



Educators for Change: Supporting the Transformative Role of Teachers in Contexts of Mass Displacement

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# EDUCATORS FOR CHANGE: SUPPORTING THE TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN CONTEXTS OF MASS DISPLACEMENT

TEJENDRA PHERALI, MAI ABU MOGHLI, AND ELAINE CHASE

## ABSTRACT

*Education in contexts affected by mass displacement is typified by political instability, the marginalization of refugee learners, and a lack of educational resources, including learning spaces, relevant curricular materials, and mechanisms for the accreditation of learning that takes place outside formal educational institutions. In these situations, teachers often become the students' most powerful and inspirational education resource. This paper stems from a qualitative study of how Syrian refugee and Lebanese teachers understand "future education" in the context of the protracted crisis in Lebanon. Drawing from Aronowitz and Giroux's (1993) concept of transformative intellectuals, we argue that transformative approaches to professional development can enable teachers to capitalize on their local knowledge, professional abilities, and creativity to create spaces in which learners feel they have greater control over their lives and can envision a better future. We propose a transformative model for teacher professional development that is based on the ideal learning space envisioned by teachers in a refugee context and on a critical understanding of their existing learning environments. The intention is to support teachers as they reshape the learning environments in which they work to bring them closer to their imagined ideal. The use of available digital technologies enabled these teachers to create spaces in which they could harness and share the transformative education practices already in place and facilitate change through massive open online collaborations.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Between 2011 and 2019, more than 11 million Syrians became internally displaced or fled to neighboring countries, mainly Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq. As of August 2019, 5,622,328 Syrians were registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2019) in these four countries. The conflict has disrupted the education of hundreds of thousands of children and youth. Of the 2,064,069 million school-age Syrian refugee children living in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt, 801,763 do not have access to formal or nonformal education (No Lost Generation Initiative 2019). Despite these host countries taking important steps to increase school enrollment for these children, significant barriers are keeping them out of school, such as child labor, not having the documents needed to enroll, language differences, and a lack of affordable transportation to and from school. Children with disabilities and those of secondary school age are particularly at risk of educational exclusion (Human Rights Watch 2017).

Through its Reaching All Children with Education plan, Lebanon's Ministry of Education and Higher Education has gone some way toward accommodating refugee students and marginalized Lebanese students in the public schools. In the 2018-2019 academic year, 223,119 refugee children were enrolled in grades 1-9 (No Lost Generation Initiative 2019); 71 percent of them were accommodated with a second shift provided for Syrian students, which took place in the afternoon after normal school hours (UNHCR n.d.). The Lebanese government further facilitated Syrian children's access to public schools by allowing them to enroll without proof of legal residency and waiving school enrollment fees (Shuayb 2015; Charles and Denman 2013).

Despite these efforts, 46 percent of Syrian refugee children ages 3-18 who are living in Lebanon remain out of school, predominantly those in their teenage years (No Lost Generation Initiative 2019). Thousands more face significant educational barriers, such as a lack of access, poor-quality schools, overcrowding and limited openings in the public school second shifts, and harassment and bullying. Moreover, the precarious security situation prevents families from sending their children to school. Poverty makes it impossible for some families to afford the indirect costs of schooling, such as books and uniforms, and they often rely on their children's employment to survive (Shuayb 2015). Another issue is that STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—are taught in English or French in Lebanon's public schools, languages with which the Syrian children and youth have no previous experience (Human Rights Watch

2016; Visconti and Gal 2018). Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working in Lebanon created a number of nonformal education programs in response to these significant educational barriers, but the Lebanese government subsequently restricted these programs in order to align refugee education with the country's formal public education system.

There are many challenges to providing education in contexts of mass displacement, including the lack of adequate resources; teachers, parents, and children who have been traumatized; poor living conditions; and tensions around curriculum, language of instruction, and a lack of mechanisms to certify learning. Forced displacement often results in the dispersal of qualified teachers, which makes it difficult to assemble a teaching workforce in the areas where displaced populations are settled. Consequently, schools in these contexts are generally compelled to rely on unqualified teachers who have limited opportunities for teacher professional development (TPD), due to a lack of resources, weak institutional mechanisms, and political barriers in the host societies. In formal schools, where national teachers work with refugee students, the teachers do not have access to specialized training to build the professional skills they need to deal with language barriers, psychosocial and behavioral issues, and the bullying refugee children often experience at school and in their communities. Moreover, little is known about how to improve teachers' skills in these contexts and which TPD models, approaches, and spaces are most conducive to providing qualified teachers and quality learning.

Given these complexities, in this paper we explore the question, What models of TPD may best address the complex needs of learners in contexts of mass displacement? Based on group discussions and interviews with teachers and education practitioners who are working with refugees in Lebanon, we present an analysis of how they might engage in transformative education practices. We argue that those who support education in challenging environments need to capitalize on existing innovative practices and act as facilitators of knowledge production and exchange. After outlining what is understood by the concept of future education and what is known about current TPD opportunities for teachers in situations of forced displacement, we introduce two theoretical ideas: teachers as "transformative intellectuals" (Giroux 1988, 1993) and an "ecological systems theory" of human development (Bronfenbrenner 1979). After describing our methodology, we present our key findings, which we use to propose an integrated framework for conceptualizing teachers' role as enablers of change within a multilayered, nested system that surrounds the child in a learning context. The

framework offers a theoretical rationale for the development of Transforming Education in Challenging Environments, a massive open online collaboration (MOOC) launched in FutureLearn and Edraak in July 2019.

### **“FUTURE EDUCATION” AND THE ROLE OF TEACHERS**

“Future education” in postconflict contexts or contexts of displacement has been conceptualized as reimagining and reconfiguring the “unknowable future” (Dryden-Peterson 2017). For refugees, this entails laying a foundation for hope, despite the often protracted nature of their exile and the uncertainties surrounding which durable solution will be deemed appropriate to their situation, be it voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement in another country (UNHCR 2003). While contributing to a sense of normalcy (Nicolai and Triplehorn 2003), the concept of future education offers refugee learners greater control over their lives and future and a sense of hope for the peaceful reconstruction of their communities (Mendenhall, Collas, and Falk 2017).

Teachers play multiple roles in crisis settings, including helping students develop the linguistic skills they need to make a successful transition to formal education in the host country, supporting learners’ social-emotional wellbeing, and helping students adapt in new educational environments while acknowledging their prior education experiences and cultural values (Mendenhall, Gomez, and Varni 2018; Dryden-Peterson 2015; Schwille, Dembélé, and Schubert 2007; Winthrop and Kirk 2005). Children and youth in conflict-affected contexts may have been victims of violence or otherwise traumatized, and some have lost their parents or close relatives (Burns and Laurie 2015). These circumstances can have an enormous impact on learners’ emotional wellbeing and their ability to learn (Betancourt and Khan 2008), and teachers need specific knowledge and skills to respond appropriately to these intense situations (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies 2016).

Unfortunately, teachers around the globe receive fairly standard models of professional development (Wei, Darling-Hammond, and Adamson 2010) that are largely decontextualized from the complex social and political environments in which they work and thus have little or no effect on their practice (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2008; Burns 2013). Teachers who work in conflict-affected environments also face a dearth of professional development opportunities (Sesnan et al. 2013, 23-41; Mendenhall et al. 2015) that are grounded in their lived experiences in a crisis context. Such opportunities often fail to take

account of refugee teachers' contextual knowledge and innovative pedagogical solutions, or to provide guidance on how they might overcome the psychosocial difficulties they themselves face, due to having fled a war zone and struggling to live a stable life in exile.

## **TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN CRISIS CONTEXTS**

The professional status of teachers in crisis contexts varies, including (1) teachers from the host community who are formally qualified and employed by the host country's education system; (2) teachers with externally funded short-term contracts, both host country nationals and refugees who meet the qualifications; (3) refugee teachers who are certified in their country of origin but not by the host country's education system; and (4) those who teach children in camp schools or informal learning centers despite having no formal teaching qualifications. Whatever their professional status, all these teachers require contextually relevant, conflict-sensitive TPD (Kirk and Winthrop 2007; West and Ring 2015).

Moreover, the status of teachers in exile largely determines the legal, policy, and administrative barriers to their employment and professional development (Mendenhall et al. 2017), such as a lack of a work permit or recognition of their professional qualifications, or in some cases due to their lack of proficiency in the language of instruction (Sesnan et al. 2013). Frequently, their only option is to be employed as a low-paid teaching assistant in a formal education setting or as a volunteer in a nonformal education setting operated by an NGO. The restrictive legal framework and the lack of coordination between education ministries, the authorities responsible for registering and providing services for refugees, and other NGOs make it difficult for these teachers to access professional development opportunities (Burns and Lawrie 2015). This leaves teachers prone to exploitation, such as sometimes not being paid, working long hours with small incentives, or working in difficult conditions with no legal protection (Igbinedion, Newby, and Sparkes 2017). Nonetheless, thousands of teachers who are not formally qualified and must teach under extremely challenging conditions with limited support make it possible for refugees and internally displaced populations to receive an education (Mendenhall et al. 2017).

Scattered TPD programs are available in emergency and refugee contexts. They often are supported by short-term humanitarian funding, which involves supplemental pedagogical training or the retraining of paraprofessional teachers. The 2017 Brussels Conference education report (No Lost Generation 2017) claims

that more than 45,000 teachers and education personnel, including Syrian volunteer teachers, have been trained in Syria and in countries hosting Syrian refugees. While it is difficult to verify this number or the quality of training, such claims nevertheless reflect the large-scale, short-term training that has come to typify TPD opportunities for teachers in displacement contexts. Moreover, professional development efforts frequently end up being duplicated rather than coordinated (Save the Children 2008).

Our review of TPD models in crisis contexts indicates that courses are mainly provided by NGOs that, through agreements with education ministries, also work with teachers in public schools. Most are unaccredited in-service courses provided over a short period of time. The delivery modality is typically face-to-face, followed when available by some mentoring and coaching via social media. Some NGOs and academic institutions are increasingly using digital technologies combined with face-to-face delivery. However, little is known about the effectiveness and scalability of these TPD provisions, and evaluation efforts currently tend to be for the internal purpose of reporting to donors, rather than for developing a critical framework that could advance knowledge about teacher development in crisis contexts (Pherali and Abu Moghli 2019). In this paper, we broaden the conceptualization of TPD to include the possibility of creating sustainable spaces for learning and reflection through digital collaboration.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, we engage with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979) and the theoretical notion of teachers as transformative intellectuals (Aronowitz and Giroux 1993, 45-48) to analyze teachers' imagined educational spaces, existing realities, and pedagogical approaches that could promote transformative education practices. We later use these two theoretical tools to reflect on our findings and conceptualize an open-source professional development space for teachers and educators who are working in areas of conflict and protracted crises.

Teachers as accommodating intellectuals accept the system uncritically and claim that professionalism is a reason to refrain from political action. Teachers as critical intellectuals adopt an approach that enables learners to question hegemonic narratives that restrict their ability to transform their social, cultural, and political conditions. Teachers as transformative intellectuals enable learners—and themselves—not only to challenge hegemonic dominance but to take action to change their unequal life conditions and future chances. Giroux (1993) argues

that, to be transformative, teachers should have the reflexive capacity, knowledge, and confidence to consciously take action to rupture the social structures that produce and perpetuate inequality. Giroux draws heavily from Freire's work on social transformation, a process that occurs through the constant engagement with critical analysis and social action, or praxis. This approach involves teachers' conscious "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire 1970, 33). Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) provide a reflective tool that enables teachers to consider whether their practices are hegemonic, accommodating, critical, or transformative. Hegemonic teachers are likely to follow the curriculum and established pedagogical approaches that reproduce the power relationships in society but fail to encourage learners' critical engagement with the content and the environment in which they live. Our contention is that TPD programs in crisis settings should enable teachers to engage critically with the conditions that determine their professional practice, and thus to play a transformative role in society through their pedagogical approaches. This notion was derived collaboratively through discussions among teachers and education practitioners who participated in three workshops that we organized in Biqaa, Lebanon, in 2018, and an analysis of the resulting data.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory offers a holistic perspective on human development that is based on the premise that the environment in which a person is situated is comprised of a set of multilevel interacting systems that include a microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. According to Bronfenbrenner, people are not passive recipients of the effects of social conditions and can influence the environment in which they live. We argue that this theory offers a tool for teachers that is both analytical, which enables them to understand more fully the opportunities for and constraints on children and youths' learning and development, and action oriented, which enables them to identify possible areas for action and change at different levels of the ecological system.

The microsystem comprises the activities, roles, and interactions a person experiences in their immediate environment as they develop. Every person typically engages with multiple microsystems, including their family or alternative caregivers, school and/or workplace, friends and peer groups, spaces of play or socializing, places of worship, and their community. These microsystems can work in ways that support or hinder learning. Through their interactions with young people, educationists represent a key microsystem.



The mesosystem is where people in two or more of the microsystems around a child interact and connect with each other, such as the child's parents attending a school event or a teacher visiting the child's home to speak with the parents. The exosystem includes extended family members, parents' workplaces, the mass media, education, health and social services, as well as political systems and policies. Although a child or youth may have no direct contact with an exosystem, they can be indirectly affected by it because it affects people in a system closer to the child. This can include governance structures such as an education ministry, a donor community, social agencies, school boards, or security agencies that affect the individual but over which they have no control.

The macrosystem includes things going on at a higher societal or cultural level, such as the ideologies, values, attitudes, laws, and customs of a particular culture or subculture. Macrosystem factors fundamentally shape how people who have been displaced are treated in host countries. This system also includes the global policy frameworks that govern host countries' treatment of refugee and displaced communities. The chronosystem refers to the patterns of events and transitions that occur throughout a person's life, both within the individual and in their environment. Examples include the various ways war and conflict affect young people of different ages, or the pace of cultural change in different historical periods and how it influences individual development.

Teachers' practice is shaped by these multiple systems, which can support or inhibit their professional roles as well as their own wellbeing. An example at the microsystem and mesosystem levels is refugee teachers who have no opportunity to interact with their host country's teachers or education officials (Dryden-Peterson 2017). They may lack the resources needed to do their work and be unable to interact with learners' families and the wider community, and their lives in exile also may mean they are separated from family and friends who were left behind or fled to another country.

Their work is equally influenced in the exosystem; for example, by whether donor agencies can continue to fund the schools they are working in or secure their salaries; by the position their funder takes vis-à-vis education quality and access; and by wider governance factors such as the framing, structure, and delivery of policies regarding the education of refugee and displaced learners. The macrosystem comprises the social and cultural norms and values in both refugee and host communities, while the chronosystem includes the shifting social, political, and cultural dynamics of the environment and how transformative educational practices shift over time at the various system levels.

## METHODOLOGY

This research investigates an underexamined dimension of TPD, with a specific focus on teachers of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. We examine these teachers' creativity and innovations in an effort to determine whether the ongoing teaching and learning crisis they are facing could be mitigated by the creation of a digital learning space in which teachers and education planners could collaboratively develop and share educational ideas, tools, and approaches. We argue that this case study and our methodological approach provide new insights into how to design TPD programs that have the potential to transform teachers' roles in a wide range of refugee contexts.

### METHODS AND SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

The insights shared in this paper emerged from a series of group discussions and interviews with teachers and education practitioners (N=61) who were supporting the education of refugees in Lebanon. Focus group discussions took place in February and May 2018, during three workshops held in the Biqaa area. Each workshop included 15-20 teachers and education practitioners, both Syrian and Lebanese, who worked with the Syrian NGOs that run informal schools for Syrian refugee children. The teachers were purposively sampled by the NGOs with whom we had already established a working relationship. All participants affiliated with the partner NGOs were invited to take part in the workshops, which we facilitated. Participation was further determined by the availability of transportation and whether people's attendance was impeded by military roadblocks and other obstacles (which was the case for several participants). The participating teachers equitably represented both genders, had different levels of teaching experience, and had worked with children of different ages. A fourth workshop took place in May 2018 at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, which included six female Lebanese teachers who had temporary contracts with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and were working with Syrian children attending the second-shift classes in the public schools. The workshops were conducted in Arabic; to accommodate participants who did not speak Arabic, simultaneous translation into English was provided in the three workshops in Biqaa, while bilingual colleagues interpreted during the smaller workshops held in Beirut.

In the workshops that were organized in Biqaa, participating teachers worked in groups of five or six, and they were asked to draw collective images of (a) their ideal imaginary learning space; (b) the reality of the learning spaces they currently work in; and (c) how they could transform their current learning spaces into

their imagined space. These images were then shared with the entire group. We gathered data from the drawings and documented each group's explanations; we also carefully documented subsequent discussions. Our research received prior ethical approval from the University College London Institute of Education and the American University of Beirut, and we adhered to strict ethical guidelines and codes of practice throughout.

### **ANALYTICAL APPROACH**

We conducted a thematic analysis by coding our detailed workshop notes as they related to the drawings participants produced in the workshops: What is their ideal imaginary learning space? What is the reality of their current learning spaces? How could they transform their current spaces into their ideal? Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological framework was helpful to our analysis, both as an evaluative tool and as a way to identify potential action and change. The typology of teachers as transformative intellectuals enabled us to identify their practices that went beyond delivering lessons in the classroom. We three researchers worked as a team, immersing ourselves in the data, discussing themes, and developing codes. We coded the data by hand and conducted the analysis using a deductive and iterative approach, where we categorized and recategorized related data under each of the three guiding questions until repetitive trends emerged. We then aligned the trends with the key theoretical concepts drawn from the notions of the transformative educator and Bronfenbrenner's multilayered ecosystem of learning.

Limitations of the study include the relatively small number of participants, the limited geographic area covered, a sampling process that was dependent on the selection of partner NGOs, and the fact that, although interpreters provided simultaneous translation from Arabic to English, some nuances in the findings may have been lost in translation. Nonetheless, the research provided rich insights into the day-to-day possibilities for teachers in the field and the challenges they face, and laid the foundation for further research on TPD and transformative learning and teaching in crisis contexts.

### **FINDINGS**

The diversity of learning spaces was one overriding theme that emerged from the analysis. The learning space was understood as consisting of multiple factors, including the physical environment (e.g., location, infrastructure, and

material resources); the social environment (e.g., parents, learners, and educators representing different gender, ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds, and the relationship between school and community); and the learning and teaching environment (e.g., teachers, learners, curriculum, pedagogy, material/digital resources and tools, assessment and accreditation systems, policies, and finances). This increasingly included the digital environment, where learners are connected in virtual spaces. A transformative learning space was conceptualized holistically by appreciating the multidimensional ecosystems that connect children and schools with families, with their social and community environments, with policy frameworks, and with the continuous changes in politics, security, aid, and technologies. Teachers positioned themselves as active players who cocreate educational environments that enable change and transform lives—their own and those of others.

### **LEARNING SPACE: AN IMAGINED IDEAL**

Teachers primarily spoke of their roles at the macro level as “building human beings, building countries, and building futures,” and of teaching as being about “society advancement” and “reimagining society.” It was up to them to discern children’s talents and help them make the most of what they had. The pursuit of educational justice was a core value of this work; that is, to improve the quality of education and provide a safe space where all children can learn, engage, develop, and have hope for the future.

When discussing what they considered the most important attributes of the physical learning space, teachers focused on the wellbeing of children and the wider community, and on the environment they considered most conducive to learning, particularly in a context where children are experiencing disruption, discomfort, and distress. They believed the ideal learning space should be a secure structure rather than a tent and have an open design, good lighting, and a realistic teacher-pupil ratio. Most important, however, was that the space provide comfort and a sense of safety and be located at a distance from symbols of violence, such as a police station or conflict zone. Teachers also felt that children should have a say in the design of the learning space, that the colors chosen should be calming, and that the flooring be able to absorb trauma. Clean bathrooms, separate spaces for eating, for entertainment, and for using the internet safely were also considered important. They said that the ideal learning space would be welcoming to the wider community, where parents and guests could engage in educational activities.

Participants talked of the importance of innovation and creativity in their teaching approaches and style. Adapting simple and locally available resources to the refugees' teaching and learning context were considered invaluable skills, suggesting that highly technical infrastructures were not considered essential for learning to take place. Teachers also advocated for creative teaching methods that could facilitate shared and group learning and generate a sense of fun, rather than more didactic methods. The arts, for example, such as comedy, drama, and music, were cited as learning approaches that children responded to well and that gave them opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. One example given was building homes for their pets, which enabled children to develop practical life skills and to work collaboratively on a group project. The ideal learning space included ideas about how to help children engage with and learn from their environments and from nature, such as learning the seasons of the year. Teachers also emphasized the kinds of relationships that were conducive to learning and the importance of a shared ethos that allowed students to communicate freely with their teachers. They said this could be achieved by teachers dressing informally and coming across as approachable, patient, and flexible, while at the same time being able to set clear guidelines, goals, and strategies for shared learning.

The core elements and ethos of the learning curriculum that teachers focused on included the importance of developing life skills, learning about self-protection and care, healthful eating, recognizing good from bad, nurturing friendships and love, and promoting dignity and freedom. The core curriculum principles teachers valued included critical thinking, self-expression, inquisitiveness, and a passion for discovery. Teachers also believed that categorizing students according to their ability through exams and burdensome homework exacerbated the stress the children and youth already were facing in their daily lives. They recommended using less intrusive forms of assessment that recognized children's diverse abilities and life experiences. Above all, they believed that, before children could learn, they needed to feel happy and safe in their environment.

Importantly, teachers also described their role in mediating across the "micro" and "meso" layers of children's lives. They considered it their role to nurture their relationships with parents and to work as part of a team of professionals that includes nurses, social workers, doctors, psychologists, and counsellors. They also saw themselves as important mediators between children and their families and the municipal authorities by advocating, for example, for improved hygiene facilities and infrastructure, in particular the roads and transportation children needed to get to and from school. Hence, teachers viewed their role as

facilitating effective learning in the classroom, and as engaging in social action with a wide constituency in order to transform the educational environment.

### **LEARNING SPACES: THE REALITY**

For most teachers, the reality of the learning spaces they worked in was far from the ideal images they described in their groups. Accounts of the daily challenges teachers faced spoke primarily to factors at the exosystem level, over which they had limited or no control. Shipping containers often were used as makeshift classrooms that were crammed with more than 30 children sitting on rows of benches. Teachers said it was an enormous challenge to work with the children's disparate learning abilities, particularly in winter, when it was too cold to sit outside. Making things worse, there was no fresh air in the classroom, and a makeshift wood- or coal-burning stove often created a stifling atmosphere. A lot of schools had no computers, and where computers had been donated by charity organizations, there often was no one who knew how to maximize their use for teaching and learning. Many teachers also reported unstable internet services, interruptions in the electricity supply, and a lack of funds to cover internet costs.

Teachers felt strongly that the existing curriculum, taught in English, was inappropriate for the refugee children. A number of participants commented that the curriculum could relate more closely to "our reality" by providing not only formal education but also relevant employability skills that would eventually enable students to maximize their economic potential. Many teachers felt the frustration of being unable to integrate refugee children into Lebanese schools or to convince refugee children who refused to attend public schools to do so; the latter group often said they feared discrimination and the risk of violence on the way to or from school.

Although NGOs had become the sole education providers for many refugee children, they were hampered by the lack of a systemized curriculum, which resulted in wide discrepancies in the curriculum content and delivery across nonstate schools, and a lack of clarity about what schools and teachers should be providing. Several participants called for a curriculum framework that was properly accredited and flexible enough to allow teachers with the requisite training to tailor it to the circumstances in which they were working and the needs of their students.

Teachers also reflected on the lack of resources and space, which meant that children at different development stages, with different abilities, and sometimes with an age difference of more than five years were taught in the same classroom. Children with additional needs, such as having Down syndrome or being hearing or sight impaired, required additional professional support from social workers and medical practitioners, which often was unavailable. Children who had completed primary school and were ready to transfer to middle school often were unable to advance because they lacked certification. Children sometimes waited up to six years in exile for an opportunity to access formal education, and even those who had a possible place in a formal school did not have certificates of their prior qualifications, which prevented them from being enrolled at the appropriate level.

Despite their hope of inspiring their students, teachers often found that many young people had lost their motivation due to the daily hardships they faced. Participants believed that teaching as a profession has not evolved adequately to respond to the complex circumstances faced by refugee children and youth, in particular the protracted nature of their displacement. One teacher commented:

I teach in two schools, and our problem is we don't have the resources or special support to work with children who have been in a camp for six years and are still there. The crisis is no longer seen as a crisis, but teachers are unable to deal with camp situation in a suitable way. (FGD 2; May 5, 2018)

Teachers reflected on feeling ill-equipped to respond to the psychological needs and stress of the children, many of whom had experienced significant trauma and loss. Even when young people had not witnessed war directly, they struggled with the realities of living in camps, which created issues of identity and questions about their future. Teachers frequently felt that responding appropriately to these needs was beyond their professional capacity and feared that, in trying to respond, they could do more harm than good.

Teachers also discussed the fact that they, too, were under enormous stress and pressure, something rarely recognized by others unfamiliar with the context in which they were working. A number of participants said they needed psychosocial assistance to help them deal with their complex situation and trauma, as they were struggling with the same issues they saw when visiting students' homes. There was a strong sense that the support NGOs provided for teachers' wellbeing was

inadequate and that better support services, including legal assistance, would help them cope with their day-to-day challenges. One participant from the discussion group in Beirut alluded to these difficulties:

How do we motivate teachers for learning [professional development]—for example, in the Biqaa—when they may not have access to water or electricity, and no internet coverage? (FGD 2; May 4, 2018)

Teachers also spoke about the barriers to teaching caused by parents who did not follow up on or support their child's learning. Some children were absent from school because they were expected to work to contribute to the household income, or they were taken to other cities to visit relatives for a week or more at a time. Many children were withdrawn from school because the parents planned to move to another part of Lebanon where they could find seasonal work. Teachers were sometimes critical of the parents they felt did not value education, as one teacher reflected:

One day I asked a girl about her homework and her notebook. She said her mother cut it and put it in the heater. Parents send children to school just to get rid of them. (FGD 3; May 5, 2018)

However, other teachers recognized the enormous stress parents were under in the camps and noted how important it was for teachers to understand and work within these constraints. They spoke about families having lived for more than six years in leaking tents, including in the winter, as parents struggled to sustain their livelihoods, and pointed out why these parents might perceive education as less important than working, particularly if they were not literate themselves. Moreover, many refugee parents were not allowed to work legally, thus their children had sometimes taken up the role of main breadwinner by finding jobs in the informal market, which is less restrictive to young workers.

### **LEARNING SPACES: TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE IN COMPLEX CIRCUMSTANCES**

Despite these difficulties, teachers emphasized their role as agents of change, including identifying problems, researching and understanding them, and finding solutions, as illustrated by the following quotes:



A teacher is an inspiration for the child. No work or opportunities is a temporary problem. We will arm ourselves with education and we should be catalysts for change. (FGD 4; May 5, 2018)

Despite everything, education is still taking place, despite conflict and wars. We insist on building a new generation that can build Syria when they go back, *Inshallah* [God willing] . . . We are teachers, this is our job. (FGD 1; May 5, 2018)

These teachers provided multiple examples of the solutions they found to the daily challenges of supporting refugee children’s learning. For example, one female refugee teacher spoke of two siblings who regularly failed to come to school, so she went to the camp to speak with the parents. Taking time to understand the context of the children’s lives and the difficulties their parents were facing resulted in a big change in the children’s attendance. Other teachers who are not refugees also said that, by going to the camps to understand why children were not attending school regularly, they learned about the economic hardships that were driving the children to work, the transportation problems they faced in getting to/from school, and the lack of food for school lunches. One teacher talked about a child who was experiencing physical and mental health difficulties, so the teacher went to the camp every day and accompanied the child to school. Another teacher said that arriving at the school early to set up games for the children encouraged them to attend more regularly. Through these and other interactions, teachers learned about the frustrations and anger of the parents and children living in the camps and how this affected their views on education and learning.

Many other teachers described the creative and transformative practices that helped them deal with daily challenges, such as an acute lack of resources. One teacher spoke of working with a class of 48 children who had mixed abilities and educational experience. She had all the children sit in a “U” on a carpet, then went about giving them individual tasks that were appropriate to their learning abilities and needs. Others described dealing with a large number of students in a classroom by doing group work, and how engaging children in activities such as agreeing to rules for learning helped them manage the classroom. Another teacher explained that she divided her 40 students into two groups, and each group attended school three days a week. The smaller number of children was more manageable, and the teacher was able to respond more effectively to their individual learning needs. These adaptive pedagogical practices reflected teachers’ professional motivation to effect change, despite the many constraints in their education settings.

Responding to the lack of a relevant or appropriate curriculum, teachers showed how, if given permission, they could adapt the existing curriculum to their purposes, sometimes with positive results:

One year, I was able to select what was relevant from the curriculum and the results were excellent. I embedded materials and resources which were relevant to children. For example, I spoke to them about making jam and one child brought in jam the next day. The exam results were excellent, but I had that freedom, and not every organization gives the freedom to act when it comes to the curriculum. (FGD 1; May 5, 2018)

Refugee teachers who participated in the study evidently understood the children they were working with and the complex ways the spheres of their lives interacted. Nevertheless, they needed additional skills and better support to be fully effective in their roles as supporters, mediators, communicators, and advocates for providing quality learning to children in crisis contexts. Many spoke in particular of the need for further training and education to recognize and respond appropriately to their students' psychological distress within their professional realm. Some teachers had received additional training that enabled them to recognize children's particular needs and appropriately signpost them. They greatly valued these new skills and believed they were now better equipped to support children's and young people's wellbeing. Others spoke of taking part in training that helped them handle difficult behavior in the classroom and even encouraged them to offer leadership roles to students who had previously been disruptive in class. In affirming the social-ecological model outlined earlier, one participant neatly summarized that what was required was a comprehensive approach to educational practice that takes account of where a child lives and of their family and home environment. "We need to begin in the camp and not in the school," said one participant, who stressed the need to collaborate with other professionals, such as social workers and medical practitioners.

The participating teachers suggested that, because they were already engaged in individual and collective actions and were collaborating with NGOs to promote social transformation, they could mount more awareness-raising campaigns at school and within the community to help prevent absenteeism and strengthen relationships between home and school. One teacher emphasized that "education has changed, so teachers need to change, and we need training to deal with education in times of crisis" (FGD 2; May 5, 2018).

While many refugee teachers had a strong conviction that having an education would be instrumental in rebuilding Syria upon their return, they recognized that it also could help them navigate the constraints they encountered in exile. As one refugee education manager asserted, “We need to educate our children as if we are going to return home tomorrow, and as if we are going to live in Lebanon forever” (Interview 1; May 4, 2018).

Teachers explained that, rather than being intimidated by the legal barriers confronting them, they were constantly striving to promote change and inspire hope for the future. They also sensed that the political and social circumstances in their host country were constantly changing and that the messiness, hostility, and precarity of refugees’ lives helped them realize their potential to entrepreneurially capitalize on their knowledge and experience gained while working within the school and community environments, and the possibilities they were able to explore around them. These experiences enhanced their resilience and determination and, most importantly, enabled them to imagine a better future.

Finally, teachers felt strongly that they needed to establish a network through which they could share their learning and experience more widely. One refugee education manager noted that

we participated in [a] robotics competition in Lebanon and won the first prize. This has enabled us to prove that we are capable of leading pedagogical innovations in our learning center. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education is now supportive of our work; we have established links with a prestigious university in Lebanon and international organizations continue to support our schools. (Interview 2; May 4, 2018)

Most importantly, teachers identified the potential use of the internet to create spaces and platforms to discuss issues they face and to communicate ideas and solutions about working in similar contexts of mass displacement.

**DISCUSSION: CONCEPTUALIZING TRANSFORMATIVE TPD THROUGH THE SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL MODEL**

Returning to the theoretical frameworks outlined earlier, including teachers as transformative intellectuals and the multilayered social-ecological systems theory, we develop a theoretical model that enables us to design TPD that focuses on transformative learning in refugee contexts. Table 1 summarizes the relevance of the social-ecological model for teachers’ practice in refugee contexts and conceptualizes the transformation of teaching and learning at each system level.

*Table 1: Transformative Educators within the Social-Ecological Model*

System	Spaces for Teachers’ Action at Each System Level	The Role of Transformative Teachers
<b>Microsystem</b>	<i>How teachers work at the microsystem level—the immediate environment of learners, e.g., how they interact with learners, fellow teachers, and other practitioners working with children and youth within the microsystem of the school/ learning space</i>	Teachers play an active role by influencing and shaping the microsystems through their agency (e.g., critical thinking, creating safe learning spaces, using technologies to access and share information, collective and self-reflection on practice, participatory learning, learning from and adapting life experiences in exile)
<b>Mesosystem</b>	<i>How teachers work at the mesosystem level—where two or more microsystems come together, e.g., how teachers interact with and build a bridge between the learning microsystem and other microsystems, such as parents, siblings, relatives, extended family, friends, peers, places of worship, or the wider community</i>	Teachers try to influence the relationships among the microsystems vis-à-vis learners to facilitate change (e.g., visiting homes to better understand the needs of learners; liaising with psychosocial support workers to ensure synergy in how support is offered to a particular learner with special needs; working with friendship or peer groups to enhance mutual support to learners)

System	Spaces for Teachers' Action at Each System Level	The Role of Transformative Teachers
Exosystem	<p><i>How teachers work and interact with the exosystem level—institutions and practices that indirectly affect learners learning, e.g., how teachers respond to education policies (second-shift education provision, public schools and the education ministry, NGOs, local authorities); with health systems; international organizations (UNHCR and other UN agencies, NGOs); media; legal system; security sector (policy, military, and state agencies)</i></p>	<p>Teachers try to widen their sphere of influence to bring about change (e.g., build connections with other organizations and institutions that can support learners and/or educational practice; seek to influence power brokers that shape institutional policies and practices; work with other teachers to advocate for change in school policies, such as preventing bullying/promoting positive interactions in the learning space; contributing to discourse through campaigns, union activities, and participating in policy-related and pedagogical research)</p>
Macrosystem	<p><i>How teachers work at the macrosystem level—dominant ideologies, social and cultural norms, e.g., how teachers might shape political culture in the host country and attitudes toward refugees (legal status of refugees; segregation in schools; social exclusion; discourse and representations of refugees as a burden or threat to national security); what they do and/or say in response to state “security” measures (detention, raids, and arrest of refugees); how they engage with international humanitarian frameworks and/or agreements between the host country and international partners (externally funded education programs); or the changing dynamics of conflict in the country of origin</i></p>	<p>Teachers seek to influence macrosystem factors (e.g., by showcasing innovations in refugee education in order to rupture the stereotypical image of refugee teachers; make the most of training opportunities or access to learning technologies provided by new funding in host communities in response to emergency education needs; refugee teachers as intellectuals for wider societal change, as advocates of democratic principles and social justice, promoters of human agencies; teachers use the framework of international human rights to secure their students’ educational access)</p>
Chronosystem	<p><i>How teachers engage with the chronosystem level—events throughout the lives of learners and teachers and their collective memory, e.g., loss of family members during a war; memory of forced displacement; broader histories of war involving host country or refugees’ country of origin; normalization of the refugee crisis and sense of abandonment</i></p>	<p>Teachers draw from their collective memory of loss to advocate for change; collectively work to heal from trauma; reflect on violent experiences; and attempt to reconfigure the hopes and aspirations of learners and themselves</p>

In this model, we advance the social-ecological systems theory by adapting it to the transformative role teachers play in navigating social, political, and economic barriers to education in refugee contexts. We argue that the framework constitutes a paradigm shift away from the usual deficit model of refugee teachers as indigent professionals to one that appreciates them as resourceful actors who have the agency to enable transformation within the complex realities in which they work. It deliberately focuses on what teachers can do to enable change within and to mitigate the constraining structures and socioeconomic conditions of crisis-affected contexts. The intention here is not to claim that education aid and external technical assistance is unimportant but to argue that educational work in emergencies must harness and capitalize on teacher agency (i.e., teachers' capacity to act despite structural inhibition) to promote transformative learning.

The notion of teachers as transformative intellectuals rests on the assumption that teachers in refugee contexts do not simply rely on external support to enable positive change in their practice; rather, they operate as proactive individuals who draw from their wealth of previous experiences, insights into the host community they live in, and available resources, networks, and circumstances. As Dryden-Peterson et al. argue, the narrative that refugee learners rely entirely on “international humanitarian aid structures for educational success” and “that few educational supports are accessible in refugee communities, particularly in isolated camp-based settings” (2017, 1041) depicts only a portion of the actual educational processes that occur in crisis contexts. As revealed through our research, in order to imagine educational pathways toward a better future, teachers in these contexts draw extensively from the multiple systems that surround their professional practice and life in exile. The multilayered framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem, combined with teachers' role as enablers of change, provides a promising analytical framework for understanding the circumstances and needs of refugee learners more fully, and for identifying potential spaces for action and change across the different system levels. As our research revealed, refugee teachers and the host country teachers who educate refugee children consider it part of their practice to work between the school and family environments in order to understand the children's social-ecological location and its effect on their learning. They described educational practice as a process of critiquing the structural conditions of their lives, as well as engaging collaboratively in transformative action to overcome barriers and change social reality, rather than being constrained by it. Hence, those who research or support education in challenging environments should engage with community-based innovative practices to harness new knowledge and inform their TPD programming. The transformative educators model presented above could be useful in this process.

## MOOCs FOR TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN CRISIS SETTINGS

As evidenced in this research, many teachers see their role as that of a transformative intellectual who works not just in the classroom or school or within the constraints of an education system, but across the multilevel systems of children's environments. While they reported working primarily at the micro and meso levels, they also reported being able to make changes at the exo and macro levels, despite the structural challenges sometimes imposed on them. However, they lack the support to harness their agency for wider application. Given the degree of creativity revealed by this study, one possible way to facilitate teachers' transformative role is by expanding the role of digital technologies and, more specifically, by creating online spaces where they are able to share their knowledge and innovative practice with other practitioners and teachers in the field. We argue that this is possible not by conceptualizing digital learning spaces as tools for one-way transfer of knowledge but as reflexive creative spaces in which to share innovations in learning and practice. This can be done by shifting the emphasis from the idea of online courses to online collaborations.

Building on the perspectives, insights, and aspirations of teachers working in contexts of protracted mass displacement in Lebanon, colleagues involved in nonformal educational programs have led the design of a massive open online collaboration for teacher professional development in these contexts.<sup>1</sup> This MOOC, *Transforming Education in Challenging Environments*, was codesigned and coproduced with teachers working with refugee children—those who are refugees themselves and those from the host community—and education practitioners in Lebanon; the curricular content is comprised of videos and textual narratives of their pedagogical practices and professional experiences. As conventional education structures struggle to provide professional development, a MOOC can be a dynamic platform through which teachers share their innovative practices and engage in dialogues with practitioners from around the world. While findings on the learning experience via the MOOC will be reported elsewhere, this paper highlights the logic and rationale of a particular MOOC that underpins the notion of transformative educational practice within the framework of the ecological systems model.<sup>2</sup>

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1 These colleagues were from University College London, the Centre for Lebanese Studies at Lebanese American University, and other organizations.

2 The MOOC design draws from the actual practice taking place in formal and nonformal education settings in Lebanon; it is available on platforms in both English (FutureLearn) and Arabic (Edraak) to make it widely accessible.

This MOOC aims in particular to generate innovations that are conflict and context sensitive and can respond to the curricular, pedagogical, and broader issues and challenges that typically undermine education access and quality in situations of mass displacement. Through our collaborative research with teachers working in these contexts, we have observed those who are highly motivated to seek professional development opportunities, improve their education practice, and share their experiences and learning, particularly those who live in refugee communities and share the experience of forced displacement. Their motivation stems from the cultural, national, and social affinity refugee teachers have with their students and their intrinsic personal aim of advancing their own displaced community. We hope this MOOC platform will be used as a tool for exchanging ideas and practices that address the development needs of teachers that we highlighted above. Drawing on a wealth of expertise and designed to enhance the kinds of transformative practice already in place, the MOOC is a promising approach for the codesign and coproduction, with refugee teachers, of a scalable TPD tool for future education in crisis settings.

### **CONCLUSION: TOWARD A CODESIGNED AND COPRODUCED TPD MODEL FOR FUTURE EDUCATION**

Current learning spaces in contexts of mass displacement can be insecure (poor infrastructure, lack of space, ongoing hostilities), digitally constrained, financially deprived, and lacking the capacity to provide quality education. Effective TPD can build teachers' capacity to mitigate these challenges. However, given the large-scale mass displacements and enormity of the need for a qualified teaching workforce in emergencies, conventional approaches to teacher development are unable to meet the demand. In response to these challenges, online education is being promoted as an alternative to increased educational opportunities for adult refugees who could qualify for professional jobs, including but not limited to teaching (Halkic and Arnold 2019; Colucci et al. 2017; UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2018; Traeger and Löwe 2018). However, issues around equitable access, learning quality, and the accreditation of online courses are overshadowed by the uncritical promotion of digital technology as a solution to educational crisis (Pherali and Abu Moghli 2019; Halkic and Arnold 2019). These provisions, some of which might be relevant to TPD, create "an illusion of access, deflecting the attention from the real issue of access, quality and equity in provision" (Pherali and Abu Moghli 2019, 12). Despite these tensions, digital learning spaces can be harnessed to share knowledge, educational resources, and professional practices among those who support education in emergencies.



In this paper, we demonstrated that teachers who work in contexts of mass displacement have a wealth of unique professional experience and are passionately motivated to improve their practice. The approach outlined here does not intend to ignore the complexities of state policies toward refugee learners and their teachers, or the lack of resources that restrict effective teaching and learning. Our aim has been to excavate innovative educational practices that teachers and other education practitioners are championing within the constraints of sometimes hostile political structures. In this process, we developed a theoretical model that could serve as a useful tool for research and practice in refugee education. We argue that teachers are a source of inspiration and enablers of change, both in their own educational environments and in the wider social contexts affected by conflict and protracted crises. While it is important to provide humanitarian support for education, it can only work if education programs are designed and implemented in collaboration with the teachers and educators who work in displaced communities. Our argument is based on the idea that teachers in emergencies who encounter complex, precarious, and emotional situations in their daily practice are the most authentic producers of pedagogical knowledge and the leaders of transformative learning.

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