# Reflection on the Education of Refugee Children: Beyond Reification and Emergency

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Research on the education of refugee children has proliferated over the past 20 years while gaining greater momentum with the Syrian crisis from 2010 onwards. A quick glance at the number of publications on education of refugee children in the University of Cambridge online library database, where one of us is based, reveals that between 1998 and 2009 there were 300 papers published that had keywords related to education and refugees. A similar search of keywords between 2010 and 2020 reveals over 2,070 published articles. This dramatic increasing interest in research on education of refugee children has been facilitated by the growing number of voices, in particular from humanitarian agencies (UNHCR 2011, 2018, 2019b), advocating for the inclusion of education as part of any humanitarian response in a crisis (Shuayb and Brun, 2020). In the last decade the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) alone has published a number of documents advocating for a framework for education of refugee children (UNHCR, 2011, 2019a, 2019b). Efforts to include education in humanitarian responses culminated in the development of the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) in 2000 and the publication of the Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, Response, Recovery in 2004, which was updated in 2010 (Shuayb and Brun, 2020): "the only global tool that articulates the minimum level of educational quality and access in emergencies through to recovery" (INEE, 2010). Since then, the INEE network has flourished. The standards have been translated and adapted in 20 countries, and the network currently even has its own peer-reviewed *Journal on Education in Emergency.*

Despite the progress achieved on this front, some core questions about refugee education are yet to be unpacked: Is there a distinct field of study such as "refugee education"? Should there be? Does the schooling of refugee children differ from that of non-refugees, especially from other marginalized children with a migration background? And finally, is the whole field in some ways artificial: does it exist only as a result of political decisions to welcome or not welcome refugees or newcomers and how they are integrated into its education provisions? In this introduction to the special issue, we want to briefly flag three major points. First, we argue that the separation of refugee children from non-refugees, in schooling and in the development of the academic field, is in part due to an increasing "reification" of refugees. Second, we want to show that the other reason for the growing disconnect between refugee education and the larger field of education—in particular, debates about equity and equality in education—is primarily political. The disconnect, we argue, is the result of the way in which states either welcome or try to keep out refugees and other newcomers.

This shapes the extent to which both groups are integrated into education policies. The third factor that has shaped the thinking and conceptualizing of refugee education has been the dominance of a humanitarian and relief paradigm. The final gap that we want to briefly highlight here and that needs addressing in research on refugee education, is the schism between research in the Global North and that conducted in the Global South.

First, what do we mean by "reification" of refugees? And how does it affect the separation of refugee children from non-refugees, in schooling and in the development of the academic field? We agree with Malkki, who argues that the international community—UN agencies as well as the research foci of academic scholarship—has contributed to the objectification and reification of the image of an isolated and disempowered refugee (Malkki, 1996). In other words, refugees are increasingly treated as a unique phenomenon and as a problem to be resolved. This reification is best manifested in Stein's (1981) discussion of "the refugee experience." In describing "newcomers'" coping mechanisms, Stein not only makes sense of "refugees" as if they were distinct in nature and behaviour, he also speaks of them as a homogeneous group. He urges us not to confuse them with migrants or other disadvantaged groups, because their experience is distinct. Hassan similarly refers to this reification process as the "refugee brand" (2016), where stories of ordinary people going about doing ordinary things in their lives—whether sewing a bridal dress or committing a minor crime—are blown out of proportion by the media, because they have been labelled as "refugees." Perhaps the epitome of this branding and reification materialized in the establishment of the first "refugee" Olympic team in 2016, which was accompanied by the closing of most borders in the face of refugees.

Second, the reification of refugees has also resulted in a divorce between "education of refugees" and the discipline or field of "education," which research has not helped bridge. For scholars working in the field of inequalities in education (or what is commonly known as "disadvantaged children" due to factors such as poverty, disability, race, ethnicity, migration, gender, etc.), the "otherness and "vulnerability" of refugee children is produced and manufactured by the same system that produces disadvantaged children at the domestic (national) level. While there is a substantial body of research on inequality in education (Apple, 2010; Ball, 2017; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Giroux, 1985), the field of refugee education is thus far disconnected from it. A quick review of the key policy documents published either by UNHCR or INEE shows the absence of any reference to this literature. Drawing parallels and bridges between these two disconnected literatures can provide answers to many of the challenges that face the education of refugee children such as access to pre-school, language provisions, early selection and tracking, access to second-chance education, curriculum, acculturation, and dropout (Crul, Lelie, Biner et al., 2019; Crul, Lelie, Keskiner et al., 2019; Shuayb et al., in press).

Third, yet another obstacle to the advancement of refugee education is the short-term thinking and conceptualizing of refugee education due to the dominance of a humanitarian and relief paradigm. This has resulted in a lack of a long-term vision of education provisions, short-term interventions, great emphasis on primary education, and neglect of secondary and tertiary education (UNHCR, 2011). In fact, a closer look into the concept of humanitarian education reveals it is an oxymoron. The nature of the education enterprise is long term and future oriented, while the humanitarian discourse is embedded in temporality and saving lives (Shuayb & Brun, 2020; Shuayb, Crul et al., in press). The humanitarian education paradigm is more occupied with the technicalities of providing an education for refugees, while the more existential questions of why education and education for what end, and the outcomes of this process, are underplayed. This has resulted in "literacy-based" education for refugees that merely teaches them how to read and write, while enrolment and retention rates beyond primary are low (Peterson, 2011; UNHCR, 2019b).

The humanitarian approach to education has also deepened the reification of refugees in practical terms, which in some cases has been used as a reason to segregate refugees in schools, such as in Lebanon, where the vast majority of Syrian refugees learn in afternoon shifts. While a transitionary phase might be needed in order to ensure the integration of refugees in mainstream schooling provisions, the challenge lies in how school practices accommodate the needs of all students. Thus, the issue becomes the extent to which the educational system provides equity and equality to students, regardless of their ethnicity, legal status, gender, disability, etc. (Crul, Lelie, Biner 2019; Crul, Lelie, Keskiner 2019). Research on equity and equality in education has shown that school provisions, early childhood education, language of instruction, late tracking, second chance and adult education, an inclusive curriculum, and acculturation are some of the factors that are critical to student education outcomes in the field of education inequality and are key factors that help refugee children achieve, in spite of their legal status. Yet research and frameworks on education of refugee children appear to be disconnected from the literature on equity and inequality in education. As mentioned earlier, in UNHCR frameworks and INEE standards there is no reference to the abundant literature on justice and education. A justice-and-equity approach, a more long-term vision for refugee education programs, and frameworks can help address this rift between fields and help mainstream it within education

research. Most refugee education programs lack a vision that goes beyond mere literacy, and the majority of education students drop out before reaching secondary education. By its very nature, education is future-oriented, yet we find hardly any discussion of this in the literature on refugee education beyond vague mention of a future (Dryden-Peterson, 2017).

The final gap that needs addressing in research on refugee education is the schism between research in the Global North and that conducted in the Global South. Forced migration studies have been long criticized for being Eurocentric and racialized (as if migrants are only those moving from South to North and not the other way around) (Bhambra, 2017). Despite growing criticism, the hegemony of the Global North in forced migration studies (McNally & Rahim, 2020) continues to be strongly felt in the education of refugees. What Fiori (2013) describes as "Western humanitarianism" is quite evident in the Education in Emergency network, which has flourished recently. A close analysis of the network and its research and activities shows not only that it did little to challenge the notion of "Western humanisms," but it also continued to maintain it. Refugees in the Global North hardly feature in the focus of the network, because most attention is on refugees in the Global South. At the same time, the network and its staff and committee members are based in the Global North, while the subjects of research and activities are in the Global South. In its bylaws, membership on its steering committee requires a subscription of US$10,000—a potentially unaffordable fee for many members or organizations in the Global South. Moreover, scholars from the Global North dominate the editorial boards of the *Journal of Education in Emergency* and are the authors of most published articles. INEE's uncritical endorsement of humanitarianism as its theoretical foundation has a profound impact on its ability to encourage research, including comparative educational research between South and North, and it restricts the kinds of theoretical, epistemological debates and research that need to take place in a field that is relatively new. Emerging evidence from comparative research between Global North and South is challenging some of the conventional wisdom about conditions that might promote better educational outcomes for refugees. On the one hand, a recent study of schooling experiences of refugees in Turkey, Australia, and Lebanon, showed that refugees who enjoyed a longer-term or permanent settlement reported a higher school performance, compared to those in an emergency state, such as in Lebanon. On the other hand, the school practices and environment at the meso level also play a major role in shaping the experiences of refugee children, regardless of their legal status (Shuayb, Hammoud et al., in press).

Our special issue attempts to bring together contributions from across the two hemispheres to discuss the education of refugee children. Although they are still juxtaposed to each other, we hope that this special issue will encourage collaborative comparative research that can ask these big questions across the Global North and South and push for a more inclusive educational thinking about refugees. The special issue brings together contributions from Lebanon, Germany, and Australia. As the country continuing to host the largest number of refugees per capita worldwide in 2019, Lebanon remains an important subject of study for scholars of forced migration. Despite housing such large numbers of displaced populations, Lebanon is not a party to the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol, similar to many other countries in the Middle East. It has also not adopted any domestic legislation pertaining to the status of refugees and government policy, and maintains that it is not a country of first asylum and that refugees will eventually move on elsewhere. However, Lebanon is frequently applauded by the international community for its generosity towards refugees—a seeming contradiction.

UNHCR estimates that the majority of refugees in Lebanon in 2019 continued to be from Syria (1.5 million, of whom roughly 914,600 were registered with UNHCR), followed by Iraqis (76%) and Sudanese (13%) (UNHCR 2020). According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), there were also 475,075 registered Palestinian refugees, with roughly half of them living in 12 refugee camps in the country, many of them (nearly 29,000) from Syria (UNRWA, 2020).

In their contribution to the special issue, Jo Kelcey and Samira Chatila interrogate the concept of integration in emergency education provisions in Lebanon. UNHCR claims to have adopted an integrative approach to the education of Syrian refugee children by offering them education in Lebanese state schools, in morning shifts alongside their Lebanese peers, or mostly in afternoon shifts designed specifically to accommodate them. However, Chatila and Kelcey demonstrate that while this policy was intended to improve access to education, it has meant education of poor quality for refugees and further marginalization and exclusion.

Next, Cathrine Brun and Maha Shuayb analyze the potentials and shortcomings of a humanitarian framework for educational response in protracted displacement in Lebanon. The authors attempt to unpack what the humanitarian education paradigm means and how it was implemented in Lebanon. They argue that emergency education can be an oxymoron, as education is a long-term undertaking while emergency implies short-term. They criticize humanitarian education logic for lacking vision, being apolitical and short-term, and contributing to the reification of refugees. In Lebanon, the emergency paradigm has produced segregation and further disadvantage for Syrian refugee children. It also strengthened the hegemony of the state while weakening

refugee communities. This means that many compromises have been made at the expense of refugee children. The authors conclude that in protracted displacement, investing in local inclusive standards that encourage collaboration and curriculum frameworks might achieve better educational outcomes in access and quality. If this is impossible, there is need to explore the potentials of a global and inclusive education framework for refugees.

In contrast to these two articles focused on formal education, Bassel Akar and Erik van Ommering (2020) examine non-formal education (NFE) and its potential to provide an alternative yet crucial stream for accessing education in Lebanon, especially as there are limited spaces for Syrian children to access public schools. The study investigates the attempts of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Lebanon to provide NFE to Syrian refugee and vulnerable host community children. The authors analyze eight NFE programs and discuss success, challenges, and program design and development. They also suggest indicators defining quality education for children in NFE. Akar and Ommering advocate for NFE programs, as there is a greater possibility to adapt them to suit the emerging and changing needs in refugee and host communities, unlike formal education. They can also engage qualified staff from refugee communities and potentially offer a more contextualied learning experience.

Two other articles in this special issue focus on Germany's recent experience with the dramatic influx of refugees as a result of the civil war in Syria. While Germany has received the most asylum applications in Europe, it was its decision in 2015 to allow roughly a million Syrians entry[1] that truly challenged the country's educational systems, because many new arrivals were extremely young.

From a human rights perspective, Annette Korntheuer and Ann-Christin Damm analyze changes to educational provisions for refugee students in Hamburg and Saxony—two very different German states—from 2012 to 2018. Prior to 2015, education policies in both states were mostly for all students or for second-language learners, but not specifically for refugee students. The influx of refugees in 2013 resulted in a visible increase in policy density in 2016 and 2017. New educational policies in both states included regulations, such as frameworks for transition systems, coordination, and monitoring systems for learners of German-as-a-second-language, and adoption of the rules for distributing refugee students. Their policy analysis reveals different models of integration, between federal states and between educational stages within one federal state. Preparatory classes were the main educational provision for refugee students, leading to greater segregation, especially of newly arrived refugees. Moreover, refugees were seen as the solution for the lack of skilled workers, so there was a push towards vocational education, undermining the realization of higher education as a human right for refugee children and youth in both German states. The study draws attention to the fact that segregation, unintended effects of support systems, and a strong focus on labour market needs in VET could result in discrimination and marginalization of refugees.

Remaining in Germany, Christoph Homuth, Jörg Welker, Gisela Will, and Jutta von Maurice examine whether legal status significantly affects the schooling of refugee children. Using data from a longitudinal study Refugees in the German Educational System (ReGES), they analyzed how children's legal status and subjective perception of it affected their education. The study found no differences in students with different legal status for the prevalence of attending a special class for migrants or the attendance of different school types. However, the study did find that students with an insecure status report worse grades than those granted refugee status. Adolescents who had a comparatively secure status also experienced subjective insecurity, thus highlighting the importance of additional social pedagogical and/or psychological care in schools.

Finally, Rachel Burke, Caroline Fleay, Sally Baker, Lisa Hartley, and Rebecca Field's article examines the experience of refugee students in accessing higher education in Australia, a country known for its harsh detention policies for anyone arriving in the country without a valid visa, including people seeking asylum by boat, and its preference for selective, off-shore refugee resettlement. Burke and her co-authors found that few refugee students manage to make it to higher education as a result of restrictive government policies and lack of scholarships, as well as visa restriction. The article highlights the negative impact of temporary, short-term legal status on the ability of refugees to attain higher education.

While covering different geographic areas and educational systems, the findings from these articles highlight common challenges to refugees in crisis. In both the Global North and South, policies remain hostile to refugees, pushing them further into the margins. At best they are seen as providers of skilled labour for the aging European communities or a burden surviving on the generosity of the host community and thus should be grateful for whatever they receive. Yet, the marginalization, exploitation, and discrimination that refugees experience is part of a structural system plagued by racism, discrimination, and injustice in both the Global North and South. These structural inequalities prompt us to

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1. Germany suspended the European Union's Dublin Regulation, which mandates that Syrians (and any other refugees) cannot claim asylum directly in Germany but must seek refugee protection in the first "safe" (EU) country they enter.

adopt a wider lens in the study of refugees that goes beyond the emergency and humanitarian scope to a justice -oriented approach.

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