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By Valentina Hiegemann

Introduction

One of the many challenges encountered by adult refugees in Egypt is the lack of access to public educational programmes and vocational training. Illiteracy, language barriers and lack of necessary skills create further obstacles among adults as they attempt to navigate an already difficult job market (Refuge Egypt 2008). There are limited opportunities available to refugees who wish to continue their education. Vocational training is scarce, university tuition fees for foreigners are very high, and often refugees lack proper documentation or proof of previous education. Moreover, even when refugees are able to continue their studies, they face many challenges that impede their learning and performance.

There are several organisations in Cairo which provide language classes to adult refugees as an alternative. Refuge Egypt is a Christian aid organisation which serves asylum seekers and refugees in Cairo and offers an adult education programme consisting of bi-weekly English evening classes taught by volunteer instructors. In order to enrol in the programme, refugees must show proof of their UN card, pay a £20 fee for the first course, and take a placement test. As of February 2012, there were forty-five students primarily from Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. During the summer, the enrolment rate reaches around 160 students, including refugees from Iraq, Nigeria, Congo and Central African Republic.

This study aims to analyse how different factors and stressors influence student performance in the adult education programme of Refuge Egypt and to evaluate the impact of English classes on the lives of refugees. Students were examined based on how factors and stressors, such as children, job-related obstacles, financial situation, discrimination and fear of harassment, play a role in their learning process. The impact of the programme was measured in terms of how attending classes affect the empowerment, motivation and livelihood of refugees. In order to protect the identity of those who participated, only their first names were included, with their consent. Existing data about the general obstacles faced by refugees in Cairo was analysed and then compared to the stressors that affect the students' performance in class. The findings about the impact of the programme were based on the perspectives of the students about how learning English influenced their lives.

Egypt has made reservations to significant articles of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Convention) that directly affect the lives of refugees. In particular, the articles with the greatest impact are Article 22, which states that refugees must obtain the same treatment as nationals with respect to elementary education, and Article 24 on employment. Therefore, for many matters, refugees are treated as foreigners and are often subjected to similar laws. As a result, they encounter many obstacles while living in Egypt and trying to integrate into society.

Research Findings

Factors and Stressors

Students in the adult education programme face challenges that coincide with many of the obstacles faced by refugees in Egypt more broadly, which I discuss below. These stressors influence their learning process.

Children

As a result of Egypt's reservations to Article 22 of the 1951 Refugee Convention on the access to free primary education, parents have difficulties finding educational alternatives for their children. Basic education for refugee children is often provided by 'refugee schools' such as African Hope Learning Center in Cairo, a private school that utilises the Sudanese curriculum, allowing refugees to receive diplomas that are recognised in Sudan. Most of the teachers are not certified and many are refugees who volunteer their time. Many children do not have the option of attending these special schools because their parents cannot afford the tuition and are therefore forced to stay at home. Consequently, parents who are employed need to find somebody to take care of their child while they are out at work. Similarly, the cost of such a service prevents some adults from attending classes.

Job-related Obstacles

Refugees often lack the opportunity to obtain a legal job in Egypt. Due to the reservation on the right to work by the Egyptian government, the requirements to obtain a work permit are strict and include employer sponsorship, non-competition with nationals, legal status and so on. Another factor that adds to the challenge of obtaining jobs is the unemployment of nationals. With such a high unemployment rate among Egyptians, it becomes even more difficult for refugees to find jobs. 'There are no jobs for all refugees', commented Buque, bookkeeper of Refuge Egypt and coordinator of the education programme. Since he cannot obtain a legal job in Cairo, he works full-time as a volunteer in the organisation and also cleans houses for Egyptians on the weekends to support his wife and five children. Yonas, a 23-year-old Eritrean student, said that although he enjoys attending classes, it is very difficult for him to set aside the frustration of being unemployed. Those who are employed also find it difficult to focus in class because many of their informal jobs often require strenuous physical work. For example, Habiba, a 23-year-old student from Eritrea works as a housekeeper four times a week and sometimes cleans up to four houses in one day. She commented that on certain days she arrives to class feeling very tired and sleepy. Other students who are employed often miss class because they have to work at night or wake up very early the morning after class. It is also challenging for students who are manual labourers to find time and energy to do their homework or read materials that would enhance their learning of the language.

Financial Situation

Many refugees in Cairo are unable to provide for themselves and their families financially. Because they live in an urban setting they must pay rent, utilities, transportation, and other

services. 'People think that because I work I am self-reliant, but not at all. It is never enough money,' said Buque. There are organisations that offer financial assistance. For example, Caritas provides monthly allowances to refugees recognised by UNHCR depending on the need and size of the family. The majority of healthy, single individuals are not entitled to allowances (The American University in Cairo n.d.). Yonas, the 23-year-old Eritrean student, occasionally feels guilty for attending classes regularly: 'My family in Eritrea says I am losing my time by coming to class'. His family argues that because he is unemployed and not receiving an allowance, he should not be doing things that will not alleviate his current economic situation. In class, he often thinks about how he is going to pay his bills and questions whether he should be looking for a way to make a living. However, his concerns do not stop him from attending classes four times a week.

Discrimination and Fear of Harassment

Often host states and nationals perceive refugees as 'illegal immigrants' who are poor and unable to contribute positively to their new society. On many occasions, nationals feel threatened by these newcomers and fear that they might 'steal' jobs and opportunities from them. In Cairo, there is a general negative public opinion about refugees. Some assume that they are likely to engage in illicit activities, such as joining gangs, stealing, selling drugs and prostitution. African refugees in particular are often discriminated against in Egypt because of their skin colour, regardless of their nationality. 'I hear all the time about African refugees being called names in the streets', said Habiba. She argues that when somebody is harassed, the entire community knows about it because most of them know each other. This causes fear to spread among the members of the community, which makes them isolate themselves even further from their host society. This fear of harassment affects student performance because it causes them to miss class and fall behind in their learning. Samuel, a 51-year-old student from Darfur, is often absent because people harass him and call him offensive names on the public bus. Another student occasionally misses classes whenever she hears that somebody in her community was harassed. 'I am afraid to go back home and walk alone at night,' says Habiba, who has to walk thirty minutes to her home after her English class finishes at eight in the evening.

Individual Impact

The overall impact of the English classes was assessed based on the students' opinions about how learning English influenced their lives.

Empowerment

According to Buque, the coordinator of the programme, learning English provides refugees with an important tool 'so that they have something in their hands when they go back home or go to another country'. In addition, he argued that, due to the limited job opportunities in Cairo, learning English might increase their chances of finding employment. The three students interviewed expressed that learning English gave them an essential skill to be used when they resettle to another country. Yonas is an Eritrean student who is hoping to be resettled to Canada and thus wants to become fluent in the language. Many students do not have the opportunity to continue their studies or enrol in universities. As a result, learning

English is the only significant skill they are able to acquire in Egypt. Habiba, who cannot afford the high university tuition fees, commented that learning English made her feel like she was obtaining something useful for her future.

Motivation

Two Eritrean students commented that learning English gave them ‘something to look forward to’. Yonas mentioned that he enjoyed coming to class because it is a relaxed environment where he can be a ‘regular student’ and not a refugee. Although being unemployed or having an undesirable job is a factor of stress that negatively affects the students’ performance in class, it is one of the most significant motivators. Samuel, the 51-year-old student from Darfur who works as a taxi driver believes that learning English will create more opportunities for employment. Since he started attending classes, he has more hope that a new language will open more doors in the future.

Livelihood

Due to the restrictions that refugees encounter in Egypt, learning English does not have a significant impact on their livelihood. The two Eritrean students believe that learning English will better their lives only if they repatriate or resettle to another country. ‘Even if I learn English perfectly I will not find a job that pays me enough’, said Yonas. Even if refugees are highly skilled, the majority has to rely on informal sector jobs because they lack the required work permits. As a result, learning English will most likely better the lives of individuals if they move to a country where there are fewer obstacles and more opportunities to apply their skills.

Conclusions

We are able to observe how various factors and stressors, such as children, job-related obstacles, financial situation, discrimination and fear of harassment negatively affect the performance of refugee students in this English programme. Namely, they affect student attendance, as well as their focus in class and their overall learning process.

Since these factors reflect the challenges that refugees in general face in Egypt, we can conclude that the programme would be more beneficial to the students if there were fewer restrictions and obstacles in their host country; for example, if refugees were able to obtain lawful employment, enrol in universities or had access to education for their children. One recommendation that may increase adult refugee student performance is to provide additional English classes during daytime. This could lessen the students’ fear of harassment, especially women, who feel unsafe walking alone at night. Moreover, it could prevent students who occasionally work in the evenings to miss class and fall behind in their learning. Also, unemployed parents whose children are enrolled in school could attend the classes while not having to worry about finding someone to care for their children in the evenings.

With regard to the overall impact of the programme, we can conclude that the English classes have the most significant influence in empowering and motivating the students, as

the programme did not have a strong influence in bettering their livelihoods, due to a lack of job opportunities. Since many of them have hopes of resettlement, learning English will potentially become useful if and when they move to another country. The programme, however, offers an alternative for refugees to learn a new skill. Due to the lack of public educational and vocational opportunities, English classes provide a useful tool that could better their lives when they repatriate or are resettled.

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