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Volume 40, Number 1, 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1112255ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.41205>

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## Publisher(s)

Centre for Refugee Studies, York University

## ISSN

0229-5113 (print)  
1920-7336 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Cite this article

Cha, J., Shephard, D., Choi, M. & Jeon, A. (2024). Children and Youths' Belonging in Protracted Displacement: A Mixed-Methods Study from Kakuma Refugee Camp. *Refuge*, 40(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.41205>

## Article abstract

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# Children and Youths' Belonging in Protracted Displacement: A Mixed-Methods Study from Kakuma Refugee Camp

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HISTORY Published 2024-06-07

## ABSTRACT

Millions of children and youth live in forced displacement. We conducted a mixed-methods study among 729 primary students in Kakuma Refugee Camp to examine the roles of knowledge, experience (direct or indirect), language, and schooling in students' sense of belonging to their home country and intention to return. We found sense of belonging is associated with knowledge of one's country and its traditions, fluency in one's home language, and schooling opportunities. However, these same factors are negatively associated with their intent to repatriate in the near future. The relationship between formal and informal learning appears to encourage a pragmatic sense of belonging to Kenya for the immediate future while any sense of belonging and hope for return to their home countries are projected onto an imagined future.

## KEYWORDS

belonging; pragmatics of belonging; home; refugee youth; Kakuma Refugee Camp

## RÉSUMÉ


Des millions d'enfants et de jeunes vivent en situation de déplacement forcé. Nous avons mené une étude mixte auprès de 729 élèves du primaire dans le camp de réfugiés de Kakuma afin d'examiner le rôle des connaissances, de l'expérience (directe ou indirecte), de la langue et de la scolarité dans le sentiment d'appartenance des élèves à leur pays d'origine et dans leur intention d'y retourner. Nous avons constaté que le sentiment d'appartenance est associé à la connaissance du pays et de ses traditions, à la maîtrise de la langue d'origine et aux perspectives de scolarisation. Toutefois, ces mêmes facteurs sont associés négativement à leur intention de retourner dans leur pays d'origine dans un avenir proche. La relation entre l'apprentissage formel et informel semble encourager un sentiment pragmatique d'appartenance au Kenya dans l'immédiat, tandis que tout sentiment d'appartenance et tout espoir de retour dans leur pays d'origine sont projetés dans un avenir imaginé.


## INTRODUCTION


Over 35 million refugees are displaced globally, more than half of whom are children and youth (UNHCR, 2023). Refugees live in contexts of displacement for variable lengths, ranging from years to decades (Devictor &

Do, 2017). Kakuma Refugee Camp, located in northwest Kenya, has been home to hundreds of thousands of men, women, children, and youth seeking refuge from neighbouring countries in East and Central Africa. While originally intended to host an influx of South Sudanese refugees for a short period

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of time, Kakuma has been operating since 1992 due to protracted and recurrent crises in neighbouring countries. Second- and third-generation refugees are born and raised in the camp, experiencing the constant “processes of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 202) while faced with an “unknowable future” (Dryden-Peterson, 2017).

Building on a diverse and growing body of research on the complex topic of belonging, this study focuses on how refugee children's and youths' sense of belonging manifests in protracted displacement. Employing Antonsich's (2010) analytical framework on belonging and Miletzki's (2014) pragmatics of belonging, this study aims to better understand the different factors that contribute to belonging for children and youth in refugee camps. Drawing from the findings of this study, we provide descriptions on how children and youth in prolonged displacement engage in the pragmatics of belonging to both their countries of origin and the host country, Kenya.

Kenya hosts one of the largest concentrations of refugees in the world. For well over a quarter of a century, protracted crises in the neighbouring countries in the region fuelled by political instability, genocide, and civil war have led hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children to seek refuge in the country. Refugees in Kenya come primarily from Somalia, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Sudan, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and other countries in East and Central Africa. At the time of this study in 2019, there were about 498,422 refugees and asylum seekers in Kenya, more than half of whom were under age 18 (UNHCR, 2019). Located in the northwestern part of Kenya in Turkana County, Kakuma Refugee Camp (hereafter Kakuma) is one of the largest camps in Kenya.

Using a mixed-methods approach, our study illustrates ways in which children and youth in displacement maintain a sense of belonging to their countries of origin while engaging in the pragmatics of belonging that are largely rooted in the Kenyan education system. We find that refugee children and youth in exile find ways of belonging to their host country through engagement in schooling while maintaining their sense of belonging to their home countries through cultural practices, home language maintenance, and informal learning. The relationship between formal and informal learning appears to encourage a pragmatic sense of belonging to Kenya for the immediate future while any sense of belonging and hope for return to their home countries is projected into an imagined future when peace returns and they can return.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**Belonging** has contested conceptualizations across different fields of study. Due to its situational, subjective, and multidimensional characteristics, belonging is a concept that scholars have struggled to define and theorize (Dromgold-Sermen, 2022). In the fields of forced migration and education in emergencies, scholars have mainly explored three dimensions of belonging in displaced populations: civic, social, and emotional.

Some scholars have focused on the official status of formal membership, such as citizenship or civic participation (act[s] of solidarity), and the politics of belonging (Fenster, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006). The politics of belonging, according to Geddes and Favell (1999), involves the “struggles between groups to shape formal institutional and symbolic boundaries of political, social, and legal rights and benefits of national and community level[s] of membership” (Dromgold-Sermen, 2022, p. 636). **Civic belonging** includes, but

is not limited to, policies or programs that provide refugees with political, economic, and/or social rights in exile or upon resettlement (Brown, 2011; Fenster, 2005). For resettled refugees, this formal structure of belonging in the form of citizenship provides their rights to political/legal participation (Fenster, 2005).

**Social belonging** refers to the relationships among displaced populations or with the host communities. This dimension of belonging occurs when people develop a sense of community with their new social milieu—regardless of whether they are host communities or other refugee communities (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018; Schachter, 2016). For example, those living in camp settings may establish new relationships with other camp residents who are from their country of origin and/or other countries through daily interactions (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). While these interactions may foster a context of reception and support for refugees allowing them to experience “symbolic belonging,” in other cases, refugees may encounter exclusion and discrimination due to cultural, religious, racial, or linguistic differences (Dromgold-Sermen, 2022).

**Emotional belonging** refers to the “personal, intimate, feeling of being ‘at home’” (Antonsich, 2010, p. 644). Refugees’ emotional attachments to their home(s) are established through daily practices of “homemaking” (Brun & Fábos, 2015), maintenance of cultural practices and refugees’ social locations in the new environment (Yuval-Davis, 2006). For instance, refugees construct their identities and belonging through multiple narratives that coexist and intersect in refugee camps. New diasporic identities and the reconstruction of home are often cultivated through community interactions in everyday spaces through social activities (Arvanitis & Yelland, 2021). Such

everyday practices could be attempts to counter uncertainties amid protracted displacement (Dromgold-Sermen, 2022).

The question of how displaced populations identify with the concept of belonging in states of transition and uncertainty is also closely related to how they construct the notion of home. Traditionally, literature has often associated home with a single, site-specific geographical place, emphasizing the dichotomy of “here” and “there” (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002). Such a binary paradigm is restrictive in understanding displaced populations as they have multiple connections to “heres” and “theres.” Some scholars challenge the traditional notion of home especially in forced migration (Brun & Fábos, 2015; Taylor, 2015).

In understanding how refugees’ perceptions of home are connected to their lived experiences, Taylor (2015) provides four dimensions of home: spatial, temporal, material, and relational. The spatial home is the architectural environment and surrounding within the physical boundaries of a country such as residences, stores, religious centres, and streets, all of which make up the village or town. The temporal home is constructed through daily routines and recurring events (both personal and collective) that shape people’s experiences of home. The material home refers to the tangible elements in the environment that influence one’s senses (e.g., taste, smell, texture). It consists of the food, scents, trees and soil, and surrounding human beings and animals. The relational home encompasses connections to family and friends and the wider social networks that engender emotional attachment as well as social and cultural capital (Taylor, 2015, p. 7).

These new perspectives and conceptualizations suggest that home is no longer a physical place that is fixed or predictable

for refugees and migrants. Al-Ali and Koser (2002) posit that “concepts of home are not static but dynamic and varied processes, involving acts of imagining, creating, unmaking, changing, losing and moving” (p. 6, emphasis added). Especially for the displaced population, home is “an intersection of space, time and social relations” that has a strong connection to our identities and emotional belonging (Taylor, 2015, p. 4). This conceptualization is closely aligned with Antonsich’s (2010) argument that home is “a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment” (p. 646).<sup>1</sup> Such a feeling of affinity and safety—which may shape identities and belonging—may be attributed to the relationships with families, friends, community members, and others through daily interactions (Taylor, 2013). Even in refugee camps, home-building occurs through the passing of shared values and stories from one generation to another; it is a collaborative process in which narratives of belonging and displacement are shared and adapted over time (Taylor, 2009).

When in prolonged displacement, refugees may also be “neither fully separated from their country nor fully integrated into the new one” (Perez Murcia, 2019, p. 1502). Arvanitis and Yelland (2021) describe refugees as “active agents” who maintain a strong attachment to their country of origin or the lost home(land), yet simultaneously feel belonging to more than one place in their migratory experience, including the first country of asylum and/or their desired final location. Home could be an amalgam of memories from the past, the ever-changing present, and the unknowable future (Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Taylor, 2015).

For displaced and mobile populations, concepts and elements of belonging to home may be constantly “recaptured,” “reconfig-

ured” (Taylor, 2009), or “renegotiated” (Perez Murcia, 2019) over time and space. In this manner, the concepts of both belonging and home are perceived as constantly “fleeting, changing, [and] contradictory” to an extent that one can belong and not belong at the same time (Marlowe, 2018, p. 39).

Building on a well-developed body of research on belonging and home, we aim to show how refugee children and youth in refugee camps cultivate belonging in the context of prolonged exile. We concur with Taylor’s (2009) assertion that

in the context of forced migration [we] must go beyond issues such as membership of or allegiance to the nation-state, or indeed legal claims to property and look instead at the lived experience of home both before and during exile. (p. 136)

Hence, in this paper, we focus on the emotional dimension of belonging and how it manifests in children and youth living in protracted displacement.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We employ Antonsich’s (2010) analytical framework of place-belongingness. Antonsich relates belonging to the understanding of home and aligns it with a sense of familiarity and safety that may be defined across multiple levels and forms of identification. In this context, belonging is represented through “particular foods, cultural traditions, religious practices, national borders and flags, familiar sounds, landscapes, shared myths and narratives that establish common forms of solidarity and purpose” (Marlowe, 2018, p. 40).

Belonging is a multi-scalar concept that occurs within a number of relational and situational contexts, which might seem relatively stable or might change over time (Morley, 2001). Antonsich (2010) provided six factors that contribute to a feeling of home: (a) autobiographical (past experiences and

<sup>1</sup>This represents Antonsich’s interpretation of hooks’s (2009) sense of place belongingness.

histories that attach person to place); (b) relational (personal and social ties within given places); (c) cultural (ways that language, traditions, and practices connect to a sense of home); (d) economic (importance of work to sustaining livelihood in place); (e) legal (citizenship and other mechanisms through which people's opportunities to participate in society are defined); and (f) length of residence (pp. 647–648).

We also draw from Miletzki's (2014) concept of the "pragmatics of belonging" to highlight refugee students' agency. Developed from Dewey's (1929) pragmatism, Miletzki argues, "belonging is a practical achievement, [and] it is useful for the future of the refugees in an instrumental way in order to reduce uncertainty and to reduce the social distance to the host society" (p. 48). This conceptual lens views refugees as having a form/degree of agency to "choose" to relate to the host community members, familiarize themselves with the new social milieu, and claim their rights. For pragmatic and strategic reasons, "[they] exercise future thinking through a sense of belonging in order to maintain hope" (p. 47). Miletzki emphasized that the pragmatics of belonging are common among refugees in protracted displacement, who live with an uncertain and "unknowable future" (Dryden-Peterson, 2017).

While refugees are still emotionally attached to their homeland, they can develop a sense of home amid exile through **emplacement**, a process that involves "the interworking of place, identity, and practice in a way to generate a relationship of belonging between person and place" (Miletzki, 2014, p. 50). Therefore, we pair the concept of place-belongingness (Antonsich, 2010) with the pragmatics of belonging (Miletzki, 2014) to gain insights into how refugee children in the camp cultivate belonging vis-à-vis the construction of homeland.

## METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

We employed a sequential mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative methods into a single study. Data collection took place in two phases over the course of 7 months in 2019. The survey was designed based on extant literature, findings from focus group discussions with students (Cha, 2020), a pilot survey exercise in 2018, and expert validation with five local teachers who had studied in Kakuma. Two schools were selected from each of the four camps in Kakuma, along with one additional school from the largest camp, Kakuma I, resulting in nine schools. Within each school, two classes were selected, resulting in a total of 729 students who were registered in Class 8. This sample constitutes 12% of all 6,047 Class 8 students in all 21 of Kakuma's primary schools in February 2019. For the qualitative sample, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with a subset of 33 participants purposely sampled from survey participants to include a variety of configurations of gender, nationality, and age. At the beginning of the survey, students were told that they would be asked about "your past, your family and friends, and your schooling experience in the camp"; the assent process did not explicitly mention belonging.

The final interpretation of qualitative and quantitative data was done simultaneously upon completion of the fieldwork. For quantitative data analysis, we conducted multiple regression analyses using the R stats v.4.3.1 package for running generalized linear and logistic regressions with the gaussian and logit link functions, respectively, and likelihood ratio tests for model comparisons using R lmer v.0.9-40.

## Independent Variables

For quantitative analysis, we modelled elements of Antonsich's (2010) factors and how they influenced students' sense of belonging to their home country, their sense of pride in being a citizen of their home country, and their plans to return home to their countries of origin to live. We operationalized (a) autobiographical factors by modelling the influence of (i) age as a continuous variable, (ii) gender as a binomial variable, (iii) nationality (South Sudanese, Sudanese, Congolese, Somalian, other) as a multinomial variable, (iv) having ever visited the home country as a binomial variable (visitHome), and (v) having general knowledge of the home country on a 4-point Likert scale (knowHome).

We operationalized (b) relational factors by modelling the influence of (i) living with members of an older generation from their home country as a binomial variable (olderGeneration) and (ii) learning about one's home country from families and community members as a binomial question (homeLearning).

We modelled (c) cultural factors with (i) fluency in their home language as a binomial variable (homeLanguage), (ii) knowledge of the culture of their home country on a 5-point Likert scale (knowCulture), (iii) knowledge of the history of their home country on a 5-point Likert scale (knowHistory), and (iv) enjoyment of the traditions of their home country on a 5-point Likert scale (enjoyTraditions).

We do not have items that represent (d) economic factors or (e) legal factors due to the age range of the participants alongside the rather homogenous legal status of respondents. Finally, we modelled (f) residence as the number of years students have resided in Kakuma as a continuous variable (residenceYears).

## Dependent Variables

The dependent variables of interest include three different operationalizations of students belonging: (a) whether or not they chose their "home country" in response to "which place or country do you feel you belong the most?" treated as a binomial variable (homeBelonging); (b) whether or not they chose their "home country" in response to "which place or country do you wish to live in the future?" treated as a binomial variable (liveHome); and (c) the degree to which they agreed with the statement "I am proud to be a citizen of my country," rated on a 5-point Likert scale (proudCitizen). For the two binomial variables, we ran logistic regressions with the results exponentiated to report the odds ratio, which indicates the ratio of the odds of the dependent variable being 1 over the odds of it being 0, with values < 1 indicating negative effects and values > 1 indicating positive effects. For the Likert dependent variable, we ran a linear regression.

We model each dependent variable by adding each factor sequentially. The first model (Step 1) contains autobiographical factors, the second model (Step 2) adds relational factors, the third model (Step 3) adds cultural factors, and the fourth model (Step 4) adds residence. For two of the dependent variables, pride and plans to return home to live, a fifth model (Step 5) included belonging as a predictor variable.

For qualitative data analysis, we used a standardized coding protocol developed through an iterative process of defining and refining codes to analyze interview data (Buckner et al., 2018). During the first phase of coding (open coding), we used in vivo coding, where we mainly used words or phrases taken from participants' responses to capture perceptions of belonging, home, and other relevant themes (Saldaña, 2021).

We initially began with 21 categories, which we then collapsed into 7, determining that categories such as home country experiences and home country education shared several overlaps. In our analysis, it was important to distinguish **how** students came to gain knowledge about their home country, and thus, we made distinctions between knowledge gained through experience and knowledge gained vicariously through community members and others. Then, we created a codebook combining the emic codes (participant informed) and the etic codes (literature driven). Upon development of a codebook, we used NVivo, a qualitative coding software, to code, and used queries to write thematic memos.

### Ethics and Positionality

The survey was provided in English and Kiswahili by the first author and five local research assistants who had lived, studied, and taught in Kakuma as refugees. Participants could also choose to respond in their mother tongue through a translator. While attempts were made to match translators/research assistants with participants in terms of gender and ethnicity, this was not always logistically feasible. Research assistants from the community also assisted in the interpretation of the interviews, especially for nuanced contextual meanings of terms like **home**, **love**, and **country**.

As a non-American researcher from a United States-based research university, the first author engaged in constant self-reflection, journaling, and engagement with the research assistants to reflexively interrogate how being an "outsider" might affect the data and interpretation. The first author recorded their questions, reactions, frustrations, "discomforts," and (un)learning in their research journals. The second and third authors are both non-refugee researchers trained and

working in the United States with experience conducting applied research with learners from refugee backgrounds. All authors experienced migration during their schooling, but none have experienced being a refugee.

This study received ethics approval from the first author's university at the time of the study (Teachers College IRB, Protocol #19-253). The first author obtained access to the camps and schools through UNHCR and the Refugee Affairs Secretariat, as well as head teachers, teachers, community leaders (zone leaders, block leaders), and students.

## FINDINGS

### Quantitative Findings

Starting with autobiographical factors, the majority of the 744 participants were male (70.8%), and the young people had an average age of 18.4 years, ranging from 12 to 45 years old. Most were from South Sudan (67.7%), followed by Somalia (32.2%), Sudan (20.6%), the Democratic Republic of Congo (5.4%), and other nations (3.1%). The respondents had lived in Kakuma for an average of 6.2 years. Across nationalities, a minority (31.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that they knew about their home country, reflecting the extended length of displacement of many. For relational factors, half of the participants (50.1%) lived with members of an older generation from their country of origin, and 69.9% learned about their home from family and community members. Regarding cultural factors, 67.7% were fluent in their home language, 59.0% reported agreement that they knew their home country's culture, 48.1% said they knew its history, and 74.2% reported that they enjoyed the traditions of their country of origin. Despite a majority learning informally about their home country and reporting knowledge of specific aspects of their home culture and tradi-



tions, this was insufficient for respondents to report that they knew their country.

The majority of students reported that they felt they belonged to their country of origin (65.2%). The fact that this level is twice that of the percentage who agreed or strongly agreed that they knew their country reflects how a sense of belonging reflects more than physical location and cognitive knowledge. When modelling students' sense of belonging to their home country, we found evidence of the influence of three out of four of the operationalized factors: autobiographical, cultural, and residential. For autobiographical factors, the influential variables were students' nationality and their knowledge of their home country. If the student was from the Democratic Republic of Congo, they had lower odds of reporting that they felt they belonged to their home country (OR [95% CI] = 0.26 [0.08, 0.79]); this was true for all steps in the model (see Table 1). This suggests differential experiences based on country of origin and thus does not provide strong evidence for the influence of autobiographical factors overall. As expected, knowing more about one's home country was associated with higher odds of feeling of belonging to the home country (1.38 [1.18, 1.62]); this is true in all models. Similarly, when turning to cultural factors, we found that students who reported enjoying their home traditions also had higher odds of feeling a sense of belonging to their country of origin (1.19 [1.01, 1.39]). The negative relationship between the length of residence outside of their country of origin (0.94 [0.88, 0.99]) was also expected.

When turning to students' sense of pride as another aspect of their sense of belonging, we found that most students felt proud to be citizens of their country of origin (80.9%), and we found additional evidence for the

influence of autobiographical and cultural factors as well as an expected correlation between pride and belonging (Table 2). In contrast with the findings on belonging, students with more knowledge of their home country had less pride in being from there (b [95% CI] = -0.01[-0.03, 0.00]), but this was only marginally significant in the first two steps of the models and disappeared once cultural factors were included. In addition, students' enjoyment of traditions was positively associated with their sense of pride in being from their country of origin (0.23 [0.16, 0.30]). Similarly, improved fluency in their home language was associated with increased sense of pride in their home (0.25 [0.08, 0.42]). Finally, adding belonging into the model (Step 5) shows that while belonging and pride are associated (0.40 [0.23, 0.58]), they are also distinct, with cultural factors remaining significantly important determinants of pride even when controlling for belonging (homeLanguage: 0.24[0.07,0.41]; enjoyTraditions: 0.20 [0.13, 0.27]).

Despite students' sense of belonging and pride, few intended to move home (19.2%). This may be because most students planned on returning home after completing schooling, and therefore such an imagined future was far removed from their current perspective. Indeed, almost all students (93.4%) wanted to stay in Kenya for post-primary schooling. Not only was the plan to return far removed into the future, but their returning home was linked to rebuilding the country once peace returned.

When modelling factors related to students' desire to live in their home country, we found that their odds of wanting to return home were negatively associated with one relational factor (if they were learning about their home country at home and in the community) (OR [95% CI] = 0.53 [0.34, 0.84]) as well as negatively associated with their

**Table 1***Students' Feeling of Belonging to Home Country*

| Variable                                     | OR (95% CI)             |                      |                      |                            |
|--|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|
|  | Step 1 Autobiographical | Step 2 Social        | Step 3 Cultural      | Step 4 Residence           |
| (Intercept)                                  | 0.90 (0.16, 4.91)       | 1.20 (0.21, 6.94)    | 0.64 (0.08, 5.29)    | 1.29 (0.14, 12.18)         |
| age  | 1.04 (0.97, 1.11)       | 1.03 (0.97, 1.10)    | 1.03 (0.96, 1.12)    | 1.01 (0.94, 1.10)          |
| gender                                       | 0.79 (0.56, 1.13)       | 0.79 (0.55, 1.13)    | 0.75 (0.50, 1.11)    | 0.78 (0.52, 1.18)          |
| nationalityCOD                               | 0.26 (0.08, 0.79)*      | 0.29 (0.08, 0.81)*   | 0.20 (0.05, 0.70)*   | 0.22 (0.06, 0.81)*         |
| nationalitySDN                               | 1.04 (0.37, 2.71)       | 1.00 (0.35, 2.63)    | 0.90 (0.26, 2.80)    | 1.05 (0.30, 3.34)          |
| nationalitySOM                               | 0.52 (0.15, 1.78)       | 0.52 (0.15, 1.77)    | 0.37 (0.08, 1.54)    | 0.46 (0.10, 2.01)          |
| nationalitySSD                               | 0.66 (0.24, 1.62)       | 0.63 (0.23, 1.57)    | 0.54 (0.16, 1.58)    | 0.61 (0.18, 1.82)          |
| visitHome                                    | 0.86 (0.55, 1.31)       | 0.85 (0.55, 1.29)    | 0.74 (0.45, 1.19)    | 0.69 (0.41, 1.14)          |
| knowHome                                     | 1.38 (1.18, 1.62)***    | 1.39 (1.19, 1.63)*** | 1.47 (1.22, 1.77)*** | 1.46 (1.21, 1.78)***       |
| olderGeneration                              |                         | 0.92 (0.65, 1.28)    | 0.90 (0.62, 1.31)    | 0.95 (0.65, 1.40)          |
| homeLearning                                 |                         | 0.90 (0.63, 1.28)    | 0.96 (0.65, 1.40)    | 0.97 (0.65, 1.44)          |
| homeLanguage                                 |                         |                      | 1.32 (0.90, 1.92)    | 1.25 (0.84, 1.85)          |
| knowCulture                                  |                         |                      | 1.10 (0.94, 1.29)    | 1.096 (0.93, 1.29)         |
| knowHistory                                  |                         |                      | 0.89 (0.76, 1.04)    | 0.90 (0.76, 1.05)          |
| enjoyTraditions                              |                         |                      | 1.19 (1.01, 1.39)*   | 1.21 (1.03, 1.43)*         |
| residenceYears                               |                         |                      |                      | 0.94 (0.88, 0.99)*         |
| McFadden pseudo R <sup>2</sup>               | 0.04                    | 0.04                 | 0.07                 | 0.08                       |
| Likelihood ratio test<br>(Step 4 vs. Step 3) |                         |                      |                      | $\chi^2 = 5.15$<br>p = .02 |

\*\*\* p &lt; .001; \*\* p &lt; .01; \* p &lt; .05.

**Table 2***Students' Sense of Pride in Citizenship in Home Country*

| Variable   | Step 1 Autobiographical          | Step 2 Social       | Step 3 Cultural      | Step 4 Residence     | Step 5 Belonging             |
|--|----------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
|  | OLS (95% CI)                     |                     |                      |                      |                              |
| (Intercept)  | 4.06 (3.25, 4.86)                | 3.64 (2.80, 4.49)   | 3.03 (2.10, 3.95)    | 2.77 (1.79, 3.75)    | 2.56 (1.60, 3.53)            |
| age  | 0.00 (−0.033, 0.02)              | 0.00 (−0.03, 0.03)  | −0.02 (−0.05, 0.01)  | −0.02 (−0.05, 0.02)  | −0.02 (−0.05, 0.02)          |
| gender   | −0.05 (−0.23, 0.13)              | −0.09 (−0.27, 0.09) | −0.05 (−0.23, 0.14)  | −0.03 (−0.22, 0.15)  | −0.01 (−0.20, 0.17)          |
| nationalityCOD   | −0.43 (−1.00, 0.14)              | −0.41 (−0.99, 0.16) | −0.35 (−0.94, 0.25)  | −0.36 (−0.96, 0.24)  | −0.22 (−0.82, 0.37)          |
| nationalitySDN   | −0.02 (−0.50, 0.46)              | −0.04 (−0.52, 0.45) | −0.09 (−0.60, 0.42)  | −0.09 (−0.62, 0.43)  | −0.09 (−0.60, 0.43)          |
| nationalitySOM   | −0.01 (−0.66, 0.64)              | −0.03 (−0.67, 0.62) | −0.17 (−0.83, 0.50)  | −0.21 (−0.90, 0.48)  | −0.12 (−0.80, 0.55)          |
| nationalitySSD   | 0.00 (−0.47, 0.46)               | −0.05 (−0.51, 0.42) | −0.11 (−0.60, 0.39)  | −0.12 (−0.62, 0.39)  | −0.07 (−0.57, 0.43)          |
| visitHome  | 0.07 (−0.14, 0.29)               | 0.08 (−0.14, 0.29)  | −0.01 (−0.22, 0.21)  | 0.06 (−0.17, 0.28)   | 0.08 (−0.14, 0.30)           |
| knowHome   | −0.01 (−0.03, 0.00) <sup>†</sup> | 0.11 (0.03, 0.19)** | 0.09 (0.01, 0.17)*   | 0.09 (0.01, 0.18)*   | 0.06 (−0.02, 0.15)           |
| olderGeneration  |                                  | 0.06 (−0.11, 0.23)  | 0.01 (−0.15, 0.18)   | 0.01 (−0.16, 0.18)   | 0.02 (−0.15, 0.18)           |
| homeLearning   |                                  | 0.02 (−0.15, 0.19)  | 0.09 (−0.08, 0.27)   | 0.09 (−0.08, 0.27)   | 0.10 (−0.07, 0.27)           |
| homeLanguage   |                                  |                     | 0.25 (0.08, 0.42)**  | 0.26 (0.09, 0.44)**  | 0.24 (0.07, 0.41)**          |
| knowCulture  |                                  |                     | 0.02 (−0.05, 0.09)   | 0.01 (−0.06, 0.08)   | 0.00 (−0.07, 0.08)           |
| knowHistory  |                                  |                     | 0.03 (−0.04, 0.10)   | 0.04 (−0.03, 0.11)   | 0.05 (−0.02, 0.12)           |
| enjoyTraditions  |                                  |                     | 0.23 (0.16, 0.30)*** | 0.22 (0.15, 0.29)*** | 0.20 (0.13, 0.27)***         |
| residenceYears   |                                  |                     |                      | 0.01 (−0.02, 0.04)   | 0.01 (−0.01, 0.04)           |
| belongHome   |                                  |                     |                      |                      | 0.40 (0.23, 0.58)***         |
| McFadden pseudo R <sup>2</sup><br>(above median split) | 0.01                             | 0.01                | 0.07                 | 0.07                 | 0.08                         |
| Likelihood ratio test<br>(Step 5 vs. Step 4)           |                                  |                     |                      |                      | $\chi^2 = 21.07$<br>p < .001 |
| Likelihood ratio test<br>(Step 5 vs. Step 4, binary)   |                                  |                     |                      |                      | $\chi^2 = 6.44$<br>p = .01   |

\*\*\* p &lt; .001; \*\* p &lt; .01; \* p &lt; .05; † p &lt; .10.

overall sense of belonging (0.35 [0.22, 0.56]). Students' desire to return home to live was positively associated with the autobiographical factors of being from the Democratic Republic of Congo (5.77 [1.86, 19.83]) but negatively associated with having general knowledge of their home country (0.76 [0.63, 0.92]), with the former remaining significant in all models and the latter only losing statistical significance after belonging is added to the model in Step 5. Cultural factors were negatively associated with the odds of wanting to return to live in their country of origin, with knowledge of history having a negative association (0.81 [0.67, 0.98]) and enjoyment of traditions also negatively associated with returning (0.81 [0.67, 0.98]) (see Table 3).

In summary, we found that a sense of belonging to one's home country was positively associated with a sense of pride in being a citizen of one's home country but negatively associated with the desire to return home in the near future. We further found that the autobiographical, cultural, and residence-related factors were positively associated with belonging to young people's "home" country. However, many of these same factors were negatively related to the desire to return home. The contrast in these factors' relationships with abstract notions of belonging and pride compared to pragmatic plans of where to reside suggest that young people are engaging in the pragmatics of belonging.

### Qualitative Findings

The students interviewed came from different countries; the majority identified as South Sudanese. Others were Sudanese, Somali, Burundian, Congolese, and Ugandan. Their ages ranged from 16 to 27, although the age at which they arrived in Kakuma varied. In analyzing individual interviews, we

found that students' responses highlighted the complexity of belonging, reinforcing that belonging is not uniformly defined but is personal, cultural, and social. Markedly, most responses showed a strong emotional connection to the homeland, although many of the students were born in exile or barely experienced it. Many students used the words **connected** and **love** when describing home, and one student explained that her "heart" was in her country. Still, it was possible to determine that for most students, belonging was framed by factors like "personal experiences, relations, and memories" that attach individuals to a given place (place-belongingness) (Antonsich, 2010, p. 647). Despite the students' affinity for their home countries, they did not express a desire to return immediately, citing economic and educational reasons for wishing to stay in Kakuma.

### Experiences, Relationships, and Cultural Practices: Belonging to Home Country

Students' connection with their country of origin was a strong determining factor of belonging. In all of the replies, students were quick to identify the concept of home with their country of origin. "I can live anywhere, but South Sudan is home. I [feel] connected to South Sudan" Anyango (age 16, South Sudanese, female) said, distinguishing her residential home from her home country.

When probed about why they felt connected to a particular place, the majority of the students alluded to autobiographical factors, which included birthplace, family residence, and personal experiences and memories. For instance, Yassir (age 18, Sudanese, male) responded that he was "born there and also [his] parents and some people were there [as well as] his elders." For Yassir, the knowledge that both he and the people clos-

**Table 3***Students' Plans to Live in Home Country*

| Variable                                     | Step 1 Autobiographical        | Step 2 Social        | Step 3 Cultural<br>OR (95% CI) | Step 4 Residence    | Step 5 Belonging                |
|--|--------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| (Intercept)                                  | 0.43 (0.06, 3.39)              | 0.67 (0.08, 5.83)    | 4.16 (0.34, 52.01)             | 4.63 (0.34, 64.87)  | 9.50 (0.67, 139.40)             |
| age  | 0.97 (0.89, 1.04)              | 0.96 (0.88, 1.04)    | 0.97 (0.88, 1.05)              | 0.98 (0.89, 1.07)   | 0.98 (0.89, 1.07)               |
| gender                                       | 1.11 (0.72, 1.70)              | 1.20 (0.77, 1.84)    | 1.36 (0.84, 2.19)              | 1.45 (0.89, 2.36)   | 1.45 (0.88, 2.37)               |
| nationalityCOD                               | 5.77 (1.86, 19.83)**           | 5.19 (1.66, 17.99)** | 5.86 (1.58, 24.50)*            | 5.44 (1.42, 23.32)* | 4.10 (1.03, 17.99) <sup>†</sup> |
| nationalitySDN                               | 0.61 (0.22, 1.87)              | 0.56 (0.20, 1.74)    | 0.48 (0.15, 1.78)              | 0.46 (0.13, 1.71)   | 0.44 (0.12, 1.67)               |
| nationalitySOM                               | 2.02 (0.57, 7.57)              | 2.10 (0.59, 7.88)    | 1.72 (0.382, 8.13)             | 1.83 (0.38, 9.19)   | 1.58 (0.32, 8.10)               |
| nationalitySSD                               | 0.70 (0.27, 2.02)              | 0.66 (0.26, 1.93)    | 0.56 (0.18, 1.96)              | 0.53 (0.17, 1.87)   | 0.44 (0.14, 1.60)               |
| visitHome                                    | 1.63 (0.93, 2.98) <sup>†</sup> | 1.62 (0.93, 2.99)    | 1.32 (0.72, 2.55)              | 1.24 (0.67, 2.42)   | 1.16 (0.62, 2.28)               |
| knowHome                                     | 0.76 (0.63, 0.92)**            | 0.76 (0.63, 0.93)**  | 0.88 (0.71, 1.11)              | 0.88 (0.70, 1.11)   | 0.95 (0.75, 1.21)               |
| olderGeneration                              |                                | 0.81 (0.53, 1.22)    | 0.76 (0.48, 1.20)              | 0.80 (0.50, 1.28)   | 0.79 (0.49, 1.27)               |
| homeLearning                                 |                                | 0.71 (0.47, 1.08)    | 0.53 (0.34, 0.84)**            | 0.52 (0.33, 0.83)** | 0.49 (0.30, 0.78)**             |
| homeLanguage                                 |                                |                      | 1.06 (0.66, 1.71)              | 0.99 (0.61, 1.61)   | 1.04 (0.64, 1.72)               |
| knowCulture                                  |                                |                      | 0.95 (0.78, 1.14)              | 0.92 (0.76, 1.11)   | 0.94 (0.78, 1.15)               |
| knowHistory                                  |                                |                      | 0.81 (0.67, 0.98)*             | 0.82 (0.68, 1.00)*  | 0.80 (0.65, 0.97)*              |
| enjoyTraditions                              |                                |                      | 0.81 (0.67, 0.98)*             | 0.81 (0.67, 0.98)*  | 0.83 (0.69, 1.01) <sup>†</sup>  |
| residenceYears                               |                                |                      |                                | 0.98 (0.90, 1.05)   | 0.96 (0.88, 1.03)               |
| belongHome                                   |                                |                      |                                |                     | 0.35 (0.22, 0.56)***            |
| McFadden pseudo R <sup>2</sup>               | 0.09                           | 0.09                 | 0.13                           | 0.13                | 0.17                            |
| Likelihood ratio test<br>(Step 5 vs. Step 4) |                                |                      |                                |                     | $\chi^2 = 19.32$<br>$p < .001$  |

\*\*\* p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05; <sup>†</sup> p < .10.

est to him originated from Sudan cemented his connection to Sudan. When students felt that those closest to them had roots in a home country, they also identified with that country. For Nyaluak (age 23, South Sudanese, female), belonging was associated with one's "roots," which is significant because belonging is (a) determined by place of origin and/or (b) perceived as fundamental to one's identity rather than choice.

Personal experiences and memories, whether positive or negative, were also sources of students' emotional attachment to their home country. When prompted about their home country, most mentioned war or conflict. However, even when descriptions of war, trauma, and instability surfaced in their memories of home, students did not see these as deterrents to the strong sense of belonging they felt. When reminiscing about their home countries, both Amna (age 16, Sudanese, female) and Salma (age 16, Sudanese, female) mentioned their educational experiences. Salma described the Sudanese education system as "good" prior to the war. She said, "At first in Sudan we have a good education but when war [broke] out, life [became] difficult for me there, so I [came] to Kakuma." Some seemed to prefer education in their home country during the pre-conflict era. In all of these cases, schooling experience and war were closely intertwined with childhood memories.

Notably, the sense of belonging to home was distinct even if students were only in their country of origin for a short period of time. Although uncommon among the students who shared their stories, students like Koang (age 19, South Sudanese, male) had never actually been to the place they identified as their home country: "I felt connected to Kenya because I was born here but I love South Sudan because it is our home. South Sudan is a wonderful country." His response

raises questions about how students gather information and understandings of home, particularly when they have limited direct exposure. Even born in exile, refugee children and youth found ways to connect with their homeland through practices of remembering and narratives passed down by parents and elders in the camp (Fincham, 2012).

Culture and history both were significant contributors to students' belonging to their home country, but students displayed more confidence in their familiarity with and enjoyment of cultural traditions such as dance, music, and stories compared to their knowledge of history (Wilkinson & Lloyd-Zantiotis, 2017). Amna (age 16, Sudanese female) explained that she was familiar with the traditional dance of her country: "Where [do I learn]? Sometimes, my parents used to tell us what happen[ed]. [I learned these dances] nowhere, but just [from] my tribe when we come and meet together. That is whereby we discuss the country and all that." Largely, students' knowledge of culture and history stemmed either from information they received from family and community members or from actively seeking information from books or online resources.

While wide acknowledgement and gratitude was expressed for the safer living conditions in Kakuma, this had limited if any bearing on students' perceptions of home. Although the majority of students highlighted the personal connection they felt to their home country as a result of (in)direct experiences (autobiographical), the influence of family, friends, and community in developing participants' knowledge of their home countries' culture and history also contributed to shaping that connection (relational).

## First Education and Then Repatriation: Pragmatics of Belonging

The connections to home that the students felt, whether due to autobiographical, relational, or cultural factors, were evident. However, when questions about the unforeseeable future arose, most students stated that they did not wish to return soon. The students' insistence on delayed repatriation was due to several factors, including educational opportunities in the host country, peace and security, and other logistical concerns. Hence, the majority of the students showed strong determination to complete their education first before returning to their home country. While repatriation was a common theme in the interviews, the desire for repatriation seemed to be conditional, hinging on two factors: completion of education and peace.

Most students were determined to return home once they completed their education. Yassir's (age 18, Sudanese, male) parents sent him to Kakuma in 2018 so that he could be educated; they sold their cattle just to afford transportation fees for Yassir's trip to Kenya. He said, "I'm here in Kakuma to acquire some knowledge because in our country we don't have knowledge [education]." Similarly, Elizabeth (age 17, South Sudanese, female) heard that Kakuma offered education for free and that the quality of education was "better" in Kakuma—it was the reason why her family moved. She explained, "I have come here to get knowledge. Schools here are good, and that is why I came." Students alluded that they could not return to their home country unless they achieved their purpose, which was to complete education (secondary or tertiary).

For most students, the ultimate goal was repatriation for the purpose of contributing to their home country. Joseph (age 16, South Sudanese, male) articulated a sense of

responsibility to his country and the people who were still there. For him, education was a tool that he hoped to use to improve conditions for those in Sudan. Joseph said,

I feel connected to Kenya because this is where I am getting my education. However, in the future, I am returning back to Sudan after acquiring the education to help my people back home. I know the situation is bad in Sudan, but I can't abandon them to die. My foundation is in Kenya educationally, but I am returning back once I am done with my education.

Gatluak's (age 16, South Sudanese, male) experience in Kakuma not only provided him access to education, but it also motivated him to reimagine the educational future for South Sudan. Nyadak's (age 18, South Sudanese, female) desire to return home stemmed from her observation of the opportunities from which girls were denied:

I want to help girls back in South Sudan because they are marginalized and no one is taking them to school. I can talk to parents about the importance of girl-child education and encourage them to take their girls to school.

Her own education had shed light on the possibilities for other girls in South Sudan. Therefore, Nyadak shared how the education they were receiving in Kakuma, together with the professional training they hoped to acquire in the future, would prepare them to support "those in need" in their home countries.

Additionally, peace was also mentioned as a precondition for repatriation; students understood that their return was not feasible at the moment due to ongoing political and economic instabilities in their home country. However, they did not view Kakuma as a permanent home but rather as a place that offered academic and career opportunities as well as peace and security. Nyaluak (age 23, South Sudanese, female) emphasized a sentiment shared by many of her friends:

"I love my country and I won't give it up anything [for it]. Once I am done with my education, I will go back to South Sudan." The students' strong sense of home may have been linked to their plans to eventually return. Anyango (age 16, South Sudanese, female) also shared, "Why would I go and stay in a foreign country? There is no place like home." Anyango's response reveals that her parents' place of origin distinguishes what she considers home and foreign. Like Anyango, others also articulated an unwavering loyalty to their country.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

By deploying a mixed-methods approach to examine the role of belonging, pride, and repatriation among young people experiencing long-term displacement in Kakuma Refugee Camp, this study provides theoretical and practical insights on how to support students' sense of belonging and their long-term plans of return. The findings show that many of the factors that enhance the sense of belonging to one's country of origin among young people living in Kakuma Refugee Camp are the same factors that reduce their intention of returning to that same country. This includes knowledge about and enjoyment of their home country and its traditions. The data provide empirical support for Antonsich's (2010) framework of belonging as applied to a younger population along with an empirical demonstration of how young people engage in the pragmatics of belonging (Miletzki, 2014). Young people's knowledge and cultural connection with their home country enhance feelings of belonging but are also associated with not wanting to return home yet due to concerns around conflict and lack of opportunities. However, the qualitative data further demonstrate that young people do plan to return home eventually.

Students' descriptions of their sense of belonging were linked to the identification of home (hooks, 2009), and that home was almost always linked to a geographical space in their country of origin. This space was one in which students felt they belonged despite limited or no direct lived experiences, representing an "imagined" homeland (Anderson, 1991). In the qualitative responses, we found that students were quick to identify where they believed was home. However, students in Kakuma exhibited simultaneous senses of belonging and unbelonging and were engaged in a "pragmatics of belonging" (Miletzki, 2014) and strategic hybridity (Mason, 2007), balancing a strong identity-based sense of belonging to their countries of origin alongside a pragmatic and place-based sense of belonging to their host country with a focus on continuing their studies.

In this study, we found support for the roles of four of the six factors in Antonsich's (2010) framework of belonging, but our findings revealed complex (positive and negative) relationships between these factors and different manifestations of belonging to home and host country. We found that autobiographical factors including experiences of home, knowledge, nationality, birthplace (self, parents'), and nationality were positively related young people's sense of belonging to their country of origin. Nationality mattered most for students, evidenced in the way they emphasized their citizenship throughout the interviews. A strong connection was made between their official status of membership and their sense of belonging and pride (Fenster, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006). This relationship between general knowledge of a largely imagined homeland and both belonging and pride is aligned with previous literature on belonging (Anderson,



1991), especially among displaced communities (Fincham, 2012).

For relational factors, we did not find strong quantitative support for the role of exposure to older generations or directly learning about one's home from community members. However, it is possible that these variables overlap substantially with autobiographical and cultural variables, with social interactions and learning often occurring indirectly around cultural practices. We found that cultural factors, particularly engaging in traditions and customs, were positively associated with students' sense of belonging and pride in their homeland. Despite students in Kakuma being educated within a curriculum that was disconnected from their cultures or home languages (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019), they could learn about cultural practices in informal settings.

Finally, the length of time living in displacement reduced students' sense of belonging. For students who either had left their home country at a young age or were born and grew up in Kakuma or a third country, home was an imagined space with which they identified but did not necessarily feel strong emotional connections. Even when sense of belonging to one's home country was weaker, the majority of students showed a strong desire to return home eventually, underscoring their perception of Kakuma as a temporary home. This could be explained by social, economic, and spatial immobility (Bellino, 2018); having an "unknowable future" (Dryden-Peterson, 2017); and other myriad challenges faced by refugees in Kenya.

Most students reported that they did not intend to go home in the near future owing to the ongoing political, economic, and social insecurities in their home countries; therefore, peace was a conditional factor for their return. We interpret this inversion of relationships as explainable by the different

time horizons young people were operating under and how such time horizons influence their pragmatic plans to stay in Kenya. Given the fact that students did intend to go back home eventually, combined with the finding that knowledge of home and cultural practices were important for their continued sense of belonging and pride, it is critical to examine how institutions, particularly in refugee camps, better cultivate these factors until the hoped-for future time of return arrives.

This study contributes to the field of forced migration and education in emergencies by exploring refugee students' construction of belonging and how it unfolds as they experience education in exile. For refugee children and youth in the study, sense of belonging to homeland as a result of direct experience/knowledge and familiar relationship/narrative not only provided a foundation for their identities but also was a driving factor in forming future goals and aspirations. As the students had strong connections to their home country, they wished to return eventually in order to "give back" or contribute to their country's reconstruction upon completing their education. We hope the insights herein will help institutions provide the necessary support for young people who love their homeland and want to return but desire to first develop their skills through education in their host country.


## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Quantitative data and related analytical code will be made accessible on the Open Science Foundation platform after publication to facilitate replication. Qualitative data will not be made available to protect the anonymity of the participants.

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