

Book Review: *Right Where We Belong: How Refugee Teachers and Students are Changing the Future of Education* by Sarah Dryden-Peterson. 2022. Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press. pp xii + 260. US\$ 36.00 (hardcover); \$34.20 (ebook). ISBN: 9780674267992

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There is one question that lies at the heart of the work of Sarah Dryden-Peterson, a researcher on refugee education and the author of the book *Right Where We Belong: How Refugee Teachers and Students are Changing the Future of Education*:

What would it take to ensure that all refugee young people have access to learning that enables them to feel a sense of belonging and prepares them to help build more peaceful and equitable futures?

Based on 15 years of ethnographic observations and more than 600 interviews in 23 countries, Dryden-Peterson tackles this question by weaving together stories with names and faces into a fabric of policies and numbers, to connect the micro with the macro and trace the connections “between places, among people, and over time” (p.3). In this way, Dryden-Peterson shows readers the complexity of this work of changing the future of education and the necessity of engaging at multiple levels “with teachers and schools and also with laws, policies, and institutions that structure migration and economic, social, and political opportunities” (p.5). This book review will mimic Dryden-Peterson’s style of letting the questions lead, by using the questions she attaches to each chapter in the book to guide readers through a summary of some of its main ideas.

This book is organized into six chapters that address the question above while connecting the past, present, and future of refugee education: Teacher, Sanctuary, Power, Purpose, Learning, and Belonging. These chapters tell a story that is “both discouraging and hopeful” and convey that “it is hard, but not impossible, to thrive in uncertainty and build new futures by remaking what and how we learn” (p.4). Every day refugees are doing this seemingly impossible task of thriving in uncertainty. Dryden-Peterson lays out how this is changing the future of education not just for refugees, but for others around the world who are experiencing marginalization and inequitable education systems, as well as those with much more privilege. From the first few chapters, I was drawn in to consider a reality where those who initially appeared to me to be victims of this global society are actually the most valuable teachers of what it means to educate and become global citizens.

The first chapter, “Teacher,” lays out the vision for refugee education through the story of one refugee teacher— Jacques. At the time when Jacques and his family arrived in Uganda, refugee policies were guided by the Control of Alien Refugees Act, which was mostly concerned with controlling how and where refugees lived rather than with the protection of their rights. This chapter repeatedly uses the word “helper” in quotations, leading readers to re-examine the work of protection officers in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), NGO workers, and others claiming to be helping refugees. The author describes that most refugees expect their time living in exile to be temporary, and similarly, most “helpers” also think of refugee education as nothing more than a “holding ground” that does its best to create schools that foster a sense of “normalcy” (p.22). However, the reality is that most refugees live in exile for many years and for some, the entirety of their childhood. Dryden-Peterson convincingly argues that we need refugee education that is “not about a return to some idealistic ‘normalcy’,” but is guided by a new vision that understands (as Jacques did) that in order to prepare refugee students for their futures, they need to be given the tools to “disrupt the status quo and to create the future anew” (p.22). I have pluralized futures to indicate the agency that refugee students have in creating their own futures as opposed to following a determined path; to lean toward what is “possible” rather than what is “probable” (p.138).

*When forced to leave home, what can protect us?* The story of Abdi, whom Dryden-Peterson met as a refugee in Uganda, opens chapter two. According to Abdi, sanctuary is not a place that protects, but a place that “expires” (p.26). Locating sanctuary for refugees is not only a personal matter of a refugee’s futures, but a matter of our collective futures “as citizens of an increasingly connected world” (p.33). However, when we look at the global refugee system, providing sanctuary for all does not seem to be a matter of our collective futures but rather a system of countries with “power and money” “outsourcing sanctuary, aiming to keep the ‘burden’ or ‘threat’ of refugees elsewhere” (p.38). Even when refugees are granted sanctuary in higher-income countries, as readers learn, refugees immediately realize that sanctuary is not only a physical place, but a relational way of being. At the same time, “utter welcome” and “utter rejection” are typically “held together in the same community, even within the same person” (p.47). Some countries (like Australia) are able to set preventative boundaries around who is granted sanctuary whereas in others (like Lebanon), “sanctuary is negotiated and created in daily relationships” like a “fragile bridge of what divides us and what unites us” (p.49) that could break at any moment. This means that while sanctuary may seem to be physical places of refuge that are created by laws and policies, where refugees actually find sanctuary is within the continuous, often fragile relational efforts of individuals.

*When sanctuary has an expiration date, who decides what we learn, and with what consequence for our futures? How are our education and our future opportunities connected? What kind of learning can prepare us— all of us— to take up and create opportunities?* These questions of power, purpose, and learning test Jacques’ vision of an education for refugees that prepares them for their futures. Chapter 3 outlines four historical eras over the past sixty years regarding the specificities of power in refugee education: Liberation, Standardization, Localization, and Nationalization.<sup>1</sup> As different countries at different time periods plan futures for refugees of resettlement, of return, or of the promises and possibilities of integration, the author describes refugees as “limit breakers” (p.133), expanding the boundaries of possibilities. Another word is used in quotations here to question the “expert” authority of those in power “who are often culturally distant from students and schools and can have transient rather than long-term interests in transforming conflict dynamics,” and tend to use education as “a tool of domination and control, where aid is tied to market and antiterrorism interests” (p.137). Contrary to these “experts,” refugee teachers are leading a “new politics of curriculum” that helps refugees to connect their present reality with future possibilities while understanding the inequalities rooted in the past. The author

argues that this education sets refugees free to “disrupt” the “dissonances between their present situations and their imagined futures” (p.139), leaving the reader to wonder, what does it really mean to be set free? This question is addressed in the next and last chapter.

*How can we fight the inequities that limit these opportunities, changing how each of us see ourselves in connection to others and redesigning our institutions to reflect that?* The last chapter on belonging begins with Abshir’s story of interdependent relationships as opposed to the global and national refugee policies that construct a dependent relational structure. These interdependent relationships that allow refugee students the freedom to imagine futures where they are an agent of change are possible through what the author calls “becoming entwined” (p.151). This is necessary to disrupt the identity-based inequalities that refugees constantly face, reforming our mindsets as members of an interconnected world, and redesigning our institutions to reflect a connection between ourselves and others. In order to grow these opportunities to experience interconnectedness, there is a need to “synthesize small-scale experiences of belonging with the national and global political contexts of migration” (p.159). And in order to do this, a new politics of migration must be built. The experiences that refugees have of creating sanctuary and cultivating relationships of belonging currently puts the responsibility of providing these opportunities on individuals rather than on institutions or governments. While it is impossible to force relationships, the author argues that intentionally providing the time and space for opportunities to interact can transform “isolated and small-scale relationships that refugee teachers and students create in schools into widespread experiences” (p.165). For the reader, whether this is a probability, or a possibility, is left as a choice, but for refugee teachers and students who “share the inability to live with the bleakness of the probable... they take the risks of embracing the possible” (p.138). From my understanding, to change the future of education then, for refugee students and teachers, is less of a choice and more of a will to live.

The title of this book suggests that refugee teachers and students are actively changing the possible futures of education right where they are, right where they belong. The irony lies in the reality of the many structural and systemic barriers in addition to individual sentiments that reject refugees, putting them into “boxes of belonging” (p.173). By addressing these challenges in her book by placing individual stories of refugee teachers and students at the forefront, Dryden-Peterson helps readers to understand refugee education not only in terms of the larger systems and structures but also as issues of individuals with individual needs, struggles, desires, and dreams. To drive this point home deeper, I wish this book further explored the concept of belonging at the intrapersonal level, divulging the process of “redrawing their own maps of belonging through their relationships” (p.143) not only with others, but also with themselves. This book highlights the intentional work of recreating and building homes that Dryden-Peterson describes as a “Sisyphean task” (p.166). However, as she also mentions in the book, there are others who are not refugees, who are also similarly engaged in this relentless, never-ending effort. These questions of sanctuary, power, purpose, learning, and belonging are familiar questions that are asked within the field of comparative and international education, a field that has been concerned with “the complex relationship between schools, citizens and nation states [that] is constantly evolving and shifting” (McCowan and Unterhalter, 2021, p.131). Educators in this field have long been aware that we need to stop “navigating an unknown terrain with the help of old maps,” and instead need to start “searching for new solutions, and creating new knowledge that is more appropriate for societies of the twenty-first century” (Arnone, et. al., 2013, p.125). Including more of these other voices in this book to show how the work of refugee teachers and students is not being done in isolation would have helped to create a more hopeful vision of how we might leverage all of our voices to work together toward changing the futures of education. Regardless, Dryden-Peterson compellingly argues that refugee teachers and students add an invaluable voice to these discussions on the intersections of mobility, education, and building more peaceful and equitable futures for all.

This book does not require any prior knowledge about refugees. This book would benefit a wide audience of readers from various fields, and anyone interested in the work of “seeking refuge, of locating sanctuary, and of creating possibilities of belonging” (p.ix).

## References

1. Arnove, R. F., Torres, C. A., & Franz, S. (Eds.). (2013). *Comparative education: The dialectic of the global and the local*. Rowman & Littlefield.
2. Dryden-Peterson, S. (2022). *Right where we belong: How refugee teachers and students are changing the future of education*. Harvard University Press.
3. McCowan, T., & Unterhalter, E. (Eds.). (2021). *Education and international development: An introduction*. Bloomsbury Publishing.