

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AMONG PUPIL REFUGEES IN RWAMWANJA REFUGEE SETTLEMENT IN KAMWENGE DISTRICT; A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY.

Nafutari Tuhaisomwe*¹, Benon Muhumuza¹, Simon Peter Ecodu¹, Charles Okidi²

¹Bishop Stuart University, Mbarara, Department of Social Work and Social Administration.

²Bishop Stuart University, Mbarara, Department of Religious Education Studies.

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Abstract

Introduction

The study aimed to investigate the correlation between psychological factors and school attendance among primary school-going refugee pupils in the Rwamwanja refugee settlement, Kamwenge District.

Methodology

A cross-sectional study involving 205 respondents assessed the impact of psychological factors like depression, anxiety, and stress on school attendance using the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress method.

Results

The response rate for the survey was 95.1%, with 195 out of 205 surveys completed, surpassing the recommended 70% threshold for data collection (Amin, 2006). A majority of the survey respondents were female (56%), and most of them (67%) fell within the 13-15 age group. Participants hailed from four different countries, with the Democratic Republic of Congo being the most represented (45%), followed by Rwanda (41%), Burundi (8%), and South Sudan (7%). The analysis of psychological factors indicated average scores of 6.7 for depression, 5.9 for anxiety, and 6.2 for stress, with slight variations between those who attended low and high school.

The data analysis indicated a strong connection between depression and school attendance, as higher depression scores were correlated with increased attendance (cOR = 1.57, 95% CI = 1.31–1.88, p<0.001). Conversely, anxiety and stress did not exhibit a notable correlation with attendance. Through multivariate regression analysis, accounting for sociodemographic variables such as age, sex, and country of origin, it was confirmed that depression remained significantly linked to school attendance (aOR = 1.59, 95% CI = 1.33–1.91, p<0.001), while anxiety and stress still demonstrated no significant impact.

Conclusion

The study concluded that psychological factors are crucial in influencing school attendance among refugee pupils, while socio-demographic factors were insignificant.

Recommendations

The study suggests that interventions focusing on psychological support and addressing socio-economic barriers can improve school attendance among refugee pupils, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to address their educational needs.

Keywords: School attendance, Refugee pupils, psychological factors, Depression, Anxiety, and Stress.

Submitted: 2024-08-01 **Accepted:** 2024-08-28

Corresponding Author: Nafutari Tuhaisomwe*

Email: tuhaisomwenafutari@gmail.com

Bishop Stuart University, Mbarara, Department of Social Work and Social Administration.

Introduction

The world has witnessed a sharp increase in the number of people forcibly displaced people in the last decade estimated at 103 million, and over 32.5 million refugees (Aysazci-Cakar et al., 2022), Out of this, over 4.5 million are in East Africa (WFP East Africa: 2021). In Africa, Uganda stands as the biggest host country for refugees, accommodating more than 1.5 million refugees and asylum seekers (ACAPS, n.d 2024.) settled in different refugee camps including Rwamwanja which is a home to over

70,000 refugees (Mafaranga, 2012). In Rwamwanja, refugees have benefited from the refugee policy of 2006 where they have free access to Education services where all adolescents are expected to regularly attend school, land for farming, and trade in various enterprises thus improving their welfare and self-reliance(Bohnet & Schmitz-Pranghe, 2019).

Gelles et al., (2020) defined primary school attendance as the act of being present in a learning environment during regular school hours. Primary school attendance is

described as a dedication to participating in classroom time and activities from the moment of enrollment until the completion of a full academic program. This therefore implies the physical presence of pupils in a classroom or other learning environment during regular school hours. Primary school attendance in Rwamwanja is closely monitored by the government and implementing partners led by Windle Trust International (WTI) thus propelling an increase of over 77 % (8,135 pupils) in primary school attendance (Metzler et al., 2019).

Education is a critical priority for refugees and this has been enhanced by providing school supplies, building new schools, and hiring more teachers for learners (Tindyebwa Muhangi, 2019). Primary school attendance enhances access to educational opportunities for adolescents to learn new skills and knowledge needed to succeed in their new country (Metzler et al., 2019), improves their language skills in the language of instruction, which is often a key factor in their ability to succeed academically and integrate in to host communities (Ruzibiza, 2020), reduces early marriages and teenage pregnancies, promotes social integration, and is significant for the psychological wellbeing (Yonis et al., n.d. 2024).

In Rwamwanja, most of the population especially the adolescents and early adults (13-22) covers 80% of the total population. Only 49 % who are between 13-22 years of school-going age are currently enrolled in primary education (Pheonah, 2023). Despite the importance of primary school attendance in the Rwamwanja Refugee settlement, the attendance rate for learners has gradually declined to as low as only 11.3% attendance (Motalebi, 2023). This has been associated with stigma at school, mental health disorders associated with PTSD (Ruzibiza, 2020), poverty and unemployment, early marriages and teenage pregnancy, as well as long distances to school.

If the situation is not attended to more problems in society are likely to arise, such as unemployment, low advocacy for their rights vulnerability, marginalization, and the cycle of poverty leaving them at risk of exploitation, abuse, theft, robbery, and gambling both inside and outside the camp. While this problem is pressing, there is no known study on the extent of primary school attendance in the Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement camp in Uganda.

It is widely acknowledged that maintaining refugee pupils in school is the crucial first step in fully assimilating them into the education systems of host countries (Ahlman, 2022). To this end, the Ministry of Education and Sports in collaboration with development partners has developed and implemented policies geared to increase access and uptake of education services in refugee settlements and host communities such as universal primary and secondary education, and the construction of schools in and around all refugee settlements (Kiiria et al., 2024). Despite these interventions, schools among refugee settlements in Uganda are still reporting low primary school attendance rates, with some settlements reporting attendance rates as

low as 44% (Tulibaleka, 2022). For example in Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement, only a 47% attendance rate was reported in 2020, indicating that regular primary school attendance among pupil refugees is low (Neyişci, 2022), while the (Gao et al., 2024) report indicated that the primary school attendance declined by 11.3%. This proposed study will therefore seek to examine the level of school attendance and its associated factors among school-going children in the Rwamwanja refugee settlement Kamwenge District.

General objective

The major objective of this study was to assess the factors of school attendance and its associated factors among the Primary School Attendance among pupils' refugees in the Rwamwanja refugee settlement in Kamwenge District.

Objective of the Study

To examine the association between psychological factors and school attendance among pupil refugees attending primary school in the Rwamwanja refugee settlement.

Methodology Research Design

The researcher used a Cross-sectional study in which data was collected from many different individuals at a single point in time. The main advantage of this type of design was that it enabled the researcher to assess the situation within the study area at the time of the study. The researcher therefore used the design to establish the relationship between the associated factors and primary school attendance among pupil refugees in the Rwamwanza refugee settlement.

Area of study/Study setting

In Uganda, Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement (population location) is situated next to Kabingo Primary School, Mirambi Primary School, and Rwamwanja Health Center III. Furthermore, Dwengo and Kyoga are close by. The Rwamwanja settlement was established in 1964 to provide housing for Rwandan refugees; it was closed in 1995. To accommodate migrants escaping violence in North and South Kivu and insecurity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the settlement was reopened in 2012. The Rwamwanja camp is managed by the UNHCR and the Ugandan Office of the Prime Minister's Department of Refugees (OPM). Refugee assistance is provided by several implementing partner NGOs, such as the African Initiative for Relief Development, Windle Charitable Trust, Lutheran World Federation, and Africa Humanitarian Action.

In Rwamwanja, 86% of the population is under the age of 18. Twenty early childhood development facilities and child-friendly spaces are managed by Windle Trust Uganda (WTU) and Save the Pupil. UNHCR/WTU is in charge of

three of the settlement's five primary schools: Kyempango Primary, the newest, Mahani Primary, Nteziryayo Primary, and Ramwanja Primary. Currently enrolled in Rwamwanja are 8,135 primary school pupils, or 70% of all pupils of school age. Data Collection was done from 1st April up to 21st May 2024

Study Population

There are five primary schools in the Rwamwanja refugee settlement. Of the 8,135 pupils enrolled in the settlement's primary schools, 440 pupils are enrolled in upper primary. These pupils were the focus of the study because it is thought that they can offer firsthand experiences and perspectives (Hammarén et al., 2024).

Selection Criteria Inclusion Criteria

All School refugee pupils aged 10 to 20 living at the Rwamwanja refugee settlement and those who consented to take part in the study were included. This age group was selected because they were expected to possess basic literacy knowledge and skills to answer the questionnaire.

Exclusion Criteria

Non-refugee pupils were not considered for this study.

Sample Size

A total of 205 respondents were chosen as the study's sample size from the 440 target population.

Sampling Techniques

Purposive Sampling Techniques

This proposed Purposive sampling was used in the study to choose the students for interviews. This was because when you need insights from specific experts or individuals with specialized knowledge, purposive sampling allows you to target those who possess the expertise relevant to your study. For instance, selecting upper-class pupils, you are sure that they will be able to provide the data needed by the researcher.

Simple Random Sampling

The researcher employed simple random sampling to select teachers and pupils from each primary school. The simple random sampling was conducted in such a way that pupils in the category of selection (Upper Primary) had an equal chance of being selected. To remove bias from respondents, cluster sampling that involved dividing a population into clusters of upper and lower primary sections was employed, the researcher randomly selected pupils from these clusters, and then collected data from a subset within the selected cluster.

Questionnaire Method

The researcher used self-administered questionnaires to obtain relevant information from pupils who were in upper primary (P.5-P.7). The researcher met the respondents and asked them questions as he filled out the appropriate answers in the questionnaire.

Data Collection instruments

Psychological Factors Associated with School Attendance
The 42-item DASS's depression anxiety and stress subscales were used to evaluate the psychological components of stress, depression, and anxiety (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995). 14 items total, each of which was rated on a 4-point Likert scale that goes from "never" to "nearly always." Higher scores indicate endorsement of more symptoms of anxiety or sadness. Scores range from 1 to 4. This instrument has been applied in various contexts and with comparable samples, producing positive outcomes and demonstrating its validity and reliability in the same sample (Ainamani et al., 2020).

Data Collection Procedure

Under Ethical clearance from the BSU – REC, an introductory letter was sought from the Directorate of Graduate Studies, Research, and Innovations – BSU introducing the researcher to the field authorities for data collection. Further still, clearance from the Office of the Prime Minister – Mbarara Regional Refugee Desk Office was sought – introducing the researcher to the settlement authorities for data collection; upon which permission was sought from the settlement commandant to allow the researcher to commence data collection at Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement. Appointments were scheduled with respective head teachers of primary schools at the settlement to discuss the purpose and objectives of the study to build rapport and cooperation. The head teacher introduced the researcher to the teachers and pupils to avail the researcher all the necessary support and cooperation during data collection processes.

Upon fully explaining the study objectives and all ethical considerations including participants' confidentiality and the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any point of data collection, Informed consent was sought from study participants whereas assent was sought from the teachers/guardians of the pupils. Thereafter, questionnaires were administered to pupils under the guidance and supervision of the researcher at a convenient time as advised by the school authorities.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using SPSS 20. Proportions and percentages were used to summarize categorical variables while means and standard deviations to summarize continuous variables. For the relationship between psychological factors and school attendance among refugee

pupils in Rwamwanja, Logistic regression was employed with school attendance as a dependent variable and a score of psychological factors as a predictor while controlling for age category, sex, and country of origin.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Bishop Stuart University Research Ethics Committee (BSU-REC), following a recommendation from the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at Bishop Stuart University. Additional permission was granted by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), which oversees refugee welfare in Uganda. Research instruments were translated into the respondents' languages and back-translated to ensure accuracy. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians, who consented on behalf of the pupils, alongside assent forms for the pupils. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality, and made aware that participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of social demographic characteristics of respondents (n=195)

Characteristic	n(%)
Sex	
Male	86(44)
Female	109(56)
Age category	
10-12	57(29)
13-15	130(67)
16-17	8(4)
Country of Origin	
Dr. Congo	87(45)
Rwanda	79(41)
Burundi	15(8)
South Sudan	14(7)

Descriptive statistics of the domains of psychological factors across levels of school attendance

The average score on depression was 6.7 with a standard deviation of 1.40, a minimum score of 3, and a maximum score of 12. The average score on anxiety was 5.9 with a

Response rate

The response rate for the questionnaires in this study was remarkably high, with 195 out of 205 questionnaires being answered, resulting in a response rate of approximately 95.1%. According to Amin (2006), a response rate of 70% and above is considered to yield a high response rate, indicating robust data collection and reliability of the findings. The 95.1% response rate in this study far exceeds this threshold, suggesting a very high level of participant engagement and confidence in the representativeness and validity of the collected data.

Descriptive statistics of demographic characteristics of respondents (n =195)

Out the 195 respondents, Majority 109(56%) were females and only 86(44%) were males. The majority of the pupils 130(67%) were in the age category of 13-15 years, this was followed by 57(29%) in the age category of 10-12 years, and only 8(4%) were in the age category of 16-17 years. The respondents originated from four different countries, with the majority 87(45%) coming from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR. Congo), 79(41%) from Rwanda, 15(8%) from Burundi and only 14(7%) from South Sudan.

standard deviation of 1.03, a minimum score of 3, and a maximum score of 8. The average score on stress was 6.2 with a standard deviation of 1.38, a minimum score of 2, and a maximum score of 11. The average score on sociological factors was 5.9 with a standard deviation of 0.97, a minimum score of 2, and a maximum score of 8.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of domains of psychological factors across levels of school attendance (n=195)

Psychological domains	Total n=195	Low n=104(53%)	High n=91(47%)
	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)
Depression, total score	6.7(1.40)	6.6(1.5)	6.9(1.27)
Anxiety, total score	5.9(1.03)	5.9(1.09)	5.9(0.97)
Stress, total score	6.2(1.38)	6.2(1.28)	6.3(1.49)

Association between Psychological factors and school attendance

At bivariate analysis Depression score was statistically significantly associated with school attendance (cOR= 1.57; 95% CI = 1.31 – 1.88; p<0.001), Anxiety (cOR= 0.94; 95% CI = 0.71 – 1.23; p=0.635), and stress (cOR= 1.18;

95% CI = 0.96 – 1.46; p=0.118), were not significantly associated with school attendance, At multivariate regression analysis while adjusting for socio-demographic factors of age, sex, and country of origin, Depression score remained statistically significantly associated with school attendance(aOR=1.59; 95% CI = 1.33- 0.91; p<0.001), anxiety and stress remained insignificant.

Table 3: Logistic regression for association between psychological Factors and School Attendance

Variable	School attendance			
	cOR (95% CI)	P –value	aOR (95%CI)	P-value
Depression, Score	1.57(1.31-1.88)	<0.001	1.59(1.33-1.91)	<0.001
Anxiety, Score	0.94(0.71-1.23)	0.635	0.89(0.66-1.21)	0.459
Stress, Score	1.18(0.96-1.46)	0.118	1.22(0.97-1.54)	0.091
Sex				
Male			ref	
Female			0.83(0.44-1.56)	0.564
Age				
10-12			ref	
13-15			0.97(0.48-1.95)	0.936
16-17			1.14(0.22-6.07)	0.875
Country of origin				
Dr. Congo			ref	
Rwanda			0.82(0.42-1.61)	0.566
Burundi			1.38(0.42-4.61)	0.596
South Sudan			0.74(0.20-2.69)	0.646

Discussion of results

The relationship between psychological factors and school attendance

The descriptive statistics reveal varying scores on psychological factors, including depression, anxiety, stress, and sociological factors, across different levels of school attendance among 195 students. The average depression score was 6.7, with slightly higher scores observed in the high school attendance group (M = 6.9, SD = 1.27) compared to the low attendance group (M = 6.6, SD = 1.5). Anxiety scores were consistent across both groups, with an overall average of 5.9. Stress scores were also similar, with a total mean score of 6.2, slightly higher in the high attendance group (M = 6.3, SD = 1.49) than in the low attendance group (M = 6.2, SD = 1.28).

The bivariate analysis identified a significant association between depression and school attendance, with a crude odds ratio (cOR) of 1.57 (95% CI = 1.31–1.88, p<0.001), suggesting that higher depression scores were associated with increased school attendance. However, anxiety (cOR = 0.94; 95% CI = 0.71–1.23; p = 0.635) and stress (cOR =

1.18; 95% CI = 0.96–1.46; p = 0.118) were not significantly associated with school attendance. After adjusting for sociodemographic factors such as age, sex, and country of origin in the multivariate analysis, depression remained significantly associated with school attendance (adjusted odds ratio (aOR) = 1.59; 95% CI = 1.33–1.91; p<0.001). Anxiety and stress continued to show no significant association. Additionally, sociodemographic variables, including sex, age, and country of origin, did not significantly affect school attendance.

The relationship between psychological factors and primary school attendance among refugee pupils portrays that there is a strong statistical relationship between psychological factors and school attendants. This further revealed that when school-going children are exposed to Depression, stress, and anxiety, their chances of attending school are always low compared to when such factors of stress, anxiety, and depression are minimized. The aftermath of conflict significantly contributes to mental depression, which subsequently affects school attendance among refugee pupils. Similarly, Song & Jordans (2014) highlighted the role of school-based psychosocial support

services in mitigating these issues, which this study also supports, albeit with a minimal correlation found between psychological factors and attendance.

Abudayya et al., (2023), also found that exposure to conflict-related trauma among Palestinian youth significantly impairs their school attendance. This discrepancy could be attributed to different sample characteristics or contextual variations in the nature and extent of conflict exposure. While Snilstveit et al., n.d (2021) also observed high prevalence rates of depression, leading to poor attendance, the current study suggests that these psychological factors especially depression, have much influence on school attendance.

The findings also align with Pettit et al. (2017) who stated that adolescent girls are among the most vulnerable groups in terms of the impact of the endemic post-traumatic stress associated with living in a conflict zone. They concluded that the mental well-being of adolescent females, more than that of adolescent males, is negatively affected by stress and depression (Pettit et al., 2017).

Saricam & Ozbey (2019) observed that mental health problems like depression and stress influence primary school attendance among refugees. In this, girls are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety than boys, hence affecting their school attendance. This study did not find a significant gender-based difference in school attendance, suggesting that gender may not be as influential in this context or that other unexamined variables may mitigate gender-specific impacts. This finding invites further research into the intersection of gender and psychological factors in different refugee settings.

Also, Fazel, Wheeler, & Danesh, (2005) noted that young people who experience war events and displacement have elevated rates of psychopathology problems, especially depression. It was further highlighted that; specific factors appear to be associated with different symptom clusters exposure to violent events and maltreatment increases the risk of posttraumatic symptoms while experience of losses and ongoing stressors and problems in resettlement countries increases the risk of depression.

Ehnholt and William Yule (2006) indicated that the onset of these mental health problems like depression and stress can have long-term negative consequences for children especially those who are schooling. Children who suffer from depression, or exhibit difficult behaviors, must find ways to cope with their symptoms while in refugee camps, a setting that provides little, if any, support to address such problems. These problems are only exacerbated when caring adults (parents or others) are missing from the lives of refugee children, perhaps because they have died or been left behind.

Conclusions

The study revealed a strong positive statistical association between psychological factors and school attendance

among refugee pupils, suggesting that while mental health issues are present, there may be other determinants that influence school attendance. The findings emphasize the need for a holistic approach to addressing the educational challenges faced by refugee pupils.

Limitations of the Study

This study makes a significant contribution as far as promoting primary school attendance among pupil refugees is concerned. The study was carried out based on data collected from only refugee schools. Further still, the study was dominantly quantitative and this could have limited the in-depth analysis.

External validity of the study findings

The research was carried out in Rwanda's Ramwanja refugee settlement, which may have its own distinct socio-political and cultural dynamics. The conclusions may not immediately apply to other refugee settlements or nations with divergent settings. The psychological stressors that refugees encounter in Uganda, for instance, might be different from those encountered in other areas because of disparities in socio-political situations, resources, and support systems.

Recommendations

Comprehensive school-based psychosocial support programs are crucial for addressing the mental health needs of refugee pupils, and fostering resilience and coping strategies for their academic wellbeing.

UN agencies and development partners should consider developing integrated service delivery models that integrate educational, health, social, and economic support to address school attendance determinants.

Government and policymakers should design interventions addressing the mental health needs of both boys and girls, recognizing gender impacts on psychological well-being and educational outcomes.

Acknowledgment

I extend my heartfelt thanks to the Almighty God for the gift of life, keeping me healthy and focused throughout the research process. I am deeply grateful to my supervisors, Dr. Ainamaani Herbert (PhD) and Dr. Benon Muhumuza (PhD), for their unwavering support and guidance. My sincere appreciation goes to my lecturers, whose efforts in class greatly contributed to the success of this research. I also thank my fellow students for their valuable discussions and support throughout the course. Special thanks to the respondents who generously gave their time to participate in the study. Lastly, I am immensely thankful to my beloved parents, Mr. Kijara Robert and Mrs. Kentembwe Edinansi, for their financial support. May God bless them abundantly.

List of Abbreviations

WFP	World Food Programme
ACAPS	Assessment Capacities Project
WTI	Windle Trust International
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
ERP II	Education Response Plan II
CwD	Children with Disabilities
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
WB	World Bank
UPE	Universal Primary Education
AAH-U	Action Africa Help Uganda
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
WIU	Windle International Uganda
cOR	Crude Odds Ratio
CI	Confidence Interval
aOR	Adjusted Odds Ratio

Areas for further research

A study to establish the factors that influence school attendance of refugee adolescents in secondary school and higher institutions is highly recommended.

A study to establish the factors associated with non-refugees on primary school attendance is also necessary and this can be carried out to compare the two.

Practical Contributions of the Study

This study makes a significant contribution as far as promoting primary school attendance among pupil refugees is concerned. The study suggests that to improve primary school attendance among pupil refugees, both sociological and psychological factors that affect primary school attendance should be given paramount consideration.

Source of funding

This work met the academic criteria without outside funding.

Conflict of Interest

From the beginning to the end of the investigation, there was no conflict of interest.

Researchers Biography

Tuhaisomwe Nafutari, Social Work student, Bishop Stuart University, Mbarara, Department of Social Work and Social Administration, tuhaisomwenafutari@gmail.com
Tel: +256 778997033.

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