JRIIE Journal of Research Innovation and Implications in Education
Center for Research Implications & Practice

Website: www.jriiejournal.com ISSN 2520-7504 (Online) Vol.10, Iss.4, 2026 (pp. 1159 - 1173)

Leading through Contradictions: Cultural–Historical Barriers and Leadership Competency Gaps in Early Childhood Care and Education Center Management Committees of a Refugee Settlement in Uganda

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Abstract: *Early childhood care and education (ECCE) in humanitarian contexts depends on service access and local governance quality. This study examines cultural historical barriers and leadership competency gaps among Center Management Committees (CMCs) governing community-managed ECCE centers in Palorinya Refugee Settlement. Guided by Cultural Historical Activity Theory, the study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Quantitatively, 261 CMC members completed a 21-item pretest leadership assessment covering seven domains: ECCE leadership knowledge, strategic planning, communication and community engagement, conflict resolution and power dynamics, monitoring and evaluation, collaboration and teamwork, and adaptability and innovation. Mean scores across all domains were below 3.1 on a 5-point scale, with weakest performance in communication and community engagement and conflict resolution. Qualitatively, we analysed six focus group discussions and 18 semi-structured interviews with CMC members, teachers, and local authorities thematically. Findings reveal contradictions between expectations and tools, tensions between formal policy roles and customary authority structures, misalignment between national ECCE frameworks and settlement realities, and leadership identities shaped by displacement, poverty, and trauma. These contradictions explain why competency gaps persist despite training and highlight leadership as a relational, system-embedded practice. The study concludes that strengthening CMC leadership in refugee ECCE requires culturally grounded, trauma-informed, and system-level interventions addressing resource scarcity, policy misalignment, gendered power dynamics, and fragmented governance. Implications are drawn for adapting Uganda's ECCE policy, designing leadership development initiatives, and advancing research linking community governance to children's learning outcomes.*

Keywords: *Early Childhood Care and Education, Refugee Education, Leadership, Cultural–Historical Activity Theory, School Readiness*

How to cite this work (APA):

Muwanga, A. M., Kabugo, D. & Ssenkusu, P. (2026). Leading through Contradictions: Cultural–Historical Barriers and Leadership Competency Gaps in Early Childhood Care and Education Center Management Committees of a Refugee Settlement in Uganda. *Journal of Research Innovation and Implications in Education, 10*(4), 1159 – 1173. **https://doi.org/10.59765/gne9h**

1. Introduction

Early childhood is a crucial stage in human development, marked by rapid interaction among physical, cognitive, social–emotional, and language domains that collectively influence long-term educational outcomes (Shonkoff, 2021). In humanitarian contexts, providing access to high-quality, holistic ECCE services is vital, as children face heightened vulnerabilities due to displacement, trauma, disrupted caregiving, and limited access to quality early learning environments (UNICEF, 2024; Ereky-Stevens et al., 2022). Uganda hosts over 1.5 million refugees, mainly from South Sudan, and delivers ECCE services through government, NGO, and community-managed centers. Here, Center Management Committees (CMCs) play a pivotal

role in governance, especially in resource-constrained, refugee-dense regions.

1.1 Centre Management Committees in Uganda's ECCE System

The establishment of CMC structures was intended to democratize ECCE governance by empowering community members, including parents, caregivers, and local leaders, to oversee center operations, mobilize resources, engage families, and ensure accountability (MoES, 2023). In practice, CMCs serve as the primary leadership body, responsible for maintaining the quality of ECCE services, supporting caregivers and teachers, advocating for resources, and advancing school readiness. Their leadership responsibilities span administrative, ethical, pedagogical, and community engagement functions, aligning with global standards for ECCE governance (Rabaey & Nsangi, 2023).

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite their critical role, CMCs in refugee settlements face significant constraints. The refugee population is highly diverse, and socioeconomic challenges hinder parental involvement. Both teachers and CMC members often lack formal training in ECCE leadership (Global Schools Forum, 2023; Okech & Huber, 2022). The prevailing approach in Uganda remains focused on survival rather than developmental goals, a tension that is especially pronounced in camps and settlements (Sserwanja et al., 2023). Moreover, the historical impact of displacement shapes collective identities, authority structures, and governance practices (Branch, 2024). CMC members must exercise leadership amid complex cultural–historical circumstances, yet little research has examined these constraints or how they translate into leadership competency gaps in ECCE service delivery.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This article examines the cultural historical barriers, systemic contradictions, and leadership competency gaps that constrain CMCs' capacity to support holistic child development in the Palorinya Refugee Settlement. Using Cultural Historical Activity Theory, the study investigates how rules, tools, community expectations, and social relationships shape leadership practices and create challenges that undermine effective governance. The aim is to identify why leadership gaps persist and how systemic constraints can be overcome to improve ECCE service delivery.

1.4 Research Question

What cultural historical barriers and gaps exist in the leadership competencies and skills of Center Management Committees governing ECCE centers in Palorinya Refugee Settlement?

1.5 Significance of the Inquiry

This study addresses several underexplored aspects of early childhood care and education (ECCE) in humanitarian settings, occupying a critical position in the evolving literature on refugee education and care. While research on ECCE in refugee contexts has expanded rapidly, most existing scholarship centers on issues such as access, participation, and child outcomes. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to the governance arrangements and leadership practices that underpin the delivery of ECCE services. Notably, current reviews of ECD and early childhood education and care (ECEC) in refugee settings tend to focus on program effectiveness, the quality of learning environments, and the cognitive and socio-emotional impacts on children. However, they seldom examine how community management structures such as Center Management Committees (CMCs) are formed, supported, or constrained. Similarly, global and regional reports from agencies like UNICEF underscore the magnitude of need and the importance of expanding ECCE access during humanitarian crises, yet offer limited empirical insight into the day-to-day leadership work of community actors who bridge policy and practice at the center level. By directing explicit attention to CMC governance within a large refugee settlement, this study helps to correct this imbalance, bringing community leadership to the forefront as a crucial, yet often invisible, determinant of ECCE quality and children's holistic development.

Additionally, the inquiry enhances understanding of community-based leadership development in environments characterized by limited resources and high-stress areas where evidence remains sparse and fragmented. Case studies of community-based preschools and ECCE centers in refugee camps indicate that local committees and volunteers are essential for sustaining services. However, these same studies reveal that such actors often receive only ad hoc, short-term training, with minimal focus on sustained leadership development or psychosocial support. Broader humanitarian reports echo that community-led models can foster nurturing care and improved outcomes at scale, but emphasize that these results depend on ongoing investment in local leadership capacity and integration into national systems, conditions rarely achieved in protracted displacement settings. In the Ugandan context, research on early childhood development has begun to document tensions between survival-oriented priorities and aspirational "thrive" agendas. Yet, these studies rarely explore how community leaders themselves learn, adapt, or experience pressures as they navigate these competing demands. By focusing specifically on CMCs as a leadership collective in a refugee settlement, this study illuminates how leadership is enacted amid chronic scarcity, enduring uncertainty, and layered vulnerability, thereby extending the literature on leadership development beyond formal school systems and well-resourced ECCE environments.

Furthermore, this research addresses an important theoretical and methodological gap in the study of refugee ECCE governance by grounding the analysis in Cultural–Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and related sociocultural frameworks. Recent critical reviews of ECE in refugee and asylum contexts note that much of the existing research is descriptive, programmatic, or outcome-focused, with limited application of robust theoretical tools to interrogate power, history, and the relational aspects of practice. Concurrently, work on cultural competence in refugee service provision argues that service delivery is shaped by intricate interactions between provider beliefs, institutional norms, and the histories and identities of refugee communities, calling for more nuanced, theoretically informed analyses of these dynamics. By applying CHAT to the activity system of CMC leadership, this study moves beyond simplistic deficit framings of "capacity gaps." Instead, it examines how tools, rules, community norms, and the division of labor intersect to produce systemic contradictions that shape the realistic possibilities for CMCs. This approach holds significance not only for ECCE research but also for broader discussions concerning localization, participation, and power in humanitarian governance.

Ultimately, a deeper understanding of the cultural–historical barriers confronting CMCs is not simply of academic interest; it has practical implications for how humanitarian agencies, government partners, and NGOs conceptualize and design leadership development initiatives. Insights from this study can inform the creation of interventions that are contextually responsive aligning leadership expectations with the material and institutional realities of refugee settlements; culturally grounded by engaging with gender norms, ethnic identities, and traditional authority structures rather than overlooking or simplifying them; and sustainable by embedding leadership support within broader systems-strengthening efforts, rather than treating it as a one-off training supplement. In this way, the inquiry contributes to reimagining ECCE governance in humanitarian contexts as a multi-layered, relational practice that must be understood historically and culturally to be transformed in ways that genuinely advance children's holistic development.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

Leadership within refugee-hosting Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centers is shaped by more than just the individual skills or knowledge of Center Management Committee (CMC) members. Instead, it emerges at the intersection of broader sociocultural histories, power relations, institutional arrangements, and material conditions. Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) provides a comprehensive lens to examine this complexity by conceptualizing human action as situated within activity systems. These systems are composed of interacting elements, subjects, tools, rules, community, division of labor, and objects rather than being viewed solely as the result of isolated individual attributes (Engeström, 2015, 2020).

In contrast to linear, trait-based, or purely behavioral models of leadership, which often focus on the characteristics of leaders themselves, CHAT emphasizes how leadership practices are mediated by cultural tools (such as policies and training materials), regulated by both formal and informal rules, shaped by community norms, and either constrained or enabled by historically embedded structures (Daniels, 2016; Edwards, 2017). This makes CHAT particularly relevant for understanding governance challenges in culturally diverse and structurally constrained contexts like the Palorinya Refugee Settlement, where formal ECCE policies intersect with customary authority systems, humanitarian protocols, and the lived legacies of conflict and displacement.

Within this framework, CMC leadership is understood as the subject of an activity system oriented toward the object of providing effective governance that supports holistic child development. The tools mediating this activity include national ECCE policies, NGO guidelines, leadership training materials, local knowledge about child-rearing, and, within the broader project, virtual tutor resources designed to strengthen leadership competencies. These tools are not neutral; they carry assumptions about childhood, governance, and accountability, which may or may not align with local cultural logics (Ereky-Stevens et al., 2022).

The activity is further regulated by formal rules such as Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) policy directives, settlement regulations, and NGO standard operating procedures, as well as informal rules rooted in cultural norms, gender expectations, and traditional leadership hierarchies (Ogsterom, 2016). The community involved consists of refugee families, host-community members, teachers, caregivers, local authorities, and humanitarian actors, all of whom may have divergent or competing interests and expectations. The division of labor describes how responsibilities and power are distributed among CMC members, teachers, elders, and external agencies, including who has the authority to make decisions, allocate resources, or represent the center to outsiders. Ideally, the outcome of this activity system is the provision of equitable, high-quality, and holistic learning opportunities for young children.

However, in humanitarian settings, these elements rarely operate stably or harmoniously. CHAT draws attention to the contradictions historically accumulated tensions within and between elements of the activity system that shape everyday practice (Engeström, 2015, 2020). Primary contradictions arise within a single element, such as tensions between the voluntary nature of CMC roles and the increasing professionalization of expectations. Secondary contradictions occur between elements; for example, MoES policy expectations regarding governance and monitoring may conflict with resource limitations or with customary norms that prioritize elders over elected committee members. Tertiary contradictions emerge when new forms

of activity, like the introduction of formal leadership tools or virtual training resources, are layered onto existing practices, leading to resistance, confusion, or the creation of hybrid arrangements. Quaternary contradictions develop between neighboring activity systems, such as those linking ECCE centers with households, religious institutions, schools, or humanitarian agencies, where differing logics of care, authority, and accountability may clash (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, 2022).

These various forms of contradiction are not merely theoretical; they have tangible consequences for leadership and governance. Research using CHAT in educational and health systems has shown that unresolved contradictions can hinder collaboration, obstruct coordination, and undermine the consistent implementation of reforms or development programs (Daniels, 2016; Khangura et al., 2023). In refugee and conflict-affected communities, such tensions are heightened by histories of violence, displacement, and disrupted livelihoods, which reshape social networks, redistribute authority, and strain institutional capacities (Betancourt et al., 2023; Oosterom, 2016). For instance, leaders who were respected in their original communities may find their authority questioned in camp settings, while NGOs or international agencies may be perceived as more powerful than local structures, resulting in complex and sometimes unstable governance arrangements.

By applying CHAT to the analysis of CMC leadership in Palorinya, this study moves beyond simplistic narratives of "capacity gaps" to examine how cultural–historical conditions determine what forms of leadership are possible, plausible, and sustainable. Contradictions between tools and expectations help explain why committee members, despite receiving training, may struggle to implement monitoring systems or strategic plans in the absence of basic resources. Role–rule contradictions clarify why formal mandates do not always result in decision-making power for CMCs when traditional authorities or humanitarian actors wield greater influence. Quaternary contradictions between ECCE center governance and household realities reveal why efforts to promote school readiness may falter when families face acute poverty, trauma, or conflicting cultural expectations around early learning. Recognizing these patterns aligns with calls in the ECCE and humanitarian literature for theoretically informed approaches that foreground power, history, and relational practice in understanding program implementation and leadership (Britto, 2014; Ereky-Stevens et al., 2022; Lau & Rodgers, 2021).

In other words, CHAT provides a theoretically rigorous and context-sensitive framework for analyzing leadership within refugee-hosting ECCE centers. It allows this study to conceptualize CMC leadership not as a trait of individual committee members, but as an emergent property of a historically evolving activity system in which tools, rules, community, and division of labor are continuously negotiated under conditions of displacement and scarcity. This perspective is essential for diagnosing why leadership challenges persist despite training efforts and for identifying leverage points where changes in tools, rules, or relationships might enable more equitable and effective support for school readiness and holistic child development.

2. Literature Review

Leadership in ECCE settings has shifted from a focus on management to a holistic approach that is relational, pedagogical, and responsive to community needs (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2022). In low-resource environments, leadership must facilitate resource mobilization, community engagement, teacher support, and coordination across health, nutrition, and protection services (Britto et al., 2021). Core competencies include strategic planning, conflict resolution, collaboration, communication, and monitoring, all of which are vital for ensuring high-quality ECCE services. However, studies in Sub-Saharan Africa highlight persistent leadership shortages due to limited training, weak governance frameworks, and insufficient public investment (UNICEF, 2024; MoES, 2023). In Uganda, the ECCE system depends heavily on community involvement, making robust CMC leadership capacity essential.

Globally, the sustainability of social services in refugee-hosting communities relies on volunteer-led structures (Kareem & Ager, 2021). Community leadership is key to mobilizing participation, managing cultural tensions, and maintaining service continuity despite resource challenges. Nevertheless, refugee service systems often lack capacity-building programs that address the unique cultural and historical realities of displaced communities. A 2023 scoping review on cultural competence in refugee service settings indicates that leadership actors frequently lack the necessary cultural competence, trauma-informed awareness, and context-specific skills to effectively navigate intercultural dynamics. Additional studies reveal that power imbalances, colonial histories, and donor-driven agendas can undermine community ownership (Rombo et al., 2024). For CMCs in Uganda, these dynamics lead to difficulties in engaging diverse refugee families, resolving conflicts, and balancing leadership practices with agency requirements and community norms.

Holistic ECCE involves the integration of cognitive, linguistic, physical, social, emotional, and moral development, as highlighted by emerging models in East Africa (Essa Africa, 2025). Effective school readiness depends on the interaction of three domains:

i. Ready Children (child capabilities)
ii. Ready Schools (teacher practices and safe learning environments)
iii. Ready Families (caregiver involvement and home support)

Leadership plays a mediating role among these domains, influencing the quality of environments, stakeholder coordination, and strategies for community engagement

(Britto et al., 2021). However, the report "Shifting the Discourse from Survive to Thrive" (Sserwanja et al., 2023) notes that Uganda's ECCE system frequently fails to incorporate holistic development, as interventions are fragmented and focus primarily on survival. Leadership gaps within community governance contribute to this fragmentation.

Displacement disrupts established community leadership structures, leading to the creation of new social organizations. Research such as "Internal Displacement, the Camp, and the Construction of Citizenship" (2022) suggests that camps often perpetuate hierarchical power dynamics and dependency, shaping governance behaviors. Refugee leaders may defer to traditional authorities, humanitarian actors, or ethnic identities, resulting in contradictions in decision-making. These historical legacies influence how CMC leaders view authority, manage conflict, and collaborate, affecting their ability to demonstrate leadership competencies.
Extreme poverty, food insecurity, and competing livelihood demands restrict the availability of volunteers for leadership roles and weaken sustained engagement in ECCE governance (Ager et al., 2022).

In many South Sudanese and West Nile communities, leadership is influenced by gender and age, determining who is considered legitimate in governance positions. These cultural norms affect communication, conflict resolution, and family engagement.

Uganda's ECCE Policy (MoES, 2023) sets out governance expectations for all ECCE centers. However, refugee-hosting communities frequently lack the resources, materials, and trained staff needed for effective policy implementation, resulting in contradictions that limit leadership agency.

Humanitarian ECCE environments typically involve numerous NGOs with varying mandates, leading to fragmentation and inconsistent support for CMC leadership development (Global Education Cluster, 2022).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to assess leadership competencies and explore the cultural–historical barriers and contradictions influencing Community Management Committee (CMC) leadership practices. Mixed-methods research is particularly suitable for complex humanitarian settings, as it enables the measurement of competency gaps while also interpreting the sociocultural factors that affect leadership behavior (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Palinkas et al., 2022).

The quantitative phase centered on identifying baseline competency gaps among CMC members using a pretest leadership assessment tool. Following this, the qualitative phase involved focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews. These qualitative methods aimed to explain and contextualize the quantitative results by drawing on the lived experiences and sociocultural realities of CMC members. The Cultural–Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) framework guided the development of qualitative instruments and the cross-phase interpretation of findings.

3.2 Setting

The research was conducted in the Palorinya Refugee Settlement, located in Obongi District, Uganda. Palorinya is one of the largest refugee settlements in the country, predominantly hosting South Sudanese refugees. The setting is characterized by extreme socioeconomic instability, significant cultural and linguistic diversity, limited educational and social service infrastructure, and a humanitarian system involving government agencies, NGOs, and community organizations.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centers in Palorinya are managed by the community and face numerous challenges, including limited funding, overcrowded classrooms, inconsistent teacher training, and chronic shortages of learning and play materials (Global Education Cluster, 2022). These conditions have a direct impact on the scope and effectiveness of CMC leadership.

3.3 Participants

Quantitative Sample

The quantitative component involved 261 CMC members from various ECCE centers across Zones 1, 2, and 3 in Palorinya. Participants were aged between 21 and 68, occupying roles such as chairperson, vice-chairperson, treasurer, mobilizer, secretary, and parent representative. Most participants were refugees, with a minority from the host community. Educational backgrounds ranged from no formal schooling to completion of upper secondary education.

Qualitative Sample

The qualitative phase included six focus group discussions (FGDs) with 8–10 participants each, ensuring diversity in gender, ethnicity, leadership role, and center location. Additionally, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with CMC leaders, teachers, caregivers, and local authorities. Supplementary reflections were gathered from CMC members participating in the leadership development initiative. Purposive sampling was used to ensure a range of perspectives across age, tribe/language, length of stay in the settlement, and leadership experience.

3.4 Instruments

Pretest Leadership Competency Assessment:

The quantitative instrument consisted of 21 Likert-scale items covering seven leadership domains: Knowledge & Understanding of ECCE Leadership (KL), Strategic Planning & Decision-Making (SPD), Communication & Community Engagement (CCE), Conflict Resolution & Power Dynamics (CRPD), Monitoring & Evaluation (ME), Collaboration & Teamwork (CT), and Adaptability & Innovation (AI). Items were adapted from established early years leadership instruments and contextualized for use in community-managed ECD centers in humanitarian settings (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2022; Ereky-Stevens et al., 2022). Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Focus Group Discussion Guide:

The FGD guide explored CMC roles and practices in supporting school readiness, cultural norms shaping leadership, barriers to community engagement, conflict resolution and teamwork experiences, perceptions of children's holistic development needs, and leadership expectations within the settlement. This guide was informed by the "Ready Schools, Ready Children, Ready Families" model utilized in ECCE readiness frameworks.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide:

Interviews delved into deeper cultural–historical contradictions affecting leadership, such as traditional authority structures, gender dynamics, inter-agency power relations, tensions between Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) policy guidelines and settlement realities, resource distribution conflicts, and leadership identities shaped by displacement, trauma, and community histories.

Procedure

Quantitative Phase

Orientation meetings were conducted with CMCs and ECCE center leaders. The pretest leadership competency assessments were administered individually using paper-based forms. Collected data were cleaned and entered into Excel for descriptive statistical analysis.

Qualitative Phase

FGDs were held in selected zones, utilizing interpreters when necessary to accommodate linguistic diversity. Semi-structured interviews took place face-to-face in private settings to ensure confidentiality. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic coding and analysis were conducted using NVivo, following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-stage thematic analysis process. A blended inductive, deductive approach was used, with CHAT informing interpretive coding.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis aimed to identify baseline leadership competency gaps. For each domain, means and standard deviations were calculated, along with frequency distributions and cross-domain comparisons. Pretest scores were interpreted as indicators of pre-existing leadership gaps.

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis followed six stages: familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting findings. Coding combined inductive interpretations with deductive categories based on CHAT, such as contradictions between rules, tools, and roles.

Mixed-Methods Integration

Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings was achieved through convergence coding matrices and a joint display linking competency gaps with qualitative explanatory themes. A narrative synthesis was developed to explain how cultural–historical factors influenced leadership competencies.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Quantitative Findings: Baseline Leadership Competency Gaps

Analysis of pretest data from 261 CMC members revealed notable baseline gaps across all seven leadership domains. Table 1 presents the mean scores (on a 1–5 scale) for each domain.

Table 1: Pretest Leadership Competency Scores by Domain (N = 261)

#	Domain	Mean (M)	SD
i.	KL – Knowledge & Understanding	2.98	0.53
ii.	SPD – Strategic Planning & Decision-Making	3.02	0.52
iii.	CCE – Communication & Community Engagement	2.92	0.55
iv.	CRPD – Conflict Resolution & Power Dynamics	2.96	0.59
v.	ME – Monitoring & Evaluation	3.02	0.56
vi.	CT – Collaboration & Teamwork	2.97	0.58
vii.	AI – Adaptability & Innovation	2.95	0.53

Mean scores across all domains were below 3.1 on a 5-point scale, indicating significant gaps in knowledge, skills, and leadership behaviors. Communication & Community Engagement (CCE) emerged as the weakest domain, followed by Conflict Resolution & Power Dynamics (CRPD). These findings are consistent with previous studies on Ugandan ECD governance, which highlight the lack of systematic leadership development in community governance structures (MoES, 2023; Sserwanja et al., 2023).

Qualitative Findings: Cultural–Historical Barriers and Contradictions

Six major themes emerged from the FGDs and interviews, providing insights into the underlying reasons for the quantitative competency gaps and how they manifest in governance practice.

Theme 1: Resource Scarcity as a Primary Contradiction

Participants consistently identified severe shortages of resources, including teaching materials, infrastructure, play equipment, and funds, as major obstacles to effective leadership. One FGD participant from Zone 2 stated, "How can you plan when there is nothing to plan with? Even chalk is sometimes not there. People expect us to lead, but leadership without resources is impossible." In CHAT terms, this reflects a contradiction between the tools available and the objectives of leadership, as resource scarcity undermines both strategic planning and the authority of CMCs within the community.

Theme 2: Normative and Traditional Authority Conflicts

CMC leadership is heavily influenced by cultural norms around authority, age, and gender. Traditional leaders, typically older men, often wield more influence than elected CMC members. As one interview participant remarked, "Even if I am the chairperson, the community still wants to hear from the elders. They make final decisions, not us." This reveals a contradiction between formal governance rules and community expectations. Additionally, women reported facing significant barriers to leadership due to cultural norms that see them as followers rather than decision-makers.

Theme 3: Policy–Practice Misalignment

While the MoES ECCE policy (2024) and operational frameworks require CMCs to implement structured governance practices and holistic development frameworks, the realities of refugee settlements, such as large class sizes, limited space, and overstretched teachers, make these expectations unrealistic. As a CMC treasurer explained, "Policies are there, yes, but they are written for schools with buildings, staff, water, everything. Our centers are different." This highlights a contradiction between policy tools and the contextual realities faced by CMCs.

Theme 4: Limited Leadership Knowledge and Skills

Qualitative data underscored the quantitative findings of gaps in leadership knowledge, especially in areas like strategic planning, monitoring, and innovation. Many CMC members lack formal education or training in ECCE leadership, yet are expected to oversee both pedagogical and administrative functions. One participant noted, "We want to help, but we do not know what quality ECD means. We only do what we see others doing." This aligns with global research showing that community-led governance often struggles to ensure ECD quality without professional support (Britto et al., 2021; Ereky-Stevens et al., 2022).

Theme 5: Coordination Challenges Across the School-Readiness System

CMC leaders reported substantial challenges in collaborating with teachers, caregivers, agencies, and local authorities. One participant observed, "Everyone is doing their own thing. We are told different instructions from NGOs, and sometimes they contradict." Such coordination gaps hinder holistic development by preventing effective alignment between the domains of Ready Children, Ready Schools, and Ready Families, and illustrate contradictions between the different actors and systems involved.

Theme 6: Leadership Identities Shaped by Displacement and Trauma

CMC members described how their leadership identities have been shaped by experiences of conflict and displacement. Some leaders reported feeling disempowered due to trauma, loss of status, and shifts in identity following forced migration (Betancourt et al., 2023; Branch, 2024). As one noted, "Where we come from, I was a respected elder. Here, life changed. I am learning again how to lead." Displacement has also affected community perceptions of

leaders, leading to fragmentation and mistrust that complicate governance.

To better understand how cultural historical conditions shape leadership competencies, the study integrated quantitative competency gaps with qualitative explanatory themes. The following joint display illustrates these connections.

Table 2: Linking Leadership Competency Gaps to Cultural–Historical Barriers

#	Leadership Domain	Quantitative Gap	Qualitative Explanatory Theme
i.	CCE – Communication & Engagement	Lowest mean (2.92)	Traditional norms restricting communication; low parental engagement due to livelihood pressures
ii.	SPD – Strategic Planning	Gap (3.02)	Resource scarcity making planning ineffective; policy–practice mismatch
iii.	CRPD – Conflict Resolution	Gap (2.96)	Traditional authority dominance; ethnic tensions; unresolved trauma
iv.	ME – Monitoring & Evaluation	Gap (3.02)	Limited training; inconsistent NGO support; lack of tools
v.	CT – Collaboration & Teamwork	Gap (2.97)	Fragmented actor landscape; contradictory instructions from NGOs
vi.	AI – Adaptability & Innovation	Gap (2.95)	Limited exposure to innovative practices; rigid cultural norms

This integration demonstrates that leadership competency gaps are not simply deficits of skill or knowledge but are symptomatic of deeper structural contradictions within the settlement's cultural–historical context. For example, challenges in communication stem from gendered norms and language diversity. Weak conflict-resolution skills are tied to the interplay between traditional authority structures and formal governance. Planning limitations are largely a result of chronic resource scarcity and external program requirements. These findings highlight the need to address systemic and contextual barriers to strengthen CMC leadership in humanitarian ECCE settings.

4.2 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the cultural–historical barriers and leadership competency gaps that constrain Center Management Committees (CMCs) in supporting holistic child development in Palorinya Refugee Settlement. Through the lens of Cultural–Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), the findings reveal a deeply interconnected set of structural constraints, sociocultural norms, and historical legacies that collectively shape and often impede effective leadership in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) center governance. The integrated analysis clarifies that leadership competency gaps identified in the quantitative assessment, such as low capacities in communication, conflict resolution, collaboration, and strategic planning, are not simply individual deficits. Rather, they are manifestations of systemic contradictions embedded in the refugee settlement context, consistent with broader evidence that leadership in humanitarian systems is structurally constrained by governance arrangements, resource flows, and historical inequalities (Britto, 2014; Leadership and Humanitarian Change, 2023).

This discussion is organized around four overarching interpretive claims. First, leadership weaknesses among CMCs are better understood as symptoms of structural and historical contradictions than as indicators of personal inadequacy. Second, cultural norms in Palorinya shape governance practices in ways that intersect with and sometimes undermine formal ECCE policy expectations. Third, meaningful progress in holistic child development cannot be achieved without explicitly engaging tensions between humanitarian governance arrangements, community traditions, and national policy mandates. Finally, leadership development interventions in refugee ECCE settings must be contextually grounded, culturally responsive, and intentionally designed for system-level transformation, rather than focusing solely on individual skill-building (Lau & Rodgers, 2021; Strachan et al., 2020).

Leadership Gaps as Structural Contradictions Rather Than Capacity Failures

Across all seven leadership domains, quantitative pretest scores averaged below 3.1 out of 5, indicating systemic gaps in strategic planning, communication, conflict resolution, monitoring, collaboration, and innovation. On the surface, such scores might suggest that CMC members simply "lack capacity" and require more training. However, qualitative analysis demonstrates that these gaps are deeply rooted in structural contradictions within the Palorinya activity system, which is consistent with CHAT's emphasis on the tensions between tools, rules, roles, and community expectations (Engeström, 2020). Rather than locating deficits within individuals, the findings support a systemic interpretation in which leadership practice is constantly negotiated in the space between humanitarian policy

prescriptions, traditional authority structures, and the lived realities of displacement and poverty (Oosterom, 2016; Lau & Rodgers, 2021).

Contradictions between Tools and Expectations

The first set of contradictions concerns the mismatch between the tools available to CMCs and the expectations placed upon them. CMC members are mandated to provide administrative oversight, manage ECCE resources, facilitate community engagement, coordinate with teachers, and ensure safe, stimulating environments for young children. Yet they routinely described conditions marked by chronic resource scarcity, inadequate infrastructure, minimal pedagogical support, and fragmented training opportunities. These findings mirror broader analyses of ECCE governance in low- and middle-income countries, which highlight the limited material, informational, and institutional resources devoted to early childhood relative to the policy rhetoric surrounding its importance (Britto, 2014; Park et al., 2013).

Within the CHAT framework, this mismatch represents a secondary contradiction between the tools and the object of the activity system: CMCs are expected to deliver governance functions associated with well-resourced centers, but operate in settings where even basic items such as chalk, toys, and adequate classroom space are lacking. These contradictions are not unique to Palorinya; similar tensions between expectations and resources have been identified in ECCE systems across sub-Saharan Africa and refugee settings globally (Ereky-Stevens et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2024). The result is a form of "structural under-capacitation," in which leaders internalize responsibility for outcomes they cannot realistically achieve given their material conditions, often leading to frustration, disillusionment, and reduced perceived self-efficacy.

Contradictions between Roles and Rules

A second set of contradictions emerges between formal roles defined by policy and informal rules embedded in local socio-political orders. The Uganda ECCE Policy and implementing guidelines emphasize the authority of CMCs to oversee center operations, supervise staff, and represent community interests in governance processes (MoES, 2023). Yet, in Palorinya, decision-making power frequently rests with traditional leaders, elders, or male-dominated councils whose authority is rooted in pre-displacement cultural hierarchies and reconfigured camp governance arrangements (Oosterom, 2016; IDRP, 2022).

Under CHAT, this constitutes a role - rule contradiction: the formal "rules of the game" encoded in policy documents position CMCs as central governance actors, whereas the informal rules of social recognition privilege traditional and gendered leadership structures. CMC members must navigate these overlapping normative frameworks, which often leads to conflict avoidance, deference to elders, or strategic silence, thereby undermining their capacity to enforce center rules, address teacher misconduct, or champion child-centered changes. Such dynamics align with broader humanitarian leadership critiques that highlight how local governance arrangements in camps can both empower and marginalize community representatives, depending on how they intersect with pre-existing social hierarchies (Leadership and Humanitarian Change, 2023; Humanitarian Horizons, 2022).

Contradictions between Community Expectations and Lived Realities

A third cluster of contradictions lies between community expectations and the realities of everyday life in the settlement. Parents and caregivers often expect CMCs to guarantee ECCE quality, maintain discipline, and ensure that children learn "what they need to succeed." Yet, socio-economic pressures, persistent poverty, food insecurity, precarious livelihoods, and gendered division of labor limit parental capacity to participate in school readiness activities, attend meetings, or volunteer in centers. These realities resonate with qualitative evidence from Uganda showing that caregivers' aspirations for their children frequently clash with the time and resource constraints of survival in low-income and humanitarian contexts (Strachan et al., 2020; Dumbaugh et al., 2023).

The low scores in the Communication and Community Engagement (CCE) domain must therefore be read against this backdrop. CMCs are attempting to mobilize caregivers around holistic early childhood goals in a context where families may be more concerned with basic needs such as food, shelter, and security. As Strachan et al. (2020) argue, the prevailing policy discourse of "thriving" frequently fails to grapple with the structural conditions that keep families in a "survive" mode. Consequently, leadership competencies related to community engagement are constrained not simply by a lack of communication skills, but by socio-economic conditions that limit the feasibility of sustained parental involvement.

Taken together, these contradictions underscore that leadership competencies cannot be understood as isolated skill sets residing within individuals. Rather, they are socially produced, historically situated, and continually negotiated within a structurally constrained activity system. This aligns with broader evidence from implementation research and mixed-methods studies showing that leadership effectiveness in complex systems is contingent on the interaction of individual capabilities with organizational and sociopolitical conditions (Palinkas, 2019; Britto, 2014).

Cultural Norms and Historical Legacies Shape Leadership Practice

The qualitative findings further highlight the extent to which cultural norms and historical legacies influence leadership behavior within CMCs. Gender roles, age hierarchies, ethnic affiliations, and traditional authority

systems do not merely form a backdrop to governance; they actively structure who speaks, who decides, and whose knowledge counts in collective deliberations.

Gendered Leadership Hierarchies

Women participants reported significant challenges in speaking during meetings, mediating conflicts, or asserting leadership authority, citing cultural expectations of female modesty and deference in public spaces. These narratives are consistent with gender analyses in forcibly displaced settings, which show that even when women occupy formal leadership positions, informal gendered norms often continue to constrain their agency (Ahaibwe et al., 2024; Kareem & Ager, 2021). In the context of CMCs, this means that critical competencies in communication, collaboration, and conflict resolution are unevenly distributed and often underutilized, particularly when women possess insights or relational networks that could enhance community engagement but feel unable to voice them.

Gendered leadership hierarchies also have implications for children's holistic development. Evidence from ECCE and gender research suggests that women leaders are often more attuned to issues of care, protection, and inclusion, especially for marginalized children (Transforming Early Childhood, 2023). When they are marginalized from leadership deliberations, opportunities to integrate more nuanced understandings of children's needs into governance decisions may be lost. Thus, addressing leadership gaps in Palorinya requires not only technical training but also deliberate efforts to renegotiate gendered power relations within CMC structures.

Ethnicity, Identity, and Authority

The refugee communities in Palorinya comprise diverse ethnic groups, each with distinct cultural practices, leadership traditions, and conflict histories. Leaders often find themselves mediating tensions that originate in pre-displacement conflicts or in perceived inequalities in access to resources and services. Oosterom's (2016) work on internal displacement and citizenship in northern Uganda demonstrates how camp governance regimes can reconfigure, but not erase, existing power relations, leading to complex, sometimes contested forms of authority.

In Palorinya, these dynamics translate into ethnicized expectations of who should lead and whose voice carries weight. CMC members may hesitate to challenge decisions made by leaders from dominant ethnic groups or may fear being perceived as biased if they intervene in inter-group disputes. Such dynamics complicate conflict resolution and collaboration, contributing to the low CRPD (Conflict Resolution & Power Dynamics) scores observed in the quantitative data. They also resonate with broader research on forced migration and governance that documents how ethnic identities and conflict legacies shape leadership practice and community trust (Journal of Refugee Studies, 2016; Researching Internal Displacement, 2022).

Displacement-Induced Power Shifts

Displacement fundamentally reshapes the social geography of power. Individuals who held recognized authority in their home villages may lose status in the camp hierarchy, while others acquire new roles through NGO structures, community-based organizations, or CMC elections. This fluidity generates uncertainty around legitimacy and accountability. As Oosterom (2016) argues, camps can be sites where citizenship and authority are renegotiated, often under the shadow of the state and humanitarian agencies.

In Palorinya, CMC leaders described how their pre-displacement identities as elders, church leaders, or local officials were partially recognized but also contested in the new governance arrangements of the settlement. This unsettled terrain contributes to inconsistent leadership practices and sometimes to competition between overlapping leadership bodies. These findings echo wider debates about localization and "local leadership" in humanitarian response, which note that formal attempts to empower community leaders may inadvertently reinforce or disrupt existing hierarchies in unanticipated ways (Humanitarian Horizons, 2022; Leadership and Humanitarian Change, 2023).

Holistic Child Development Depends on Addressing Activity System Tensions

Holistic child development requires effective coordination across households, schools, and community governance structures. However, the current activity system in Palorinya is characterized by fractured relationships, overlapping mandates, and inconsistent communication. Without addressing these tensions, interventions aimed at improving children's developmental outcomes are likely to remain fragmented and less effective than intended.

Fragmented Governance Networks

The governance of ECCE centers in Palorinya involves a complex web of actors, including NGOs, district education authorities, settlement management, community leaders, and caregivers. The study's participants described how different organizations introduced parallel initiatives, reporting requirements, and expectations, sometimes with limited coordination. Similar patterns of fragmentation have been observed in cross-country analyses of ECCE governance, where multiple agencies share responsibilities without clear accountability or integrated planning mechanisms (Britto, 2014; Park et al., 2013).

This fragmentation hinders the ability of CMCs to exercise coherent leadership. Leaders receive sometimes contradictory instructions from different partners, must navigate competing priorities, and may feel caught in the middle when NGO-driven agendas diverge from community expectations. This helps to explain the quantitative gaps in the Monitoring & Evaluation (ME) domain: systematic data collection, analysis, and feedback

are difficult to sustain in environments where information systems are fragmented, and reporting demands are externally driven rather than locally owned.

Limited Alignment between Ready Schools, Ready Children, and Ready Families

Weak communication channels and contested authority structures make it difficult for CMCs to mobilize parents for early learning activities, parent–teacher conferences, or home-based school readiness practices. This limited alignment between Ready Schools, Ready Children, and Ready Families is widely recognized as a critical barrier to achieving holistic child outcomes in low-resource settings (Strachan et al., 2020; Dumbaugh et al., 2023). In Palorinya, hunger, time poverty, and caregiver fatigue further constrain engagement, as caregivers must prioritize daily survival tasks such as collecting water, securing food, and pursuing informal income-generating activities.

The study's findings suggest that improving holistic child development in refugee settings cannot be reduced to upgrading classroom practices alone. Instead, it requires system-level work to strengthen relationships among CMCs, teachers, caregivers, and external agencies, ensuring that each actor understands their role in supporting young children's development and that structures exist to resolve conflicts, share information, and coordinate efforts.

Rethinking Leadership Development for Humanitarian ECCE Contexts

The evidence from Palorinya underscores that conventional leadership training models, which assume relatively stable institutions and individual learning trajectories, are ill-suited to refugee settings. Leadership development in such environments must be reconceptualized to reflect the realities of trauma, displacement, and hybrid governance.

CMC Leadership Requires Cultural and Historical Grounding

Standard leadership curricula often emphasize generalized skills such as strategic planning or communication without sufficiently engaging with the cultural and historical contexts in which leaders work. In Palorinya, however, leadership is inseparable from local understandings of authority, gender, age, and spirituality, as well as from the collective memory of conflict and displacement. Training that fails to address these dimensions risks reinforcing existing inequities or remaining superficial in its impact (Lau & Rodgers, 2021; Ager, 2022).

Leadership development for CMCs should therefore incorporate trauma-informed approaches, reflective dialogue on power and identity, and explicit engagement with traditional authority structures. It should also create opportunities for refugee leaders to co-construct the content of training modules, ensuring that they reflect both formal ECCE standards and local practices of care and child rearing.

Structural Reform Must Accompany Capacity Building

While training is important, the present study reinforces that capacity-building alone cannot resolve contradictions between policy and practice or between formal and informal authority structures. Policy frameworks need adaptation to reflect settlement realities, including variable staffing levels, chronic resource deficits, cultural diversity, and inter-agency fragmentation. Recent work on ECCE systems argues that effective governance requires attention to vertical coordination (across levels of government and implementing agencies) and horizontal coordination (across sectors and organizations), as well as mechanisms that institutionalize local participation (Britto, 2014; Park et al., 2013).

In Palorinya, this implies revisiting the design of CMC mandates, resource flows, and accountability relationships. Without such structural reform, even highly motivated leaders will remain constrained by misaligned rules, tools, and expectations.

Leadership as Relational, Not Merely Functional

Finally, the study highlights the importance of understanding leadership as a relational practice, rather than a purely functional or transactional one. Holistic child development depends on the quality of relationships among caregivers, teachers, leaders, and children, as well as on the trust and reciprocity that underpin community engagement (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2013; Strachan et al., 2020).

CMC leadership should therefore emphasize relationship-building, conflict mediation, empathy, and participatory decision-making competencies that are deeply intertwined with cultural norms and values. This perspective aligns with distributed and relational leadership models in ECCE, which argue that leadership is enacted collectively across teams and communities, rather than residing in a single individual (Heikka, 2014; Britto, 2014).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the cultural–historical barriers and leadership gaps affecting CMC governance of ECCE centers in Palorinya Refugee Settlement. The findings demonstrate that leadership gaps are not simply deficits in knowledge or skills; they are embedded within a complex web of historical, cultural, socioeconomic, and organizational contradictions. Applying CHAT provided a deeper understanding of how leadership activity is shaped by tools, rules, community norms, and power dynamics, revealing that the everyday practice of governance in

refugee ECCE centers is characterized by constant negotiation among competing demands.

Several key insights emerge. Leadership capacity gaps are produced and sustained by resource scarcity, policy–practice misalignment, and traditional authority structures that privilege certain actors over others. Cultural norms related to gender, age, and ethnicity significantly shape governance practices, often constraining the participation of women and marginalized groups. Fragmented humanitarian governance systems undermine coordination across school readiness components, leaving CMCs to navigate competing agendas with limited support. Effective leadership development in this context, therefore, requires systemic, culturally grounded approaches that address structural contradictions rather than focusing narrowly on individual skills.

Addressing these barriers is essential for improving ECCE quality and ensuring that refugee children gain the holistic developmental foundations needed for lifelong learning. Without tackling the cultural–historical roots of leadership gaps, efforts to improve curriculum, pedagogy, or infrastructure risk being undermined by weak governance. Conversely, strengthening CMC leadership through contextually responsive, structurally informed interventions offers a promising pathway for advancing both educational equity and child well-being in refugee settings.

5.2 Implications

The study's findings carry important implications for policy, practice, and research. At the policy level, there is a clear need to adapt national ECCE frameworks to the realities of refugee-hosting communities. Standards and guidelines for CMC governance should be flexible enough to accommodate variability in resources, staffing, and cultural norms, while still providing a coherent vision for quality and accountability. Integrating community leadership development into district-level ECD implementation plans can help institutionalize support for CMCs rather than treating training as an ad hoc, project-based activity. In addition, promoting gender-inclusive leadership through targeted policies, quotas, and mentorship initiatives is crucial for ensuring that women's voices and perspectives inform ECCE governance in Palorinya and similar settings (Ahaibwe et al., 2024; Humanitarian Horizons, 2022).

For practice, the findings underscore the importance of providing sustained, culturally responsive leadership development for CMCs. Short, one-off workshops are unlikely to transform deeply entrenched patterns of authority and communication. Instead, programs should integrate trauma-informed content, reflective practice, peer learning, and ongoing mentoring, ideally using blended approaches that combine virtual tools with in-person sessions where feasible. Strengthening coordination mechanisms among NGOs, government actors, and community structures is also critical. Regular multi-stakeholder forums, shared planning tools, and joint monitoring processes can reduce fragmentation and help align efforts around shared goals for children's holistic development (Britto, 2014; Park et al., 2013). Further, structured community dialogues can be used to harmonize traditional authority structures with formal ECCE governance roles, enabling a negotiated balance that respects local norms while upholding children's rights and well-being.

For research, the study highlights several avenues for further inquiry. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how leadership competencies evolve as CMCs receive training and as settlement conditions change. Such research could help disentangle the relative contribution of training, structural reform, and contextual shifts to improvements in governance. Additionally, there is a need for empirical studies that directly link CMC leadership practices to measurable child development outcomes, such as school readiness, attendance, and socio-emotional well-being, using validated tools suitable for low-resource and humanitarian contexts (Measuring Early Child Development, 2021). Comparative research across different refugee settlements in Uganda and beyond would also help identify which patterns of governance challenges are context-specific and which reflect broader structural features of humanitarian ECCE systems.

5.3 Recommendations

Building on these implications, several interrelated recommendations emerge for stakeholders seeking to strengthen CMC leadership and support holistic child development in Palorinya and similar contexts.

1. First, stakeholders should implement blended leadership development programs that combine virtual learning modules with in-person mentoring, peer learning circles, and practice-based coaching. Such programs should be co-designed with refugee leaders to ensure cultural relevance and responsiveness to local governance realities.

2. Second, the development of multilingual communication tools, such as pictorial meeting guides, translated parent information leaflets, and radio or audio messages, can enhance engagement with diverse refugee families and help CMCs overcome linguistic barriers to community mobilization (Strachan et al., 2020; Dumbaugh et al., 2023).

3. Third, agencies and government partners should work with refugee communities to co-create leadership frameworks that clearly articulate roles, responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms for CMCs, while acknowledging and respectfully engaging with existing traditional authority

structures. This co-creation process can mitigate tensions between formal policy and local norms, thereby strengthening the legitimacy and effectiveness of CMCs. Fourth, system-level reform should be prioritized to clarify roles across NGOs and government departments, reduce duplication and fragmentation, and align expectations regarding data collection, reporting, and program implementation.

4. Finally, establishing simple, context-appropriate monitoring dashboards using tools such as wall charts, notebooks, or digital templates where feasible can enable CMCs to track progress on key school readiness indicators and use data for local decision-making. When combined with supportive supervision and feedback, such dashboards can help embed a culture of reflective, evidence-informed leadership within CMCs, consistent with contemporary approaches to ECCE systems strengthening (Britto, 2014; Lau & Rodgers, 2021).

Taken together, these recommendations emphasize that strengthening CMC leadership in Palorinya is not primarily a technical challenge but a relational and structural one. It requires simultaneous attention to policy adaptation, organizational coordination, cultural negotiation, and community empowerment. If undertaken thoughtfully and collaboratively, such efforts hold promise for transforming ECCE governance in refugee settlements and enabling young children not only to survive but to thrive.

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