



WE SEE YOU: WHAT SYRIAN REFUGEE STUDENTS WISH THEIR TEACHERS KNEW

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By Sarah Dryden-Peterson, Vidur Chopra, Joumana Talhouk, Carmen Geha

Summary

Refugee young people build their futures in contexts of extreme uncertainty. Conflicts now last on average between 10 and 20 years, so they know that return to their countries of origin are near impossible in the short-term and improbable over the course of their educations and young working lives.

Refugee young people go to school while displaced because they imagine that opportunities will follow. These opportunities are short-term and long-term, small and large. They wish to pass their end-of-year exams and proceed to the next level of school. They wish to go to university and become vets and engineers and teachers. They wish to build relationships with peers and feel happy and secure. They wish to contribute to their communities—both to their conflict-affected home places and to the places they find themselves at that moment.

But the opportunities that refugee young people imagine will follow from their education are often limited. They are frequently unwelcome in their places of exile, experience constant fears that their refugee status will be taken away, and face severe limitations on access to higher education and the rights to work, own property, and be contributing members of society.

How can education for refugees narrow the gap between the opportunities refugee young people imagine and those that are plausible in these settings of extreme marginalization?

We wanted to learn from refugee young people about their experiences and their ideas on narrowing this gap. Our study included 8 months of observations in schools in Lebanon and over 100 hours of interviews with Syrian Grade 9 students, their teachers, and families.



We learn from students that it is hard, but not impossible, for teachers to help them narrow this gap. Students describe actions their teachers take to help them navigate fixed and exclusionary structures and content of schooling, like their structural and social isolation in second shift (i.e., Syrians going to school in the afternoon and Lebanese in the morning) and their alienation from curriculum that does not recognize their experiences. Teachers bridge these gaps through ways of teaching and ways of building relationships—what we call pedagogies of predictability, pedagogies of explaining, pedagogies of fairness, and pedagogies of care.

You will see some of these pedagogies in action in the beautiful [animation](#) from our collaborative research, funded by the [Research Council of Norway](#) and created by our team in collaboration with [PositiveNegatives](#) and artist [Sawsan Nourallah](#). We also include concrete ideas below on how policymakers, educators, and researchers can support these practices.

Key Takeaways

We offer the following practical steps and actions based on this research below.

For Policymakers

INSIGHTS

Refugee young people describe “being behind.” They literally come behind national students as they attend school only in the afternoons and for a shorter amount of time. They also struggle to catch up on years of lost schooling and to learn in a new language.

Refugee young people describe challenges in finding spaces where they can discuss their identities, their histories, and their experiences of exclusion. As one student described, the teachers often say, “Don’t interfere with politics. We’re here to study not to talk about these issues.”

Refugee young people describe valuing pedagogies of predictability, pedagogies of explaining, pedagogies of fairness, and pedagogies of care (see below For Educators).



ACTIONS

While refugee young people recognize that “there’s no country that favors others over their own citizens,” education leaders can mitigate these feelings of being behind through equalizing access to resources and supports and allocating them to the specific needs of refugee students, including increased instructional hours, remedial learning during or after regular school hours and language support.

Even when it is not possible to address issues of identity, exclusion, and politics in the formal content and curriculum, education leaders can provide teachers with adequate instructional autonomy to welcome informal conversations and additional discussions that allow students to appropriately explore questions around their identities, their displacements and current experiences in exile.

Education leaders can support teachers in cultivating these pedagogies. Pedagogies of predictability and explaining are often emphasized in existing teacher training, which teachers of refugees need access to. Pedagogies of fairness and care are relational practices that are often overlooked in teacher professional development and can be usefully included. Learning and practicing these pedagogies takes time and requires professional development that is targeted, comprehensive, and ongoing.

For Educators

INSIGHTS

Refugee young people find great value in pedagogies of predictability, including a calm environment and clear expectations.



Refugee young people find great value in pedagogies of explaining, including answering questions and making materials relevant.



Refugee young people find great value in pedagogies of fairness, supporting them to navigate the inequities they experienced in their education and opportunities.



Refugee young people find great value in pedagogies of care, including listening, kindness, and welcome.



ACTIONS

Refugee young people are better able to learn when the classroom environment feels predictable in having a set schedule, being calm and not too noisy, and having clearly communicated and collectively established expectations for student behaviors.

Refugee young people are better able to catch up and overcome feelings of “being behind” when their teachers focus on explaining the content they teach, including using simple terms (especially when language terms are complicated or in a new language), answering questions, reinforcing ideas and concepts, focusing on processes rather than facts, and engaging with students on the relevance of what they are learning.

Refugee young people want to be taught the same materials as national students. They appreciate teachers who recognize their different needs, including when teachers translate to reduce the language barriers. They value teachers who support them in making relevant some content that feels exclusionary or does not recognize them since they are without the same rights and opportunities as national students.

Refugee young people are better able to learn and feel motivated to achieve their future goals when their teachers get to know them as individuals, including listening to their ideas and concerns, approaching them with kindness, and as one student described a teacher who, “didn’t at all make us feel that we were entering a country that isn’t ours.”

For Researchers

FURTHER RESEARCH IS NEEDED TO EXAMINE:

- Refugees' educational experiences over the long-term and the implications of what and how they learn on the kinds of opportunities they can access and create;
- Ways to support and strengthen existing system-wide teacher professional development for all teachers that can integrate pedagogies of predictability, explaining, fairness, and care;
- Context-specific practices that teachers can and do use to support refugee students in navigating and resisting the often exclusionary and unequal socio-political conditions in which they live and learn.

YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE

- **Video** | [Animation highlights need for refugee education and durable futures](#)
- **UNESCO background paper** | [Including and educating Syrian refugees in national education systems: The case of Lebanon](#)
- **Research** | [Borders and belonging: Displaced Syrian youth navigating symbolic boundaries in Lebanon](#)

CITATION

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