

IMPROVING REFUGEE TEACHER DEVELOPMENT IN LEBANON AND JORDAN: NURTURING TEACHER IDENTITY, RELATIONSHIPS, AND AGENCY

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Non-formal education is key when formal schooling is disrupted or unavailable to refugee children; however, teacher development can be lacking or inconsistent in these very contexts. The LINEs research project explored the role of teachers working in Lebanon (Syrian refugees) and Jordan (Sudanese, Somali, Yemeni refugees), and piloted ways to strengthen 'teacher identity' and 'agency' as key aspects of their professional development experience. Using a participatory approach that aims to work with and for people and to achieve long-lasting change,¹²⁷ we supported teachers in examining and articulating their vision for refugee education and teachers' roles within their communities.

For the purposes of this article, teacher identity is defined as the hopes, beliefs, values, and sense of purpose a teacher holds. This is informed and influenced by inter-related factors which include their personal and professional experiences, the contexts in which they live and work, and the perceptions and behaviour of those around them.¹²⁸ Teacher agency refers to

a teacher's ability to act in accordance with their values and beliefs. Teachers can enact change at multiple levels of the system, including the classroom, school, and community.¹²⁹ These concepts offer insight into refugee teacher development beyond improving classroom teaching skills, and they help us understand the roles of teachers as leaders of change.¹³⁰

Why identity and agency?

Our research has found that refugee teachers often explicitly incorporate personal and political dimensions into their work. Rather than simply substituting formal schooling – which is unavailable to their students – in nonformal spaces, teachers take an active leadership role in community development, responding to political and social change and tension in, between, and beyond their communities. Closeness to and a sense of responsibility towards their communities enables teachers to tailor their practices to their students, source spaces and resources for teaching, persuade parents to enrol their children, and prioritise

student welfare. Teaching is thus a form of activism and resistance to the precarity and loss of control that displacement entails, both in the act of teaching itself and in advocating for education rights within communities and with different stakeholders (e.g. NGO representatives, donors, etc.). Being a teacher can offer the opportunity for agency and purpose in a context where there is often so little.¹³¹

For these reasons, we identify 'teacher identity' and 'teacher agency' as key to refugee teacher development. Strengthening identity can lead to a stronger purpose and a stronger teacher community, reducing feelings of isolation and providing hope for sustainability. Focusing on agency can empower teachers and lead to social change within and beyond refugee communities. To promote agency, we must also address the obstacles and constraints that refugee teachers encounter that prevent them from acting as they would like. This includes holding education stakeholders (e.g., ministries of education in host communities, United Nations agencies, donors, NGO

Key takeaways:

Invest in holistic teacher development that prioritises teacher identity and agency and fosters a sense of belonging within the wider education community, strengthening teachers' motivation and sense of purpose.

representatives, etc.) accountable for providing education in refugee settings and ensuring that they work with teachers to achieve the best possible outcomes for them.¹³² Relationships are at the heart of agency and identity, and nurturing these relationships within teacher development helps teachers to find enjoyment and friendship, which contributes to wellbeing and resilience. A focus on identity and agency can therefore create a shared ethos that helps refugee teachers navigate structural and local barriers and challenges.

Structural barriers to holistic teacher development

In addition to addressing precarious and unjust working conditions, stakeholders need to overcome conventional views of professional development. All teacher interventions ultimately aim to improve student achievement, but focusing solely on classroom outcomes can limit teachers' potential to flourish.¹³³ Furthermore, the precarity in which refugee teachers work makes it unattractive to invest in contextualised and sustainable approaches that recognise teachers' expertise and knowledge, as this type of localised and holistic development requires more time to realise intended outcomes, and its impact is less easily quantifiable.

Navigating these barriers requires building awareness among all stakeholders and professional bodies at all levels of the

education system (e.g. ministries of higher education, curriculum developers, trainers, and practitioners), and piloting programmes that develop and showcase holistic approaches, including the measurement of teacher success beyond traditional metrics, which might include teacher enjoyment, sense of belonging, wellbeing, and inclusion.

What should education stakeholders do to support nonformal refugee teacher development?

- Prioritise refugee teacher identity and agency and foster a sense of belonging within the wider education community, strengthening teachers' motivation and sense of purpose.
- Use teacher development opportunities to nurture supportive and collaborative relationships locally and globally, as these contribute to enjoyment and well-being and reduce refugee teachers' feelings of isolation.
- Empower refugee teachers by codesigning development activities that start from and build on teachers' existing experiences, skills, and knowledge and that effectively respond to their needs.
- Recognise and support refugee teachers as agents of change within their communities. Help teachers develop advocacy skills and identify platforms through which they can influence a range of stakeholders, including parents, donors, and aid workers.

- Find new ways to measure teacher success, such as teacher enjoyment, sense of belonging, well-being, and inclusion.



Recommended reading:

Mendenhall, M. (2023). Participatory approaches for strengthening teacher professional development in refugee settings: successes and limitations. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 1–12.

