, this research relied on the extended case method design (Barata,

2010) in which data were realised from repeated visits and interactions with children in over eight months of fieldwork.

Furthermore, this research employed a multi-method approach which allowed children to participate and express their viewpoints using different methods. While the use of multiple methods was critical in forwarding this research process, it was also necessary to have these methods be as inclusive as possible (Abebe, 2009; Clark et al., 2014; Punch, 2001). To this effect, the applicability of different methods was based on the age groupings of the participants. For instance, all participants 9 to 13 years participated by way of art-based methods which included drawing, mapping and photo voice. From all these, both individual and group conversations were generated (Okimait, 2022). For those 14 to 17 years, I engaged with them initially using focus group discussions. The conversations from these FGDs were later used to engage this group of participants in follow-up individual semi structured interviews.

My use of focus groups with children[3] 14 to 17 years of age was initially to find an entry point into children's world. My capitalization of shared group dynamics such as children being a group, made it easier for them to engage in conversation with a stranger (adult). I refer to all the focus groups that I conducted by phone calls with children as *tele-focus* group discussions (Okimait, 2022). The justification for tele-FGDs was premised on stringent lockdown measures and suspension of face-to-face research during the COVID pandemic. A prior visit to the settlement during gatekeeper clearance facilitated the identification of research assistants who would later support this research work.

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[3] The legal and statutory provisions in Uganda define all persons under the age of 18 years as children. It is within this context that all participants within this category are constructed as children.

Ethnographic methodologies and processes, when well utilized, allow for the manufacture of lasting research relationships. The tele-FGDs relied heavily on more prior relationships developed with research assistants who remotely supported the identification of target child participants, facilitating an over three weeks rapport building through telephone conversations with the children prior to the actual tele-focus group conversations. How much research assistants supported this remote process and other research processes when face to face research resumed can be equated to Msila (2022) argument that research assistants can be part of the liberating process in research as their presence can help navigate past some research dilemmas.

The themes that emerged from these discussions were critical in setting the agenda for discussion in preceding unstructured individual interviews. On the other hand, artwork activities with children ages eight to thirteen years that included drawing, photovoice, and mapping were fun methods that children enjoyed engaging in. They were a build-up to highly engaging discussions among the children themselves and also with me (Punch, 2002).

The use of this theoretically driven methodology realised a balanced and child-centered research approach in which alone and unaccompanied refugee children in Uganda freely expressed their views in participatory ways. These methods, I further argue, were not just data collection tools, (Pattman, 2015) but through them, relations were built. For instance, my use of artwork activities such as drawings and photovoice supported children to overcome overbearing communication challenges that research processes sometimes subject them to. In this situation, relation building was partly because participation was combined with fun research activities. It is such a methodological approach, I argue, that

allows for children's voices to be heard as it provides spaces for them to espouse their feelings and emotions.

These methods further appreciated children as experts of their stories and co-constructors of knowledge using their social reality. One way I achieved this was through continuously negotiating the effect my adult power would have on children and how it would affect their participation if it were not well balanced. I sought to challenge power differentials by assuming different roles including that of a listening adult and the playing and neutral adult. These allowed me to thrive in children's spaces within the settlement where I was soon appreciated as a present but noninterfering adult in a children's world. This positionality in childhood research has been appreciated as the adult researcher assuming the least-adult role (Abebe, 2009; Mandell, 1991).

How a pre-pandemic Ugandan learning system guaranteed a future for refugee children

While learning emerged as a critical aspect of children's everyday life, it was initially perceived and constructed as a teacher–learner centered point of view (Sikoyo, 2010). In this perspective, the children perceived learning as a one-sided process in which the adult (teacher) is the creator and giver of knowledge and the child is merely a recipient. This is a dominant learning perspective that is deep rooted not only within the Ugandan (Muganga & Ssenkusu, 2019) schooling environment but also elsewhere in Africa (Otara et al., 2019; Sakata et al., 2023). In situations such as these, I argue that a teacher–learner centered approach undermine the principle of child agency which needs to be emphasized and developed when engaging children in Africa in research processes. This corresponds with Sikoyo's advocacy for learner-centered practices that overcome authoritarian learning and teaching

practices while emphasizing active participation of the learner. Thus, through this research process, I appreciated the challenge the teacher-centered learning notion posed to my research, for instance its potential to exclude or limit refugee children's participation (Okimait, 2022). Advocates for child-centered research across Africa (Abebe, 2009; Green & Kloos, 2009; Skovdal & Abebe, 2012) caution that, for children in dire humanitarian circumstances such as these, emphasizing their vulnerability over their agency is very likely. It is for such reasons that I place emphasis on the role refugee children play as co-researchers (Cuevas-Parra, 2020; Mackrill, 2008; Spriggs & Gillam, 2019) as opposed to second-class citizens without a voice. My repeated interactions with children confirmed the existence, not absence, of a silent agency within them. It is on the premise of this silent agency that I am drawn to argue that children emphasized initially the adult (teacher) centered learning approach in which there were merely recipients.

While children come to be appreciated beyond just being recipients of adult human processes, their participation has been emphasized especially through research with the call to support them to awaken and realize their silent agency. Through this work with refugee children, effort was placed to help the children appreciate the active agency embedded within them. Specifically, children were supported to appreciate that their experiences were best shared and told by them and not the adults in their lives. This was in addition to the assurance that being an adult did not equate to being knowledgeable about everything especially where their lives were concerned; thus, as adults, we used research processes to learn from them the important things about their lives. This perspective resonates with the argument that child-centered research must support children to realize and utilize their

agency during research processes (Beazley et al., 2009; Clark et al., 2014).

While reflecting on the period preceding the lockdown, children shared their learning experiences that stemmed from being in a Ugandan schooling system. Their recollection of being at school did not only stop at facilitating relationship building but was a step in the right direction in gaining their dream careers. It was not uncommon for the older children (14 to 17 years) to share their dreams, as reflected in the excerpt below from a tele-FGD with girls only.

> *So according to me my thoughts are once I complete my studies one day I will go away from here and have something to do by my own self, like when I complete my studies maybe I will get job. I am planning to become a nurse… I want to become a teacher. I also want to become a nurse…*

Others also expressed their desire of becoming teachers, nurses or medical doctors among other professions.

At the same time, the ensuing group discussions from photovoice around the preferred places within the refugee settlement with the 9 to 13 year old children revealed school spaces as desired places that not only fostered friendships, but also aided their realization of goals and career ambitions as reflected below.

> D: You chose and took pictures of school as important places to you.
>
> P1: Yes.
>
> D: Can you tell me more about the picture of school that you took?
>
> P3: For me I chose school because if I study, I can be a pilot.
>
> D: How about you P1? What do you think of P4?

> P1: Before lockdown, I would play with my friends in the school compound.
> P4: Even me I want to be a doctor. I can leave the settlement here and go live somewhere when I am a doctor

Furthermore, for these children, their forced migratory journeys to Uganda had uprooted bits of their childhood in South Sudan which, from their reflections, included an education. This partly informed some of the uncertainties of how their lives would turn out in Uganda as alone children. With this, some of them highlighted how a chance to stay or to return to school during their earlier days as refugee children had reawakened their dreams. For others, their forced migratory plight arguably rewrote their childhood moments in Uganda for the better.

> D: So, how do you compare your life here now in Uganda and the way it was in South Sudan?
> A: It is better than that one in South Sudan.
> D: What makes it much better here?
> A: Because I am safe here and I also go to school.
> D: So, in South Sudan, you were not going to school?
> A: Sometimes I would go and sometime stay because I did not have money for school fees.
> D: How would you imagine your life now in South Sudan?
> A: I would be married now, because of no money for school fees

As reflected in the insights above, for some children, their families' inability to pay their school fees in South Sudan presented the prospects of being school dropouts or at risk of being married off early. While this research process presented children with the opportunity to share their dreams, the children set learning through schooling as an important agenda

of their everyday lives. It thus became important, through this work, to acknowledge the place of formal schooling in helping children to assert and prepare for their career dreams and ambitions (Clark-Kazak, 2010).

The importance of formal schooling as seen from the children's lens stretched beyond the pause on learning and closure of known traditional learning spaces (schools). In exploring how children felt about being away from school and how this affected their dreams, one boy said, *"Yes, that dream is still intact. I know we shall go back to school."* Another opined, *"I know our dreams will come true. You see not only us are home, but everyone, even the nationals, they are not going to school."* We gather from both these reflections that almost a year after the suspension of school, the boys held on to their dreams. Although caught up within the uncertainty of when schools would reopen, they were assertive that someday, they would resume school. Furthermore, one boy further argued that even nationals (Ugandan children) are affected by the closure of schools due to the pandemic. This points to an assurance that whereas there is a delay in working towards their ambitions, this is not selective to them only as refugee children but had affected all children.

Dealing with uncertainties of prolonged lockdown of learning spaces

While sharing their thoughts on the continued lockdown measures and how the COVID-19 pandemic continued to affect their childhood experiences, children keenly reflected on moments that ushered in the closure of schools. One of the critical issues that emerged from their reflections was the anxiety, stress, and uncertainty that the pandemic created in them and their communities. For others, it bred fear which they equated to what they felt when they undertook their long

journeys from South Sudan to Uganda. When the government announced closure of schools, some of the children argued this move was in their best interests as it was aimed at safeguarding them from infection. It should be remembered that closure of schools in Uganda happened long before Uganda even registered its first case of COVID-19 infection on 21 March 2020 (Sserwanja et al., 2021). Almost eight months later, with schools still locked down, the children were irked by the continued confinement to home spaces. The exhaustion and stress that emerged from being restricted to home spaces had children query the government's intention of continued closure of their schools while other sectors such as public transport and marketplaces had been reopened. The easing of lockdown measures on most sectors while schools remained closed illustrates Cuevas-Parra's statement that "the COVID19 crisis has exacerbated unequal structures, which in turn has caused those in power to disregard children and young people's ability to participate in solutions to the pandemic" (2020, p. 2).

Negotiating aging and thoughts about repeating classes

Thorne opines that "children are said to 'grow up' or 'grow older', while at some point in their life course, the process of 'aging' sets in" (2004, p. 405). This argument is reflective of the dilemmas that alone and unaccompanied refugee children found themselves in amid a continued pause in their learning processes while they 'aged'. The children argued that, age wise, they no longer corresponded to the classes they were in at the time when schooling was halted. This argument was premised on a previous one that stemmed from their earlier lived migratory experiences where they highlighted the distortion of their class progression when they were eventually enrolled into Ugandan schools. As reflected by some of the children, they found themselves being allocated to

classes that were not commensurate to those they were in while in South Sudan. Some argued that they had been taken two classes lower than their original classes. While this was a reality they had adjusted to in the four or so years they had been in the Ugandan school system, they worried that, with almost a year of being at home, they risked experiencing this again. This concern, among other things, saw children express their desire to return to school learning spaces before the end of 2020.

The uncertainty surrounding which classes children would be placed in for the following academic year in 2021 was compounded by their physical growth and the inevitability of aging. As they argued for acknowledgment of their physical maturation, the looming question remained unanswered due to the unpredictability of school reopening amid the global pandemic. This uncertainty added a layer of complexity to the typical transition process between their academic levels, which only left them grappling. In contextualizing age, James et al are of the view that "age adds a distinctive ingredient to the theoretical mix by bringing in 'processes of temporality including biological growth and aging, and the continuing constitution and reconstitution of persons cognitively, emotionally, socially as they move through the life course" (1997 cited in Thorne, 2004, p. 405). Age *per se* is an ever-evolving segment of human life that humans have no control over. Drawing on James et al argument with regard to the children, it becomes important to understand the children's debates of their ages versus their classes were founded on what James et al highlight as the biological growth contributing to aging.

Unknown to them, a stronger wave of the delta corona virus would further delay the anticipated reopening of the 2021 academic year, causing them to lose another year. Schools eventually resumed at the start of 2022. To make up

for the over two years of interruption in continuous learning due to the lockdown of schools in Uganda (which has been reputed to have had the longest school lockdown in the world), the government directed all learners to be automatically promoted to the next class. This, however, only partially addressed the fears raised by the children in 2020. A lost class progression of two years was just 'rewarded' by skipping one class through automatic promotion. This therefore meant that children's fear of repeating the classes they were in during the initial year of lockdown were downplayed by an extended lockdown period in which skipping two classes could not be justified in their academic progression. Whilst some children had expressed how uncomfortable they were with increase in age and size but no class advancement, ultimately refugee children like other children (nationals) had to adapt their new attained physical (chronological) and social ages to their present classes.

Coping through friendships

With a diminishing hope of when they would resume learning in their school spaces, children recalled how the lockdown measures had severed their school friendships. This followed their observance of the restricted movements within and beyond the settlement. In their revelations, they argued they were confined to their home spaces and were not allowed to interact with spaces such as the playgrounds which were outer spaces from their homes. Some childhood scholars, for instance Meinert (2009), have revealed through their work with children that school spaces are fluid grounds for the children to form friendship groups and for their peer culture to thrive. Some research has explored and argued that peer relations between migrant and native children is crucial in helping the former adapt to the sociocultural context of their new migratory space (Bergnehr et al., 2020). In the wake of the

lockdown, the opportunity to cultivate such friendships ceased. In addition to this, some of them reiterated that friendships built at school had long been lost with the continued lockdown.

Not being able to access the larger groups of friends, some of the children revealed that they soon resorted to strengthening their friendships within their homesteads. The strengthening of these previously taken for granted relations – for instance among siblings and unrelated children who lived within the same homes – bred new peer cultures within homes. With limited external social interactions, children adapted by strengthening friendships within their own households. This led to the emergence of new peer cultures within homes, where siblings and unrelated children living together formed closer bonds. These strengthened relationships also became crucial for academic support, where older peers within the household assisted younger ones with their studies.

Skovdal et al (2009) emphasize the importance of friendships among children and young people in providing support during difficult times. The shifted focus to home-based friendships highlights how children leveraged these relationships for emotional and academic support during the lockdown. This shift also fostered a sense of continuity in their social lives, offering them stability and familiarity during uncertain times. For these forced migrant children, forming bonds within their new homes in these moments equally aided their cultural integration, providing a sense of belonging within the restrictive social environments with which they interacted. Additionally, the development of new peer cultures within these new spaces in households encouraged social interaction and play, contributing to children's overall social and emotional well-being. These adaptations underscored refugee children's resilience in adapting to adversity and finding solace and support within their immediate environment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

How children bridged their learning gaps through home schooling

Most of the alone children recalled that in the days after schools went into lockdown, they felt a need to continue studying while at home. For them, this was one way to keep up with the learning process. Others took homework from their teachers, while others felt that the initial school lockdown was supposed to be short lived, and they would be back in school sooner rather than later.

It was important to learn from the children the different learning mechanisms that they adopted and how they negotiated these as part of their everyday lives. Some of the children highlighted self-study learning approaches which they adopted differently within their home spaces. For instance, during a group discussion with boys 14-17 years, one of the older boys (17 years) argued that his way of engaging in self-study was using school textbooks: *When the government locked down schools, I had to revise some of the textbooks I had on my own. I would even borrow some from my friends here at home. I want to go back home to South Sudan after school so I must still revise my books even when the schools are closed. When I return to school, I will be ready for exams.* However, because he had a limited number, he could only self-study for a while. For other children, self-study involved what they called 'revising books.' This involved the children studying individually what they had already studied in class. They would use their classroom notes to guide their revision.

In further exploring these self-study approaches and others presented by the children, it is important to note that being promoted to the next class was one of the major motivations behind home self-studying. As was seen from three different follow up focus groups, the anticipation of a promotional examination when the schools reopened was

eminent. The children thus saw the need to be well prepared for when the moment came.

Yet another perspective to abridging learning uncertainty was the engagement of learning through the radio platforms. This learning platform was established by the Government of Uganda with the bid to accelerating home learning for children in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The practicality of this approach generated lots of debate across the country, even within the alone and unaccompanied childhoods. For some of the children who adapted this radio studying approach, they opined that it was so challenging having to listen in to a teacher on the radio whose delivery they could not comprehend on occasion. While the children appreciated the radio learning platform, their perspectives about it clearly questioned its effectiveness at reinforcing accelerated learning. Issues of comprehending the material that teachers shared with their learners on this platform emerged. For instance, the older girls (14 to 17 years) revealed that they found some of their teachers' styles of facilitating learning rather fast and this affected them immensely. Beyond this, the children argued that there was no interaction between them and their teachers. This one-sided learning approach, according to the children, actually went against the provision in their learning curriculum: *"It is a bit challenging because they say in our curriculum that they will put us in groups, and we discuss. But it is now difficult to read on our own. We find many things that we cannot even understand by ourselves".*

Through these shared reflections, it is evident that these alternative approaches were not entirely effective in addressing most of the children's learning priorities. However, it can be argued that these learning approaches were critical in helping children overcome some of their learning uncertainties. As highlighted in their experiences, these can

further be argued as giving children the satisfaction of working towards the realisation of their ambitions. The importance of unaccompanied refugee children's ambitions are have also been documented by Wallin and Ahlström (2005) whose work with refugee children revealed that they had ambitions and realistic view of their future. They further revealed that for most of these children, their future and ambition were premised on undertaking an education that would assure them of gainful employment and bright futures.

Reconstituting resilience through a child-centred perspective

Drawing on the children's perspectives on the notion of resilience, it is important to acknowledge its fluidity and varying interpretations, particularly in the context of forced migratory childhood during the COVID-19 pandemic. While it is often constructed from the lens of being able to bounce back from adversity (Boyden & Mann, 2005; Keles et al., 2018), the insights from this work with refugee children have revealed how resilience goes beyond mere survival and includes the aspects of children's adaptive strategies, emotional endurance, and social mechanisms. This heightens the fluidity of resilience in forced migratory childhoods by emphasising how refugee children adapt to continuously shifting circumstances within their everyday lives.

Furthermore, while the stresses of the prolonged lockdown put a strain on children's aspirations, it is important to highlight that self-study initiatives played a role in fostering childhood resilience. These efforts not only helped children stay connected to their aspirations but also alleviated the stress caused by prolonged confinement, uncertainty and the disruption of their education. Through children's reflections on lost class progression, their awareness of their appreciating

age with a stagnation in academic achievement, revealed that childhood resilience is not passive. From their perspectives and actions, it rather involves active negotiation of their present challenges with future hopes in mind. These reflections challenge the dominant perspectives that construct refugee children entirely as passive victims (Hart, 2014) of trauma in dire need of protection only, and instead highlight their agency in shaping and determining their narratives of their everyday lived experiences.

Another aspect to note is the sense in which children's resilience is both individually and collectively shaped by social relationships (Siriwardhana & Stewart, 2012), institutional responses (for example, lockdown guidelines), and the children's aspirations as well as strategies for learning. Collectively, the strengthening of domestic friendships within households and the creation of new peer cultures within the confines of home space during lockdown reflects the social dimension of resilience. Resilience here was seen from the lens of children's ability to form new support networks when external ones, such as school friendships, were inaccessible. This aspect exemplifies the importance of friendships and peer cultures in providing emotional and academic support during crises, and resonates with von Denkowski and Krause's (2024) argument that agency, vulnerability and resilience are mutually interacting processes within forced migratory childhoods.

Conclusion

In exploring refugee children's learning uncertainties in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda, I have explored how children perceived learning and delineated why the continuation of learning was important to the children even when schools were locked down for an extended period. Drawing on a child-centered methodological approach, my

work with alone and unaccompanied children challenged the dominant categorization of alone refugee children as a distinct humanitarian group that is entirely traumatized and vulnerable. It is such categorization that Lems et al. (2020) challenge and call for interventions that elevate unaccompanied minors beyond just being victims in need of protection. This paper through its methodological approach appreciated the need to have alone and unaccompanied children's voices heard on matters (learning in times of COVID-19) that are of concern to them in ways not done before in a Ugandan context. This resonates with Cuevas-Parra's thoughts "that learnings from the COVID-19 pandemic show it is pivotal to open up potential opportunities from meaningful engagement of children and young people in research" (2020, p. 2).

While some literature has revealed that children in forced migratory situations are compelled to forego their childhoods in their homes of origin (Menjívar & Perreira, 2019; Wernesjö, 2012), this paper has revealed how experiencing childhood is continuous for even children in adversity. The preflight migratory experiences of children in this study revealed that children battled with uncertainties of the continuation of their schooling and learning which they had been forced to abandon upon the emergence of the armed conflict in South Sudan. While at the same time, some of the children hung on to a hope of an education in Uganda, for others the hope was that it would be better than the one they had foregone in South Sudan. The strong will to be enrolled into a learning system in Uganda has been revealed in this paper as one that, even in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, offered hope and an anticipation of respected professions and a better outcome for their lives after going through the Ugandan education system.

In navigating their learning uncertainties, this paper has revealed that alone and unaccompanied children

demonstrated high levels of resilience by adopting several mechanisms such as self-study initiatives to keep their aspirations alive. As exemplified by Boyden and Mann (2005), children can bounce back from adversities that affect them in their childhood. Although they did not always find the alternative learning approaches the best means to facilitate and enhance the continuity of their learning, the children demonstrated a resilience towards them, taking advantage of them in preparation for the resumption of normal learning when they would interact with their friends and teachers physically.

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