

Comparative Perspectives on Refugee Youth Education: Dreams and Realities in Educational Systems Worldwide. Edited by Alexander W. Wiseman et. al.

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Refugee Children, Status, and Educational Attainment: A
Comparative Lens

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Comparative Perspectives on Refugee Youth Education: Dreams and Realities in Educational Systems Worldwide



Edited by Alexander W. Wiseman, Lisa Damaschke-Deitrick, Ericka L. Galegher, and Maureen F. Park
New York: Routledge, 2019, pp. 302

C*omparative Perspectives on Refugee Youth Education: Dreams and Realities in Educational Systems Worldwide* contributes to the field of refugee studies by challenging the assumption that education is a “cure-all” for integrating refugee youth and their families into host societies. Proponents of this perspective believe that education can provide refugee youth with the skills and country-specific values necessary for full participation in society, contribute to healing the trauma that many refugee children have experienced, and alleviate poverty in host countries. The purpose of challenging this assumption is to shed light on how the capacity of education to solve social challenges is often overemphasized, as demonstrated by the limited success experienced by countries around the world with education-centred approaches to integration. Educational attainment for refugees has not been universally translated into future economic productivity, social integration, or civic participation. The failure of education to consistently act as a panacea for refugee integration stems from the inconsistent definitions of “refugee” in international and national policy frameworks, from the diverse experiences faced by refugees in their forced migration journeys, and from countries’ differing institutional approaches to providing educational services to refugees. Despite international recognition of education as a human right, many public education systems, often characterized by a shortage of qualified teachers and an impersonal approach to teaching, are ill-equipped to provide quality education for all. Wiseman, Damaschke-Deitrick, Galegher, and Park focus on these challenges and limitations from two main perspectives that inform the structure of the book: the anticipated effects of education at a macro-policy level in part 1 and the local, community, and school-level assumptions about the wide-ranging impact of education in part 2.

The global push to integrate refugee youth into national education systems, as opposed to parallel systems implemented by non-state actors, in unorthodox settings such as refugee camps, is intended to provide a long-term solution for increasingly protracted refugee displacement. Through reviews of scholarly literature, government documents, and secondary data analysis, part 1 of this volume showcases the structural challenges faced by different national attempts to integrate refugee youth into domestic education systems.

The diverse approaches highlight how countries seek to align with international policies but also with domestic social, economic, and political norms. For example, in the United States, where economic self-sufficiency is prioritized, refugee youth are fully incorporated into an educational system designed to position students for post-secondary education and careers by acquiring a broad range of skills. In contrast, the German government views social integration as a crucial first step towards social participation, hence integration programs focus heavily on German language acquisition, with the government providing integration support courses that are separate from the typical education system.

Similarly, the influence of context-specific factors on educational integration is highlighted in several examples, such as the No Lost Generation initiative and the Regional Refugee and Resilience Frameworks in the Middle East, as well as the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework in Uganda and Kenya. These initiatives are designed to standardize integration into national education systems and to reduce the burden for host countries; however, their targets, goals, and strategies are often disconnected from local and national realities. In the Middle East, despite national policy shifts to increase access to education for refugee youth, many refugees are faced with barriers imposed by long distances to schools, prohibitive school fees, overcrowding, and lack of legal status or documentation necessary for enrolment. In Turkey and Lebanon, community members pressure school administrators to refuse the enrolment of refugee students, regardless of national policy. Countries in the Middle East, as well as Uganda and Kenya, also encounter severe financial constraints. These are major barriers to implementing educational policies, as most of the regional and international organizations that propose such policies do not provide funding, or do so in a limited capacity. The financial burden of incorporating refugee students into public education systems is not shared internationally, so countries with the greatest influx of refugees often cannot fully implement international and national educational policies aimed at improving quality of education.

Part 2 reflects similar findings, yet from the perspective of refugees themselves as they pursue educational opportunities at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. In emphasizing the individualized narratives, part 2 sheds light

on the lived implications of macro-level policy decisions for refugees. For example, many of the international frameworks focus predominantly on integrating refugee youth into primary and secondary schools, failing to account for the significant population of refugees seeking to continue or begin tertiary education. For women pursuing higher education in Germany, Egypt, and Kyrgyzstan, this translates into bureaucratic challenges, such as legal status requirements for enrolment, increased financial burdens resulting from classifying refugees as international students, and lack of access to formal labour market opportunities. In countries such as Egypt, where unemployment is high, governments are hesitant to facilitate access to resources for refugees in the interest of protecting the needs of their citizens. Additionally, language barriers and a lack of peer understanding about refugee students' contextual situations contribute to feelings of marginalization, motivating students to seek support from refugee communities as opposed to local peers. These challenges point to the failure of higher education in contributing significantly to refugee integration into host societies, and point to a need for heterodox solutions for refugee integration that go beyond primary and secondary education.

Despite the challenges faced by the host countries with recruiting teachers and preparing them to integrate refugee youth into the classrooms, both parts 1 and 2 of the book underscore the importance of teacher training and pedagogy at the primary and secondary levels. Analysis in chapter 3 of data from 72 countries suggests that highly educated female teachers who participate in mentoring and training opportunities are best equipped to address both the academic and

non-academic needs of refugee students, many of whom have experienced significant trauma and extended periods out of school. Interviews with teachers in Kenya, however, suggest that in order to improve student outcomes, teachers need access to higher quality, longer term support, particularly in the form of professional development opportunities and teaching materials. Furthermore, as teachers work most directly with refugee youth, their perspectives need to be incorporated in policy decisions. This evidence suggests a need for a national education system of integration that accounts not only for student needs but also those of the teachers.

Overall, *Comparative Perspectives on Refugee Youth Education* provides a comprehensive analysis of the limitations inherent in refugee youth education, challenging the burden placed on education to solve all challenges associated with refugee integration, while still highlighting the positive role it can play. A criticism of the volume is that, since it appears that each article was written in isolation, the introductory summary in each commentary comes across as repetitive. Nevertheless, the article build on each other to provide a comprehensive picture of the challenges, limitations, and possibilities of refugee youth education. This volume proposes strategies for critically approaching educational programming in context-specific ways that address their potential to mitigate but also to exacerbate the challenges faced by refugee youth.

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