

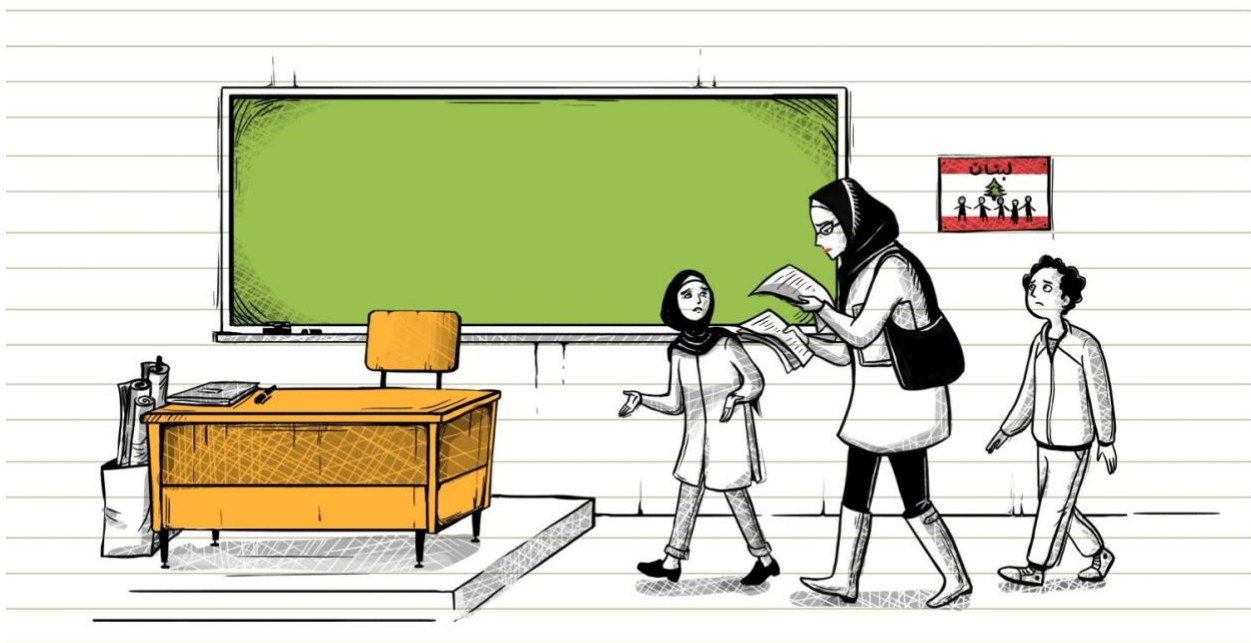


## Refugee REACH ROUNDS

Harvard Graduate School of Education

Creating Welcoming Communities to Foster Learning and Belonging

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Drawing: Sawsan Nourallah

**Refugee REACH ROUNDS** aim to foster discussions on common dilemmas of practice experienced by researchers, policymakers, and educators working in settings of migration and displacement. Our hope is that through dialogue and debate on really challenging questions and dilemmas in our field, together we can advance our collective understanding and find ways to promote quality education and welcoming communities for all in settings of migration and displacement. Please read more about our work at [www.reach.gse.harvard.edu](http://www.reach.gse.harvard.edu)

## Dilemma Definition: Learning Outside the ‘Box’ of Belonging

Since 2012, refugee education policy has adopted the approach of including refugees in national education systems.<sup>1</sup> Yet for refugee children and families in host country settings, their experiences—their lives, the futures they imagine for themselves—do not fit neatly into the ‘boxes’ of nation-state borders, nor do they fit into the boxes of schooling or the boxes of belonging. Instead, they often learn about a world in which they do not fit.

Creating spaces of learning and belonging in refugee education involves tensions. For students, learning in the present is typically accompanied with the impossibility of being ‘established’ in a host country over the long-term. With this ‘unknowable future,’ there is no guarantee of where education can lead in terms of future education, livelihoods, and social and civic participation. For teachers, there is a joint sense of responsibility to meet the learning needs of their refugee students but with ever-present concern for their obligations to the state, as well as the stability of their own living and working conditions.

The position of refugees within hosting nation-states creates gaps in the ways in which education can connect past, present, and future for refugee young people, their teachers, and the state. Given this, what principles do you think could guide teachers in building connections between daily teaching and learning and their students’ aspirations for the future?



### Dilemma in Practice

Mira and Munir are Syrian refugees currently in Grade 9 in Lebanon. As part of a school project, they made a beautiful chart of the periodic table, clearly the product of time and thought. Their teacher was so impressed by their work and, to show her pride, she put it up on the wall so that the entire class of Syrian students, who attend school in the afternoon in this double-shift school, could see it. Their teacher thought they should leave the periodic table up on the wall to allow the Lebanese national students who attend the same school in the morning shift to use it as well.

The next afternoon, however, Mira and Munir walk into their classroom only to find the periodic table torn into pieces and thrown on the floor. They turn to their teacher who is busy organizing her class notes, for an explanation. Distracted by the task at hand, she shrugs and says that perhaps the Lebanese students in the morning shift see the refugee students in the afternoon shift as intruders in the school.

Discouraged, Munir turns to Mira to express his frustration: “I swear, whatever it is we want to do in this class, we can’t.” Their teacher glances up from her papers and replies to Munir: “Maybe they think you’re Syrian, and maybe they think that it’s their class and so they don’t like you to ruin it for them.”

Munir looks at Mira, hoping for a better explanation. He and the other refugee students are only trying to integrate themselves into the same school, he laments, not ruin anything for the national students. “It’s not what I think,” their teacher says curtly. “It’s what they think.” She then turns back to her notes and begins preparing for the afternoon of classes.

Mira is equally hurt and confused by the Lebanese students’ actions. She understands that the school is Lebanese, but she cannot understand why others would want to destroy her hard work. She quietly asks Munir whether there is any country that favors other residents over its own citizens. Overhearing the students’ conversation, their teacher quickly interrupts: “Don’t interfere with politics. We’re here to study, not to talk about these issues.” Inside, their teacher wants to acknowledge her students’ concerns and vocally empathize with their frustration—but she herself feels torn in her obligations. She feels obligated to get through the entire curriculum on time. She feels obligated to her school—her employer—knowing that the school in fact does serve Lebanese students as its primary constituency. And she feels obligated to preserve a sense of peace, or at least lack of overt conflict, in a time period that feels full of political tensions among nationals and refugees. With so many things on her mind after a full morning of teaching, exhaustion is beginning to set in.

Munir puts his head in his hands, hurt by his teacher’s words. Mira tries to reassure him, acknowledging how difficult it is to live in a place where others see them as outsiders. Suddenly, their teacher turns around and shouts at Mira: “Pay attention! The morning shift is *months* ahead of this class.” In that moment Mira suddenly feels so behind. She looks down at her notebook, but she cannot concentrate. “If we have not covered the curriculum,” she thinks to herself, “we will not know what questions they will have...I will be lost in the exam, then I will need to leave school – forever!”



*From the Research:*

### *Educational Challenges Facing National Schooling Systems in Host Countries*

Host countries where refugees are included in national education systems often face challenges regarding educational access, quality, and outcomes for their own citizens. Studies suggest that the majority of refugees—85 percent—live in exile in countries that neighbor their conflict-affected countries of origin.<sup>2</sup> These neighboring host countries are generally characterized by over-stretched education systems, fragile political and economic institutions, and challenges to inclusion and membership related to their own histories of conflict and division.<sup>3</sup>

In Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, for example—a country where refugee students have access to national schools but are geographically separate from nationals—Piper et. al find learning and literacy outcomes for refugee students to be concerningly low, and even lower than for those of disadvantaged children in the host community, compared to their national counterparts.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, most refugee young learners are located in one of Kenya’s poorest counties, where average learning outcomes are among the lowest for nationals anywhere in the country.<sup>5</sup>

Similar trends and challenges are observed in Lebanese public schools, like the one that Mira and Munir attend, where evidence of low enrollment rates in public schools by Lebanese nationals reflect a prevalent belief that the public system provides poor quality education.<sup>6</sup> Public education in Lebanon has been characterized by a lack of qualified teachers,<sup>7</sup> inadequate pre-service and in-service teacher training,<sup>8</sup> poor quality textbooks and outdated curriculum,<sup>9</sup> dependence on rote-based teaching practices,<sup>10</sup> student disengagement,<sup>11</sup> and overall low investment.<sup>12</sup> Studies also suggest that repetition and failure rates are typically higher among public school students in-country than their private school counterparts.<sup>13</sup>



*From the Research:  
The Competing Obligations of Teachers*

Teachers in refugee settings face competing obligations under the inclusion model of national education within host countries. On the one hand, they are responsible for meeting the learning needs of their refugee students and helping them to prepare for further studies and entry into the labor market. On the other hand, these educational needs conflict with what teachers are ‘supposed’ to teach according to the national curriculum, as well as the structure of the host country’s school system, which is their employer, and the stability of their own career.

Philipp O. Amour writes about these ‘pedagogical deficiencies,’ wherein a state may use curricula to suit its own national narrative and inculcate its own nation-state values and ideas among students.<sup>14</sup> However, this stands in contrast to the vision of teachers who identify as non-citizens of the state,<sup>15</sup> and who may want to use the curricula instead as an instrument against the state to foster their own sense of community and belonging.

Drawing upon interviews with Syrian educators living as refugees and working to educate Syrian refugee students in Lebanon, Elizabeth Adelman finds that educators struggle to balance their teaching obligations with the realities of their current environment.<sup>16</sup> This struggle is especially poignant for those who are refugees themselves, and who feel powerless to transcend the social, economic, and political barriers constructed around them. This leaves them with a sense

of frustration and loss, as “the tension between possible and impossible, powerful and powerless is often magnified.”<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, Lopes Cardozo and Shah write about how teachers’ sense of agency is deeply influenced by economic/material, political, and socio-cultural conditions, particularly in conflict settings.<sup>18</sup> Despite their commitment to the profession, educators “face continuing and new professional constraints that limit their space for maneuver to act as transformative or committed intellectuals.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, teachers may find themselves “caught in the middle of a complex range of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces at play,”<sup>20</sup> often having to make strategic choices to protect their livelihoods and their lives.<sup>21</sup>



*From the Research:*  
*Politicized Caring*

Research suggests that there is an association between school climate and academic achievement, whereby a positive school climate helps to mitigate the negative contribution of weak socio-economic background on academic achievement.<sup>22</sup> A positive school climate may refer to positive teacher-student relationships, a sense of safety, and student connectedness to and engagement in school. This affective quality of teacher-student relationships is significant: studies find that students deemed at higher levels of risk for poor outcomes benefit more from positive relationships with teachers and are more harmed by negative teacher affect.<sup>23</sup>

Teachers of refugees seek to support their refugee students and provide them with safe classroom spaces, as well as help them catch up on learning they may have missed while displaced. While balancing their multiple and often conflicting obligations, they can engage in what is called ‘politicized caring.’ Politicized caring includes having high expectations of one’s students and focusing on academic achievement; cultural affirmation of students; having supportive norms, structures, relationships, and environment; using relevant pedagogies; cultivating students’ voices and helping them develop a critical lens; advancing students’ know-how in confronting oppression; and the teachers acting themselves as advocates or allies of students in real-time situations.

Also at the heart of politicized caring is teachers’ socio-political consciousness. By recognizing the existence of oppression in their students’ lives, educators can use their personal, professional, and social power to encourage children to understand and undermine their subordination.<sup>24</sup> In order to do this, however, teachers must “develop their own consciousness about the socio-political realities of their students in ways that authentically engage students rather than essentialize, pity, or fear them.”<sup>25</sup>



## Dilemma Revisited: Dilemma in Practice

The bell rings, signaling the end of class. The teacher leaves the room with her head down and passes her colleague, the biology teacher, in the hallway. “Are you OK?” he asks, sensing her exhaustion. She hesitates and looks up at him. “I feel paralyzed,” she says, fighting back tears. “All the pressure in this country, the instability, all the fear of the future...and then [the students] blame me.” Her colleague smiles gently, as to reassure her. “Listen to them,” he says. “They need to love and trust you. Maybe you need that too.”

As she turns to walk away, the biology teacher enters the classroom to find a group of concerned students. He notices Mira in the front and wishes her a happy birthday, and she smiles back. “Pay close attention today,” he tells the class. “Tomorrow you will explain the lesson, and I will listen – I will be the student!” The students become visibly more relaxed and engaged. “He makes you *like* learning,” Mira thinks to herself, and she reflects on how much she appreciates this teacher’s friendly and open teaching style. “He doesn’t make us feel like failures; he gives us space and hope.”



## Questions to Consider Ahead of Discussion

- How do teachers balance their obligations to their students and to the state?
- In what ways do teachers support students in linking their day-to-day learning and their future goals?
- What types of pedagogies might support environments of learning and belonging in your context?



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2012). Education strategy 2012- 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/enus/protection/operations/5149ba349/unhcr-education-strategy-2012-2016.html>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2018). "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2017." Geneva: UNHCR.

<sup>3</sup> Dryden-Peterson, S., Adelman, E., Bellino, M. J., & Chopra, V. (2019). The Purposes of Refugee Education: Policy and Practice of Including Refugees in National Education Systems. *Sociology of Education*, 92(4), 346-366.

<sup>4</sup> Piper, B., Chopra, V., Dryden-Peterson, S., Reddick, C., & Oyanga, A. (2020). Are refugees learning? Early grade literacy outcomes in a refugee camp in Kenya. *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, page 87.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pages 74-75.

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- <sup>6</sup> Chami, M. (2016, October 12). Public schooling in Lebanon: Difficult conditions but can still be engaged. The Daily Star. Retrieved from <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Business/Local/2016/Oct-12/376114-publicschooling-in-lebanon-difficult-conditions-but-can-still-be-changed.ashx>; MEHE. (2017). *Race Lebanon: Presentation to Education partners meeting*. Ministry of Education and Higher Education. Beirut, Lebanon.
- <sup>7</sup> MEHE. (2016). *Reaching all children with education: RACE II (2017-2021)*. Lebanon: Ministry of Education and Higher Education; Mattar, D. M. (2012). Factors affecting the performance of public schools in Lebanon. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 32(2), 252-263.
- <sup>8</sup> Bahou, L. (2015). Addressing issues of (in)justice in public schools within postwar Lebanon: Teachers' perspectives and practices. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 43, 63-76.
- <sup>9</sup> Shaaban, K. A. (2013). Disparity between ideals and reality in curriculum construction: The case of the Lebanese English language curriculum. *Creative Education*, Vol.04, No.12, 7. doi:10.4236/ce.2013.412A2005.
- <sup>10</sup> Akar, B. (2016). Learning active citizenship: conflicts between students' conceptualisations of citizenship and classroom learning experiences in Lebanon. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 37(2), 288-312.
- <sup>11</sup> See Endnote 8.
- <sup>12</sup> MEHE. (2014). *Reaching all children with education in Lebanon*. Lebanon: Ministry of Education and Higher Education.
- <sup>13</sup> CERD. (2016). Statistical bulletin for the academic year. Beirut, Lebanon: Author.
- <sup>14</sup> Amour, Philipp O. (2019). The evolution and implementation of a national curriculum under conditions of resistance: The case of the Palestinians (1970-1982). *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 51(1), 87-107.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, page 92.
- <sup>16</sup> Adelman, Elizabeth. (2019). When the Personal Becomes the Professional: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Syrian Refugee Educators. *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, 5(1), 94-122.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, page 99.
- <sup>18</sup> Lopes Cardozo, Mieke T.A, & Shah, Ritesh. (2016). 'The fruit caught between two stones': The conflicted position of teachers within Aceh's independence struggle. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 14(3), 331-344.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, page 342.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, page 331.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, page 339.
- <sup>22</sup> Berkowitz, R., Moore, H., Astor, R. A., & Benbenishty, R. (2017). A research synthesis of the associations between socioeconomic background, inequality, school climate, and academic achievement. *Review of Educational Research*, 87(2), 425-469.
- <sup>23</sup> Roorda, D. L., Koomen, H. M. Y., Spilt, J. L., & Oort, F. J. (2011). The influence of affective teacher-student relationships on students' school engagement and achievement: A meta-analytic approach. *Review of Educational Research*, 81(4), 493-529.
- <sup>24</sup> Beauboeuf-Lafontant, T. (1999). A movement against and beyond boundaries: 'Politically relevant teaching' among African American teachers. *Teachers College Record*, 100(4), page 702.
- <sup>25</sup> McKinney de Royston, M., Vakil, S., Ross, K. M., Givens, J., & Holman, A. (2017). "He's more like a 'brother' than a teacher": Politicized caring in a program for African American males. *Teachers College Record*, 119(4), pages 34-35.