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Umuzigo w'inyongera: girls' differential experiences of the double-burden of language and gender in Rwandan English medium secondary education

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that learning in an unfamiliar language of learning and teaching (LoLT) negatively impacts Rwandan girls in the early years of lower secondary education. Based on classroom observation and interviews with case-study girls in four Rwandan secondary schools, we show that where girls' life circumstances differ, so too does the way in which the use of an unfamiliar LoLT affects them. Through the development of five typologies, we explore the ways that when girls face inequalities at the levels of time, space, material and emotional support they have for learning, the requirement that education be conducted and assessed in an unfamiliar language works to compound these inequalities. Our conclusions advocate for greater attention to be paid to the language of learning and teaching in global and national girls' education policies to alleviate the 'double burden' that many girls carry.

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English medium education; girls' education; language-in-education; Rwanda

Introduction

Decades of research have consistently demonstrated the negative role of an unfamiliar language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in children's educational experiences and outcomes across sub-Saharan Africa (Desai et al. 2010; Kiramba 2018; Milligan 2020). Concurrently, there has been substantial literature that has highlighted the role of contextualised gendered norms and practices in constraining girls' educational access, experiences and outcomes (e.g. Hailu 2019). However, there has been extremely limited consideration of the impact of the language that girls learn in Milligan and Adamson (2022). This paper argues that the role of an unfamiliar LoLT in girls' learning cannot be isolated but must be understood in the context of the set of circumstances and responsibilities shouldered by different girls. Because of this, although the use of an unfamiliar LoLT presents challenges for both boys and girls, the well-recorded nature of the additional household responsibilities and gendered behavioural expectations carried by girls means that LoLT should be considered a gendered

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issue. We demonstrate this through the conceptualisation of *umuzigo w'inyongera* - a Rwandan phrase that we translate as 'double burden' - to analyse girls' experiences when learning in English medium secondary education in Rwanda. This is inspired by African feminist scholars (e.g. Nnaemeka 2004; Rwabyoma 2014) who argue for the importance of localised actors' perspectives as the starting point for understanding African girls and women's diverse experiences. Through the development of five typologies, we show the different ways in which an unfamiliar LoLT exacerbates gender-based inequalities for different girls and highlight the ways that girls respond to, and challenge, the burdens placed on them.

The ways that gender and language-related factors combine to burden girls need to be contextually understood, due to the diversity of these factors in contexts both within and across countries. Within the Rwandan context, gender equality is a key pillar of the Rwandan government (MIGEPROF. 2021). One education strategic priority is 'equitable opportunities for all Rwandan children and young people at all levels of education', with a specific outcome to 'ensure gender parity in participation and achievement at all levels of education' (MINEDUC 2018, 33). Following significant investment, there has been success in achieving gender parity, particularly in terms of access, with girls outnumbering boys in primary and lower secondary education. Questions remain about inequities of learning outcomes and transition to university (Adejimi and Nzabalirwa 2021; Rubagiza et al. 2022). In contrast with the diversity of African languages spoken in other countries in East Africa, Kinyarwanda is the home language for the majority of children in the country. However, English is the LoLT from the first day of primary school following a 2019 policy shift removing Kinyarwanda as the LoLT in the first three years. In our conclusions we suggest that this policy decision needs to be reassessed if the government's target for gender equality in participation and achievement is to be met.

The analysis that we draw on in this paper comes from the qualitative second phase of a mixed-methods exploratory case study of girls' experiences of learning in Rwandan English medium basic education. Our analysis combines data generated at four schools through semi-structured interviews with 24 secondary three girls and dual-focus observations of the same girls learning in different subject lessons (16 lessons in total). In the quantitative first phase of the study, results showed that there is a significant gender gap in English results by the end of lower secondary education, with girls more likely to fail than boys in every district. However, the analysis also demonstrated key differences between girls, for example, with girls in Kigali city performing on average better than those in rural areas (Uworwabayeho et al. 2021). In the qualitative part of the study, which we focus on in this paper, we particularly sought to understand the differences between girls, following other gender and education scholars who have argued for the importance of understanding girls' experiences of schooling beyond direct comparisons with boys (Unterhalter et al. 2022). This approach was designed to attend to what Kwachou (2023, 180) explains as a central tenet of African feminism - the 'varied experiences of gendered inequalities in different areas and for differently situated individuals'. This framed our analysis to identify the multiple interwoven language and gendered factors that shape girls' educational experiences in different ways.

Literature review

There is a rich body of critical feminist literature that has consistently critiqued the 'girls' education development project' including in the ways that national and international policies

have prioritised measures of parity and individual 'success stories' (Khoja-Moolji 2015; Silver 2022) presenting 'an inadequate connection of education systems with other social relations and institutional formations that form gender inequalities and injustices' (Unterhalter et al. 2022, 11). In Rwanda, gender mainstreaming policies have seen remarkable results in terms of increasing access to schooling but 'these policies have not necessarily created more equitable learning environments for ***[all]*** female students' (Russell et al. 2021, 236; our addition in italics).

As Chisamya et al. (2012) show in the contexts of Malawi and Bangladesh, rather than being sites of equitable learning, schools are often spaces which reproduce and reaffirm existing discriminatory gender practices. In Rwanda, such practices are broadly shown to reflect widely shared cultural beliefs about hegemonic masculinity and female deference, (Wallace et al. 2018), with research highlighting the ways these impact gendered teaching practices (Uwineza et al. 2018) and textbook representation (Russell et al. 2021). The ways that some girls challenge and negotiate these practices are also noted (Wallace et al. 2019). Other research also highlights a range of burdens that girls carry including those related to household chores and gendered behavioural expectations (Gerver 2013; USAID 2019). Rubagiza et al. (2022), writing about the factors that influence Rwandan women's participation at the University of Rwanda, further suggest that such socio-cultural determinants intersect with structural determinants – such as institutional requirements and policies - to limit girls' transition to university. They highlight that these structural determinants can become determining factors despite not being intentionally biased against female students. Their argument that we focus on this intersection in Rwandan education is helpful for widening the gaze beyond explicitly gender-based factors in girls' education research.

We have widened the gaze to look at the use of an unfamiliar LoLT in girls' learning. Critical language-in-education scholars have been arguing for decades that monolingual language policies have a detrimental and unequal impact on children's learning (e.g. Desai et al. 2010). It has also been noted that monolingual policies are often not matched by classroom practice as teachers respond to the realities of language knowledge of their students (Mokgwathi and Webb 2013; Mligo and Mwashilindi 2017). Two recent small-scale studies within Rwanda support this literature through showing teachers 'teaching in English and explaining in Kinyarwanda' (Bowden et al. 2022, 12) and often relying on content simplification and pedagogies that predicate rote memorization (Sibomana 2022). These studies also concur with findings from literature from South Africa (Guzula et al. 2016; Charamba 2021) that highlight the essential role of language and talk in substantive meaning-making in the classroom and the ways that an unfamiliar LoLT impoverishes these processes (see also, Kuchah et al. 2022).

Given the increasing focus on policies and practices to support the most marginalised girls to access a quality education, it is perhaps surprising that so little attention has been paid to the language girls learn in (see Girls Education Challenge 2018 as an exception to this). It has been two decades since Benson (2002, 2005) and Hovens (2002) proposed that learning in a home language brings about positive experiences and outcomes for girls, but there has not been sustained interest in exploring this relationship further. A recent extended policy brief collated evidence that suggested that an unfamiliar LoLT may impact on some measures of gender parity, such as girls' examination results and propensity to dropout (Milligan and Adamson 2022). The evidence further suggested that an unfamiliar LoLT may also relate to feelings of shame and low self-confidence. For example, Adamson (2022)

convincingly argues for the importance of focusing on these socio-emotional aspects of learning experiences in an unfamiliar LoLT based on ethnographic research in two schools in Tanzania. This highlights the importance of exploring how LoLT and gender may intersect in the socio-emotional and educational aspects of girls' learning experiences.

Conceptualising umuzigo w'inyongera - the double-burden - of gender and language in girls' education

Following our review of the literature, we discussed as a team some different ways to conceptualise the relationship between language and gender in the girls' learning experiences. The insights from Aline and Aloysie who conducted the interviews and observations with the girls were particularly important here as they reflected on the ways that the girls' words were often heavy as they discussed both learning in an unfamiliar LoLT and wider gendered expectations on their time and behaviour. This resonated most closely with the conceptualisation of burdens, a term that is used extensively in the gender and education literature to refer mainly to the burden of additional caring and household responsibilities carried by girls (e.g. Nussey 2021). Although less common, the language-in-education literature has also invoked the language of 'burden' to describe the challenge created by an unfamiliar LoLT for children and teachers (e.g. Mokibelo 2016).

Importantly, Kinyarwanda offers two words that can translate into English as 'burden'. *Umutwaro* refers to the physical aspects of a burden that must be carried, but it is *umuzigo* that the Rwandan researchers believe is appropriate here and which was used by some of the girls to describe their experiences. *Umuzigo* refers to a burden which also weighs heavy on the heart and mind. It is this aspect of the term that we believe is particularly important for conceptualising girls' experiences of both gender and language in Rwandan education, but that might be missing from other possible terms such as 'barrier' or 'obstacle'. The accounts from girls that are presented below make it clear that there are physical, practical burdens associated with their gender, but that some of these are accompanied by a socio-emotional weight, such as feelings of shame, worry, and pressure to conform to expectations and ideals.

While we were initially drawn to *umuzigo* as a descriptive concept, the notion of being burdened can also be explanatory, for example, when English is viewed as a 'burdensome yoke' and 'as a tool of exclusion' (Mugane 2018, 148). Several authors have pointed to the use of English as the LoLT in Africa as a source of exclusion. Literature refers to a range of different forms of exclusion, from physical exclusion, where English prevents children from accessing or continuing in school (Vuzo 2018), to the exclusion of children's home knowledges and experiences from school learning (Qorro 2013), to epistemic exclusion, where children are prevented from participating in meaning-making in the classroom (Kuchah et al. 2022). However, it is evident that for the girls in this study the LoLT is not the only source of exclusion. Here, we draw on feminist literature that has highlighted the importance of analysing inequalities as 'a net of inter-meshing structures of exclusion' (Unterhalter 2021, 21) and understanding how the subordination of African women is compounded by multiple forms of oppression (African Feminist Charter 2006; Kwachou 2023). In the following sections, we show how the analytical innovation of typology development allowed us to apply the notion of *umuzigo w'inyongera* and understand the differing ways that language and gender come together for the girls in the study (Adejimi and Nzabalirwa 2021).

Methodology

Data generation

The data generated and analysed in this study came from a four-site exploratory case study (Yin 2014) of girls' learning in English Medium Basic Education. The data generation took place in early 2021, following postponement from 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic-related impact of school closures and community lockdowns. Following Yin's criteria for an exploratory case study, we had a singular purpose of exploring how girls differentially experience issues related to gender and language in their secondary education. A case study research design necessitates multiple data generation methods to explore the case related to different perspectives and spaces. Our methods were semi-structured interviews with 24 girls, alongside dual-focus classroom observations of the same girls in four lessons. 24 Teachers and 4 head teachers were also interviewed, although these data are not included in this paper.

We identified schools in four districts with different urban-rural and educational profiles, levels of gendered bias in the wider community and poverty levels, based on our statistical analysis in the first phase of the study (see Uworwabayeho et al. 2021). The four schools were identified by Alphonse in collaboration with District Education Officers in Ruhango, Burera, Kirehe and Nyarugenge districts. At each site, six girls in the final year of lower secondary school (secondary 3) were identified by Aloysie and Aline with the head teacher to fulfil a range of signifiers (see Table 1). These indicative signifiers were used to enable a range of girls to participate in the study, in terms of their predicted English achievement, attendance and risk of drop-out. We aimed for these to be reflective of the school and district profiles but make no claims to these being representative. These signifiers were verified or amended following interviews if girls included details that contested the initial marker, for example, through including detailed discussion of their irregular attendance.

The 24 girls who agreed to participate in the study were given a pre-task to note the things that they liked and did not like about their learning, both in school and at home. These were used as a guide for the (very loosely structured) semi-structured interviews with the girls' initial ideas acting as prompts for the interviewer when needed to support the girls to talk about their schooling experiences. Interviews took place in Kinyarwanda between the girls and Aline and Aloysie (both of whom are female, multilingual Rwandans), outside of lesson time. All interviews were transcribed and translated into English by Authors 2 and 3 to support the involvement of the non-Kinyarwanda speaking members of the team. In the dual observations, Aline documented the lesson content, key activities that took place, and noted the teacher's approach to inclusion and language use and Aloysie focused on the six girls' engagement and talk in each lesson.

The research underwent ethical appraisal at both UK institution and Rwanda institution where the formal aspects of the project were reviewed before data generation began. Participant Information sheets and consent forms were translated into Kinyarwanda and presented orally and in writing to participants. We also undertook a contextualized and dialogic ethical approach, talking as a team about how to approach the research and our collaborative work (Hultgren et al. 2016). We spoke about what we deemed ethical in the context of the pandemic, and the associated social, economic and educational inequalities that accompanied it. We decided to shorten the time spent in each school and with each girl to minimise disruption close to the national examination period which led to the adaptation of the planned data generation method of photo-linked interviewing to include the pre-task instead.

Data analysis and typology development

There were three distinct phases to our data analysis across the datasets. Lizzi undertook an inductive thematic analysis (Terry et al. 2017) of each girl's pre-task notes and interview words using NVivo, focusing on aspects related to LoLT. Terra, by contrast, read the data focusing on the gendered elements of the girls' words and the description of how they were in the observed lessons, alongside the indicative signifiers given in Table 1. For classroom participation analysis, the girls were given signifiers based on their level of engagement and the amount and type of talk in English they did, noted in observations or through girls' own descriptions of lesson involvement (see Table 1). For gendered experiences, these focused on their burdens at home as described by the girls in their interviews (see Table 1).

We sketched each participant by making visual representations of each girl in an online collaborative Miro Board. Using existing shapes in Miro, we applied a colour-coding scheme to paint the signifiers onto parts of the girls' 2D bodies. This allowed us to easily see relationships between home and school factors and we began to group the girls into typologies while further interrogating the data. The third stage of data analysis involved all authors contributing iteratively as we looked across the girls' visual representations to cluster the

Table 1. Initial signifiers/sample selection.

Signifier	
English achievement	At risk of failing *(below 40)* Just passing *(in the 40s)* Comfortably passing *(50–59)* High achiever *(60+)*
Attendance	Irregular attender *(regularly missing whole days or very late)* Somewhat irregular attender *(sometimes missing school or late in the mornings)* Regular attender *(comes regularly, also often attends early quiet time)*
Risk of drop-out	At risk of drop-out *(unlikely to complete the year)* Not at risk of immediate drop-out but unlikely to transition *(expected to complete but not progress to the next phase of schooling, usually due to low grades)* Likely to transition *(expected to continue to the next phase of schooling)*
Lesson engagement	Fully engaged *(consistently/mostly engaged and following in all lessons)* Partially engaged *(engaged and following in some lessons/some parts of lessons)* Disengaged *(consistently/mostly disengaged and distracted in all lessons)*
In-class talk	Active *(regularly participating in full class talk in English, including individual responses e.g. to teacher questions)* Sometimes active *(occasionally participating in full class talk in English, including individual responses or only when responding to whole class repetition)* Passive *(very limited or no talk in full class talk in English, only speaking when in groupwork)*
Financial home burden	Significant financial challenges in the home *(frequent mention of multiple challenges, e.g. lack of food, school fee payment issues)* Lower levels of financial challenges *(some material things in the home mentioned/some financial concerns but not central theme to interview)*
Perceived level of chores	Significant time spent on chores in the home *(frequent mention of multiple chores and/or impact of chores on their well-being and learning)* Some or no time spent on chores *(limited mention of chores and/or lower in volume and impact)*
Insecurity in the home	Insecure home environment *(clear discussion of violence and/or high levels of dysfunctionality of household set up)* Relatively secure home environment *(limited discussion of violence, fear or dysfunctionality at home)*
Limited time/space for out-of-school learning	Limited or no time for out-of-school learning *(lack of time and space mentioned to do revision/homework, because of e.g. other commitments, no resources or desk, long walk home)* Time and space for out-of-school learning *(able to find time and space to engage in revision and homework)*

girls into typologies before mapping these onto the key language-related themes (Elman 2009). It was at this point in the analysis that we started to clearly see the ways that the LoLT and gender burdens came together for the girls in different ways.

The five typologies shown in Table 2 outline five distinct groups of girls and some possible signifiers for how these girls could be identified. These include some basic measures of attendance and attainment and more qualitative descriptors of girls home and school experiences. For example, the typologies identify distinct differences in the quantity and type of home burdens that these girls experience. All the girls in the *At risk* typology are living in financially and physically insecure home environments, and so the use of the term 'at risk' is to reflect the riskiness of their personal lives and not only their risk of failure and drop-out[1]. This compares with the girls in the *Tipping point* and *Against the odds* typology who also have significant home burdens, but these are primarily related to the amount of household chores. This again compares with those who are in the *Multiple Strategies* and *Teachers' Favourites* typologies who have relatively low home burdens. Similarly, we identified distinct differences in the ways that girls are engaged and talk in the classroom across the five typologies, and their sources of support. For example, we term the *'Teachers' Favourites'* in this way because of the multi-faceted role that teacher attention plays in their

Table 2. The five typologies.

Girls who are…	At a tipping point	At risk	The teachers' favourites	Going against the odds	Using multiple strategies
Location	All four districts	Three rural districts.	Two of the three are from Kigali district.	All four districts	Mainly from rural districts.
Age	16–19	16–19	16–17	16–19	16–17
Attendance	Mostly irregular attenders	Some have irregular attendance	Very regular attenders	Mostly regular attenders	Very regular attenders
Attainment	'Just passing' at best	Expected to fail	High achiever	Just or comfortably passing	Comfortably passing
In-class engagement	Inconsistent	Mostly disengaged	Consistently engaged	Engaged, often despite feeling ignored by teachers	Mostly engaged
In-class talk	Sometimes called upon and answer safe responses to teacher questions	Mostly silent	Most regularly called upon by the teacher, some limited opportunities for different types of talk (e.g. summarising)	Try to answer and ask questions	Regularly called upon by the teacher, mostly safe responses to teacher questions
Home	Significant household chores at home	Living in financially and physically insecure home environments	Minimal home burdens	Heavy home burdens, particularly related to household chores	Mostly low home burdens
Revision	Try to find time to revise, particularly memorising	No time or space for revision	Consistent time and space for revision – at school, walking home and at home	Doing everything they can to find time to revise	Some time and space for revision – particularly at school

educational experiences, both in terms of their propensity to talk in the classroom and their feelings of secure and attention, and the relationship between teachers' opinions of their 'seriousness' and their unburdened home lives.

In the Findings section below, we begin by discussing girls' experiences in relation to themes that were identified during the thematic analysis as having an important role in supporting learning. In the presentation of these themes, we highlight where girls' experiences were shaped by language, gender, or both. However, during the research process, it became clear that the thematic analysis alone is insufficient to fully understand the ways in which different aspects of girls' lives intersect and work together to shape their differential experiences of *umuzigo w'inyongera*. The development of typologies responds to this shortcoming.

Findings

It is neither possible, nor is it the aim of this paper to present all the barriers to learning discussed by girls in this study. Instead, we focus on four themes that were identified as important for supporting learning, but where there were clear differences between the experiences of different girls and where the burden of an unfamiliar LoLT weighed heavier on some girls than others. These themes are: opportunities to practice English; teacher and peer support; a safe socioemotional environment for learning; and time to study. For girls who did not have access to these opportunities and supports, it was clear that their absence constituted barriers.

Opportunities to practise English

The challenge presented by the use of an unfamiliar LoLT was striking in both observations and interviews, even though we purposively did not ask the girls explicitly about the use of English. The word 'understand' or 'understanding' is used 72 times across the 24 girls' interviews, and it was clear that engaging with curriculum content was a struggle for all girls, but particularly so for girls from the *At Risk* and *Tipping Point* typologies. The importance of English is underlined by Rose (Burera, *At Risk*), who says that she likes English because 'if I know it, it will help me to understand other subjects'.

Considering the importance of English for enabling understanding, lesson observations and girls accounts revealed dramatic differences in the opportunities different girls had for speaking and practising English. Rose (Burera, *At Risk*) draws a direct comparison between herself and her brother who she says is much better than her at English 'because he speaks to the teachers and builds up his confidence in English'. Close analysis of classroom transcripts, explored in detail elsewhere, reveals gendered patterns of interaction in secondary three classes that were not present at the end of primary school, with girls noticeably more reluctant to participate than boys (Kuchah et al. 2022). Girls themselves did not directly comment on these differences, but the wider literature and Aline, Aloysie and Alphonse's lived experiences in Rwanda suggest these patterns may be shaped by gendered behavioural expectations. However, we also observed that there were a small number of girls who repeatedly raised their hands and were regularly called upon by the teacher. These girls fell into the *Teachers' Favourites* and *Multiple Strategies* typologies, while, in contrast, girls in the *At Risk* group, were largely silent during lessons.

Teacher and peer support

Teachers played an influential role in girls' learning, but the way that this was perceived by the girls themselves differed. Teachers could support girls to navigate the language demands of the classroom, for example Alice (Ruhango, *Tipping Point*) states that she enjoys 'the way our teacher teaches us … he translates from English to Kinyarwanda or sometimes mix the two languages to help us understand well'. In contrast, when teachers refused to allow the use of Kinyarwanda, this was strongly criticised by some girls. Rosine (Kirehe, *At Risk*) only mentions the teacher once when she shares that she 'hate[s] it when the teacher tells me to ask my classmates when I ask what I don't understand during learning because sometimes my classmates have the same difficulty as me, so we leave the topic without understanding'.

Those girls who interacted more often with teachers also spoke more positively about the role of the teacher in their learning. Girls in the *Teachers' Favourites* typology talked at length about the importance of their teachers for both their learning, and more widely in roles more akin to being mentors. However, while Gianna (*Teachers' Favourites*) liked 'paying attention to teachers in class and asking them questions to understand well', girls in the *At Risk* and *Tipping Point* typologies barely mentioned the role of their teacher in their learning beyond the points about translation above.

In addition to the role of the teacher, all girls talked to differing degrees about the role of their peers, with many talking about how they helped them to understand content. Although here the languages used were not made explicit, we note that all the groupwork that we observed in lessons was overwhelmingly in Kinyarwanda. Some girls talked about their reliance on their peers to keep up, often working with other girls who also did not understand content, while others strategically sought out peers that could explain concepts and extend their understanding. Tressy (Nyarugenge, *Against the Odds*), for example, was frustrated that she often requests 'learners to explain to me at school and [they] refuse, this bothers and discourages me'.

A safe socio-emotional environment for learning

Tressy's experience of feeling 'discouraged' by her peers was echoed by other girls and is an important example of the role that socio-emotional factors played in their learning experiences. For example, Nazou (Ruhango, *Against the Odds*) spoke at length about her fear of ridicule in the classroom, directly citing fear about using English incorrectly, which leads to her 'losing self-confidence … during learning at school, when I raise hand I feel people can laugh at me or when I say something and others laugh'. She expresses frustration with teachers who 'ignore' her questions, saying, 'I feel angry, they discourage me and I dislike people who discourage me'. However, the reason that Nazou has been placed in the *Against the Odds* typology is that, unlike others with similarly heavy home burdens, she persists in volunteering answers and asking questions despite her fear of ridicule.

The impact of fear on learning also extended to fear of physical violence. Aurore (Kirehe, *Multiple Strategies*) reflected that 'some learners including me, get scared to attend school when they know they might be beaten' while Francoise (Burera, *Against the Odds*) felt 'threatened by some teachers, especially male teachers'. Charity (Burera, *Tipping Point*) further explains that 'there are teachers who scare us, like the teacher of entrepreneurship… sometimes he comes quietly and surprise you when he finds you taking notes of other

lessons, he beats you either using a stick or with a hand on the head…you cannot learn his lesson well'. Although this in-school violence was not explicitly gender-based, some girls also talked about the burden of direct and indirect experiences of gender-based violence at home and on the journey between home and school.

Time to study

All girls talked about the role of study time for homework and revision to help them in their learning. However, although some were able to spend significant time revising, for others this was aspirational as they had too many other demands on their time. This was particularly true for girls who lived in insecure home environments or who carried responsibility for high levels of home chores, an expectation that often falls unevenly upon girls. Some noted that 'too much work', 'lack of quiet place' and 'lack of electricity' all prevent them from 'studying well at home' (Winny, Burera, *At Risk*). Atfa (Nyarugenge, *Tipping Point*) further explained that she gets frustrated when she cannot take the time to understand what she is taught because 'there are many children in the house…I take care of them and I can't get time to study'. When time and space for study at home were restricted, this often resulted in girls relying on strategies of rote memorisation rather than deepening their understanding. But Charity (Burera, *Tipping* Point) lamented that the LoLT made even memorisation a struggle, explaining, 'it is actually hard to memorize something in English that you do not even know the meaning in Kinyarwanda'.

Time to spend on revision was not restricted to within the home, with most girls talking about the importance of the walk to and from school for peer-to-peer learning, although the nature of the discussions clearly differed. While Elise (Kirehe, *At Risk*) appreciated the time to 'help each other to understand…and give advice', Imaculee (Nyarugenge, *Teachers' Favourites*) described a more competitive environment where she talks with other learners about 'the content of the day … [and] we randomly chose the question and chose randomly who should answer the question'. Some girls missed out on this time because of persistent attention from older boys and men who waited for them on their way to and from school, often attention that the girls described as unsolicited and fear-inducing. When girls had to walk long distances to school, or accompany younger siblings to school first, this also often meant that they missed the hour of quiet revision time in the classroom before lessons started. Honorine (Nyarugenge, *Tipping point*) was frustrated by this lost learning time, saying: '…so I don't learn the same content with my classmates and I can't compare to them in grade because there is content they learn that I don't learn'.

In this section we have found it useful to first present themes relating to key supports for learning, that act as barriers when absent. In doing so, we have demonstrated that different girls had access to different supports and opportunities. However, this thematic approach cannot fully convey the ways in which different factors come together for individual girls. To address this, we took a narrative approach and developed stories that more clearly demonstrated the ways in which girls' experiences of language in the classroom intersected with their wider life circumstances. This led us to observe patterns in girls' experiences, leading us to group girls into five typologies. Space precludes the sharing of examples from all five typologies. Instead, we share excerpts from the narratives created for two girls, Rose and Charity, who exemplify the At Risk and Tipping Point typologies.

The umuzigo w'inyongera (double burden) for At Risk and Tipping Point girls

An excerpt from Rose's narrative (Burera, *At Risk*)

Rose's description of her home life is one where there is a lot of arguing and financial precarity with the expectation for her to do a lot of household chores, which she sees as unfair compared to how her brother contributes. She also does not attend school regularly, particularly when she cannot afford sanitary products. She likes to be at school with her friends and in the school choir. However, when in class she is observed as silent, only speaking once when called upon by a teacher and only to read out a sentence from the blackboard. She berates herself for not being able to memorise more complicated English and compares her lack of confidence in speaking English with her brother.

Rose is an example of the *At Risk* typology. These girls were grouped together because they were at significant risk of failing and dropping out of school. In addition, they shared common characteristics of their home lives, including financial precarity and often unsafe home environments, in some cases including gender-based violence. By bringing information about Rose's home and school experiences together, we can see that she does not have access to the supports that are identified above as important for learning. Considering the challenges she faces protecting time and space for revision, it is all the more important for Rose and others in this group to practise speaking English in lessons. Yet, our observations found that it these are girls more likely to remain silent, contributing to a vicious cycle of epistemic exclusion from meaningful learning. In Rose's case, English may not be the main driver of exclusion, however, the requirement to use English adds further practical and emotional burdens to her already challenging life, contributing to a heavy *umuzigo w'inyongera*.

An excerpt from Charity's narrative (Burera, *Tipping Point)*

She describes her biggest challenge in class as 'not speaking and understanding English language, when teachers teach only in English, I get nothing, my learning becomes difficult'. At home, she has limited time to revise because of many household chores, including looking after younger children and the family cow. She regularly gets up at 5.30am and worries about using a torch in the evenings because she sometimes falls asleep and her parents tell her off when the torch battery is dead in the morning. She also states that she gets distracted, takes 'much time' when she is reading, and cannot translate from English to Kinyarwanda.

For the girls in the *Tipping point* typology, like Charity, we observe that the LoLT burden potentially plays a more pivotal role in their epistemic inclusion or exclusion from learning. These are girls who are just about keeping up with content in the classroom but who regularly rely on teacher and peer code-switching to access curricular content. They are observed as 'inconsistent' in their engagement in class and become distracted when teaching remains only in English. At home, these girls carry significant, gender-based chore burdens, but they do squeeze in time for revision. However, this revision is characterised by struggle with the LoLT. Unlike Rose, who may still struggle to keep up with her learning, even if the requirement to use English were removed, Charity would likely feel significant benefit and would be able to use her hard-fought revision time more productively.

The generation of girls' narratives helps us to move beyond the identification of key factors that either support, or in their absence constitute barriers to, learning. By considering a more holistic picture of girls' home and school lives, we can see how different circumstances, responsibilities and experiences of schooling interact. We can also begin to see patterns and

identify combinations of factors that are more likely to result in educational marginalisation and exclusion. Through this analysis, we provide emerging evidence, firstly that there are girls who carry significant *umuzigo w'inyongera,* and secondly that different girls experience these burdens in different ways. Although we haven't been able to share examples from all typologies (for examples from all five typologies, see Milligan et al. 2023). girls' differential experiences come through particularly clearly when we contrast Rose and Charity's narratives with other girls, such as those who were observed to speak regularly in class and who were usually contending with less heavy burdens outside of school. These girls (particularly within the *Teachers' Favourites* typology) also had access to more of the supports identified as important above, such as pre-school quiet revision time and peer collaboration on the walk to and from school. However, it is important to note that even for these girls, the requirement to use English as the LoLT limited the extent to which they could engage in extended meaning-making activities within the classroom (see Kuchah et al. 2022).

Discussion and conclusions

The findings from the thematic analysis of girls' accounts demonstrate that the use of an unfamiliar LoLT has a significant and broad impact on learners' educational experiences. This supports much of the existing research evidence from Rwanda (Bowden et al. 2022; Sibomana 2022) and other East African countries (Vuzo 2018; Ssentanda 2022). For all the girls in this study, the LoLT clearly contributed to challenges of understanding, resulting in reliance on peer and teacher code-switching to Kinyarwanda and the strategies of repetition and memorization. These coping-mechanisms limit opportunities for extended talk, thus the LoLT restricts girls' learning by excluding them from processes of meaning-making that would enable deeper understanding (Guzula et al. 2016; Charamba 2021).

Challenges with the LoLT are by no means limited to girls. However, our analysis suggests that, when combined with gendered factors – particularly in relation to responsibility for household chores, gendered behavioural expectations, and worry about gender-based harassment and violence – these challenges are compounded for girls. We argue that LoLT is, thus, a gendered issue, and acts as one of the structural factors that Rubagiza et al. (2022, 128) argue 'are institutionalized in educational institutions' norms, structures and processes to present barriers to equitable outcomes'. As such, the role of language demands much greater consideration in girls' education policy, planning and research.

We have found it useful to conceptualise this intersection of language and gender as *umuzigo w'inyongera*. This connects to, and extends, existing use of the concept of 'burden' to describe girls' gendered responsibilities (Nussey 2021). However, it is also steered by the girls whose voices are at the centre of this research and who spoke both about the physical obstacles they faced, but also about the socio-emotional toll. They articulated feelings of discouragement from teachers and peers, self-criticism for not being able to find time for additional revision, and shame in relation to talking English in the classroom (see also Adamson 2022). Moreover, several girls talked about the impact of feeling fearful for their physical safety both in school and when travelling between school and home. The Kinyarwanda concept, *umuzigo w'inyongera,* incorporates this socio-emotional heaviness that existing uses of the English term 'burden' have not.

The findings from this study suggest that the impact of LoLT, gender, and other factors, cannot be fully understood in isolation. Instead, we need to understand how they work together to shape girls' learning experiences. As such, the thematic analysis of data felt

insufficient, and so we developed typologies that enabled us to see patterns in the experiences of different groups of girls who shared similarities in their home and classroom experiences. We acknowledge the limitations of our sample size and methods of data generation and analysis, and we do not suggest that the typologies developed are explanatory (Elman 2009). However, they powerfully illustrate differences amongst girls' experiences of *umuzigo w'inyongera*. Moreover, this analysis demonstrated that the use of an unfamiliar LoLT appears to compound existing inequalities and likely contributes to the exclusion of girls from learning. The examples shared from girls from the *At Risk* and *Tipping Point* typologies demonstrate that English is a contributing factor, leading most girls to remain silent (Kuchah et al. 2022), and pushing some towards failure. Our findings, thus, add important new evidence to a small body of literature that suggests LoLT impacts not only girls' learning outcomes but also their likelihood to dropout (Benson 2005; Milligan and Adamson 2022).

Although space has prevented us from sharing extended examples, there are a small number of girls who are achieving well relative to their peers. The girls within the *Teachers' Favourites* typology, and to a lesser extent those in the *Multiple Strategies* group, are given attention by the teacher, with examples of teachers explicitly calling on them by name. As a result, these girls have more opportunities for talk, which enables English language development, leading to increased confidence and credibility (Milligan 2020). They also, crucially, have more limited demands on their time so can access all learning spaces. However, even for these girls, we argue that there may be some gendered factors that lead them to limit their engagement to repetition and responding to teachers' questions rather than more sustained spontaneous meaning-making opportunities that may be more readily available to boys (Kuchah et al. 2022). Given the relative lack of physical gendered burdens that these girls carry, we also caution against these girls being seen as indicative of successful gender programming (Khoja-Moolji 2015). Similarly, care must be taken when considering the achievements of girls in the *Against the Odds* typology who do not seem to be silenced in the same way as others with similar levels of home burdens. Examples of this small number of girls must not used to demand superhuman levels of individual grit and resilience as a requirement for success (Wilson-Strydom 2017).

This paper demonstrates a clear case for further research to understand girls' differential experiences of language and gender in education, using girls' descriptions of their schooling as a starting point for conceptualising how girls are burdened in multiple and different ways (African Feminist Charter 2006). It also cautions against research designs where the significance of gender inequalities is reduced to simple parity measures or where girls as a homogenous group are only compared to boys (Unterhalter et al. 2022). However, even from this small-scale study, there is little doubt that there are important implications for Rwandan education, particularly given the unequal failure and transition rates for girls at the end of lower secondary education (Uworwabayeho et al. 2021; Rubagiza et al. 2022). As an immediate priority, supporting girls, particularly those in the T*ipping Point* and *At Risk* typologies, to have the opportunity to talk and develop their English would be a short-term remedy. Critically, the findings mainly suggest that a change in language policy to create a much greater role for the familiar language, Kinyarwanda, could contribute to equity both between and within genders. The typology analysis indicates that amending the LoLT would most directly support the most marginalised girls. However, importantly, there are no examples in our sample of girls who are fully thriving in English medium classrooms, and so a change in language policy and practice may bring about a more positive learning environment for all.

Note

1. Given this multiplicity of 'risk', we felt it was important to describe these girls as 'at risk'. However, we caution against the use of 'at risk' as a way to stigmatise vulnerable children.

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