

Book Review: *Citizen Identity Formation of Domestic Students and Syrian Refugee Youth in Jordan: Centering Student Voice and Arab-Islamic Ontologies* by Patricia K. Kubow

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BOOK REVIEW

CITIZEN IDENTITY FORMATION OF DOMESTIC STUDENTS AND SYRIAN REFUGEE YOUTH IN JORDAN:

CENTERING STUDENT VOICE AND ARAB-ISLAMIC ONTOLOGIES

BY PATRICIA K. KUBOW

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Education in the Middle East, and across the world, is a key arena in which to address societal divisions and exert governmental control by constructing certain visions of identity and citizenship. Refugee education in particular creates an interesting paradox for the refugee-hosting countries in the region. Many refugees—Syrian refugees in Jordan and Türkiye, for example, and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon—are exposed to identity formation through the host-country curricula while lacking citizenship and without any foreseeable pathway toward such legal status. In *Citizen Identity Formation of Domestic Students and Syrian Refugee Youth in Jordan: Centering Student Voice and Arab-Islamic Ontologies*, Patricia K. Kubow contributes to our understanding of constructions of citizen identity and a sense of belonging by exploring the perspectives and experiences of both refugee and host-country students in Jordan.

Kubow's primary objectives in *Citizen Identity Formation* are to understand more fully how school-age Arab youth view their social and civic identities in contexts of protracted displacement, and what role formal schooling plays in forming and transforming these identities. Kubow specifically addresses four questions: "(1) What are the professed citizen identities of school-aged Syrian refugees and Jordanian girls and boys? (2) What role does public schooling play in fostering particular citizen identities? (3) In what ways do the students' citizen ontologies converge or diverge by gender and/or by country of origin? and, (4) How does the narrative (i.e., collective assemblage of child/youth enunciation) affirm or contest dominant citizenship discourses in Jordan?" (pp. 29-30). Kubow explores these questions by applying process philosophy, a philosophical approach "centered on ontology and concerned with the dynamic sense of being as becoming or occurrence" (p. 2). In keeping with this approach, she focuses on social interactions and on how youths' citizen identity is constructed within their social world. To center youth voices and experience in the study, Kubow conducted focus groups with Jordanian students and Syrian refugees who attend public double-shift schools in Amman, Jordan.¹ The students are in grades 5-11 and range in age from 10 to 18. She conducted separate focus groups with the Jordanian students and the Syrian students, during which she

¹ In these schools, Jordanian students attend school in the morning, refugee students in the afternoon. Jordanian teachers teach the national curriculum in both shifts.

asked them to share their views on identity, sense of belonging, and the role of schools in citizen identity formation.

The book consists of seven chapters. The first two chapters focus on the study context and methods used, followed by five chapters that examine the findings. Chapters 3-6 present findings from the separate groups of students: chapter 3 focuses on Syrian refugee boys (grades 6-10), chapter 4 on Syrian refugee girls and Jordanian girls (grades 7-10), chapter 5 on Jordanian boys (grades 6-9), and chapter 6 on Jordanian girls (grades 5-8) and Syrian refugee girls (grades 8-11). Each of these four chapters addresses the same research questions and explores numerous thematic areas, including sense of belonging, negotiating multiple identities, inclusion and exclusion for refugees, civic duties and loyalties, and gender as a signifier of identity. Finally, chapter 7 synthesizes the findings across the sampled groups and discusses where the students' views on identity, citizenship, and schooling converge and diverge.

Overall, the findings indicate that both Jordanian and Syrian students consider an Arab-Islamic identity to be central to their civic identities and sense of belonging. Many of these students have built their civic identities around Islamic values and talked about their desire for a pan-Arab Islamic unity fostered by a shared language, shared religion, and shared history and geography. In addition to their Arab-Islamic identities, the Jordanian students expressed allegiance to their Jordanian identity and the state. Kubow argues that the Jordanian students' constructions of civic identity largely align with the school curriculum, which is focused on Jordanian identity, Arab unity, and Islamic values. Syrian students, on the other hand, feel "marginalized and alienated" in the segregated double-shift schools, and they struggle with having a sense of inclusion in Jordanian society (p. 153).

Kubow's book is a timely and important contribution to the fields of education in emergencies and refugee studies, as there is currently a strong global policy shift toward including forcibly displaced children and youth in host-country education systems. Rather than providing parallel informal education pathways, this policy promotes refugees' access to publicly funded education institutions and national services on the same basis as the children of the host community (UNHCR 2012). While there is great variation in the ways inclusion in national systems is understood and implemented, it generally occurs in two ways: (1) refugees and nationals learn side by side in the same classrooms in national schools; and (2) refugees and nationals study in separate spaces, but refugees follow the host-state curriculum, take the host-state national examinations, and receive certification from the host country (Dryden-Peterson et al. 2019).

In many contexts where refugees are included in the national system, they continue to attend segregated schools or classrooms, which is shown in this book through the case of Syrian refugees attending Jordan's double-shift schools. Although the author does not explicitly address refugee inclusion versus integration in the book, the findings

support the literature stating that physical or structural access to national systems (i.e., inclusion) may not translate into integration—meaning in this case refugees’ identity transformation and their sense of belonging in the host community (Bellino and Dryden-Peterson 2019; Dryden-Peterson et al. 2019). As this book also shows, refugee integration may not occur through their structural inclusion in national systems if they are not offered any future opportunities (e.g., sociocultural or economic integration) or a pathway toward citizenship. Despite efforts to include them in national education systems, refugee students may continue to feel marginalized and to struggle for acceptance and a sense of belonging.

Citizen Identity Formation has two main limitations to consider when drawing conclusions from the findings of Kubow’s study. First, although the book identifies the role of schooling in citizen identity formation as a key area of focus, it offers limited insights into how social and civic identities are presented in the curricula and instruction. The author attempts to provide this information using the student focus group data and the existing literature, rather than, for example, conducting curriculum analyses or teacher observations. This is a valid approach; however, both the literature presented and the students’ reflections on their schooling fail to provide a full picture of how identity and citizenship are formed within Jordan’s education system. Without a better understanding of identity formation in Jordan’s public schools, it is difficult to conclude whether or to what extent the schools play a role in fostering the identities the students discussed in the focus groups.

Second, given that identity formation is at the center of the study, a more detailed description of the sample, with a focus on students’ backgrounds, would have significantly enhanced the interpretation of the findings. The book only provides information about students’ national identities (Jordanian or Syrian) and gender, their age, their schools, and their grade levels. We do not learn facts about their life histories, which are critical to their identity formation, such as how many of the Jordanian students are of Palestinian origin; how many of the Syrian students were born and raised in Jordan and how many come from Syria; and where the Syrian students came from in Syria and when. For example, one key finding is how salient the Arab Islamic identity, as promoted in Jordanian schools, is to the students, including both Jordanian and Syrian students. However, without any information on the students’ backgrounds, it is difficult to argue that the Jordanian schools played a key role in this outcome, at least for the Syrian students, because Sunni Muslims—the central constituents in Syria—have been historically devout, and Arab nationalism has long played a key role in Syrian politics and social life, including in education (Guvén 2018; Phillips 2015). As such, it would have been helpful to understand these students’ constructions of identity, both in the present and in relation to the past.

Kubow's book is a valuable resource for scholars of citizenship education and those who make policy on refugee inclusion. Although the Middle East has grappled with humanitarian crises and protracted displacement for decades, there is still scarce evidence on how refugees' civic identities and sense of belonging are being altered (or not) in the host countries, especially through education. This book makes an important contribution to building this evidence base for the region, while also revealing an important disconnect between refugee inclusion and refugee integration for a broader audience.

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