



## Academic Persistence for Students Involved in the Accelerated Education Program in Dadaab Refugee Camp

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### ABSTRACT

The academic community has highlighted the lack of research into accelerated education programs (AEPs) in refugee camps. Furthermore, AEPs take different forms in different countries. Generally speaking, however, several AEPs in different parts of the world are known for their low attendance rates. Accordingly, this article presents the key barriers causing absenteeism or preventing students from continuing their education within the program in Dadaab Refugee Camp. Our study shows that humanitarian action itself plays a significant role in pupil academic persistence. Also, flexible schedules are not a solution to absenteeism in AEP.

### KEYWORDS

Dadaab; education in emergencies; academic persistence; absenteeism; accelerated education program; refugee camp

### RESUMÉ

La communauté académique a souligné le manque de recherches sur les programmes d'éducation accélérée (PEA) dans les camps de réfugiés. En outre, les PEA prennent des formes différentes selon les pays. De façon générale, cependant, plusieurs PEA dans différentes parties du monde sont réputés pour leurs faibles taux de participation. Par conséquent, cet article présente les principaux obstacles causant l'absentéisme ou empêchant les étudiant.es de poursuivre leur éducation au sein du programme dans le camp de réfugiés de Dadaab. Notre étude démontre que l'action humanitaire elle-même joue un rôle important dans la persévérance scolaire des élèves. L'étude démontre également que les horaires flexibles ne sont pas une solution à l'absentéisme dans les PEA.

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## INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) Global Monitoring Report on Education, during the 2017 school year, 64 million children who could attain primary education are still out of school (UNESCO, 2018). Likewise, according to this report, 199 million youths worldwide are not enrolled in secondary school. Many of these children and youths are refugees; only 61% of refugee children attend primary school (UNHCR, 2019b). In comparison, the world average is 92% (UNESCO, 2018). This is worrisome, especially since as young refugees age, barriers to education only grow higher. In this regard, only 23% of young refugees go to secondary school (the world average is 84%), while only 1% of refugees will reach the university (the world average is 37%) (UNHCR, 2019b; UNESCO, 2018). Four million school-age refugees do not go to school, an increase of 500,000 compared to the 2017 school year (UNHCR, 2019b). Additionally, girls are particularly disadvantaged, being 2.5 times more likely to drop out of school than their male peers (UNHCR, 2019b). According to UNESCO (2015), conflicts remain a major obstacle to schooling, as a large and growing proportion of out-of-school children live in conflict zones. Furthermore, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2012) estimates that 1.5 billion people live in countries affected by recurring cycles of violence and insecurity. The number of people displaced by armed conflict exceeded the 50 million mark in 2013, a figure unparalleled since the Second World War (UNHCR, 2016), and that has continued growing ever since. In fact, this number reached 74.8 million forcibly displaced people in 2018 (UNHCR, 2019a). As a result, the

displacement due to an armed conflict or natural disaster frequently results in substantial periods of missed schooling for refugee children (Burde et al., 2015). With each missed semester or school year, there is a greater risk that children will be unable to return to formal education, which exponentially increases risks that threaten children's security, especially for teenagers (Benavot, 2015).

Responding to the needs of these children has increasingly led governments, UN agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to explore the possibility of providing accelerated education programs (AEPs) so that refugee children and youth can gain the equivalence of formal schooling and, if possible, return to formal education at their appropriate age and grade levels (Nicholson, 2014). After the Rwandan crisis in 1994, UNICEF launched the "Back to School" campaign, which implemented AEPs across dozens of crisis/conflict-heavy countries, becoming one of the most important education initiatives in international emergencies (Nicholson, 2014). Almost a decade later UNESCO (2011) states, "Accelerated programs can help them [youth] build the basic literacy and numeracy skills they need to return to primary school or make the transition to secondary school" (p. 254). Globally, AEPs have become the most common response to the overwhelming and widespread populations of out-of-school children and youth in conflict areas and natural disasters (Nicholson, 2014). One such example has been the case in Dadaab Refugee Camp since 2013 (Taylor, 2015).

Nevertheless, some studies from the scientific and grey literature indicate that learning outcomes for AEP students are often low (Shah, 2015). Furthermore, poor learning outcomes can result in a low rate of transition into formal education (Arvisais,

2016). In this regard, achievement is connected to attendance (Charlick, 2005; O'Gara & Kendall, 2000). Several AEPs in different parts of the world are also known for their low attendance rates (Ananga, 2011; Longden, 2013; Taylor, 2015). According to Nicholson (2007), low attendance can lead to dropouts. Therefore, a better understanding of the reasons leading to student absenteeism and eventual dropouts seems paramount, especially since the ultimate causes of these high absentee rates in AEPs are not well known (Shah, 2015). Thus, this research aims to identify key barriers causing absenteeism or preventing children and youth from continuing their education. The results are intended to highlight factors at play in student academic persistence, as well as absenteeism factors in the AEP implemented in Dadaab Refugee Camp.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

Researchers have drawn attention to the dearth of information on educational initiatives that meet the needs of children (Cooper, 2005; Sinclair, 2007; Tomlinson & Benefield, 2005). Fresia (2007) adds:

These processes (educational services) still require greater study, be it in regard to their form or their consequences. With respect to the offer of educational services in camps, we could, for example, have a look at the impact that hybrid academic programs defined by various actors (international experts, the UNHCR, NGOs, ministries of education of the country of origin or the country of asylum, etc.) and taught by refugees, who are also political leaders in their groups, have on children's socialization (p. 114).

Processes like politicization, intermediation, or recovery within refugee camps remain largely unanalyzed in specific cases, particularly where standards and values (humanitarian, national, or local) conflict with one

another (Fresia, 2009). With these conditions in mind, Lanoue (2006) states that researchers must address the matter of education in refugee camps (Arvisais & Charland, 2015; Dryden-Peterson, 2011). Therefore, the objective of this study is to help close this gap by generating knowledge about the factors affecting student academic persistence in the Dadaab AEP.

### Theoretical Foundations

In order to narrow the range of factors that can influence student academic persistence, this research adopted Lewin's 1951 force field analysis model as applied to the education sector by Anderson (1985). The term "field" refers to the idea that there is a field of conflicting forces in the lives of individuals (Gagnon & Brunel, 2005). This theory proposes a dynamic perspective identifying the forces involved (internal/external, positive/negative) and postulates that behaviour represents a mechanism for preserving or restoring the homeostasis of psychological and physical needs, thus underlining the interaction between individuals and their environment (Schunk et al., 2012). However, this contextual theoretical model, "based on the interaction between humans and their environment," and Lewin's theory of force fields posits that environmental conditions play the largest role in school persistence (Schunk et al., 2012). Thus, this model allowed the researchers to identify the driving and restrictive forces causing absenteeism and dropouts, with our emphasis in this article being restrictive forces (barriers). These forces that influence withdrawal or persistence vary in intensity and type according to individuals, groups, context, and educational initiatives (Anderson, 1985).

## CONCEPTS

### ACADEMIC PERSISTENCE

The concept of academic persistence has been very present in education science research (Holman et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Reason, 2009). According to Holman et al. (2016)

for this reason, much of the theoretical discussion has revolved around the factors that shape this psychological phenomenon, with little attention to isolating its manifestations and consequences on learning outcomes, namely retention, dropout intentions and achievement (p. 9).

Therefore, we define academic persistence as the individual's ability to direct personal resources towards academic achievement in order to complete the program, regardless of barriers (Holman et al., 2016; Duckworth et al., 2007). Given the interconnections between the individual and environmental factors in education within an emergency scenario, this article focuses on two key barriers to academic persistence: absenteeism and intention to drop out.

#### *Accelerated Education Program*

An accelerated education program (AEP) is a flexible, age-appropriate program that promotes access to education in an accelerated time frame for disadvantaged groups, such as over-age and out-of-school children and youth, who missed out or had their education interrupted as the result of poverty, violence, conflict, and crisis (Inter-Agency Accelerated Education Working Group, 2017). The goal of AEP is to provide learners with equivalent certificated competencies that they would gain in the formal system in an accelerated time frame. In this way, learners

can transition back into mainstream educational settings or complete an entire primary cycle (Baxter et al., 2016). In short, it is non-formal education in support of the formal system. The goal of accelerated education is to ensure a rapid return to formal education for its students or learners (Baxter et al., 2016). These programs often condense about eight years of primary education into three or four years. Finally, these interventions are also called "catch-up" or "open schools" and are widely implemented in low-income and crisis-affected countries, particularly by UNHCR (Flemming, 2017).

## METHODOLOGY

### THE CASE UNDER STUDY

Dadaab refugee camp is located in a semi-arid region of Garissa County, Kenya, and is one of the most populous refugee camps in the world. Opened in 1992, Dadaab is also the oldest camp under UNHCR's responsibility. During the research period, the Dadaab complex hosted 332,455 refugees, or 78,092 households, 95% of which originate from Somalia. The population of Dadaab is very young, as 60% of refugees are 17 years of age or younger (UNHCR, 2019b). With regard to education, enrolment rates are low, as 51% of school-age children (3–17 years) remain out of school. Furthermore, only 13% of young people have access to secondary education (Taylor, 2015). This phenomenon is even more acutely felt by girls, with only 25% of secondary school students being female (Taylor, 2015). Moreover, according to a more recent case study, youth enrolment in Dadaab schools consist primarily of over-age students, with 41% of primary school students being older than 13 years of age (Flemming, 2017). According to UNHCR and its partners, the main reason for this sit-

uation was the prolonged and/or frequent breaks in youth schooling (Arvisais, 2016).

One solution employed to address this situation was the implementation of an AEP. The AEP was implemented in Dadaab camp in 2013. At the time of our research, there were nine NGOs administering AEP in Dadaab (Arvisais, 2016; Flemming, 2017). These organizations were coordinated by the Education Working Group, co-chaired by UNHCR's education sector and UNICEF. These organizations jointly implement formal education programs in 35 primary and seven secondary schools. At the time, the program had 4,848 students enrolled (Taylor, 2015). As elsewhere, the program objective is to enable children, adolescents, but also adults to return as quickly as possible to formal education at the appropriate age and level. AEP condensed contents while focusing on literacy and numeracy competencies using a learner-centred pedagogy and interactivity (e.g., teamwork, discussion, questions). In Dadaab, AEP curriculum is composed of three levels. It allows for two transitions to the formal system: (1) upon successful completion of level 1 the student can enter the fifth grade of formal school, and (2) upon successful completion of level 2, the student can enter the seventh grade. Finally, successful completion of Level 3 leads to primary level certification. The goal of AEP is to enable learners to make the transition to the formal school system at the primary, secondary, and vocational levels. Despite the success of this program in terms of enrolment, the academic persistence of students still remains an issue, as absenteeism and school dropout rates are high (Gomez, 2015).

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This study used a mixed-method sequential exploratory design (Creswell, 2004). In addition

to using mixed methods, this study takes an inductive approach, which gives priority to data, lived experience, and fieldwork, and then uses this knowledge within an iterative process (Guillemette & Luckerhoff, 2015). According to this design, the data collection has been carried out in two phases. The first phase (qualitative) was meant for purpose theorization and instrument design. The second phase (quantitative) was used to administer a survey questionnaire and validate the theory.

## DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

### INTERVIEWS (PHASE 1)

The lead researcher first conducted non-directive interviews in English with a convenience sample of employees from partner organizations ( $n = 6$ ) and head teachers ( $n = 12$ ). This step led to the design of a semi-structured interview guide and participant selection according to the snowball sampling method. The gradual construction of the sample, using references obtained from first responders, led the research team to conduct semi-structured interviews among AEP teachers ( $n = 18$ ) and their students ( $n = 36$ ). This round of interviews allowed us to identify a number of dropouts ( $n = 11$ ) and also conduct semi-structured interviews with them. It is also important to mention that the participants who recently dropped out of their AEP were contacted with the help of each school's parent-teacher association.

The choice fell on a combination of non-directive interviews and semi-structured individual interviews because of the exploratory nature of this research, the lack of scientific literature (and the large amount of grey literature), and the complexity of its object of study. The objective was to build a solid, data-based theoretical framework. To



do this, we privileged the grounded theory method (GMT) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The semi-structured individual interviews were conducted in the Somali language by a team of data collectors composed of eight community workers, all of whom were trained by the lead researcher to carry out qualitative one-on-one interviews. This team was led in the field by a team coordinator from the host community and a lead researcher. A total of 65 semi-structured interviews and 18 conversational non-structured interviews with head teachers and partners were analyzed using GMT. All verbatim reports were analyzed line by line in a process referred to as “open coding” (Corbin, 1997). In the end, the contributive concepts were identified and certain phrases were marked as key quotes.

### Survey (Phase 2)

The survey was administered in 11 schools within the five camps that constitute Dadaab. In total, 188 AEP students participated in the survey. Tables 1, 2 and 3 show the main characteristics of the sample. The survey was carried out during regular school hours. Some questions were about hygiene or female genital mutilation, so the survey was administered among female students in a separate classroom by a female team member. The bilingual questionnaires (English/-Somali) were administered in two different ways for reading comprehension. Primary school students also participated in an interview, and then a self-administered in-class survey was issued to secondary-level students. All questionnaires were retrieved by hand, onsite, and later transposed manually into a computer. The questionnaire was organized in three blocks of synonymous items for internal validity purposes. This allowed us to evaluate the internal consistency estimate of reliability for each sub-

scale/concept of the questionnaire (Cronbach’s alpha, see Table 4). All items about absenteeism were presented using a six-point Likert scale.

From the qualitative analysis of the interviews, for each factor (concept) that may have caused students to miss school, three items were identified in the questionnaire. As shown in Table 4, internal validity analyses made using Cronbach’s alpha and the Pearson coefficient allowed us to confirm the consistency of 10 out of the 14 concepts created using the grounded theory method. Consequently, three items had to be treated separately—or rather, as entirely distinct concepts.

It was expected that a large majority of the students would not be able to read the questionnaire. However, we had anticipated and controlled reading skills ahead of time. In this way, the survey includes a question to verify students’ reading skills in order to avoid randomly answered questionnaires, although this precaution could generate validity problems, such as experimental mortality. To avoid such a problem, we proposed to administer the survey through interviews at the primary school level. Before deciding upon this solution, we ran a self-administered test in the field with two samplings, the first one composed of primary-level students and the second one composed of secondary-level students.

For primary-level students, 66 participants answered the questionnaire, and only seven correctly answered the reading skill question. This is such a low result that it is even unlikely that the students could answer correctly by luck. Therefore, given the conclusion of the test, we decided upon the one-on-one interview solution, despite the method’s potential drawbacks. For one thing, the method is time-consuming, and it might cause a social desirability bias, or what we call the “never”

effect in the survey. In this context, however, it was the only possible solution. For secondary-level students, the test was conclusive, with only 4 rejected questionnaires out of a sample of 70 students. Therefore, in light of the test result, and because it is the most organic solution and the most efficient method to produce good quality data, we decided to keep the self-administered strategy at the secondary school level.

**Table 1**  
*Implementation partners*

| Partner               | %            |
|-----------------------|--------------|
| LWF (Primary Level)   | 16 (n = 30)  |
| NRC (Primary Level)   | 30 (n = 56)  |
| RET (Secondary Level) | 54 (n = 102) |

## RESULTS

### QUALITATIVE RESULTS (PHASE 1)

First, some general observations emerged from many of the student interviews: "Absenteeism is very common in schools." Teachers also made note of a general trend: "Boys' attendance is much better than girls'. Girls tend to miss classes more frequently than boys." According to a student named Nala, "If you miss the teacher's explanation of the topic, it is always hard to catch up with the other learners, and it will be very hard to continue in the program."

More specifically, the qualitative data reveal that food distribution is one main reason students miss school. This phenomenon mainly affects boys. As one student named Hussein noted, "I miss school during food distribution cycles with my brother when we are fetching our family rations." The same

**Table 2**  
*Age of Participants*

| Age        | %  |
|------------|----|
| 13 or less | 6  |
| ca. 14–16  | 19 |
| 17–20      | 41 |
| 21–25      | 27 |
| 26–30      | 6  |
| 31–40      | 2  |

**Table 3**  
*Genders of Participants*

| Gender | %  |
|--------|----|
| Female | 28 |
| Male   | 72 |

is true for Ali. When asked if he sometimes misses school, he answered, "Yeah, sometimes I go for ration collection during distribution days." Another of their colleagues, Omar, told us, "Mostly, I come to school every day, but some days I need to go like other boys to the distribution centre, so I miss school." Food distribution cycles have been identified as the most common cause of absenteeism, not just by students, but also by teachers. Teachers seem powerless in this situation, as they cannot prevent boys from collecting monthly rations for their families.

In addition, hunger can generate absenteeism. Idil told us, "The most frequent reason [to miss school] is when I miss my daily bread. I'm hungry. I cannot learn." Her colleague, Omar, said, "We don't have enough food at home... Sometimes, I don't have something to eat. So I stay at home hungry." Most of the schools with AEP classrooms do not have a food program. Accord-

**Table 4**  
Internal Validity

| Concept/Factor                         | Item 1   | Item 2  | Item 3   | $\alpha$          |
|--|--|---|--|-------------------|
| Domestic Work                          | I have to do domestic work                         | I need to fetch water                                   | I need to find firewood                                    | .738              |
| Loitering                              | I prefer entertainment                             | I prefer to play football                               | I prefer to hang out                                       | .670              |
| Nutrition Problems & Food Distribution | I am too hungry                                    | I need to find some food                                | I need to collect rations during distribution <sup>a</sup> | .719 <sup>b</sup> |
| Intimidation                           | I am a victim of intimidation                      | I am a victim of peer pressure                          | I am afraid to walk to school                              | .708              |
| Religious Education                    | I need to go to the madrassa                       | I need to attend another school                         | I prefer religious education                               | .666              |
| Child Care                             | I have to take care of my siblings                 | I need to stay at home to take care of younger children | My parents are sick <sup>c</sup>                           | .646 <sup>c</sup> |
| Sickness                               | I am sick  | I'm not feeling well <sup>a</sup>                       | I am diseased <sup>a</sup>                                 | .593 <sup>d</sup> |
| Distance                               | The distance from home to school is too far        | The school is too far away                              | The walk to school is too long                             | .877              |
| Drug Use                               | I used drugs                                       | I smoked or used drugs                                  | I drank alcohol or used other substances                   | .653              |
| Parental Responsibilities              | I need to take care of my own children             | I have parental responsibilities                        | I have to stay home with my children                       | .802              |
| Paid Work                              | I have a schedule conflict                         | I need to work to get an income                         | I was not available at that time of the day                | .694              |
| Menstruation <sup>e</sup>              | Because of my menstruation                         | Because I have my period                                |  | .728              |
| FGM <sup>e</sup>                       | Pain due to female genital mutilation <sup>e</sup> | Because of genital pain <sup>a</sup>                    |  | .560 <sup>f</sup> |
| Pregnancy <sup>e</sup>                 | Because I am or I was pregnant                     | Because I will have a baby                              |  | .645              |

<sup>a</sup> The Cronbach's alpha (.719) shown here is without the item "I need to collect rations during distribution." This item has been processed separately as a concept in itself labelled as "Food Distribution."

<sup>b</sup> The Cronbach's alpha (.646) shown here is without the item "My parents are sick." This item has been processed separately as a concept in itself labelled as "Parental Sickness."

<sup>c</sup> The reported Cronbach's alpha did not consider this item since it did not correspond well with the scale.

<sup>d</sup> The Cronbach's alpha for this item group was not reliable. Therefore, the item "I am sick" has been processed separately as a concept in itself labelled as "Sickness."

<sup>e</sup> These items were only administered to female students.

<sup>f</sup> The Pearson correlation for this item group shows no significant correlation. Therefore the item "Pain due to female genital mutilation" has been processed separately as a concept in itself labelled as "FGM."



ing to teachers, this is “due to a lack of financing.”

Another important reason for absenteeism mentioned during the interviews is that some students have to work in order to generate an income. As one teacher expressed it, “Some of them [students] are asked to work for families for income by their parents.” Assad said, “I work one day per week in the market and go to school the other days.” Like his colleague, Mohamed also works at the market. He told us, “I work in order to have an income. I work in the market as a shoe-shiner.” Other students participate in gathering activities as an income generator. For example, Dalmar stated, “I go to the forest to fetch firewood for sale.” Just as with food distribution, paid work seems to affect male students primarily.

On the other hand, domestic work affects mainly female students. Faduma said, “I am just a girl. Girls and boys are not the same. Girls do housework. So, in the morning you might delay your departure to school due to this work.” As another girl, Hani, shared, “I’m the oldest in our family. I help my mother. I fetch water and firewood. I also stay with the younger children.” A similar comment was made by her peer Idil: “I do chores. I stay with my siblings. I wash clothes. I fetch firewood for cooking.” Domestic and family responsibilities are also sometimes exacerbated by the fact that some students live without their parents. As Faduma pointed out, “Most of the students aren’t with their parents in the camp.” According to teachers, this is generally the result of the “death of a parent, or because they have returned to Somalia in order to find work, leaving the children safely behind in the camp.” This situation puts more pressure on adolescent girls and may lead to a difficult reconciliation between family responsibilities and school.

Another obvious and common reason for being absent from school is sickness. However, according to teachers, “The difficult living conditions in Dadaab make it more frequent.” As Ali said, “I am often sick, so I don’t go to school for a day or two.” Additionally, parental health also appears to have an impact on attendance. For example, Bashir mentioned, “When one of my parents is sick, either my father or my mother, I usually miss school.” The same applies to his female colleague Amina: “When my father is sick, he tells me to stay with my siblings. My father is blind and I have a disabled sister.”

One marginal factor that became clear from the interviews is that sometimes students prefer to play rather than go to class. We noted some statements to this effect, such as “I prefer to play outside,” or “I want to play football [soccer] more.” One student named Jamil mentioned, “Sometimes I miss school because I like playing at the playground. At the school there is no playground.”

Lastly, but no less important, students like Uba mentioned, “There are times when we miss school because of violence at home or a fight between the students.” To echo this remark, according to several teachers, insecurity plays a significant role in academic persistence. Finally, according to teachers, the UNHCR voluntary repatriation program represents an important source of dropouts.

### Quantitative Results (Phase 2)

Quantitative results show that there is a significant split in the reasons that students miss school. The mean Likert score across all concepts shows that the reasons leading to absenteeism vary widely from one student to another. Although there are no dominant factors, certain factors stand out. **Table 5** shows the 12 questionnaire items with the

highest mean Likert scores. The 12 reasons listed in the table are the ones most given by students when declaring themselves absent from school.

**Table 3** shows that domestic work as a whole (that is, work related to everyday tasks, eating, or even family responsibilities) is in large part why students say they miss class. Furthermore, the data show a strong correlation between the level of domestic responsibility and the absenteeism caused by the distance between the school and the home. All the items related to domestic responsibilities were strongly and positively linked with absenteeism because of distance: domestic work ( $R = 0.713, p < 0.001$ ), taking care of siblings ( $R = 0.622, p < 0.001$ ), and parenting ( $R = 0.639, p < 0.001$ ). Although both parametric and non-parametric coefficients were significant and similar, only the Spearman coefficient results are reported here, given the non-parametric nature of our data.

**Table 6** shows the main results by ranking the 12 concepts/factors with the highest mean Likert score, thereby helping us to establish the most common barriers to accessing the AEP (as a result of absenteeism). The most common barrier is that of food distribution, affecting adolescents and young male adults in particular. In girls, menstruation is among the highest causes of absenteeism. The other prevalent barriers are (1) distance, (2) student and parent health issues, and (3) religious education. Distance is strongly linked to several other factors, such as (1) reconciliation of family responsibilities and daily tasks, (2) peer pressure or intimidation, and (3) nutritional issues.

**Table 5**  
*Questionnaire items*

| Rank | I miss school because ...                             | Likert Score Mean |
|------|---|-------------------|
| 1    | I prefer to attend religious education                | 3.9               |
| 2    | I need to go to ration collection during distribution | 3.6               |
| 3    | I have to take care of my siblings                    | 3.4               |
| 4    | I am sick   | 3.3               |
| 5    | I need to fetch water                                 | 3.1               |
| 6    | I need to find some food                              | 3.0               |
| 7    | my parents are sick                                   | 3.0               |
| 8    | the walk to school is too long                        | 3.0               |
| 9    | I have parental responsibilities                      | 3.0               |
| 10   | because of my menstruation <sup>a</sup>               | 2.9               |
| 11   | the school is too far                                 | 2.8               |
| 12   | I am too hungry                                       | 2.6               |

<sup>a</sup> Administered only to female students

There seems to be a slight difference between the reasons leading to dropouts and those causing absenteeism. As shown from the qualitative analysis of the interviews in **Table 7**, socioeconomic factors (for boys) and cultural factors (for girls) are the dominant causes of dropouts, whereas domestic tasks and other factors associated with daily life are what most affect absenteeism.

Finally, in order to establish an absenteeism profile, we conducted an analysis by quartile. This analysis revealed that the profile of the most commonly absent student

(gender is not important in this matter) is in secondary school, is among the oldest students in his or her cohort, and has children. Regarding absenteeism, girls do not have a greater tendency to miss school than boys, but they still face a number of barriers, some of which are specific to their gender (menstruation and FGM, for example).

- Students who most often miss class (25% and higher) are almost all at the secondary school level. Those in the third quartile also tend to be at the secondary school level, in comparison to their counterparts in the lower 50% (of declared absentees).

- Of the students who miss class the least often (25% or lower), a significantly lower number have children when compared to their colleagues who miss class most often (50% and higher).

- Students who declared themselves absent more often (25% and higher) are older than those who are absent less often (50% and lower).

**Table 6**  
*Concepts*

| Rank | Barriers                  | Likert Score Mean |
|------|---------------------------|-------------------|
| 1    | Food Distribution         | 3.6               |
| 2    | Sickness                  | 3.3               |
| 3    | Nutrition Problems        | 3.1               |
| 4    | Parental Sickness         | 3.0               |
| 5    | Religious Education       | 2.9               |
| 6    | Distance                  | 2.9               |
| 7    | Childcare                 | 2.8               |
| 8    | Menstruation <sup>a</sup> | 2.8               |
| 9    | Domestic Work             | 2.7               |
| 10   | Parental Responsibilities | 2.5               |
| 11   | Paid Work                 | 2.2               |
| 12   | FGM <sup>a</sup>          | 2.2               |

<sup>a</sup> Administered only to female students

**Table 7**  
*Reported frequencies vs. questionnaire means*

| Rank | Reasons Leading to Dropout | Frequency in the Interviews | Reasons Causing Absenteeism | Survey Likert Score Mean |
|------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1    | Domestic Work              | 30                          | Food Distribution           | 3.6                      |
| 2    | Paid Work                  | 29                          | Sickness                    | 3.3                      |
| 3    | Early Marriage             | 28                          | Nutrition Problems          | 3.1                      |
| 4    | Community Values           | 14                          | Parental Sickness           | 3.0                      |
| 5    | Food Distribution          | 14                          | Religious Education         | 2.9                      |
| 6    | FGM                        | 9                           | Distance                    | 2.9                      |
| 7    | School Supplies            | 8                           | Childcare                   | 2.8                      |
| 8    | Parental Support           | 6                           | Menstruation                | 2.8                      |
| 9    | Childcare                  | 6                           | Domestic Work               | 2.7                      |
| 10   | Parental Values            | 5                           | Parental Responsibilities   | 2.5                      |
| 11   | Repatriation               | 5                           | Paid Work                   | 2.2                      |
| 12   | Loitering                  | 5                           | FGM                         | 2.2                      |

## DISCUSSION

The first observation is that the mean Likert score across all concepts seems to show that the reasons leading to absenteeism vary widely from one student to another, which conforms with the findings of the literature corpus. According to [Charlick \(2005\)](#), absenteeism varies widely and depends on many factors. While the study revealed no dominant reasons for absenteeism, certain pre-eminent factors stood out.

According to our study, domestic work as a whole (work related to everyday tasks, nutrition, or family responsibilities) is in large part why students miss class. As demonstrated by both the qualitative and quantitative results, domestic responsibilities are indeed the most frequent cause of school absences, especially for older students. Furthermore, according to the interviews, this seems to affect mainly female students. However, the survey results show that it affects both girls and boys alike. In this regard, our result converges with other studies. In fact, according to [Sinclair \(2007\)](#) and [Tannir and Hroub \(2013\)](#), students are often absent from school in order to support their household. However, our study provides additional insight by demonstrating that there is interaction between domestic responsibilities and the parents' level of health. The same applies to the distance between school and home.

Likewise, contrary to what [Charlick \(2005\)](#) argued, our results seem to show that flexible schedules as a solution to this problem have a low impact on attendance, even for Dadaab AEP students who have significant responsibilities at home. The AEP runs three hours less per day than the formal secondary schools. Students are present in class only in the morning. In the afternoon, the teacher gives homework assignments in the form of

the module to be done at home. Teachers are usually available after class until 1 p.m. to answer students' questions. Originally, low attendance called for more flexibility. However, our results show that absenteeism remains high, despite flexibility. Our interview data tend to show that students feel less compelled to attend school regularly because of the flexibility of the program. This echoes similar findings from case studies ([Flemming, 2017](#)). The high flexibility of the program helps to increase enrolment from year to year. On the other hand, this same feature might lead to a steady decline in attendance. Our data show that about half of the students have a class attendance rate between 20% and 59%. Nevertheless, more research is needed to better understand the interactions between flexibility and absenteeism.

Additionally, the flexibility offered by the secondary-level program is causing a year-long delay in the program's completion, which means that the curriculum is no longer accelerated. For example, the accelerated curriculum is thus being completed in 4 years at the same pace as the formal program. This phenomenon might cause students to drop out, and contribute to creating confusion between the concepts of flexible scheduling and absenteeism among pupils. In this regard, the data lead us to believe that a better understanding of AEP goals within the community can contribute to reducing absenteeism and dropout. It is important to explain to parents and leaders that AEP is not a shortcut to graduation. Therefore, raising awareness in the community about real AEP objectives is even more necessary. This effort is also important for encouraging more girls to join AEP or school in general, as female students are largely underrepresented.

Alongside the phenomenon of domestic responsibilities, some tasks to support the

household, but performed outside the family environment, also seem to have a major influence on classroom attendance. For example, food distribution has a significant impact on male students. This is confirmed by both qualitative and quantitative data. Girls experience another type of problem also related to distribution: the distribution of feminine hygiene products, which also generates a similar cycle of absence as does food distribution for boys. In fact, for female students, menstruation and genital pain are among the highest causes of absenteeism. It is worth mentioning that this reason for school absence was not mentioned in the interviews at all, yet is highly significant and represented in the survey data, due in part to the sensitive nature of this subject. If anything, this shows and reinforces the value of a mixed methodology.

These two observations mark a step forward in knowledge on this subject. For boys as well as girls, these two barriers may cause absences of 5 to 7 days for each month of school. Both barriers are particularly structural, as opposed to socio-economic (i.e., paid work) or cultural (i.e., early marriage), as they are directly related to the organization of humanitarian aid within the camp. In fact, one may reasonably infer that these barriers are caused by the way in which food assistance and feminine hygiene products are distributed in the camp. These results show the predominant role of humanitarian action itself on pupil absenteeism. In light of the data, one may argue that the different facets of intervention conflict with each other in academic persistence. Beyond their role in survey design, the interviews allowed us to go deeper in interpreting the data. When juxtaposing the interview and survey results, the first finding is that the frequency of absenteeism declared by students for all

concepts is lower than that mentioned during interviews by teachers and head teachers. Furthermore, on-site observations during survey administration reveal that students declare a lower frequency of absenteeism than their actual rate of absence.

The fact that "distance between one's home and school" is found high in the list of mean Likert scores seems to confirm the interview results. As such, distance is a more common barrier for students who have greater responsibilities outside of school. Indeed, as mentioned previously, our data tend to support the notion that distance affects the younger and more vulnerable students much less than the older ones, who potentially have more family responsibilities or paid work. It would therefore appear that distance is not necessarily a physical barrier, but rather a factor making school more difficult to reconcile with other daily life tasks. In addition to distance, intimidation seems to be a more common cause of absenteeism in schools in more isolated sectors. The reverse is also true: students in schools near residential zones or in sectors where other services are concentrated experience less bullying from other students, as in the two LWF schools located inside the Kam-bioos camp. Finally, according to the normative data collected, students from minority communities, such as the Ethiopian community, are more likely to miss school as a result of intimidation. Moreover, according to our results, hunger combined with distance tends to reduce attendance in the afternoon. In fact, a large proportion of students say they have to go home during the break to eat. For many, the significant distance between home and school forces them to be absent for the second half of the day. However, some studies performed in other contexts have found low conclusive evidence of a causal



link between attendance and school feeding (Penson & Tomlinson, 2009). That being said, our results are strong enough to allow us to maintain that a school feeding component can be a major factor in helping to reduce absenteeism in the Dadaab AEP.

Additionally, teachers do not seem to practise student-centred teaching, or teaching techniques that utilize diverse learning strategies, both of which are basic principles of AEP (Flemming, 2017). Lectures and recitations seem to exacerbate school dropout due to repeated absences from school. In fact, students who miss school regularly are no longer able to follow the lessons based on repetition. As a result, they often end up dropping out. This appears unsurprising, since AEPs' principles are unsuited for the conditions that teachers face while teaching (i.e., high student-teacher ratios and few educational supplies). Thus, a more traditional educational approach focused primarily on formal teaching and repetition is usually adopted. This matter also calls to mind another related issue. Somali is the most common language of instruction in AEP, but it is not formally taught (Arvaisais, 2016). Indeed, during the interviews, some participants mentioned the impact this had on them. This has the potential to undermine the literacy skills of students as much in Somali as in English or Swahili, which can make the transition to formal school in Dadaab more difficult. In addition, it may also represent a barrier to integration in the Somali education system in the event of repatriation. This seems to be in line with the literature: according to Dryden-Peterson (2003), refugees often face significant language barriers in their schooling, which can affect school retention.

Finally, as the non-absenteeism-related reasons for dropouts are difficult to pin down using a survey, the qualitative data were

very helpful in identifying trends. In fact, according to the interviews, repatriation is one of the most common causes of dropouts, but that fact is not mentioned in the surveys. Surprisingly enough, head teachers and teachers both identified voluntary repatriation as one of the most common reasons for dropping out, even though only a small proportion of refugees had benefited from this UNHCR program during the time of the study. Furthermore, as reported by Boisvert (2017), the same observation also seems to be widespread in the grey literature. However, this seems rather surprising, given the low proportion of refugees who had benefited from the UNHCR repatriation program at the time of the study. Indeed, official data indicate that only 1,454 school-age refugees had been repatriated to Somalia out of a population of 346,428 (0.4%) at the time of the interviews (UNHCR, 2019b). It is not possible to know how many of them were enrolled in the AEP. On the other hand, with only 4,848 enrolments, it is likely that the proportion of students otherwise enrolled in the program who have been repatriated is small. Unfortunately, it is virtually impossible to track dropout students and gain an understanding of or measure the effect that repatriation has on the dropout data. On the other hand, even if we were not able to measure this phenomenon using the survey, the interviews seem to reveal that repatriation does not play a significant role on dropouts.

The same applies to pregnancy and early marriage. The effect of pregnancy and early marriage on academic persistence is well documented in the literature (Shah, 2015). That being said, based on this research's specific objectives and design, it was not possible to circumscribe those factors. However, in many cases, the interview results align quite well with the field's literary corpus, so we may conclude that these two ele-

ments play a major role on school persistence. In conclusion, on the basis of our results, we recommend the implementation of an attendance-tracking system in each school in order to conduct interventions for those with chronic absenteeism. Also, we recommend the extension of the WFP project called Bamba Chakula. This project increases the flexibility of the food supply system and thus helps students to better balance their daily responsibilities with school.

## LIMITS

As indicated earlier, the questionnaires were administered in two different ways: interviews and self-administered questionnaires. This may present a possible limitation to the research, as the results obtained using one method may differ from those obtained using the other. In the present case, the interview method is more likely to cause a social desirability bias (particularly on the more sensitive questions) in comparison to its self-administered counterpart, in which students can answer the questions with more privacy. In order to determine the extent to which this bias affects participant responses, we analyzed the results of three particularly sensitive items in the absenteeism section of the survey: drug use, entertainment, and pain caused by genital mutilation. Using the data from two subgroups, we compared the results of these items for the same age bracket (17 to 20) as a function of the means of administration. In this way, we could check whether students replying orally had given lower absence frequencies for all three sensitive items than those of their colleagues who had replied in writing. **Table 8** shows the results of this verification.

**Table 8**  
*Administration bias test*

| Categories    | Sig.<br>(2-Tailed) | Likert Score<br>Mean<br>Difference |
|---------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| Entertainment | .000               | -1.26903                           |
| Drug Use      | .032               | -.38626                            |
| FGM           | .485               | -.75714                            |

The outcome of this verification does not allow us to conclusively state whether social desirability had any effect on the results. However, it is possible for us to affirm with reasonable certainty that if this bias had an impact, it was significantly different for two of the three sensitive items. The mean deviation between absenteeism declared by one means of administration and the other is -0.80 on the Likert scale. It can therefore be said that students replying orally gave answers of almost one Likert level less (out of 6: never, very rarely, rarely, occasionally, very frequently, always) than their peers for the sensitive items of the questionnaire.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the results produced by the inductive approach adopted for this research allow us to better understand what factors hinder access to education and affect students' academic persistence (absenteeism, which leads to dropouts). Our study revealed that humanitarian action (that is, distribution of food and feminine hygiene products) itself plays a predominant role in student academic persistence. The data also enable us to make hypotheses that may be validated in a future research project using a hypothetico-deductive method. We believe that this is an important step towards acquiring better knowledge of educational initiatives in a

humanitarian crisis, especially with regards to AEP. On the other hand, much still remains to be done, and future research should produce knowledge about the relationship between absenteeism and learning outcomes in AEPs. In light of our findings, insecurity should also be analyzed to understand its role in student performance, persistence, and achievement. Hence, further research must investigate the interaction between those concepts. Our work focused on academic persistence constraints. We did not study the driving factors among students or the best practices among school staff. Future research should address these issues. Finally, it would also be useful for researchers and practitioners to do a comparative study between the AEP and the formal school.

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