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<td><a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2020.1794203">https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2020.1794203</a></td>
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Civic Education and the Education of Refugees

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Published in *Intercultural Education*

**Abstract**

This essay explores the civic education of refugees within the context of a radical global policy shift to include refugees in national education systems. I argue that this shift has promoted structural inclusion of refugees in national schooling but has not adequately engaged with the relational processes of inclusion. I explore two central dilemmas for civic education in this context: the dilemma of nation-state-centric curriculum and national narratives that do not include refugees; and the dilemma of marginalization of refugees within national education systems and limited spaces for refugees to imagine or enact civic behaviors. I examine these dilemmas through a synthesis of existing literature, both historical and contemporary, that addresses civic dimensions of the educational experiences of refugee children while also drawing on my original research with refugee children and in refugee-hosting schools and from interviews with national and global actors. I conclude with reflections on the implications of these dilemmas for future research to inform school-based practices in refugee education.

**Key words**
Refugee education, civic education, migration, curriculum, inequalities

**Article History**
Received 14 March 2020
Accepted 25 June 2020
The structures and content of refugee education have shifted over time, reflecting intersections of local, national, and global interests and enduring negotiation over where power is located in educational decision-making. Refugee education post-World War II was largely designed and delivered at local levels, by and for communities in exile and oriented toward preparing leaders for decolonizing nation-states across Africa and Asia. The Education for All movement, beginning in 1990, recognized “war, occupation, [and] civil strife” as some of the “daunting problems” that “constrain efforts to meet basic learning needs” (World Conference on Education for All, 1990).

Formalization of global commitments through such conventions and declarations, as well as economic globalization that accompanied the post-Cold War era, marked the development of new forms of global authority in education (Mundy, 2006), including in refugee education. The concurrent advent of refugee camps located refugees geographically inside but politically and civically outside hosting nation-states. In this context, prior to 2012, in most refugee-hosting nation-states globally, refugees were educated in parallel schools, where they were separate from national students and often followed the curriculum and in the languages of instruction of their countries of origin (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). This model of refugee education positioned refugees outside of national imaginaries, with envisioned futures squarely oriented toward the country of origin (Dryden-Peterson, Adelman, Bellino, & Chopra, 2019). A radical global policy shift in 2012, rapidly adopted at national levels, ushered in a new era of refugee education in which refugees are included in national education systems, with implications for where refugees are positioned in national imaginaries, for the nature of their envisioned futures, and for their civic education.
In this essay, I begin by defining the context of inclusion of refugees in national education systems and the implications of this model of schooling for civic education. I then explore two central dilemmas for civic education in the context of inclusion of refugees in national education systems. First, I examine the dilemma of nation-state-centric curriculum and the civic implications of national narratives that do not include refugees. Second, I examine the dilemma of the marginalization of refugees within national education systems and the implications of this marginalization on refugees’ spaces to imagine or enact civic behaviors. This essay examines these dilemmas through a synthesis of existing literature, both historical and contemporary, that addresses civic dimensions of the educational experiences of refugee children while also drawing on my original research with refugee children and in refugee-hosting schools in Uganda, Kenya, Egypt, and Lebanon and from interviews with national and global actors. I conclude with reflections on the implications of these dilemmas for both future research and school-based practices in refugee education.

Inclusion of Refugees in National Education Systems

The 2012 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Education Strategy put forth a new approach for the education of refugees: inclusion in national education systems (UNHCR, 2012). Some countries had already begun to use this approach to meet the needs of refugee children and youth, especially in protracted situations and in urban settings (e.g., Dryden-Peterson, 2017). By 2012, more than half of refugees were living in urban areas, not camps, and the average length of exile was between 10 and 25 years, three times as long as it was in the 1990s (Devictor & Do, 2016; Milner & Loescher, 2011). Given increasing restrictive migration policies in countries of the global North, now exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic,
the vast majority of refugees are confined for these extended durations in neighboring host
countries. The structural rationales for separate schooling for refugees no longer held.

The adoption of inclusion as an approach to refugee education was rapid. In 2010, only
five of 14 of the largest refugee-hosting nation-states\(^1\) used the national curriculum and national
languages of instruction to teach refugee learners; by 2014, 11 of these 14 nation-states did
(Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Prior to 2012, UNHCR did not have a formal relationship that
addressed education with a single government authority in any country in which it worked; by
2016, UNHCR had formal relationships with national authorities in 20 of their 25 priority
country operations for the provision of education.\(^{ii}\)

The shift to locate authority over refugee education with host country governments has
taken place at national and regional levels as well. For example, the December 2017 Djibouti
Declaration on Refugee Education – signed by Ministers of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia,
South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda – set the goal to “integrate education for refugees and returnees
into National Education Sector Plans by 2020” (IGAD Member States, 2017, p. 3); the April
2018 Nairobi Declaration and Call for Action on Education committed to “making our
educational systems more responsive, flexible and resilient to include refugees and internally
displaced people, and increasing investment for Education in Emergencies and Crises”
(UNESCO & African Union, 2018); and the 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for
Action commits to “developing more inclusive, responsive and resilient education systems to
meet the needs of children, youth and adults in [conflict-affected areas], including internally
displaced persons and refugees” (UNESCO, 2016).\(^{iii}\)

The inclusion of refugees in national education systems has been swiftly adopted as a
standard global policy approach. Yet the practices of structural inclusion have been varied. In
processes of “vernacularization,” or “appropriation and local adoption,” inclusion policies “land in very different ways in different places” and have resulted in varied models for the practice of inclusion (Levitt & Merry, 2009, p. 445). These models fall generally into four categories, ranging from no access to government schools, such as in the case of Malaysia; access to national schools but separation from nationals geographically, such as in the case of refugee camps in Kenya; access to national schools but separation from nationals temporally, such as in the case of second shift schools in Lebanon; to full access to government schools with refugees and nationals together in the same classrooms at the same time, such as in some urban schools in Nairobi and Cairo (see Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019 for an in-depth analysis of these models).

In the 2012 Global Education Strategy, UNHCR used the term “integration” to describe the shift from parallel schools for refugees to this new approach. Beginning in 2016, and following the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), UNHCR shifted to use the term “inclusion” when describing the process of bringing together refugees and nationals within national education systems. UNHCR’s most recent policy framework, “Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion” also uses this language of ‘inclusion’ (UNHCR, 2019b). This rhetorical shift is important because it reflects how refugee education is conceptualized in national and global policies, with implications for the experiences of refugee children in schools. In particular, the choice of terms reflects a distinction in the literature on integration between structural integration and relational integration (Korac, 2003; Strang & Ager, 2010).

Structural integration, often also called functional integration, centers on access to institutions and services, in this case to national government schools. Structural integration is what is signified by the term ‘inclusion’ in global and national policies. Distinctly, relational integration is a sociocultural process, related to individual-level development of a sense of
belonging, or connectedness, as well as group-level social cohesion. The relational elements of integration have been largely ignored in policies and practices that structurally integrate refugees into national systems, not only in education but also in health (Rowley, Burnham, & Drabe, 2006). While these structural elements of integration, such as using an established national curriculum and accessing national exams and certification, are foundational for promoting access to schooling for refugees, they at the same time ignore or run counter to civic roles of education for refugees.

Curriculum does not include refugees in the national narrative

Curriculum is the content of what children learn, which can be both explicit – the formal curriculum – and implicit – the hidden curriculum. What and how children learn both represents and shapes the ways in which a nation-state views itself and its future, particularly in terms of economic, social, and civic development (Ramirez & Boli, 1987). The foundational place of curriculum within national imaginaries and envisioned futures is evident both in newly-independent states and long-established national education systems. For example, in South Sudan, the most recently independent country in the world, the Interim Constitution and Education Act of 2012 laid the legal groundwork for the formation of a new curriculum and, in 2013, the government began a systematic curriculum review toward the specific goals of ridding the country of curricula from Kenya, Sudan, and Ethiopia that have been in use, with the aim of developing a new national South Sudanese curriculum (Novelli et al., 2016). The South Sudan National Curriculum was launched in 2015. Then Minister of Education, Science, and Technology Dr. John Gai Yoh noted in his introduction that this new curriculum “sets out our ambition as a nation” (Republic of South Sudan, 2015, p. 2). Use of curriculum to define national
identity and orientations in this way is widespread across nation-states. In an analysis of 576 recent textbooks from 78 countries, Lerch et al. (2017) found that, despite globalization, these textbooks center on nationalist narratives and are oriented toward the creation of national citizens.

Political and social context drive decisions about the standardization of curriculum, including in these nationalist narratives. Such can be even more the case in countries where histories are contested and where governance is fragile. In South Sudan, the new curriculum on paper advocates a critical approach to history teaching in secondary schools. Yet in practice, teachers adopt a single narrative of nationhood, resulting in a “simplistic civic national identity” and an avoidance of discussion of ethnic groups or the causes and effects of the 1955-2005 armed struggles (Skårås, 2019). In post-genocide Rwanda, textbooks focused on conceptions of a united nation (Lerch et al., 2017), with goals of overcoming past divisions and stemming possibilities for overt violence. The new and united identities fostered in history texts blur group differences (King, 2014), but also leave “no room for any kind of ethnic identification” limiting space for “productive conflict” (Freedman, Weinstein, Murphy, & Longman, 2008, pp. 674-675).

In Lebanon, from 1997 to 2010, the civic and citizenship curricula were narrow, prioritizing a facile nation-building narrative over a critical history of conflict and social justice (Shuayb, 2016). Teachers and students describe a mismatch between the materials in civics textbooks and their own realities (Akar, 2016), yet they avoid discussions of these issues given their own positions and vulnerability, pressures from political parties, and fear of inciting further conflict among students and parents (van Ommering, 2015). Civic education can reflect and generate uncertainty and insecurity both for teachers and students in the context of continued conflicts and ambiguous allegiances.
Given that 85 percent of refugees live in a host country that is adjacent to their conflict-affected country of origin (UNHCR, 2019a) and that many of these host countries also have recent histories of conflict, it is into these types of civic curricular context that most refugees are included in national education systems. Current UNHCR policy “encourages cooperation with national education authorities for early adoption and/or transition to use of the country of asylum curriculum in refugee settings” (UNHCR, 2015). Global frameworks, including the current UNHCR Education Strategy (UNHCR, 2019b) and the INEE Minimum Standards (INEE, 2010), fail to engage sufficiently with approaches that address the lack of relevance of or possible harm promulgated by these national curricula for refugee students, focused on structural processes and not relational ones. Global actors consistently cite concerns over state sovereignty as the rationale for not getting involved. “Curriculum is a national role and refugees are included in national systems,” explained an education specialist with long-time experience in Jordan, despite his familiarity with refugee students’ experiences of alienation in national schools. Historical examples and emerging research on contemporary contexts, however, illuminate the dilemmas of civic education for refugees in the context of national curriculum.

In the 1970s, Burundian refugees in Tanzania followed the Tanzanian curriculum, in Tanzanian languages of instruction, in both town and camp areas of the country (Chopra & Dryden-Peterson, 2015). In camp areas, Malkki (1995) describes parents’ resistance to civic lessons refugee children learned in schools, including “malign knowledge” and replication of power structures of conflict. In particular, Malkki found that what refugee children learned in school conflicted with families’ envisioned future return to Burundi and thus with the kind of socialization and civic preparation that would facilitate that future.
The education of Palestinians in exile over the past seven decades demonstrates similar patterns. An agreement among the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the United Nations agency with the mandate for Palestinian refugees, UNESCO, and host countries in 1952 stipulated that students in UNRWA schools be taught the curriculum of the hosting country. Despite resistance from teachers, manifest in different ways and at different levels over time including in classrooms and in public debates, UNRWA has been unable to shift from this host-state-centric approach, which has “marginalized the perspectives of refugees within curriculum debates” (Kelcey, 2020). In particular, the histories and imagined futures of Palestinians and Palestine have no place within these host country curricula, limiting ways in which Palestinian children can see themselves in their education (Amour, 2019; Nasser & Nasser, 2008; Shabaneh, 2012; Shuayb, 2014).

In Ethiopia, archival research demonstrates that the explicit intent of including refugees in the national curriculum, as early as the 1980s, was to build empathy for Ethiopian political relations with Eritrea, what Alebachew (2016) calls “grassroots diplomacy.” The explicit socialization of Eritrean refugees into empathy with Ethiopian politics highlights the potential for mismatch between education that fosters the civic goals of the nation-state and education that fosters the civic goals of refugee communities.

Unable to see themselves in these civic narratives of nation-states, refugees have historically often set up their own schools or alternative spaces. The goals of education in these separate spaces are often explicitly to reflect refugees’ histories and include space for them as civic actors. These types of community-based schools, often called non-formal schools, are common both in countries of first asylum (Dryden-Peterson, 2006, 2017; Kelcey, 2020; Malkki,
1995; Monaghan, 2015) and in resettlement countries (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017; Shirazi, 2019; Zakharia, 2016).

More recently, since the more widespread shift in approach to include refugees in national education systems, an emerging body of research has documented teachers’, students’, and families’ rejection of status quo national education for refugee students and/or negotiation of alternative and additional spaces for the education of refugee children. In these spaces, there are patterns of curricula that are differently-oriented than national curriculum, including related to reflecting refugees’ past and present experiences and oriented toward a future of return to the country of origin or a future of transnationalism (Adelman, 2018; Chopra & Dryden-Peterson, 2020; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; Karam, Monaghan, & Yoder, 2016; Magee & Pherali, 2017). In Egypt, where Syrians are included in national schools, one recent example points to the mismatch of national schooling with what refugee students and families seek. Syrian families began choosing community centers for their children over national public schools. Recognizing these trends, the Ministry of Education and UNHCR developed a policy to allow refugee children to study primarily in the community centers but to attend the government school once a week for lessons, once a month for tests, and at set intervals for certification exams (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019).vi

More research is needed on what and how children are learning in these educational spaces outside the national education system. Lessons from school- and classroom-based practices in these contexts might be applied to national schools as ways to better enable refugee children to see themselves represented in the curriculum of national schools. Importantly, research is needed to explore the ways in which students negotiate their civic learning in both national schools and
community-based spaces and how they make sense of and act on these varied experiences of recognition.

*Marginalization limits refugees’ spaces to imagine or enact civic behaviors*

Liberal conceptions of citizenship presume that individuals can participate civically in equal ways. Yet a vast literature describes the ways in which the civic development of young people is shaped by structural inequalities, including differential access to rights, to resources, and to opportunities for imagining or enacting varied civic behaviors (Abu El-Haj, Rubin, & Bellino, 2020; Banks, 2017). In the context of the United States, Rubin points to civic “disjuncture” based on the mismatch between how young people are socialized into citizens in schools and their experiences as citizens both inside and outside of schools, including as a result of racism, discrimination, and economic injustice (Rubin, 2007).

Refugees experience this disjuncture between what they learn in school and what they experience as a result of factors that are legal and socio-political. For example, the rationale for national investment in education is framed in most foundational documents for national education systems globally as a catalyst for economic growth. This national narrative translates to a key individual-level purpose of education as a means to future economic participation. In most refugee-hosting nation-states, however, refugees are unable to access the labor market due to restrictions on their right to work, access capital, and own property (Zetter & Ruaudel, 2016). The purposes of education that relate to economic participation then are misaligned with refugees’ legal abilities to engage in such participation (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019).

Disjunctures between education and economic participation are heightened for refugees. While these disjunctures are unique in scale and severity given refugees’ legal status, they are
not unfamiliar in nature to nationals who also experience social, political, and economic inequalities. In most settings where refugees are included in national schools, these schools are also serving marginalized national students. In Lebanon, for example, refugees have access to public schools, viewed by nationals as of low quality; less than one third of Lebanese children attend public schools (Lebanon Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2017). While refugees do not have the right to work in Lebanon, and this lack of future economic opportunities hangs over their education in national Lebanese schools, many Lebanese national students also do not see realistic future economic opportunities, despite their secure legal status (Bahou, 2016). Increased unemployment and lack of economic opportunities in the wake of Covid-19 threatens to further destabilize economic possibilities for those with precarious legal status, including refugees.

Similarly for refugees in Kenya, the districts where the vast majority of refugees live and go to school are the most marginalized nationally. Turkana, where Kakuma camp is located, has some of the highest levels of poverty and the lowest levels of access to education in Kenya (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics and Society for International Development – East Africa, 2013). In this context, refugees are multiply marginalized, with refugee children in school in Kakuma having even lower literacy outcomes than the host nationals in Turkana (Piper, Chopra, Dryden-Peterson, Reddick, & Oyanga, 2020). While the narrative of schooling in Kenya, including through the civic education curriculum, is that education leads to economically and socially productive futures, both for individuals and the nation-state, refugees and national hosts do not find evidence for this presumed trajectory in their lives. A refugee teacher in Kakuma, who arrived from South Sudan as an upper-primary student and completed his secondary schooling in Kenya, said: “[T]here is no future. . . . [I]t gives me a divided mind whether . . . I
want to be integrated. . . If I am integrated as a citizen of this country, what will be my life? Will it be better or worse than the way I am [now in the refugee camp]?”

Structural inclusion in the national education system also creates among refugee children the expectation that they have access to opportunities to participate in public life in their host countries. Yet relational experiences in schools conflict with the expectations of structural inclusion. In Uganda, in the early 2000s, refugee and national students studied together in schools in the rural areas where refugee camps (called settlements in Uganda) were located in a de facto way despite no formal policies that sanctioned this practice. In this setting, the UNHCR staff member in charge of overseeing education in schools described the rationale for not collecting data on ethnicity or country of origin. “When they come here,” she said, “we ask them not to be their nationalities anymore.” Yet refugee children described how, daily, national students in their classes refused to sit with them, silently excluding them from membership in the classroom community. Nationals sat two to a bench and refugees sat four to a bench, and the children as young as six understood the implicit boundaries of nationality that surrounded them and that they could not move to even out the numbers.

These relational exclusions from civic participation are often reinforced by the structures of schooling. Just as use of national curricula is politically non-negotiable for refugee education within national education systems, so too are the languages of instruction (Reddick & Dryden-Peterson, 2020). By policy, refugees use the national languages of instruction, despite their frequent isolation in separate classrooms under three of the four models of inclusion. Often, these languages are unfamiliar to refugees, such as for Congolese children arriving from French-language instruction in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to English-language instruction in Uganda. Through their pedagogy, teachers of refugees take steps to mitigate the
civic alienation of language use. In a second shift in Lebanon, for example, a Grade 9 student described how her teacher “explained things in both Arabic and English…. Everything she read in English, she would explain in Arabic and write on the board.” Yet being submerged in unfamiliar languages or feeling “behind” and “weak” in them as Syrians in Lebanon said, limits refugee children’s opportunities to engage in classroom discourse and discussion, foundational to civic learning.

In addition, even when refugees and nationals do not share the same classrooms due to geographic separation through camps or temporal separation through double shifts, what refugee children learn about civic behaviors in school often does not apply to them. For example, the Grade 9 Civics curriculum in Lebanon includes a lesson on “The Right to File Administrative Complaints.” In the afternoon shift of two public Lebanese schools in classes of only refugee students, we observed how this lesson was taught didactically, as it appeared in the textbook. In one classroom, the teacher drew a chart on the board illustrating the government institution responsible for receiving each kind of grievance by geographical region. “For example,” she said, “if someone wants to raise a complaint to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, and they live in Beirut, they go to the ‘Educational District’ in Beirut and file a complaint there.” At a Private School that followed the same Lebanese national curriculum including in Civics, but with all Syrian students and Syrian teachers, this same lesson demonstrated explicit recognition of the contradictions for refugee children of learning nation-state-centric civics. The teacher subtly called out the disjuncture for Syrian students learning about these methods of filing complaints, when Syrians did not have the legal right to do so in Lebanon. The teacher said, “Let’s say Leila Ali takes her relative to the hospital for an emergency. The hospital was late to admit her relative. Let’s say Leila Ali is Lebanese. What does she do? She filed a
Clear to the students in this lesson was that if Leila Ali was Syrian, she would not and could not file a complaint. Unaddressed in the classroom teaching were any ways that students could act civically within the juridical restrictions in place.

More research is needed on ways in which refugee children imagine and enact civic behaviors in host countries both inside and outside of school, despite limitations of nation-state-centric civic education and legal and socio-political restrictions on refugees’ participation. Alternative forms of civic education, such as those practiced in community-based schools and in non-school activities, may illuminate mechanisms to enable refugee children to see themselves represented as civic actors, while also considering the contextual risks of participation given uncertain legal and social status.

**Implications**

Refugees’ experiences in schools expose the disjunctures between nation-state education systems and imagined and presumed futures for refugees. Both historically and currently, patterns emerge around the ways in which civic education of refugees is conceptualized differently in public and private spaces. Nation-state-centric narratives that do not include refugees generally define the public spaces of civic education for refugees. On the other hand, the private spaces of civic education for refugees are generally defined by refugee families and communities with divergent visions of the civic development of their children, informed by past histories of conflict, present experiences of exile, and futures as civic actors outside of the host country.

Contradictions in the public and private education experiences of refugees are extreme examples of the ways in which many young people encounter civic education, premised on
assumptions that individuals can participate civically in equal ways. Refugee education amplifies this mismatch between the opportunities promised by structural inclusion in education and marginalization through lack of relational inclusion both in schools and in social, political, and economic experiences outside of school. Including refugees in national education is a critical foundation for addressing inequalities in access to school, yet it exacerbates other inequalities in terms of what and how children learn, and how they harness resources and opportunities as civic actors.

Historically, refugee families and communities have sought to meet these disjunctures by setting up alternative forms of schooling that replace or add to experiences of formal, public schooling. More research is needed on the content and pedagogies of these forms of education and how they seek to mend the disjunctures that refugee children face in national schools as connected to their recognition and their development as civic thinkers and actors. Further, practices from these alternative spaces might be adapted to fit national schools, meeting needs of both refugee children and other marginalized national children to see themselves represented in the curriculum.

Notes on contributor

Sarah Dryden-Peterson (sarah_dryden-peterson@gse.harvard.edu) is an associate professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her research focuses on education in armed conflict and the ways in which learning, pedagogies, and relationships may alter trajectories of conflict for nation-states and individuals. She is recipient of the Palmer O. Johnson Award for outstanding article from the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and a National Academy of Education Postdoctoral Fellow.
Research Ethics

All research included in this paper was reviewed and approved by the Committee on the Use of Human Subjects at Harvard University.

Funding

This research was made possible with support from the Mellon Foundation, the Migration and Urbanization Node of the University of the Witwatersrand, the Fulbright Commission, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and the Norwegian Research Council (project number 274650, in collaboration with the Peace Research Institute of Oslo).

Disclosure statement

The author holds no financial interest or known benefit that has arisen from the direct applications of this research.

Notes

i These 14 countries included Bangladesh, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Kenya, Lebanon, Malaysia, Pakistan, Rwanda, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, and Yemen.

ii These 25 priority countries were countries implementing the 2012-2016 Education Strategy. They included: Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Malaysia, Niger, Pakistan, Rwanda, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, Turkey, Uganda, Yemen, and Zambia.

iii Similar declarations have been adopted in other regions: the 2016 Buenos Aires Declaration committed to “making our education systems more responsive, adaptable and resilient in order to meet the rights and satisfy the needs of migrants and refugees” (UNESCO, 2017); the 2018 Dubai Roadmap for Education 2030 in the Arab Region stated that, “we also remain dedicated to the inclusion of refugee children and youth systematically in national educational planning processes in order to monitor their participation and educational attainment” (UNESCO, 2018).
We examine this distinction also in a background paper for the 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report on Migration, Education, and Displacement. See (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2018).

Observation by Sarah Dryden-Peterson, 5 September 2019, as part of the project “Development and Implementation of Refugee Education Strategies” (PI: Dryden-Peterson).

Data collected by Elizabeth Adelman, August 2014, as part of the project “Development and Implementation of Refugee Education Strategies” (PI: Dryden-Peterson).

Interview by Michelle J. Bellino, 24 June 2014, as part of the project “Development and Implementation of Refugee Education Strategies” (PI: Dryden-Peterson).

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Interviews by Vidur Chopra and Joumana Talhouk, as part of the project Refugee Education: Building Durable Futures (REBuild) (PIs: Horst and Dryden-Peterson).

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