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Original Article

Planning for the Accelerated Education Programme for Refugee Learners in Uganda: Stakeholders Experiences

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This study focused on Accelerated Education Programme (AEP) to develop planning and coordination models tailored to this kind of programme. The specific objective of the study was: To explore stakeholder's experiences in planning for AEP to enhance transition of refugee learners to secondary education. The study sought to explore how stakeholders experience planning and how planning influences transition of refugees learners to secondary education based on grounded theory design. Data collection was done through in-depth interviews and constant comparison analysis were done. The findings indicate that planning for AEPs was based on the four major aspects: planning for programme support, the beneficiaries, stakeholder engagement and harmonizing the curriculum. However, there is a gap in how planning is done which negatively influences transition of AEP learners to secondary education. The above factors need to be taken into consideration right from the initial stages of the programme. A Community-Focused Planning Model was developed from the study- a model which upholds the significance of community focused planning with emphasis on taking into consideration the socio-ecological environment/community in which the child lives while planning for AEP. The study therefore contributes to improved planning of AEPs while taking into consideration the needs of refugee learners, the environment in which they live and collaboratively engaging communities in the design of AEP. Thus, leading to improved learning outcomes and transition of refugee children to secondary education.

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INTRODUCTION

Uganda currently hosts over 1.5 million refugees with about 61% being children and youth of school going age 57% are out of school. Majority of these refugees (over 50%) are settled in the West Nile region. Due to continuous influx of refugee into Uganda since 2014, AEP has become the pathway for refugee learners to reintegrate into Ugandan schools to peruse their education further (ERP 2018). However, despite the government's efforts together with INGOs in supporting AEP programmes, planning and coordination of such programmes remains a challenge (Oddy 2019). Oddy asserts that there is need for planning and coordinated approach at all levels including school, community, district and national levels for AEP programmes to achieve their purpose and facilitate transition of refugee children to secondary education as well as to other education pathways. Vaynshtok (2016) recognizes that refugee children have experienced a lot of psychosocial challenges because of war and displacement which profoundly influence their learning and therefore, planning for AEP should be tailored to address the varying needs of refugee learners. Lack of planning as well as coordinated approach in implementation of these programmes has significant negative impact on refugee education and consequently transition (Oddy 2019).

Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs) are non-formal short- term targeted interventions to facilitate out-of-school children and youths reintegrating into formal education system (INEE EiE Term Bank, 2022). They are flexible, age-appropriate programmes that promote access to education in an accelerated time frame for disadvantaged groups specifically, for out-of-school, over-age children and youth excluded from education or who had their education interrupted due to crisis and conflict Menendez et al. (2016). AEPs are typically implemented to fill a critical gap in essential educational services to

crisis- and conflict-affected populations and ensure learners receive an appropriate and relevant education that is responsive to their life circumstances (Menendez et al., 2016).

Planning for AEP is essential in determining programme aims and resources needed, developing premises about the current environment, selecting the course of action, initiating activities required to transform plans into action, and evaluating the outcome of the programme (Fayol, 2016). Bridges (2017) recognizes that planning for refugee education programmes is not different from planning for any other educational programme, but what creates a particular challenge and difference is that refugee learners are a culturally diverse audience and emotionally traumatized group with unique learning needs. These cultural, psycho-social differences and unique learning needs influence practical decisions we make regarding planning, design, and the implementation of programs for this kind of learners (Bridges 2019).

Existing evidence indicates that through AEP, refugee children with unique learning needs can attain initial educational level that enables them to attend formal schooling, catch-up with educational system of their hosting countries and transition to higher educational pathways (Oddy, 2017). Studies of bridging programmes at university and tertiary level prior to commencing a formal award course were done by students of the hosting countries (Chauraya Efiritha et al., 2015; Warnell et al., 2016) but few if any were available on primary and secondary level. Providing AEPs at primary level significantly impacts transition (UNESCO, 2019). This study therefore sought to explore further how planning of AEPs for refugee learners is done with a purpose to generate models tailored to AEP for the transition of refugee learners to secondary education This study addresses the knowledge gap on how AEPs are planned, it will provide a benchmark to practitioners and policy makers on

which to base AEP programming and consequently enhancing transition of refugees learners to secondary education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Past scholars recognize that planning for refugee education is not different from that of planning for any other educational program. What creates a particular challenge and difference is the fact that refugee learners are a culturally different audience and emotionally traumatized group (Bridges, 2019). These cultural and psycho-social differences, influence practical decisions we make regarding planning and coordination, design, and implementation of programmes for this kind of learners (Bridges, 2019) and consistent with findings on the need for sustainable support for AEPs in terms of funding, material support and psychosocial support to address unique needs of these kinds of learners. Similarly, Menendez (2016) asserts that there is need for adequate funding for learners to complete full cycle of learning in crisis and conflict-affected environments, where AEPs are often seen as an appropriate response.

Furthermore, evidence on programme support places emphasis on planning for sustainability at the initial stages. Menendez (2016) proposes that when a program is transitional, an exit strategy to determine when and how activities should be scaled down should be part of the initial planning process. For more foundational programs, this process could be referred to as a transfer strategy or sustainability planning, where decisions should be outlined as to whom and how the project will be transferred. These strategies should be part of the initial planning for sustainable programme support and should be coordinated at all levels (Menendez, 2016).

Experiences of children, teachers, families, and education stakeholders on AEP, suggest that all stakeholders including international development partners and District Education officials emphasize the importance of coordination structures for AEP at all levels, adding that should be introduced and strengthened to ensure

coordinated approaches to implementation of the programmes (Oddy 2019). INGO community and all other education actors involved with AEPs need to work closely with the Ministry of Education and Sports to support the right of refugee children. This should include coordination of the programmes at the settlement level, joint monitoring visits to centres, improved support to primary schools hosting the programmes and establishment of formal ties with secondary schools and vocational training centres to support transition (Oddy, 2019).

Other studies further indicate that establishing community trust and understanding of peoples' fears and perceptions as well as leveraging community engagement are key to education response in crisis. This plays a very important role on how planning for education is done and shaping the community's long-term perceptions of the intended programme (Centre for Global Development 2020). Effectively responding to AEP needs requires working with local communities affected by the crisis and calls for a link between the AEP and the community and there's holistic involvement of community key stakeholders including learners, parents, community leaders into school affairs. The community should be part of SMCs and other Associations in order to increase the level of community ownership in education programmes such as the AEP. There should be clearly defined channels of communication in the community to affect this cause. There's therefore need for communication strategies. Multiple channels of communication should be used to reach all groups in the community, sharing information using sources judged credible by communities (Shelby et al., 2020 - Centre for Global Development). Communication forms the heart of project implementation (Taleb, Ismail, Wahab, Rani, & Amat, 2019). A clear communication mechanism should be in place to ensure effective coordination and collaboration with communities for the success of the programme (Magezi 2021).

A consortium engagement enables greater project success (Gerstenfeld et al., 2017) especially where

resources are minimal yet with a diversity of needs. Similarly, avoidance of duplication of efforts and leveraging on each other's capabilities are some of the benefits of using a project consortium implementation strategy (Kirinde, 2016; Preston, 2018); therefore, ignoring consortia engagements and perusing some certain types of projects alone is discouraged, as it can be fatal (Gerstenfeld et al., 2017). According to Magezi (2021), consortia engagements are not always successful, instead are faced with many challenges. There is lack of clear guidelines (Oso & Machuki, 2019). Similarly, many NGOs engaged in consortium projects in Uganda, are faced with ineffective project communication. Many consortium partners were communicating directly with the key stakeholders without using the agreed project communication channels and methods. Barr, Fat champs and Owens (2003) report, NGOs in Uganda fail to meet the required reporting standards by delaying their reporting duties. This is worsened by the use of poor project information distribution methods and tools. Such issues need to be planned for at the initial stages of the programme. Regarding the role of government, sustainability planning is emphasized, government should be engaged to ensure sustainability of AEP programme. Lack of sustainability planning influences the quality of the programme and thus affecting transition of learners.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Uganda in districts of Terego, Yumbe and Obongi in West Nile region in the schools hosting AEP Centres. The greatest majority of refugees including out of school children and youths are settled in West Nile Sub-Region. The Government of Uganda, UNHCR and International agencies are providing AEP to out-of-school children and youth to enable them to reintegrate into formal education (ERP, 2019). The study was conducted in three primary schools hosting AEP Programmes. One school was selected from each district - Terego, Yumbe and Obongi. The 3 sites selected were to increase the

data richness in terms of diversity in experiences in the planning processes of AEPs.

The study took a qualitative research approach that majorly relied on inductive inquiry and adopted aspects of grounded theory to facilitate the exploration of stakeholder experiences on planning processes for AEP. The stakeholders included project officers from organizations implementing AEPs, District Education officers and AEP teachers. Data collection and analysis took Qualitative procedures inclined to grounded theory principles. Consistent with grounded theory procedures data collection and analysis were done simultaneously while developing categories and subcategories from the data. As the study aimed to generate a planning model, theoretical sampling was adopted for the study. Thirty-four (34) participants were selected on the basis of their participation in development and implementation of AEPs as well as their experiences regarding planning for AEP. However, Purposive sampling was used at the beginning of data collection and at the end of data collection in order to select participants who can provide relevant information to the study.

In-depth interviews were conducted to understand how AEPs were developed. In the first round of interview, all participants were asked the same starting questions; how they came up with the AEP programme and how the AEP was developed. The subsequent questions that followed, therefore, involved probing the planning aspects. Interrogation was further extended to understand planning processes at national, district, community, and school levels. After 19 key informant interviews, there were no new insights and topics arising from the data for further probing, thus, a point of saturation was reached. Based on the categories that emerged from the data, 3 FGDs with AEP teachers of 6 participants each was conducted to confirm saturation. Another general FGD was conducted with all the 18 teachers to further affirm saturation.

Data Analysis

The study adopted constant comparison analysis. Data analysis involved a back-and-forth process which required a re-alignment of preliminary aspects of the study. Once data from the first interview was collected, transcription and first coding were done. This first step of the analysis involved Open coding where, with the help of qualitative data analysis software (NVivo version 13), initial codes were developed from the first interview done. Data from subsequent interviews was then compared with previous ones to form sub-categories and categories.

To ensure Reliability and validity of the research instrument, all participants were asked the same starting question in order to understand how AEP

is developed and conducted. And one general FGD was conducted that brought all the 3 FGDs together to further confirm the data. This FGD was purposely conducted to gain consensus and confirm the findings from in-depth interview and document analysis.

FINDINGS

The study findings on the experiences of stakeholders of the planning of AEP fell into three core categories as follows; planning for program support, planning for the beneficiaries who are majorly out-of-school children and youth and child mothers, planning for stakeholder engagement and planning for harmonization of the AEP curriculum.

Table 1: showing key categories emerging from selective coding.

Objective	Core Categories	Sub-categories (codes)	Description
Experiences of stakeholders on planning processes and procedures for implementation of Accelerated Education Programme (AEP).	Programme support	Psychosocial support	Factors that may influence the experiences of various stakeholders, importance of support to the implementation of AEPs education programs
		programme funding	
		Quality learning support- material support, teacher training and capacity development/continuous professional development, programme monitoring/supervision and evaluation	
Stakeholder engagement	Stakeholder engagement	structural support	Government/MoES, District Education officials Education professionals (Headteachers, teachers) The community – parents, community leaders, learners Donors Beneficiaries – learners
		Resources for transition	
		Menstrual hygiene support, provision of baby minors for child parents	
Curriculum	Curriculum	Non- formal education	
		Harmonized curriculum	
		Condensed curriculum	
Beneficiaries	Beneficiaries	Out of school children and youth	
		Child parents	

Planning for Program Support

Planning for program support emerged as crucial for the successfully implementing Accelerated Education Programs (AEPs). Considering the

kind of beneficiaries the program attracts, programme support takes various dimensions to address the various challenges AEP learners face and support must be planned right from initiation of the programme. The participant views indicate

support in terms of funding for the AEP programme, psychosocial support to address trauma associated with these kinds of learners, material and quality learning support. The District Education officer DI had this to say:

“There is a need for a continuation of support for an AEP program into secondary education as well. This can help these learners finish all their education levels, so some children don’t see why they should put energy when they may not go anywhere after. Limited funding affects continuation of the programme. AEP is meant to be for 3 cycles but in most cases, learners go through only one or two cycles”.

Participants F1 S1 further added that:

Now with no pay at all since AEP is completely free studying; not a single penny that they pay, this encouraged most of them; the dropouts to study and complete their primary level. Partners therefore need to support the programme. This is all possible with planning the support they need”.

Planning for the Psychosocial Support

Other kinds of support provided have also included psycho-social support from different development partners, The District officer D2, put it this way,

“Many learners in the program have got a lot of social emotional issues due to the warfare backgrounds they come from. Many child mothers are enrolled in the program, their challenges like having to take care of a child, support themselves and study must be considered during planning. The biggest percentage of AEP learners that are failing PLE are girls. Their psychosocial wellbeing needs to be considered during the planning and coordination of the program which requires engagement of the learners themselves.”

The DEO D1 also stressed the importance of psychosocial sessions saying:

“Things like psychosocial sessions have helped these learners not to feel out of place, and hence they stay in school, study and complete their studies even to be able to transition to secondary or vocational training where they can get skills for employment.”

However, attendance is still a challenge despite the psychosocial sessions to help learners, as the Education Officer, W1, stressed:

“We have a psychosocial partner, which is TPO. The organization supports refugees have access to psychosocial support, and so whenever we encountered any challenges of those that may need the support, we refer TPO to support them. But of course, what we provide is basic psychosocial support that a teacher is able to offer. However, there is no targeted psychosocial support to assess learners’ willingness or motivation to enrol into the program, because even the partners implementing AEP are struggling with enrolment vis-a-vie attendance.

Planning for the Material and Quality Learning Support

Study materials need to be planned to ensure quality learning experiences for pupils. The district officer D3 added that:

“We have partners like Save the Children, Windle International, Plan International and World Vision who give support with reading materials. Save the Children, and Windle International have designed some learning materials for the learners and teachers to use. They have also constructed some classrooms and provided some necessary basic scholastic materials to some schools. They have also given some support under WASH.”

The above participant views indicate the paramount importance of programme support for AEP learners to cater for varying needs of AEP learners.

Planning for Stakeholder Engagement

Participant perceptions below indicate the key role played by implementing partners in implementing AEPs and how they influence planning processes. Based on findings, the major stakeholders involved in planning and implementing AEP programme are the INGOs, commonly referred to as ‘Implementing partners’ and donors who mainly provide funds for AEP. The District Education Officer Y noted that:

“In the aspect of planning, AEP is a top-down model in the sense that these ideas and activities are thought of by implementing partners through generating proposals”.

Further adding that this support is also known to the district:

“Here there is Save the Children, as a development partner their role I see is centred in looking for funds to undertake this project because they are the ones running this project and funding partly under Education Can’t Wait Funding Project but also, they recruit through these funds the teachers who are trained to undertake this curriculum and they give them capacity building in terms of CPDs that is Continuous Profession development.

The findings further indicate the need for all partners to be engaged in the planning process for AEPs. District officer D3 put it that:

“When the AEP project came, they consulted both with OPM in charge and the district and we were able to find which schools they were supposed to have this program running in; like for Save the Children they have been implementing this in seven schools whereas actually for us we have seen as council the population of the required age group is more and at the same time in these schools the number of children that enrol at the school going age are great so that is where we directed them to implement”.

Other views indicated the need for all partners to be engaged in to enhance collaboration and

harmony between the district, the implementing partners and the school. Participant W4 noted that:

“Windle also collaborates with partners to carryout joint monitoring of the school programs. This harmony in the school environment ensures the smooth operation of the program. Thus, enabling learners to get any assistance from all teachers. There are coordination meetings amongst partners so as to share any challenges, propose solutions and implement activities together and avoid any collusions”.

The implementing partners commit to various roles such as Windle international does,

“Basically, as an organization we support through offering age group statistics to implementing partners to help in their planning. Such as school enrolments compared to the numbers of learners that are out of school. This helps in zoning of the areas and setup of centres where they are most needed. Also, to avoid collusion, we have partner meetings that harmonize the activities of each partner and areas of operation. Save the Children and Norwegian Refugee Council run their own AEP centres and The VBO runs the Teaching at the Right Level program.”

To supervise implementing partners, UNHCR oversees them, as the Education officer U1 stated:

“Our role as UNHCR is coordination and supervision not directly handling any programs. Implementation is done by other partners and donors. We ensure there is a full education package given without one counteracting another, we have Finn Church Aid, World Vision, NRC, and Save the Children. We assigned each partner specific areas in specific zones for example we would assign them Primary schools because these AEP programs are run in schools.”

Other respondents argued that: planning for AEP needs involvement of all stakeholders considering the various challenges AEP learners face. The DEO D2, put it this way:

“Many learners in the program have got a lot of social emotional issues due to the warfare backgrounds they come from. Many child mothers are enrolled in the program, their challenges like having to take care of a child, support themselves and also study has to be put into consideration during planning. The biggest percentage of AEP learners that are failing PLE are girls. Their psychosocial wellbeing needs to be considered during the planning and coordination of the program which requires engagement of the learners themselves.”

The Education Officer N1” also retaliated that:

“All partners have their own specific components they perform which contribute to the overall development of these children in the AEP.”

Also adding,

“For the ECW, several partners were involved such as Windle International, Save the Children, FCA. As well ECHO consortium, involves many partners contributing to the same project but addressing specific components of the project based on their expertise. ECHO had 5 partners working in different areas under the same project such as Save the Children, War Child Holland, Finn Church Aid and Humanity and Inclusion which does a lot of inclusive education.”

Based on participant views, engagement of all the stakeholders at the initial stages of planning and all throughout programme implementation is key for proper planning of activities at different levels of the hierarchy. Each of the stakeholders plays a great role in the planning process thus, holistically, and comprehensively contributing to the purpose of the AEP programme.

Planning for Beneficiaries Especially Out of School Children

The kind of beneficiaries targeted by the AEP programme and how the planning processes need to take into consideration this kind of learners

while tailoring the plans to cater for their needs. Participants’ quotes below tell us that given the nature of the beneficiaries targeted and enrolled to the AEP programme, planning for the AEP learners needs to go beyond the classroom and beyond merely meeting educational needs of learners. Planning processes need to take a more comprehensive approach to cater for these kinds of learners.

AEP targets disadvantaged learners from the ages of 10 to 18, who may have missed out on a chance to complete their primary education. The District Education officer D3 had this to say; “The program is planned out as a catch-up scheme targeting those learners that dropped out of school due to various reasons but are still within a school going age group”. The Education Officer U1 also added, “Children that are overgrown for their classes are the direct beneficiaries of catch-up programs such as the AEP”. According to participant S1:

“AEP falls under the non-formal education system and its aim is to provide a flexible learning opportunity that is age-appropriate for out of school children who miss out on their academic career for various reasons and are already overgrown the age requirements for lower primary, making it difficult for them to join primary...”

To reiterate this, the program also caters for child parents to enrol and continue with their studies, Participant F2 stated as follows:

“Even more vulnerable learners like child mother, they are being encouraged to enrol if they had dropped out due to pregnancy. We actually encourage them to join regardless of the age of the child even if they are like months, we have strategies of how to handle those children to find more support like working with community structures. We have these learners get to school, as well as their children get supported. This is all possible with planning the support they need”.

Harmonization and Approval of Curriculum

The AEP curriculum is condensed and accelerated and harmonized with the mainstream curriculum to ensure transition of learners to formal education in the host country.

The Education Officer D3 emphasized the government's take about the program:

“National Curriculum Development Centre has approved this curriculum and has informed UNEB about the type of curriculum being undertaken otherwise when UNEB is registering they usually have a condition of seeing that the learner is supposed to have covered seven years in primary before such a learner can be registered but these other ones are registered and the UNEB is actually informed that candidates number this to this are learners who have undertaken primary education in three years through the Accelerated Learning Education curriculum”.

And since the program considers majorly refugee children that are older for their classes, many of whom being child parents or family child heads, the program is designed to be flexible and which planning processes and procedures should take into consideration.

This curriculum was harmonized with the mainstream primary section curriculum, and this also enables transition. The Headteacher C had this to say:

“The AEP syllabus moves together with the mainstream school program, but the curriculum of the AEP differs a bit. AEP is designed in levels that cover only 3 years that is level 1 combining primary 1, 2, & 3, level 2 combines primary 4, & 5 and then level 3 combines P. 6 & P. 7 so their curriculum is compressed, the lessons are planned out in such a way that for level 1, textbooks used for teaching P. 1, 2, & 3 are used for that lesson plan. And so on with other levels.”

Education officer S1, adds that: the curriculum is also flexible to allow for learners who may be

absent to be catered for through remedial lessons. And some of the learners especially child mothers prefer to come to school in the afternoon after finishing some roles, but other learners like to come in the morning.

“Teachers normally start at 8 am but when learners come at different intervals, there is always that catch-up for those learners, they aren't left out, so learners that come in the morning will be attended to as well those that come in the afternoon, the teachers would spare some time at the end of the day for catch up for those that turned up at different intervals.”

The issue of language also emerged as an obstacle to effective learning and consequently transition. District Education officer Y1 further put it that:

“The issue of language is a big challenge, these children struggle to understand English, this is what makes them to fail and cannot transition to Secondary school, some we hire translators, but this delays lessons. It would be good if the programme is extended for four years so that they only concentrate on language for the first year”.

Given the importance of pupils transitioning to formal institutions, the need to ensure harmonization and approval of the non-formal curriculum is vital.

DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

From the analysis and framework constructed, program support was one of the core categories in the implementation of the Accelerated Education Programs. Further, bridges as cited by Neuman (2020) asserts that considering the kind of beneficiaries the program attracts, programme support needs to take various dimensions to address the various challenges AEP learners face. The kind of support needed should be comprehensive and tailored to address the unique learning needs of refugee learners, the needs should be identified and planned right from the initial stages of the programme. The findings

indicate the need for support in 3 key areas which include 1) psychosocial support 2) Quality Learning support and Material support. Relatedly, in a study conducted by Menendez (2016) on review of literature for AEPs in contexts, Menendez (2016) asserts that in war and conflict-affected contexts, even though AEP is seen as a relevant response for out of school children, there is need for adequate funding for learners to complete full cycle of learning. Adequate funding is therefore a key factor emerging from this study to support transition of learners. Planning for AEPs should critically look at how the programme will be funded throughout the entire AEP cycle.

The findings indicate that Planning for AEPs should involve creating an environment where children who are psychosocially challenged are supported to return to normalcy. AEPs should plan for structured social activities to reduce the amount of stress and enhance mental wellbeing. This is line with Jordan et al. (2013) assertion that children are most resilient when they feel good in their bodies and when supported by teachers in a caring atmosphere. Planning AEPs requires that aspects of Psychosocial well-being are well integrated at the initial stage of programme design. While the study indicates some level of planning for PSS, this is done at a lower level of the pyramid and with very little reach. More comprehensive planning therefore needs to be considered to cater for all levels as pointed out in the IACS Pyramid ((IASC 2007).

On the quality learning support, the study found that AEP implementing partners (INGOs) are supporting AEP programme through teacher capacity development, distribution of teaching-learning materials and monitoring and evaluation of AEP activities to ensure quality of the programme. This is being done in a consortium approach where each partner (INGO) has been allocated particular activities to implement to ensure complementary of the different activities. This resonates with Menendez et al. (2016) argument that in situations of crisis and conflict, governments and relevant ministries may be in a

nascent stage or may lack capacity (financial and otherwise) to effectively manage and operate education systems. In situations with large refugee populations, such as in the case of Uganda, the additional demand may stretch already limited resources within the host country. In the case of Uganda, the additional demand may stretch already limited resources within the host country's government. In these instances, aid agencies often take responsibility for infrastructure, teacher training and salaries. Menendez (2016) further asserts that international donors and bilateral international donors often fund these aid agencies and historically work together with the government (or take on the role of the government). This requires taking a consortium approach to resource fundraising and implementation of education programmes. However, consortium activities require prior and careful planning (Bozena, 2016). Further, evidence indicates that, for consortium engagements to be considered successful, the key performance indicator of effective project communication must be met (Association for Collaborative Leadership, 2020). This means that all relevant stakeholders are effectively engaged at all levels right from the initial stages of the programme and throughout the implementation period. Therefore, planning for consortium engagement requires engagement of all partners with each partner clearly understanding their contribution in the consortium which requires a more collaborative engagement.

The findings further indicate that there's limited funding for the programme which affects quality implementation of AEP, sometimes funds run out before learners complete the full cycle which affects their transition to secondary education. Besides the government of Uganda has not financially committed to AEP programme. Similarly, Studies from other countries on AEP (such as SSIRI in South Sudan) indicate that the government ministry did not feel that it could adequately implement the program. Although the ministry wanted it to continue, it appears the program stopped when funding ceased. In Liberia,

multiple INGOs and agencies implementing AEPs were taken by surprise when authorities announced the closure of the initiative (with no viable exit strategy); as a result, the programs simply stopped (Manda, 2011). The few that remained in operation (IBIS, USAID, and UNICEF 2011) did not outline an exit strategy or transfer. Such issues negatively affected the implementation of the programme. And taking lessons from such countries coupled with participant experiences above, it is paramount that government involvement is streamlined from the initiation stage of the programme. This resonates with findings from the study, which indicate the role of teachers in quality implementation, which given the role played by teachers in AEP programme, there is need to engage them at all stages of the programme. The teachers have multiple roles to play ranging from learner mobilization, engagement with the community, delivery of teaching and learning as well as monitoring and assessment of learner progress and participating in training and continuous professional development courses. Relatedly, using the transition intervention framework of Kohler and Field (2003) the findings of this study support the importance of learner-oriented planning and interventions tailored to improving outcomes that contribute to transition of refugee learners.

The concept of community engagement that came out strongly as a key feature to ensuring successful implementation of AEP involves the refugee welfare committees as crucial factor. Refugee Welfare committees are responsible for refugee affairs including social service delivery for refugees at settlement/community level. The role for refugee welfare committees was emphasized. The findings on community engagement indicate the fundamental role of refugee Community leaders in making decisions affecting their people at grassroots. Involving community leaders in the planning process is key for the success of AEPs. Community members believe in their leaders and look up to them to make decisions on issues affecting them as individuals and the community including issues

relating to education. Available evidence on the importance of community engagement in planning for AEPs recommends to policy makers and practitioners the need for communication and collaboration at all levels throughout the course of implementation (Centre for Global Development, 2020). A clear communication mechanism should be in place to ensure effective coordination and collaboration for the success of the programme (Magezi, 2021). Communication forms the heart of project implementation (Taleb, Ismail, Wahab, Rani, & Amat, 2019). Carvalho et al. (2020) further emphasizes the value of building community trust for productive engagement of communities and in designing and implementation of effective education plans. Further recommending that policymakers should prioritize community engagement early to shape perceptions of risk and improve responses to government policy. Share clear, credible, and consistent messaging through multiple channels to reach all groups and to match local resources and norms.

Looking at the harmonized and condensed curriculum, a close examination of AEP and as reflected from the findings of the study, indicate some learners struggle with English as a language of instruction, one District Education officer noted:

“The issue of language is a big challenge, these children struggle to understand English, this even what makes them to fail and cannot transition to Secondary school, sometimes we hire translators, but this delays lessons. It would be good if the programme is extended for four years so that they only concentrate on language bridging for the first year”.

There is need to enhance the AEP curriculum to include language bridging. The issue of language came out strongly as a key factor affecting effective delivery of the AEP curriculum. In the study conducted by British Council on Language use in Refugee settlements in Uganda, Hicks and Maina, (2018) assert that there is a multiplicity of home languages, with 19 different languages used by significant numbers of refugees and up to a

third of refugee children had previously learnt in a language different to the one they are using in their Ugandan school. Not surprisingly, almost a third of the teachers were unable to speak any language used by the refugees and thus were unable to adopt any bilingual approaches. Lee (2019) argues that refugee learners who do not understand the language of instruction of their hosting country will find it hard to fit in the education system and this is likely to result to poor learning outcomes, thus, affecting their transition.

Relatedly, in the research on learners with interrupted formal education, Kanu (2008) asserts that there is a relationship between language, literacy proficiency and academic achievement. Rossiter and Dewing (2012) further highlight why providing English as a second language is challenging for refugee learners. This shows that when children lack a strong foundation in reading, they find it difficult to transition. For refugee learners, learning to read should be a continuous process until they are able to transition from learning to read' to 'reading to learn'. Unfortunately, this is not usually the case with AEP programmes. There's no special arrangement for AEP learners to develop proficiency in reading. This study found out that there were no language-bridging programmes specifically targeting AEP learners. The AEP learners, upon enrolling in their host schools are faced with daunting challenges of developing language proficiency, reading proficiency, and understanding the subject matter at the same time. This affects their learning and transition and therefore, while planning for such learners, curriculum considerations ought to be made to cater for such issues (Kanu 2012).

On flexibility in AEP curriculum, teachers particularly indicated that during the onset of AEP programme, the learners for instance used to have their lessons in the afternoons but this was changed to morning as the programme progressed. While some AEP learners prefer to have their lessons in the mornings, others especially child parents prefer to have their lessons in the afternoons considering the multiple

responsibilities. The teachers indicate that some learners especially the child parents find it hard adjusting to the programme given extra responsibilities they have. Flexibility in this case would mean that learners would be provided with the opportunity to choose a study time most appropriate for them given that some of them are parents and have other roles to play to fend for their families. Child mothers have no child attendants to take care of their children as they attend lessons. Therefore, requires that planning for AEP programme is comprehensively done to address curriculum challenges that affect beneficiaries and consequently their progress and transition to secondary education.

This finding suggests that students with unique learning needs such as refugee learners would benefit more from integrated programmes where cognitive and meta-cognitive strategy instruction (i.e., learning how to learn) are integrated with practical skills as well as from attention paid to development of students' interests and talents. Other scholars (e.g., Carter & Lunsford, 2005; Houchin, 2001; Repetto, 2003; Shillington & Neubert, 2004; Thomas, Nathanson, Baker, & Tamura, 2002), argue that vocational training including work experiences in real jobs, particularly work experiences that focus on socialization with co-workers, and access to adult role models and mentors in meaningful work roles would also be useful to learners with adult responsibilities. Furthermore, they add support for a focus on career planning and development that encompasses and builds on specific job skills (Chadsey-Rusch, 2003). Considering that some of AEP learners are Child parents with a lot of responsibilities integrating such skills would be helpful in coping in their new role as parents but as also for income generation support their families.

This study develops a community- focused planning model that places emphasis on the unique individual needs as well as larger community needs of refugee/AEP learners and the centrality of engaging the entire community in planning for these needs while designing

education programmes. Planning for Children and adolescent's optimal development and well-being are contingent upon interacting biological and environmental/contextual factors including family, community, sociocultural, economic, political, and legal influences, and the services and structures that surround them, all affecting their development through the life course. These factors have been articulated through various frameworks – child development theories, social ecological models and studies of children's resilience in the face of adversity – all of which emphasize that children, adolescents and families bring their own skills, assets and resources for coping with challenges.

The social ecological model illustrates the importance of networks of people and structures that surround a child or adolescent, safeguarding their well-being and sense of agency, and supporting their optimal development. This therefore draws attention to the importance of taking such factors into consideration while designing programmes for refugee learners and youth. Based on this model Education serves a critical role in establishing (and re-establishing) safety and structure in the lives of primary school aged children, and offers a mechanism that supports their resilience, coping and overall mental health and psychosocial well-being (Lund et al., 2018). It's thus, critical that education programmes are tailored to cater for such factors. Organized psychosocial activities further provide opportunities for creativity, play and recovery from trauma and stressful events. Participation and engagement, such as peer support activities, can engage older children and adolescents in discussion on relevant issues, giving them an opportunity to voice their concerns and ideas which can help them realize their own agency through their contributions to recovery efforts in their communities (Lund et al., 2018).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

This research emphasizes the importance of Community- Focussed Planning for realization of

transition of refugee AEP learners to secondary education. The study develops a planning model for AEP, pointing out the significance of looking beyond academic needs of AEP learners to include the family and community in which the learner lives. Engagement of community leaders and the learners themselves in planning for educational needs of their communities is key. And considering the nature of beneficiaries targeted by this programme who are majorly child parents and out of school children, it's important that plans are comprehensive and tailored to address the unique needs of this lot of learners. And for sustainability of the programme, emphasis is placed on engagement of all key stakeholders at all levels. The Community-Focused Planning Model provides a benchmark for AEP programming which is scalable across similar contexts.

Recommendations

There is need for AEP practitioners to engage communities in planning for their educational needs, ensuring that the voices of children and youth (AEP learners) are heard as well as the larger community and ensuring that educational programmes are tailored to address these needs. Policy makers and practitioners should use Community-focused model of planning arising from this study as a benchmark for planning for reintegration of out- of school children and youth to formal education.

Considering the nature of refugee learners and AEP learners in particular, AEP curriculum ought to be adjusted and more flexible to include a year of language acquisition and more integrated to include practical skills to provide opportunities to child parents for income generation. Education programmes should play a critical role in establishing (and re-establishing) safety and structure for children who have undergone traumatic experiences, and offer a mechanism that supports their resilience, coping and overall mental health and psychosocial well-being.

Sustainability planning should be integrated at the initial stages programme. The success of AEP is

dependent on availability of adequate funding and therefore calls for political commitment and financial support for AEPs. This will reduce on over dependence on INGOs for the implementation of AEP. It is important to consider institutionalizing AEP for replication in non-refugee settings in Uganda. More research on Planning for AEP could be conducted in a non-refugee context to ascertain and compare the implementation dynamics across contexts. This will inform adoption of more cost effective and scalable model(s).

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