Human Rights and Human Capital: The Influence of the UNHCR and the OECD on the Swedish Refugee Education Reform

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This study analyzes differences between the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) global scripts and how they influence Sweden's refugee education reform. This study examines human rights-based policies as recommended in the UNHCR's Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion (2023) and human capital-based policies in the OECD's Strength Through Diversity: Spotlight Report for Sweden (2019). I compare these recommendations to the enacted policies outlined in the Swedish Ministry of Education's legal framework, the School Act. I argue that tensions between human rights and human capital in Sweden's refugee education reform are exacerbated by global pressures, supporting world society theory. The findings reveal the degree of alignment between each international governmental organization's policy recommendations and Sweden's refugee education reforms, contributing to the literature on refugee education both globally and in Sweden.

Keywords: International Governmental Organizations, human rights, human capital, refugee education, education reform, Sweden

Introduction

Human rights in education emphasize fundamental freedoms that all individuals are entitled to access education (Suarez & Ramirez, 2007). In contrast, human capital in education analyzes the economic value and rate of return in schooling, and strongly suggests that schooling is a good investment in propelling a country's economy (Hanushek, 2012). Worldwide educational systems rely heavily on human rights and human capital rationales to justify why education reform is important and why change is necessary (Choi, 2024). Refugee education reforms in Sweden serve as a quintessential landscape where both human rights and human capital frameworks have significantly shaped education policy, as the Swedish education system simultaneously guarantees refugee children legal rights to education and yet policy is explicitly referenced towards their integration and future labor market participation (Olsson et al., 2023) Yet, there is limited research on how policymakers reconcile the potential tensions between rights-based inclusion and economically-driven integration goals within Swedish refugee and global refugee education reform. This study is a qualitative comparison between the human

rights-based policies as recommended in the UNHCR's 2023 *Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion* and the human capital-based policies in the OECD's 2019 *Strength Through Diversity: Spotlight Report for Sweden* to ascertain the differences between the UNHCR's and OECD's global scripts and how they both influence Sweden's refugee education reform landscape.

Background

The Global Rise of Human Rights in Refugee Education

The rise of human rights-oriented education reforms is linked closely to processes of globalization following World War II. In this era, advocacy for human rights became a worldwide movement (Ramirez et al., 2007). After its formation in 1945, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which established education as a fundamental human right in Article 26 (UNESCO, 2021). Article 26 increased global awareness of education as a human right and pressured governments to ensure access for all (Ramirez et al., 2007; UNICEF, 2023). Shortly after, the UNHCR was established in 1950 to support the millions of individuals who were displaced in the aftermath of World War II (Goodwin-Gill et al., 2021). The UNHCR's 1951 *Convention of a Refugee* became the first legal document to define refugees and their rights, enshrining educational access as a fundamental right through Article 22. Ongoing conflict, human rights violations, and persecution have led to 117.4 million people being forcibly displaced worldwide, (UNHCR, 2025). As of 2025, the UNHCR recognizes over 42.5 million individuals as refugees, with 40% of that population being identified as children under the age of eighteen. Over the last 10 years, the number of refugee minors has more than doubled (Friedrich, 2016). Currently, nearly half of refugee children worldwide are without access to education (UNHCR, 2025). In response to the growing number of refugee children and the ongoing challenges to educational access in their host countries, UNHCR developed education briefs outlining human rights-based policy recommendations to improve access. The UNHCR's (2023) *Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion*[1], now serves as their most comprehensive publication. It builds upon the momentum of all published strategies of refugee education that precede it, with a set of policy recommendations and goals aimed at improving refugee education by 2030.

The Global Rise of Human Capital in Refugee Education

Human capital theory was quickly embraced by economists in the 1950s as a new way of thinking about education as a significant contributor to economic growth (Holden & Biddle, 2017). Research using the human capital framework examines the "rates of return" to education, which refers to the proportional increase in earnings associated with years of schooling, and theorizes how increased knowledge can bolster economic outcomes in modern societies (Crocker, 2006; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2012; Klees, 2016). Human capital ideology encourages educational

[1] Henceforth referred to as the "UNHCR document"

investment, and the OECD has been central in measuring the skills and competencies that give modern human capital its value (Cardoso, 2020). Created in 1961, the OECD was founded during the political and economic reconstruction following World War II (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009; Wolfe, 2008). In the 1960s, improving education quality became a key focus of global reforms. Soon after, OECD-influenced education policy became closely aligned with economic priorities (Papadopoulos, 1994; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). One of the ways in which the OECD claims to promote quality education as a means to ensure human capital development is through their international large-scale assessment, the Program for International Student Assessment, commonly known as the PISA. In the OECD's global prominence, PISA has played a vital role in driving, supporting, and shaping education policy and reform efforts worldwide (Fischman et al., 2018). Rising global refugee populations have created considerable pressure on OECD countries to provide accommodation and support integration (Cerna, 2019). The OECD's research on refugee education fulfills a vital need, as PISA scores have historically demonstrated how refugees continually yield lower results in comparison to their native peers (Cerna, 2019).

Recently, the OECD has begun to apply human capital-based reform pressure on the sector of refugee education, as outlined in their numerous *OECD Working Papers* publications, such as *Refugee Education: Integration Models and Practices in OECD Countries* (Cerna et al., 2019), or their country-based *Strength Through Diversity Spotlight* reports. The OECD's (Cerna et al., 2019) *Strength Through Diversity: Spotlight Report for Sweden*[2] provides policy recommendations to improve the quality of refugee education in a country with a substantial refugee population. These policy recommendations focus on future labor market integration, utilizing education as a key investment in human capital to support refugees' sustained economic integration in Sweden.

The Rise of Refugee Education in Sweden

Historically, Sweden has received more refugees per capita than any other European country (Jahan, 2016). As Swedish immigration policies expanded to offer asylum to individuals escaping conflict, refugee population rates have steadily risen in Sweden following World War II (Åmark, 2013; Sellström, 1999). In 2015, almost one in three students in Sweden had a refugee background (Cerna et al., 2019). Swedish educational policy reformation began to focus on long-term integration for refugees through education (Browder, 2018). Although Sweden holds strong policies for providing educational access for refugees, managing their refugee population is vital, as it can affect future labor markets. As refugees face ongoing difficulties in establishing a school-to-work "pay-off" in the labor market, the socioeconomic integration of refugees is a top priority in Swedish migration policy (Hélio et al., 2019; Wiesbrock, 2011).

[2] Henceforth referred to as the "OECD document"

The Swedish Ministry of Education's *School Act*, otherwise known as *Skollagen*, is the governing legal framework for Swedish education, representing all levels of education and servicing all individuals who are entitled to the education system, including refugees (Sveriges Riksdag, 2024). Sweden's large influx of asylum seekers has strained its educational systems, highlighting a number of educational challenges, such as long-term integration for refugees into the community (Cerna et al., 2019). However, the 2015 increase of refugee arrivals in Sweden also created a window of opportunity for path-breaking policy reformation on refugee education, enabling the Swedish government to introduce new approaches for market integration (Hagelund, 2020). Refugee education reform in Sweden can be observed as both human rights and human capital-oriented by promoting both educational access and quality for refugees, as outlined and enacted within the Swedish Ministry of Education's legal educational framework.

Critical Literature Review

The current emphasis on human rights education reflects a growing understanding of the individual person as a member of a global society rather than just a national citizen, and many studies have examined how human rights as a world culture have shaped educational curricula (Bromley & Andina, 2010; Choi, 2024; Meyer et al., 1997; Ramirez et al., 2007). Much of the literature regarding ideals of human rights within refugee education focuses heavily on the notion of access, and the specific global obligations to the educational rights that refugees hold is outlined by the 1951 Refugee Conventions (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Willems & Vernimmen, 2018). Extensive research suggests that the global commitment of "education for all" for refugees is dependent upon how individual nation-states interpret their responsibilities within these international declarations and treaties (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; McIntyre & Neuhaus, 2021; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012).

The United Nations' focus on education as a human right and the OECD's reliance on human capital lead to different emphases on education (Cardoso, 2020; Choi, 2024). Literature on human capital-based educational policies often refers to the OECD as a mechanism for contributing those ideologies into the globalization of education (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009; Wiseman & Taylor, 2017). Research on the quality of education for refugees argues that in the midst of conflict and war, many children are not able to attend school, and for those who can or are in a host country where they have access to education, the quality of that education is often poor (Bromley & Andina, 2010; Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; Kirk & Winthrop, 2007). While the human rights approach is often positioned against the human capital approach in their conflicting implications for educational policies and practices, some authors suggest that they are more closely aligned than perceived (Choi, 2024; Meyer et al., 1992; Robeyns, 2006). This reinforces the applicability of world society theory as the theoretical framework guiding this study, specifically in

examining how global human rights and human capital frameworks shape refugee education reform in Sweden. The literature on educational access for refugees in Sweden underscores Sweden's efforts to uphold human rights while providing legal access to free and public education for all (Berhanu, 2011; Hélio et al., 2019; McIntyre & Neuhaus, 2021). Other comparative studies that examine Sweden's refugee education policies in comparison to other countries demonstrate that Swedish refugee education policies are often positively evaluated. These studies underscore the influence that Sweden holds in setting policy standards for refugee education, which other countries then borrow (Abdelhady & Al Ariss, 2022; Bevelander & Irastorza, 2020; Bucken-Knapp et al., 2020; Niemeyer, 2015; Nordgren, 2017;;). Although refugee education literature in Sweden continually refers to access and human rights, quality of education for refugees has become a new central theme in Swedish education policy, especially in the wake of Sweden's declining performance on international assessments, like the OECD's PISA (Bergh, 2020; Dhawan et al., 2023; Edmark et al., 2023). There is substantial literature that examines the effect of refugee education and their labor outputs as explored through human capital (Abdelhady & Al Ariss, 2022; Bevelander, 2011; Bevelander & Lundh, 2007; Rooth, 1999).

In addition to the lack of literature on Intergovernmental Organization's (IGO) influence on refugee education reform, the significance of this study is underscored by Sweden's historical acceptance of refugees, Sweden's extensive research output on refugee education, and Sweden's prominent relationships with both the UNHCR and the OECD (Crul et al., 2016; Jahan, 2016). As IGOs are an essential backbone in world culture, many scholars in the field argue that a culturally informed analysis of IGOs are necessary to understand key aspects of global development (Boli & Thomas, 1999; Lechner & Boli, 2008). Sweden is a critical site for examining how two major IGOs influence policy frameworks in refugee education reform, as their policies are shaped by strong commitments to both human rights and human capital market integration. Although existing literature addresses human rights and human capital in the global education reform landscape, there is a scarcity of research that comparatively examines their combined respective influence on the global and Swedish refugee education reform landscape. By applying world society theory, this study addresses this gap by examining how global human rights and human capital frameworks are transmitted through IGOs and reflected in Sweden's refugee education policies.

Conceptual Framework

World society theory offers a sociological perspective that explains the relationships among a globalized set of values and the institutions that influence those values (Meyer et al., 1997). While world society scholarship has continuously examined the process of global diffusion in educational norms, country-level analyses remain underdeveloped, and furthermore, the analyses on refugee education are vastly

limited. Focusing on Sweden allows the observation of how IGO-driven norms are interpreted and institutionalized within refugee education policy. World society theory suggests that these global frameworks become embedded in national policies through processes of diffusion, standardization, and legitimation, which this study seeks to identify in the Swedish context of refugee education reform. This framework guides the central research question by examining how global human rights and human capital norms are transmitted through IGOs and reflected in Sweden's refugee education policies. Here, we can understand how influential IGOs are as an essential contributor to global educational development, a medium of influence in world society theory (Boli & Thomas, 1999; Lechner & Boli, 2008).

The United Nations has continuously facilitated convergence in educational policies among nation-states, starting with its stance on access to education as a fundamental human right and continuing with its ongoing global influence on education policy (Meyer et al., 1997). As the OECD explicitly aims to measure the educational advancements of a country and how they correlate to that country's future economy in comparison to other nations, the OECD itself is now a significant contributor to these global norms. Through this lens, the OECD's emphasis on measurement and quality can be understood as part of a broader global script that shapes how nations evaluate and structure their educational reforms.

Conversely, this research also underscores Sweden's reciprocal role in legitimizing both IGOs as pivotal actors in the global refugee education reform landscape. By comparing IGO policy recommendations to enacted policies within Sweden's School Act, this study applies world society theory to assess how global norms are interpreted, adapted, and institutionalized at the national level. This analytical comparison can underscore the influence that IGOs have on refugee educational policy, amplifying principles of educational access and quality for refugee children both in the nation-state of Sweden and on a global scale. This approach allows for a clearer understanding of how alignment between global frameworks and national policy reflects broader processes of globalization in education.

Methods and Data

Data Selection

This paper uses a qualitative case study to compare two policy documents produced by the UNHCR, OECD, and the Swedish Ministry of Education's School Act. The OECD's (2019) *Strength Through Diversity: Spotlight Report for Sweden* reflects the OECD's human capital approach, and the UNHCR's (2023) *Refugee Education 2030* advances a human rights-based framework. The contrasting documents both amplify the competing global logics which are largely articulated and debated within education reform. The OECD's document represents the most comprehensive set of refugee education policy recommendations specifically directed at Sweden, and is grounded in a human capital-based framework of future economic participation and

acclimation. In contrast, the UNHCR's document provides a set of global policy objectives on refugee education with articulated goals to be fulfilled globally by 2030 and reflect a human rights-based agenda. Sweden's refugee education reform was selected as the case study due to its substantial refugee population.

Documents represent an alternative source of data for a qualitative study and offer the advantage of language that has been given thoughtful attention (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Additionally, documents will allow interpretation of the meaning that IGOs assign to specific ideas or happenings (Creswell 2014; Merriam 2002). The 2023 UNHCR document includes a total of 9 policy recommendations for refugee education. The 2019 OECD document for Sweden includes a total of 20 policy recommendations for Swedish refugee education. The strength of published policy documents as a data source are the insights and clues within the phenomena of research, as it can reveal details about goals and decisions that may not be properly articulated by observation or through an interview (Merriam, 1998; Merriam, 2002).

Data Analysis

This study employs a deductive qualitative content analysis across two IGO documents, compromising a total of 29 policy recommendations between the UNHCR and the OECD. The aim of this analysis is to ascertain and compare dominant "global scripts" of human rights versus human capital embedded within policy language, to determine the degree of alignment in Sweden's national education policy for refugee education.

First, both documents were read in full to establish contextual familiarity and identify recurrent thematic patterns. Drawing on recurring conceptualization between the UNHCR and the OECD, a codebook was developed deductively based on theoretically informed categories to systematically examine language in policy framing across organizations. The use of language and specific words are advantageous in deriving meaning from the analysis (Creswell, 2014). Human rights literature from the UNHCR emphasized policy language of "*Access"* and the right to education. "*Quality*" was defined in policy language from the OECD that uplifted human capital, focusing on educational outcomes, instructional effectiveness, assessments, and performance. Following this, each of the total 29 policy recommendations between both documents were line-by-line coded into an assigned category of access of quality. The coding scheme was applied repeatedly to the dataset of policies to enhance analytical consistency, alongside analytic memos of each policy to strengthen validation. Finally, I then used the coded dataset of "*Access*" versus "*Quality*" driven policy to comparatively analyze how Sweden's School Act aligns with each policy recommendation, to discover the degree of alignment between each IGO and Sweden's enacted educational policy for refugees. This allowed me to assess whether Sweden's refugee education policy reflects more

of a human rights-based access framework in alignment with the UNHCR or a human capital-based framework, which is more closely aligned with the OECD.

Findings

This study compares the 2023 UNHCR and the 2019 OECD documents to examine how each IGO frames refugee education policy. Table 1 presents the refugee education policies globally recommended by the UNHCR in *Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion*. Here, we can clearly see the Refugee Education 2030 objectives with 9 total policy recommendations as expressed in the *Expected Results* section. In contrast, Table 2 presents the refugee education policies specifically prescribed to Sweden by the OECD in its 2019 document, the *OECD Strength Through Diversity's Spotlight Report for Sweden.* There are a total of 20 total policy recommendations as expressed in the *Policy Pointer* section.

Table 1

Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion: Objectives and Expected Results

UNHCR REFUGEE EDUCATION 2030: OBJECTIVE 1: Promote equitable and sustainable inclusion in national education systems for refugees, asylum seekers, returnees, stateless and internationally displaced persons.
Expected Result 1: National policy and emergency preparedness create the conditions to include forcibly displaced and stateless children and youth in schools and programs registered with the ministry of education.
Expected Result 2: Approaches to education in the humanitarian and development sectors are harmonized for inclusion.
Expected Result 3: Children and youth have access to all levels of formal and nonformal education within national education systems and under the same conditions as nationals.
Expected Result 4: Alternative pathways to education will be accessible in situations where formal academic education within national systems does not meet the learning needs of displaced or stateless out-of-school and/or over-age children and youth and their host communities, including those with disabilities.

UNHCR REFUGEE EDUCATION 2030: OBJECTIVE 2: Foster safe enabling environments that support learning for all students, regardless of legal status, gender, or disability.
Expected Result 1: Children and youth are prepared to learn and succeed in national education systems.
Expected Result 2: Learning environments are safe.
Expected Result 3: Learning environments are accessible to all.

UNHCR REFUGEE EDUCATION 2030: OBJECTIVE 3: Enable all learners to use their education towards sustainable futures.
Expected Result 1: Children and youth complete their education with relevant skills, knowledge, and competencies.
Expected Result 2: Girls and women have equitable opportunities for and access to education, work, community representation and leadership.

Source: (UNHCR, 2023)

Table 2

OECD Strength Through Diversity's Spotlight Report for Sweden: Priority Areas and Policy Pointers

SPOTLIGHT REPORT PRIORITY AREA 1: Facilitating the access of immigrants to school choice
Policy Pointer 3.7.1: Provide quality information and support for an active school choice so that all parents and guardians can choose schools that best respond to the needs of their children.
Policy Pointer 3.7.2: Promote lightly controlled freedom of choice to balance providing an equitable education and freedom of choice.
Policy Pointer 3.7.3: Establish concrete, robust and comprehensive definitions of disadvantage that go beyond migration status.
Policy Pointer 3.7.4: Introduce clear goals and criteria in a weighted funding program to ensure equity and consistency in school funding that supports disadvantaged students.

SPOTLIGHT REPORT PRIORITY AREA 2: Building teaching capacity
Policy Pointer 4.7.1: Increase teacher salary alongside other incentives to attract and retain teachers in disadvantaged schools.
Policy Pointer 4.7.2: Revise recruitment and teaching programs for teachers with an immigrant background to offer financial support and language training.
Policy Pointer 4.7.3: Prepare teachers for diverse classrooms through comprehensive training programs in diversity including a language component.
Policy Pointer 4.7.4: Provide continuing professional development for diversity training and facilitate networks for training and exchange.
Policy Pointer 4.7.5: Offer extra support to teachers through comprehensive mentorships and expert teams to respond to additional needs of immigrant and refugee students.

SPOTLIGHT REPORT PRIORITY AREA 3: Providing language training

Policy Pointer 5.8.1: Promote an individualized learning plan in the early assessment model to better support all newly arrived students and follow up on their language progress and needs.
Policy Pointer 5.8.2: Integrate specialized language courses, particularly Swedish as a Second Language, in the curriculum and focus on newly arrived students.
Policy Pointer 5.8.3: Increase mother tongue tuition and study guidance so that all immigrant students can access them.
Policy Pointer 5.8.4: Promote plurilingualism in schools and develop guidelines to enable a systematic implementation across all schools.
Policy Pointer 5.8.5: Offer language camps and access to leisure centers to all students irrespective of their family's situation.
Policy Pointer 5.8.6: Engage immigrant families in language learning so that they are able to support the language skills and integration of their children.

SPOTLIGHT REPORT PRIORITY AREA 4: Strengthening the management of diversity
Policy Pointer 6.7.1: Implement a diversity-conscious curriculum consistently across schools.
Policy Pointer 6.7.2: Promote inclusive education in schools so that all students can benefit from a good quality education.
Policy Pointer 6.7.3: Develop active citizenship education in schools that can help students develop democratic values and skills.
Policy Pointer 6.7.4: Offer training for administrative leadership in diversity management to prepare school leaders for increasingly diverse schools and to be able to support teachers, staff, and students.
Policy Pointer 6.7.5: Reinforce a whole school approach to foster an inclusive school climate and culture in order to welcome and integrate all students.

Source: (OECD, 2019)

The deductive coding process as illustrated in Table 3 shows the comparison between the UNHCR's document and their policy recommendation towards refugee education and the OECD's document and their refugee education policy recommendations specifically prescribed for Sweden. The UNHCR document holds a total of 9 policy recommendations, with about 78% of their policies towards refugee education being categorized as being access-oriented and only 22% being categorized as quality-driven. The UNHCR's document Objective 1, Expected Result 3 states: "*children and youth have access to all levels of formal and nonformal education within national education systems and under the same conditions as nationals.*" This demonstrates that there is a strong emphasis on access to schooling and this aligns with their human-rights approach towards refugee education. The OECD's document holds a total of twenty policy recommendations, with 65% of their policy

recommendations being categorized as quality-driven, and 35% categorized as access-driven. The OECD's document Priority Area 3, Policy Pointer 5.8.6 explicitly says "*engage immigrant families in language learning so that they are able to support the language skills and integration of their children*," and Priority Area 4, Policy Pointer 6.7.3 recommends to "*develop active citizenship education in schools that can help students develop democratic values and skills.*" Key words like "*integration"* and "*active citizenship,*" coupled with a priority on educational quality reflect the human capital-approach and long-term market integration embedded within the OECD's policy recommendations. Table 3 further summarizes the key differences between the refugee education policies recommended by the 2023 UNHCR and 2019 OECD documents.

Table 3

Differences Between Policies: UNHCR Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion and the OECD Strength Through Diversity: A Spotlight Report on Sweden

CODE	UNHCR	OECD
ACCESS	OBJECTIVE 1: Expected Result 1: National policy and emergency preparedness create the conditions to **include** forcibly displaced and stateless children and youth **in schools** and programs registered with the ministry of education.	PRIORITY AREA 1: Policy Pointer 3.7.1: Provide quality information and support for an active **school choice** so that all parents and guardians can **choose schools** that best respond to the needs of their children.
	OBJECTIVE 1: Expected Result 2: Approaches to education in the humanitarian and development sectors are harmonized for **inclusion**.	PRIORITY AREA 1: Policy Pointer 3.7.2: Promote lightly controlled freedom of **choice** to balance providing an **equitable education** and freedom of choice.
	OBJECTIVE 1: Expected Result 3: Children and youth have **access** to all levels of formal and nonformal education within national education systems and under the same conditions as nationals.	PRIORITY AREA 1: Policy Pointer 3.7.3: Establish concrete, robust and comprehensive **definitions of disadvantage** that go **beyond migration status.**

CODE	**UNHCR**	**OECD**
	OBJECTIVE 1: Expected Result 4: Alternative pathways to education will be **accessible** in situations where formal academic education within national systems does not meet the learning needs of displaced or stateless out-of-school and/or over-age children and youth and their host communities, including those with disabilities.	PRIORITY AREA 3: Policy Pointer 5.8.3: **Increase mother tongue** tuition and study guidance so that all immigrant students can access them.
		PRIORITY AREA 3: Policy Pointer 5.8.5: Offer language camps and access to leisure centers to all students irrespective of their family's situation.
	OBJECTIVE 2: Expected Result 2: Learning environments are **safe**.	PRIORITY AREA 4: Policy Pointer 6.7.1: Implement a **diversity-conscious curriculum** consistently across schools.
	OBJECTIVE 2: Expected Result 3: Learning environments are **accessible** to all.	
	OBJECTIVE 3: Expected Result 2: Girls and women have equitable opportunities for and **access** to education, work, community representation and leadership.	
		PRIORITY AREA 4: Policy Pointer 6.7.5: Reinforce a whole school approach to **foster an inclusive school climate and culture** in order to welcome and integrate all students.
CODE	UNHCR	OECD
QUALITY	OBJECTIVE 2: Expected Result 1: Children and youth are prepared to learn and **succeed** in national education systems.	PRIORITY AREA 1: Policy Pointer 3.7.4: **Introduce clear goals and criteria** in a weighted funding programs to ensure equity and consistency in school funding that **supports** disadvantaged students.
		PRIORITY AREA 2: Policy Pointer 4.7.1: **Increase teacher salary** alongside other

CODE	UNHCR	OECD
		incentives to **attract and retain** teachers in **disadvantaged** schools.
	OBJECTIVE 3: Expected Result 1: Children and youth complete their education with relevant **skills, knowledge, and competencies.**	PRIORITY AREA 2: Policy Pointer 4.7.2: Revise recruitment and teaching programs for **teachers with an immigrant background** to offer financial support and language training.
		PRIORITY AREA 2: Policy Pointer 4.7.3: **Prepare teachers for diverse classrooms** through comprehensive training programs in diversity including a language component.
		PRIORITY AREA 2: Policy Pointer 4.7.4: Provide continuing **professional development for diversity training** and facilitate networks for training and exchange.
		PRIORITY AREA 2: Policy Pointer 4.7.5: Offer **extra support to teachers** through comprehensive mentorships and expert teams to respond to additional **needs of immigrant and refugee students.**
		PRIORITY AREA 3: Policy Pointer 5.8.1: Promote an **individualized learning plan** in the early assessment model to **better support** all newly arrived students and follow up on their language progress and needs.
		PRIORITY AREA 3: Policy Pointer 5.8.2: Integrate specialized language courses, particularly **Swedish as a Second Language**, in the curriculum and focus on **newly arrived students.**

CODE	UNHCR	OECD
		PRIORITY AREA 3: Policy Pointer 5.8.4: Promote **plurilingualism** in schools and develop guidelines to enable a **systematic implementation** across all schools.
		PRIORITY AREA 3: Policy Pointer 5.8.6: Engage immigrant families in **language learning** so that they are able to support the language skills and **integration of their children.**
		PRIORITY AREA 4: Policy Pointer 6.7.2: Promote **inclusive education** in schools so that all students can benefit from a good quality education.
		PRIORITY AREA 4: Policy Pointer 6.7.3: Develop active citizenship education in schools that can **help students develop** democratic values and skills.
		PRIORITY AREA 4: Policy Pointer 6.7.4: **Offer training for administrative leadership in diversity management** to prepare school leaders for increasingly diverse schools and to be able to support teachers, staff, and students.

Source: (OECD, 2019; UNHCR, 2023)

A qualitative analysis of the School Act reveals a clear historical transition from access-based refugee education policies toward policies emphasizing educational quality. Table 4 compares the 2023 UNHCR recommendations with refugee education policies enacted through the School Act. The findings demonstrate that all UNHCR policy recommendations are already fulfilled within Swedish law, reflecting Sweden's long-standing commitment to human rights-based educational access.

Table 4

Swedish Laws that fulfill the Recommended Policies in UNHCR Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion

UNHCR REFUGEE EDUCATION 2030		**SWEDISH LAW**
OBJECTIVE 1: Promote equitable and sustainable inclusion in national education systems for refugees, asylum seekers, returnees, stateless and internationally displaced persons.	Expected Result 1: National policy and emergency preparedness create the conditions to include forcibly displaced and stateless children and youth in schools and programs registered with the ministry of education.	(School Act Law 2017:1115)
	Expected Result 2: Approaches to education in the humanitarian and development sectors are harmonized for inclusion.	(School Act Law 2015:246) (School Act Law 2018:1303) (School Act 2010:800)
	Expected Result 3: Children and youth have access to all levels of formal and nonformal education within national education systems and under the same conditions as nationals.	(School Act Law 2014:960) (School Act Law 2008:567) (School Act Law 2023:951) (Child Guarantee 2022)
	Expected Result 4: Alternative pathways to education will be accessible in situations where formal academic education within national systems does not meet the learning needs of displaced or stateless out-of-school and/or over-age children and youth and their host communities, including those with disabilities.	(School Act Law 2022:1315) (School Act Law 2018:1303) (School Act Law 2022:833) (School Act Law 2015:246)

UNHCR REFUGEE EDUCATION 2030		**SWEDISH LAW**
OBJECTIVE 2: Foster safe enabling environments that support learning for all students, regardless of legal status, gender, or disability.	Expected Result 1: Children and youth are prepared to learn and succeed in national education systems.	(School Act Law 2022:1315) (School Act Law 2023:951)
	Expected Result 2: Learning environments are safe.	(Discrimination Act Law 2008:567) (School Act Law 2018:1303)
	Expected Result 3: Learning environments are accessible to all.	(Discrimination Act Law 2008:567) (School Act Law 2014:960)
OBJECTIVE 3: Enable all learners to use their education towards sustainable futures.	Expected Result 1: Children and youth complete their education with relevant skills, knowledge, and competencies.	(School Act Law 2018:1303) (School Act Law 2022:1315)
	Expected Result 2: Girls and women have equitable opportunities for and access to education, work, community representation and leadership.	(Discrimination Act Law 2008:567) (School Act Law 2014:960)

Source: (UNHCR, 2023)

The findings show that Sweden's most recent refugee education reforms align more closely with OECD policy guidance, particularly in their focus on quality and human capital development. While some OECD recommendations—such as increasing teacher salaries or fostering democratic skills—are not explicitly codified in the School Act, they are addressed through adjacent governing documents, including the national curriculum, *Läroplan för Grundskolan*, which is enforced through the School Act. The timing of legislative changes further highlights this shift. Many refugee education laws were introduced in 2015 following a significant influx of refugees into Sweden and have since been revised to enhance quality. These developments illustrate a broader transition in Sweden's refugee education framework: while early policies prioritized access through human rights-based language, more recent policy reforms between 2019 and 2023, especially following the publication of the OECD's

document in 2019, emphasize quality and labor market integration, reflecting human capital-oriented pressures and policies in alignment with the OECD.

Table 5

Swedish Laws that fulfill the Recommended Policies in the OECD's Strength Through Diversity's Spotlight Report for Sweden

OECD STRENGTH THROUGH DIVERSITY'S SPOTLIGHT REPORT FOR SWEDEN		**SWEDISH LAW**
PRIORITY AREA 1: Facilitating the access of immigrants to school choice	Policy Pointer 3.7.1: Provide quality information and support for an active school choice so that all parents and guardians can choose schools that best respond to the needs of their children.	(School Act Law 2023:943) (School Act 2022:1315)
	Policy Pointer 3.7.2: Promote lightly controlled freedom of choice to balance providing an equitable education and freedom of choice.	(School Act Law 2022:1315) (School Act Law 2022:1315) (School Act Law 2022:1315) (School Act Law 2023:943)
	Policy Pointer 3.7.3: Establish concrete, robust and comprehensive definitions of disadvantage that go beyond migration status.	(Discrimination Act 2008:567), (2014:960), Law (2022:146) (Child Guarantee 2022:01667)
	Policy Pointer 3.7.4: Introduce clear goals and criteria in a weighted funding programs to ensure equity and consistency in school funding that supports disadvantaged students.	N/A
SPOTLIGHT REPORT PRIORITY AREA 2: Building teaching capacity	Policy Pointer 4.7.1: Increase teacher salary alongside other incentives to attract and retain teachers in disadvantaged schools.	N/A
	Policy Pointer 4.7.2: Revise recruitment and teaching programs for teachers with an immigrant background to offer financial support and language training.	(2021:452) (2022:1315)

	Policy Pointer 4.7.3: Prepare teachers for diverse classrooms through comprehensive training programs in diversity including a language component.	(2021:452)
	Policy Pointer 4.7.4: Provide continuing professional development for diversity training and facilitate networks for training and exchange.	Law (2017:620)
	Policy Pointer 4.7.5: Offer extra support to teachers through comprehensive mentorships and expert teams to respond to additional needs of immigrant and refugee students.	(2018:1098)
SPOTLIGHT REPORT PRIORITY AREA 3: Providing language training	Policy Pointer 5.8.1: Promote an individualized learning plan in the early assessment model to better support all newly arrived students and follow up on their language progress and needs.	(2015:246), (2018:1303) Law (2022:146)
	Policy Pointer 5.8.2: Integrate specialized language courses, particularly Swedish as a Second Language, in the curriculum and focus on newly arrived students.	Law (2022:1315) (Child Guarantee 2022:01667)
	Policy Pointer 5.8.3: Increase mother tongue tuition and study guidance so that all immigrant students can access them.	Law (2022:1315) (Child Guarantee 2022:01667)
	Policy Pointer 5.8.4: Promote plurilingualism in schools and develop guidelines to enable a systematic implementation across all schools.	Law (2017:620) Law (2022:1315) (Child Guarantee 2022:01667)
	Policy Pointer 5.8.5: Offer language camps and access to leisure centers to all students irrespective of their family's situation.	Law (2022:1315)
	Policy Pointer 5.8.6: Engage immigrant families in language learning so that they are able to support the language skills and integration of their children.	Law (2022:1315)

SPOTLIGHT REPORT PRIORITY AREA 4: Strengthening the management of diversity	Policy Pointer 6.7.1: Implement a diversity-conscious curriculum consistently across schools.	(Child Guarantee 2022:01667)
	Policy Pointer 6.7.2: Promote inclusive education in schools so that all students can benefit from a good quality education.	(Discrimination Act 2008:567)
	Policy Pointer 6.7.3: Develop active citizenship education in schools that can help students develop democratic values and skills.	N/A
	Policy Pointer 6.7.4: Offer training for administrative leadership in diversity management to prepare school leaders for increasingly diverse schools and to be able to support teachers, staff, and students.	(Child Guarantee 2022:01667) Law (2021:452)
	Policy Pointer 6.7.5: Reinforce a whole school approach to foster an inclusive school climate and culture in order to welcome and integrate all students.	N/A

Source: (OECD, 2019)

Discussion

Existing literature supports the distinction between the UNHCR's human rights-based global script and the OECD's human capital-based approach to education. Scholars note that limited policy-relevant research on refugee education has constrained global understanding of effective reforms (Cerna, 2019; Fransen & De Haas, 2022). By applying world society theory, this study contributes to scholarship by examining how competing IGOs shape refugee education reform in Sweden. As IGOs are foundational to world culture, culturally informed analyses are critical for understanding global development processes (Boli & Thomas, 1999; Lechner & Boli, 2008). Sweden provides a compelling case due to its high refugee intake per capita, strong research output on refugee education, and close ties with both the UNHCR and the OECD (Crul et al., 2016; Jahan, 2016).

The findings demonstrate that while Sweden has fully institutionalized the UNHCR's access-oriented, human rights-based recommendations, as reflected in the School Act and the Discrimination Act (Sveriges Riksdag, 2008; Sveriges Riksdag, 2024), its most recent refugee education reforms increasingly align with the OECD's emphasis on quality and human capital development. This suggests that although the UNHCR remains influential globally, the OECD is emerging as a competitive and increasingly prominent IGO in shaping refugee education policy in Sweden and

beyond. This shift from access towards quality raises tensions, as emphasizing educational performance metrics may inadvertently disregard the foundational goal of educational access to refugees, and be particularly demanding towards newly arrived refugee students with language barriers. While access ensures education as a human right, an increased priority on quality and academic tracking through standardized assessments may induce academic stress for students, amplifying issues of acclimation and inclusion. However, these dynamics suggest a potential trade-off, as these policies aimed at increasing educational quality in refugee education could improve overall dynamics and long-term integration. There is also a surprising reoccurring mention of teachers within the OECD's policy recommendations, especially in regard to professional development for teachers of diverse students, reducing teacher turn-over rates, and increasing teacher salary, all inherently contributing to quality of education.

Taken together, these findings are valuable to the existing literature as they extend the idea that human rights and human capital ideologies are not oppositional, but are increasingly coexisting. In line with Choi's (2024) global ideology of this phenomena, this study demonstrates the nation-state of Sweden's alignment to both human rights and human capital ideologies are enabled by institutional and cultural conditions that frame education concurrently as a human right and as an investment in future market integration and participation.

Conclusion

In ascertaining if the UNHCR or the OECD exerts greater influence on the refugee education reform landscape of Sweden, the findings demonstrate a clear shift toward prioritizing refugee educational quality over access. In recognition of the long-term economic potential of refugee integration, and in conjunction with these findings, the Swedish Ministry of Education has enacted a majority of the proposed policies in the OECD's 2019 document to support refugee education assimilation in Sweden (Browder, 2018). This shift reflects a global transformation in how refugee education has moved beyond rights and access, towards a strategic investment in national economic development. By examining the timelines of these laws and how they have transitioned and changed, we can see a clear shift of focus from access to quality in Swedish refugee education policies. These new refugee education laws as modified and enforced by the Swedish Ministry of Education emphasize how enhancing quality is now of paramount concern, as long-term refugee educational policies are emphasized as a way to foster a smooth transition from education into the future labor market. Coupled with the Swedish Ministry of Education's direct collaboration with the OECD in developing these policy recommendations, the timing of these reforms and enactment of the OECD's suggested policies, especially following the date of the publication in 2019 to 2023, implies Sweden's deepening alignment towards the OECD's global script of a human capital approach towards refugee education. The timing of Sweden's refugee education reform is significant. These

reforms emerged after Sweden's peak refugee intake in 2015, when access to education for refugees had already been largely institutionalized. This further reflects the transition from immediate human rights-approach to education towards long-term market integration and economic participation. This suggests that the prioritization of quality could be a second-phase policy response shaped by the changing national needs of the nation-state.

This is significant because it underscores how nation-state alignment between human rights-based and human capital-based educational frameworks is largely context dependent. Unlike Sweden, in the context of lower-income nation-states, the UNHCR's access-oriented and human rights-approach remains essential, as ensuring basic rights to education could be a primary policy challenge. As Sweden is a globally engaged and institutionally developed nation-state, their refugee education reform illustrates how advanced educational systems are increasingly integrating refugees through policies that prioritize economic integration, which may suggest that quality oriented frameworks may be emerging across other developed contexts as a national economic strategy.

Scholars and researchers alike have continuously observed human rights and human capital discourses in education reforms, as worldwide educational systems rely heavily on their rationales to justify why education reform is important, and why change is necessary (Choi, 2024). However, in line with Choi (2024), this study demonstrates that these frameworks are not mutually exclusive in Sweden, but rather their influence can coincide together, and this can inform other similar contexts in the refugee education reform landscape. Future studies could comparatively explore refugee education reforms across countries with diverse financial resources and governance structures in order to assess the varying influence of different IGOs. This is fascinating, as the OECD is seen primarily influencing economically affluent countries such as Sweden, and the UNHCR is more influential to countries with limited fiscal resources. Taken together, these findings have broader implications for global education policy reform and suggest that as nations expand their access to education for refugees, policy attention may shift toward quality and economic outcomes. This study contributes to the limited research on Sweden's refugee education reform landscape and underscores the influence of both the UNHCR and the OECD in worldwide refugee education. Despite refugee migration remaining central to global political debates, there remains a poor global understanding of effective refugee education policies (Fransen & De Haas, 2022). In the prominent roles of Sweden, the UNHCR, and the OECD in the refugee education reform sector, this study offers the potential to illuminate how future reforms may be shaped across different educational landscapes.

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