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Toward Cognitive and Temporal Mobility: Language Considerations in Refugee Education

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'What language?' Over the past two decades of work in the field of refugee education, this is the question most asked in conversations with parents, students, teachers, government officials, policymakers, in local, national, and global decision-making spaces. What language will I use to speak with my teacher? What language will enable me to have opportunities in the future? What languages will support me in maintaining relationships of love and care? What language will allow for lives here or there, or here and there? For all actors, this question – 'What language?' – reflects personal and political experiences and preoccupations, with responses to the question tied to reverberating implications for lives now and for the future.

In his essay, Suresh Canagarajah cautions us away from Eurocentric conceptions of migration and proposes a model that links spatial, social, and geographic mobilities with implications for language pedagogies. I discuss two additional mobilities that emerge through our[1] work on refugee education, which also have broad relevance for what, how, and why children and young people learn, including as related to language in education. They are *cognitive mobility* and *temporal mobility*. Aspirations for these mobilities emerge from refugee young people's experiences of uncertainty, placemaking, and future-building. I explore each of these three themes in turn after some brief background on refugee education vis-à-vis language.

SPACE AND TIME IN REFUGEES' EXILE

Refugees, as defined by international law, flee across an international border due to a "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" (UNHCR, 2010). This legal conceptualization hides devasting human consequences of fleeing in fear, being often unable to locate sanctuary, and the ways in which the term 'refugee' is used to exclude and disempower. I use the word 'refugee' here to describe one who seeks refuge, resonant with Indigenous epistemologies that invoke the sharing of space, as Canagarajah refers to, where "The question becomes not whose land is this, but which groups of people are hosted by this land."

The nature of where and how refugees are 'hosted' has changed quite drastically over the past decade, which has shaped refugees' educational and linguistic ecosystems. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that 73 percent of refugees are hosted in countries that neighbor their countries of origin and 86 percent in countries classified as 'developing countries,' with fewer resources for social services such as education. My focus is on these sites of asylum. In 2020, the largest numbers of refugees, having fled Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, among others, lived in Turkey, Colombia, Pakistan, and Uganda (UNHCR, 2021). More than 60 percent of refugees live in cities, not in camps or separate settlements, generally multilingual spaces both in neighborhoods and in schools (UNHCR, 2019). The length of displacement for refugees has also drastically shifted, with 80 percent displaced for over five years and 20 percent displaced for over 20 years, three times as long as in the early 1990s (Crawford, Cosgrave, Haysom, & Walicki, 2015; Devictor & Do, 2016; UNHCR, 2020).

Refugee education has shifted, too, reflecting these changes in where and for how long refugees are displaced. Until the last decade, most refugees had access to education in parallel

schools for refugees only, set up in camps and with the intention of providing temporary schooling until a presumed swift return to the country of origin. The curriculum and languages of this education also oriented toward the country of origin (for more on the history of refugee education, see Dryden-Peterson, 2016). A 2012 global UNHCR policy radically reshaped the kind of education refugees have access to in exile, advocating for inclusion of refugees in national systems of education. This new approach was rapidly adopted by many refugee hosting countries and further codified by the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, and the 2019-2030 UNHCR Education Strategy.

The day-to-day practices of this approach are markedly different from country to country and within spaces in a given country. For example, Syrian and Lebanese children in Lebanon attend the same government schools with the same curriculum and exam structures and with mostly the same teachers, but Syrians in the afternoon and Lebanese in the morning; South Sudanese children in Kenya attend government schools with Kenyan curriculum and exams and with both refugee and national teachers, but in isolated camp spaces without any Kenyan children (for more on these models and their development, see Dryden-Peterson, Adelman, Bellino, & Chopra, 2019). Despite different models, cornerstone to this new approach is that refugees' education follows the curriculum of the host country and in the official languages of instruction of that country, which shape considerations and experiences of mobility and language.

NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY: COGNITIVE AND TEMPORAL MOBILITIES

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced multiple reckonings, related to race, inequities, geopolitical isolationism, and the interconnectedness of individual, collective, and planetary

health. The pandemic has also forced a reckoning with the ubiquitous nature of uncertainty and how it shapes young people's experiences in education. Vavrus argues that the pandemic has made more visible the idea of "schooling as laden with uncertainty" (Vavrus, 2021), echoing Berlant's notion of "crisis ordinariness" and the "amplification" of what already exists (Berlant, 2011, p. 10). Rather than conceiving of uncertainty as only a negative state, to circumvent, educators, students, parents – all of us – have been forced to reckon with uncertainty as a set of conditions and processes that are unavoidable and, despite massive challenges, that holds potential for generativity and new learning.

For many young people, including refugees, uncertainty is not new but instead the only context in which they have ever experienced education.[2] A central uncertainty experienced by refugees connected to their education is related to conceptualizing the future. They face what I have called "unknowable futures" (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). This uncertainty is both pragmatic and existential. The walls erected mostly by the United States and the European Union through migration laws and policies, as well as electric and barbed-wire fences, serve to confine the great majority of refugees globally in liminal spaces (Achiume, 2019). They are unable to return to their countries of citizenship due to on-going conflict and disaster and unsure when refugee status might expire in their current place of asylum, when they might be forced again to move from the land on which they are hosted. At the same time, refugee families know that their exile is almost certain to be protracted, to be a life-course experience for their children, whose one shot at education is likely to be outside their country of origin.

These experiences of uncertainty situate refugee young people at the crossroads of placemaking and future-building. They result in the dual imperative to live in the place one is hosted from the very moment of arrival while also connecting that placemaking to future-

building. Future-building involves imagining, and planning for, multiple possible futures – here, there, and/or somewhere else entirely. Integral to future-building is the "constant and on-going activity" of placemaking (Canagarajah uses the term 'home-making'), which is "not linear, rooted, or colonizing," not seeking some sedentary and arrived-at geographic, spatial, or social state. There are massive legal, policy, and xenophobic constraints on refugees' access to resources and opportunities for placemaking and future-building. Refugee young people and their families describe how education can support navigation of these barriers, particularly the misalignments between schooling in the present and opportunities in the future. I use the terms 'cognitive mobility' and 'temporal mobility' to reflect the processes they describe. Cognitive mobility refers to the ways in which young people can apply what they learn in school across place and time. Temporal mobility refers to the ways in which young people connect their presents and their futures. In both cases, these mobilities support young people in not having to choose between kinds of knowledge and learning that are reified and deemed worthy within different nation-state borders or between opportunities that trade away the present for the future or the future for the present.

PLACEMAKING AND FUTURE-BUILDING IN PERPETUAL UNCERTAINTY

Cognitive and temporal mobilities have applied relevance to the curriculum, pedagogies, and relationships of education, with particular importance for the recurring question, 'What language?' Refugees, almost all in protracted displacement, engage in indefinite placemaking, what Canagarajah describes as "indefinite home-making." In these processes, "Language is becoming more important than ever to mediate and construct these layered, multifarious, and

liminal spaces." Yet the educational decisions that follow from recognition that displacement is protracted and that language is a key navigational tool in uncertainty are not obvious.

Current refugee education approaches to include refugees in national education systems respond to the protracted nature of refugees' displacement through re-envisioning access to school in exile over the long-term, not as a temporary measure. In theory, this model allows refugee young people to access existing schools, with established curriculum, trained teachers, national exams and certification. It also means that refugee young people learn in the official languages of the host country, typically, but not always, a language that is unfamiliar to them. Well-documented is that this "submersion" in unfamiliar languages makes learning challenging, including for basic literacy, engagement in discussions, persistence in school, and identity development (see Reddick & Dryden-Peterson, 2021 for a review as related to refugee education).

The threat of language submersion and the steep learning curve and limited perceived value of that investment can shift decision-making for refugees as they flee. Faced with crossing a near border to Turkey or a far border to Lebanon, some Syrian young people chose the far border with the hope of continuing their studies in Arabic (Chopra & Dryden-Peterson, 2020). What these young people found, though, was that while Arabic could help them to navigate life outside of school, it did not support their school success. Official languages of instruction in the government schools they had access to in Lebanon were English and French. For refugee young people in Lebanon, as elsewhere, the language shifts they experience not only between home and school but between home country and host country contribute to the feeling of being chronically "behind" (Chopra, Dryden-Peterson, Geha, & Talhouk, 2020).

In Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, we found that refugee families ascribed different languages with value for now and value for the future. Home languages, entwined with histories of placemaking in countries of origin and on-going identity development in exile and future aspirations of return, were not used in schools. Kiswahili, one of the official languages of school instruction and a language unfamiliar to most refugees prior to their exile, was framed as a 'now' language, necessary to survive daily life in the present. English was framed as a 'future' language, with little relevance for the current placemaking that families engaged in, but essential to the placemaking they envisioned for the future, connected to higher education, resettlement to a third country, or return to a home country where English could bring opportunities (see, among many, as related to returned refugees and languages of power Momo, 2021; Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). At the same time, our research reveals that students in Kakuma can understand, speak, read, and write very little English, despite its being a language of instruction in schools (Piper, Chopra, Dryden-Peterson, Reddick, & Oyanga, 2020), echoing the dangers of submersion for learning. The hopes that any language will enable future mobilities – geographic, spatial, social, cognitive, and temporal – are not likely to be realized with experiences of submersion and other limitations on opportunities to learn languages in schools.

Language can be a navigational capacity (Swartz, 2021) for refugee young people, supporting and creating opportunities for educational, economic, social, and political participation now and in the future. Yet within national education systems, refugee young people often experience language instead as a set of trade-offs that all too often seem zero-sum, with limited possibilities for bringing together present and future. This kind of navigation, as Vigh describes it, is the "complex political praxis of moving toward a goal while at the same time being moved by a socio-political environment" (Vigh, 2006, p. 236).

Language of instruction in exile is the quintessential example of the trade-offs between the past, the present, and the future that refugee young people are often forced to make in the absence of cognitive mobilities and temporal mobilities. Success in national education in a host country, in terms of accessing school, persisting in school, passing exams, and achieving certification, requires commitment to learning the language(s) of instruction in that host country. This process also often involves loss of one's home language, connections to a country of origin, and to loved ones, echoing assimilationist and "subtractive schooling" experiences in settler colonial settings as well (e.g., Valenzuela, 1999). And, in addition to the precarities of legal status and how welcome refugees might be in a host country over time, the utility of these metrics of success in national education are questionable (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). In most host countries, refugees do not have the right to work, to own land, to accrue capital, or to eventual citizenship (e.g., Nunn, McMichael, Gifford, & Correa-Velez, 2015; Zetter & Ruaudel, 2016). These immutable-feeling restrictions beg the question: how worthwhile is it to invest one's energy, time, and identity in stockpiling new languages that could support certain kinds of mobility, but that, circumscribed as they are by rigid nation-states boundaries of belonging and on-going geopolitics of refugee confinement, seem out of reach for refugees?

Refugees do not generally have the possibility of being "laminated firmly within the host community," as Canagarajah describes it, nor often is that an aspired future (e.g., Long, 2013). Unlike a central goal of education globally – the socialization of citizens – refugees are, despite being primarily now in national schools, not being educated not as future citizens (see, Dryden-Peterson, 2020; Motomura, 2006). Placemaking among refugees thus provides a different model than dominant assimilation and integration models of education in settings of migration, with a particular focus on future-building that is not nation-state centric (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019;

Levitt, Viterna, Mueller, & Lloyd, 2017). Cognitive mobility and temporal mobility are central to this future-building.

Educators who de-center rigid notions of nation-sate belonging, enable refugee children and young people to develop the navigational capacities that support these cognitive and temporal mobilities. While migration policies are hyper-focused on boundary management, the pedagogies of these educators in settings of migration focus on learning and relationships that blur these boundaries (Chopra & Dryden-Peterson, 2020; Dryden-Peterson, 2021; outside of eduation, see, Hovil, 2016). Several dimensions of these pedagogies as related to language are fruitful areas of emerging theory and practice in refugee education.

First is decision-making about language policies and practices that adopts a backward planning approach, beginning with the desired purposes, which can vary among actors (Dryden-Peterson, 2019). An overarching purpose is future-building, with cognitive and temporal mobilities as mechanisms by which to imagine and build future opportunities (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). No one language of instruction in school is the golden key to unlocking these outcomes. Yet out of an orientation to future-building emerge some questions that can help to guide decision-making.[3] For example, in considering cognitive mobility, we might ask, *what language practices are transferrable across multiple contexts?*; in considering temporal mobility, we might ask, *what language practices allow continuous and meaningful intergenerational relationships?* Clarity in conceptualizing the purposes of language decisions, and their consequences, can allow us to consider the cognitive and temporal trade-offs in language choices, orient languages as resources rather than problems, and reject either/or decisions to embrace more inclusive multilingual approaches (Hult & Hornberger, 2016; for a

refugee-specific review, see, Reddick & Dryden-Peterson, 2021; for a review of orientations to language planning, see, Ruiz, 1984).[4]

Second are language pedagogies that do not conceptualize language as only an instrumental tool to get by day to day, to pass exams, and to make one's way through the education that is offered in a host country but as integrally connected to cognitive and temporal mobilities. In particular, these pedagogies are relational, often centered in educators' political clarity and actions of politicized caring. These pedagogical approaches include political motivations for education that are explicit, a literature more deeply developed in connection with Black pedagogical practices (McArthur, McArthur, Lane, & Lane, 2019; McKinney de Royston, Madkins, Givens, & Nasir, 2020). Beauboeuf-Lafontant , whose work focuses on pedagogies of Black women teachers in the U.S., describes educators with political clarity as those who "recognized the existence of oppression in their students' lives and sought to use their personal, professional, and social power to encourage children to understand and undermine their subordination" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999, p. 702).

In a literature that is emerging, we see educators of refugees using similar pedagogies to support their students in navigating experiences in host countries, including inequities, xenophobia, and discrimination, and in using their learning, including related to language, to imagine and begin to build different kinds of futures (Adelman, 2019; Amour, 2019; Cohen, 2019; Dryden-Peterson & Reddick, 2019). This type of pedagogy de-centers whose land this is in a hosting country and the limited notions that spawns of who belongs on it. At the same time, it does not ignore the political nature of language decisions and experiences, especially as related to the political longevity of refugees' welcome in a host country (e.g., Alebachew, 2016). Nor does it free-fall into abstract notions of global belonging that, while meaningful for those who

have access to resources that allow for expansive mobilities, can be empty for those like refugees who face geopolitical restrictions (Goren & Yemini, 2017; Lerch, Russell, & Ramirez, 2017; Veugelers, 2011).

As Canagarajah argues, migration is but one form of mobility. To his triad of spatial, geographical, and social mobilities, I proposed here two other forms that are relevant particularly in the context of refugee young people's experiences of education and the ways in which language is implicated in those experiences: cognitive mobility and temporal mobility. These mobilities are particularly critical to "decolonizing our understanding of the mobility/language nexus" that Canagarajah calls for, including in the context of the nation-state-centric spaces of schooling. Detrimental to the education of refugees is a default to this nation-state-centric status quo, without attention to the ways in which educational experiences can cultivate learning, including as related to language, as navigational capacities for placemaking and future-building.

Author biography

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Notes

[1] I use the word 'our' to reflect the collaborative nature of this research program over many years that has brought together graduate students and colleagues. In particular, my reflections in this commentary have been shaped by collaborative work with Elizabeth Adelman, Michelle J. Bellino, Vidur Chopra, Negin Dahya, Carmen Geha, Cindy Horst, Bethany Mulimbi, Benjamin Piper, Celia Reddick, Joumana Talhouk. Original research referenced in this commentary was made possible with support from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Norwegian Research Council (project number 274650, in collaboration with the Peace Research Institute of Oslo).

[2] I am grateful to Ranya Brooks for pushing my thinking on this point.

[3] I am grateful to Paola Uccelli for this suggestion.

[4] These ideas have been developed over many years in collaboration with Celia Reddick.

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