



Teachers in Forced Displacement Contexts: Persistent Challenges and Promising Practices in Teacher Supply, Quality, and Well-Being

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TEACHERS IN FORCED DISPLACEMENT CONTEXTS: PERSISTENT CHALLENGES AND PROMISING PRACTICES IN TEACHER SUPPLY, QUALITY, AND WELL-BEING

INTERVIEW WITH MARY MENDENHALL, SONIA GOMEZ, AND EMILY VARNI

INTERVIEWED BY OZEN GUVEN

Teachers are essential to any education system. For millions of refugee and internally displaced children and youth, teachers play an especially important role. With comprehensive training and ongoing support, teachers can help these children navigate unfamiliar settings and new curricula, thereby creating a protective educational environment in which all students can thrive. In this interview, Dr. Ozen Guven talks to Dr. Mary Mendenhall, Sonia Gomez, and Emily Varni about their research on teachers and teaching practices in contexts of forced displacement.¹ Mendenhall, Gomez, and Varni recently authored “Teaching Amidst Conflict and Displacement: Persistent Challenges and Promising Practices for Refugee, Internally Displaced, and National Teachers,” a background paper for the 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report on the challenges and opportunities available to teachers working in forced displacement settings.² Drawing from their paper, which includes case studies from countries as diverse as Germany, Kenya, Chad, and Iraq, the authors discuss such topics as education planning, teacher professional development, teacher well-being and motivation, and teacher agency. Throughout the discussion, they highlight practices and policies that could be leveraged to strengthen support for teachers working in displacement contexts.

1 Dr. Mary Mendenhall and Emily Varni are from Teachers College, Columbia University. Sonia Gomez works at the Norwegian Refugee Council. Dr. Ozen Guven is a consultant with American Institutes for Research.

2 A link to the full background paper is available at the end of this interview.

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Mendenhall, Gomez, and Varni are scholar-practitioners whose work focuses on the challenges faced by teachers in crisis contexts, and on the policies and practices that provide these teachers with comprehensive support. Guven's work examines teaching practices among Syrian refugees in Turkey.

GUVEN: Why is it important to focus on teachers working in forced displacement contexts?

MENDENHALL: All global education agendas, including the UN Sustainable Development Goals, talk about the right to education and how to get children and youth back into school and keep them learning. Yet, these agendas tend to overlook the role teachers play in accomplishing these goals. While the needs of teachers will vary depending on their own backgrounds, the contexts in which they teach, and the profiles of the learners in their classrooms, we have to pay attention to teachers and how they are recruited, remunerated, and supported if we care about improving access to safe and quality education.

VARNI: Besides providing academic support, teachers in forced displacement contexts play a critical role for their students by supporting their psychosocial well-being, helping them develop social-emotional skills, and facilitating their transition to a new schooling environment. These teachers, many of whom have themselves been displaced or experienced traumatic events, are expected to play a wide range of roles for their students. Therefore, they need a lot of support and training to do their jobs and to be well themselves while involved in these efforts.

GUVEN: When you say "teachers in displacement contexts," to whom are you specifically referring?

MENDENHALL: In our paper, we presented profiles of three different groups of teachers working in displacement contexts. The profiles centered on teachers' backgrounds, displacement status, and the employment conditions under which they worked, which dictated to some extent what type of support they needed. One category is host community teachers or national teachers (working in host state public or private schools) who have displaced learners in their classrooms in the countries or communities of asylum. They typically have been trained in national teacher training programs and are usually registered with the national teachers service. It is important to think about the types of support these teachers need in terms of accommodating refugee students who have different needs (e.g.,

language acquisition, psychosocial support). The second category is internally displaced teachers, who have been displaced but have not crossed a border and who are working in a host community school or internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in their country of origin. They may have gone through formal teacher training channels or, because of displacement, are being given the opportunity to become teachers. The third category is refugee teachers, who have been displaced across a border and are now in a host country. Some of these teachers may have worked as teachers prior to displacement and now find themselves in another country with the skills required to teach. Those who do not have prior teacher training or experience may now find opportunities to become a teacher. There are great differences in the teachers' profiles and in their needs from one context to another. For instance, in the Syrian context, a number of displaced teachers were formally trained and highly skilled, whereas most of the teachers in sub-Saharan Africa only finished high school or secondary education and became teachers through a more ad hoc approach. The question is, what types of support does each teacher profile require, and what policies and practices will enable us to address their short-term and long-term education and training needs most effectively?

GUVEN: *In your background paper for the 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report, you used data from both academic and practitioner resources to identify challenges and promising practices for these teachers. What teacher data are available and accessible for conflict-affected and displacement contexts? Does this vary across contexts?*

GOMEZ: We had a lot of difficulty finding and accessing data for our paper, as there is a massive gap in the data on teachers in displacement contexts. There is also a difference between refugee and IDP settings. We have some data on teachers and students in refugee contexts, particularly in camp settings, but fewer data are available for urban refugee settings. We also tend to have more information on refugees who are registered with UNHCR or government refugee management agencies, but the data gap is especially noticeable in IDP settings. For example, we have global data on the number of refugee children who are out of school, but we don't have such data from IDP contexts. We also found that the data on teachers are highly fragmented in many emergency situations; although various organizations collect teacher data, having a centralized database is not common. Education partners in a few countries—Uganda is a good example—have centralized teacher data and identified the teacher gap for the refugee education response, but that's still not happening on a routine basis across emergency contexts.

MENDENHALL: We reached out to some of the major institutes like the UNESCO Institute for Statistics to request information for our paper, and they made it clear that this is a huge gap in their work and in the field in general. Efforts are under way for refugees to be included more fully in national education sector plans. There are no great examples of that yet, but there's a real push for it in Kenya, for example. So, there is some promising momentum but still quite far to go. As members of one of the INEE Working Groups, we've been doing some work on a set of education indicators. For example, we looked at the Global Education Cluster indicators, and there were very few indicators about teachers at all.³ What was included were simple things like how many people came to a training, but the indicators don't capture information about teacher profiles, backgrounds, and needs. The field as a whole has quite a few gaps to fill in terms of how we're capturing and interpreting teacher data, which is critical for both the humanitarian response side of things and long-term planning across the humanitarian-development nexus.

VARNI: Teachers really are missing in global education indicators related to conflict-affected and displacement settings, which is detrimental to our understanding of teacher profiles and the quality of education being delivered in different contexts. It's important to think not only about having more indicators for teachers but also what type of data we're collecting—not just the number of teachers but disaggregating teachers by profile, background, and professional development needs, and by their own perception of the professional development they are receiving or the type of professional development they desire.

GUVEN: *Drawing from the existing data and your own experiences, what major challenges do teachers face in displacement settings, and how do these challenges vary across the three categories of teachers that you mentioned previously?*

GOMEZ: One major issue we see in displacement contexts is the need to increase the supply of teachers, given the large influx of children who are either IDPs or refugees. Whether these children are accommodated in national schools or in schools set up by NGOs or UN agencies, we see a huge spike in demand for teachers and the need to pay their salaries. In Uganda, for example, the education ministry estimates that providing salaries for a sufficient number of teachers to reach the primary and secondary school populations will cost more than US\$92 million for the period 2018-2021. This number takes into account the need to hire more

³ The Global Education Cluster and related country-level clusters consist of groups of humanitarian organizations that are responsible for improving the quality of education responses in humanitarian crises, such as better coordination.

teachers to address shortages and reach displaced children living in settlements. Providing regular contracts with adequate remuneration is a serious problem in these settings, and we see a wide variety of contracts and hiring modalities. As Mary described, some of these teachers are qualified and experienced, while others have little teacher training and just sort of jump into teaching. The shortage of teachers causes overcrowding in classrooms, which puts extra pressure on teachers. Poor working conditions in many contexts where teachers are volunteers or earning a very low stipend, what we often call “incentive teachers” in refugee camp situations, are another challenge. There are also issues related to the student population that are common to all teachers working in displacement contexts. These include multi-age classrooms, in which learners have diverse needs, and classrooms that often are overcrowded and under-resourced. Some children come into the classroom having never been to school or having missed a significant amount of schooling, and many have psychosocial or trauma issues. Supporting social cohesion and second language acquisition among learners from diverse national, cultural, and religious backgrounds is very challenging, especially for national teachers or displaced teachers in countries providing asylum.

MENDENHALL: It’s also important to highlight that, in addition to the support teachers need to tend to their students’ psychosocial well-being, they need support for their own psychosocial needs. Teachers have issues managing their own stress, due to what is happening both inside and outside of the school environment. Teaching and learning resources, such as textbooks and other materials, are incredibly limited in many cases, and refugee students are often moved to the host country curriculum, which is likely different from the one they are used to.

VARNI: Another challenge in these settings is that teacher professional development is fairly ad hoc. The multiple organizations involved sometimes provide contradictory training or teach different pedagogical styles. It can be difficult for teachers to manage these different inputs from different professional development providers. Another thing I would emphasize, particularly for internally displaced and refugee teachers, is that these teachers face a host of challenges outside the school setting in addition to the difficulties they experience in the classroom. For example, displaced teachers may have issues related to social cohesion and belonging in their host community, or they may be facing challenges related to fulfilling their own basic needs, like accessing food or clean water. These and other contextual challenges impact teachers’ ability to do their job and ultimately affect their ability to provide a quality education to their students.

GUVEN: *We know that the humanitarian community is paying a good deal of attention to student well-being, and teacher training programs therefore try to address the question of how to interact with and help students whose psychosocial well-being has been negatively affected. But, as you all mentioned, teachers themselves may have been through traumatic events, so they may need support for their own well-being. What are some of the psychosocial issues among displaced teachers, and what factors affect their well-being?*

GOMEZ: We see a lot of psychosocial issues or needs among both children and teachers who have experienced extreme violence, rights violations, and the extreme stress of displacement. Additionally, living in displacement settlements, in refugee or IDP camps, and even in urban settings puts enormous stress on families, and the whole social fabric of refugees is very damaged. Support for teacher well-being is an area that has not received enough attention or programmatic response.

VARNI: Displaced teachers are often affected by their own experiences of violence and displacement, and their psychosocial and social-emotional well-being affects their work in the classroom. Teacher well-being is influenced by many individual and contextual factors. The individual factors include teachers' self-efficacy, their job satisfaction, and their own social-emotional competence. Contextual factors are found at the school, community, and national level and include teachers' relationships with their students and peers, the social cohesion within their community, the respect or recognition they receive (or don't receive) from community members, and teacher management and pay. In our paper, we included a 2016 study from the International Rescue Committee on teacher well-being in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The study found that teacher well-being was influenced by a range of factors: from stress around supporting IDP students to inconsistent or nonexistent salaries, and even teachers' perceptions of a lack of respect for them in their communities. Teacher well-being is something the field is still grappling with, but it's really important to consider when we're thinking about how to provide more quality and equitable education for children in these settings. I agree with Sonia that the subject has been sidelined in terms of programmatic support and policy.

GOMEZ: Aside from all the problems we've told you about regarding teacher well-being, it's important to also highlight teacher agency and resilience. It's become very clear from both our research and our personal experiences that, in many situations and settings, teachers have extraordinary resilience. They are able to find creative ways to solve problems at the classroom level while being very sensitive to the problems their students bring to the classroom. Teachers

are heroically rising to challenges with very few resources. Despite the terrible compensation, teachers are still doing really great work with an amazing sense of commitment. So, as we emphasized in our paper, the policy-level changes we advocate for need to be made in consultation with teachers and must consider lessons learned at the classroom and school level. I say this because the practical truth is that teachers in many difficult situations figure out interesting ways to resolve the issues we've described.

GUVEN: *To what extent are teachers included in the process of policy-making and program design?*

GOMEZ: There are a few examples, as discussed in our paper, where teachers participate in decision-making around teacher development and teacher support, but generally we're still doing quite a poor job of consulting with teachers.

MENDENHALL: Yes, I agree, but I also would like to mention one promising example from our experience, which we wrote about in the background paper. The Teachers for Teachers initiative is a multi-modal teacher professional development program that I and a team from Teachers College implemented in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. We could have done far more than we did, but I think there are some interesting examples in that particular approach that really tried to authentically engage teachers. For example, we did an initial quasi-needs assessment study, including interviews with teachers, and they were able to tell us what they thought they needed in terms of professional development. We used the findings in the design of the larger program, which ultimately consisted of face-to-face training, peer coaching, and mobile mentoring. Throughout that process, some of the teachers from the early training cohorts gradually took on more leadership and facilitation roles and helped to inform and influence the continued programmatic work. We were keen on doing that from the beginning, and we quickly saw the benefits of teachers' participation because they knew the context better than we ever would. They worked in those classrooms every day, so they were able to offer critical perspectives about the challenges teachers face in Kakuma. Also, they were able to help bring teachers together to overcome some of those challenges. Through peer-to-peer support, they were able to harness the voices of those teachers, which they then shared with UNHCR and other operating partners about additional changes that might need to be made to both policy and practice. These are examples of how to involve teachers more and why it's so important. We need to see how we can mainstream some of these approaches more effectively in our work.

GUVEN: *Are there coordination and collaboration challenges related to the multiple actors involved in teacher professional development?*

MENDENHALL: In refugee contexts, the initial teacher professional development is primarily run and facilitated by international organizations that are setting up programs, recruiting teachers, and trying to implement their programmatic interventions. The same is also true in some IDP contexts. Ideally, teacher training colleges or institutes in the host countries would be actively engaged in that space. Lots of collaborations and partnerships form over time, but it probably takes longer than it should to connect all of the relevant actors.

GOMEZ: Yes, there is quite a lot of fragmentation among the different actors. There are coordinating mechanisms in most refugee and humanitarian contexts—for example, the Education Cluster or UNHCR education working groups—that bring humanitarian actors together. But there are also many government divisions and education ministry departments that need to be engaged, such as teacher services commissions and teacher education services. It's difficult to bring together the diverse set of actors who need to solve these problems. A promising example is the INEE Teachers in Crisis Contexts Collaborative, which is a global inter-agency working group where a wide variety of NGOs, UNHCR, UNICEF, and academic institutions have come together to coordinate teacher professional development efforts. The group has since produced a couple of major teacher development packages for primary school teachers in crisis contexts: one is a training package, and one is a peer coaching package. The working partners pool their resources and train teachers using one package of tools. That's very good to see, but there's still a lot to be done in terms of bringing together disparate actors from both the national and international levels to solve teacher and displacement issues.

GUVEN: *You have already mentioned a number of promising practices that address the issues we have discussed. Are there other programs or practices you would like to highlight that may help support teachers?*

GOMEZ: I would like to highlight six states in Germany that have mainstreamed second language acquisition in the basic teacher education institutions, so all teachers in those states now have training in language acquisition. I believe this is the way we need to go in preparing teachers to deal with more diverse classrooms. It's critical for teacher education systems (e.g., policies, programs, institutes) to mainstream some of the key areas that we've discussed, such as second language learning, multi-level learners, and dealing with students with psychosocial issues.

MENDENHALL: Something we strongly advocate for in the Teachers in Crisis Contexts Collaborative is to move away from one-off teacher training workshops and think about more comprehensive professional development through continuous in-service support and teacher collaboration. For instance, evidence from “stable contexts” shows that teacher collaboration is critical for teachers’ self-efficacy, preparation, and competence in the classroom. The question is, what does that look like in coaching or mentoring activities carried out in crisis-affected settings? It can take various forms, of course, but finding ways for teachers to collaborate is incredibly beneficial for improving their performance and well-being. While research on teachers’ experiences in conflict-affected and displacement settings is thin, the evidence that does exist from these settings shows the benefits for teachers of coaching and mentoring, and it offers useful lessons that can be applied across a range of displacement contexts. Another important need is to make policy and practice changes that will provide pathways to more formal recognition and certification of teacher credentials. In our paper, we highlight the promising example of Chad, where refugee teachers are now able to become fully certified and work in public schools. From 2012 to 2016, more than 300 Sudanese refugee teachers were certified in Chad through a two-year training course. The Chadian government also signed a joint agreement with the Sudanese government, UNESCO, UNICEF, and UNHCR to ensure that certification and equivalency are recognized if and when Sudanese teachers are able to return home. Chad is one of a few promising examples of this, but there is quite a long way to go. Finally, cross-pollination between national and international actors could be critical. On the one hand, we have teacher training colleges that might be particularly well-equipped to handle the curriculum and pedagogical training of teachers. On the other hand, there are the NGO actors who are maybe more innovative in terms of addressing the psychosocial needs of displaced students and supporting their well-being. To improve sustainability and the humanitarian-development transition, we need to find a way through our global, regional, and national work to combine the strengths of these two groups of actors. We need to look at how we can ensure that the important work of NGOs feeds into national systems, and how the important work the national systems are already doing can feed into and supplement what NGOs are doing most effectively. Overcoming some of the coordination quagmires and figuring out how to collaborate and share lessons learned are critical to making significant improvements to the field of teacher professional development.

VARNI: On the point of policy and practice, I'd like to add that, even in settings where there are more "inclusive" education policies for displaced teachers and students, it's critical to understand if and how these inclusive policies are translating into practice and what they actually look like for teachers and students on the ground. For example, the Djibouti Declaration (signed by Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda) is an example of a promising regional policy. The Declaration calls for including refugees in national education systems, and specifically mentions the need to include refugee teachers in national systems as well. It addresses professional development, certification, and equivalency for refugee teachers. The Declaration is being operationalized now, and it will be important to follow that process to see how countries are translating it into practice and what the effects are for teachers and their students. Finally, we've talked about teacher engagement and participatory approaches to programming and policy-making. I want to add that, when we do research to build the evidence base on the teachers in these settings, we need to include teachers in the research process. For example, right now I'm working on a desk review on teacher well-being in displacement contexts with a colleague at Teachers College, and we include interview data from teachers working in Uganda and Kenya that reflect teachers' own conceptualizations of their well-being. It is important to include teachers' perspectives and voices in the research process whenever possible, to co-author with them, and also to make sure we're doing that on all fronts of research, policy, and programming.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

The full 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report background paper, "Teaching Amidst Conflict and Displacement: Persistent Challenges and Promising Practices for Refugee, Internally Displaced, and National Teachers," is available at <http://gem-report-2019.unesco.org/background-papers/>.

For more information about the INEE Teachers in Crisis Contexts Collaborative, including the open-source training and coaching packages, please visit <https://inee.org/collaboratives/ticc>.