

Humanitarian Pedagogies of Transit

Middle East Section

Estella Carpi September 26, 2017

One of the most basic educational challenges in refugee settings is that of school dropouts.

Despite the traditionally temporary character of their interventions, humanitarian agencies providing ad hoc services in crisis-affected areas are increasingly viewing education as a necessity. As such, education has been progressively integrated into the standard humanitarian toolkit. Delivering formal education in crises, however, remains an enormous challenge. On the one hand, development aid does not provide adequate support to countries in long-term crises, and on the other, humanitarian aid generally does not prioritize education. Among displaced communities, education often loses its own acknowledged potential to bring refugees closer to the civic and political fabric of host countries. In early 2015, I observed this challenge first-hand while visiting Za'atari and Mrajeeb el-Fhood refugee camps in northern Jordan, which are currently home to approximately 142,000 Syrian refugees ([UNHCR 2017](#)). In this context, looking at schooling curricula and materials offers interesting research avenues.

One of the most basic educational challenges in refugee settings is that of school dropouts. In 2012, approximately 121 million children were out of school worldwide, of whom 33.8 million were in conflict-affected countries and 6.2 million in Arab states ([UNESCO 2015](#)). School dropout rates are often attributed to the daily pressures that make child labor a necessity for many refugee families. However, refugee children face a number of other important barriers in accessing formal education. These barriers may be physical (military checkpoints), bureaucratic (the need to provide documentary evidence of previous schooling), economic (cost of transportation) or linguistic (not speaking the language of formal education in a host country). Moreover, an underappreciated factor affecting dropout rates is the quality of camp schools. Finally, refugees very often initially view displacement as short-lived and think that children can wait to return home to resume formal studies. This short-term approach affects decisions regarding what kind of education refugee children should receive.

From an anthropological perspective, what is interesting is the manner in which school curricula change following displacement and the re-establishment of social networks in new places.

In tackling school dropout rates, international NGOs have increasingly provided education to supplement that officially offered by host states. On a visit to Za'atari, I spoke with a Syrian woman and a Jordanian teacher who explained that the dropout rate from formal schools financed by NGOs and UN agencies was high; informal NGO education programs had been much more successful than formal classes, even though NGOs did not provide

official certificates ([cf. HRW 2016](#)). These views are supported by wider data indicating that in Jordan's Syrian refugee camps children leave school in order to attend informal training seen as more engaging ([UNICEF and REACH 2014](#)).

Given this “humanitarianization” of education, the “emergency education” model may reduce our understanding of education to a simple humanitarian toolkit item. Instead, in both home and host states, schooling has myriad consequences. In particular, it contributes to shaping new curricula and ideas, which in turn lead to the emergence of specific political subjectivities and communities ([Kenyon-Lischer 2005](#)), which crystallize as a spontaneous response to the provision of various care services. For instance, in Za‘atari, humanitarian assistance—reliable health services, lifesaving vaccines and, sometimes, daily meals—is being provided to children in humanitarian educational spaces. Furthermore, NGOs also use these spaces as hubs to distribute aid to the community ([INEE 2011](#)).

From an anthropological perspective, what is interesting is the manner in which school curricula change following displacement and the re-establishment of social networks in new places. The humanitarian system is now one of the main actors providing refugee education and it has been crucial to the emergence of a “pedagogical culture of transit.” In refugee settings, temporary school programs become permanent (in)formal forms of “emergency education”—often delivered through psychosocial support programs—and they shape refugees’ socio-political and civic interaction with their surrounding space. This raises the issue of where camps are located and the extent to which they are segregated from local communities. For instance, Mrajeeb el-Fhood is in an extremely isolated desert location, distant from potential sources of livelihood and critical infrastructure.

These examples point to an important divide between refugee communities and institutional schooling.

I would like to suggest that anthropology has a crucial role to play in investigating the extent to which “emergency education” has been devised as a tool to integrate refugees into the local population or merely as a stopgap measure tailored to refugees as individuals in transit. Throughout my interviews with Syrian refugees in Za‘atari and Mrajeeb el-Fhood, their lack of enthusiasm towards schooling services was evident. Among many other factors, this seemed to play a large role in family decisions to alternately remain in the camps, move within Jordan, or leave the Middle East altogether. For example, most of the children I met in Za‘atari stated that they wanted to return to Syria: in a family of eight children, none was attending school, and four had dropped out two years earlier. Children’s unwillingness to stay in school was certainly related to the ease with which they could access it. However, it also had to do with the perceived low quality of “emergency education” in Jordan—a decisive factor in family decision-making regarding migration. This low quality was largely defined politically; that is, Syrian children felt the education they were receiving did not enable a reconstruction of Syrian history and memory. As Mara’, a nine year old girl from Dara’a,

recounted, “I don’t like schools here. There are 50 pupils in a class, and we don’t learn anything about Syria. No politics, no history ... I ended up here, and I don’t know why!” Indeed, all students reported that they were required to follow the Jordanian curriculum. Siham, a 14 year old girl from Eastern Ghouta similarly stated, “I dropped out a year ago. I was wasting my time ... I don’t feel the desire any longer to go to school here. The teachers don’t know *where* I come from.” In a parallel case, a Palestinian refugee I interviewed in Amman argued that values of Palestinian nationhood were promoted principally via NGO education rather than through formal UN schools operating in Palestinian refugee camps. These examples point to an important divide between refugee communities and institutional schooling.

Does such education “of transit” help generate socio-cultural resilience for refugees facing increasingly protracted displacement? Beyond the formation of new collective identities, how do young refugees envision their future within such schools founded on humanitarian goals?

What I call “emergency education” has become integral to emergency relief in diverse crisis-affected zones. On the one hand, some humanitarian donors and teachers use education as a tool to consolidate a specific regional identity. For example, Bahraini, Qatari, and Saudi schools have been established in Za’atari. Arab Gulf-funded humanitarian services have been strongly associated with the politicization of aid and with the opportunistic formation of new political and social subjectivities ([Al-Mezaini 2017](#)). On the other hand, [global North humanitarian educational programs](#) are believed to aim ideally to neutralize refugees as political subjects, in accordance with humanitarian principles and security agendas traditionally upheld by a “global liberal governance” ([Duffield 2008](#)). In a global context of increasing hostility to migrants, NGOs and UN agencies are concerned less with refugees’ educational aspirations, and more with whether education in crisis settings contributes to social stability in host countries ([UNHCR 2015](#)).

In fact, in the Middle East, education has often been portrayed as a strategy to solidify social control and maintain political order, rather than one to achieve the Western ideal of education as critical to the development of independent political awareness. Likewise, the international emphasis of “emergency education” has often been on integrating refugees into host communities in order to achieve social cohesion ([EU Commission 2016](#)). In contrast, I argue that in the Middle East, refugee and government schools, as well as other educational programs, have been important (though sometimes unintentional) spaces of political and cultural socialization despite decades of political oppression explicitly aimed at creating and preserving the constituencies of ruling regimes. That is, individual socialization at school occurs through various pathways, some of which are independent from the political reasons behind their establishment.

New concepts of “humanitarian education” are thus emerging that require us to critically unpack humanitarian actions and values beyond their ostensible

neutrality. The needs and aspirations of refugees should be the driving force behind building a school in emergencies. In this regard, I ask: Does such education “of transit” help generate socio-cultural resilience for refugees facing increasingly protracted displacement? Beyond the formation of new collective identities, how do young refugees envision their future within such schools founded on humanitarian goals?

My preliminary research on “emergency education” looks beyond what role schooling plays in conflict and in peace building—alternately a victim of attacks or complicit with the perpetrators ([Pherali 2016](#)). Instead, it asks what the implications are of a “pedagogy of transit”—one conceived of as a short-term endeavor in which schools are a pre-resettlement educational experience that, at times, becomes permanent.

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