

Book Review: *Right Where We Belong: How Refugee Teachers and Students Are Changing the Future of Education* by Sarah Dryden-Peterson

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BOOK REVIEW

***RIGHT WHERE WE BELONG:
HOW REFUGEE TEACHERS AND STUDENTS
ARE CHANGING THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION***

BY SARAH DRYDEN-PETERSON

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2022. XI + 261 PAGES

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In *Right Where We Belong: How Refugee Teachers and Students Are Changing the Future of Education*, Sarah Dryden-Peterson highlights the innovative and resilient approaches taken by refugee teachers and students to overcome the educational challenges posed by displacement. Supported by 15 years of ethnographic observation, Dryden-Peterson's research blends rigorous qualitative methods with compelling narratives, gathered through more than 600 interviews conducted in 23 countries, that document the experiences of refugee teachers and students. Her methodology, which includes extensive field observations, ensures that the findings are grounded in diverse experiences and that they capture how policy has shaped the refugees' educational journeys. By linking individual stories to broader education and social theories, Dryden-Peterson effectively illustrates how refugee-led initiatives are transforming education in emergencies (EiE) and providing stability and hope for displaced communities.

Dryden-Peterson's broad study sample is drawn from conflict-affected countries including Uganda, Somalia, Lebanon, and South Africa. She explores how grassroots education practices challenge traditional top-down models and advocate for more inclusive and community-driven approaches. Dryden-Peterson highlights the value of flexible education frameworks that can be adapted to refugee students' varying levels of prior education and calls for the decentralization of education systems to promote localized decisionmaking. She examines how schools can serve as sanctuaries that provide stability and identity for refugee students while addressing power dynamics, building self-reliance, and incorporating refugees' experiences into the curricula. Her analysis reveals how policy decisions about school placement, language of instruction, and curricular frameworks can shape refugee students' integration and success, and how these policies influence their academic outcomes and their sense of identity and belonging.

Dryden-Peterson highlights the agency and leadership of refugee teachers and students. Her grassroots perspective reveals the innovative solutions that are emerging from refugee communities and focuses a unique lens on how EiE can be shaped by those most affected. Dryden-Peterson's approach, which centers on local agency, demonstrates the potential of community-driven education practices to address the challenges of displacement and to foster resilience and adaptability in ways that external interventions might not be able to. Her approach contributes meaningfully to the discourse on refugee education and emphasizes the importance of empowering refugees to lead their own educational journeys.

The theme of *Right Where We Belong*, which is organized into thematic chapters on sanctuary, power, purpose, and learning, aligns with and builds on current EiE research and practices. By emphasizing the need for education systems to be flexible and responsive to the unique needs of displaced populations, Dryden-Peterson supports the growing number of scholars who advocate for holistic refugee education models, including Dana Burde, Joanna McIntyre, and Fran Abrams. The EiE literature increasingly calls for innovative forms of education that reflect refugees' lived experiences rather than replicating pre-crisis learning models, and that integrate mental health support, community involvement, and culturally relevant curricula into refugee education programs (Burde 2014; McIntyre and Abrams 2021).

In addition to presenting innovative practices, *Right Where We Belong* is closely aligned with current research trends in EiE. Readers of the *Journal on Education in Emergencies* will find Dryden-Peterson's book particularly relevant due to its alignment with the journal's focus on innovative education responses to crisis. She offers practical examples and theoretical insights that can inform future EiE research, policy, and practice. Her emphasis on refugee educators' and students' agency offers a fresh perspective that is both inspiring and instructive.

Right Where We Belong pairs well with *Refugee Education: Theorising Practice in Schools* by Joanna McIntyre and Fran Abrams (2021), which takes an interdisciplinary approach that emphasizes social justice and offers a framework for creating inclusive educational environments. While Dryden-Peterson highlights how refugee communities shape their own education practices, McIntyre and Abrams focus on policy recommendations for fostering inclusive education. Together these works provide a comprehensive view of refugee education and offer a balance of practical strategies with a deep understanding of community-driven approaches. Both books are essential reads for those committed to improving education for displaced populations.

The primary merit of *Right Where We Belong* lies in its ability to humanize the refugee education crisis through detailed personal stories, while also providing actionable insights for policymakers and educators. For instance, Dryden-Peterson emphasizes the importance of community-driven education initiatives and encourages policymakers to support refugee-led schools and programs that are adaptable to the specific needs of displaced populations. She advocates for the integration of mental health services, culturally relevant curricula, and community-driven education practices. By advocating for the involvement of refugees in decisionmaking processes and for providing platforms for their voices, Dryden-Peterson highlights the need for policies that prioritize sustainable education systems and address the unique social and emotional needs of displaced learners.

While Dryden-Peterson's qualitative approach offers valuable insights, there are areas where *Right Where We Belong* could benefit from a more nuanced analysis. One such area is the role of language in refugee education. Dryden-Peterson acknowledges the challenges refugees face in learning new languages, but she could have delved deeper into how language policies influence both academic success and cultural identity. For many refugees, losing their native language in educational settings can feel like cultural erasure. A closer examination of multilingual education models that balance the preservation of refugees' native languages with teaching in the host-country language could provide richer insights into fostering both academic success and a sense of belonging.

Another area that merits further exploration is the sustainability of community-driven education practices in different refugee contexts. While Dryden-Peterson highlights grassroots initiatives, she could have given more attention to the challenges refugees face in sustaining these efforts, particularly when refugee-led initiatives encounter limited resources or local political tensions. Addressing these obstacles would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how community-driven practices can succeed over the long term.

Right Where We Belong is a valuable resource for anyone involved in EiE—from practitioners and policymakers to academics and students—because it offers both theoretical insights and practical applications. Dryden-Peterson's extensive research, combined with real-world examples of successful refugee-led initiatives, provides a comprehensive toolkit for those working to improve educational outcomes for displaced populations. Her recommendations on community involvement, flexible policies, and the integration of emotional and social support make the book an essential guide for shaping more inclusive and effective education practices in refugee settings.

BOOK REVIEW

My experiences as a teacher in Afghanistan, a student in India, and now a professional in the United States resonate with the depiction in *Right Where We Belong* of having to navigate diverse education systems to support students in conflict-affected regions. The book is a valuable addition to the EiE literature, as it offers a nuanced view of how refugee-led education fosters inclusive and resilient education systems. It highlights the challenges faced by refugee students and teachers while celebrating their innovative contributions. Drawing from my own experiences, I can affirm that this work captures the essence of striving for stability and success amid adversity. It is an inspiring read for anyone involved in education or humanitarian work, and it underscores the critical role community-led education initiatives play in shaping the future of displaced populations.

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