

Responsibility for refugee education: Education by the state but not for the state?

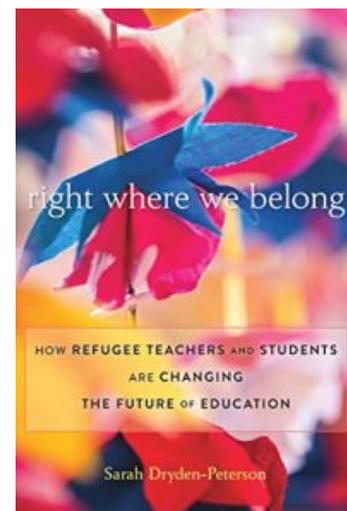
Monday 20 June is [World Refugee Day](#). Sarah Dryden-Peterson draws from her recent book, [Right Where We Belong: How Refugee Teachers and Students Are Changing the Future of Education](#) (Harvard University Press), to argue for the need for collective responsibility in refugee education.

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Jacques arrived in Kampala, Uganda, in January 2000, having fled his home in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. He found himself, he said, 'as someone who is in the forest', a dense urban forest where refugee children did not have access to school. A teacher by training and by vocation, Jacques decided to start a school for refugees with the goal to 'ensure for our children a basic education to prepare them for their future lives'.

At first, between 2000 and 2002, this school was in a room in a church leader's home, where the children, who sought refuge there, rolled up their sleeping mats and blankets each morning to make space to sit. Then, between 2002 and 2004, it was a cavernous, windowless, doorless space of a church under construction, where children of all ages placed benches on the dusty floor, stacked one high for seats, two high for desks. Then, in 2005-2006, a local school where refugee children shared space with Ugandan national children. Then, between 2007 and 2009, a brand-new, stand-alone classroom, built with boards and dirt, paid for with funds from the French Embassy. And, finally, from 2010 to today, the refurbishment and extension of that classroom, with funding from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and registered with the Uganda Ministry of Education and Sport.

The history of Jacques's school is one illustration of a persistent question that is central to the field of education broadly and that takes on particular contours in refugee education: who is responsible for education? I see this question echo across the fifteen years of ethnographic research, including 600 interviews in 23 countries, that I draw on in [Right Where We Belong](#).



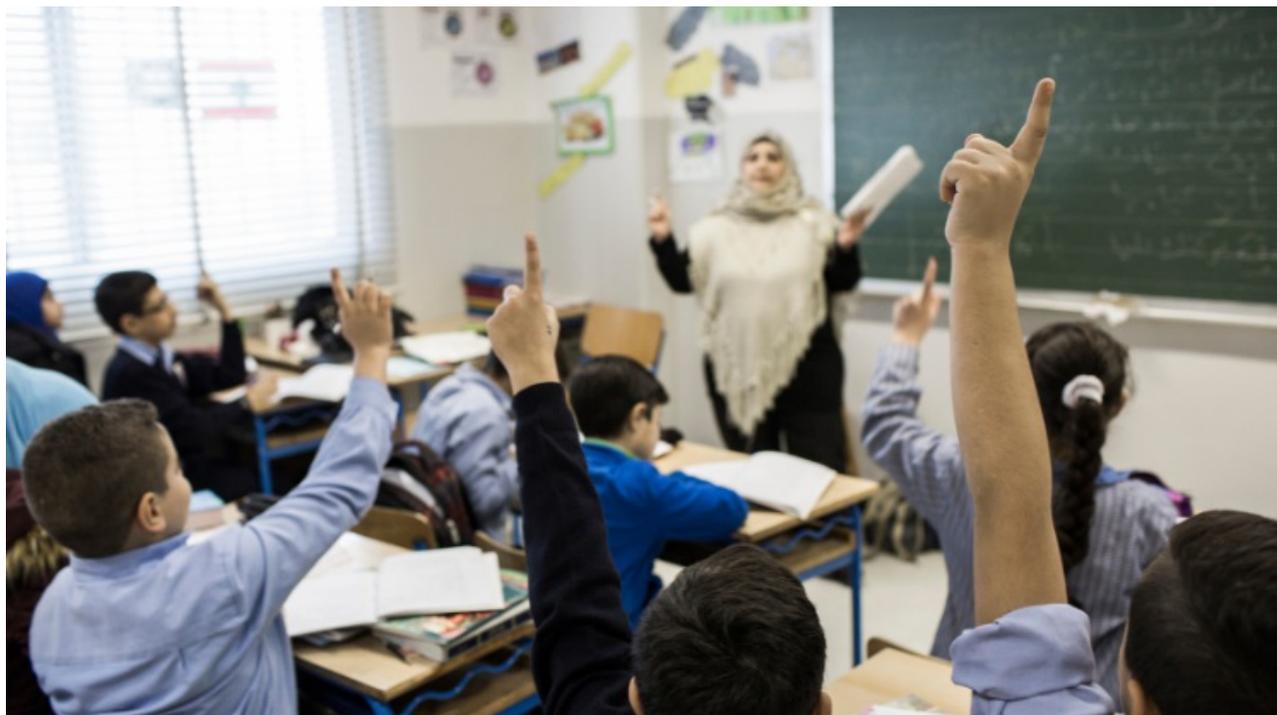


Image Credit: [‘Syrian students are back in class in Beirut, Lebanon’](#) by [DFID – UK Department for International Development](#) licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#)

Responsibility for education relates to funding but also to the content of what children learn and what it prepares them for. Debates on this kind of power shape education policies and practices in all places and at all times. Until recently, in most parts of the world, communities were responsible for the education of their children, the kind of responsibility Jacques took on when he arrived in Kampala and found refugees without access to school. Now, in almost all places, the widespread presumption is that governments are responsible for the education of children, which is where responsibility for Jacques’s school now lies, with the national Ministry of Education.

In my historical analysis, I see responsibility for refugee education shifting over time. After World War Two, refugee education was a community endeavour. Zimbabwean, then Rhodesian, refugees in Botswana, for example, self-organised schools to prepare leaders of a future independent Zimbabwe. From about 1985, during the proliferation of refugee camps such as those built for Somalis in Kenya and Afghans in Pakistan, global actors took responsibility for the content and funding of refugee education.

We are now in a new phase where responsibility for refugee education is being renegotiated. Global policies advocate inclusion of refugees in national schools. This approach of inclusion may seem ordinary in a place like the UK, where refugees have legal access to schools. Yet prior to 2012, UNHCR had no formal relationships with Ministries of Education in countries hosting refugees, and refugees had little, if any, access to formal schools, as Jacques found when he arrived in Kampala.

Global commitments, such as [The Global Compact on Refugees](#), describe inclusion as a way to work toward ‘responsibility sharing’ with an important role for global funding. Yet in practice, there is little concrete sharing of responsibility for refugee education. With inclusion, as an NGO staff member in Rwanda said, ‘the big responsibility is on the government’. 85 per cent of refugees live in countries classified as low- and middle-income, which means that the governments holding responsibility already have overstretched national education systems struggling to meet existing educational needs.

The education of refugees challenges dominant models of the ways education systems function and what young people learn, which generally focus on actors and politics inside countries, at various regional and local levels, and with concerns about the making of future citizens. Responsibility may be concentrated with national governments, yet refugee education is also embedded in global politics and power structures and concerned with the education of non-citizens, likely never-citizens. It is in most cases a situation of education by the state but not for the state.

This misalignment is experienced in classrooms. For example, a Lebanese teacher explained to a class of all Syrian students the process of filing an administrative complaint, which was an examinable topic for their high-stakes Brevet (Grade 9) exam. The teacher posed a question: what should a student who has a typo in her name on the certificate to take this Grade 9 exam do? She paused, realising who she was teaching to, and then rephrased: 'Let's say she is Lebanese, what would she do?' She recognised in that moment that her students do not have the right to file an administrative complaint, a right she must teach about and they must learn about.

The misalignment is experienced at policy level. In the 2017-2018 school year, the Lebanon Ministry of Education and Higher Education reported that 12,251 staff members worked in the second shift, the shift for refugee children, which meant 12,251 more salaries to fund in a national system already struggling to cover the basic costs of public education. In September 2018, the Ministry circulated a memo to all schools noting a freeze on enrolment of non-Lebanese students unless outside funding was available. Global donors had made commitments to supporting the inclusion of refugees in the Lebanese education system — at the London Conference (2016), the Brussels I Conference (2017) and the Brussels II Conference (2018) — but only some of it had materialised in Lebanon, and it was unpredictable. Understood in the memo was a message to donors: without additional funding, the Lebanese state would not take responsibility for the education of refugee students.

The misalignment is experienced by refugee young people and their families. In most refugee-hosting countries, even when refugees have access to schools, they rarely have access to the opportunities that an education implicitly promises to them. They have limited rights to post-secondary education, to work, to access capital and to long-term residence.

Khawla, a Syrian Grade 9 student in Lebanon, had a dream of being a surgeon who helps people in need for free. After Googling the requirements for this training in Lebanon, she wrote out a detailed series of steps to get there, covering the next twelve years of her life. But each step was accompanied by a set of factors over which she had no control. Would refugees be allowed to continue to go school in Lebanon? Would she be allowed to work in Lebanon if she did become a surgeon? She had top grades, the kind that, according to the logics of exam systems, would facilitate her further study and enable her to reach medical school. But what Khawla experienced in schools and in daily life in Beirut shook her trust in whether these opportunities would be open to her. She explained that she began to think, 'Maybe they're right, maybe we are coming to Lebanon, it's not our country, we can't study here, we can't work here, we can't stay here. Maybe they're right. We are occupying their country.'

The education of refugees exposes an unresolved dilemma at the heart of policymaking regarding refugees: who is responsible for provision of services to refugees and to what entity do the collective benefits of such investment accrue? Without collective commitments to this responsibility, the empirical realities of who takes responsibility for the education of refugees will be teachers like Jacques, who work daily to shift economic, political and social opportunity structures for their students but who cannot and should not do so alone.

Note: This piece gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog or of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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