Article

Revisiting Inclusion: An Exploration of Refugee-Led Education for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in Lebanon

Elnaz Safarha * and **Zeena Zakharia**

Department of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education, University of Maryland, 3942 Campus Drive, College Park, MD 20742, USA; zakharia@umd.edu
* Correspondence: esafarha@umd.edu

Abstract: This article explores the concept of inclusive education in contexts of forced displacement, where refugeehood intersects with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), as well as gender, poverty, and overlapping forms of discrimination. Drawing on extensive engagement with a refugee-led, non-formal educational organization in Lebanon, we revisit inclusion for refugee children with SEND through a bottom-up lens. We consider inclusion within Lebanon's sociopolitical landscape, focusing on a community of educators, most of whom are refugees themselves. Grounded in decolonial feminist epistemologies and critical refugee studies, we highlight the role of educators as cultural actors who employ engaged pedagogies to humanize the educational experiences of refugee children with SEND. By challenging traditional top-down, outcome-oriented policies that focus solely on structural access, this paper advocates for an alternative framework based on refugee educators' orientations to working with children with SEND. This framework prioritizes holistic, context-sensitive approaches to inclusion and underscores the importance of humanizing education for refugees.

Keywords: critical refugee studies; disability; humanizing education; inclusion; refugee education; special education

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1. Introduction

The right to education for refugees was first recognized in the 1951 Refugee Convention (UN 1951) and its 1967 Protocol (UN 1967). However, inclusive education (IE) for refugees did not gain significant international attention until later, with key milestones, such as the 1990 World Declaration on Education for All, the 1994 Salamanca Statement (UN 1994) and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, and the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2006). Despite these advancements, the conceptualization and practical implementation of IE remain limited in contexts of forced displacement, particularly when refugeehood intersects with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Key challenges to this limited implementation include ambiguous definitions of inclusion in both national and international settings (El Ahmad 2022, 2023; Kelcey and Chatila 2020; Hadidi and Al Khateeb 2015), insufficient funding (Alkhateeb et al. 2015; Crea et al. 2023; El Ahmad and Kawtharani 2022; IASC 2019), inadequate teacher training (El Ahmad 2023; Crea et al. 2023; Hadidi and Al Khateeb 2015), and a lack of inclusive curricula (El Ahmad 2022, 2023; Hadidi and Al Khateeb 2015; Shuayb et al. 2016) that address the needs of refugees. Furthermore, societal attitudes often view refugees as burdens on social and economic resources (Kiwan 2019), and regard children with SEND through a medical model, which adopts a deficit-based lens, assuming children with SEND cannot benefit from education (IASC 2019).

In 2012, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2012) began to advocate for the integration of refugees into national education systems through its Global

Education Strategy, moving away from prior practices of separate schooling (UNHCR 2012). Dryden-Peterson (2020) notes that UNHCR's strategy implies two dimensions of inclusion: (1) "structural inclusion", meaning integration or access to education, and (2) "relational inclusion" that is concerned with social inclusion and sense of belonging. In formal educational settings, inclusion is often reduced to its structural aspect, with national education systems adopting a "child-rights lens". This approach treats refugee children through general child protection obligations rather than recognizing their distinct needs as refugees (Buckner et al. 2017). While addressing basic educational rights in terms of access, this approach fails to capture the complexity of refugee experiences and their needs for comprehensive, relational inclusion (Dryden-Peterson 2020; Kelcey and Chatila 2020).

While extensive literature has explored the structural and, to a lesser extent, the relational dimensions of inclusion for refugees, the concept of inclusion when refugeehood intersects with disability, gender, race, ethnicity, and/or age remains underexplored (Crea et al. 2023). In particular, critical elements of inclusion, such as emotional belonging, love and healing, and their incorporation into pedagogy, especially for refugees, are still notably underrepresented in the existing literature.

This paper offers a framework for reconceptualizing disability and inclusion in refugee education from a bottom-up lens. Although our analysis is largely theoretical, we draw on empirical examples from our long-term engagement with a refugee-led organization in Lebanon to revisit the concept of inclusion for children with SEND in contexts of forced displacement and marginalization. The refugee-led organization, which we refer to as RO in this paper, serves Syria[1] refugees through a nonformal educational program that is mostly staffed by refugees. Educators primarily deliver instruction in Arabic,[2] which is Syria's official language of instruction. Despite lacking formal accreditation due to Lebanese regulations, RO offers refugee children a sense of normalcy and belonging, making it a crucial educational opportunity for children who might otherwise be out of school.

Grounded in critical refugee studies and decolonial feminist epistemologies, our work positions refugees and individuals with SEND as cultural actors and agents of change, paying attention to their historical and sociopolitical context. Significantly, this work is contextualized within the broader sociopolitical landscape of Lebanon, which hosts a large population of Syria refugees (approximately 1.5 million) amidst its own economic and political crises (UNHCR 2024), including the devastation wrought by Israel's most recent invasion. Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention (UN 1951) and its 1967 Protocol (UN 1967). This profoundly shapes the educational challenges faced by both refugee students and teachers despite the Lebanese government's stated commitment to promoting inclusion for Syria refugees.

Based on over a decade of collaboration with RO, including observations and discussions in recent years with educators and staff about how they support children with SEND, we revisit the concept of inclusion in refugee education. We highlight the role of educators who adopt engaged pedagogies to humanize the educational experience for refugee children with SEND. Together with an exploration of the literature, our analysis is informed by the practices and reflections of refugee educators, which offer insights into how inclusion might be reconceptualized in refugee education.

The organization of this article is as follows. We begin by describing the educational landscape for Syria refugees in Lebanon, identifying the structural and social barriers to refugee inclusion. Next, we outline the theoretical foundations of critical refugee studies and decolonial feminist epistemologies, which shape our conceptual lens for exploring the humanizing and healing aspects of inclusive education. We then discuss how inclusion is currently conceptualized in global context and its challenges. In the subsequent section, we reflect on the practices of inclusion at RO. We highlight illustrative examples of how refugee educators utilize situated agency and cultural practices to create a collaborative and inclusive learning environment. Finally, by connecting these reflections with the existing literature, we offer a reconceptualization of inclusion as a dynamic, relational process that challenges traditional, outcome-driven policies to emphasize the holistic well-being of

refugee children. We conclude with reflections on how this framework might inspire more nuanced, inclusive policies and practices in refugee education worldwide.

2. Syria Refugee Education in the Context of Lebanon

The Syria refugee crisis, which began in 2011, brought approximately 1.5 million refugees to Lebanon, including over half a million school-aged children (UNHCR 2024). Initially, education for these children was provided through non-formal education (NFE) programs by local and international NGOs (Shuayb et al. 2014). These programs ranged from remedial classes to fully developed educational services. However, as the refugee population grew, pressure mounted from international donors with their promises of financial support for Lebanon's Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) to take the lead in addressing refugee education in the country. This resulted in launching the Reaching All Children with Education (RACE) initiative.

Rolled out in two phases between 2014 and 2021, RACE aimed to integrate Syria refugees into Lebanon's public education system through a double-shift model (World Bank 2016). This model aligned with the UNHCR's 2012 Global Education Strategy, which sought to integrate refugees into national education systems. However, the program's focus on structural access has not fully addressed the quality of education or the social inclusion of refugee children in the country. Even with improvements in access, with enrollment rates rising to 42 percent for refugees by 2016, the initiative struggled to surpass enrollment rates over 50 percent (Kelcey and Chatila 2020).

Several factors have contributed to this persistent gap in access to quality education for Syria refugees in Lebanon. Firstly, public schools in Lebanon, have been historically underfunded and reliant on poorly compensated teachers, leading the majority of Lebanese children to attend private or semi-private schools (Bahou and Zakharia 2019; Buckner et al. 2017). This leaves public schools to primarily serve Syria refugees and Lebanese children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Then, after 2012, MEHE partially started suspending enrollment of Syria refugees in the morning shifts within the public school system. As a result, Syria refugee children, except for the highest achievers, are typically placed in the second shift, which is perceived to be of lower quality due to fewer resources and less experienced teachers (Shuayb et al. 2016).

Moreover, qualified Syria refugee teachers are excluded from participating in public education, further impacting the quality of education (Kersting and Najdi 2023). MEHE's restrictions on non-formal education programs have also limited their scope, relegating them to a transitional role rather than a sustainable long-term solution for refugee education (Shuayb et al. 2014). These programs are not accredited and are prohibited from offering official academic credentials because of Lebanon's education regulations, discouraging some families from enrolling their children, as the lack of certification limits future opportunities.

Legal and societal barriers also hinder the inclusion of Syria refugee children. Lebanon, though committed to several human rights treaties, is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. This leaves many Syria refugees without legal status, limiting their access to education and other services. The absence of legal frameworks governing refugee education means that decisions about inclusiveness are often left to local actors, some of whom might hold discriminatory views against Syrians, exacerbated by historical tensions between the two countries (Kelcey and Chatila 2020). Other significant barriers to inclusion of Syria refugees with or without SEND are the lack of an inclusive and adaptive curriculum, along with language barriers (Kiwan 2019; Shuayb et al. 2016). Lebanon's public schools teach in French and English in addition to Arabic, particularly for mathematics and science courses, further marginalizing Syria children, many of whom are proficient only in Arabic.

For children with SEND, the situation is more complex. While Lebanon recognizes the right to education for children with disabilities in both public and private schools under Law 220, the practice of mainstreaming education for children with SEND faces multiple challenges (El Ahmad 2022; Khochen and Radford 2012; Kiwan 2019). In fact, in 2018, with support from international donors, MEHE launched a pilot program in 30 public schools

across the country, which extended to 90 first-shift schools and 20 second-shift schools, providing IE to approximately 3000 children with SEND in mainstream environments (UNICEF and MEHE 2023). Alongside government initiatives, various national and international NGOs and civil society organizations have been active in providing IE programs for children with SEND in both formal and non-formal educational spaces; but they mainly operate in private settings (Khochen and Radford 2012; UNICEF and MEHE 2023).

Despite these efforts, systemic issues such as inadequate funding, insufficient teacher training, and reliance on a deficit-based medical model of disability continue to limit the effectiveness of these programs (El Ahmad 2023; El Ahmad and Kawtharani 2022; Khochen and Radford 2012). Additionally, there are no legal requirements or preparation mechanisms in place for schools (public or private) to accept children with SEND, whether they are nationals or refugees (El Ahmad 2023; Kiwan 2019). Consequently, decisions about inclusiveness fall on school principals and teachers, influenced by the type and severity of disabilities and the availability of support (El Ahmad 2023).

For non-Lebanese children with disabilities, the educational services are even more limited. While Palestinian refugees have received some support through UNRWA (El Ahmad 2022; El Ahmad and Kawtharani 2022), no equivalent services exist for Syria refugee children, despite estimates that 22.6 percent of them aged two and above have disabilities (Humanity and Inclusion 2023). Data on out-of-school children in Lebanon, both Lebanese and non-Lebanese, do not include disaggregated information by disability, making it difficult to assess the full scope of exclusion (Humanity and Inclusion 2023). Even MEHE's latest National Policy on Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs in Lebanon does not account for displacement in its cross-cutting themes for children affected by crisis and conflict (UNICEF and MEHE 2023).

In short, while Lebanon has expanded access to education for Syria refugee children, significant challenges remain, particularly for refugees with SEND. Legal, societal, and institutional barriers continue to impede their inclusion in both public and non-formal educational settings. Addressing these challenges requires a more holistic approach that integrates social, cultural, political, and educational factors to ensure that all children, regardless of nationality or ability, have access to quality education.

3. Conceptual and Analytic Approach

Our conceptual and analytic approach incorporates critical pedagogy, critical refugee studies, feminist decolonial epistemologies, and an intersectional lens to revisit the concept of inclusion within a dynamic process, rooted in the lived experiences of refugees. Drawing from the works of Paulo Freire and bell hooks, we adopt a holistic educational lens that centers active participation, mutual respect, and collaborative learnings between educators and students (Freire 1970; hooks 1994). Informed by critical refugee studies, we conceptualize the experiences of refugees through Nguyen's (2019) concept of "refugeetude," encompassing an epistemological shift that views refugees as continuous, dynamic sources of creativity and resilience. By recognizing refugees' enduring contributions and complex relationships, this lens allows us to shift focus from viewing refugees as passive recipients of aid to cultural agents engaged in knowledge production and meaning-making, especially within educational contexts (Espiritu 2006; Nguyen 2019).

Drawing on feminist decolonial perspectives from scholars like McKittrick (2021) and Nagar (2019), we emphasize that refugees' lived experiences hold inherent theoretical value. Reframed as stories, these experiences foster engagement, curiosity, and collaboration, allowing knowledge to emerge organically from the community itself. This approach allows us to view refugees' stories as theories, capturing the depth of their lived experience without imposing external frameworks. In line with McRuer's (2006) Crip theory, rather than situating disability solely within the process of social disablement (i.e., social model of disability) or the body (i.e., medical model), we move beyond these single-focused frameworks to conceptualize disability as a value-laden cultural site. This feminist cultural model of disability allows us to explore "how and why [disability] is constructed and

naturalized; how it is embedded in complex economic, social, and cultural relations; and how it might be changed" (McRuer 2006, p. 2). Finally, through an intersectional lens, we pay heed to the entangled systems of power, such as citizenship, ablism, and classism, which interconnectedly shape the lived experiences of refugees.

While our analysis is largely theoretical, it is informed by ethnographic research and discussion with Syria refugee educators in Lebanon over the last decade (e.g., Menashy and Zakharia 2022; Zakharia 2023, 2024). Since 2014, the second author has documented the development and growth of RO, accompanying RO through multiple compounding crises, and learning from their work through several qualitative and mixed methods studies. In the last two years, together with the first author, this body of work has included more focused attention on refugee children with SEND. In this paper, we rely on our critical reflections about the observed practices of refugee educators to explore the concept of inclusion, in dialogue with refugee educators, the literature, and each other. We discuss empirical examples from this research to illustrate the theoretical resources offered by refugee educators.

Our approach resists a singular narrative of inclusion and the tendency to seek educational "solutions". Instead, we adopt McKittrick's (2021) notion of lived experiences as stories that can serve as active, collaborative processes to challenge dominant assumptions and engage curiosity for alternative meanings. However, acknowledging our unequal positionality with our interlocutors, we focus on collective knowledge production to revisit the concept of inclusion without seeking a "perfect translation" of refugees' lived experiences. Instead, we emphasize the relational nature of these stories (Nagar 2019). This perspective allows us to engage in ongoing learning, relearning, and retelling of refugee experiences, while refusing definitive interpretations.

4. Inclusion in Global Context

Refugee children face a myriad of political, economic, legal, social, and health-related challenges that disrupt their education and impact their psychosocial development. These challenges are often compounded by structural violence such as poverty, discrimination, and statelessness, as well as psychological violence, such as bullying and social exclusion. When resettling in or remaining in transit countries with unfamiliar languages and cultures, refugee children face additional difficulties in social and emotional development and a sense of belonging (Saldıray and Meydan 2023). These challenges are exacerbated when refugeehood intersects with factors such as disability, gender, and poverty, complicating access to and participation in quality educational opportunities (Crea et al. 2023).

Access to quality education for refugee children remains significantly lower than the global average, with disparities increasing as children age (Kelcey and Chatila 2020). According to UNICEF (2022), information about refugee children with disabilities is very limited, especially regarding the prevalence, types of disabilities, and nature of their compounded experiences because of displacement, including disruptions in their health, education, and social services. This is particularly concerning because refugee children with disabilities are more likely to experience structural violence, which can either exacerbate their existing disabilities or lead to new ones, due to lack of access to health services and the challenges of living in poverty.

Multiple global conventions recognize the importance of education as a fundamental right for all children, regardless of their background or disadvantages. However, they often lack an intersectional lens and clear conceptualization of inclusion for refugees, particularly those with SEND. This can result in fragmented policies and strategies, where refugee inclusion and IE for refugees with SEND are often addressed in silos. For example, the Salamanca Statement (UN 1994) and Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2006) focus on mainstreaming[3] education for children with SEND. The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) highlights IE for children, youth, and adults, with separate targets for sex and disability (UN 2015). The 1951 Refugee Convention (UN 1951) and its 1967 Protocol (UN 1967) affirm the right of refugee children

to receive education on par with national students. In other words, inclusion and inclusive education seem to be worded and used as two distinct technical terms that might work in parallel but not necessarily together.

Significant global attention to inclusive education particularly for refugees, however, emerged with the UNHCR's Global Education Strategy in 2012, which aimed to integrate refugee learners into national systems and reduce the number of out-of-school refugees (UNHCR 2012). The 2019 Refugee Education 2030 strategy (UNHCR 2019) expanded this focus to include the quality of inclusive education for refugees, with consideration to gender and disability. However, the incorporation of these factors is mostly limited to the wording of the key strategic objectives, with little detail on the methods (the how) and the underlying rationale (the why).

UNESCO (2017) offers a more comprehensive definition of inclusive education, describing it as the process of dismantling barriers to access, participation, and achievement for learners excluded from educational opportunities. This includes students living in poverty, linguistic minorities, refugees, and children with SEND as examples (UNESCO 2001; UNICEF 2022). As mentioned earlier, Dryden-Peterson (2020) interprets these global strategies, particularly the recent UNHCR strategy, as reflecting two dimensions of inclusion: structural inclusion and relational inclusion. However, in formal settings, inclusion prioritizes the structural aspect, often overlooking the complex lived experiences of refugees, such as their psychosocial support needs to address the trauma they might have experienced (Kelcey and Chatila 2020).

Agencies such as the Inter-Agency Networks for Education in Emergencies (INEE 2010), and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC 2019), provide clearer guidelines for the inclusion of refugees with SEND, acknowledging the complexity of refugees' needs. However, they still insufficiently engage with "approaches that address the lack of relevance of or possible harm promulgated by [the] national curricula for refugee students, focused on structural processes and not relational ones" (Dryden-Peterson 2020, p. 8). This is particularly problematic given the heightened risk of learning difficulties among refugee children due to their experiences of various forms of violence, including conflict-related trauma, poverty, and statelessness.

Empirical studies show that ambiguities in how inclusion is perceived lead to inconsistencies in its implementation. Educational laws often conceptualize disability within a medical model, viewing it as a defect in body or mind to be fixed, widening the gap between policy and practice. Policies influenced by such deficit-based models assume that children with SEND cannot benefit from education (IASC 2019), thereby further contributing to the stigmatization and marginalization of refugee children with SEND in schools (Hadidi and Al Khateeb 2015; Kiwan 2019). Additionally, institutional and environmental barriers, such as insufficient funding, inadequate teacher training, the absence of inclusive curricula, and the educational needs of parents of refugees with SEND, hinder the provision of inclusive education for refugee children (Alkhateeb et al. 2015; Crea et al. 2023; El Ahmad and Kawtharani 2022; IASC 2019; Rfat et al. 2023).

Most of the research on IE for refugees has been conducted in the Global North, where findings are not always applicable to refugee contexts in the Global South because of different political and economic challenges. While there is growing literature on social inclusion in refugee education, little is known about how refugeehood intersects with factors such as disability, gender, race, ethnicity, and age (Crea et al. 2023; Kiwan 2019). Studies that incorporate an intersectional lens are often conducted in private schools practicing inclusion or in schools operated by UNRWA (El Ahmad 2022; El Ahmad and Kawtharani 2022; Khochen-Bagshaw 2023).

To effectively implement inclusive education, scholars and practitioners emphasize the need for collaboration among all stakeholders, including children with SEND, their parents, teachers, school leaders, government officials, and local communities (Crea et al. 2023). Inclusive education for refugee children, especially those with SEND, must be conceptualized as a holistic approach to education that addresses social, cultural, political,

economic, and academic factors (Alkhateeb et al. 2015). This collective effort and a holistic approach are necessary to enhance access, meet educational needs, and maximize the participation of refugee children with SEND (El Ahmad 2022; El Ahmad and Kawtharani 2022). Fostering collaboration among educators, policy makers, and communities helps address the existing disconnect between policy and practice, and might offer a more nuanced, practical, and intersectional approach to inclusive education. However, achieving these objectives requires radical changes in the current systems, including unlearning, learning, and relearning new meanings for inclusion, refugeehood, and disability.

5. Inclusion at a Refugee-Led Organization

In this section, we highlight examples from our long-term engagement with RO's community to reflect on how the concept of inclusion might be expanded to encompass humanizing aspects of education for refugees. Our observations and discussions at RO inform our theoretical analysis of inclusion. Through humanizing pedagogy that centers emotional belonging, love, and healing for refugee students and teachers, RO embodies inclusive education and provides an opportunity to reconceptualize inclusion for refugee learners with SEND.

In nearly all classrooms at RO, a distinct approach to inclusive education emerged, reframing refugee children not as victims, but as valued learners. Initially, RO sought to hire teachers with education and science backgrounds, but the profound socioemotional needs of the students soon prompted a shift in strategy. The academic director explained that they began recruiting and employing social workers trained to address children's mental well-being, equipping them with additional training to extend their roles as educators. The rationale for hiring social workers as teachers was clear to the founding educators, who wanted to ensure a "holistic approach to education and to move away from traditional teaching methods" that might further marginalize their students. As the academic director explained, "We felt it would be easier to train and prepare social workers to teach than to get trained teachers to 'unlearn' what they know about education". This deliberate choice to hire teachers with backgrounds in social work reflects a critical dimension of RO's inclusive practices, as it directly addresses the severe emotional distress and psychological trauma that many refugee children experience.

In addition to teachers with backgrounds in social work, RO had an on-site social worker, trained in special education, who supported children with special needs and learning difficulties, acting as a bridge among teachers, students, and their parents. As explained by the social worker, her key role was to guide teachers in adopting individualized strategies for each child, allowing flexibility in teaching methods. By stating, "We know our kids are special in a certain way, educationally," she conveyed that all refugee students at RO might be considered as needing special educational supports. One teacher explained that students face "both learning difficulties due to disruptions in schooling and difficulties arising from the environment in which they live. And then, there are those cases that are made worse by the current situation [of displacement]." In this context, RO sought to operate as a space of inclusion for refugee children with SEND. The social worker further explained:

> "When I work with teachers, I suggest some ways to teach [children with] difficulties. And I always tell them, 'There is no one successful thing. We'll find a suitable way for this case.' We have to find a certain way [that will work for each particular child]. I say, 'You [can let me know if] what I suggested isn't [working]. . . I [found] the following 1, 2, 3 [options]. And don't be afraid of trying new things.' We have to make some pulses [i.e., try different options] in order to find the right thing. And the right thing will not [necessarily] be the right [option] for all the students."

When teachers would consult the social worker about a specific child facing learning difficulties, the social worker would observe the class and meet individually with the student to identify the cause. In cases where learning challenges stemmed from experi-

ences of abuse, sexual violence, or neglect, the social worker, while respecting the child's privacy, would share relevant context with teachers to help them understand the student's challenges. She said,

> "...considering [the child's] privacy, I tell [teachers] the situation of these kids and [explain] why [they] behave the way they do. And I give them some instructions [on] how to deal with annoying behaviors or things that they feel [are] under their [control], in a way that will not damage [the child] more, because [the child has] already been punished [socially and structurally], and... rejected [by society], they [are] already [experiencing] all of this."

In several instances, the social worker described how students' behavior and academic performance improved significantly when teachers shifted their approach, viewing the students' learning within the context of the structural challenges they were experiencing. A teacher shared: "At the end of the day [children] go home to these difficult circumstances—no security, garbage, no electricity, no clean water, the home does not get any sun [...] After we work with a child for a while, we observe a complete transformation".

Even before the social worker with special education training joined RO, teachers recognized that their students had distinct needs: "The children are coming from the context of war. Some have begun to stutter, others have had their schooling disrupted, others have learning difficulties due to some form of trauma". A teacher described how she worked with a boy who had a speech impediment. She taught the whole class using motions and signals to show where the letter sounds come from. "In this way I taught the whole class without making the child stand out or feel different. The whole class benefited from this additional awareness of letter sounds and the child seemed joyful in producing the same sounds as his classmates". By making small adjustments to her instruction, the teacher supported the individual as part of the class. Eventually the student advanced dramatically to overcome his speech difficulty.

With a vision to expand inclusive practices for current and out-of-school students with SEND, the social worker expressed her hopes for promoting IE at RO. She emphasized, "We need to work on the skills of each student... They [need to] feel that they [are] good at something, [which] of course, [will] positively impact on their educational achievement as well". In other words, she highlighted the importance of a strength-based teaching approach, one that communicates to students that "they can do something; [that] they [were] not born accidentally, [without] an aim or role [in life]".

Consistently, in the classroom, teachers demonstrated a strong awareness of students' diverse learning foundations, aiming to personalize the learning process. An observed storytelling class in 2023 exemplified this approach, where the teacher sought to engage students in creating their own books. She began by reading a story to illustrate the format, passing the book around so students could examine the images and structure. According to the social worker, the emphasis on clarity and simplicity helped address the measurable regression in foundational literacy skills that had followed the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020/2021. Teachers needed to simplify instructions, as many students struggled with comprehension after prolonged absences and were accustomed to more physical forms of communication outside school.

After reading, the teacher guided students to create their books with relaxing instrumental music in the background, creating a calm and supportive environment. Each child was given options to either draw or write their raw ideas, and the teacher provided one-on-one support, helping them to refine their ideas into full sentences with correct dictation. By the end of the class, each student had a self-created book, complete with a personalized cover, their name as the author, and a title. The lesson promoted creativity and self-expression through a strength-based approach that helped students recognize their potential.

Teachers regularly developed targeted activities to ensure an inclusive learning space, at times improvising, and other times planning in teams. This required flexibility and creativity in ways of working. It required being attuned to the children. One school

principal noted, “Flexibility is part of our structure. . . and the well-being of students and teachers is our primary concern”. In reflecting on her approach, one teacher noted, “The situation of each child differs. They have emotional issues due to war; they are displaced and are living in difficult conditions. So, the way I work with them also has to change.” Another said: “We have to keep noticing the details, reflect on our work, and think in new ways”. For example, although they had no knowledge of sign language, teachers fully integrated two students who exhibited deafness, by thinking through possible approaches and valuing them as learners. The students learned to lipread and kept pace with the class.

Due to disruptions in children’s education and other learning difficulties, teachers also worked with students of different ages in their classrooms. This required teachers to “think differently”. As one teacher explained, “Being [overage] impacts their emotional state. I have to think and strategize about how to advance them academically and support them emotionally”. One teacher addressed this by explaining to the children that in the past, “people of all ages used to meet in schools, homes, mosques, or churches to just learn together. They were very young and very old”. She then had them act this out through a skit in class, with canes and mustaches for the elders. “The children got a kick out of this. It brought them great joy!” Another teacher described this exchange: “I had this teary-eyed boy in my class, and I pulled him aside and said, ‘Listen Mohamad, dear, I see that you are an older member of the class, and so am I. You and I, here, we need to be teachers and learners. You will be my right hand, my assistant’”. She also promised to promote him to the next class as soon as he felt he knew all the material of the current class. According to the academic director, he worked hard to advance, and he progressed quickly.

This personalized, attentive teaching embodies Freire’s concept of humanizing pedagogy, transforming education into a process of emotional and intellectual growth. As the social worker stated: “Here our goal is literacy and also to feel loved and have value, to have a purpose”. By aligning RO’s supportive ethos with inclusive, student-centered methods, educators provided resources tailored to students’ needs, developing academic skills and creativity in a nurturing environment that fostered healing. RO’s social worker explained, “Once you make children feel loved and valued, it makes a huge difference in their behavior and learning”. A teacher put it this way: “In my teaching, I think of the hardships of my own children, and I try to put myself in the shoes of every mother and how she would like her child to be treated—her child to learn at school”. This humanizing principle extended beyond the classroom, as teachers collaborated with social workers, school administrators, and parents to equip themselves with tools to address students’ varied needs and to create a holistic, inclusive learning experience.

At the entrance of RO’s school a sign reads, “Education is not preparation for life. Education is life itself”. RO educators understood this well. They sought to co-create and embody an inclusive school that stood in stark contrast to the discrimination that refugees faced in wider society. Syrian teachers frequently spoke about their students’ and their own experiences with discrimination both outside school and on the way to school. According to a teacher who rode the bus to school, “The driver treated the Syrian children as though they are not human”. But at RO, it was different: “We don’t experience the discrimination of wider society in this school. We are mostly Syrian teachers, and there are some Lebanese teachers. But there is a spirit of camaraderie”. By employing both Lebanese and Syrian teachers, RO fostered a learning environment that challenged the power dynamics rooted in citizenship status, allowing teachers to collaboratively enact situated agency in their pedagogical practices. This form of agency, as described by Danforth and Naraian (2015), empowers teachers to navigate complex sociopolitical realities and engage in creative, context-specific actions that prioritize equity and inclusion. As one teacher noted: “We found [our school] to be the antidote we needed to this [dehumanizing] treatment”.

The concept of marginalization by association (Stapleton 2021) is particularly relevant to RO. It draws attention to a layer of exclusion experienced by teachers due to their association with the challenges faced by their students. Syria refugee teachers at RO, who are already marginalized due to their legal status in Lebanon, are further marginalized

because of their professional role serving refugee children. This dual marginalization operates at two levels: structurally and socially. Structurally, their legal status as refugees limits their employment opportunities in Lebanese public schools, confining them to roles within non-formal educational settings, which lack the same formal recognition and career advancement potential. Socially, these teachers bear the same stigmas and social exclusions that their students experience, which can lead to reduced access to resources, diminished professional respect within the broader educational landscape, and at times, blame for their students' underperformance through accountability mechanisms. Despite these challenges, the teachers at RO exemplify what Danforth and Naraian (2015) refer to as situated agency—they utilize their marginal position to become teacher-activists, reimagining education as a process of humanization and healing for their students and themselves. Reflecting this sense of activism, a teacher noted, "I tell the students, we are here to learn so that we can return to build", and a principal concluded: "I am building something. I feel good". This teacher-activism is a critical element of RO's pedagogy, teacher professional development, and ways of working.

As shown in these examples, RO extends the notion of inclusion, from an outcome to a process, which is fluid, dynamic, and inherently political (Danforth and Naraian 2015). It requires teachers, students, and communities to engage in ongoing dialogue and reflection, continuously adapting to the evolving needs of refugee children in complex sociopolitical contexts. Inclusion, as practiced at RO, is not a final goal but an ongoing commitment to equity, humanization, and healing. This process-based approach aligns with decolonial feminist epistemologies and Indigenous knowledge systems, which emphasize relationality, emotional belonging, and the holistic development of individuals.

Instead of viewing refugee students through a deficit-based lens, particularly those with learning difficulties or disabilities, teachers at RO situate students' challenges within the broader historical, social, and political contexts that shape their lives. This approach mirrors Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, which emphasizes education as a practice of freedom and consciousness-raising, and hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, which integrates the mind, body, and spirit into the learning process. By engaging these frameworks, RO's teachers foster a healing pedagogy that aims to humanize their students' educational experiences through love, care, and emotional support.

The presence of social workers at RO also plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between teachers, students, and parents, especially when dealing with students with SEND. This holistic approach underscores the importance of creating an inclusive educational environment that acknowledges not only the academic but also the emotional and social dimensions of learning. It aligns with Barcelos and Coelho (2016) concept of attentive love, where teachers actively listen to their students and adapt their teaching to meet the unique realities of each child. In the context of RO, teachers also listen to each other: "Our voices matter here, and we are attached [to our school] because we love it". In this way, RO's inclusive pedagogy moves beyond the conventional, outcome-oriented models of education that often dominate refugee education discourse.

The practices and articulation of inclusion at RO call for a reconceptualization of inclusion in refugee education. Currently, global strategies on inclusive education, such as those advocated by the United Nation agencies, tend to focus on access and participation as measurable outcomes. While dismantling barriers to education is essential, we argue that a more comprehensive approach is required, one that includes the emotional and psychological dimensions of learning for refugee children. RO's model, which prioritizes love, care, and emotional belonging, offers an alternative framework for inclusion that humanizes education.

This humanization is particularly important for refugee children who have experienced significant violence, including displacement, poverty, and social exclusion. RO's pedagogy fosters a sense of normalcy and belonging for children, helping them recover from the trauma they have experienced and providing them with the tools to rebuild their lives. By offering a safe space for learning that integrates emotional and social well-

being with academic development, RO challenges the conventional, often depersonalized approaches to refugee education.

6. Revisiting the Concept of Inclusion for Refugees

Danforth and Naraian (2015) critique the foundation of IE that is rooted in special education knowledge, which is often based on psychological measurement and behavioral modifications. These methods, they argue, were initially developed to support segregated schooling, and extending them to IE can serve as a "strategic cover for traditional, deficit-based practices", and "depoliticize[e] issues of human values and social participation" (p. 71). In response, they propose to rethink IE as a distinct field with its own conceptual and practical foundations, emphasizing the political and social dimensions of inclusion.

The four priorities they offer to guide this reconceptualization are (1) democracy, which embeds freedom, collaborative learning and humane values into teaching; (2) interpersonal relationships, where mutual respect, care and trust between teachers and students are central; (3) political consciousness, encouraging teachers to reflect and resist systems of power such as ablism; and (4) situated agency, which allows teachers to navigate complex and often contradictory educational spaces and to advocate for equity, while challenging narratives of dualism such as learnings/achievement, ability/disability, and success/failure.

While Danforth and Naraian (2015) focus on the context of children with SEND in the United States, we extend their argument to inclusion for refugees to revisit the concept of inclusive refugee education in the literature. By rejecting the notion of inclusion as an achievable *outcome*, as commonly depicted in global strategies, RO invites us to frame it as a political, fluid, and dynamic *process*, or as Danforth and Naraian (2015) describe it, "a work in progress" (p. 72). This approach views IE as a matter of advanced professional work—of teaching practices and political activism seeking equity and humanity—within historical, sociopolitical, and economic contexts (Danforth and Naraian 2015). With this reconceptualization, we do not ignore the importance of dismantling barriers to access and participation for children systematically excluded from education. Rather, we attempt to expand the definition by humanizing inclusion and decolonizing pedagogical efforts in refugee education through a holistic education lens.

To transform outcome-oriented global educational policies, influenced by neoliberal and globalized capitalism (Cremin 2016; Harris 2008), the need for critical and engaged pedagogies grounded in a practice of freedom (Freire 1970; hooks 2003) and love (hooks 2003; Rangel 2016) is as crucial as ever. Critical and engaged pedagogy emphasizes dialogical encounters in the classroom based on profound love, humility, faith in humanity, mutual trust, and hope, activating critical thinking and actions–praxis (Freire 1970). While Freire focuses on the consciousness of the mind, hooks (1994) expands this to include the engagement of mind, body, and spirit, all dimensions of being.

Aligned with decolonial epistemologies and Indigenous knowledge, Rangel (2016) argues that "by integrating mind, body, and spirit, a person can understand with their whole being how states of frustration, depression, and anger can serve as catalysts for healing and social change". This healing is only possible through the practice of love, which fosters "emotional, spiritual, psychological, and physical wellness" for both students and teachers (Barcelos and Coelho 2016; hooks 2003). In other words, it is the "act of love that promotes spiritual and mental growth in our learners and in ourselves as teachers" (Barcelos and Coelho 2016).

McInerney and Cremin (2024) argue that the path toward sustainable peace and education involves shifting away from "[o]thering, mechanistic learning, and hyperrational modernity" (p. 301) toward a collaborative, innovative, and relational pedagogy that engages body, mind, and spirit. Lin et al. (2023) contend that modern education, deeply rooted in Western ideologies, promotes individualism by focusing primarily on the development of the mind while neglecting to cultivate a sense of love and connection among students and with their surroundings, including non-human kin. Barcelos and Coelho

(2016) further point out the absence of love in the curricula, school leadership, and language of teaching and learning.

According to hooks (2003), love in teaching is "a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust" (p. 131), which all work interdependently. Barcelos and Coelho (2016) demythologizes the implications of love in teaching, arguing that affective approaches bring joy and unity to learning unlike the assumption that they impact seriousness in learning. As bell hooks (2000) states, "When we choose to love, we choose to move against fear—against alienation and separation" (p. 93). Similarly, despite objections toward this approach, caring relations are fundamental for effective pedagogies and do not impair professionalism (Barcelos and Coelho 2016). Instead, teaching with love helps teachers better understand their students' unique needs and base their lessons accordingly (Barcelos and Coelho 2016; hooks 2003).

When the fundamental principles of love underpin the teacher–student relationship, the shared quest for knowledge fosters an ideal learning environment. In this setting, teachers learn alongside their students, who are also learning and contributing (hooks 2003). This aligns with Freire's (1970) assertion that education is constantly made in praxis.

Barcelos and Coelho (2016) name such love in teaching and learning as "attentive love", which goes beyond merely seeing the good in students to a desire to "reach beyond ourselves" and explore what it means to "be human". In other words, it allows teachers to see "students' realities in their own terms" (p. 134). Incorporating attentive love into the concept of inclusion is critical and organic, as empirical studies in humanitarian contexts have already shown that teachers serve as agents of change in student lives, acting as second parents, role models, and more (Adebayo 2019; Spear 2019).

Feminist scholar, Chela Sandoval frames this concept as a "methodology of the oppressed", a system deregulator that serves as "a postmodern decolonizing activity", or a "methodology of love in the postmodern world" (Sandoval 2000, p. 10). Sandoval views love as a hermeneutic, political technology, body of knowledge, arts, and practices that allows exploration of self and the world around us. For hooks (2003), "the act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own. In such knowing we know and are known as members of one community" (p. 132).

Moreover, defining inclusion through love as a hermeneutic enhances effective learning and a sense of community. It also promotes resilience in students. By choosing to love and moving against the culture of fear, dominant in the competitive educational environment, "students are encouraged to trust in their capacity to learn and can meet difficult challenges with a spirit of resilience and competence" (hooks 2003). Furthermore, by seeing love "in the context of inquiry, discovery, and creation a way to reach beyond ourselves", students find room to expand their curiosity, active listening, and critical thinking skills as well (Barcelos and Coelho 2016). Barcelos and Coelho (2016) further explain that this embodied love in pedagogy is also crucial for teachers as it allows them to engage in active listening and remain receptive to emotional communication with their students (Barcelos and Coelho 2016).

Theorizing inclusion in this context, and social change in educational settings in general, through the concept of love as a hermeneutic, is crucial for understanding the realities of refugees, particularly with SEND. Love as a hermeneutic refers to interpreting and engaging with the world through a lens of compassion, empathy, and deep respect for the inherent dignity of every creature (hooks 2003). This approach involves a set of practices and procedures that transform people individually and collectively, fostering a differential mode of knowing and being (Sandoval 2000). By emphasizing relational care and mutual respect, love as a hermeneutic helps to create inclusive environments that recognize and value the diverse experiences and needs of refugees, promoting their holistic development and well-being (Barcelos and Coelho 2016).

Having a conceptual understanding of love as an integrative way of being, (1) ontologically, as the universal force; (2) axiologically, as the source of joy and unity; (3) epistemo-

logically, as the source of knowing and being; and (4) methodologically, as a pedagogical imperative (Lin et al. 2023; Rangel 2016), can play a critical role in facilitating inclusion and healing for refugees, while decolonizing pedagogies. This aligns with the concept of "emotional belonging" (p. 139) that Barcelos and Coelho (2016) suggest is essential for individual and collective learning. We extend this notion of love to the refugee context, proposing it as a necessary element for fostering inclusion and a missing piece in inclusive education discourses and academic research on IE.

Conceptualizing inclusion through "attentive love" provides a robust framework for reimagining refugee education. By emphasizing emotional belonging, love, and healing, this approach creates a holistic and inclusive educational environment, supporting both the academic and social integration of refugee children while empowering them as agents of their own learning.

7. Conclusions: Reconciling Policy, Practice, and Research

Fostering emotional belonging and supporting refugees as active agents of their own learning does not absolve national and global policy makers of their responsibilities. Rather, it highlights the need for macro-level initiatives to support inclusive micro-level practices, such as those observed at RO. Policy makers must move beyond a narrow focus on access and participation to address the deeper, more complex needs of refugee children, including their emotional and psychosocial well-being.

Our findings suggest that reimagining inclusion through the lens of love and humanizing pedagogy can profoundly transform refugee education for children with SEND. By emphasizing emotional belonging, healing, and relational care this approach fosters a holistic, inclusive educational environment that supports both the academic and social integration of refugee children. Love as a hermeneutic provides a robust framework for understanding inclusion in refugee education, challenging the outcome-driven approaches prevalent in current policy frameworks. By centering emotional belonging, relational care, and humanizing practices, RO offers a new vision for inclusive education—one that empowers refugees as agents of their own learning, healing, and future.

While our conceptual framework builds on RO's valuable insights to offer a potentially generalizable vision, we acknowledge the deeply contextual nature of inclusion. Future comparative research might enrich our understanding of its implementation and barriers across diverse sociopolitical landscapes. These reflections underscore the importance of bridging gaps between research, policy, and practice, advocating for dynamic, relational approaches to inclusion that align with the lived realities of refugee children and their educators.

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Notes

[1] We purposefully use the term 'Syria refugees' instead of 'Syrian refugees', except when quoting others, to be mindful of the politics of citizenship and refugeehood, recognizing diverse ways of refugee self-identification.

[2] RO also teaches English as a second language to prepare students to transition into Lebanon's public school system, where English is one of the official languages of instruction.

[3] Mainstreaming education for children with SEND refers to the practice of integrating students with SEND into general education classrooms rather than enrolling them in separate, specialized settings. The aim of this approach is to enhance inclusion for children with diverse learning needs.

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