



## FEATURE

### Forced migration and education

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## **Forced migration and education**

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### **Abstract**

This feature provides a brief account of the contemporary context of forced migration globally and the issues around education for refugees who have fled their home countries and live in exile. This discussion is informed by Paulo Freire's ideas of oppression and liberation and suggests that refugees live in the context of oppression, which stems from the forced migration and may continue through education provision in host communities. While the generosity of the hosts in this provision should be recognised, the lack of refugees' agency in this provision is the factor linked to oppression.

Key words: forced migration, refugees, education, Freire, oppression

## **Introduction**

Although people have been migrating throughout the whole history of the humankind (Manning, 2012), we are witnessing now the highest levels of documented forced displacement (UNHCR, 2019). Refugees are presented in the literature both as victims of oppression as well as potential threats to the well-being of host communities that, therefore, have to be controlled, or in other terms oppressed. They are victims because they compromise their own health, die in travels while fleeing their countries or may become victims of human trafficking if they manage to reach their destination (Durrheim *et al*, 2018). They are also portrayed as threats because they pay for smuggling and insist on travelling to the country of their choice, may exercise violence towards the border guards and cause damage in refugee camps in host countries (Kugiel, 2016). Hosting countries, in their turn, are also portrayed in different ways. On one hand, they are presented as suffering from dealing with the burden of refugee arrivals through processing their documents and supporting the refugees (Willems and Vernimmen, 2018). On the other hand, they are explicitly portrayed as oppressors in the cases when some of them build fences, their border police exercise violence towards asylum seekers, prohibit attempts to rescue drowning refugees in the sea or refuse the refugee status and send the people back to their home country where their life is endangered (Kugiel, 2016; Khiabany, 2016).

Forced migration creates many issues, including those in the area of education for refugees who have fled their home countries and live in exile. The discussion of the contemporary context of forced migration globally, and the issues around education for refugees below is informed by Paulo Freire's ideas about oppression and liberation and suggests that the context of oppression, in which refugees live, stems from the forced migration and may continue through education provision in host communities. While the generosity of the hosts in this provision should be recognised, the lack of refugees' agency in this provision is the factor, which may be linked to oppression.

### **Freire's ideas about oppression and liberation**

Freire's seminal work 'The Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1970) serves here as a framework to analyse a mutually shaping relationship between education and wider societal trends. He distinguishes between two types of these relationships. One of them is the banking concept of education, which is shaped by the oppressive society, and it reinforces the existence of such a society. Education in this case is compared to an act of depositing: 'The more completely she [teacher] fills the receptacles [students], the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better student they are' (Freire, 1970: 72). Such education is didactic and focuses on teaching reproduction rather than creation. Education like this serves as a control tool for the leaders of the oppressive society to raise docile individuals who will help them maintain the hierarchical, unjust society and not question it. The other type of relationship between education and society that Freire discusses is liberating education in a free society, which reinforce each other. The free society depends on the creative power of individuals who are raised by the liberating education system. It aims to raise critical thinkers who can transform the world for the better, rather than to comply with it. Such education system rejects the banking concept of education and sees education as an act of emancipation. While the liberating education in a free society may seem like a 'better' option, it is problematic to achieve this in practice.

Freire himself acknowledges that those who want to promote liberation are surrounded and influenced by the environment that generates oppression and 'paradoxically, then, they utilise this same instrument of alienation in what they consider an effort to liberate' (Freire, 1970: 79). Freire's critics have elaborated on other aspects of the difficulty of implementing the liberation ideas in practice as well (e.g., Allman, 2001).

Freire's ideas have been applied to the analysis of different marginalised groups including refugees. For instance, Stewart (2011) analyses conditions for the liberation of refugees while acting as research participants. The scholar argues that refugees 'must be actively engaged in their own liberation, leadership or active facilitation of the process', and thus, researchers should seek to have a dialogue with refugees about their issues and looking for ways to solve them. This resonates with the notion of participatory action research that Vecchio *et al* (2017), being guided by Freire's ideas, advocates in research into the topics about refugees.

The rest of the discussion below takes these ideas further by explaining forced migration globally as an expression of oppression and how approaches to education in host communities may continue the oppression of refugees by stripping them off their agency.

### **The world on the move**

Forced migration is an expression of oppression because people are compelled by external forces to flee their homeland where crises unfold (Castles, 2003). According to the United Nations Refugee Agency – UNHCR – there are 68.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, and quite shockingly, '1 person is forcibly displaced every two seconds as a result of conflict or persecution', over half of whom are under 18 (UNHCR, 2019). This is compared to 59.5 million people around the world who were forcibly displaced in 2014 (Khiabany, 2016: 755).

There are a number of overlapping categories of people who are forced to migrate: refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons, returners, stateless people and other populations of concern (UNHCR, 2019). According to the UNHCR Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951: 14), a refugee is someone who 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his (her) nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail (him/herself) of the protection of that country'. This definition is common in the literature on migration (e.g., Manning, 2012; Gagné *et al*, 2017).

Pastore and Henry (2016: 580) use the term 'mixed flows' to refer to the overlaps in the categories of irregular migration which includes refugees. Irregular migration, according to the scholar is a broad notion that, apart from asylum seekers, includes other types of migrants such as economic migrants, human traffickers themselves, etc. They also emphasise that there are a number of grey areas in migration policy, and they yield a so-called 'a categorisation crisis' of the international mobile persons (p.569).

There were a number of factors that shaped the 'migrant crisis' in the world as a multi-faceted phenomenon which sat on the intersection of various 'crises'. For example, Balkan (2016) who focuses

on the EU region mentions the link between the immigration problem on one hand and a humanitarian and political crisis in the EU on the other hand. The author states that 'More than one million migrants and refugees have crossed into Europe since 2015, sparking a massive humanitarian and political crisis as European Union member states struggle to manage the influx of people and the responsibility of resettling them.' (p.118).

### **Education in exile**

The explanation of forced migration globally starts in the context of the oppressive society where the oppression 'starts'. The physical displacement of people into a different society does not, arguably, free them from oppression by default. While the threats present in home countries have disappeared, oppression may continue in a different form because of the position in the new society that refugees take – the position where they lack agency, particularly in the area of education. This area is crucial, as according to Freire's (1970) perspective outlined earlier, the lack of agency in education correlates with the lack of agency in a wider society. While refugees have the right to education and some institutional networks for this provision have been emerging in host communities, what and how refugees learn is usually beyond the scope of choice of refugees.

#### *The right of refugees to education*

Education is one of refugees' rights. Back in 1951, 145 states ratified the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees which outlined legal obligations to protect the rights of refugees. Article 22 of the Convention states that 'The contracting states shall accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education'. It also states that 'The contracting states shall accord to refugees treatment as favourable as possible, and, in any event, not less favourable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances with respect to education other than elementary education'. There is a range of other international treaties that advocate the right of refugees to education, according to Willems and Vernimmen (2018), such as: European Social Charter (1961), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Despite these measures in place:

“...the legal truth is however more complex. In the words of the special report of the United Nations (UN) on the right to education of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers: 'human rights law does not sufficiently address the question of binding obligations of States to take positive measures' and 'it is largely unclear which distinctions between migrants and the citizens are admissible and which are not.'”  
(Willems and Vernimmen, 2018, pp. 219-220).

#### *Who is responsible for providing education for refugees*

Article 22 of the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) placed responsibility on 'the contracting states' to provide education to refugees. However, the meaning of this responsible body is too broad and abstract and we need to dig deeper to understand who within the contracting states deals with refugee education. First and foremost, governments and their subsidiary organisations would be central in an institutional network of such education provision, particularly the responsibilities of schools,

and legal support for it (Waters and LeBlanc, 2005). These scholars as well as Preston (1991) place a lot of emphasis on schools more generally that try out different techniques to support refugees in their acquisition of the new language and culture. The role of individual teachers specifically in the education provision cannot be underestimated as they are the drivers of change (Gagne *et al*, 2017). NGOs and volunteers are also important especially in bridging the gaps missed by the direct provision from the government (Oh and Van Der Stouwe, 2008).

#### *What and how refugees should learn*

De Haene *et al* (2018, p. 211) discuss educational policies and practices of host countries 'as spaces of hospitality'. However, Derrida (1992: 55) explicitly links the practice of hospitality to a form of violence: '[...] sovereignty can only be exercised by... excluding and doing violence... In its inherent conditionality of practice, every act of hospitality becomes an act of violence'. We can understand Derrida's (1992) provocative statement by recognizing that while host bear the burden of allocating resources for refugees' education, the hosts exercise their agency in shaping the content of refugee education to fit their own – hosts' – needs, first and foremost. Refugees' agency in shaping their education is minimal, and their needs in education are secondary to what hosts think refugees need and the hosts want to achieve with providing education to refugees. For example, this could be linked to programming refugees' contribution to the host country's economy in the future.

Here are key foci of education for refugees as determined by their host countries: primary education, local language (De Haene, 2018), culture including law, finance, nutrition and other life skills education (Gunnell *et al*, 2014). Some countries practice placing refugees in segregated catch-up classes before integrating them in mainstream education (De Haene, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

This feature article was informed by the theoretical ideas of Freire about oppression and liberation. It presented the contemporary context of forced migration globally and positioned this context as the root of the oppression refugees encounter in their lives. The physical relocation of people into a different society seems not to free them from oppression by default as oppression may continue in a different form because of the lack of agency refugees have in their governing their lives in the new place, particularly in the area of education. This area is crucial, as according to Freire (1970), the lack of agency in education correlates with the lack of agency in a wider society. While education is one of refugees' rights and host countries have been making some effort in supporting this right, what and how refugees learn is usually not determined by them. The issue of agency is a delicate matter in the case of refugees' education as the hosts are, arguably, entitled to not give up their agency as the act of hosting is an act of generosity after all, which is often voluntary. However, a more developed dialogue and more balanced power relations among the hosts and refugees in the area of education for refugees in host communities would help position this education as liberating and the host community as a free society in Freire's terms.

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