

Chopra, Vidur; Adelman, Elizabeth

## The pursuit, practicality and potential of refugee education

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Das Thema Fluchtmigration ist vielschichtig, kontrovers und omnipräsent. Dies spiegelt sich – insbesondere im Kontext der stark angestiegenen Zahl an Neuzugewanderten nach Europa – auch im empirischen Interesse am Thema Flucht wider. Ziel des Hefts ist es, aus erziehungswissenschaftlicher Sicht Schnittstellen zwischen ‚Bildung‘ und ‚Fluchtmigration‘ zu bearbeiten. Fluchtmigration als unfreiwillige Migration ist ein der Globalisierung inhärentes Phänomen, dessen Diskussion jedoch nicht losgelöst werden kann von nationalen (z.B. asylrechtlichen) Strukturen, die auch Bildungsfragen maßgeblich betreffen. Um dieser Komplexität gerecht zu werden, kommt die erziehungswissenschaftliche Auseinandersetzung mit diesem Thema nicht ohne interdisziplinäre und internationale Öffnung aus. So umfasst diese Ausgabe empirische Beiträge aus internationalen und nationalen Studien sowie Beiträge von Wissenschaftler/innen, die Fluchtmigration und Bildung in (Nachbar-)Disziplinen bearbeiten. Die Thematisierung von Flucht ist in den Erziehungswissenschaften nicht neu. So schließt das vorliegende Heft an die ZEP 4/2013 und die ZEP 2/2002 an. Es lässt sich daher fragen, mit welchen Akzenten das gewachsene Forschungsfeld gegenwärtig erweitert und/oder konturiert werden kann. Diese Ausgabe stellt Bildung und Flucht unter zwei verschiedenen Blickwinkeln in den Fokus a) unter der Perspektive „Bildungsprozesse von Geflüchteten und deren Erforschung“ und b) unter dem Blickwinkel „Flucht als Gegenstand für Bildungsprozesse“. Zu jedem der beiden Perspektiven werden Bildung und Flucht in ihren Relationierungen mit je drei Beiträgen diskutiert.

*Vidur Chopra* und *Elizabeth Adelman* präsentieren empirische Ergebnisse aus einer

Interviewstudie mit Geflüchteten zu ihrer Bildungssituation in Jordanien. Vor dem Hintergrund dauerhafter Konflikte und einer unwahrscheinlichen Rückkehr der Geflüchteten ins Heimatland diskutieren die Autorinnen, wie Bildung auf der Flucht konzeptionell dazu beitragen kann, Lernende auf eine unsichere Zukunft vorzubereiten.

Der Beitrag von *Hannes Schammann* und *Christin Younso* liefert einen Überblick zu den Herausforderungen, die Geflüchteten auf dem Weg zu einem erfolgreichen Studium in Deutschland begegnen. Die Autoren präsentieren Befunde einer qualitativen Studie, die zeigen, wie sich die Angebotsstrukturen an Hochschulen von „Beschäftigungsmaßnahmen“ hin zu studienvorbereitenden Angeboten für Studienberechtigte wandeln.

*Mervi Kaukko*, *Karen Dunwoodie* und *Elisha Riggs* widmen sich ethischen und methodologischen Fragen bei der Forschung mit geflüchteten Kindern. Die Autorinnen führen aus, dass ein forschungsethisches Vorgehen kontextbezogener, zeitlicher und sozialer Flexibilität bedarf, um den spezifischen Lebenskontexten dieser Personengruppe gerecht zu werden, und plädieren für eine relationale Forschungsethik.

*Norbert Frieters-Reermann* und *Nadine Sylla* widmen sich in ihrem Beitrag der Thematisierung von Flucht in Bildungsmaterialien für schulische und außerschulische Bildungsprozesse. Ausgehend von einem postkolonialen Ansatz liefert der Artikel Anregungen zur Bewertung von Bildungsmaterialien und befasst sich mit der Frage, ob fluchtbezogene Bildung nicht nur über, sondern auch mit und durch geflüchtete Menschen gestaltet werden kann.

*Olaf Kleist* beschreibt anhand von Datenerhebungen unter Ehrenamtlichen in der

Flüchtlingsarbeit, welche bedeutende Rolle Ehrenamtliche in der Bildungsarbeit spielen. Dabei unterscheidet er zwei Ansatzpunkte: Bildung als Instrument und als Ziel von Integration. Zum einen ist gerade Sprachunterricht für Geflüchtete eine der wichtigsten Tätigkeiten von Ehrenamtlichen. Zum anderen kann das Engagement von Ehrenamtlichen zum Ausbau des sozialen Kapitals von Geflüchteten beitragen.

*Sarah Lange* geht empirisch der Frage nach, welche Kompetenzanforderungen für die Professionalisierung von Pädagog/inn/en für die Arbeit mit geflüchteten Kindern und Jugendlichen bedeutsam sind. Ausgewertet wurden zu dieser Frage Aussagen von Studierenden, die im Rahmen von ‚Service Learning‘-Seminaren ehrenamtlich mit geflüchteten Kindern und Jugendlichen arbeiten. Die Ergebnisse werfen die Frage der Zielgruppenspezifität von pädagogischen Kompetenzen auf.

Zudem umfasst das Themenheft ein Portrait der „SchlaU-Schule und SchlaU-Werkstatt für Migrationspädagogik“ in München. Unter der Rubrik ‚Informationen‘ liefert eine Informationsbox einen Überblick zu aktuellen Daten zu weltweiten Fluchtbewegungen. Das Themenheft wird mit Arbeiten aus dem Oberstufenprojekt „Refugees. Flüchtling in der bildenden Kunst“ illustriert. In ihnen fließen persönliche Auseinandersetzungen mit der medialen Bildprogrammatisierung zum Thema Flucht und der handlungspraktische Zugang der Kunstpädagogik zusammen.

*Neue Erkenntnisse und Anregungen wünschen*

Sarah Lange (Bamberg), Susanne Timm (Bamberg),  
Susanne Höck (Freising) März 2017

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**WAXMANN**

Vidur Chopra/Elizabeth Adelman

## The Pursuit, Practicality and Potential of Refugee Education

### Abstract

This article presents the ways in which conflict influences the educational trajectories and aspirations of Syrian children and young people. The findings are based on interviews conducted in Lebanon with Syrian learners, and teachers and administrators working with school-aged refugee students. Participants discussed significant barriers to education in this setting including political, social and economic factors. Learners continued to demonstrate a strong commitment to education despite these challenges, yet they were unsure whether their educational pursuits would secure their future aspirations. These results call into question the promises of refugee education.

**Keywords:** *conflict, education, qualitative research, refugee, Syria*

### Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel stellt dar, welchen Einfluss Konflikte auf Bildungswege und -erwartungen syrischer Kinder und Jugendlichen ausüben. Die Ergebnisse basieren auf Interviews mit syrischen Lernenden, Lehrkräften und Verwaltungskräften im Libanon, die mit geflüchteten Schülerinnen und Schülern arbeiten. Dabei diskutierten die Teilnehmenden für sie bedeutsame politische, soziale und ökonomische Bildungshemmnisse. Trotz der Herausforderungen zeigten die Lernenden eine anhaltende Leistungsbereitschaft, waren sich aber unsicher, ob ihre Anstrengungen die eigenen Zukunftserwartungen würden sichern können. Diese Ergebnisse stellen jene Hoffnungen, die Bildung auf der Flucht in Aussicht stellt, in Frage.

**Schlüsselworte:** *Konflikt, Bildung, Qualitative Forschung, Flüchtling, Syrien*

### Introduction

Unyielding and widely spread violence, shrinking economic opportunities, and little provision of social services inside Syria have contributed to a mass migration of Syrians (UNHCR, 2015). Over 5.5 million Syrians have fled to seek refuge from more than six years of bloody civil war (De Bel-Air, 2016), half of whom are under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2017a). In the context of forced displacement, an entire generation of Syrian children and young people may be left with limited to no educational and economic opportunities. The responsibility for re-

constructing Syria post-conflict will rest with its next generation – children and youth forcibly displaced outside Syria's borders. However, with limited opportunities to develop academic and vocational skills, it is unclear how this next generation of Syrians will be capable of rebuilding a wartorn nation.

In this article we explore how conflict impacts the pursuit, the practicalities and the potential of education for Syrian children and young people in Syria and in Lebanon. We refer to Lebanon as a country of first asylum, or the first country refugees move to when displaced (Kjaerum, 1992). Specifically, we draw attention to the experiences of young Syrians attempting to continue their education as war unfolds at home and as they flee across the border into neighboring Lebanon, currently hosting one million Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2017b). While our participants demonstrated continued commitment to education, threats to personal safety, discrimination, financial burdens, political challenges and a loss of a clear future often thwarted their educational pursuits. Their experiences portray the complexity of refugee education in practice, suggesting a need to better understand local-level challenges and, in contexts of uncertain and opaque futures, to link educational opportunities to the long-term goals of refugee learners themselves.

In the next section, we expand refugee learners' non-linear and complex education trajectories and situate this within the context of Lebanon specifically. We present our methodology, discuss the findings from our study and suggest some conclusions as a way forward.

### Refugee education: Caught between the global and the local

Through this paper, we seek to develop a deeper understanding of how the experiences of and expectations for education shift for refugees over time and space. We first explore the global dimensions of refugee education and the variations in its practice. We then juxtapose these larger global dimensions to examine the ways refugee education is practiced and delivered in one specific context, that of Lebanon. We find disconnects between the global expectations for refugee education and the lived realities of Syrian refugee learners in Lebanon.

### A global perspective on refugee education

Education is a fundamental human right, an end in itself, and an enabling right that activates the fulfillment of other rights

(United Nations, 1948). Article 22 of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention specifically articulates the right to education for refugees (United Nations, 1951). However, gaps remain in the realization of these rights for refugee learners. A global review of refugee education in 2011 found access to education for refugees limited and uneven across settings of displacement and levels of education, largely of poor quality and lacking a focus on learning (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). These findings suggest gaps remain between the normative aspirations legal instruments espouse and the everyday experiences of refugee learners in accessing, continuing and completing their education in countries of first asylum.

The translation of these global policies into action that touches the lives of refugee learners occurs within nation-states. Learning opportunities for refugees are beholden to the laws, policies and practices of countries to which refugees first move. Eighty six percent of the world's refugees live in low-income countries that neighbor their country of origin, countries that themselves are often stretched in their delivery of social services like education (UNHCR, 2014). Recognizing the contemporary, protracted nature of conflict, UNHCR's Global Education Strategy (2012–2016) calls for the "integration of refugee learners within national systems, where possible and appropriate" (UNHCR, 2012, p. 8). While integration within national education systems seeks to provide refugee students with certified and formal learning opportunities, the practice of refugee education in countries of first asylum is often fraught with challenges that can disrupt the educational trajectories of refugee learners. A full review of the challenges confronting refugee learners in the country of first asylum is beyond the scope of this article. Among others, the many challenges refugee learners confront include, learning a curriculum in a new language, hostile classroom environments that ignore the diversity of refugees' learning needs and the lack of accreditation and recognition of refugee learners' previous knowledge and skills (Dryden-Peterson, 2016b).

Despite the many protective and psychosocial benefits that education lends to refugees (INEE, 2010), we argue that refugee education is protective only when it is productive. Severe labor laws often restrict refugees' entry to the labor market (Desiderio, 2016), and pathways to citizenship in countries of first asylum are far and few (Hovil, 2016), high-lighting the unrealized potential of refugee education. In situations of prolonged conflict when return to refugees' country of origin in the near future is unlikely, and when education is unable to fulfill refugee learners' work and life aspirations in the country of first asylum, there remains a strong case to conceptualize refugee education in ways that prepare learners for a future that may be uncertain and unknown, yet still productive (Dryden-Peterson, 2016a; Hovil, 2016).

#### **A local perspective on refugee education**

Lebanon is host to the greatest number of refugees per capita worldwide with over one million Syrians living along side approximately 4.4 million Lebanese (European Commission, 2016). While Lebanon is not a signatory of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, it considers education a human right and a strategy to mitigate the impact of conflict on young Syrians (Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education

(MEHE), 2016). Since Syrian refugees first arrived to the country in 2011, MEHE has permitted school-aged children to enroll in Lebanese public schools. The influx of a million Syrian refugees pressured the government to quickly adapt to the sudden overwhelming demand for education. In 2013, a second shift for Syrian students at public schools was introduced (Shuayb, Makkouk & Tutunji, 2014). Of the estimated 500,000 school-aged (3–17) refugee children living in Lebanon, approximately 135,400 enrolled in public school during the 2016/17 academic year, only 2 % of whom entered secondary school (UNHCR, 2016b; UNICEF, 2017). All public schools follow the Lebanese curriculum and all registered students, including refugees, sit for the same national exams at grades 9 and 12, with MEHE certifying their formal education in Lebanon (Shuayb, Makkouk & Tutunji, 2014).

Refugee students not attending public school may participate in one of many alternative school models run by local or international organizations. Referred to as non-formal schools, they are not accredited/certified by MEHE. In accordance with Lebanese law, public schools can only employ Lebanese teachers. In contrast, teachers working in non-formal schools are often Syrian (Shuayb et al., 2014).

The government of Lebanon's official policy response to education for Syrian refugees is outlined in the first and second versions of its Reaching All Children with Education (RACE) documents (MEHE, 2014, 2016). These documents are silent on the issue of higher education, demonstrating little attention to the lifelong learning needs of Syrian refugee youth in Lebanon.

In examining the dissonances between global policies and local practices surrounding refugee education in Lebanon, we build on emerging inquiries by Dryden-Peterson (2016, 2017) that complicate the purposes of refugee education. In this paper we explore the form and function of refugee education in Lebanon as an effort to continue to strengthen its purposes and delivery. As educators and scholars, we do not for once question the benefits of education but find the precarious space that refugee education occupies – between the global and the local – renders more questions than answers. We find while Syrian learners have relentlessly pursued educational opportunity during active conflict in Syria, their learning when displaced is impacted by the practicalities influencing the delivery of refugee education in Lebanon. For those that are able to continue their education when displaced, how far and where their education will take them in the future remains uncertain.

#### **Methodology**

We draw on data<sup>1</sup> from 107 interviews we conducted in Lebanon during the 2015–2016 school year with Syrian learners, and with Syrian and Lebanese teachers and administrators working with school-aged refugee students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Arabic or English, each lasting approximately one hour. Our interviews sought to understand learners' educational trajectories and aspirations, as well as teachers' experiences with teaching refugee children in their classrooms. Specifically, we asked learners about the challenges and successes in their pursuits of refugee education, their life aspirations, and how and from where they drew support to overcome hurdles. Teachers were asked to discuss the ways in

which they support the academic, social and emotional development of their refugee students and the challenges they encounter in their work. Learners for the study were selected through snowball sampling and represented young Syrians who were able to access some form of formal higher education in the Mount Lebanon area. Teachers were randomly selected from seven schools participating in the study, representing a mix of formal and non-formal schools. Three of these schools were located in the capital Beirut and four in the Bekaa region, an area with one of the highest concentrations of refugees in Lebanon. Each of our participants has been given pseudonyms in order to protect their identity and safety.

After each interview we reviewed the audio recording, developing a set of detailed notes documenting main ideas conveyed in the conversation, pertinent themes that arose, salient quotes and our own initial reflections on the data. Audio recordings were also transcribed for analysis. For this paper we first reviewed the notes on each of our participants, compiling a set of memos summarizing results and important findings. We then coded our transcripts based on the three major themes presented in this paper: the pursuit, practicality and promise of education. Drawing on this data we developed the findings presented here.

In analyzing the data and framing our findings, we draw from the practice of portraiture, a qualitative social science methodology that seeks to “document and illuminate the complexities and details of a unique experience or place” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 14). Conflict and displacement are exceptional events that interrupt individuals’ life trajectories. Through our analysis we attempt to understand the multiple ways our participants construct shared meaning in their experiences of learning amid conflict and displacement.

## Results

When considering refugee education, little attention is paid to how learners experience education before displacement or how they imagine using their education for a life after. In our participants’ articulations of their educational experiences and future aspirations, we find them drawing on both their past, and envisioned futures as they navigate education in the present. Based on their experiences and our analysis, we therefore explore three framings of education as identified by our participants: the pursuit of education amidst active conflict in Syria, the practicality of teaching and learning when displaced in Lebanon, and the potential of refugee education in an unknowable location.

Refugee learners do not simply leave class in one country to pick up where they left off in the other. Through their narratives, we explore the lived realities of education within conflict and displacement, using the voices of few to bring life to the experiences of many.

### Pursuit of education

Prior to the conflict, in 2010, Syria had achieved universal primary enrolment and near universal enrolment in lower secondary education (UNESCO, 2011). Estimates suggest that 26 % of urban Syrians were enrolled in some form of higher education inside Syria (Watenpaugh, Fricke & King, 2014). However, since the beginning of the conflict the proportion of out-

of-school children has more than tripled. In the 2014/15 school year an estimated 2.8 million school-aged children were out of school (UNICEF, 2016). For the young male participants in our study, accessing education in Syria during conflict often entailed being frisked, harassed and harmed at military and rebel checkpoints. Majed<sup>2</sup>, a participant, once imprisoned in Damascus by the Syrian army for three hours, was released only when he signed a declaration to withdraw from university and not partake in any protests. Children rapidly witnessed their schools transformed when groups of armed forces occupied the very spaces that once represented safety, stability and joyful learning to them. Today one in four schools inside Syria have either been damaged, destroyed, or used as shelters for military purposes rendering access to education inside Syria largely impossible (UNICEF, 2016). Rizwana, a non-formal school principal and mother recalled, “When my children did their exams they did not get the marks that we expected because of the military tanks that were in front of the school.” Maha, an 18-year-old participant, crouched and covered her head with her hands to demonstrate how she sought refuge for three hours when her grade 9 classroom was bombed.

Despite insurmountable hurdles, participants’ pursuits of education amidst active conflict remained relentless. Fares’ university was in a neighborhood of both opposition and regime supporters such that multiple checkpoints along the way posed threats to his safety. Nonetheless, he continued attending university at least 60 % of the time, the bare minimum needed to pass. Rizwana made the difficult decision to remain in her home in the suburbs of Damascus despite the obvious danger to her family. “For me learning is sacred,” she told us. “I am willing to lose everything but I want my sons to be educated. I was willing to live in any condition for my children to continue their education.” Determined to complete her grade 9 national exams, Maha tutored herself at home after her school closed for a year due to bombing. “If there’s something I didn’t understand, I used to write it on the paper to memorize it, not to understand; to memorize,” she said recalling her learning strategies at the time. As the bombings in her neighborhood intensified, Maha’s family moved to an underground shelter where she struggled to continue studying. “In the morning if there were many projectiles, you can’t study anything, you can’t even sleep. You don’t know how you will die ... At night when there were clouds [and no projectiles], I just had a chance to study.” Maha was finally able to sit for her exams but as she was writing her Arabic test, a projectile landed in her school. “I went to the teacher and said, ‘Just take the paper. I don’t want to do the exam. I just want to go home.’” Maha knew this time she must prioritize personal safety over her ambitions to complete her lower secondary education.

These examples of our participants’ varied educational experiences in Syria amid active conflict suggest the multiple meanings education simultaneously assumed for individuals and families. For some, the quest for learning was worthy of risking one’s life and security to continue pursuing educational opportunities. For others, intimidation and violence entailed altogether abandoning or temporarily placing their education on hold. Abrupt school and university closures with little teaching communicated to families that the time to seek refuge across Syria’s borders had indeed arrived. As the participants

themselves identify, their experiences with learning amid conflict have been diverse and interrupted at different time points. As they continued their life and migratory journeys onward in search of safety, they also carried with them their experiences of learning in Syria.

### Practicality of education

The Lebanese MEHE no longer requires students to provide proof of legal status or previous schooling when enrolling in second shift schools. At the local level though, not all school directors have complied equally. In a number of locations across Lebanon, refugee parents reported being asked to provide legal residency permits for their children, documents many of them cannot afford (UNICEF, UNHCR & WFP, 2016). For public school principals the presence of Syrian children in their schools has entailed confusion and frustration as they try to follow an everchanging list of rules, regulations and policies regarding the administration of second shift schools. Ester, a Lebanese public school principal, recounted the stress surrounding the Grade 9 national exam. Just days before the exam MEHE decided to waive requirements for some paperwork, permitting most refugee students to sit for the test. In the wake of these continuously evolving regulations, Ester and her staff spent a late night rushing to prepare all of their students' files as they only had a 24 hours-notice to meet MEHE's registration deadline. Students themselves had no time to prepare for an exam that would determine their ability to enter secondary school.

For university enrollment, refugee students have had to maneuver a sea of required documentation, permits and paperwork. For those that began university in Syria, continuing to study in Lebanon has often implied starting from scratch. At one point, Nisreen was misinformed that her credits would transfer from a public university in Syria to the public university in Lebanon. In dismay she said, "I can't move my marks from there to here. I asked so many times and [the university] said either way you have to do the [entrance] exams and be accepted. I can't do a transfer." Students also struggled with the long list of documents required of them to enroll or continue their education including secondary school and university transcripts certified by the Ministry of Education in Syria (United Nations Inter-agency coordination, 2016). Fares made several attempts to complete his university degree in Lebanon, but could never obtain the necessary documents from Syria. He knew returning to Syria to obtain those documents could jeopardize his safety and therefore decided to place his degree on hold while he considered alternatives.

On a daily basis, many Syrian students must confront the binary of studying to achieve their goals or working to fulfill pressing daily needs. The seeming financial luxury of investing in a distant future is evident in the thoughts of Basel, a young Syrian male. "Study here? Without work? No! Because I don't have home, I don't have money ... I need work and [then a] house and then university." While "study[ing] is a dream" for Basel, it must be placed on hold as he searches for employment as a young displaced Syrian in Lebanon.

Families confront similar dilemmas, often trying to balance keeping a child in school and putting food on the table. Sana, a teacher for Syrian refugees in a non-formal school, found her students often missing class to sell tissues on the

street. Her attempts at persuading parents to keep their children in school have been futile, and are often met in exasperation when they tell her, "What can we do? We want to live and have an income." While teachers may understand this dilemma, they observe first-hand the negative impact of these absences on their students' learning. In Ahmed's class in a non-formal school, students are often absent for extended periods of time during the local potato-harvesting season. He knows these absences stymie gains in learning, undercut students' motivations and place them at a risk of dropping out of school entirely. At formal public schools, students who miss more than ten days of school for non-health related reasons face losing their place (MEHE, 2015). MEHE estimates that of the 131,100 refugee students enrolled in primary school, daily attendance only averages at 112,000 (UNICEF, 2017). Students report missing school due to various challenges including costs associated with schooling, family work obligations, difficulty with academic demands, and the experience of violence and harassment (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

Once enrolled in Lebanese public school, Syrian children are confronted with additional challenges due to learning in a new language. While the official policy related to language of instruction for refugee students has vacillated between students learning in Arabic or English throughout the crisis, as of the 2016/17 school year MEHE mandated math and sciences be taught in English starting at grade one (Education partners meeting, 2016). Comparatively, Arabic is the only language of instruction in Syria. Mastering English (or French) is essential as the math and science sections of the Lebanese national exams are given in either language. Furthermore, at the university level, much coursework in any institution is taught in English or French.

Most teachers must cope with the stark reality that their refugee students arrive unprepared to meet the language demands of the Lebanese curriculum. Lamia, a public school English teacher, was unsure where to even start with her new second grade students. "I can't go through the [English] textbook, it's very difficult for them, they don't even know how to say the letters sometimes; so how can I go through the book?" By second grade, as per the Lebanese curriculum, students should be able to read words and say short phrases, a level far beyond Lamia's students. In Adnan's fourth grade science class, the language level of his new students was too low to grasp the curriculum. To overcome the language barrier, he spent much of his time summarizing the ideas in Arabic. His students learned less than the bare minimum but Adnan believed he was doing his best given the circumstances. "This is the program so you don't have much choice."

At the university level, students must familiarize themselves with learning in a second language. All Tarek recalled of his first year at a Lebanese university was sitting in a class for hours without understanding the lecture delivered in English. "I just sat in class and listened. I didn't understand – nothing!" He spent hours translating his Microeconomics textbooks into Arabic, struggling to teach himself what he could not follow in class. Maya remembered being unable to move from her seat after her first class, shocked by the sudden reality of her situation. "It's all in English, but in Syria all things were in Arabic. It was a very difficult semester for me. I didn't know how to study."



The social integration of Syrian children within Lebanese public schools remains an area of concern. A third grader recalled the consequences of drinking water without permission in class. “The teacher made me sit on the chair, take off my shoes, and hit me on my feet.” When a classmate tried to defend him the teacher insulted her by saying, “You are not even worth my shoes.” Syrian and Lebanese teachers alike have been startled by the violence among Syrian students they have observed in their schools. Aatifa, a public school teacher, recounted in shocked tones the time an elementary school student brought a knife to school during the second shift and threatened the safety of another student. Mona, a principal at a public school, tries to reason with her students “you are from one home country. Like each other, love each other”.

The examples above illuminate that the practice of refugee education in Lebanon involves complex challenges not always anticipated at the policy level. Each set of actors has had to find their own solutions to the dilemmas they confront. At the national level, the Lebanese MEHE has had to balance the demand for expanded access to education for Syrians, while attempting to not dilute the quality of public education for its own citizenry. Concurrently, administrators and teachers have had to attempt integrating Syrian students into Lebanese society and the Lebanese curriculum, while also addressing students’ varying language and psychosocial needs. Finally, as Syrian children and youth charter a steep pathway to achieve their goals and aspirations in the future, they must navigate the present realities of violence, discrimination and poverty.

### Potential of education

For Syrians in Lebanon, education represents a pathway to a better future. However, for most, this journey is not one that terminates in Lebanon; instead it lays a route leading back to Syria or onward to a third country. Young Syrians in Lebanon remain acutely aware that their education in Lebanon provides no access to employment or a productive future as ‘equals’ in the country (Lebanon Support, 2016). Despite the limited opportunities their education in Lebanon extends to them within the country, Syrians continue in the hope that the promise and potential of education will be realized outside Lebanon’s borders.

Nour, a Syrian refugee teacher at a non-formal school, illustrated the tension between planning to stay in Lebanon and preparing to leave. When asked whether she speaks to her students about the future, Nour explained, “I try to keep them focused on the present. Neither I nor the students know what is going to happen to us in the future. I talk to the student who is neglecting his studies because he knows that he is going to travel [outside Lebanon]. I assure the student that if they are successful over here, then they will be successful wherever they go.” However, Nour admitted her vision of the future was bleak. “If we remain this way [in Lebanon], it saddens me. I don’t show them that. I feel that they are going to miss a lot if the situation remains this way.” As a teacher, Nour directs students’ efforts to the present because success in the future in an unknown place is contingent on success now.

Despite the murky future, young Syrians’ pursuits of education in Lebanon seem to be driven by an unflinching belief in the potential education holds to shape a new Syria. For Maysa, a young Syrian teacher, “all of the things that happened

in Syria are things because of ignorance. We need to fight that with education.” Nearly all the young Syrians we interviewed believed that returning to Syria would be valuable only if they and others like them, returned skilled and educated. In his imagining of a future Syria, Fares believed Syrians must “study for building Syria, [to] get developed to benefit Syria.” Education has allowed youth to envision education as a path back into post-conflict Syria, as a productive tool for the country’s reconstruction.

In other cases, young Syrians’ inability to continue their education in Lebanon or find gainful employment has been an impetus for onward migration. Ali spoke about his friend’s life-threatening journey across the Mediterranean. “He didn’t have any progress in his life ... he wanted to continue his studying and couldn’t do that in Lebanon.” As Ali saw other friends migrate onward, the thought lured him too, but he decided to wait because he refused to live in a refugee camp in Europe or risk his life by sea. Instead he spent two years applying for scholarships until he won funding to study in Latin America.

Young, displaced Syrians in Lebanon do not doubt the potential that education offers for their lives. However, the potential of refugee education is intertwined with larger questions of who and what it can enable children and youth to be and do in the future. Through their own experiences and that of others, these students discover that ironically, the potentials of the education they have so relentlessly pursued amid conflict and displacement is evasive within Lebanon. Yet they continuously renew their commitment to education in hopes that someday in the distant future, their education as refugees in Lebanon will bring reward home in Syria or in a distant land far beyond Lebanon’s borders.

### Conclusion

For the participants in our study, education has always been considered a fundamental right, a necessary investment and a keystone to future opportunities. A belief in the promise of education motivated these individuals to persist in their pursuit of education despite seemingly unconquerable challenges. Compared to many countries of first asylum, Lebanon has been generous to facilitate Syrian refugees’ access to educational opportunities. Yet as our participants have demonstrated, commitment at the national level does not always translate to accessibility and applicability at the local level.

Being a refugee is not an identity label or a marker for life. Like learners across the world, our participants envision a life of significance, stability and security. Yet they simultaneously grapple with the lingering question that their education during displacement leaves them with. How far will this education take them in the future, what will it allow them to do and in which context?

This research underscores the need to align the support of national education interventions with increased dedication to transparency, communication and guidance at the local level. While global and even national mandates may outline preferred approaches to refugee education, it is at the school and community levels where policy becomes practice and challenges become realities. Refugees themselves need access to information that provides clear and consistent instructions on how

to navigate the educational system and where to find support and assistance to succeed.

The experiences of our participants indicate that learning environments are secure not merely through their physical and psychological dimensions, but also when learning yields security for the future. In designing refugee education programs, we must articulate and pay attention to the longterm purposes of refugee education and the promises refugee education implicitly makes to refugee children and youth, especially as we persuade them to continue their education trajectories. The education we offer today must recognize the strength of learners' past experiences and simultaneously align with the ways in which refugee learners envision their own tomorrow.

Currently UNHCR estimates the average length of a protracted refugee situation to be around 26 years (UNHCR, 2016a, p. 20). For children forced to flee at a young age, their only opportunity to become educated may be in a country or countries far from home. Today, millions of children are living in this reality, but only few studies document how their experiences of education evolve across time and space. In this paper participants were able to recall the past, report on the present and ruminate about the future, providing unique insight into the ways conflict and educational pursuits intersect at different stages. Longitudinal research is critical to documenting the educational trajectories of refugees throughout their time in exile as they may have a powerful impact on the development and delivery of refugee education in different contexts. Only with time can we see clearly whether the promise for a better future unfolds into a present day reality.

## Notes

- 1 The data are from two larger dissertation research projects conducted by Elizabeth Adelman and Vidur Chopra at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The first explores the experiences of teachers working with refugee students. The second considers how Syrian youth in Lebanon navigate their higher education and life trajectories when displaced by conflict. Additional publications are in development.
- 2 All names used in this paper are pseudonyms to ensure anonymity of our participants.

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