Critically Examining Social Emotional Learning with Refugees in East Africa: Tensions, Challenges, and Complex Dynamics

Kelsey A. Dalrymple
University of Wisconsin-Madison, U.S.

Social emotional learning (SEL) has become a popular trend in the field of Education in Emergencies (EiE). Many SEL programs targeting refugee learners aim to help individuals develop skills that are necessary for learning and development, as well as mitigate the adverse impacts of crisis and displacement. While nearly half a billion USD has been invested in SEL initiatives for refugee and crisis contexts world-wide, little evidence exists about the impacts of SEL interventions with refugee communities. As 20% of all refugees globally reside in East Africa, and it is estimated that over 152 million African children live in active conflict zones, this study set out to qualitatively examine understandings, implementation, and implications of SEL interventions across actors engaging refugee communities in the region. The results expose tensions, challenges, and complex dynamics related to culture, power, and the complicated reality of implementing refugee education initiatives in East Africa. While further research into this area of inquiry is needed and proposed, these study findings provide a stronger understanding of the refugee education landscape in East Africa and its current insufficiencies through the example of SEL, and serve to inform other topical EiE interventions and the broader uptake of SEL by education systems globally.

Keywords: Socio Emotional Learning, East Africa, Education in Emergencies, crisis context, refugee.

Introduction

Humanitarian crises significantly impact the educational opportunities and experiences of learners globally. Currently, an estimated 224 million crisis-affected school-age children require education support (ECW, 2023). At the end of 2019, one fifth of the world's crisis-affected children lived in Africa, and it was estimated that 152 million African children lived in active conflict zones (ACPF & AMC, 2019). Studies have found that many refugee children and families affected by conflict and crisis suffer extreme trauma, live in inhumane conditions, and often become trapped in a cycle of displacement and poverty for years, and sometimes generations (Brown et al., 2017; Ferris, 2018). Many of the world's refugees living in protracted displacement come from Central and East Africa, with numerous individuals living in displacement for over 20 years (Devictor, 2019; Hyndman & Giles, 2019).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is currently positioned by Education in Emergency (EiE) practitioners as a key component of refugee education, as it is believed to help improve academic achievement and support psychosocial wellbeing, trauma-recovery, and resiliency for refugee teachers, students, and communities (INEE, 2018; UNESCO,

2019). SEL is commonly understood, from a Western[1] perspective, to be an educational approach that claims to help children develop the thinking, behavioral, and self-regulatory skills needed for learning (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). Since 2018, nearly half a billion USD has been invested in SEL initiatives for refugee and crisis-affected communities globally, with more pledged for the years to come (ECW, 2018; Renau, 2022). However, little evidence exists about the understandings, implementation approaches, and implications of SEL across actors engaging refugee communities (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016; USAID, 2022).

As 20% of all refugees globally reside in East Africa (UNHCR, 2022b), this article comes from a qualitative study that utilized in-depth structured interviews and document review to answer two research questions: 1) how do EiE actors working with refugee communities in East Africa understand and implement SEL interventions? and 2) what are the implications of these interventions? The study was conducted by myself—the author of this article and the primary Principal Investigator (PI), and Dr. Kassa Michael Weldeyesus[2], who served as the co-PI. We engaged 20 EiE practitioners across 16 national and international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and one donor government across East Africa. This included individuals from: Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. Additionally, while all individuals interviewed identified as EiE practitioners, their positions and SEL interventions sometimes fell within the Child Protection in Emergencies (CPiE) sector due to funding and/or programming structure.

We examined a broad set of SEL interventions targeting mostly refugee children and youth, though many interview respondents also reported engaging adult stakeholders (i.e. teachers, parents, administrators), supporting host-community children, and working with national governments on integrating SEL into national education systems. While the study intended to serve as a simple landscape review, the results expose much more complex dynamics connected to culture, power, and the complicated reality of implementing refugee education initiatives in East Africa. Findings reveal tensions and challenges related to inconsistencies of understandings about what SEL is and how it should be delivered, siloed implementation approaches leading to uncoordinated and inadequate programming, the use of Western SEL materials with limited contextualization processes, and an absence of refugee involvement in the design and delivery of SEL interventions. Finally, this study illustrates SEL as an example of the lack of follow-through on the part of national governments in East Africa to integrate refugee children into national education systems, despite numerous regional commitments to do so.

However, this article only begins to address the lacuna of qualitative research in the fields of comparative and international education (CIE) and EiE on the complex dynamics of implementing interventions like SEL within the refugee education landscape and proposes further research to better inform these scholarly fields. As SEL is

---

[1] In this article, 'Western' is conceptualized as largely North American and Euro-centric contexts, cultures, practices, and beliefs.
[2] Associate Professor at the Addis Ababa University-College of Education and Behavioral Sciences.

one of a number of topical EiE interventions (e.g. gender, protection, inclusion), these study findings serve as an example of the need to critically interrogate these initiatives to better inform EiE work and link to larger issues (i.e. Westernization, cultural imperialism, subaltern epistemicide) within the refugee education landscape. Additionally, as SEL is currently a popular trend being taken up by education systems globally, in both refugee and non-refugee contexts, these study findings may serve to inform CIE scholars exploring SEL and similar global trends.

Refugee Education in East Africa

Due to colonial rule, shifting state borders, inter-communal conflict, and post-colonial power dynamics, East Africa has been a region of significant forced migration for decades and a site of consistent humanitarian intervention (Milner, 2019; Williams, 2020). As a result, refugee education activities have a long history in East Africa, influenced by various global education initiatives, policies, and actors over time (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). As the number of refugees in East Africa has tripled over the last decade (UN News, 2022), with nearly 60% being children (UNICEF, 2019), refugee education efforts have also intensified.

Over the last five years, the refugee education sector in East Africa has been a significant target and test site for various global humanitarian initiatives[3], as well as regional efforts to strengthen refugee education policy and practice; in particular the inclusion of refugee learners into host-country education systems[4]. While these commitments and initiatives have been ratified by national government actors, they have created a vast policyscape (Carney, 2008) comprised of: private, bilateral, and multilateral donors; UN agencies; international and local NGOs; inter-agency working groups and coordination mechanisms; and refugee individuals and communities. The study that informs this article specifically engaged EiE practitioners working with NGOs responsible for implementing SEL programming; many of these individuals also engaged in and/or led inter-agency working groups and coordination mechanisms.

National and international NGOs are largely responsible for the direct implementation of refugee education activities in the region. However, they often liaise and comply with various donors and local/national government, as well as Education Clusters and Working Groups responsible for the coordination of NGO activities. The presence of these myriad actors and mechanisms has increased education programming for refugee learners and brought significant resources to the region. However, millions of refugee children in East Africa remain out of school (UNHCR, 2022c), educational achievement and psychosocial wellbeing among refugee children remains low (Karas, 2019; Piper et al., 2020), and a lack of consistency, coordination, and continuity across this policyscape has contributed to the repetition of siloed and inadequate refugee education practices (The Perspective, 2023; UNHCR, 2016, 2021).

---

[3] For example, the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, the New Ways of Working framework, and the Education Cannot Wait fund.
[4] For example, the Agenda 2063 on Education and the Djibouti Declaration.

SEL in the Refugee Education Landscape
In an effort to improve education for refugee children in East Africa and globally, EiE actors have identified SEL as a promising practice that has the potential to improve academic achievement and support psychosocial wellbeing, trauma-recovery, and resiliency (INEE, 2018; UNESCO, 2019). The Western understanding of SEL as an educational approach that claims to help children develop the thinking, behavioral, and self-regulatory skills needed for learning and later life (Jones & Doolittle, 2017) has been widely taken up by the EiE sector, as well as the CPiE sector, and exported globally to refugee contexts. However, experts acknowledge that SEL is not a modern, Western phenomenon; the basic tenets of contemporary SEL have existed across history and cultures for centuries (Chiu & Huaman, 2020). Additionally, within the refugee education landscape, various actors have included elements of contemporary SEL under other umbrella terms for decades, such as: Life Skills, transferrable skills, soft skills, 21st century skills, and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS)[5].

The Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) and the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (ACPHA) subscribe to the Western conceptualization of SEL and consider it to be one of many interventions falling under the MHPSS umbrella (INEE & ACPHA, 2020). However, some scholars like Brush et al., (2022) argue that SEL and Life Skills in particular differ in that SEL is rooted in theories of learning and developmental psychology and generally targets younger children. Alternatively, Life Skills has traditionally been a multi-disciplinary approach that mostly targets adolescents and young adults and incorporates elements of healthy decision-making related to drug and alcohol use, sexual and reproductive health, vocational training, and women and girls' empowerment. However, as elements of contemporary SEL can be found across all of these terms and approaches, significant confusion exists across EiE and CPiE practitioners about what exactly SEL is and under which sector or umbrella it belongs. Indeed SEL is often conflated or used interchangeably with all of these terms and approaches in the refugee education landscape, resulting in poor coordination, inconsistency, and limited SEL program effectiveness (Gallagher, 2018; Soye & Tauson, 2018).

Problematizing Western SEL
Regardless of which sectoral or terminological umbrella SEL is associated with, experts have demonstrated that the way SEL skills and competencies are conceptualized, prioritize, and displayed are highly tied to culture and societal behavioral standards that shape the way people understand, interpret, and make meaning of their experiences (Brush et al., 2022; Gay, 2018). As a result, scholars have more recently begun to explore non-Western understandings and practices of SEL across various cultures and contexts. Their work has found that concepts and terms used in Western SEL frameworks do not always align with the values and interests of different contexts and cultures, and sometimes do not translate easily or even exist in other languages (Jeong, 2019; Jones et al., 2019; Jukes et al., 2018). However, the Western concept and approach to SEL continues to remain dominant in the EiE and CPiE sectors globally and an assumption

---

[5] MHPSS is defined in the humanitarian sector as any type of local or outside support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial well-being and/or prevent or treat mental disorder (IASC, 2021).

that SEL competencies found in Western frameworks are universally applicable to all children is pervasive among EiE and CPiE practitioners (INEE, 2016).

As such, SEL is one of a long list of Western educational interventions that have been rolled out across African societies, both displaced and non-displaced, over the last three decades to address perceived deficits within education systems and child development practices. There is an abundance of literature documenting the spread, challenges, potentials, and failures of approaches such as: learner-centered pedagogies (LCP) (Sakata et al., 2021; Vavrus et al., 2011; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2012), early childhood development (ECD) programming (Ng'asike, 2014; Pence & Marfo, 2008; Serpell, 2019), school discipline practices (Ndofirepi et al., 2012; Rampa, 2014; Sibanda & Mpofu, 2017), child rights policies (Bourdillon & Musvosvi, 2014; Maudeni, 2010), and play-based learning (PBL) (Chick, 2010; Lancy, 1996) across African societies and education systems. Those working specifically in refugee contexts have demonstrated that Western assumptions and post-colonial logics about the purpose of education for refugees and the corresponding practices and approaches (i.e. LCP, literacy learning, language of instruction, digital education, higher education, life-long learning) are highly problematic and ineffective. These scholars demonstrate that many of these practices and approaches don't adequately take into account culture or context—and how these are impacted by conflict and displacement, or the realistic futures and needs of refugee learners (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; Morrice, 2021; O'Keef & Lovey, 2022; Piper et al., 2020; Reddick & Dryden-Peterson, 2021; Sharif, 2020).

Numerous education and child development scholars who critically examine these trends, as they relate to culture and context, highlight the fact that most of them are, or have been, informed by Western constructions of childhood, standards of learning, and perceptions of what "optimal" child development is, despite the fact that the majority of the world's children to not reside in Western contexts (Mucherah & Mbogori, 2019; Nsamenang, 1995; Viruru, 2001). Some African scholars argue that these initiatives perpetuate the domination of Western perceptions and practices and enact a kind of cultural imperialism, denigrating Africa's rich cultural heritage (Nsamenang, 2011; Rwantabagu, 2010). Similarly, scholars like Tabulawa (2003, 2013) highlight how trends like LCP function as a way of spreading socio-political-economic ideologies throughout the world, engaging in a neocolonial process of Westernization and subaltern epistemicide.

Evidence on the impact of SEL initiatives with refugee communities is significantly lacking (USAID, 2022) and it remains unclear if and how SEL functions as a tool of cultural imperialism, Westernization, or otherwise. As a result, some scholars have attempted to explore the effects of SEL with refugee and crisis-affected communities (Diazgranados Ferráns et al., 2019; D'Sa & Krupar, 2021; Torrente et al., 2019; Tubbs Dolan & Weiss-Yagoda, 2019). However, much of this work is largely quantitative and preoccupied with the measurement of Western SEL skills and academic achievement, rather than the interrogation of the Western assumptions and post-colonial logics that underly many SEL initiatives in refugee and crisis contexts. The qualitative data collected in this study has produced significant findings related to the tensions, challenges, and complicated dynamics of refugee education initiatives like SEL in East Africa that begin to address this gap in the scholarship.

Methodology

This article draws on a qualitative study conducted from February 2022 to April 2022 that aimed to explore how EiE actors working with refugee communities in East Africa understand and implement SEL interventions, and what the implications of those interventions are. To gather in-depth qualitative data on experiences and conceptual understandings, the primary method used for the study was in-depth structured interviews with 20 EiE practitioners[6] across 16 international and national NGOs and one donor government[7] in Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda[8]. This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to ensure the inclusion of actors who are currently delivering SEL activities with refugee communities in East Africa, which could not have been obtained through the use of randomized strategies (Maxwell, 2013).

Table 1
Study Participant Breakdown

Participant Demographics	Countries								
Type of participants	Ethiopia	Kenya	Rwanda	Sudan	South Sudan	Tanzania	Uganda	Multi-Country	TOTAL
Interviews	5	2	1	1	1	2	3	2	17
Individual participants	5	2	2	1	3	2	3	2	20
National NGOs	3				1	1			5
International NGOs	2	2	1	1		1	3	1	11
Donor governments								1	1
Directors	1	1			1		1		4
Managers	2		1			1	1	1	6
Advisors	1						1	1	3
Specialists	1		1	1					3
Coordinators					2	1			3
Officers		1							1

Note. In some cases, multiple individuals participated in a single interview.

---

[6] This number was reached due to the responses from e-mail requests for interviews, as well as our time and availability to conduct data collection. While additional individuals were contacted, we did not pursue interviews with individuals if no response was received after sending an initial e-mail and two follow-up e-mails.

[7] While we contacted individuals working for UN agencies and national and local governmental departments for interview, they either did not respond to our interview requests, or declined and redirected us to NGOs as they felt NGOs were better placed to speak about SEL work in their respective countries.

[8] Individuals working in Burundi, Djibouti, and Somalia were also contacted, though, interviews were not conducted with them as we were either unable to find a suitable time for interview or were unable to identify organizations working specifically on SEL.

Myself and the co-PI identified organizations through both personal acquaintances, as well as contacting Education Cluster and Working Group Co-Chairs in each country. Co-Chairs were identified by contacting the Global Education Cluster HelpDesk and INEE Emergencies HelpDesk to acquire individual contact information. Once Co-Chairs were contacted, they were able to identify and connect us with EiE actors delivering SEL interventions. Additionally, we identified two study participants working on SEL programming in multiple countries across East Africa. Next, we contacted these EiE actors and scheduled virtual interviews with relevant expert individuals.

We conducted interviews in English and all interview participants provided either verbal or written consent to participate. Interviews lasted between thirty minutes to one hour and took place on a variety of virtual platforms. The interview protocol used for each interview asked about: program details (location, timeline, funding, partners, populations served, goals, objectives, activities, and targets); specific SEL frameworks, components, and competencies; challenges with implementation; and availability of programmatic evidence. Additionally, we focused on SEL interventions that were actively running at the time of interview, as well as interventions that had recently concluded or were planned for implementation in the near future. An interview notes template was used to ensure consistency.

We also conducted document review to triangulate the interview data. We identified and reviewed approximately 30 items including: policy briefs, project descriptions, program guides, and training curricula. These documents were obtained directly from interview participants, from personal files, and through general search engines (i.e. Google and Google Scholar) and databases (i.e. Save the Children Resource Centre and INEE Resources). We used QDA Miner Lite and NVivo software to review and analyze all interview notes and documents. Prior to data collection, we created a general list of categories that stemmed from a review of the literature, as well as our professional experiences working in this field. These categories informed the interview protocol, as outlined above, and also supported initial deductive coding. Though, inductive analysis, understood as "discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one's data" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 159), guided the overall analysis process. We highlighted excerpts and phrases from interview responses that related to the interview protocol topics and grouped them accordingly to identify variations and consistencies across study participants and their agencies. Upon completion of coding, we compared our findings as a validity check and generated the results described in the following sections.

Positionality
As the author of this paper, I identify as a white, North American woman, as well as an EiE practitioner and critical scholar of CIE. Having worked for nearly 15 years in the fields of education and humanitarian response, my experience—as well as my personal and professional social networks—aided in navigating EiE coordination and communication systems to recruit study participants. While I interviewed a variety of individuals with varying self-identifiers (i.e. male, female, European, African) and occupying diverse positions within their agencies (i.e. Advisor, Director, Coordinator, Manager, Officer, Specialist), I believe my perceived position as a white researcher at a U.S.-based university initially attracted individuals to participate in interviews. I also

believe that my experience as an EiE practitioner, having worked with and for many of the agencies that study participants did, in addition to my personal connection to some individuals as friends and colleagues, allowed study participants to feel comfortable to openly share details about their programming. Though, I recognize that my position as a critical scholar may have influenced how I interpreted the data in this study, as I have been academically trained to situate data within larger social and political structures and to identify and challenge structural weaknesses with the goals of improvement, equity, and social justice. I also recognize that my positionality, power, and worldview as a white, North American scholar influences the way I interpret data and frame key findings. Thus, working with the co-PI who identifies as a Black, East African man was an intentional effort to limit my personal influence and bias over the study findings.

Limitations
This study included a range of limitations. First, myself and the co-PI recognize that the small sample size (20 individuals across 17 agencies) does not allow for a full understanding of the experience and perceptions of all actors delivering SEL programming to refugee communities in East Africa, but rather a small slice of the most globally visible actors working in this area. We also recognize that by only involving EiE practitioners as study participants, the perceptions and experiences of refugee-community members are not represented in the data. Therefore, we do not fully understand how SEL interventions are received and experienced at the refugee-community level and further research into this area of inquiry is needed and encouraged to supplement the study findings.

Additionally, interviews were only conducted in English and through virtual platforms. Therefore, it is possible that interviewees were not able to fully express themselves the way they may have if they were able to participate face-to-face and in the language of their choice. It is also possible that this study included an element of social desirability bias and we do not know the extent to which respondents were willing to promote their SEL interventions in order to sustain them. Though, despite these limitations, the study findings help to understand how SEL is conceptualized and implemented among actors working with refugee communities in East Africa and exemplify the numerous tensions and challenges associated with implementing SEL, and other Western education approaches, in non-Western crisis contexts.

Findings
The findings presented here reflect discussions with EiE practitioners about how they understand and implement SEL interventions with refugee communities in East Africa. Responses from practitioners were diverse and produced key findings related to: consistencies across programming related to the use of Western SEL frameworks, implementation challenges, and evidence generation; and variations in understandings and interpretations of SEL and implementation approaches. When referring to numbers of study participants in the sections below, the following terms can be considered as such: majority/most = 15-20; many = 10-14; some = 5-9; few = 4 or less. Finally, all names used in the sections below are pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity and privacy of study participants.

Consistencies
Western materials and cloudy contextualization
The majority of interviewees reported that they are currently using either their own organizational SEL framework and/or programming materials that were developed at the "global" level—meaning headquarter offices based in Western countries—or pre-existing general frameworks like the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework. For example, Avery, who works across the region, shared that they: "[…]hired a specialist from the U.S. to develop the SEL component of our teacher training, and I believe [they] based the content mostly on the CASEL framework" (Interview, March 1, 2022). Additionally, Casey, who also works on a multi-country project, confirmed that: "We are using the [organizational] framework developed a few years ago at headquarters" (Interview, April 4, 2022).

As indicated by these participants, *global* or Western SEL materials are often used across countries and regions with diverse target communities. Participants from Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda, working for the same international NGO in their respective countries, confirmed that their country-specific programs each use internal materials that were developed at their organization's *global* level. When asked if they contextualized the materials for their countries, these participants were not able to recall any such process. When asked the same question, participants working for other NGOs in the region referred to vague contextualization processes, though were not able to detail the extent and quality of these activities. For example, Casey reported that "we say we did 'contextualization', but honestly it was more a of a tick-box exercise" (Interview, April 4, 2022).

While a few respondents reported working to develop *local* SEL frameworks, the processes they described were largely driven by Western advisors and included limited refugee participation or input. For example, Tadele reported developing an SEL framework for use with refugee communities in Ethiopia, though with technical guidance and oversight from their U.S.-based donor. Additionally, Rene who works in Uganda reported that they are currently developing a local SEL framework for use with both refugee and host-country children, but with technical guidance from the Harvard EASEL Lab. No interviewees mentioned working explicitly with refugee communities to develop SEL programming or to build on their existing/local forms of SEL. Tadele did report conducting consultations and an assessment with refugee communities to help inform the contextualization of their SEL content, but did not mention the refugee community's direct involvement in the contextualization process.

These examples do not mean that the other organizations have not, or do not, consult with refugee communities regarding SEL programming. However, many study participants felt that their SEL interventions were largely driven by donor priorities, global best practices, and coordination with education partners, rather than by refugee community requests or expressed need for such programming. This is illustrated by Jonah from Tanzania: "The program materials that were given to us by [the organization], were already developed in line with global standards, so we did not see the need to change them much" (Interview, March 7, 2022). Additionally, Casey shared that when working on a multi-country project:

> "…it is super clear that SEL is something the donor wants baked into the project. I feel like every EiE project you see now-a-days has SEL included in it somehow because it's considered a 'best practice'…every proposal has to mention SEL now just for the sake of it, donors are expecting to see it there. I'm sure refugee parents want their kids to learn these skills in their own way, but I doubt this concept of SEL is a community priority compared to just having enough school rooms, or books, or meeting other basic needs" (Interview, April 4, 2022).

As shown, EiE actors working with refugee communities in East Africa commonly use *global* and/or Western SEL materials, yet do not engage in meaningful contextualization and adaptation processes. A strong case to contextualize SEL programming in refugee and crisis contexts, and to involve community stakeholders in that process, has been made by various scholars and practitioners (Berg et al., 2017; INEE, 2022; USAID, 2021). However, the inability to detail contextualization processes and the lack of involvement of refugee communities demonstrates a clear tension and disconnect between what is recommended in theory and what is happening in reality. Even those developing *local* SEL frameworks are doing so with oversight and guidance from Western technical specialists and there is extremely limited awareness or acknowledgement among EiE practitioners of existing SEL concepts and practices within refugee communities. This directly contradicts the scholarship presented previously and the recognition that SEL concepts and practices are highly based on culture and societal behaviors (Brush et al., 2022). This ignorance within the refugee education landscape in East Africa is likely to render SEL programming ineffective and potentially culturally pernicious.

Lack of follow through: Exclusion of refugee learners from national SEL plans
While the focus of this study was on refugee communities, several interviewees mentioned working with national Ministries of Education to design SEL frameworks for integration into their national education systems. Though, again, this work is informed by significant guidance from Western institutions and technical experts. For example, Nico, who works for a European-based NGO in Kenya, confirmed: "The government wants to integrate SEL elements of our program into the national curriculum, especially since Covid"(Interview, March 18, 2022), while Avery shared that while working across the region they have been: "[…]interacting with Ministries of Education and there have been discussions around integrating SEL into the national teacher training programs" (Interview, March 1, 2022). Though, when engaging with Ministries of Education to develop national SEL frameworks, no respondents mentioned the integration of refugee children into national education systems of their host countries. Despite the existence of numerous regional commitments and policies to integrate refugee children into national education systems (Cole, 2017; Crawford & O'Callaghan, 2019; IGAD Member States, 2017), government enthusiasm for SEL appears to apply mostly to national students and not the refugee students they are hosting. This has larger implications related to the intentions of host-governments to actually integrate refugee communities into national systems. While SEL is just one example, it exposes the tension that these commitments exist mostly in theory and have yet to be realistically executed.

Implementation challenges: Donor priorities, repatriation, and attendance
A major challenge raised by all respondents is the lack of consistent and sustainable funding for SEL programming, and EiE programming in general. All participants

reported being tied to strict funding timelines set by donors with no guarantee of continued funding after their project end dates. Some individuals also highlighted that when a project or grant comes to an end, the associated activities also come to an end, as exemplified by Muhammad from Sudan:

"Facilitators don't want to play with children and support development; people only do these activities during the program. But once the program ends, the activities stop because the community doesn't value them. Teachers don't want to teach Life Skills, it's not in their job description" (Interview, March 16, 2022).

Additionally, when a new grant or project begins, it often incorporates new activities that may not take into consideration or build upon the activities and approaches that preceded it. This was highlighted by Eli from Tanzania:

"We have been doing PSS [psychosocial support] activities here for years, but this new [SEL] program is not really taking that into account. The incentive [refugee] workers have been doing similar activities for a long time, but now they are being told to do something that seems new and confusing, but is really very similar to what they were doing before" (Interview, February 23, 2022).

This demonstrates the challenge of donors having their own priorities and not necessarily being interested in funding the continuation of activities and approaches previously funded by other donors. In particular, many interviewees reported that there is a trend of perceiving SEL as something new and innovative that donors are eager to fund, which often generates the development of new materials, waves of trainings, advocacy initiatives, and the hiring of new staff. However, many of these SEL projects do not acknowledge or build upon the existing systems, structures, and previous trainings that refugee communities have already received, as exemplified by Casey:

"We trained all of the refugee teachers in SEL in 2018 and 2019, though we just didn't explicitly call it SEL at the time. And now this new project is coming in with all of these new staff members and technical experts who don't have the organizational history and it's like that original training never happened. They are re-training [the refugee teachers] and not acknowledging or building on the fact that they have had a ton of PSS and SEL-based training over the years" (Interview, April 4, 2022).

Another challenge mentioned is the issue of repatriation of refugees. While it is the right of refugees to return to their country of origin, it can have numerous ramifications for SEL programming. For example, when a project invests in training a group of teachers or community members to deliver SEL and subsequently some of them repatriate, the project must recruit, onboard, and train new individuals, which they may not necessarily have budgeted or planned for. This is illustrated by Jonah in Tanzania: "Every time we lose a teacher, we lose someone who we have invested time and resources into, knowing that the person who replaces them won't have the level of quality we achieved with the last teacher" (Interview, March 7, 2022). Additionally, when projects aim to reach a certain number of individuals with their programming and there is a steady rate of repatriation over the course of the project, this can cause problems for donor reporting,

and has financial, human resources, and other implications if the target population is decreasing. Often donors will either require projects to scale down, pivot to targeting additional communities and stakeholders, or engage in additional or alternative activities.

Similarly, study participants working in Ethiopia, Sudan, and South Sudan mentioned challenges of delivering SEL to pastoral and nomadic refugee and displaced communities, and specifically communities with repeated student absences. As SEL is commonly defined as an ongoing process, rather than a single-time intervention (CASEL, 2023), these respondents reported that helping children to develop and practice certain social and emotional competencies is difficult when teachers have few contact hours with them in a week or even a month. This is exemplified by Hakim from Ethiopia: "Since the community is largely pastoralist, absence during the afternoon sessions is a challenge" (Interview, March 24, 2022).

Sustainable funding for refugee education and the EiE sector generally has been a persistent challenge for decades. Though, these findings demonstrate that, in addition to a general lack of funds, donors who fund SEL activities within the EiE sector do not acknowledge or take advantage of existing and/or former activities and programs. Not taking these into account is a costly oversight that clearly affects the continuity, capacity, resources, and quality of EiE teams and programming. If donors were committed to sustaining and/or building upon the work of previous projects, grants, and donors, then perhaps EiE teams would have more capacity to address key issues like student absence. Additionally, the challenge of working with pastoral and nomadic refugee and displaced communities is another example of the lack of contextualization and cultural-responsiveness of SEL as described previously; the problem does not lie with the communities and their practices, but rather the Western assumptions and post-colonial logics about what kind of education refugee children *need* and the resulting program design and implementation.

Operating in the dark: The continued lack of evidence
In line with the global dearth of evidence on the impacts of SEL in refugee and crisis contexts discussed previously, no study participant was able to provide explicit data or evidence related to the results of their SEL programming. Some respondents were able to provide data related to their overall EiE activities (e.g. number of students reached, number of teachers trained, attendance rates, etc.), though without any explicit link to the SEL component of their programming. Some participants did mention that they have conducted qualitative interviews, generated case studies, held focus-group discussions, and have had informal conversations with refugee-community members about the overall impact of their SEL programming, which have shown perceived positive results. However, much of this data was only corroborated by interviewees themselves reporting their own observations of positive improvements in refugee communities. This is exemplified by Nico in Kenya: "The kids said they really liked the approach and want to continue with the sessions. They mentioned that the coaches are different from regular teachers, that they care for them and have fun with them"(Interview, March 18, 2022). Additionally, while working across the region, Avery shared: "I have attended a lot of the teacher trainings and I can tell you the teachers really love the PSS and SEL module.

They get really into the mindfulness activities and are really energized to support their students" (Interview, March 1, 2022).

All study participants confirmed that their organizations have not yet completed any formal assessment or evaluation that could illuminate the specific impacts that their SEL programming has had on refugee communities in the region. Though, a few participants reported that their organizations have plans for future research and assessments to help understand the effects and outcomes of their SEL activities. For example, Rene in Uganda mentioned that they are working with national universities on a robust research agenda, which includes studies looking at SEL; though none have been completed yet. Additionally, Casey reported that their multi-country project includes a sophisticated research agenda and monitoring and evaluation framework, specifically intended to generate evidence related to SEL; though this evidence has yet to be produced. This general lack of evidence on the impacts of SEL in refugee contexts in the region serves to reinforce this gap in the CIE and EiE scholarship described earlier. Further, it perpetuates the cycle of EiE practitioners, and donors who invest in SEL for refugee and crisis-contexts, operating on assumptions and post-colonial logics rather than evidence.

Variations
Understandings and objectives of SEL: The influence of sectors and delivery mechanisms
Findings illustrate that perceptions about what SEL is and its larger objectives are tied to the sectors and mechanisms through which it is delivered. SEL for refugee communities in East Africa is delivered through three main mechanisms: 1) integrated into formal schooling under the EiE sector; 2) MHPSS programming, delivered through both formal schooling and out-of-school activities, mainly under the CPiE sector; and 3) Life Skills programming, again delivered through both formal schooling and out-of-school activities, under both the EiE and CPiE sectors[9].

Most respondents described the goals and objectives of their SEL programming as aligned with global rhetoric on the potential benefits of SEL for refugee learners based on perceived or assumed deficits. These include improved academic achievement and psychosocial wellbeing, though programming priorities differ significantly by sector. For example, participants working in formal schools through the EiE sector first prioritized an improvement in academic achievement, followed by school-readiness, support for whole child development, psychosocial wellbeing, and skills for later life. This is exemplified by Amara from Ethiopia who reported that: "Our main goal is to improve children's learning; we just want them to get through school" (Interview, April 11, 2022),

---

[9] Education in Emergencies (EiE) and Child Protection in Emergencies (CPiE) are two types of programming sectors within humanitarian response. EiE programming is concerned with ensuring all individuals have access to safe and quality learning opportunities during humanitarian emergencies and can included: formal education, non-formal education, accelerated learning, recreational activities, etc. CPiE programming is concerned with preventing and responding to violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect of children in humanitarian emergencies and can include: setting up and managing referral systems, case management, providing counseling and psychosocial support, positive parenting training, etc. While programming in these two sectors usually have separate funding sources and programming approaches, there is often overlap and coordination across EiE and CPiE activities and child protection is usually mainstreamed through EiE activities.

while Peter from Rwanda shared that they: "[…]have integrated SEL into a pre-existing ECD school-readiness program targeting teachers and school leaders" (Interview, March 9, 2022).

Additionally, practitioners who integrate SEL into formal schooling perceive SEL according to the CASEL definition, a process by which young people and adults learn and apply certain knowledge and skills related to social and emotional domains (CASEL, 2023). These interviewees reported using an SEL framework to guide their programming. In particular, most individuals reported using materials that draw directly on the CASEL framework, which aims to support learners to build competencies in the domains of: self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Some participants also reported that their organizations have developed, or draw from, similar frameworks that include alternative or additional domains, including: physical development, cognitive development, creativity, character-building, values, personality, and self-efficacy.

Similarly, practitioners delivering SEL through Life Skills programming also reported using frameworks that include competencies reflective of those used in formal schools. For example, Muhammad in Sudan reported using the CASEL framework, whereas frameworks mentioned by other interviewees focus heavily on skills like: teamwork, communication, collaboration, conflict-resolution, critical thinking, problem-solving, self-confidence, goal-setting, and assertiveness. When asked what the larger goals and objectives of their Life Skills/SEL programming are, participant answers varied from: supporting children to gain skills that will prepare them for adulthood, helping children learn to cope with stress, and supporting children's learning and development outside of formal school spaces. For example, Nico in Kenya shared that they:

> "[…]deliver social sports sessions made up of games that are designed to teach about specific skills and social topics. For example, how to prevent certain diseases, what are my rights, different forms of violence. The core of our curriculum is resilience" (Interview March 18, 2022).

In contrast, SEL delivered through MHPSS programming, largely supported by the CPiE sector, is often not guided by specific SEL frameworks. Rather, SEL is perceived as a byproduct of the MHPSS activities, as shared by Jessie from Kenya: "Our flagship program is a PSS intervention, so we are supporting children's social and emotional health naturally through that program" (Interview, March 16, 2022). Reported MHPSS activities include art, music, and dance to help focus children's attention and support motor-skill development, as well as a large focus on stress-reduction and coping strategies to support learners and educators to work through and recover from traumatic experiences. These activities aim to support learners to develop competencies and characteristics including: resilience, self-expression, self-regulation, communication, collaboration, cooperation, teamwork, conflict-resolution, creativity, problem-solving, and self-confidence. Additionally, practitioners delivering SEL through MHPSS programming unsurprisingly perceive the main goal to be the psychosocial wellbeing of learners, educators, and their larger communities, as Muhammad from Sudan confirmed: "SEL is part of our child-friendly space services. It helps to mitigate the

impacts of conflict on children, making them calm, providing psychological first aid right after families come to the camp" (Interview, March 16, 2022).

These findings demonstrate that there is both overlap and divergence of SEL intervention objectives, as well as the competencies and behaviors that these interventions aim to help learners develop (see Figure 1). Though, it is clear that the delivery mechanism and associated programming sector highly influence how practitioners think about, design, and implement their SEL interventions. This is illustrated further in the sections below.

Figure 1
SEL Delivery Mechanism Comparison
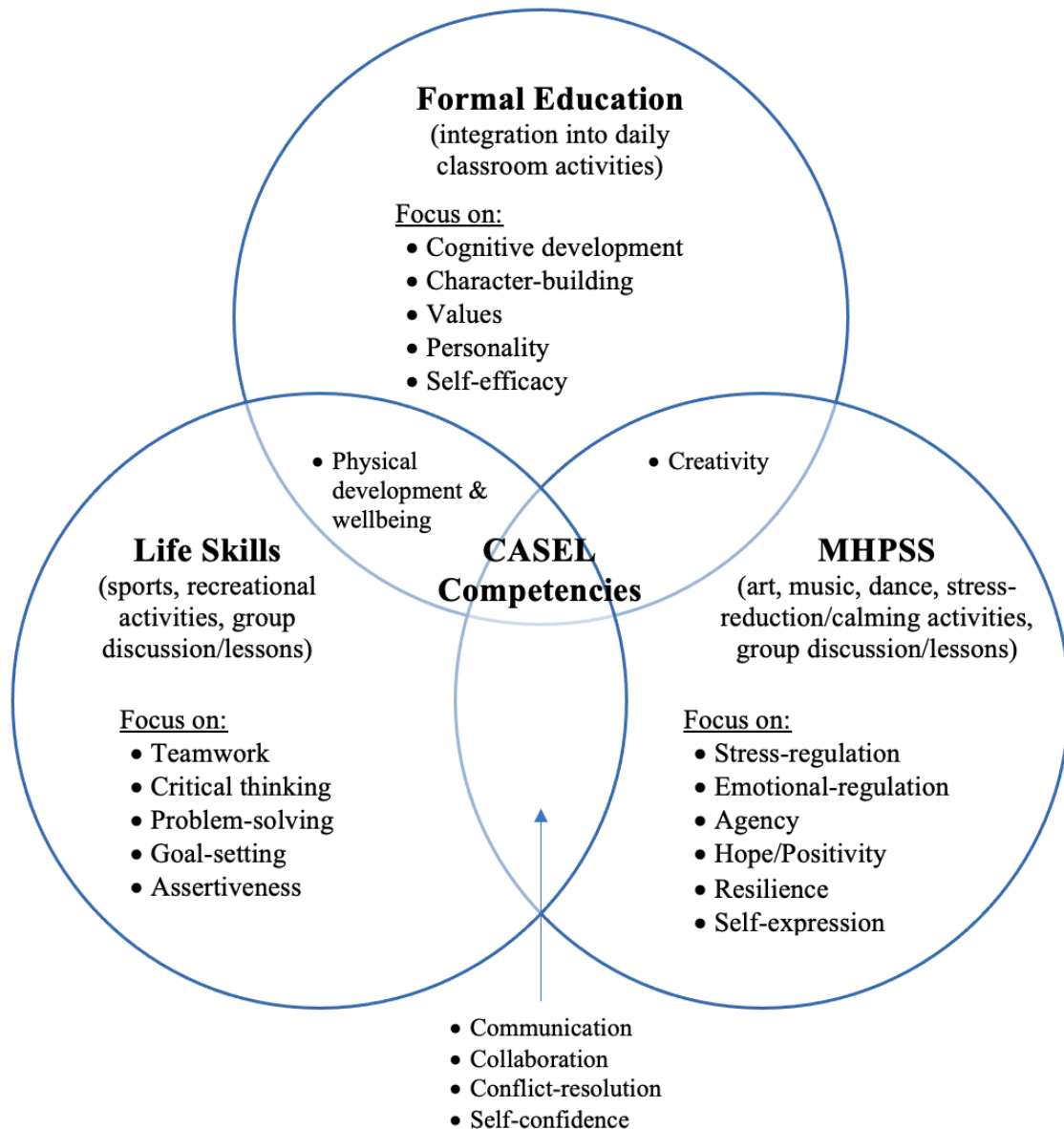
"It's not new, just different": Refugee community perceptions of SEL
SEL was generally reported as a new term for refugee communities, but not necessarily a new concept. While a few study participants mentioned that refugee communities were aware of the term SEL due to previous programming, many participants reported that refugee communities were familiar with the general tenants of SEL, but did not refer to this kind of learning and development specifically as SEL. This is exemplified by Eddie from Uganda: "When we explain it to them [the refugees] they say 'Ah, it's just a different way of doing what we do'. But they are not explicitly aware of SEL as a term" (Interview, March 24, 2022). Some participants mentioned that traditionally, helping children develop social and emotional competencies is often done in community settings through mechanisms like religious education and by community and religious leaders; sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally, as Jonah from Tanzania shared:

> "[The term] SEL is not well known here. There are some people doing it, but they don't call it SEL activities. Many activities may touch on some [SEL] skills, but they are traditionally learned in the community or at home, not school" (Interview, March 7, 2022).

Many interviewees felt that current SEL programming is not new, but is organized and structured in a more intentional way that brings explicit awareness to the process of learning and development, especially by embedding it in institutions like formal schooling. For example, Yafet from Ethiopia reported that:

> "The [refugee] community had some awareness of the components of SEL in an unstructured manner when we started the program, but what we do is put what the community has in a structured manner. So the program is not completely new, but reorganized in a meaningful way that impacts the awareness and overall practice" (Interview, March 23, 2022).

Additionally, participants using the Life Skills delivery mechanism voiced that refugee communities were more familiar with the concept of Life Skills, which is why SEL is often conflated with such programming and terminology, as shared by Nico from Kenya: "When discussing our work with [refugee] parents and community members we generally use the term Life Skills, not PSS or SEL, because Life Skills has been around forever compared to PSS and SEL" (Interview, March 18, 2022). Alternatively, participants using the MHPSS delivery mechanism generally perceive SEL and PSS as being one in the same, and regularly interchange the terms, as Ibrahim from South Sudan demonstrated: "Our program is focused mainly on PSS and mental health, so we often use SEL and PSS as the same when talking with refugee communities" (Interview, April 21, 2022).

While many respondents conceptualize SEL as an educational approach that can be integrated into formal schooling, others conflate it with Life Skills or MHPSS. Additionally, while some refugee communities may already be familiar with the underlying tenants of SEL, most are not aware of the specific term SEL and its more structured and formalized approach. While I do not argue that a consistent definition and approach for SEL should be developed and adopted by all practitioners and

agencies worldwide, this data highlights clear inconsistencies among practitioners currently working in the East Africa Region. Further, these findings again highlight: 1) the lack of understanding about existing refugee concepts and practices related to SEL; 2) the limited recognition that the term SEL does not exist or even translate in many communities; and 3) no clear intentions to try and address these tensions.

Integration vs. stand-alone: Sectoral influence on implementation approaches
A curriculum and training-based methodology was the most commonly cited way of delivering SEL interventions. This includes developing new and/or utilizing pre-existing training materials to train teachers, parents, coaches, and facilitators to deliver SEL content directly to children, whether through formal schooling, community settings, or recreational activities. This also includes providing curricula, often with sequenced lesson plans and activities, as well as general guidance materials to these adult stakeholders. Some SEL interventions also use a multi-media approach by incorporating radio broadcasts, interactive voice response calling, and tablet-based activities. Though many of these activities either recently emerged as a necessity due to the COVID-19 pandemic, or are still in development and have yet to be officially tested and/or implemented.

Despite these common activities, interviewees reported significant variation regarding perceptions of SEL as a stand-alone intervention versus using an integrated approach. For example, most SEL programs delivered through formal schooling are integrated into daily teaching practices and instructional routine, as exemplified by Avery in their work across the region: "We have tried to train teachers to think of SEL as something that facilitates learning and should always be present in the classroom, not something extra" (Interview, March 1, 2022). Alternatively, many Life Skills and MHPSS programs that include SEL are delivered as stand-alone interventions, as demonstrated by Eli from Tanzania: "This is a specific program delivered in CFSs [child friendly spaces] that targets SEL and PSS skills and doesn't really relate to other programming" (Interview, February 23, 2022).

Whether SEL is integrated into other programming or delivered as a stand-alone intervention is again influenced by which sector SEL programming falls under: EiE or CPiE. For SEL programming falling within the EiE sector, it is often perceived as something that should be integrated into teacher pedagogy, daily practice, and embraced through a whole community approach. SEL through formal schooling is also often connected with other humanitarian activities, social institutions, and supports within a community. However, SEL falling under the CPiE sector usually results in MHPSS or Life Skills programming that is somewhat self-contained, having a very specific and sequenced implementation approach, tied to a finite timeline with clear curricular modules, and with specific indicators for measurement of impact. Indeed, study participants from Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, and Tanzania shared curricula materials and facilitator guides that outline specific modules designed to be delivered by classroom teachers, sports coaches, and MHPSS counselors within specific timeframes and tied to particular domains and objectives.

While curriculum and training-based strategies are the leading approach, with multi-media interventions gaining popularity, perceptions of whether SEL should be an

integrated versus stand-alone intervention are clearly divided among those working in EiE vs. CPiE. As shown previously, these sectors also influence attitudes about the main objectives of SEL programming. The EiE sector is rooted in philosophies of teaching and learning and child development, whereas CPiE and MHPSS programming is largely rooted in the field of clinical psychology. Despite global guidance encouraging the EiE and CPiE sectors to collaborate through integrated and coordinated approaches in an effort to galvanize multi-sectoral resources, maximize programmatic impact, and better support whole child development (INEE & ACPHA, 2020), SEL implementation with refugees in East Africa continues to be siloed and limited by humanitarian sector norms, philosophies, and the theoretical fields that inform them.

Not just for younger children: Target groups of SEL
Target groups of SEL programming also varied significantly by sector. Most formal-school programming targets refugee children either at the primary-school-age level (ages 6-12) or children in the early childhood age range (3-5), or in rare cases both. SEL programming at the secondary-school level was only reported by two respondents, as illustrated by Avery in their work across the region: "We don't see SEL for secondary school students, so that is why our program is targeting that age range; they need it too. It's not just for younger children" (Interview, March 1, 2022).

SEL activities delivered through MHPSS and Life Skills programming reportedly target refugee children as young as three and as old as eighteen, though often breaking children up into appropriate age groupings (i.e. 3-6; 7-10; 11-14; 15-18). A number of programs also target host-community learners, over-age learners (i.e. those in accelerated learning programs), out-of-school children (i.e. orphans and street children), and children in non-school settings, for example through sports and recreational activities, as Nico from Kenya confirmed: "We target mostly primary school-age children, but some of them are a bit older because they've missed some schooling. We also work with older siblings of these children, so youth I guess" (Interview, March 18, 2022). Many interviewees also mentioned including educators, parents/caregivers, and community members as participants in trainings that aim to prepare adults to deliver SEL activities directly to children and, in-so-doing, helping to build SEL competencies, and particularly stress-reduction skills, for these adult stakeholders. Mustafa from South Sudan shared that: "[Refugee] communities were skeptical of SEL at first because they didn't want to share the difficulties they were going through, but they are embracing it now; [the training] has really improved psychosocial wellbeing for them, especially the parents" (Interview, April 21, 2022).

While SEL delivered through MHPSS and Life Skills programming targets stakeholders of a wider age range, many SEL activities delivered through formal schooling target mostly children at the early childhood or primary school levels, despite global rhetoric that SEL is a life-long process and should target individuals of all ages. This could indicate: 1) limited funds and/or capacity to reach a wider age range; 2) that donors and/or implementors feel SEL is mostly beneficial for younger ages; or 3) that donors and/or implementors perceive SEL as a one-time intervention, rather than an ongoing life-long process. While probing into these conjectures was beyond the scope of this study, this highlights a gap of knowledge and practice within the EiE field and further research into this area of inquiry is encouraged.

Discussion

While this study set out to explore how EiE actors understand and implement SEL interventions with refugee communities in East Africa, and the implications of those interventions, the findings reveal significant tensions related to issues of culture, power, and the complicated reality of implementing refugee education initiatives in the region. One such finding is that understandings and perceptions of what SEL is and how it should be delivered vary significantly within and between NGOs and practitioners. Actors continue to interchange the terms SEL, PSS, and Life Skills and use them inconsistently. As outlined by in the scholarship discussed earlier (Gallagher, 2018; Soye & Tauson, 2018), this inconsistency causes significant confusion across EiE and CPiE practitioners about what exactly SEL is, how it should be delivered, and what its main objectives are. This confusion perpetuates poor coordination and siloed approaches between the EiE and CPiE sectors, resulting in the limited effectiveness of SEL interventions.

Additionally, definitions and approaches to SEL are heavily influenced by what sector and type of programming SEL is delivered through, as well as the theoretical foundations of these sectors and approaches. Those working through the EiE sector understand SEL as an educational approach, rooted in child development theories, that should be integrated into daily teaching practices and other routine education activities. However, those working through the CPiE sector perceive SEL as a targeted stand-alone approach that contributes to larger MHPSS objectives, rooted in clinical psychology. As mentioned above, existing scholarship has demonstrated the confusion, inconsistency, and limited program effectiveness that these differing sectoral perceptions and approaches have caused for some time. As a result, global guidance has been developed by EiE and CPiE actors, which emphasizes the need to integrate SEL across EiE and CPiE activities in a coordinated and cohesive manner. However, study findings demonstrate that SEL implementation with refugees in East Africa remains siloed. These siloed approaches appear to be common practice as they can be found in numerous past and present refugee SEL initiatives globally (Save the Children, 2023; Shah, 2017; Torrente et al., 2019). Yet, this practice serves to perpetuate disjointed, repetitive, and inadequate programming, rather than collaborative and maximized efforts that could potentially reach more refugee children and improve the perceived and assumed academic and psychosocial deficits among refugee learners.

Despite these differences of understanding and implementation, it is clear that SEL delivered through both sectors is heavily influenced by Western frameworks, materials, and standards developed at the *global* level. Whether using open-source frameworks like CASEL, organization-specific materials, or developing *local* SEL frameworks, the foundational content, domains, and competencies that all SEL interventions (examined in this study) utilize are rooted in and guided by the Western conceptualization of SEL. In line with the scholarship presented earlier (Brush et al., 2022; Gay, 2018; Jeong, 2019; Jones et al., 2019; Jukes et al., 2018), study findings demonstrate that this more structured and explicit approach to SEL does not align with how some refugee communities and cultures understand, teach, and learn social and emotional competencies. This contributes to discourse that problematizes the imposition of Western SEL interventions in refugee contexts, as well as other Western educational interventions (e.g. LCP, ECD, PBL, literacy, life-long learning, etc.), and the fact that they may be limited or

unsuccessful due to a lack of refugee community understanding and buy-in. Additionally, without understanding and building upon existing refugee conceptualizations and practices of SEL, Western approaches could potentially enact forms of cultural imperialism and subaltern epistemicide, as argued by Nsamenang (2011) and Tabulawa (2013), that undermine or erase existing practices and conceptualizations of SEL in non-Western refugee contexts. These consequences could negatively impact continued investment—by donors, NGOs, and other actors—in SEL for refugees in the East Africa region, and globally, if it proves to be ineffective or culturally pernicious.

In order to avoid these potential consequences, global guidance has been issued on the crucial need to contextualize and adapt Western and "global" SEL materials for refugee and crisis contexts, and involve community stakeholders in that process (Berg et al., 2017; INEE, 2022; USAID, 2021). However, most interviewees either did not engage in a contextualization process or were unable to recall the extent, depth, and quality of the process. Actors also reported little or no engagement with refugee communities when designing and delivering their SEL interventions. Those who detailed some form of contextualization and/or community engagement made clear that it was a performative and "tick-box" action, rather than genuine or meaningful engagement. This not only demonstrates a clear tension and disconnect between what is recommended in theory and what is happening in reality, but also illustrates the unequal power dynamics between implementing actors and refugee communities. NGOs appear to hold much of the decision-making power related to educational programming like SEL for refugee communities in East Africa, thus replicating the common and historical practice of stripping refugee communities of their agency and self-determination (Agier, 2011; Harrell-Bond, 1986; Krause, 2021; Malkki, 1996).

These unequal power dynamics are also fortified by the fact that SEL programming in East Africa is largely driven by donor priorities, global best practices, and coordination mechanisms, not by refugee communities. As demonstrated above, scholars and practitioners recognize that SEL is not new, but rather a particularly structured way of supporting individuals to learn certain skills and competencies. However, donors continue to insist that NGOs utilize Western SEL approaches, based on "global best practice", rather than building on existing or previous SEL, or SEL-adjacent, practices and programming in refugee contexts. This not only reinforces the inequity of power between donors, NGOs, and refugee communities, but also results in repetitive and ineffective programming. As SEL is considered to be an on-going, life-long process, and the potential benefits of SEL take time to manifest (CASEL, 2023), this lack of continuity in programming will especially perpetuate the limited success and impact of SEL—and similar EiE interventions, with refugee communities in the region.

A final key tension identified through this study relates to the integration of refugee children into national education systems. When engaging with Ministries of Education in East Africa to develop national SEL frameworks, no study participants mentioned the integration of refugee and displaced children into national education systems of their host countries. Despite the existence of numerous regional commitments towards this goal, SEL appears to function as an indicator that these commitments exist mostly in theory and have yet to be realistically executed. If national governments, donors, and

relevant agencies continue to delay meaningful processes of refugee integration, they will only perpetuate the protracted nature of many refugee communities in the region, thus subjecting refugee learners to the repetitive, inadequate, and ineffective education programming that has plagued them for decades.

Conclusion

The tensions, challenges, and complex dynamics related to culture and power identified through this examination of SEL with refugees in East Africa are not unique to SEL or refugee education for that matter. Rather, the findings speak to broader Western educational trends and topical EiE interventions globally (e.g. gender, protection, inclusion) and the fact that many of these interventions are: 1) rooted in Western concepts, philosophies, and approaches; 2) NGO and donor-driven; and 3) repetitive and inadequate. I acknowledge the hard work and positive intentions of the study participants and do not discourage EiE actors from continuing to uphold the right to education for refugees and endeavoring to improve EiE programming globally. However, the EiE field must first acknowledge the existing challenges and tensions in the field, like those presented in this article, in order to meaningfully address them and uphold the humanitarian principle of *do no harm*.

This article begins to address the qualitative and critical gap in CIE and EiE scholarship on SEL in refugee contexts, however more research is needed to fully understand how refugee communities in East Africa—and globally, receive and experience SEL interventions and what the deeper impacts of these interventions are. Additionally, research on why SEL interventions delivered through formal schooling target mostly younger refugee children, and not older refugee learners, could help to inform EiE practices and donor policies to align with the concept of SEL as a life-long process and ensure older refugee students also reap the perceived benefits of SEL. Finally, examination of SEL contextualization processes—and the development of *local* SEL frameworks, as well as to what extent refugees retain and travel with learned SEL knowledge, and the cultural and behavior-change implications of this, could also help CIE and EiE practitioners and scholars understand if and how SEL functions as a tool of Westernization, cultural imperialism, and subaltern epistemicide. Adding these areas of inquiry to the CIE and EiE research agendas will not only serve to inform other current topical EiE interventions, but also the broader uptake of SEL by education systems globally.

Kelsey A. Dalrymple *has nearly 15 years of experience in the fields of education and humanitarian response, focusing mostly on refugee education. She is currently a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where she is critically examining the use of social emotional learning in refugee and crisis contexts.*

References

ACPF & AMC. (2019). *In the Firing Line: The War on Africa's Children*. https://www.africanchildforum.org/index.php/en/sobipro?sid=207

Agier, M. (2011). *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government*. Polity Press.

Berg, J., Osher, D., Moroney, D., & Yoder, N. (2017). The Intersection of School Climate and Social and Emotional Development.

Bourdillon, M., & Musvosvi, E. (2014). What can children's rights mean when children are struggling to survive? The case of Chiweshe, Zimbabwe. In A. Imoh & N. Answell (Eds.), Children's Lives in an Era of Children's Rights: The Progress of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Africa (pp. 105–122). Routledge.

Brown, F. L., Graaff, A. M., Annan, J., & Betancourt, T. S. (2017). Annual Research Review: Breaking cycles of violence – a systematic review and common practice elements analysis of psychosocial interventions for children and youth affected by armed conflict. The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 58(4), 507–524. https://doi.org/doi:10.1111/jcpp.12671

Brush, K., Jones, S. M., Bailey, R., Nelson, B., Raisch, N., & Meland, E. (2022). Social and Emotional Learning: From Conceptualization to Practical Application in a Global Context. In J. DeJaeghere & E. Murphy-Graham (Eds.), Life Skills Education for Youth: Young People and Learning Processes in School and Everyday Life (pp. 43–71). Springer. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-85214-6_3

Carney, S. (2008). Negotiating Policy in an Age of Globalization: Exploring Educational "Policyscapes" in Denmark, Nepal, and China. Comparative Education Review, 53(1). https://doi.org/0010-4086/2009/5301-0004$10.00

CASEL. (2023). Fundamentals of SEL. CASEL. https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/

Chick, G. (2010). Work, Play, and Learning. In D. Lancy, J. Bock, & S. Gaskins (Eds.), The Anthropology of Learning in Childhood (pp. 119–143). AltaMira Press.

Chiu, B., & Huaman, E. (2020). Who Drives Social-Emotional Learning? https://mgiep.unesco.org/article/who-drives-social-emotional-learning#

Cole, L. (2017). Key Issues on Agenda 2063 and Their Relevance to the Education Sector in Africa. Global Partnership for Education. https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/key-issues-agenda-2063-and-their-relevance-education-sector-africa

Crawford, N., & O'Callaghan, S. (2019). The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework Responsibility-sharing and self-reliance in East Africa.

Devictor, X. (2019). 2019 update: How long do refugees stay in exile? To find out, beware of averages. The World Bank.

Diazgranados Ferráns, S., Weiss-Yagoda, J., & Tubbs Dolan, C. (2019). Measuring social-emotional learning outcomes for children in crisis: An education in emergencies open-source measurement library (NISSEM 37; NISSEM Global Briefs).

Dryden-Peterson, S. (2011). Refugee Education: A Global Review. https://www.unhcr.org/hu/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2016/12/Dryden_R efugee_Education_Global-Rvw.pdf

Dryden-Peterson, S., Adelman, E., Bellino, M., & Chopra, V. (2019). The Purpose of Refugee Education: Policy and Practice of Including Refugees in National Education Systems. Sociology of Education, 92(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040719863054

D'Sa, N., & Krupar, A. (2021). Developing and Validating the International Social and Emotional Learning Assessment: Evidence from a Pilot Test with Syrian Refugee Children in Iraq. Journal on Education in Emergencies, 7(2), 20–56. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.33682/xdpq-bwp2

ECW. (2018). Strategic Plan 2018-2021.

ECW. (2023). Crisis-Affected Children and Adolescents in Need of Education Support: New Global Estimates and Thematic Deep Dives.

Ferris, E. (2018). When refugee displacement drags on, is self-reliance the answer? The Brookings Institute. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/06/19/when-refuge e-displacement-drags-on-is-self-reliance-the-answer/

Gallagher, E. (2018). Mental health and Psychosocial Support and Social and Emotional Learning support for learning outcomes in conflict-affected settings. UK Department for International Development. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c70058140f0b603de07e331/475 _MHPSS_and_SEL_support_for_learning_outcomes_in_conflict-affected_settings .pdf

Gay, G. (2018). Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice. Teachers College Press.

Harrell-Bond, (1986). Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees. Oxford University Press.

Hyndman, J., & Giles, W. (2019). Protracted displacement: living on the edge. In A. Bloch & G. Dona (Eds.), Forced Migration: Current Issues and Debates (pp. 74–87). Routledge.

IGAD Member States. (2017). Djibouti Declaration on Regional Conference on Refugee Education in IGAD Member States. https://globalcompactrefugees.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/2018 Addis Ababa Call for Action on Implementation of the Djibouti Declaration.pdf

INEE. (2016). INEE Background Paper on Psychosocial Support and Social and Emotional Learning for Children and Youth in Emergency Settings.

INEE. (2018). Guidance Note: Psychosocial Support-facilitating psychosocial wellbeing and social and emotional learning.

INEE. (2022). PSS-SEL Toolbox.

INEE & ACPHA. (2020). Collaboration Across Child Protection in Humanitarian Action and Education in Emergencies.

Jeong, J. (2019). Researching cultural nuances and values for a contextually and culturally relevant social and emotional learning in Ghana: Methodological and conceptual challenges (NISSEM 9; NISSEM Global Briefs).

Jones, S., Bailey, R., Meland, E., Brush, K., & Nelson, B. (2019). Integrating international frameworks into the taxonomy project: A report for Echidna Giving.

Jones, S., & Doolittle, E. (2017). Social and Emotional Learning: Introducing the Issue. The Future of Children, 27(1).

Jukes, M. C. H., Gabrieli, P., Loti Mgonda, N., Nsolezi, F. S., Jeremiah, G., Tibenda, J. J., & Bub, K. L. (2018). "Respect is an Investment": Community Perceptions of Social and Emotional Competencies in Early Childhood from Mtwara, Tanzania. Global Education Review, 5(2), 160–188.

Karas, T. (2019). Deeply Talks: Refugee Children and Resilience. The New Humanitarian. https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/refugees/community/2019/03/01/deeply-talks-refugee-children-and-resilience

Krause, U. (2021). Colonial roots of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its effects on the global refugee regime. Journal of International Relations and Development, 24, 599–626.

Lancy, D. (1996). Playing on the Mother-Ground: Cultural Routines for Children's Development. The Guilford Press.

Malkki, L. (1996). Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization. Cultural Anthropology, 11(3), 377–404.

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2006). Designing Qualitative Research. SAGE Publications.

Maudeni, T. (2010). Challenges faced in the implementation of provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in Botswana. Journal of Social Development in Africa, 25(1), 59–84.

Maxwell, J. A. (2013). Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach. SAGE Publications.

Milner, J. (2019). A History of Asylum in Kenya and Tanzania: Understanding the Drivers of Domestic Refugee Policy. Monde(s), 1(15), 69–92.

Morrice, L. (2021). The promise of refugee lifelong education: A critical review of the field. International Review of Education, 67, 851–869. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-021-09927-5

Mucherah, W., & Mbogori, T. (2019). Examining Child Development from an African Cultural Context. Global Journal of Transformative Education Transformative Education, 1(1), 11–17. https://doi.org/10.14434/gjte.v1i1.26140

Ndofirepi, A., Makaye, J., & Ndofirepi, E. (2012). To discipline or to punish? A critical discourse on schooling in South Africa. Greener Journal of Educational Research, 2(4), 83–90.

Ng'asike, J. (2014). African early childhood development curriculum and pedagogy for Turkana nomadic pastoralist communities of Kenya. New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, 2014(146), 43–60. https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20072

Nsamenang, A. B. (1995). Theories of Developmental Psychology for a Cultural Perspective: A Viewpoint from Africa. Psychology and Developing Societies, 7(1), 1–19.

Nsamenang, A. B. (2011). The culturalization of developmental trajectories: A perspective on African childhoods and adolescences. In L. A. Jensen (Ed.), Bridging cultural and developmental approaches to psychology: new syntheses in theory, research, and policy (pp. 235–254). Oxford University Press.

O'Keef, P., & Lovey, T. (2022). Meaningful higher education in Kakuma refugee camp: A case study of why context and contextualization matter. Prospects. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-022-09610-z

Pence, A., & Marfo, K. (2008). Early childhood development in Africa: Interrogating constraints of prevailing knowledge bases. International Journal of Psychology, 43(2), 78–87. https://doi.org/10.1080/00207590701859143

Piper, B., Dryden-Peterson, S., Chopra, V., Reddick, C., & Oyanga, A. (2020). Are Refugee Children Learning? Early Grade Literacy in a Refugee Camp in Kenya. Journal on Education in Emergencies, 5(2), 71–107. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.33682/f1wr-yk6y

Rampa, S. (2014). Discipline in Schools: Assessing the Positive Alternative Invitational Discipline Approach. World Journal of Education, 4(4), 20–29.

Reddick, C., & Dryden-Peterson, S. (2021). Refugee Education and Medium of Instruction: Tensions in Theory, Policy, and Practice. In C. Benson & K. Kosonen (Eds.), Language Issues in Comparative Education II (pp. 208–233). Koninklijke Brill NV.

Renau, A. (2022). LEGO donates $143 million to address "global early childhood emergency" exacerbated by pandemic. Upworthy. https://www.upworthy.com/lego-donates-143-million-in-grant-money-for-early-childhood-development

Rwantabagu, H. (2010). Moral education in a post-conflict contexts: the case of Burundi. Journal of Moral Education, 39(3), 345–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2010.497614

Sakata, N., Oketch, M., & Candappa, M. (2021). Pedagogy and History: Ujamaa and Learner-Centered Pedagogy in Tanzania. Comparative Education Review, 65(1), 56–75.

Save the Children. (2023, June 7). Healing and Education Through the Arts (HEART). https://www.savethechildren.org/us/what-we-do/protection/healing-and-education-through-the-arts

Serpell, R. (2019). Perspectivist Challenges for ECD Intervention in Africa. In A. Kjorholt & H. Penn (Eds.), Early Childhood and Development Work: Theories, Policies, and Practices (pp. 39–68). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91319-3_3

Shah, R. (2017). Improving Children's Wellbeing: An Evaluation of NRC's Better Learning Programme in Palestine. https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/evaluations/nrc-blp-palestine-summary.pdf

Sharif, I. (2020). The Applicability of learner-centered education in refugee settings: The Syrian refugee teachers' case study. Global Education Review, 7(4), 74–92. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1285084.pdf

Sibanda, L., & Mpofu, M. (2017). Positive Discipline Practices in Schools: A Case of Mzilikazi District Secondary Schools in Zimbabwe. Journal of Educational and Social Research, 7(3), 117–125.

Soye, E., & Tauson, M. (2018). Psychosocial Wellbeing and Socio-Emotional Learning in the Syrian Refugee Response: Challenges and Opportunities.

Sullivan, A. L., & Simonson, G. R. (2016). A Systematic Review of School-Based Social-Emotional Interventions for Refugee and War-Traumatized Youth. Review of Educational Research, 86(2), 503–530. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315609419

Tabulawa, R. (2003). International Aid Agencies, Learner-Centered Pedagogy and Political Democratisation: a critique. Comparative Education, 39(1), 7–26.

Tabulawa, R. (2013). Teaching and Learning in Context: Why Pedagogical Reforms Fail in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The Perspective. (2023, April 12). The Lost Generation? The International Failure of Refugee Education. https://www.theperspective.se/2022/04/15/migration/a-lost-generation-the-international-failure-of-refugee-education/

Torrente, C., Aber, J. L., Starkey, L., Johnston, B., Shivshanker, A., Weisenhorn, N., Annan, J., Seidman, E., Wolf, S., & Tubbs Dolan, C. (2019). Improving Primary Education in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: End-Line Results of a Cluster-Randomized Wait-List Controlled Trial of Learning in a Healing Classroom. Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 12(3), 413–447.

Tubbs Dolan, C., & Weiss-Yagoda, J. (2019). IRC Healing Classrooms Retention Support Programming Improves Syrian Refugee Children's Learning In Lebanon: Vol. 1.1.

UN News. (2022, April 13). Eastern Africa: Millions displaced, amid growing hunger, 'unprecedented needs.' UN News. https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1116132

UNESCO. (2019). Education as healing: Addressing the trauma of displacement through social emotional learning (No. 38). https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000367812

UNHCR. (2016). Missing Out: Refugee Education in Crisis.

UNHCR. (2021). Staying the Course: The Challenges Facing Refugee Education.

UNHCR. (2022a). Africa. https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/africa.html

UNHCR. (2022b). Refugee Statistics. https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/#:~:text=Sub-Saharan Africa,at the end of 2021.&text=20 per cent of the global refugee population.

UNHCR. (2022c, June 16). East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes.

UNICEF. (2019). Data snapshot of migrant and displaced children in Africa.

USAID. (2021). Consider the Context: Why and How to Factor Environment in Measuring SEL/Soft Kills.

USAID. (2022). Social and Emotional Learning Systematic Review - Study Brief.

Vavrus, F., & Bartlett, L. (2012). Comparative Pedagogies and Episte- mological Diversity: Social and Materials Contexts of Teaching in Tanzania. Comparative Education Review, 45(2), 213–229.

Vavrus, F., Thomas, M., & Bartlett, L. (2011). Ensuring quality by attending to inquiry: Learner-centered pedagogy in sub-Saharan Africa (No. 4; Fundamentals of Teacher Education Development).

Viruru, R. (2001). Early childhood education. Postcolonial perspectives from India. SAGE Publications.

Williams, C. (2020). African Refugee History. African Studies Review, 63(3), 560–567. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.76