Refugee education: Backward design to enable futures

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Abstract

This essay explores the use of backward design in classrooms and as an analytic tool for research. Drawing on examples of classroom and research experiences, it proposes a planning template for the use of backward design in refugee education policy and practice, as a way to enable policy and practice to facilitate the futures that refugee young people imagine and aim to create.

Key Words

Refugee education

Backward design

Education policy

Migration

The need for backward design

I remember sitting in a giant ballroom, deep inside a large hotel on the outskirts of Boston. It was just a few months after school had begun for the year, in my first year of teaching. The room was filled with teachers, pencils poised for a day of professional development. Hard to admit, even to myself, was that I was grateful not to be in my own classroom that day. I had a class of grade 6 students who were years behind in their learning, and I was determined to help them become stronger and more confident learners. I did what I had been taught to do during my teacher training and what I reflected on as good practice from my own experiences as a student. I painstakingly planned out each moment of each lesson, created my own materials from primary sources (I was a history teacher), had specific learning goals for each student, took time to get to know each of them, and established spaces for community-building among peers. But no matter how prepared I thought I was, moment to moment I could not predict what might happen that would take me off my charted course and throw me into a situation I did not know how to handle. Several times a day, Markus[1] would stand up, shake his arms out to the side, and sing, at the top of his lungs. Jerome wrote in his journal about a shooting he witnessed the weekend before, just down the street from his house. Keira worried constantly about being evicted from her apartment. And Amaya wished her parents would take her back home to Barbados where at least the sun shone.

As I sat in this ornate ballroom for my professional development, I listened to Grant Wiggins describe his theory of "backward design." Wiggins was asking

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[1] All names are pseudonyms.

me to think about my work as a design process, a process that begins by envisioning the end. He asked me to pose questions such as "What should students know, understand, and be able to do? What is worthy of understanding? What enduring understandings are desired?" (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998). I began to wonder how I might use this framework to move from the kinds of questions I had been asking – how do I control what Markus does in the next moment? – to more productive ones. What enduring understandings do I want to work toward with Markus this year? How do they connect to his future aspirations? And what do I think, and what does he think, is worthy of understanding over the long-term?

These questions, inspired by backward design, have become core for me in my work in the field of refugee education, as a teacher, a researcher, and as part of policy discussions. In this essay, I explore the use of backward design in classrooms and as an analytic tool for research. In synthesizing classroom and research experiences, I propose a planning template for the use of backward design in refugee education policy and practice, as a way to enable policy and practice to facilitate the futures that refugee young people imagine and aim to create.

Mindset shifts in the classroom: Now-oriented to future-oriented and system-focused to student-focused

The framework of backward design allowed me, as a teacher, to make two critical, and related, mindset shifts vis-à-vis where to begin my thinking and planning. It prompted me to begin with a future orientation and trace back what that future meant for my decisions and actions in the present. It also prompted me to begin with the student and then situate them within broader systems that influenced their learning.

Beginning with a future orientation

Backward design enabled me to prioritize a future-oriented mindset, situating my simultaneous now-oriented mindset within it. How could I keep forefront in mind my long-term goals for Markus' learning? Of course, I could not ignore that in order for everyone – himself included – to participate and learn he could not sing at the top of his lungs

at any moment. But backward planning allowed me to keep in mind that this singing was one small part of a much larger and more important future-oriented vision for Markus' learning. When seen in the context of one day, his singing seemed insurmountable as an obstacle to his successful education. When seen in the context of an educational trajectory that spanned several decades, it seemed less consequential and allowed both he and I to have the mental space to address the underlying challenges.

Beginning with a student focus

Backward design enabled me to synthesize a system-focused mindset with a student-focused mindset. How could I plan my lessons in a way that pushed Keira toward meeting society's standards for what she needed to know and be able to do while at the same time ensuring that, for her, they seemed worthy of understanding, despite the constant threat of eviction? My inclination had been to begin with the curriculum standards for the state and see how I could make Keira fit them. Backward planning helped me to hone my vision on Keira, and beginning from this student-focused place allowed me to see how I could shape the state standards to fit her.

Backward design as an analytic tool for research in refugee education

Fifteen years later, backward design continues to guide my thinking as a teacher, and also my work in research on refugee education. The concepts of beginning with a 'future orientation' and beginning with a 'student focus' have both emerged from and also served as analytic tools to guide my research.

Beginning with a future orientation

I began doing research in Uganda on refugee education in 2002, not long after my year with Markus, Jerome, Keira, and Amaya. When I spoke with newly arrived refugees, they had energy only to focus on just getting through a day, with conviction that soon they would be returning home. They engaged in what a participant in Cindy Horst's study in Dadaab, Kenya called 'don't die survival' (as cited in Hyndman and Giles, 2011).

In refugee education policy and practice, the approach was similar, focused on creating

"normalcy" for refugee children, quickly enrolling them in school to create familiar routines (INEE, 2004; Nicolai and Triplehorn, 2003). Under this approach, children's experiences in school, I observed, were remarkably similar to my own first year of teaching. I had been focused on how to get Markus not to burst into song at unpredictable moments. Refugee education at this time focused on passing time safely until refugees could swiftly return home.

In my three-year study following refugee children and their families, I observed families to undergo similar mindset shifts to the ones I underwent as a teacher. Rather than a mindset of "don't die survival," over time they began to adopt "future-oriented" mindsets, beginning with an imagined future and planning backwards from there. Central to this mindset shift among refugee families was a changed view of the purposes of education. Rather than a holding ground or just something to do, refugee families in longer-term displacement began to conceptualize education as a central mechanism by which children would create different futures for themselves and their communities (for more on this research in Uganda, see, Dryden-Peterson, 2006a; Dryden-Peterson, 2006b; Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Dryden-Peterson, 2017).

In a recent study of refugee education in 14 countries, we found that actors working at global, national, and school levels identified four possible futures for refugees: resettlement to a distant high-income country, return to the country of origin, integration in the setting of exile, and transnationalism across contexts (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). Even though each of these possible futures varies in its likelihood and desirability over time and across contexts, we find that refugee young people both imagine and pursue these multiple futures simultaneously, as an intentional strategy to mitigate the uncertainty of their situations of displacement (see also, Bellino and Dryden-Peterson, 2019; Chopra, 2018; Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Dryden-Peterson, Dahya and Adelman, 2017). Education for refugees needs to account for this volatility and refugee young people's aspirations within it by enabling refugee young people to develop the skills and knowledge to navigate and create these multiple futures.

Beginning with a student focus

Through our research, we have learned that essential elements of the futures refugee families seek to create are economic livelihoods, social participation, and rebuilding of communities and countries of origin (Bellino and Dryden-Peterson, 2019; Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; Dryden-Peterson and Reddick, 2017). We are particularly preoccupied with what elements of education could enable these futures. Following a backward design approach, we design our research with a student-focus. For example, in one recent study, we decided to begin with one aspiration refugee families identify as enabling the other aspirations outlined above: completing secondary school. Rather than start from the systemic barriers we know from other research impede success, we decided to begin with the students. We wanted to understand how refugee young people achieved this aspiration – with implications both for student actions as well as systemic actions. We thus created a sample of Somali refugee secondary school graduates in Dadaab, Kenya – those who had achieved the aspiration – and asked them about the factors that they perceived to have enabled their success in school (Dryden-Peterson, Dahya and Adelman 2017).

Just like in the classroom with Keira, our findings enabled us to document ways in which the system might accommodate to the needs of students, rather than students accommodating to systems. In addition to well-defined structural dimensions of education such as infrastructure, class size, and teacher training, refugee students in our study focused on relational supports as key to their success in school. They described to us the ways they have created diverse networks of support, drawing on local relationships with UN agency and NGO staff members, peers, and teachers as well as global relationships with peers who have migrated elsewhere and other members of Somali diaspora. Students use these relationships to seek guidance on a wide range of topics such as expectations for academic writing, chemistry topics not covered in class but yet examinable, and strategies to negotiate housework and schoolwork, especially among young women. These global relationships of support are virtual, often using Facebook and WhatsApp, and usually beginning as face-to-face relationships, shifting in geography and mode of communication over time.

By framing our research around the question of what factors can enable students' success in school and examining processes that led to that success, we have been able to identify different and important kinds of academic support that systems are not currently set up to provide in refugee camps but that refugees have accessed in other ways. Beginning with the future-oriented aspirations of graduating from secondary school and synthesizing it with a student focus, our research was able to identify kinds of support that refugee education policy and practice could productively leverage and further create for current and future refugee students.

Implications: Backward design as an analytic tool in refugee education policy and practice

The ways in which refugee young people shape their own educational trajectories toward their envisioned futures echo both the theory and substance of Richard Elmore's work on backward design in policy implementation (1980). He argues that resources directed 'at the lowest level of the implementation process' (Elmore 1980) are likely to have the most effect, in particular because "the problem-solving ability of complex systems depends not on hierarchical control, but on maximizing discretion at the point where the problem is most immediate" (Elmore, 1980). Policymakers and teachers can use backward design both to forward this student focus and enable the kind of education that adopts the future orientation refugee young people and their families espouse.

Figure 1 provides a backward design planning template of questions that policymakers and teachers can ask themselves towards these goals. One of my Masters students, when reflecting on a class session where we discussed backward design, commented that "'[b]ackwards seems more forward to me."[2] It does to me, too. In asking and seeking to answer all of these future-oriented and student-focused questions for all of the possible futures that refugee young people imagine and work toward, refugee education research, policy, and practice can enable refugee young people to pursue these futures even in the face of on-going uncertainty.

Backward Design Questions	Possible Futures			
Future-oriented and student-focused	Resettlement	Return	Integration	Transnationalism
What are this students' aspirations vis-à-vis this possible future?				
How likely is this possible future?				
What enduring understandings would enable this possible future?				
What practical decisions about curriculum, pedagogy, language, and certification would enable this future?				

Figure 1. Planning Template for Refugee Education to Enable Possible Futures

[2]Anonymous student response survey in course A816 Education in Armed Conflict, Harvard Graduate School of Education, October 2015.

Author Bio

Sarah Dryden-Peterson leads a research program that focuses on the connections between education and community development, specifically the role that education plays in building peaceful and participatory societies. Her work is situated in conflict and postconflict settings and with Diaspora communities. She is concerned with the interplay between local experiences of children, families, and teachers and the development and implementation of national and international policy. She is on the faculty at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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