



When the Personal Becomes the Professional: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Syrian Refugee Educators

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# WHEN THE PERSONAL BECOMES THE PROFESSIONAL: EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SYRIAN REFUGEE EDUCATORS

ELIZABETH ADELMAN

## ABSTRACT

*Teachers play a central role in supporting students whose lives have been disrupted by crisis, yet the teachers providing education to refugee students often are refugees themselves. This article explores how being a teacher influences the experience of being a refugee and, conversely, how the experience of being a refugee influences the teacher's role. I present portraits of two Syrian educators living as refugees in Lebanon who are working to educate refugee students. I find that that these two educators struggle to balance their teaching obligations with the realities of living as refugees themselves. While global frameworks depict refugee educators as having the power to prepare a new generation of Syrian students, these educators feel powerless to transcend the social, economic, and political barriers constructed around them in Lebanon. In their personal lives, these educators struggle with a loss of hope and psychological exhaustion, yet they are expected, and expect themselves, to project hopefulness and psychological strength in the classroom. While the educators welcome the opportunity to reclaim a professional identity, their work often leaves them with a sense of frustration and loss. These findings support the need to improve the support provided refugee teachers.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Dalia, a soft-spoken 26-year-old, appears many years older as she recounts the exact moment her family decided to leave Syria, due to the ongoing conflict.<sup>1</sup> “A rocket landed right next to our house . . . The glass was scattered and everyone was screaming; I will never forget the scene.” Since arriving in Lebanon as a refugee, Dalia has worked as a teacher in a non-formal school for Syrian refugee students.<sup>2</sup> Dalia knows her experiences of being a refugee and being a teacher of refugees are intertwined, and she describes how she tries to separate her work from the personal difficulties of her past and her present. “When I enter the class, I leave everything behind and enter with the mentality that we are coming to school to learn, have fun, and play,” she explains. Dalia has chosen this approach, as it gives her a necessary respite from the personal challenges she struggles with as a refugee. However, Dalia also realizes that her refugee experiences guide the pedagogical decisions she makes in the classroom and enable her to make a strong connection with her students. Framed within the concept of teacher identity, this paper explores the ways teachers like Dalia negotiate the tensions inherent in the experience of teaching while being a refugee, and how this process influences their work and their well-being.

Teachers play a central role in supporting students whose lives have been disrupted by crisis (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies [INEE] 2010; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2012; Winthrop and Kirk 2008). However, the teachers providing education to a refugee population often are refugees themselves (Kirk 2010; Penson 2013; Sesnan et al. 2013). Being both refugees and teachers, these individuals negotiate a continual tension between the expectations of their professional roles and the limitations inherent in their position as refugees. As educators, they are figures of authority and knowledge who are expected to support students’ academic and social development and emotional recovery (INEE 2010; UNHCR 2012; Winthrop and Kirk 2008). As refugees, their positions in their host communities in a country of exile are often marginalized. Teachers face many of the same difficult realities of living in exile as their students, including loss of home and family, economic stress, and continued uncertainty about their future (Sesnan et al. 2013).

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1 Schools and participants have been given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

2 In this paper, non-formal schools refers to programs implemented outside of the formal public school system (Coombs and Ahmed 1974).

Much of the literature related to refugee teachers focuses on system-level challenges, such as the supply and retention of teachers, and on classroom-level challenges, including language of instruction and pedagogical approaches (Burde et al. 2015; Mendenhall et al. 2015; Richardson, MacEwen, and Naylor 2018; West and Ring 2015). Overlooked within the research on refugee teachers is an exploration of teacher identity formation, a crucial element in the way teachers define and develop their work (Day et al. 2006). This paper considers how tensions between their personal and professional experiences shape refugee teachers' identities and, as a result, influence their abilities in the classroom, their commitment to the profession, and their emotional well-being. This research draws from interviews with 42 Syrian educators who are living as refugees in Lebanon and educating refugees enrolled in non-formal schools. For the teachers in this study, experiences of displacement and loss of identity, tensions between professional agency and personal powerlessness, and the dissonance between teaching hope while personally experiencing hopelessness had important bearing on how they approached their responsibilities and imagined their own futures. I present the main findings from this research through the narratives of two of these educators, Alma and Haroun. These portraits provide a nuanced understanding of the processes through which refugee educators reconcile their different personal and professional identities as refugees and teachers, and the specific contextual circumstances that shape their teaching.

This research extends the study of teacher identity, explored most often in Western settings, into the context of refugee education, where educators' personal experiences as refugees often collide with the professional expectations they face as teachers. By exploring the relative importance of professional identity formation in circumstances significantly different from those in which these themes have traditionally been studied, it also adds to the existing theoretical perspectives on occupational identity formation, wherein the influence of sociocultural contexts and other primary identities such as gender, religion, and nationhood is recognized but has never been studied relative to the refugee experience (Phinney and Baldelomar 2011). Furthermore, understanding how refugee teachers' identities are shaped and formed, and how these identities are tried and tested, suggests that there are more effective ways to support refugee teachers in their work and in their personal lives.

**TEACHER IDENTITY: PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL**

Teacher identity is a key influence on how teachers work, learn, and develop within their profession (Day et al. 2007; Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Bransford 2005). However, scholars have yet to agree on a precise definition of teacher identity (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004; Sfard and Prusak 2005). Instead, most research on teacher identity focuses on how it is constructed. Identity formation collapses boundaries between the personal and the professional (Alsup 2006), suggesting that professional identity is influenced by and constructed from “personal histories, patterned behavior, and future concerns” (Akkerman and Meijer 2011, 316). Expanding on this understanding, Sachs (2005) argues that teacher identity is “negotiated through experience” as teachers develop “their own ideas of ‘how to be,’ ‘how to act,’ and ‘how to understand’ their work and their place in society” (15). Experience and emotion are essential components of the discussion of professional identity in general. However, key to teacher identity formation in particular is the interaction of experiences and emotions situated both within and outside the professional sphere. This framing suggests two different aspects of teacher identity, one entwined with professional responsibility and one related to personal experience. Considering teacher identity formation through the lens of refugeehood unearths more complex ways these two spheres may interact. Furthermore, situating teacher identity within the dynamic relationship between professional and personal experiences aligns with the important influence this construct has on teachers’ practice and development.

In the last few decades, extensive research has sought to understand teacher identity formation as an essential mechanism for improving individuals’ preparation for the teaching profession, for supporting professional growth and motivation, and for strengthening connections and relationships across the profession (Akkerman and Meijer 2011; Rodgers and Scott 2008). The ways teachers develop and form their identities as educators also have an impact on their effectiveness in the classroom, particularly in terms of how they relate to their students and how they adjust their practice and their beliefs to meet the diverse and changing needs of learners (Day et al. 2006). Teacher identity is also linked to teacher agency, understood here as an educator’s ability to pursue the goals they value in their classroom and in their profession (Day et al. 2006). Feeling confident and comfortable in “how to be,” “how to act,” and “how to understand” empowers teachers’ sense of agency and enhances their ability to implement new ideas, bring positive change to the classroom, and continue their professional growth (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Olsen 2008).

Teacher identity also is strongly related to their personal development, particularly in terms of emotional well-being. Developing a positive professional identity supports a teacher's self-esteem, self-efficacy, and ability to adapt and persevere in the face of challenging and changing circumstances (Day et al. 2006; Gu and Day 2007). However, when a teacher's well-being is jeopardized or simply not prioritized, their investment in and commitment to their professional identity, and thus to their work, is weakened (Day and Leitch 2001). The importance of teacher well-being relative to their professional practice has been well documented in Western contexts (see, for example, Lam 2019; Duckworth, Quinn, and Seligman 2009; Collie et al. 2015), and various interventions have been designed to foster teacher development, including professional learning communities, mentoring opportunities, and stress management support (Naghieh et al. 2015; Wenger 1998).

In contrast, research on mechanisms to support teachers' well-being in contexts of conflict and forced migration, where the stress and strain they experience is arguably heightened, is limited (Falk et al. 2019). Studies in these settings suggest that strengthening social support, working conditions, and professional development opportunities for teachers can have a positive influence on their well-being (Falk et al. 2019; Frisoli 2014; Kirk and Winthrop 2008; Wolf, Torrente, McCoy et al. 2015; Wolf, Torrente, Frisoli et al. 2015). Yet, there is a scarcity of studies exploring the specific experience of refugee teachers' identity formation (see, for example, Kirk 2010; Penson 2013; Sesnan et al. 2013). What data are available suggest that refugee teachers face challenges that impact both their personal and professional identity formation. These include personal difficulties such as struggles with poverty, discrimination by members of the host community, and the psychological strain of managing loss and displacement (Falk et al. 2019; Sesnan et al. 2013). Refugee teachers also are often unable to work in host country schools, due to social, political, or language barriers. They instead find positions in non-government schools or schools serving only refugees, which may mean lower pay, longer hours, and less job security (Mendenhall, Gomez, and Varni 2018; Sesnan et al. 2013). Refugee teachers' personal and professional circumstances may also interact with their pedagogical and ideological approaches, which can influence what and how they teach (Lopes Cardozo and Shah 2016). Some teachers' refugee experiences serve as a resource for teaching tolerance and understanding to students who are living in a society divided by conflict. In other settings, however, their backgrounds mark them as outsiders, restrict their agency in class, and hinder their ability to progress professionally (Perumal 2015; Kirk 2010).

## TEACHER IDENTITY: TENSIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS

Regardless of geographic location, developing a professional identity is complicated when a teacher feels personally marginalized or like a social outsider. Individual and collective experiences and assumptions related to race, gender, class, and, in this case, refugee status impact the ways teachers experience their work. This points out the importance of considering how broader contextual settings and social relationships influence teachers' personal and professional identities (Alsup 2006). The tension and discord inherent in pairing the identity of teacher with the identity of woman have been deeply explored in the North American and European literature (see, for example, Acker 1989; Casey 1993; Dillabough 1999; Munro 1998). Walkerdine (1990) suggests that female teachers in Western society embody an "impossible fiction" (19), a contradiction between the identity of teacher, which is associated with power, authority, status, and respect, and the position of woman, which is often seen as secondary, subservient, powerless, and marginalized. Kirk (2004) extends the concept of impossible fiction beyond Western settings to explore the personal and professional experiences of female teachers working in Pakistan. The author argues that impossible fiction describes not a state of irreconcilable differences but "a constant tension between possibility and impossibility," as well as the "fact and fiction" (379) inherent in the work of women teachers relative to broader policy aims and expectations. Kirk demonstrates the considerable disconnect between what she refers to as the official conceptualization of the role of women teachers in general and the lived experiences of women teachers in Pakistan.

For refugee teachers working with refugee students, the tension between possible and impossible, powerful and powerless is often magnified. In their professional roles as teachers of refugees, these educators are considered important members of the school community: individuals who have the knowledge, power, and agency to ensure the growth and development of a generation of children (Kirk and Winthrop 2008; Vongalis-Macrow 2006; Winthrop and Kirk 2008). They also are expected to impart academic knowledge, bring a sense of stability and normalcy to children's lives, promote peace-building and ideals of citizenship, nurture students' psychosocial well-being, and embody a promise of a better future (INEE 2010; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2006; UNHCR 2012; Winthrop and Kirk 2008). Yet, outside of school, in the eyes of the host community, these educators are bound by the "master status" (Gonzales 2015, xix) of refugee, a status that supplants all other experiences and identities. As refugees, these educators are temporarily in a state of limbo and uncertainty, and they often are powerless to alter the structures, policies, and



practices that so sharply mark their experiences of displacement (Penson 2013; Sesnan et al. 2013). How, then, do the experiences of being a refugee and being a teacher intersect? How do refugee teachers navigate the impossible fictions inherent in these identities?

## REFUGEES IN LEBANON

Since 2011, Syria has experienced devastating violence and destruction. Between 2011 and 2018, more than 400,000 individuals lost their lives on account of the civil war (Human Rights Watch 2018). Lebanon currently hosts close to one million registered Syrian refugees (UNHCR 2018); the exact number is unknown and is likely higher, as the government suspended the registration of new refugees in May 2015 (UNHCR, United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], and World Food Programme [WFP] 2017). In Lebanon, refugees face political, social, and economic barriers that significantly impact their ability to live and work in the country. Because the Government of Lebanon (GoL) is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Syrians residing in Lebanon are not legally recognized as refugees under international law. The GoL permits individuals seeking safety to reside in the country, but it exercises its right to implement laws that restrict their legal and living conditions. For example, Syrian refugees must obtain a legal residency permit to remain in Lebanon. Due to the relatively high cost of applying for and renewing residency permits, only 26 percent of Syrian adult refugees have legal residency in Lebanon (UNHCR, UNICEF, and WFP 2017).<sup>3</sup> Many Syrians who lack legal papers limit their movement within the country to avoid military checkpoints and possible deportation (Lebanese Center for Human Rights 2016).

Employment opportunities for Syrian refugees in Lebanon are also severely restricted. They may obtain legal work permits, but only for jobs in construction, agriculture, and cleaning services (Khater 2017). Syrian refugees who are educators are effectively banned from working in official schools. Due to the complexity and cost of obtaining a work permit and the restrictions on the types of positions available, most Syrian refugees work in the informal sector (Errighi and Griesse 2016). For example, refugee educators who want to continue in their profession are allowed to work only in non-formal education centers, where the salaries and job security are often poor.

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<sup>3</sup> In 2017, the GoL decided to waive the yearly \$200 fee to renew legal residency papers, and it is expected that a greater number of Syrian refugees will now be able to obtain legal status.



Syrian refugees in Lebanon also confront discrimination and xenophobia in public and private spaces (El Gantri and El Mufti 2017). Politicians and media outlets often blame Syrian refugees for Lebanon's worsening economy and continued security concerns, rhetoric that has exacerbated tensions and increased the likelihood of violence toward refugees (Geha and Talhouk 2018; Yahya, Kassir, and El-Hariri 2018). Some municipalities have chosen to close all Syrian-run businesses and implement curfews for the Syrian refugees. Others have forced Syrian refugees out of the community altogether. In addition to systemic discrimination, Syrian refugees commonly report negative encounters with Lebanese citizens, including incidents of harassment, bullying, and physical abuse (Yahya et al. 2018).

## METHODOLOGY

In this paper, I explore how being a teacher influences the experience of being a refugee and, conversely, how the experience of being a refugee influences the teacher's role. I demonstrate these influences by presenting portraits of two Syrian refugee educators, Alma and Haroun, who work in different non-formal schools in Lebanon. Portraiture is a qualitative social science methodology that seeks to "capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis 1997, 3). The portraits of Alma and Haroun provide an intricate understanding of how two individuals make sense of their experiences as refugees and as educators, how they make decisions relative to these experiences, and how the specific social, cultural, and political environments in which they are situated influence these processes.

To construct these portraits, I drew from multiple data sources, including two semi-structured interviews with Alma and three with Haroun, ten full-day visits to Alma's school and twelve to Haroun's. The school visits provided the opportunity to engage in informal conversations with both participants about their work and their lives, and to make seven observations of Alma during meetings with students, teachers, and program staff and eight observations of Haroun teaching. Though I focus on Alma's and Haroun's narratives, this analysis is informed by 42 interviews with refugee educators and 116 school and classroom observations across four non-formal schools, including the two schools where Alma and Haroun worked. I collected data for this research from January 2015 to December 2016, which included 18 months of fieldwork in Lebanon. When I was not in Lebanon, I maintained virtual contact with participants using electronic media such as Skype and WhatsApp. The teachers came from a wide variety

of backgrounds and experience. They had an average of five years of teaching experience. Some (19 percent) had taught for more than ten years, and others (34 percent) started teaching upon becoming a refugee in Lebanon. Almost all the teachers had either graduated from university (74 percent) or completed some higher education (22 percent). The majority of teachers (71 percent) had been living in Lebanon for three to four years, while the rest (29 percent) had arrived one to two years before our contact. Alma's and Haroun's experiences encapsulate the most prevalent themes found across my interviews with educators (a term I use to refer to both teachers and principals): tensions regarding identity, agency, power, and hope. Alma and Haroun also represent the two important demographic groups in my data: educators with families and children to tend to, and educators with no family commitments in Lebanon. In the discussion section below, I draw from the larger set of interviews in order to integrate the voices of other teachers into my findings.

I selected schools based on physical location and educational structure, and with consideration for my safety. Three schools, including where Alma taught, were located in Lebanon's rural Beqaa Governorate, where the majority of Syrian refugees reside. The school where Haroun taught was located in the urban capital of Beirut, which is host to the second largest number of Syrian refugees worldwide (UNHCR 2018). Within these governorates, I focused on locations that my network of friends, family, and colleagues in Lebanon believed were safe enough for me, a woman from the United States, to travel through alone. I also purposefully sought out non-formal schools that aimed to provide a structured education program, as the role of the teachers in these settings was more clearly defined. This criterion significantly reduced the number of possible sites, as most educational programming provided to Syrian refugees outside the public school system does not re-create a formal academic environment. The four non-formal schools in this study followed the Lebanese curriculum using Lebanese textbooks, taught the same core subjects as the Lebanese public schools, and had structured academic goals for each grade level, which students were required to pass. The schools were managed by two nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that had no religious or sectorial affiliations. At each school, I interviewed every teacher and principal interested in participating in this study. I conducted most interviews in Arabic with help from a local translator, while some educators, including Haroun, spoke fluent English. I audio recorded, transcribed, and, when necessary, sent these interviews out for translation. I coded transcripts and field notes using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. The final set of codes I used for this analysis included "personal journey," "professional identity," and "envisioning the future."

As this research reflects the experiences of a select group of Syrian refugee teachers working in Lebanon, it is not possible to draw broad generalizations from the findings. The insights these teachers provided are directly related to the conditions they are facing, conditions that may be quite different from refugee teachers working in other countries or even in other settings in Lebanon. However, this research is an important starting point for documenting the relationship between the personal and professional experiences of refugee teachers, and for building a broader understanding of the complexities of their work.

## FINDINGS

In this section, I present the portraits of Alma and Haroun. Alma's narrative sheds light on the life-altering event of becoming a refugee and how returning to the role of educator has helped her reestablish an identity lost. Haroun's narrative affords a direct view into the classroom and illuminates the complex interplay between teaching refugee students and being a refugee.

### ALMA: ON BECOMING A REFUGEE EDUCATOR

From Beirut, the journey to Lebanon's Beqaa Valley entails a twisting, harrowing drive along the Damascus Highway, up and over the steep Daher Al Baydar mountain range. The highway continues across Lebanon's border and into Syria's capital city of Damascus. The road, an essential artery between the hearts of these neighboring countries, pulsates with a constant stream of cars and trucks, people and goods. Historically, Syrian laborers traveled across the border on a seasonal basis to cultivate the many crops this region produces. However, when the conflict in Syria began, the porous border became an important corridor for flight. Syrians with and without ties to the valley crossed into Lebanon and settled into neighboring communities, staying for years instead of weeks.

Tanmia School is one of a handful of non-formal schools in the Beqaa Valley, all recently opened to serve the sudden influx of refugee students. A long, uneven dirt road runs from the surrounding community to the school, a path that seems to mark separation as opposed to connection. On this morning, four blue-and-white buses bounce along the route and into the school parking lot. Children spill out of the vehicles, their voices infusing the serene surroundings with new energy. Teachers and staff members are careful observers of the ensuing disorder. Alma, the school's principal, is a notable presence among the gathered adults, her broad, strong frame wrapped in a long dark housecoat, her hair hidden under

a soft brown scarf. Students quickly notice her stern glare and within moments are standing single file behind their teachers, waiting their turn to be ushered into the school building.

Alma may be strict with her students, but each time I walk into her office she envelops me in a large embrace, as if our last encounter took place many months ago. Hidden behind Alma's quiet demeanor is an engine of energy and persistence that she continues to fuel, regardless of the challenges set in her path. At the age of 43, she has many professional accomplishments, including earning a degree in electrical engineering, managing a successful family construction business, and working as a teacher in multiple educational settings. This is her second year as the principal of Tanmia School and her fourth year as a refugee in Lebanon.

Today is one of the first times I see Alma's smile melt away, albeit briefly, as she recounts her experience of becoming a refugee in Lebanon, a harrowing tale of back-and-forth migration as she sought to protect the lives and the futures of her children and family. On their first flight, Alma, her husband, their two teenage sons, and young daughter left their home in a Damascus suburb after being informed that the area would soon be raided by local militia. "We were told that we were going to be pulled out of our houses and killed if we did not leave. In half an hour, I left the house that I had been living in for six years." They fled to a family home in a neighborhood a few hours away, not realizing that area was also under attack. After a rocket passed by the kitchen window, Alma took the risky decision to bundle her three children back into the car and flee yet again. "I felt that, at any minute, a rocket was going to hit the house and we were going to die. My son Ahmed put his fish in a glass and my other son brought his birds as well, because he did not want to leave them behind . . . We were in the car in 30 seconds." Together they moved to yet another temporary home.

Despite the escalating violence throughout Syria, Alma struggled with the decision to move her family to Lebanon, as it meant choosing between the need for safety and continuing her children's education. "For me, learning is sacred. I am willing to lose everything, but I want my sons to be educated." After an armed militant pulled her eldest son from their taxi and tried to kill him as she pleaded for his life, Alma finally decided that Syria was simply too dangerous for her children. Alma's husband and younger son crossed the border first while she stayed to enroll her eldest child at a university, the only way to postpone his forced enlistment in the Syrian army. But then, in the middle of the night, her house was raided and the neighborhood bombed. Alma forsook all her family's important paperwork in a terrifying scramble for her life, narrowly escaping down the back steps of the

apartment building, hands tightly entwined with those of her daughter and son, as armed militiamen stomped up the front steps. Alma and her children found shelter that evening and left the next day for Lebanon, knowing they would not be returning to Syria for a long time.

In her flight across the Lebanese border, Alma abandoned more than just documentation. Her identities of electrical engineer, businesswoman, and teacher were left behind in Syria, replaced in Lebanon by the label of “refugee.” A combination of national policies prohibiting Syrians from entering the workforce and anti-Syrian discrimination made it difficult for Alma to find decent employment. She first worked in various NGOs, getting a “volunteer” salary of less than US\$100 a month from each organization. Her salary in each position was a fraction of what her Lebanese counterparts were earning—a fact Alma found emotionally demeaning. “This used to affect us psychologically because we were working very hard, yet being paid so little.” Although she received little economic reward, Alma continued to work, as her identity had for so long been defined by her professional activity.

Navigating the tensions between professional aspirations and societal limitations was not a new experience for Alma. Back in Syria, Alma initially moved into teaching after realizing that, as a woman, her accomplishments as an electrical engineer in her husband’s business would always be overlooked. “People only recognize[d] that my husband was the one working. I was invisible.” Becoming a teacher brought Alma recognition and personal and professional satisfaction. “I loved teaching . . . I felt that I left a mark by making children happy.” Unwilling to abandon the professional identity she had established in Syria, Alma searched for teaching opportunities in Lebanon, despite national labor laws banning her from working in public schools. Looking around her own community, Alma quickly realized that, like her own sons, a high number of refugee children had no access to school. Alma remembered thinking, “Who is going to teach those students?” Appointing herself as the solution, Alma decided to open a school in her living room for out-of-school refugee youth. Her landlord eventually blocked her efforts and closed the school, but, not long after, Alma was contacted by an NGO that was establishing a new non-formal school in the area. She interviewed to be a teacher, but after multiple conversations with the education team, the organization finally convinced Alma to accept a position as the first principal of Tanmia School.

Returning to the role of educator has given Alma a renewed sense of professional accomplishment. Instead of offering classes to a handful of children in her living room, Alma now oversees the education of around 700 refugee students a year, which means, she notes, that “the number of people who are benefiting from my work and expertise is more.” Outside school, Alma continues to feel unwelcome in Lebanon, yet inside the school her efforts are appreciated and recognized, even though her salary still is not enough to cover her family’s expenses. “I am happy [at school] because I am working with people who respect us . . . Huda [my Lebanese supervisor] is very kind and respectful towards us. She never makes us feel the way other Lebanese people make us feel. Many make us feel humiliated.” Alma says that as a refugee she often feels powerless, mistreated, and rejected. Working at Tanmia School has given Alma a sense of professional purpose, a reason to command respect and appreciation, and, in the eyes of some Lebanese, an identity above and beyond that of refugee.

However, the school is also a place that reinforces Alma’s refugee status, as it ties her to a space where students, parents, and staff all share this label. At the school, Alma is constantly reminded of the detrimental impact conflict and displacement have had on her community. Teachers have moments of emotional distress, due to their past and present circumstances, at times lashing out at Alma to release their frustration. Many of the families who send their children to Tanmia School face extreme poverty. At harvest time, parents consistently pull their children out of school to work in the fields to augment the family’s income, which causes these students to fall far behind in their studies.

In Syria, Alma would never have permitted such treatment by her colleagues or such disregard for the importance of education, but as a refugee in Lebanon she forgives this behavior, as she too struggles to keep control of her emotions and to keep her family clothed and fed. Alma tries to remain hopeful about the future of all her students but finds it difficult to imagine that they will be successful, given the difficult circumstances they face as refugees. Alma is aware of the tension between the hopelessness she feels and the hopefulness she wants her students to experience. Alma worries about the future of her more accomplished students: “I am not 100 percent sure that they will continue their education. To be honest, there are always doors getting closed in their faces.” She notes how difficult it has been for Syrian refugees to enroll in secondary school in Lebanon, due to missing documents and the challenges of dealing with English as the language of instruction.

Alma has watched doors close on the future of her own children. While she was able to enroll her daughter in elementary school, Alma has not found space in a secondary school for her younger son and cannot afford university tuition for her elder son. Seeing her sons' education stalled is what Alma says is "bothering me the most in our situation in Lebanon," more than the discrimination she experiences or her strained financial status. As if to compensate for her inability to alter the circumstances facing her own family, Alma works tirelessly to meet the needs of the students in her school, including visiting refugee settlements to encourage families to send their children to school and working closely with parents to support children who show signs of neglect or psychological strain. Many times a year, in order to accommodate the large number of children who return to school after being absent for the harvest, Alma reorganizes the students' classrooms and shifts the teachers to different grade levels. Alma admits that teachers often complain loudly and forcefully when she changes their schedules, frustrated that their own professional agency has been overpowered. These administrative struggles have often left Alma feeling ostracized by the other adults at Tanmia School, a community she would like to look to for support, given their shared experience of refugeehood. However, Alma is willing to accept her circumstances if it means she can provide schooling to more students, which she sees as a personal and professional responsibility. "There are students outside waiting for the chance to be given a pen and paper and be told to come to school. My main mission is to get these students educated, even if it means that my feelings get hurt because of what teachers say. We are grown-ups and can tolerate difficult situations; however, those students have a right to learn and should be educated."

Surrounded by the stress of dealing with teachers and families, Alma admits that, "every once in a while, I feel psychologically tired." At those times, she draws personal strength from her professional accomplishments, finding fuel in her role as an educator to continue supporting those who depend on her both inside and outside the school. "If I am not strong, my family will fall apart, and [so will] all the people who depend on me over here [at the school]." Alma says that she "feel[s] responsible for" the teachers in her school and therefore makes an effort to support them as they process the difficult circumstances they are experiencing. However, there are times when she too wishes "to find a person to listen to my concerns," briefly acknowledging the great emotional strain she hides behind a wall of professionalism.



In my final conversation with Alma, I asked if there was anything more she would like to share regarding her experiences working with refugee students. The question elicited a reflection on her feelings not about her work but about refugeehood. Alma explained, “Even though I have been [in Lebanon] for four years, I do not feel at home. I do not feel comfortable. I feel that we are still suffering from the difficulties” carried from Syria. Despite her efforts to re-establish some semblance of her professional identity, the difficulties she carries from the past alongside the complexities of the present are what define her current experience as a refugee educator. Alma again returned to her struggle of finding hope within hopelessness, noting that, like her students, her own future “is not clear.” While she feels great pride in and dedication to her role as an educator, life in Lebanon only continues to become more difficult. Her husband wants to migrate west, a move that would have her yet again negotiating her personal and professional identities. Alma is resigned to this fate, as she knows it is the only opportunity for her children to continue their education. “I think I got my chance out of life,” she explains, pointing to her professional accomplishments. Now she must dream for her children.

#### HAROUN: ON TEACHING REFUGEES

Irada School is buried deep in the heart of Beirut in one of the most congested and impoverished sections of the city. The area is a maze of narrow streets, packed tight with crumbling apartment buildings, tiny bakeries offering fresh *manoushe* pastries, and small grocery shops stuffed to the ceiling with cans of powdered milk, jars of Nescafé, and other daily necessities. The neighborhood, home to a major Palestinian refugee camp, carries the dark memory of the 1982 massacre of Palestinian civilians during the Israeli invasion of Beirut—arguably the bloodiest episode in Lebanese history. The population in this section of the city has grown significantly since Syrian refugees began entering the neighborhood in search of inexpensive housing, adding additional stress to overcrowded buildings, overstretched public services, and overstrained relationships.

Irada School is housed in a long, narrow cement building in the complex of a well-established NGO. Irada’s students and staff members are expected to come and go through the back door so as not to interrupt the classes held for Lebanese students in the other buildings. The first floor of Irada is a large open room, where students line up in the morning and afternoon for general assembly before marching off to class. School staff members and volunteers spent their weekends transforming the space into a place that embraces children and adults alike. The walls are decorated with big, bright, graffiti-style writing; the name “Irada” is

proudly splashed across one, “Syrians forever together” across another. Paintings of flowers, hearts, and peace signs dance around the space. Beirut’s familiar soundtrack of honking cars and screeching motorcycles is inaudible here.

Today I knock on the door of Haroun’s classroom, and within moments I am greeted with a warm smile. Waving his hands next to his ears, Haroun ushers me into the classroom with a loud, excited, high-pitched “Yaaah! Welcome!” Haroun is in his first year of teaching English in Lebanon. He is in his early twenties, has a wiry build and unkempt curly brown hair. His pale cheeks are stained with a few angry patches of red skin that, according to Haroun, have recently developed due to stress. In class, Haroun’s energy is infectious; students buzz around the room and hop in place as they tackle the day’s task. Haroun has split his 18 students into two teams; whichever team fills out the worksheet first wins. The children work avidly, huddled over worksheets in deep secrecy, debating the answers in excited whispers, popping up to murmur a question directly into Haroun’s ear. One girl sits silently in the middle of the commotion, completely unengaged, watching with a blank, empty expression. Haroun leaves her alone, as do the other students. From my vantage point, she looks like a small statue whose garden has been invaded by a flurry of starlings. Her expression and position remain transfixed, despite the ruffling and chirping surrounding her.

The happy, boisterous personality Haroun projects in the classroom is, as he explains, “a performance” he puts on for his students, with the goal of providing them at least one positive experience among so many difficult ones. Outside of class, as this act falls away, Haroun often appears distracted and on edge, nerves rubbed raw by the ongoing battles and concerns he faces outside of school. Haroun moved to Lebanon from Syria in 2011 to escape the violence encroaching on his city and his impending conscription into the Syrian army. In Lebanon, Haroun may not face the same level of physical danger as he did in Syria, but he carries with him the accumulated stress of past memories and the continual frustrations of present challenges.

As a Palestinian refugee from Syria, Haroun suffers from two tiers of discrimination in Lebanon, one rooted in more than 60 years of history and one triggered by current events. Although he considers himself Syrian, due to complex global politics his travel documents only refer to his Palestinian origins. As such, he shares the same status as any longstanding Palestinian refugee in Lebanon, a group that has been consistently marginalized since they first arrived in the country in 1948 seeking safety from an open-ended conflict. Haroun describes becoming a refugee in Lebanon as living “one disappointment after the other,

after the other, after the other, after the other.” He knew leaving Syria “wasn’t going to be easy,” yet he never anticipated the difficulties he would confront in Lebanon, especially those related to his nationality. Each time Haroun has tried to make plans for his future, such as continuing his education, finding a job, or immigrating to another country, he has found his choices and opportunities blocked by his status as a Palestinian refugee from Syria. He recently had to turn down a scholarship to a university in Malaysia, as Lebanese national security would not let him exit the country without a proper visa, one he could not obtain due to his refugee status. Feeling trapped by his own identity, Haroun has taken to speaking English when interacting with Lebanese people to hide his Palestinian accent and avoid discrimination.

For Haroun, the classroom is one of the few places where he can “mentally disconnect” from the barriers he faces as a refugee and focus on the possibilities he identifies in his role as a teacher. Haroun admits that learning English “is not really the purpose all the time” in his classroom. He focuses instead on providing his students with a sense of structure, consistency, and dependability that, through personal experience, he knows is often absent from their lives as refugees. He regularly strays from the English curriculum to focus on lessons related to self-esteem, self-empowerment, and students’ ability to determine their own future. For example, when students complained about the paint peeling from the walls of the classroom, Haroun turned the problem into an opportunity for learning. He told his students, “if a wall is dirty and depressing you . . . just paint over it.” His students spent a day pasting large sheets of paper to the wall and decorating them as they wished. Haroun continued to use the wall as an example for months, with the goal of teaching students that they have the power to change things for the better in their own lives. Similarly, after feeling overwhelmed by the experiences of violence and poverty his students told about in the classroom, Haroun began designing activities to help students identify positive aspects of their lives. Recently, he sent his students home with sticky notes and instructions to label five things a day around their homes that made them happy. In an environment where so little is under their control, Haroun wants his students to realize that they do have some power over their own happiness.

In the classroom, Haroun has learned to take his own lessons to heart. He describes how training himself to see “everything in the classroom [as something] that we can control and change . . . is helping me to look at the positive things” in his own life. This change in mindset has brought him a greater appreciation for the community he has around him, for the safety he has found in Lebanon, and for the opportunities he has to grow as a professional at Irada School. Haroun also

describes the strong sense of hope he gleans from just seeing his students smile. The happiness on their faces reminds him that “life will go on . . . there’s always going to be challenges that can always be overcome because we can still smile, we can still be here to learn.” Haroun reflects, “when they learn a new word, I just feel like I own the world.” His students’ progress gives Haroun a sense of professional accomplishment and reminds him he actually has something important to contribute to the society around him.

However, Haroun admits that, as the roadblocks in his own life have grown higher, he has found it harder to maintain his positive perspective in the classroom. Lately, he has begun questioning the purpose behind his teaching. “What I’m doing is just insane. It’s going nowhere. It’s spinning wheels.” Haroun cannot help but see that all the cards are stacked against his students and, by extension, himself. “I need to believe that they have a bright future, but then there [are] so many, so many overwhelming factors” that stand in the way of their happiness. While the school, the classroom, and the teachers may offer momentary protection, the fact remains that Haroun’s students are poor Syrian refugees who, with little support at home, are struggling to learn. Regardless of the skills he develops or the community he creates, Haroun will never be able to live or work freely in Lebanon. He initially thought their shared refugee background equipped him to teach his students, but after spending time in the classroom, he now feels “sometimes it’s too much of a burden.” Haroun finds it hard to assume the responsibility of so many lives when he is struggling to assert any control over his own future. In these moments, Haroun talks about feeling exhausted, explaining how hard it is to “exert any positive energy” in his professional sphere when circumstances in his personal life feel so daunting. Sometimes, he admits, “I cannot give anymore . . . I just feel completely drained.”

Back in Syria, before the civil war erupted, Haroun saw his life as simple and linear—it was laid out for him in a straight line. But since the violence began, Haroun has started to feel that this line has been “interrupted . . . cut into pieces,” with the “loose ends all over” the map. Outside of school, Haroun has lost a sense of who he is and where he is going. “I used to identify myself with my surroundings, and as my surroundings changed, so did I. But they changed much faster than my ability to process everything [so] that I literally don’t know where I am in life.” Yet, in his position as a teacher, Haroun is grounded in a sense of purpose and belonging and a role that he says gives “my life a meaning,” despite the shadow of uncertainty that falls just outside the classroom door. However, even his identity as an educator feels precarious, and Haroun continually struggles to believe in and work for a new future for himself and his students.

## DISCUSSION

### NAVIGATING THE IMPOSSIBLE FICTION OF TEACHER AND REFUGEE IDENTITIES

The narratives of Alma and Haroun demonstrate how the identity of educator and the identity of refugee merge, diverge, and shift in relation to cultural, social, situational, personal, and professional experiences. Alma's and Haroun's experiences illuminate a number of impossible fictions inherent in the work of refugee teachers: tension between teachers' professional responsibilities and personal powerlessness, dissonance between the hope they are expected to impart and the hopelessness they continually experience, and the psychological toll taken by their challenging past and present circumstances. These tensions are captured in the two teachers' narratives, which echo many experiences shared by educators across the larger sample of individuals interviewed for this research. Below I incorporate the perspectives of other teachers to highlight their similar experiences.

#### POWERFUL OR POWERLESS?

Considering the narratives of Alma and Haroun through a broad contextual lens highlights the contradictions they experience between their status and the agency they have as professionals at their schools and their marginalized, constrained positions as refugees. From this perspective, we see how the tension between power and powerlessness experienced by refugee educators mirrors the "impossible fiction" Walkerdine (1990) identified for female teachers in Western settings, where the workplace offers a level of agency and authority not available in personal settings.

Alma and Haroun described experiencing a sense of daily purpose and belonging as members of their school and the Syrian community. At school they had the power to make decisions that impacted their students and their colleagues and were identified as educators, individuals whose efforts were respected and valued by the children who returned to school each day and the parents who chose to send them there. Yet outside the school walls, Alma's and Haroun's identities were restricted to the "master status" (Gonzales 2015, xix) of refugee. Global and national structures, policies, and practices circumscribed their professional and personal possibilities. Despite their seemingly important role in the education of Syria's next generation, Alma and Haroun continually felt powerless to transcend the social, economic, and political barriers constructed around them in Lebanon,

a contradictory state experienced by refugees across the sample. Batoul, an elementary school teacher and Syrian refugee, quit a better paying teaching position at a Lebanese school because “the looks of pity” and superiority she felt coming from the staff left her “tired emotionally and very stressed,” feelings that impacted her effectiveness in the classroom. Though she experienced greater support working at a non-formal school with students and staff from her own community, Batoul still felt the weight of her refugee status all around her. She described how she could connect with her students because “we share the same misery, the same problems.”

The financial constraints Alma faced in Lebanon were particularly devastating. She moved her family to Lebanon to ensure that her children could continue their education, but without access to a better paying job she was unable to afford university tuition for her son. When Haroun left Syria, he left behind his family, his home, and his sense of citizenship. In Syria, his Palestinian heritage had had a minimal impact on his daily life, yet in Lebanon it exacerbated his position as a refugee and further restricted his rights.

#### LOCATING THE HOPE IN HOPELESSNESS

The tension between the agency Alma and Haroun experienced in their jobs and the limitations they were subject to in their daily lives was replicated and reinforced by their roles in their schools. Given their collective identity as refugees, the educators participating in this study had an intimate understanding of the challenges facing their students, knowledge that influenced their beliefs about their students’ accomplishments. While the label of refugee shared by these educators and their students afforded a feeling of solidarity and connectedness, it simultaneously accentuated the impossibility of having a meaningful and productive present and insecurity about the future. Thus, the second impossible fiction emerging from these narratives is the contradictory position in which refugee teachers find themselves. As teachers, they are expected to instill in their refugee students a sense of agency and a hope for the future, goals that are central to education. Yet, as refugees, they and their students share insecurity about the future and the freedoms they will be able to enjoy.

Alma oversaw the educational development and advancement of hundreds of students, yet she noted the clear contradictions in her work. Her students faced continual barriers to their academic future; as she put it, her students were “always getting doors closed in their faces.” In Lebanon, these same doors were closing

around Alma's own family as her children struggled to continue with their education or find meaningful employment. Haroun tried to imagine a "bright future" for his students, but at times he felt that the challenges present in their homes, their communities, and the broader Lebanese society were too momentous to contend with. While Haroun felt frustrated and hopeless on account of the barriers he and his students faced, he drew motivation and inspiration from his students' dedication to their studies. Their belief in the future helped propel him forward. Other educators in the study vacillated between feelings of hope and hopelessness, between the emotions of their personal and their professional circumstances, and between varying images of the future. In her classroom in a non-formal school, Farah purposefully fostered conversations about the future, encouraging her refugee students to "take advantage" of any opportunity presented in Lebanon and to work toward future success. Privately, however, Farah felt the future was only "becoming darker" for herself, noting that her dreams of building a life and a family seemed "far away" as she struggled to imagine when or where those dreams would materialize. Across the sample, teachers were committed to helping students imagine a more positive future, but the tension these educators experienced between their personal feelings of hope and hopelessness made this work much more difficult, leading them at times to question the purpose of their efforts and jeopardizing their ability to effectively support their students.

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL STRAINS OF PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

In applying the concept of impossible fictions, Kirk (2004) explores the contradictions experienced by female teachers in reestablishing their own lives, tending to their own and their families' psychosocial needs, and developing their own vision for the future. What supports are needed to foster teacher identity among refugee educators and, by extension, to ensure that these individuals continue in their efforts to educate some of the most marginalized populations?

Providing teachers opportunities within their schools to build community with fellow teachers and staff members is one step toward both building teachers' professional identity and mitigating the psychological stress they experience. While Alma, Haroun, and the other educators in the sample shared many of the same personal frustrations and professional concerns, there were no structured mechanisms in their schools to encourage shared problem-solving or provide community support, particularly relative to teachers' personal challenges. These educators also had no opportunity to reflect on their practice or their professional goals. Research on teacher professional learning communities (PLCs) in conflict-affected settings is limited. However, studies set in more stable contexts



suggest that participation in PLCs can support teachers' professional growth and development and lead to their greater well-being (Wenger 1998; Vescio, Ross, and Adams 2008). Implementing PLCs in schools and providing educators with time, training, and support to foster their success may prove an effective mechanism for helping refugee teachers manage stressful events and find ways to use their personal experiences as refugees to strengthen their pedagogy.

In conflict-affected countries, aid organizations focused on child protection sometimes provide counseling to refugee children, often using schools as a convenient location to identify and support children in need of these services. However, refugee teachers are rarely offered the same psychological support services provided to refugee students, despite the fact that, in both stable and fragile contexts, improving teachers' emotional well-being can have a significant impact on how they implement their role, how they persevere in the profession, and how well they meet their students' complex needs (Collie et al. 2015; Duckworth et al. 2009; Lam 2019; Gu and Day 2007; Torrente et al. 2015; Wolf, Torrente, Frisoli et al. 2015). Three of the schools included in this study began offering counseling to educators after this research was concluded. Although the evidence is anecdotal, educators reported feeling less depressed or anxious and more capable of managing stress after these sessions. The counseling also influenced their work, as they reported having greater patience with their students and more confidence about the emotional support they could offer. Participants also saw improvements in their relationships with co-workers and found it easier to talk about and resolve problems that arose in school (education director, Irada School, personal communication, April 6, 2018).

Financial stability was one source of stress shared by all refugee educators interviewed for this research. While almost all participants had advanced degrees, they were unable to access the formal labor market in Lebanon and instead had to settle for lower pay in the informal sector, in this case non-formal schools. Although participants felt fortunate to have an income, their earnings were often not enough to cover basic expenses. Like Alma, many female educators noted that their salaries were the only stable source of income for the family, which created an additional level of complexity in their households as they tried to manage traditional gender roles along with the need to provide financially for the family. Across settings of displacement, investment in salaries for refugee educators is often poor, which leads to challenges in recruitment and retention (West and Ring 2015). For refugee educators who stay in their jobs, low pay may lead to heightened stress and a lack of motivation and investment in the work, factors that negatively impact teacher identity formation (Richardson, MacEwen,

and Naylor 2018). Ensuring that teachers earn a salary that reflects their efforts and the financial reality of their current location is a necessary step in supporting and legitimizing the work of these professionals, whose efforts are vital to the provision of education in complex contexts.

Teachers' experiences as refugees outside the classroom have an important impact on their work as teachers of refugees. Haroun's and Alma's own personal frustrations were compounded by the difficulties they witnessed each day among their students at school. If they are to foster quality education for refugees, global frameworks and funding mechanisms must consider the personal and professional needs of teachers of refugees, who provide the lens through which students see the world around them and the future ahead.

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