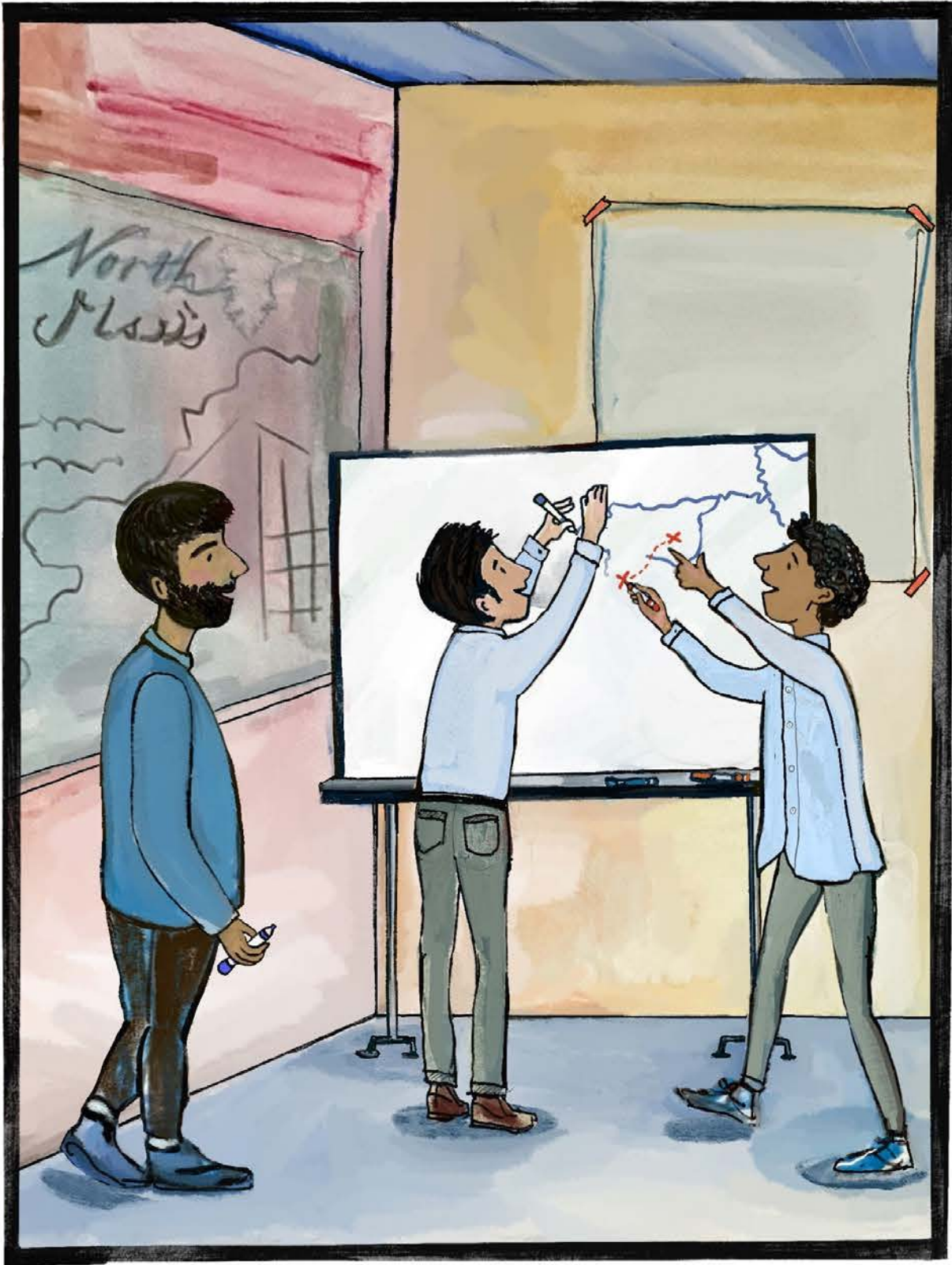


BEIRUT

LEBANON





MR. AHMED, BEIRUT, LEBANON

“I didn't believe that a teacher could do that for their students but I found out that it was true.”

– Tayseer, Mr. Ahmed's student

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

ABOUT MR. AHMED

Mr. Ahmed is a grade nine civics teacher in a school on the outskirts of Beirut, Lebanon. Most refugees in Lebanon attend public schools, where national students come in the morning and refugees in the afternoon. Mr. Ahmed's school is different; it is a private school run for and by Syrian refugees. Students must follow the official national curriculum in English or in French in order to pass the high-stakes Brevet exam at the end of grade nine, which determines whether or not they can continue in school. But Mr. Ahmed and other teachers work together to ensure that their Syrian students can both learn during the year and take this exam in Arabic, a language familiar to them. Mr. Ahmed builds upon this inclusive approach as his foundation for ensuring his students feel seen and heard, and that they matter, which runs counter to many of their experiences outside of school.

CREATING RELEVANT CURRICULUM

Mr. Ahmed knows that for his students to be successful in their education and in the lives they imagine for themselves, they must pass the Brevet exam. He maintains high expectations for students by keeping this goal in mind even as he incorporates modifications to the curriculum to make it more meaningful to them.

One time, Mr. Ahmed summarized a 100-page history book into 40 pages, making the content his students needed to pass their exams accessible to them. Each day, Mr. Ahmed also modifies the official curriculum to make it more relevant to his students. One day, he used a geography lesson to focus not only on the physical contours of borders, states, and compass directions as the curriculum specified but also on “identifying one location with respect to another location.” He homed in particularly on Syria and Lebanon, places that held meaning for students. He also emphasized to students how maps were not just static markers of places but could be navigational tools. In this way, he tapped into their previous experiences of navigating multiple locations and their relationships with them as well as to possible future migrations.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Mr. Ahmed invests time in getting to know his students. It is clear to his students that he enjoys spending time with them. As Mr. Ahmed once said, “No matter how long I sit with the 9th grade students, I don’t get bored.”

From the outset, Mr. Ahmed wants his students to know that he cares about who they are, who their families are, and what they care about. At the beginning of the year, for example, he shares a questionnaire with his students asking about them and their families. During class daily, Mr. Ahmed engages with each student to better understand what they need. He knows them well enough to observe when a student is feeling shy or uncertain in a particular moment. Mr. Ahmed encourages them with a “bravo” when they complete a task, an experience uncommon to them with previous teachers. When he notices that his students are frustrated and tired, Mr. Ahmed recognizes the need to pause and encourage them. One year, the night before the Brevet exam, as his students were preparing, he reached out to them on WhatsApp and sent them encouraging texts and study tips.

RECOGNIZING IDENTITIES

As a Syrian refugee himself, Mr. Ahmed understands the hardships his students and their families face, including lack of access to jobs and housing and experiences of discrimination in daily life. His own experiences as a refugee shape his insights and actions on how to recognize these social and political realities while also creating conditions that enable his students to feel safe and to learn.

Mr. Ahmed brings into conversation the official curriculum and the expectations and lived experiences of his students. Knowing that his students face challenges at home with overcrowded rooms, limited electricity, and limited bandwidth to study, he designs his lessons so that students learn what they need to know for the exam in class rather than for homework. He creates space for students to make comparisons between what the textbook says and their own experiences, including addressing disconnects between the two. In particular, he recognizes, instead of glossing over, that Syrians do not have most of the rights outlined in civics lessons. When teaching Lebanese laws, for example, Mr. Ahmed explained, “I make it clear that this is a law that exists but is unfortunately not applied. As simple as that.”

Learn More about Mr. Ahmed and refugee education in Lebanon, “Creating Educational Borderlands: Civic Learning in a Syrian School in Lebanon” (forthcoming).