

Refugee Education: Aligning Access, Learning & Opportunity

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Access, learning, and opportunity are usually conceptualized in a sequential and linear way: with access to school comes learning and with learning comes opportunity. But for most refugee students—and for most marginalized students globally—this model simply does not hold. In settings where students' mobility and their social, economic, and political rights have massive restrictions, access to school does not translate into learning, and learning does not translate into opportunities. Creating education that enables refugee young people to feel a sense of belonging and prepares them to help build more peaceful and equitable futures requires us to address these misalignments, which are rooted across the ecosystem, from macro-level geopolitical arrangements to micro-level interactions in classrooms. I pose three questions as central in understanding these misalignments: Who is allowed to be where and for how long? Who is responsible for refugee education? And who can feel a sense of belonging? Answering these questions informs how we might work,

ve years before, which is the one she still has now: to return to her home in Syria. Wadad now prefers not to think about the geography of her future, explaining she has come to realize how powerless it makes her feel to dwell on what she cannot control. She explained with some resignation, “It doesn’t make a difference where [my future] happens, but I prefer a place where I’m most comfortable in my job, my family . . . a place where I have people I love, not a place where I’m alone.” What Wadad has not given up, and is adamant that she will never give up, is a focus on this future. Yet maintaining this focus has been a constant challenge for Wadad and her Syrian classmates. They have found much of their education instead centered on what Wadad described as the “details of each day,” of just getting by in the present.

Wadad is one of now more than 43.4 million people globally who live as refugees, half of whom are children.³ A refugee is someone who has fled across a border with a well-founded fear of persecution. Those counted in these numbers—and often more visible—are those to whom host governments give legal status after deciding on the legitimacy of persecution claims. Millions more live as asylum-seekers, often spending years in limbo without legal status, and others are counted in categories created to fit domestic and global political purposes, including Palestinians outside the five-country mandate of UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) and “other people in need of international protection,” which includes all displaced Venezuelans. In addition, 68.3 million are internally displaced within their countries of citizenship.

The number of refugees, those displaced outside their country of citizenship, is growing; in the past decade, the number of refugees has tripled.⁴ The number of refugees globally is the equivalent of all the residents in Canada or California or Tokyo. Yet most refugees do not live in these places. Confronted by policies and walls erected by high-income countries, 69 percent of refugees live in countries that neighbor their conflict-affected home countries, and 75 percent live in low- and middle-income countries.⁵ These sites of exile have fewer resources for social services and already-overstretched education systems. In 2017, when Wadad was fifteen years old, 25 percent of the population in Lebanon were refugees compared to less than 0.1 percent in the United States.⁶ In 2019, the United States admitted only 1,198 refugees from Afghanistan, while almost 1.5 million Afghan refugees continued to live in Pakistan, many for more than twenty years.⁷ This long-term displacement is a central dimension of refugee education.

Refugees today live in exile between ten and twenty-five years on average, three times as long as in the early 1990s.⁸ This length of displacement means exile is the one and only chance most refugee children have for education. Abroon, who lived in Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, thought he would quickly return to Soma

lia after he ed home with his family as a young child. But twenty-one years later, he was still in Kenya. Raphael, an NGO staff member in Kakuma camp, also in Kenya, said: “We can’t keep talking about emergency . . . if people have been here for twenty years. . . . So when you design things that are emergency in approach and in context, then you are not addressing my needs as I grow up.”⁹ The expectation of short-term displacement is met by the reality of long-term displacement for individual refugees, like Abroon, and for agency staff, like Raphael, who make education policies.

Not all refugee children have access to school, as Wadad and Abroon did. Globally, only 68 percent of school-aged refugees are enrolled at primary levels and 37 percent at secondary levels.¹⁰ Even when they do have access to schools, they often have little access to school learning. In Kakuma camp in Kenya, we nd that literacy among children in early primary school is among the lowest in the world.¹¹ In classrooms, refugee children are often excluded through use of languages they do not understand, curricula that does not represent them or actively discriminates against them, and fraught relationships with teachers and peers.¹² Their opportunities are also frequently truncated. In almost all countries where refugees live, they are noncitizens and likely will never be citizens. Lack of citizenship curtails their access to school and to post-schooling opportunities, with limited rights to work, access capital, and maintain long-term legal status.¹³ Overall, refugee children are less likely to go to school. They are less likely to nish school. They are less likely to learn in school. And they are less likely to feel like they can contribute to their communities.¹⁴ For young people

We cannot succeed in the global quest for educational equity if we do not address the needs of refugees. So what would it take to ensure that all refugee young people have access to learning that enables them to feel a sense of belonging and prepares them to help build more peaceful and equi

beled Syria on the map. Others followed, labeling countries and bodies of water. One student held back, uncertain she wanted to go to the board. Ahmed encouraged her, and the faces of peers, eager and open, also gently prompted her. She did get up and go to the board, making it so that everyone in the class had participated. “Bravo,” said Ahmed when she completed the task. To the class he said, “She was saying she did not know anything. She turned out to know everything.”

Students were no strangers to being treated as if they were clueless and unaware of their experiences of everyday exclusions as refugees in Lebanon, and Ahmed often talked in metaphors that were about immediate classroom moments and also addressed larger themes in his students’ educational experiences. As the class focused on the details of making the map on the board, Ahmed zoomed out to the larger purposes of the exercise, reminding students to think about “identifying one location with respect to another location.” While talking about the physical contours of borders, states, and compass directions, this concrete task resonated with much more expansive ways of how he thought about supporting students in their learning as they constantly navigate multiple locations and their relationships to them.

Ahmed was clear that this navigation involved a good deal of compromise in his teaching, an intentional balancing act. As a Syrian refugee himself, he wanted his students to learn about the daily constraints they faced within Lebanon’s exclusionary social, economic, and political structures. Yet, as their teacher, he also had to teach the lessons prescribed by the Lebanese curriculum, which the students needed to follow to pass the Brevet exam. Ahmed needed to navigate tensions between the kinds of learning he—as their civics teacher and as a Syrian refugee—wanted students to do about membership and participation; the lessons prescribed by the Lebanese curriculum they followed; and the daily social, political, and economic realities of Lebanon. (p. 64)

Figure 1
Mr. Ahmed Teaches Civics in Beirut, Lebanon



Source: Artwork by Wilhelmina Peragine. See Sarah Dryden-Peterson and Hania Mariën, *Pedagogies of Belonging: Educators Building Welcoming Communities in Settings of Conflict and Migration* (Refugee REACH, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2023). © 2023 by Sarah Dryden-Peterson and Hania Mariën. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International license. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>.

guarantee visa-free travel in Europe for Turkish citizens, and agree to re-engage negotiations on Turkey's EU membership.²³ The 2022 U.K.-Rwanda Agreement included involuntary deportation of asylum-seekers from the United Kingdom to Rwanda. Political scientists Fiona B. Adamson and Kelly M. Greenhill argue that this kind of deal is not unique, that "the exchange of cash and the promise of additional side-payments for a distant country's acceptance of 'unwanted' populations bears a striking resemblance to earlier schemes that aimed to resolve thorny political problems by proposing to transfer populations to far-ung locations."²⁴

These constraints and limitations on refugees' movement effectively constrain the kinds of access refugees have to education. In most cases, refugees live in places where access to school is not universal, and the quality of education is unequal because some students and schools do not receive sufficient resources. In Kenya, refugees live in districts with some of the highest levels of poverty and the lowest levels of access to school.²⁵ An NGO staff member in Egypt explained that "there is no benefit" to including Syrian refugees in a system already struggling to implement quality education.²⁶ In South Sudan, an UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) staff member explained that schools are "barely functional" and act in "haphazard" ways while trying to include refugees.²⁷ In Lebanon, where Wadad is in school, Lebanese citizens choose private schools whenever they have the option, not the public schools refugees have access to.²⁸ In most countries, poor children, including refugees, have access to poor schools.²⁹

Restrictions on and the unpredictability of who is allowed to move where—and who is allowed to stay where—shape misalignments between refugee children's access to school and their learning and opportunities. Khawla, one of Ahmed's students in Beirut, had a specific goal of being a surgeon who provides free medical care to people in need.³⁰ After researching the requirements for this training in Lebanon, Khawla wrote out a detailed series of steps covering the next twelve years of her life that would allow her to accomplish this goal. But each step was accompanied by a set of factors over which she had no control. Would refugees be allowed to continue to go to school in Lebanon? Would she be allowed to work in Lebanon if she did become a surgeon?³¹ She had top grades, the kind that, according to the logics of exam systems, would facilitate her further study and enable her to reach medical school. But what Khawla heard from her teachers when she began primary school in Lebanon shook her trust in whether these opportunities would be open to her. She explained that she began to think, "Maybe they're right, maybe we are coming to Lebanon, it's not our country, we can't study here, we can't work here, we can't stay here. Maybe they're right. We are occupying their country." Khawla and other refugee young people know they are at the mercy of cyclical and conflicting logics: educational policies that allowed them to study, but social and economic policies and politics that did not allow them to participate.

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already overstretched hosting countries to examine the extent to which they can, or should, support refugee education.³⁸ An NGO staff member in Rwanda described how “the big responsibility is on the government.”³⁹ Approaches to refugee inclusion exhibit varying degrees of what responsibility entails, in terms of access to school, learning, and/or opportunities. Without a shared global responsibility, refugee education in most places has involved minimal realization of the right to education through access to school, but—lacking the necessary additional resources and commitments—limited quality of learning or long-term opportunities.

Inclusion has marked a major opportunity for addressing certain core dimensions of refugees’ educational marginalization: namely, their access to school. Yet what remains are persistent dilemmas connected to learning and opportunity that closely mirror the experiences of other marginalized children globally, such as alienation from curriculum, exclusion and discrimination in relationships with teachers and peers, and misalignments between the promises of getting educated and limited opportunities for equitable social, civic, economic, and political participation. To align access, learning, and opportunity, we must address the third central question: who can feel a sense of belonging?

one hand, the kinds of learning that are deemed worthy within the education they have access to at the present in one specific geography and, on the other hand, the opportunities they then might trade away for a different future.

The time is right for a collective and multilevel approach to refugee education that addresses the misalignments among access, learning, and opportunity. This requires more expansive and interconnected responses to the three questions of who is allowed to be where and for how long; who is responsible for refugee education; and who belongs. The daily work of figuring out how to ensure that all refugee young people feel a sense of belonging falls to teachers and students in schools. Yet we—in governments at all levels, in financial institutions, in universities, in civil society organizations, as parents, as school leaders, as activists, as engaged members of our local and global communities—have roles to play. We can learn from these teachers and students about what they do and how, as in some of the examples presented in this essay; we can expand opportunities for teachers and students to learn from each other about these practices and how they might be adapted across contexts; and we can support, institutionally and systemically, professional development of teachers around these practices, including attention to their financial and social well-being.⁴⁸

Yet teachers and students cannot and should not do this work alone. Every day they experience the consequences of the structural causes of forced migration: the environmental destruction, the economic exploitation and devastation, and the discrimination and racism that compel people to move in search of new homes and continue to surround them as they try to build new lives. To ensure that all students have access to learning and belonging that enables them to help build more peaceful and equitable futures requires us to address these causes and their consequences, including new visions of who is responsible for refugee education and who is allowed to be where and for how long. High-income countries, like the United States, often fuel environmental destruction, economic exploitation, and racism linked to the conflicts that refugees flee. They—we—need to shoulder more of the responsibility for refugee education, both financially in the regions where most refugees live and through migration policies not based on containment but on more equitable opportunities for mobility. It is in the interests of all of us to act now to create access to learning that does enable refugee young people to feel a sense of belonging and prepares them to help build more peaceful and equitable futures—these are the futures in which all of us will share.

author's note

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- ⁸ Xavier Devictor and Quy-Toan Do, “How Many Years Have Refugees Been in Exile?” *Population and Development Review* (2017): 355–369, <https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12061>; and James Milner and Gil Loesch, *Responding to Protracted Refugee Situations: Lessons From a Decade of Discussion* (Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, 2011).
- ⁹ Abroon was a participant in a study of Somali students’ pathways to educational success in Kenya. See Sarah Dryden-Peterson, Negin Dahya, and Elizabeth Adelman, “Pathways to Educational Success Among Refugees: Connecting Local and Global Resources,” *American Educational Research Journal* (2017): 1011–1047.
- ¹⁰ Raphael was a participant in a fourteen-country study of inclusion of refugees in national education systems. See Sarah Dryden-Peterson, Elizabeth Adelman, Michelle J. Bellino, and Vidur Chopra, “The Purposes of Refugee Education: Policy and Practice of Including Refugees in National Education Systems,” *Sociology of Education* (2019): 346–366.
- ¹¹ Olga Sarrado, Cirenía Chavez Villegas, Kristy Siegfried, et al., *All Inclusive: The Campaign for Refugee Education* (UNHCR, 2022); and Kendra Dupuy, Júlia Palik, and Gudrun Østby, “No Right to Read: National Regulatory Restrictions on Refugee Rights to Formal Education in Low- and Middle-Income Host Countries,” *International Journal of Educational Development* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102537>.
- ¹² Benjamin Piper, Vidur Chopra, Sarah Dryden-Peterson, et al., “Are Refugees Learning? Early Grade Literacy Outcomes in a Refugee Camp in Kenya,” *Journal on Education in Emergencies* (2020); and Sarah Dryden-Peterson, Benjamin Piper, Celia Reddick, et al., “Navigating the Present and the Future: Language Choice in Refugee Education” (unpublished).
- ¹³ Celia Reddick, “Who Can Participate, Where, and How? Connections Between Language-in-Education and Social Justice in Policies of Refugee Inclusion,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* (2023): 668–693, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fead009>; Celia Reddick and Sarah Dryden-Peterson, “Refugee Education and Medium of Instruction: Tensions in Theory, Policy and Practice,” in *Language Issues in Comparative Education*, ed. Carolyn Benson and Kimmo Kosonen (Sense Publishers, 2021); Celia Reddick and Vidur Chopra, “Language Considerations in Refugee Education: Languages for Opportunity, Connection, and Roots,” *Language and Education* (2023): 244–261, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2021.1983588>; Maha Shuayb, “The Art of Inclusive Exclusions: Educating the Palestinian Refugee Students in Lebanon,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly*

- ¹⁴ Roger Zetter and Héloïse Ruaud, *Refugees' Right to Work and Access to Labor Markets—An Assessment* (Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development, 2016); and Thomas Ginn, Reva Resstack, Helen Dempster, et al., *2022 Global Refugee Work Rights Report* (Center for Global Development, Asylum Access, Refugees International, 2022).
- ¹⁵ These four sentences are adapted from Dryden-Peterson, *Right Where We Belong*.
- ¹⁶ Ahmed was a participant in a study across three schools that asked Syrian students about their experiences with education in Lebanon. See Vidur Chopra, Joumana Talhouk, Sarah Dryden-Peterson, and Carmen Geha, “Creating Educational Borderlands: Civic Learning in a Syrian School in Lebanon,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 36(4) (2023). The three paragraphs about Ahmed here are taken verbatim from this article (see pages 785–786), according to the Oxford journal author guidelines.
- ¹⁷ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer’s suggestion to make this point explicit.
- ¹⁸ See Dryden-Peterson, “Sanctuary,” *Right Where We Belong*, 49.
- ¹⁹ UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement 2022*.
- ²⁰ Catherine Lowe Besteman, *Militarized Global Apartheid* (Duke University Press, 2020), 18.
- ²¹ Lara Jakes, “For Ukraine’s Refugees, Europe Opens Doors That Were Shut to Others,” *The New York Times*, February 26, 2022.
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- ²³ European Commission, “EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan,” October 15, 2015, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-15-5860_en.htm
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- ²⁵ Tabitha Wambui Mwangi, “Exploring Kenya’s Inequality Pulling Apart or Pooling Together?” (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics and Society for International Development, 2013).
- ²⁶ Interview by Elizabeth Adelman, August 20, 2014, Cairo, Egypt. This interview was conducted for a collaborative project.
- ²⁷ Interview by Chris Del Vecchio, April 16, 2014, by Skype. Interview conducted under my supervision in the context of a for-credit class at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- ²⁸ Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, “Statistical Bulletin for the Academic Year” (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2016); and Lebanon Ministry of Education and Higher Education, “Race Lebanon: Presentation to Education Partners Meeting” (Lebanon Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2017).
- ²⁹ See also Timothy P. Williams, “The Political Economy of Primary Education: Lessons from Rwanda,” *World Development* 41 (2017): 550–561, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.03.037>
- ³⁰ Khawla was a participant in a study across three schools that asked Syrian students about their experiences of education in Lebanon. This study was collaborative with Vidur Chopra, Joumana Talhouk, and Carmen Geha. I have also written about Kawla’s experience.

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periences in Dryden-Peterson Right Where We Belong

- ⁴⁴ Hiba Salem and Sarah Dryden-Peterson, "Protection in Refugee Education: Teachers' Socio-Political Practices in Classrooms in Jordan," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* (1) (2023): 75–95. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12436> See also portraits of two teachers, Ms. Susan and Mr. Faisal, in Dryden-Peterson and Marietta, "Pedagogies of Belonging"
- ⁴⁵ Chopra, Talhouk, Dryden-Peterson, and Geha, "Creating Educational Borderlands."
- ⁴⁶ This data is from a collaborative study with Vidur Chopra, Joumana Talhouk, and Garmen Geha.
- ⁴⁷ Sarah Dryden-Peterson, "Toward Cognitive and Temporal Mobility: Language Considerations in Refugee Education," *Modern Language Journal*