

Refugee teachers: the challenges of managing professional expectations with personal experiences

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DESCRIPTION OF CRISIS-SPECIFIC CHALLENGE

In settings of conflict and displacement, teachers are central to the possibility of education being protective and productive, rather than contributing to on-going harm. In addition to delivering academic content, teachers must ensure a safe learning environment, support children's emotional needs, foster social cohesion, and lay the foundations for peace and stability. The expectations held for teachers of refugees are significant. However, in many settings, the teachers teaching refugee populations are refugees themselves. Often these educators are navigating many of the same difficult circumstances their students face, including economic stress, emotional strain, and continued uncertainty about their futures.

Few studies consider the relationship between the personal and professional experiences of refugee educators and how tensions between these identities may influence teachers' work and their well-being. This research looks to build a deeper understanding of how being a teacher influences the experience of being a refugee and conversely, how the experience of being a refugee influences the teacher's role. Findings from this research suggest a need to rethink the types of support and training provided to refugee teachers in order to ensure success within the classroom.

BRIEF OVERVIEW

This research is situated in Lebanon and focuses on Syrian refugee teachers working to educate Syrian refugee students in non-formal schools. Lebanon is host to the greatest number of refugees per capita worldwide. Around 1 million Syrians and 450,000 Palestinians live within Lebanon, a combined population equivalent to one-quarter of the Lebanese population. The status of refugees in Lebanon is particularly complex as the Government of Lebanon is not signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to

the Status of Refugees and does not consider itself an asylum country. In Lebanon, teaching is considered a 'protected' profession, meaning legally, only Lebanese citizens are eligible to teach in schools accredited by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE). Syrian refugee teachers hoping to continue working within their profession can only work in schools not recognized by MEHE, referred to in this research as non-formal schools.

This analysis is informed by interviews with 42 refugee educators across four non-formal schools and 116 school and classroom observations. Schools were selected based on physical location and educational structure. Three schools were located in the rural governante of the Beqaa, where the majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon reside. One school was located in the urban capital of Beirut, which is host to the second largest number of Syrian refugees. These non-formal schools followed the Lebanese curriculum using Lebanese textbooks, taught the same core subjects as Lebanese public schools, and had a set of structured academic goals for each grade level that students were required to pass. These schools were managed by non-government organizations with no religious or sectarian affiliation.

When possible, every teacher interested in participating in the research study was given an opportunity. Before interviewing any teacher, I first observed them teaching at least twice. During classroom observations, I took note of the number of students in the classroom, the physical environment and available materials, learning activities, classroom routines, and interactions among students and teachers taking place during the lesson. The goal of these observations was to develop an understanding of the teacher's pedagogical methods, the social and educational routines of the classroom, and to note how students engage with each other and with the teacher. I often referred to moments from these

observations during interviews to help situate questions and elicit grounded reflections from teachers. Teachers often appeared to feel more comfortable speaking with me after I had spent time in their classrooms as they knew I had observed the complexities of their work. In addition, these observations provided an opportunity to interact multiple times more informally. I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants that were approximately one-hour in length and focused on teachers' understanding of their role as educators supporting refugee students and their experience as refugees in Lebanon. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and, when necessary, translated. I wrote detailed memos after each interview, noting the major themes and patterns that arose in each interview as well as any divergent findings. From these memos, I developed a set of codes for analysing the data. To develop these codes, I also drew on findings from an earlier pilot study and was guided by literature around teacher identity. The final set of codes used for this analysis included codes such as 'personal journey', 'professional identity', and 'envisioning the future'. I coded the interview transcripts and field notes using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. In an effort to ensure internal consistency in regards to coding, I engaged in simultaneous coding with a research partner. In instances when our coding differed, we discussed these discrepancies and resolved them together. Using the classroom observation data, I created school profiles in which I noted patterns regarding student-teacher interactions, the classroom environment, and common pedagogical approaches.

EVIDENCE AND OUTCOMES

This analysis shows refugee educators struggling to balance obligations related to teaching refugees with the realities of living as refugees. Educators welcomed the opportunity to reclaim a professional identity through teaching. They saw themselves as playing an instrumental role in reconstructing the lives of their refugee students by supporting students to learn, grow, and dream about a better future. This responsibility provided a sense of purpose and accomplishment that motivated them to continue in their roles as educators, regardless of the continual challenges they faced in their classrooms. Teachers also saw their efforts as a concrete way to assist their own community and felt uplifted by the opportunity to extend care and support to their students.

However, in their personal lives, educators struggled with loss of hope, psychological exhaustion, and high levels of stress. Educators felt powerless to transcend the social, economic, and political barriers constructed around them in Lebanon. As refugees, these educators faced considerable challenges as they worked to re-establish their own lives, tend to their own psychosocial needs, and develop their own vision for the future. These challenges made the hard work of teaching even harder, especially as the conflict became protracted and future stability seemed far from reach.

This research suggests the need to provide teachers working in conflict-affected settings with opportunities within their schools to build community with fellow teachers to help mitigate the psychological stress educators experience. In addition, there is a need to integrate mechanisms into the school structure that allow teachers to collaboratively address complex challenges present in their classrooms. Teachers should also be provided with psychological support services and training regarding how best to help their students' social and emotional recovery. Finally, financial stability was one source of stress shared by all refugee educators. Ensuring teachers earn a salary reflective of their efforts and the financial reality of their current location is a necessary step to supporting and legitimizing the work of these professionals.

LIMITATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND/OR LESSONS LEARNED

While qualitative research allows a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon, as a research method, it is not possible to draw broad generalizations from the findings. The research documented here reflects the experience of a select group of Syrian refugee teachers working in Lebanon. Their reflections are directly related to the conditions that they are facing, conditions that may be quite different from refugee teachers working in other countries or even in other settings within Lebanon. This research should be seen as simply a starting point to documenting the relationship between personal and professional experiences of refugee teachers. Expanding this research into a longitudinal study of the experiences of Syrian refugee teachers working in other locations across Lebanon could help provide both further evidence of the complexity of the personal-professional relationship as well as allow insight into

how these identities shift and develop overtime. Expanding this work into other countries and settings would also help provide a greater understanding of the different types of supports refugee teachers need to ensure their professional and personal well-being. While understanding the experiences of any refugee teacher would afford useful insight, one approach to extending this research specifically would be to consider Syrian refugee teachers in other host-country settings. For example, how do Syrian refugee teachers in Turkey, Jordan, or Germany make meaning out of the experience of being a refugee and being a teacher? Given the different social and political contexts, how do these understandings diverge and converge and what can they tell us about the types of support teachers need more broadly and what seems to be particularly contextual?

TEACHER PROFILE

Sana graduated from university in Syria with a degree in art. She taught in Syria from 2007 to 2013 until she was forced to flee to Lebanon to escape escalating violence. She soon began working in a non-formal school where she teaches Syrian refugee students in grades 2-4 across all subjects. Living in Lebanon has been very difficult for Sana as she and her husband struggled considerably to find jobs. Even with employment, it is hard to afford life in Lebanon. Sana has also found it difficult to build connections with the broader Lebanese community. However, she tries hard to remind herself and her students that “there are good Lebanese people and there are bad ones” and they should not judge all individuals based on a few negative experiences.

Sana feels extremely lucky to have found a teaching job in Lebanon as being an educator is a core element of her identity. “I have loved teaching ever since I was a child. I used to dream of becoming a teacher like my mother.” For her, returning to teaching was a “life-changing moment,” an opportunity that has been vital in her ability to manage the challenging and overwhelming situation of being a refugee. For Sana, working at a non-formal school has provided her with a place to call home within a country that has offered little, if any, welcome. She feels an extreme sense of purpose and the work itself keeps her motivated, despite how exhausting and demanding her role can be.

LINKS

This case study draws on research published in the *Journal for Education in Emergencies* under the title: *When the personal becomes the professional: Exploring the lived experiences of Syrian refugee educators*

Blogs that may be of interest include:

- <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2016/02/10/inside-syrian-refugee-schools-teachers-struggle-to-create-conditions-for-learning/>
- <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2016/02/24/inside-syrian-refugee-schools-in-their-search-for-a-destination-teachers-face-difficult-choices/>

Sana also points to the ways in which her teaching skills have expanded as a result of the professional development she has received in Lebanon. In Syria, Sana depended on rote learning techniques. Through trainings provided by her current school and by organizations like Right to Play, Sana has completely changed her approach to teaching. She has integrated more hands-on activities into class and uses interactive materials in many of her lessons. She has found ways to ensure that every child is engaged throughout an activity instead of having to wait to be called on to answer. Sana dreams about the day she can return to Syria so “I can apply the teaching methodology that I have learned” in Lebanon to teaching in Syria. Sana hopes for new opportunities to continue developing her pedagogy. She also would like the chance to build other skills that would improve her employability including learning English and how to use a computer.

Despite her dreams of return, Sana admits that the future feels very unclear to her as the conflict drags on in Syria. She does not want to stay in Lebanon as remaining here means continuing to struggle with the challenge of “not know[ing] what is going to happen” to herself and her fellow refugee community. In particular, Sana is concerned for the future of her children, who will soon graduate out of the non-formal school and enter Lebanon’s public education system, a system that she believes to be of poor quality. The lack of quality educational opportunities available to her daughter has made Sana think seriously of traveling abroad. “I have achieved what I aspire; now I have to think of my children.”