

2023

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Recommended Citation

Zakharia, Z. (2023). Ordinary Solidarities: Re-Reading Refugee Education Response Through an Anticolonial Discursive Framework. *International Journal of Human Rights Education*, 7(1). Retrieved from <https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre/vol7/iss1/3>

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Ordinary Solidarities: Re-Reading Refugee Education Response Through an Anticolonial Discursive Framework

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Abstract

Growing attention to longstanding issues linked to racism and coloniality in humanitarian assistance has impelled important conversations about power inequities in global education spaces and their related scholarly fields. This paper contributes to these conversations by advancing an anticolonial discursive framework for rights-based interventions in and through education. Drawing on a three-year case study of one faith-based school in Lebanon, this paper explores how one ordinary school in a refugee hostile transit country secured and protected the right to education for refugee children from Syria, within a significant broader context of multiple compounding crises. The notion of “ordinary solidarities” is used to describe how this refugee education response

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sustained engagement in learning, despite tremendous community opposition and against a deteriorating sociopolitical, economic, and pandemic backdrop. Through organic responsiveness, upholding of equitable relationships, and the principles of inclusion and anti-discrimination, ordinary solidarity embodies an anticolonial mandate for rights-based interventions and demands a shift in orientation from saviorism to care. By intertwining humanitarian discourse and one school's practices, the paper draws out implications for ongoing efforts to reconfigure humanitarian relations and structures.

Keywords: Humanitarian aid, Lebanon, refugee education, right to education, solidarity, Syria

Introduction

This paper explores how one ordinary school in a refugee hostile transit country secured and protected the right to education for refugee children, within a significant broader context of multiple compounding crises. Drawing on a case study of one faith-based school in Lebanon, I take up the notion of “ordinary solidarities” to advance an anticolonial discursive framework (Sefa Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001) for rights-based humanitarian interventions in and through education.

Over the last two decades, the widespread endorsement of education as a universal human right has given rise to a burgeoning field of global engagement in education in emergencies (EiE). Following calls for Education for All and growing recognition that the right to education extends to children in contexts of conflict, forced migration, and disaster, an addendum to the Sphere Minimum Standards in 2000 established education as a pillar of humanitarian aid and EiE as integral to the international humanitarian response system (Burde, Kapit, Wahl, Guven, & Skarpeteig, 2017; INEE, 2020). Within this system, actors and organizations based in the Global North,¹ such as United Nations agencies, multilateral banks, high-income country donors,

¹ The terms “Global North” and “Global South” refer to geopolitical relations of power, linked to colonial processes, through which inequalities in living standards, resources, and life expectancies are maintained (Dados & Connell, 2012).

and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), hold most power over decision-making in education policy, finance, and programming (Naylor, 2011; Zakharia, Menashy, & Shields, 2022). Whereas actors and organizations based in the Global South, including affected communities and recipients of foreign aid, technical advice, and programmatic activities, remain in least influential positions (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019; Menashy, 2019; Ramalingam et al., 2013).

Growing attention to these power imbalances in recent years has led EiE actors to begin questioning how partnerships that support the right to education perpetuate global inequities. In particular, the confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic and intensification of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in 2020 impelled important conversations in the EiE sector about longstanding issues linked to racism and coloniality in global education spaces and their related scholarly fields (Menashy & Zakharia, 2022a). Critics assert that inequitable relationships in rights-based interventions reflect colonial inheritances, structural dynamics, and deficit views about local actors and affected communities, who are commonly portrayed as lacking capacity, agency, credibility, relevant skills, and knowledge (Barbelet et al., 2020; Kothari, 2006; Paige, 2021; Pailey, 2020; Parpart, 1995; Wilson, 2017). Furthermore, critics cite “saviorism” as a pervasive orientation, reproduced through paternalistic relationships that cast local and refugee actors as objects of rescue (Khan, Dickson & Sondarjee 2023; Kyriakides, et al., 2019; Paige, 2021; Wilson, 2017). Both academic and practitioner-based literatures indicate that aid interventions reinscribe the epistemic authority of Northern “experts,” while undermining local knowledges, and they further describe the racialization of this expertise (Bian, 2022; Paige, 2021; Parpart, 1995).

Yet, despite clear evidence of these power imbalances in international development and humanitarian arenas, racism and coloniality have not received substantive attention within global education circles and related scholarly fields (Menashy & Zakharia, 2022a; Sriprakash, Tikly, & Walker, 2020). Since 2020, a handful of rights-based organizations have initiated organizational introspection and self-study, exploring, for example, the linkages between localization and institutional or systemic racism, and the

potential for addressing colonialities that manifest through unequal relationships, interactions, and decision-making authority among donors, international agencies, and local actors (Paige, 2021).² Calls to decolonize aid have been met with questions about how to do so and whether it is even possible (Aly & Ali, 2022). These developments constitute a potential inflection point for organizations seeking to protect the right to education for refugee children and to influence wider change in the international aid architecture. However, very little research exists on how to develop or implement equitable processes and practices in EiE and what effects these might have on the outcomes of rights-based interventions.

This paper contributes to these conversations within both practitioner and scholarly fields by drawing on the interconnectivities between efforts to address coloniality in aid and various lines of scholarship that provide conceptual entry-points for this work. By exploring what might be learned by centering a localized refugee response, the study contributes to research on Southern responses to displacement (see <https://southernresponses.org>). At the same time, the study responds to the provocation to “combine discussions about what is possible with what exists” (Sefa Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001, p. 298, emphasis original). As such, this paper attempts to address both academic and political concerns. I use Sefa Dei and Azgharzadeh’s (2001) anti-colonial discursive framework to understand what might be learned from a Southern refugee education response (responding to critiques of Northern epistemic authority in rights-based interventions), as well as to draw out implications for ongoing efforts to reconfigure humanitarian relations and structures.

Through ordinary solidarity, the school at the center of this study secured the right to education for Syrian refugees and sustained their engagement in learning despite tremendous opposition and against a deteriorating sociopolitical, economic, and pandemic backdrop. By intertwining

² For example, launched in 2022, The Pledge for Change 2030 commits signatories to “build a stronger aid ecosystem based on the principles of solidarity, humility, self-determination, and equality by focusing on three core changes: (1) equitable partnerships; (2) authentic storytelling; and (3) influencing wider change” (<https://pledgeforchange2030.org>).

humanitarian discourse, anticolonial framing, and one school's practices, this paper draws out implications for addressing power imbalances in EiE.

Thinking Through an Anticolonial Discursive Framework

To think through power imbalances in rights-based interventions, I consider Sefa Dei and Asgharzadeh's (2001) anticolonial discursive framework and conceptual resources drawn from the field of human rights education to write against racism and coloniality in refugee education, which manifest in aid structures, relationships, and orientations, including the specific embodiments of Northern epistemic authority (Zakharia, forthcoming) and saviorism (Cole, 2012).

Sefa Dei and Asgharzadeh's (2001) anticolonial discursive framework envisions a "common zone of resistance" against colonial tendencies in research and practice. Building on insights from indigenous research traditions, antiracist works, and "spaces created by Marxist, feminist, postcolonialist, and deconstructionist struggles," it seeks to forge solidarities among anti-oppression activists in both academic spheres and larger society (p. 297). These interconnectivities are significant for humanitarian critique, given the colonial inheritances of aid and the "insidious attempts to deny the validity of the knowledges shared by certain bodies who may not follow conventionally accepted methods of theorizing" (Sefa Dei & Azgharzadeh, 2001, p. 298).

Critiques of humanitarian interventions in education note that "theory" is reserved for Northern actors who claim and confer epistemic authority in rights-based interventions, as they determine educational systems, programs, and policies for so-called beneficiaries in the Global South (Paige, 2021; Pailey, 2020; Parpart, 1995). In this way—and supported by the economies and structures of aid—theories, goals, and mandates overwhelmingly travel from Global North to Global South (Kothari, 2006). Northern epistemic authority is claimed through social, political, and economic processes that are shaped by deficit perspectives about particular groups, and justifications for this epistemic authority are grounded in the notion that certain "rational" and "objective" observers are in a better epistemic position to "see,"

understand, and explain the world than others (Janack, 1997). Refugees and localized communities within aid structures do not enjoy epistemic authority because they are neither viewed as rational agents nor objective observers, capable of interpreting or shaping their social worlds (Paige, 2021). So, while Northern theory is considered generalizable to the South, Southern theory, or ways of knowing, are considered context specific. In a field shaped by colonial and racist legacies, epistemic theory belongs to Northern experts who are perceived to know better (Bian, 2022).

Deficit orientations toward Southern perspectives and knowledges intersect with racism in aid to establish what critics have termed the “White-savior industrial complex” (Cole, 2012; see also charitysowhite.org). Under the banner of “making a difference,” current humanitarian practices and norms reinforce saviorism, an ostensibly well-meaning rescue ideology that is palpable in the fundraising, advocacy, imagery, and structures of aid (Khan et al., 2023; Paige, 2021). Saviorism embodies racism and coloniality and reinscribes power asymmetries in refugee education.

Thinking through an anticolonial discursive framework pushes against this dominant perspective and seeks to provide insights from below, in this case, by considering what might be learned from one school’s practices for current efforts to decolonize aid. The framework is particularly effective for theorizing issues that emerge from colonial relations by interrogating “power configurations embedded in ideas, cultures, and histories of knowledge production, validation, and use” (Sefa Dei & Azgharzadeh, 2001, p. 300).

Human rights education scholars have also sought to change the content and terms of conversations on colonial and decolonial human rights education, noting the colonial relationships from which human rights frameworks have emerged, their Eurocentric assumptions and principles, and the savior ideology that accompanies rights relationships (Becker, 2021; Zembylas, 2017). Scholars have explored the possibility of a decolonial ethic in human rights education (Zembylas, 2020) and have highlighted the significance of indigenous knowledges and strategies used to “bring the decontextualized global to the nuanced and politicized local” (Abu Moghli, 2020, p. 1). As Becker (2021) notes, decolonial thinking is bottom up, communal, and

relational in process and embedded in the struggles of a pluriversal humanity (see also Maldonado-Torres, 2017; Williams & Bermeo, 2020).

This paper draws from these conceptual resources. Like Sefa Dei and Azgharzadeh (2001), my intention is not to reify theory, but rather “to problematize a conception of theory that has little or no bearing on the lived realities of peoples whose academic and political interests are in contradiction to hegemonic social orders” (p. 298). I apply my understanding of an anticolonial framework and the possibilities sought through a decolonial reading of human rights education to call attention to racism and coloniality in aid. These conceptual resources provide entry points for uncovering and addressing power imbalances in educational interventions, based on the epistemic resources of subordinated populations who are subjects of their own experiences, histories, and traditions.

The Syria Refugee Crisis in Lebanon

Since 2011, the war in Syria has prompted mass displacement on an unprecedented scale. An estimated 5.6 million Syrians have sought refuge in neighboring countries (UNHCR, 2022), including 1.5 million in Lebanon, a lower-middle-income country with the largest per capita refugee population in the world (GoL & UN, 2022).³ A combination of forces, including a Northern thrust to contain refugee migration in the Middle East and prevent migrants from reaching Europe (Knudsen & Berg, 2021), as well as the sheer scale of an estimated 1.2 million school-age Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt (3RP, 2019), catalyzed a proliferation of partnership-based interventions aimed at protecting the right to education (Zakharia, Menashy, & Shields, 2022). This expansion in education has implicated rights-based education responses in what Knudsen and Berg (2021) have identified as a larger “containment strategy, which seeks to stem the flow of refugees and asylum seekers while increasing the hosting capacities of third countries [by] combining economic incentives (international aid)

³ Approximately 1 in 5 individuals in Lebanon are Syrian refugees.

and concessions (visa and trade) to incentivize Middle East host states to carry the burden” (n.p.).

In Lebanon non-state actors, including faith-based organizations, were central to the provision of educational services to refugees from the onset of the crisis (Shuayb, Makkouk, & Tuttunji, 2014). Tasked with absorbing over half a million school-aged refugees from Syria, or one-third of all children in Lebanon (UNICEF, 2017), the Government of Lebanon followed suit by establishing “Reaching All Children with Education” (RACE I) in 2013 with support from the international community. In 2015, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) established the Program Management Unit to oversee the rollout of Syrian refugee education, opening 1000 public schools to Syrians in “second shift” refugee-only afternoon classes, thus reducing opportunities for interaction between Lebanese and Syrian children. In turn, a proliferation of organizations partnered to respond to the Syria refugee crisis in education, producing a multifaceted dynamic between public and private educational actors, both domestic and international (Menashy & Zakharia, 2022b). In 2017 RACE II extended its predecessor, by aiming to expand access to all vulnerable children in Lebanon. By 2018, children displaced from Syria accounted for 45 percent of Lebanon’s public-school enrollments (Abdul-Hamid & Yassine, 2020).

From the outset, government and society were deeply divided over the Syria crisis, and consequently, assistance to refugees (Naufal, 2012). Tensions were linked to perceptions among the Lebanese that Syrians pose an economic, physical, and symbolic threat (Harb & Saab, 2014); a historical context of political involvement and occupation of Lebanon by Syria; and a hostile policy context that does not fully recognize the status and rights of refugees (Alsharabati & Nammour, 2015). This situation led to explicit acts of discrimination, stereotyping, scapegoating, and violence against Syrian refugees that are reflective of systemic racism (Chit & Nayel, 2013) and that go unsanctioned.

Nowhere are these tensions felt more keenly than in schools, where poor young people are subjected to various forms of discrimination, physical violence, and verbal abuse from Lebanese teachers, students, bus drivers, and

host communities in the schools' vicinities (Abu-Amsha, 2014). Syrian students report leaving public schools because of this treatment, despite the high value placed on education and on school certification (Bahou & Zakharia, 2019). Research has identified additional factors that work against the right to education, such as language barriers and historic tensions between the Syrian and Lebanese people (Abu-Amsha, 2014; Akkeson, Badawi, & Elkchirid, 2020).

Attempts to uphold the right to education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon have taken place within a significant larger context of multiple compounding crises, including state fragility, political unrest, economic crisis, and COVID-19. In October 2019 anti-government protests led to bank and school closures across Lebanon for weeks at a time, as food, water, and electricity shortages accompanied soaring food prices, staggering fuel inflation, medical supply shortfalls, and a devastating deterioration of the economy (Abouzeid, 2021; Chehayeb, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic that same academic year compounded these crises and created severe setbacks in education access and quality (Abu Moghli & Shuayb, 2020). Due to country-wide school closures during the 2019-2020 academic year, children in Lebanon received between 12 and 18 weeks of formal education, as opposed to the standard 31 to 33 weeks. At this time, 45 percent of refugee children in Lebanon were completely out of school (Save the Children, 2021). On August 4, 2020, a massive explosion in the Port of Beirut brought human devastation and damage to infrastructure vital to economic recovery, service, delivery, and education (MEHE & UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2021).

By 2020, 89 per cent of Syrian households were described as living in extreme poverty (UNHCR, 2020) and more than half of the Lebanese population was living below the poverty line, with food costs in 2020 six times what they were in October 2019 (GoL & UN, 2022). The Ministry was not certifying students who had completed their program of study, making it impossible for Syrian students to sit for official exams and receive academic credentials. Deteriorating conditions increased anti-refugee sentiments, with 36 percent of Lebanese and Syrian households reporting inter-communal

tensions in 2021, as compared with 20 percent three years earlier (GoL & UN, 2022). The downward spiral affected the ability of schools to function due to increased operating costs, massive devaluation in salaries, and severe inequities, resulting in low attendance and retention among Syrian refugees (GoL & UN, 2021).

Methods and Data Sources

This paper draws from a three-year study of Syrian refugee education in Lebanon (2018-2021), conducted in collaboration with Francine Menashy, Maha Shuayb, and researchers at the Centre for Lebanese Studies.⁴ The broader inquiry sought to examine the nature and impact of partnerships in education in emergencies through a vertical case study (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2009) of the Syrian refugee education response at the global level and through multiple crises within Lebanon. The project team used multiple methods to document multi-scalar partnership processes over time, including changes to global conditions, arrangements, and practices and how these played out in the more localized contexts of Syrian refugee education in Lebanon.

The period of study was characterized by acute political and economic crises (2019-2021), the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021), and the devastating explosion in the Port of Beirut (2020). Among the dead were two students from the case study school, which also sustained damage to its buildings, despite its distance from the blast epicenter. The overwhelming pain resulting from these crises and acute deterioration of conditions during the research period weighed on the research team and participants and served to amplify unanticipated aspects of partnerships, such as the nature of solidarity in crisis contexts.

For this analysis, I focus on a subset of data comprising 58 interviews and 31 site visits and observations of partnership practices among locally-led organizations. I center ethnographic data from one private, non-profit, faith-

⁴ For more information about the research team, contributors, broader methodology, and findings, see <https://eiepartnerships.org>.

based school, which I refer to as Old Faith School (OFS), and its partnership work with two other faith-based organizations: a Lebanese faith-based NGO, which I call Iman Lebanon, and a faith-based INGO headquartered in the Global North, which I call International Faith Ministry (IFM).⁵ Both Iman Lebanon and International Faith Ministry supported Old Faith School's educational activities.

The school was identified through a broader case study selection process that documented a subset of 16 partnerships. These were purposively identified from an original database of 440 organizations involved in Syrian refugee education in Lebanon, representing different types and relationships. Through interviews, site visits, and an analysis of documents relevant to their educational programs, the research team further identified a subset of three partnerships for in-depth case studies that highlight promising partnerships led by local organizations.

This paper offers data from one of these case studies—the partnership between Old Faith School, Iman Lebanon, and International Faith Ministry. Old Faith School followed the official Lebanese national curriculum and offered formal, integrated education for refugee students from Syria. With the support of Iman Lebanon, the school also provided a nonformal afterschool program that prepared Syrian refugees for integration into other schools, both public and private. International Faith Ministry provided tuition subsidies to support refugee integration directly into the school. The Principal of OFS identified the two organizations as their sole partners, established based on shared faith and personal relationships.

Using ethnographic methods, including interviews, site visits, participant observation, and document analysis over a three-year period, the case study sought to understand how Old Faith School's partnerships worked to support refugee learners through multiple compounding crises. Semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with teachers and administrators from OFS, Iman Lebanon, and IFM were conducted in both Arabic and

⁵ I use pseudonyms to protect the identities of the organizations and participants in the research, in line with Institutional Review Board guidance for research with human subjects.

English and took place in-person, over the phone, and virtually. Interviews were simultaneously audio recorded and documented through corresponding fieldnotes to capture contextual nuances. Audio recordings were transcribed and translated into English for coding and analysis. Participant observation of school activities included teaching and learning, recess, and messaging on school walls and bulletin boards. These observations took place in person in 2019 and virtually in 2020, following school closures due to the spread of COVID-19. During this time, OFS moved its teaching and learning activities to WhatsApp⁶ and then supplemented this activity with an e-school learning platform. We joined the “live” virtual classrooms in May and June 2020 to document the routine, content, methods, and relationships used to sustain the right to education for Syrian refugees via WhatsApp. Our observations of Grade 7 and 8 mathematics, sciences, and English language classes, as documented through real time images, texts, voice notes, videos, and assignments, as well as virtual and phone interviews with teachers and administrators provide insights into the types of activities that teachers used to engage students in learning during the COVID-19 school closure.

Through an iterative coding process involving both deductive and inductive codes, the research team identified emergent themes across the corpus of data. We analyzed each data set from the larger study and from each of the three partnership case studies independently, and then iteratively across partnership cases, by applying inductive codes from each analysis to the others. Through this process, we identified convergences in the datasets, as well as unique ways of working. The findings provide rare insight into the many obstacles to refugee education across multiple compounding crises, the ways in which schools navigate these obstacles and at what costs, and the unrelenting commitment of the case study school to sustain teaching and learning for refugee students.

In this paper, I do a rereading of the data informed by an anticolonial discursive framework and decolonial entry points to human rights education.

⁶ WhatsApp is a free messaging and video calling smartphone application that was released in 2009 and immediately became widely used in Lebanon because of the free service and ease of use, even on slow connections, supplanting mobile calls and text messaging, which incurred costs.

I apply these conceptual resources to frame my discussion of findings. To protect participant identity, unique features and characteristics of the school and its partnering organizations have been abstracted, losing some of what might be discerned from the particularities of the case. Still, the findings provide a rich case of school-based refugee responses that serve to uphold the right to education in emergencies.

“It just happened, really”: Refugee Response at Our Faith School

Our Faith School was a small faith-based private school in Beirut with a diverse population of learners in Grades K-9, including Syrian refugee students, integrated across its classrooms. It was a cheerful place amid a dreary urban jungle. The dingy concrete façade belied a child-friendly school with brightly painted walls. The sunlit hallways and classroom doors were lined with student work. From the ceiling hung decorations in celebration of the upcoming winter holidays. Backpacks hung on hooks and in cubbies, and posters reminded students of the values of kindness and care.

An inner courtyard that served as the school’s main sports and play area awaited students whose voices could be heard over closed doors, responding to teachers. On an upper level, Kindergarteners joyfully clamored up the stairs for playtime in another covered open-air playground. As they made their way, they counted the steps, following their teacher. The Dean pointed out two Syrian students who, like the other children, smiled and greeted the Dean along their way. On entering the faux-grass covered space, they scrambled to take turns on the small slides at the far end of the play area.

OFS enrolled students from diverse backgrounds:

If you look at our numbers, 45% are Syrian, 5% are other nationalities, 50% are Lebanese. 50% Muslim, 50% Christian. [...] You have Kurds, Armenians, Arabs, so it’s a healthy reflection of the neighborhood. [...] We are happy with that. I think if we ever lose that then we should ring the alarm or something. (OFS Dean, December 2019)

Students included Iraqis displaced during the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. The school also enrolled the children of domestic workers. This level of integration of diverse religions, nationalities, and socio-economic groups was atypical for a Lebanese private school (OFS Dean, February 2019). The school also exhibited racial and ethnic diversity. As a neighborhood school in an impoverished area, the school had always enrolled “economically vulnerable” students, with most students paying partial tuition, and some paying none: “We don’t send kids home; we try to keep them” (OFS Dean, December 2019). The school was governed by Our Faith Church and registered with Lebanon’s Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE). It taught the official Lebanese curriculum in Arabic and in English.

After 2012, the population of school-aged children from Syria increased dramatically in the neighborhood of OFS: “We live in an area of Beirut where hundreds of thousands of refugees were coming in. Many of the kids could not find a school” (OFS Dean, February 2019). The enrollment of refugees at OFS occurred organically.

It started with a few families from the church, who were Syrians, who came to church who were of the same faith, and they didn’t have a school for their kids, so the church spoke with the school saying: Can you accept them? We said yes. (OFS Dean, December 2019)

International Faith Ministry helped to fund the school by supporting the tuition fees of students: “They would pay part of the tuition, we would pay a part, and the parents would pay a part” (OFS Dean, February 2019). The sponsorship program had been in place prior to the Syria crisis. But after 2011, “there was an increase of support specifically for refugees coming from Syria” (IFM Global Program Coordinator, December 2020). IFM initially agreed to pay full tuition for 25 Syrian students attending the school. “That’s how it started” (OFS Dean, February 2019).

A year later, Iman Lebanon initiated a nonformal education program at OFS: “We felt obliged to get involved in helping the Syrian families who came to Lebanon. [...] We wanted to build a good relationship with them, to accompany them on their journey” (Iman Lebanon director, February 2019). The afterschool program assisted Syrian students with the transition to

formal schools, including OFS, and provided partial tuition funding to support refugee integration directly into Our Faith School, alongside other students. “The number started with seven to eight children, then it increased to 10, then to 20... and last year, it was 50” (OFS Principal, November 2020):

And then slowly, it was a flood. So, we didn’t sit down and say we are going to register Syrian kids, but also no one said we shouldn’t. There was never anyone saying we don’t want Syrians in this school. We were worried about the finances, because even before the crisis, we’ve never been a wealthy school. We’ve always struggled to survive year to year. [...] So, no one said “no,” but no one said “yes;” it just happened, really. (OFS Dean, December 2019)

In this way, Old Faith School initiated a refugee education response that expanded over time, despite limited resources, to support an influx of children. IFM and Iman Lebanon stepped in to support this locally driven effort to “accompany” refugee students and their families.

“The school system applies to everyone”: Integrating Refugee Students and Families

On a Kindergarten classroom door, it read “Welcome to KG1,” and a snow scene with cotton balls glued to blue construction paper greeted the students alongside green pine trees decorated with red pom poms. Inside the classroom, children sat around a rectangular table, busy in a learning activity with their teacher, who sat at the table with them, interacting with each child. All of the children appeared to be engaged in the activity, animated, moving in their seats, laughing and talking with each other and with the teacher. A huge white bear sat with “Barney,” a character from a popular children’s television show, atop a bookshelf that held colorful classroom manipulatives, such as blocks, counters, shapes, and stacking rings.

Our Faith School’s partnerships appeared to have a positive impact on Syrian students’ academic and social integration into the school community. IFM’s partnership ensured that Syrian students would enroll and remain supported financially, removing a significant barrier to integration. The partnership with Iman Lebanon also supported the enrollment of students through

referral and tuition contributions, and it provided academic support and follow up through the afternoon program. Iman Lebanon also kept track of how their students were doing at OFS and communicated concerns with parents. With measures of support taken at the school—in communication with parents, school support staff, and Iman Lebanon—Syrian students remained in school: “I can’t think of anyone who has dropped out, except for students who have resettled to the U.S. or Australia” (OFS Dean, February 2019). The Dean approximated the rate of progression from grade to grade at 95%.

Teachers noted that students made remarkable strides because of school supports, including concerted efforts to understand the situation of each student by “meeting the families so that they learn more about their situation in general, not just their economic situation”: “Some of the students do not have parents. Maybe loss of something made a certain impact, moral or psychological” (Science teacher, November 2020). A social studies teacher remarked that “some [Syrian] students became the top of their classes” (December 2020).

Our Faith School’s partnerships appeared to have a positive impact on Syrian student integration into the school community as well:

The kids are very much integrated in the school. We’ve only had, in the past six years, maybe, I remember one fight which was related to [...] Syrian-Lebanese [tensions]. Only one fight between two teens, hitting each other in six years. So, they’re very much integrated in the school. (OFS Dean, December 2019)

The Dean described their approach to integrating refugee students and families as simply being inclusive of everyone: “We’ve never devised a system for the Syrian parents. The school system applies to everyone” (OFS Dean, February 2019). For example, the school met regularly with all parents and had a part-time psychologist who supported all students.

The school also had a parent committee – a group of parents who met to address concerns, provide input on school decisions, and support school activities. That year the parent body had elected both Lebanese and Syrian officers to lead it. The Dean observed that this was a positive sign of Syrian families being integrated into the school:

This year's parents' committee, which was elected two weeks ago, [...] three of them are Syrian, which I think is great. It's healthy, it shouldn't be all Lebanese because half the parents are Syrian. (OFS Dean, December 2019)

OFS teachers and staff described relationships within the school and with Iman Lebanon as being "like a family" (Interviews, OFS Dean, Principal, December 2019). One teacher described relationships in this way:

I know each one cares about the students. In my first year [at OFS], I noticed that even in the teacher room, there was this sense of closeness to each other, like a family. [...] Teachers play sports and games with students and run activities outside the school for them. And the way they give importance to each student, other schools, they don't have it. (OFS Science teacher, November 2020)

These relationships were observable in the ways in which school staff greeted one another, dropped in on the Dean to discuss issues, and spoke with students in the school yard. Students high-fived the Dean who addressed every student by name and asked how they were doing. It was also evident in the way the Dean managed a pair of rowdy boys who were misbehaving in one class. The Dean's office itself was central and had an open door, so that anyone—teachers, staff, students—could pop their head in, and they did.

“We don't have a big strategy; we just try to encourage people to accept each other”: Confronting Discrimination

The Dean's office had a large glass sliding door, making him visible and accessible to all members of the school community. Teachers, administrative staff, and a member of the custodial staff popped their heads in to say "hello," or dropped in to discuss a student or other concern. The atmosphere appeared collegial and non-hierarchical (or at least not overtly so), supporting what people told us in interviews about "family-like" relationships within the school community. In particular, the respectful relationships between the Dean and the custodial staff member, who cracked a joke while extending herself to offer a cup of coffee, signified an atmosphere of kindness and care and an attitude of nondiscrimination.

Our conversation in the glass office was interrupted by a teacher accompanying two teen-aged boys out of class: “I will not have them back until they learn their manners,” she said firmly. The Dean excused himself and stepped out. The boys had been misbehaving in class. The Dean spoke to them in the hallway in a manner that evoked kindness, asking for their perspective on what happened in class. They claimed that the lesson was “boring.” The Dean asked them to consider the effort that the teacher was making to teach them and that they might express their feedback politely to the teacher. He accompanied them back to their classroom where they apologized to the teacher. Before she could accept, the school bell rang for lunch!

Students streamed out of their classrooms and animatedly made their way down the stairs to the courtyard. As they passed the Dean on the stairs, they greeted and high-fived him. He spoke to each of them by name, asking how they were doing. They skipped down the stairs and sat or stood in groups in the courtyard, eating their sandwiches. The Dean remarked: “See how they are [in the courtyard]? There is no child standing alone or left out. You cannot tell who is Syrian or who is Lebanese. They are just together as children” (December 2019). In the courtyard, the student population appeared visibly diverse, with Black African, South Asian, and Southeast Asian students among its largely Arab student body. All students interacted with the Dean on the stairs and with other children in the courtyard, suggesting that students were well integrated into school life.

However, the integration of Syrian students and families was not without its difficulties. The Dean cautioned that their integration into school life should not be taken as a sign that the students were accepted or integrated into the wider community:

I wouldn't say they're integrated in society, the larger host community. We still get parents who come in and say you shouldn't serve the Syrians; you should serve the Lebanese only. Or they walk in and say [that] it's not fair; you're giving scholarships to Syrians and not to Lebanese [...] So, the host community is still very angry with us—the church and the school—for doing this. (OFS Dean, December 2019)

Most families received tuition support, but Syrian students received more through Our Faith School's partnerships with Iman Lebanon and IFM. This created tension with Lebanese families who felt they should receive more support: "They always tell us, 'We are also poor, and you should be helping us'" (OFS Dean, February 2019). Parents also cited political-sectarian reasons for excluding Syrians:

Because of [Lebanon's] history with Syria, some parents, especially the Christian ones, did not want to put their children in class with Syrian students [who are mostly Muslim]. We did lose some families. Some Lebanese families just removed their kids from our school. (OFS Dean, February 2019)

Muslim parents also complained about their children studying with Syrians and Syrian Kurds (OFS Dean, December 2019). The school did not bow to this pressure, despite its financial vulnerability. Although fee-paying families left the school because of its policy of integrating Syrian students, OFS continued to receive and support Syrian refugees.

Our Faith School actively sought to mitigate this discrimination against refugee students through its equity-oriented tuition practices and integration into all facets of school life, including addressing issues with students and parents within the school community:

How do we go about doing that, solving that challenge [of community discrimination against Syrian students]? On the level of the students, we try to do team building activities. We do chapels. [...] We phrase our rules in terms of being a loving community, being a respectful community to each other [...] regardless of what's happening outside. And kids tend to bond easily. They bond over a basketball game. And parents, we do sessions for them, we do [joint activities], such as on Mothers' Day, we get all the mothers together for a breakfast. (OFS Dean, December 2019)

Iman Lebanon also provided spaces for family engagement in their work with the school, and the school organized parent workshops and information sessions geared towards all parents to support their participation in their children's education: "I don't remember doing anything specific with Syrian

parents. [...] We talk about their kids, we talk about money issues, we talk about cultural issues” (OFS Dean, February 2019). In reflecting on wider political tensions affecting the community and the school’s approach to mitigating them, the OFS Dean concluded: “We don’t have a big strategy; we just try to encourage people to accept each other” (December 2019).

**“Because we want to help our students”:
Navigating Lebanon’s Compounding Crises**

Lebanon’s compounding crises deeply impacted Our Faith School, its community, and partnerships. By December 2019, the school’s financial vulnerability had already been magnified by a deepening economic crisis: “People struggled with finances, and they were unable to pay their tuition fees. Some of them wanted to withdraw from school because they were not able to continue” (OFS Principal, November 2020). As a result, OFS “faced financial challenges also” (OFS Dean, June 2020).

Despite being tuition dependent, OFS did not ask students to leave because of unpaid fees. In August 2020, the explosion in the Port of Beirut damaged the school and directly impacted families who “lost their homes, their jobs, their shops that were in the downtown area or somewhere in Ashrafieh” (OFS Principal, November 2020). Many families were severely struggling. Still, the school called up parents at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year to ask them to bring their children to school “even if they could not pay. We did not want any child to stay at home because of money reasons” (OFS Principal, November 2020).

OFS reached out to IFM for more financial support. Up until this point IFM had only given donations in the form of student scholarships or sponsorships: “This was the first time we asked for straight-up fund donations, saying we don’t want scholarships; we want you to give us money to survive” (OFS Dean, June 2020). IFM provided “additional resources to repair the school, to provide tablets, and back-to-school packs” (IFM Global Program Coordinator, December 2020).

Because we realised that in our commitment to the children, we had to provide consistency and stability for them, and if they are stuck at home for months and months, this is a really difficult time for them, and it's really important for the school to continue to provide the program. (IFM Global Program Coordinator, December 2020)

The crises brought the school community together:

After the [Beirut Port] explosion, we asked the parents who had suffered damages [to their homes or shops] if they needed any help. There were a lot of groups that started helping and cleaning [debris from the blast]. Some families were unable to repair glass or aluminum, so we contacted people who helped with that and carpentering. We helped around 25 of our families. (OFS Dean, December 2020)

OFS also hosted a five-day mobile clinic in collaboration with two faith-based charities: “There were doctors distributing free medicine and food. Then we started visiting all the houses that are near the school and met a lot of people that are in real need” (OFS Principal, November 2020). The OFS Principal noted that the devastating impact of Lebanon’s crises helped to expand their work and created a new sense of empathy among Lebanese families for their Syrian counterparts (November 2020).

The situation continued to deteriorate, but OFS persisted in serving students, both Syrian and Lebanese: “We have a lot of people who are in need now and the main difference is that there are more Lebanese students in need [than before]” (OFS Principal, November 2020). In Spring 2020, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the initial depreciation of the Lebanese Lira, OFS reduced teacher salaries to 75 percent. Referring to the economic crisis, the Dean said: “We do have some money in the bank, but as you know, banks are not giving us our money.” This issue was compounded by pandemic travel restrictions which impacted international fundraising efforts: “It became harder to get money in from supporting churches and NGOs outside” (OFS Dean, June 2020). OSF had begun to hear of schools permanently closing in the area, “schools that just couldn’t make it,” and they worried about

losing NGO support for Syrians “as things get harder and harder” (OSF Dean, June 2020).

Despite these challenges, OFS persisted in supporting refugee students through various means, identifying new sponsors for 30 students, and organizing fundraising events “because we want to help our families” (OSF Principal, November 2020). Iman Lebanon could no longer sustain their partnership. They made a final contribution to “help 40 Lebanese kids with a small amount, for those who were directly affected by the Beirut [Port] explosion” (OFS Principal, November 2020).

The political crisis and COVID-19 pandemic also resulted in multiple forced closures during the 2019-2020 academic year: “Teaching became harder, we closed for many consecutive days [due to protests], and with Corona, we closed for more days. Then we had to go online completely” (OFS Dean, June 2020).

Like other schools and nonformal education programs, OFS transitioned to online learning in a context where few students and teachers had the required technology, connectivity, or know-how.

Many of our students are refugees with no access to Wi-Fi, or they don’t have a smart pad or laptop; in some cases, a family has just one phone, so this makes online teaching more challenging. (OFS Dean, June 2020)

Students also faced access issues due to inadequate Wi-Fi connectivity (Science teacher, November 2020). “They use their parents’ mobiles and maybe Wi-Fi from neighbors” (Social studies teacher, December 2020). To support students who could not attend live classes, teachers started sending video explanations after class to help students keep up. But the ongoing pandemic created yet more challenges:

Teachers had to cope with the new reality, whether to explain things online, film themselves talking, send pictures and worksheets and search for things online. It was not part of the things that we used to do before. [...] We didn’t have time to train our teachers. [...] School

closed. We weren't ready; we didn't have a platform running. (OFS Dean, June 2020)

OFS delivered teaching via WhatsApp: "We started to send weekly work there for every subject from Tuesday to Friday, via videos, explanations, maybe some YouTube videos and recorded videos, worksheets for kids to work out" (OFS Dean, June 2020). A social studies teacher explained: "I send a video of the explanation. I convert my PowerPoint to a video, and I send it to the students" (Social studies teacher, December 2020).

Some teachers adapted well to online instruction, producing creative lessons that uplifted the class community. For example, in one Arabic grammar lesson, the teacher had students film themselves using imperative verbs in daily life. She then collated the videos and sent an edited film back to the students. "We have some successful stories this, with kids enjoying their time" (OFS Dean, June 2020).

WhatsApp observations demonstrate the ways in which teachers delivered instruction through structured lessons that encouraged active participation and provided positive reinforcement for student engagement. Lessons allowed for social interaction, substantiating what teachers told us in interviews: That, while something was lost in terms of pedagogy, this did not impact the caring relationships between teachers and students. A typical Grade 7 Science class proceeded like this:

The teacher greeted the students using a voice note: "Good morning Grade 7; we'll start Biology." Then he asked them to check in for attendance. Students checked in by typing their names into the chat upon the teacher's request.

The science teacher used voice notes and images to explain the lesson. He sent several short voice notes to elicit answers from the students and then to explain the concepts more fully. The students shared their thoughts and answers via text messages.

Next the teacher sent images of exercises for the class to solve, particularly for students who did not have their books. He first called students by name to answer questions, then he elicited more

answers from the class. He also mentioned the names of students who were not participating.

In one instance, he clarified his question when one of the students answered incorrectly. Then three students answered via text with, “I don’t know,” and one texted: “I forgot,” with a laughing face. One student answered correctly, and the teacher replied with, “Yes! Good!” The student who stated that he doesn’t know, replied with, “Ugh,” when his friend answered correctly and sent an emoji (happy face wearing sunglasses). A classmate replied to the emoji with an “expressionless” emoji. The teacher didn’t comment on the exchange of emojis; he sent a voice note explaining the answer further.

At the end of the session, he asked the students if they had any questions. Several students replied with, “No.” He referred students to a PowerPoint presentation and homework that he had posted earlier. Students signed out by typing their names at the teacher’s request. (Adapted from field notes, May 2020)

The excerpt from this science class provides insight into the WhatsApp classes we observed across several subjects in May and June 2020, revealing an interactive learning space in which teachers and students engaged in real time through structured lessons that kept students accountable by taking attendance, encouraging their participation, and providing positive reinforcement. The teachers also managed the class, allowing students to comment on each other at times, and curtailing this behavior at others. In this way, teachers provided an engaging environment in which students appeared to be at ease, as demonstrated in this playful text message to the science teacher on the last day of class: “Bye mr we gonna miss u. I don’t no how I’m going to spend my summer without sciences 😊😊😊😊👏👏❤️” (Student text message, June 2020).

Our observations also illustrated some of the technical issues that emerged in the live sessions. For example, in one session, the mathematics teacher sent several videos over WhatsApp. A number of students texted that they could not download them due to poor connectivity. The teacher replied via a text message, “OK,” to these students. He also sent an “OK” to a student

who apologized that the electricity got cut and he got disconnected. After four minutes, the teacher sent three more videos and one of the students commented: “Not opening;” “wait please.” Another shared (in English): “My phone is full,” “Not opening.”

Despite technical difficulties, a majority of students participated in every session, showing an ability to retain students even in challenging circumstances. Our WhatsApp observations supported what teachers and administrators told us in interviews about the positive nature of teacher-student relationships and the ways that teachers engaged all students, regardless of their background. The use of humor and lighthearted exchanges was observed through teacher texts and voice notes and student responses, as illustrated in strings of laughing emojis and texts representing laughter: “hahahahahahah.” In the face of extreme difficulties posed by multiple compounding crises, teachers at OFS persisted in their teaching and upheld their partnerships to support Syrian student learning in an integrated environment.

Ordinary Solidarity in Refugee Education Response

Drawing on the conceptual resources of Sefa Dei and Azgharzadeh’s (2001) anticolonial discursive framework, I suggest the notion of “ordinary solidarity” to capture how Old Faith School sustained the right to education for refugees. Bajaj and Tow (2021) describe solidarity as a relationship that “challenges inequity, injustice and colonialism” as part of the daily practice of an engaged community grounded in a concrete sense of justice (p. 1). They note that solidarity requires a relinquishing of privileges on the part of members. Building on this notion, I suggest that OFS exhibited what might be called *ordinary* solidarity in working with refugee students and their families. They practiced this ordinary solidarity through their organic responsiveness, equitable relationships, and the principles of inclusion and anti-discrimination. Through an orientation of “That’s just what you do,” partners supported each other and worked towards refugee rights, guided by what they viewed as everyday principles of care and respect: “Just a loving community.”

Old Faith School had trusting and equitable relationships with its partners, and because of this trust, the partnerships, too, developed organically to support Syrian students, as an extension of existing work with vulnerable populations in an impoverished area of Beirut. It was never planned; “It just happened, really.” Through existing relationships, OFS partnered with IFM and Iman Lebanon to support Syrians in their school. Their efforts were responsive and characterized by equity, inclusion, and anti-discrimination.

Equitable relationships within OFS and with partners were described as “like family,” having a “sense of closeness,” “giving importance to each student,” and care. Equitable relationships among students; between staff, teachers, and parents; and across partnerships sustained the work in difficult circumstances and made strides in addressing discrimination faced by Syrian students and parents within the school.

Old Faith School’s partnerships also sustained a school with a diverse population of learners that integrated Syrian and Lebanese students, alongside students of various nationalities, religions, and ethnicities. OFS clearly prioritized the integration of Syrian students. Even when Lebanese fee-paying parents complained and even left the school due to the new population of refugee students, OFS continued to support refugees, thereby forsaking material resources on which the school depended.

The academic and social integration of refugees was guided by an orientation of inclusion into a school system that “applies to everyone.” This had a positive impact on Syrian student enrollment, retention, and grade progression. It also served to integrate families into the structures and decision-making of the school through equitable participation in the leadership of the parent committee and school-community activities.

OFS confronted discrimination in its practices, within its school and within wider society. Despite its financial precarity, it did not bow to members of the community demanding the exclusion of Syrians from the school: “We should not have limits such as working with only certain groups of people; it should be open to everybody” (OFS Dean, November 2020).

Through its organic responsiveness, upholding of equitable relationships, principles of inclusion, and anti-discrimination, Old Faith School

sustained the right to education for Syrian refugees through multiple crises and within a broader refugee-hostile environment. And it supported the school's mission "to be a loving community." OFS described the commitment of their local and international partners—and teachers and administrators described their commitment to the students—in terms of care and respect: "just taking care of people, seeing what they need;" "people here who care about them;" "accompanying them on their journey;" and "respect shared with beneficiaries." This orientation ran counter to inequitable relationships in EiE that have been critiqued for embodying saviorism and advancing Northern epistemic authority.

Care required flexibility. Instead of the fixed project start and end dates and top-down accountability mechanisms typical of rights-based interventions in EiE, care entailed ongoing responsiveness to evolving needs among local and international partners and within the local and refugee community. Care guided the work of OFS and partners and provided accountability for the work. There was no "big strategy;" "we just try to encourage people to accept each other;" and "provide a good education." In this way, OFS and their partners enacted ordinary solidarity, as part of the daily practice of an engaged community, challenging inequity and injustice through their refugee education response. And while power imbalances have characterized humanitarian relationships between Northern aid agencies and local partners, as well as between local partners and refugee recipients of aid, the ordinary solidarities of the case study partnerships stood in contrast to these dynamics, countering the saviorism, Northern epistemic authority, racism, and coloniality that have pervaded the sector.

Conclusion

In this study, ordinary solidarity emerges as an anticolonial mandate for rights-based interventions, characterized by organic responsiveness, equitable relationships, and the principles of inclusion and anti-discrimination. The findings suggest that a central feature of this mandate is care and that care contributes to positive partnerships in EiE. Care derives from a degree of vulnerability through which partners come to know one another's

struggles, needs, and desires. Importantly, care sustains solidarity through crises; it fosters empathy; and it reduces the risk of discrimination among partners.

Commonplace approaches to education in emergencies often derive from a place of benevolence or charity that risks embodying saviorism and reinscribes deficit perspectives of local and refugee communities. Such motivations also tend to center the epistemic authority and needs of those providing aid, rather than refugees and local partners—people with struggles, but also knowledge, agency and capabilities. This research suggests that ordinary solidarities demand a shift in orientation from saviorism to care. Such a shift in turn counters racism and coloniality in humanitarian relations.

While there is a need for more overarching transformation in the humanitarian architecture, that includes dismantling ways of operating, this study suggests that there is much to be learned from ordinary solidarities. Organizations can begin to spur change through a shift in their own orientations and practices, with the potential to show what is possible from what exists, and in turn influencing wider change in the sector. Achieving structural change in aid mechanisms and rights-based interventions requires an explicit anticolonial mandate that reorients humanitarian relationships into ordinary global solidarities.

Acknowledgements

My deep gratitude goes to Francine Menashy and Maha Shuayb for their partnership and support over the life of this project. I also wish to thank Samira Chatila, Ola Al Samhoury, and Langan Courtney for their contributions to this research. I am profoundly indebted to “Old Faith School” and their partners, who allowed us to learn from their work through much hardship.

Funding Statement

This research was funded by Dubai Cares under the Evidence for Education in Emergencies Research Envelope.

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