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Learning as ecosystems: Shifting paradigms for more holistic programming in education and displacement

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ABSTRACT

Meeting the educational needs and aspirations of learners affected by conflict and crisis, and particularly those who have been displaced within and across national borders is a wicked and vexing problem impeding progress on SDG4. We argue a radically different approach is required. Based on insights from complexity science and regenerative development, we present an ecosystem approach based on three dimensions: 1) connectedness and nestedness, 2) reflective learning and 3) working from potential rather than problems. We provide an example of where such work is already being explored, and the possibilities it offers for shifting paradigms informing programming and design of education for learners in displacement.

1. Why this piece, now?

As educators, researchers and practitioners committed to the broader field of education in emergencies, we find ourselves increasingly questioning our ability to make significant progress if we continue with our business-as-usual approaches.[1] The commentary provides us an opportunity to collectively reflect, with you as readers, about both the need for change, and what we think this might look like. In this text we reflect on what is at stake in terms of the wicked challenges facing the field of education in emergencies, and specifically education for displaced learners. We share a range of questions and challenges we struggle with ourselves, and some suggested pathways for reflection and action to explore as we, along with you as readers, move forward in potentially more wholesome, regenerative ways. Our intention in asking and reflecting on these questions is that they might serve to continue to shape our collective critical thinking and agency on these and related issues.

2. What's at stake?

The global crisis of displacement, both within and across national borders, has increased exponentially since the ratification of the SDGs in 2015. At that point approximately 65 million peoples were displaced, but by the end of 2022, this had increased to over 108 million (UNHCR, 2022). A combination of armed conflict, climate-induced disasters and political instability are driving increasing numbers of people away from their homes and livelihoods, children included, who comprise 40% of all forcibly displaced peoples. Alarmingly, close to half of refugees (48%) remain out of school and gross enrolment rates for refugees remain significantly below global averages at all levels of education (UNHCR, 2022b). Given such inequities, our capacity to achieve the SDGs' aspiration of inclusive, equitable and lifelong learning for all is significantly thwarted by our collective failure to ensure children living in contexts of displacement can benefit from such opportunities.

This, however, is not for lack of trying. The right to education for refugees has been foundational to global policy and strategy since the 1951 Convention. Recent commitments made at both the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), and the Global Compact on Refugees, have reaffirmed a global commitment of access to quality primary and secondary education for all refugee learners (UNHCR, 2018; Education Cannot Wait ECW, 2020). As displacement itself becomes a chronic condition, funding, policies, and programming have shifted towards ensuring educational responses for displaced learners are working towards their full integration into the national systems of hosting countries

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[1] We draw on our respective experiences as practitioners, researchers, and educators in the field of Education and Emergencies, and our work with displaced learners. While we work in academic or philanthropic organisations, the presented here reflect our personal rather than professional perspectives.

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(UNHCR, 2019). This change in approach has had some success—with greater percentages of refugee learners in education at the primary, secondary, and tertiary level—than was the case five years ago (UNHCR, 2022b). Yet these small, incremental increases are insufficient to the scale and scope of the issues at hand, often because at present, we fail to "foster the conditions, partnerships, collaboration and approaches" required for displaced learners to "learn, thrive, and develop their potential" (UNHCR, 2019b, 6).

3. Why such limited progress?

Providing access to quality education for refugees is a clear example of a "wicked problem". "Wicked problems" is a term developed to identify scenarios where the problem itself is complex with multiple root causes, where multiple stakeholders carry different interests in either maintaining and/or addressing the issue, is constantly evolving, and where there are both a low level of certainty on how to solve the problem alongside the lack of a singular solution or set of solutions to the problem that exists (Ramalingam et al., 2008). Migration and displacement—key wicked problems of our time—are cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral in nature. They are shaped not only by educational concerns, but also the (geo)political, social, and economic interests of the minority world.[2] This external engagement collides with national systems, policy and laws, alongside social norms, and values at the local level at a time where increasing numbers of peoples are fleeing across increasingly securitised borders.

Within the broader field of education and development, challenges such as addressing the impact of poverty on education, or conflict on education, are two such wicked issues which much has been written about already (see for instance ODI, 2014; IIEP, 2010; Lopes Cardozo, 2022). Yet, many of the current responses and solutions for refugee learners fail to acknowledge the multiple scales and sectors across which quality education provision is dependent and contingent on for this group. Such efforts originate from a problem-solving approach – and paradigms oriented at maintaining and repairing systems (the status quo) in light of changing circumstances - which tend to: (a) frame refugee learners as problems (current or future) in need of being fixed under the guise of strengthening their 'grit' and 'resilience' and to prevent extremism and social discord in the future; (b) remain focussed on actions within the education sector specifically; (c) seek to 'best practice' solutions that are cost-effective, efficient and scalable, that fail to sufficiently acknowledge the aspirations, motivations and hopes of young learners and their nestedness within communities (Sanford, 2017; Cox, 1981; Shah et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2023; Cohen et al., 2021). Since 2015, these have included: the establishment of learning management systems to allow for recognition and transferability of learning across jurisdictions, providing alternative and accredited non-formal learning pathways, embracing and improving distance learning approaches, integrating refugee learners fully into national education systems of host countries, training refugee educators to teach these learners and/or providing psychosocial support or teaching social emotional learning skills (Bergin, 2017). While each of these actions may be an important component to addressing the challenge at hand, in isolation, they fail to realise their potential because they remain poorly connected to each other and to the needs and aspirations of learners and their communities.

Finally, while inclusion of refugees within national systems is now actively advocated for by UNHCR, this is often done with insufficient acknowledgement of the politics of such a project, which is tied to contested notions of citizenship, belonging and rights (Shah, 2023). This then influences priorities for curriculum, pedagogy, and practices of education for learners in displacement contexts (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). Hence, understanding the relationship between refugee education provision and wider transnational, domestic, and localised politics and (a myriad of) interests is critical towards the goal of improving access to quality education for these learners. For these reasons, seeing education in displacement as a wicked problem, working within this complexity, and learning from it, are key to more regenerative approaches to transformation.

4. An ecosystems approach to education: Embracing the complexity of change

An ecosystem approach draws inspiration for better understanding wicked challenges by looking at living systems (Mang and Haggard, 2016). Living systems, like a watershed or forest, are open and porous, rather than bounded and closed. The outer edges of an ecosystem are not immediately clear, nor are the borders of it impermeable to influences and actions from other sectors and systems. This renders designing for and evaluating change in an ecosystem challenging because parameters for action cannot be clearly bounded and difficult to model or forecast without full knowledge of the dynamics of all other systems (economic, social, political, environmental etc.) which are influencing on the outcomes observed. As such, an ecosystem approach challenges the teleological and modernist thinking which contemporary humanitarian and development work in education does and instead asks us to think through how to hold complexity in place, rather to diminish its importance (Jones, 2011; Ramalingam et al., 2008). It forces us to ask, what kind of education (systems) would enable human communities across the globe to more meaningfully, peacefully, and successfully engage with the multiple wicked challenges humanity and our planet are faced with at present?

Drawing on scholars such as Davies (2004), Mason (2008), Wals (2019) and Tikly (2019), we argue what is necessary is more coherent and connected, and emergent action across an education system, and which arises out of learning and adaptation. One way of better grasping complexities is to conceptualise education systems for refugee learners as living, where ongoing interactions between various elements and actors in the system can foster more thriving learning ecologies (van den Berg, 2020; Wahl, 2016). This, we argue, is comprised of three dimensions:

1. **Connectedness and nestedness** - Developing a culture of meaningful connectedness across actors and nested scales of influence/work;
2. **Reflective learning for emergent change** - Building crucial capacities to critically reflect on own thinking and acting, in order to better understand and respond to complexities and nestedness of systems; and
3. **A paradigm shift: from problems to potential –** moving beyond solving problems to exploring potential for dynamic change, recognising that ecosystems are open, adaptive and thrive when there is diversity and flexibility.

In the three following sections, we briefly sketch out these three interconnected dimensions, how such perspectives are often still lacking in the field of education provision for displaced learners, and what might be needed or necessary to think, relate and start to respond differently. Without claiming any blueprints, or complete answers, we then offer brief examples within the education community of where such thinking is already being explored.

[2] We use the term minority world as an alternative to terms like the Global North or "developed world" which does not acknowledge where power should rest in the world—with the majority of the world's population. The minority world, hence, reflects the disproprotionate power which these countries hold over others acknowledging the legacies of colonialism, capitalism and racialisation on which this power has been built (Shallwani, 2015).

4.1. Connectedness and nestedness

In an ecosystem there are a myriad of agents acting and reacting simultaneously within a constantly changing and evolving context. By implication, one element or entity of an ecosystem cannot be understood as separated from the whole, and it is the relationship between actors, and the nestedness of their actions and responses within systems in the broader contextual environment, which shape patterns of change. These interactions lead to certain characteristics that are more than the sum of its parts.

For this reason, there is a need for holistic understandings of a system, which extends beyond siloed technical and project-based views to recognise the importance of relationships and interdependence of ones' actions on others. Relationship and network building—what Mayne et al. (2018) labels as "webs of influence"—require investment of time as well as close attention paid to the contextual factors that influence decision-making at systems level. Additionally, relationships and network building that is cross-sectoral and inclusive of a range of challenges (and potential pathways forward) strengthens the power of relationships to both affect change and withstand disruptions to the system (Gaventa, 2006). This requires a diverse guild of stakeholders to develop a collective sense of purpose and direction to navigate their (individual and collective) thinking and actions (Mang and Haggard, 2016).

However, in the education in displacement community, efforts are oftentimes not directed towards building and forging relationships, nor is there a meaningful commitment to work that extends beyond and across siloes, whether it is within or across organisations or aspects of engagement in the education sector. Rather, the propensity for the "projectisation" of activity, along with a focus on particular "beneficiaries" to the exclusion of others (for example, host communities or the education or social system of a whole), leads to unnecessary fragmentation of the sum into parts. As noted by Flemming et al. (2021, 35):

> *Current organisational practices, cultures and belief system result in [education in displacement] actors operating in silos, and in competition with, rather than collaboration alongside each other—with such work driven by a paucity of time to deliver outcomes, and an acute shortage of financial and technical resources…This results in actors throughout the ecosystem replicating and duplicating the work of others in some areas, either because they do not know or fail to understand what others are doing; and in other areas of need, leave large voids where funding and expertise are currently not available or appropriately tapped into.*

Such approaches fail to embrace the necessary holism required to see the issue in its entirety – and as being nested within multiple connected systems. Complex challenges such as those facing the education in displacement system cannot be addressed through logic models and technical solutions alone. They necessitate relational and emergent approaches which build authentic connections between diverse stakeholders and members of the ecosystem as well as reflective learning capacities to work with emergent changes (Milligan et al., 2022).

4.2. Reflective learning for emergent change

Like cells in a living body, agents within an ecosystem are constantly communicating, adapting, and evolving in relation to their context and respective communities or other stakeholders. The capability to critically reflect on *how* our own internal thinking patterns, informed by our existing education and cultural systems, influence both what we think, and how we respond, is a radical, and crucial, component for change to meaningfully take shape in the systems we work in and care for (Sanford, 2022). Ideally, and connected to our first dimension discussed above, this commitment to reflective learning provides ecosystem agents with a heightened awareness of their interconnections, and the ways in which their actions are constrained or supported by the actions of others, as well as their context.

Much of this, however, requires those working in the field of education for displaced learners (education policy-makers, planners, designers, educators and so forth) to go beyond accountability and externally driven "feedback loops", and instead to develop the capacity for introspective reflective learning, and structured shared learning processes across and between the various scales of the system. Such shared learning requires high levels of critical reflection to increasingly understand and engage with evolving complex system dynamics. Without such shared critical reflection junctures, an ecosystem's vitality begins to falter, and its future potential to evolve and change successfully is put in jeopardy (Mang and Haggard, 2016).

At present in the refugee education ecosystem, and more widely within humanitarianism, there is a propensity to address the immediacy of the problem at hand, rather than to see the complex problem within the wider system. This tends to lead to not only fragmentation, but also competition in a community that is often starved for resources—with the aim of showing how best to "solve" the issue most effectively to mobilise more funding and support wider scaling of efforts (Campbell, 2016; Bare, 2017). It also leads to a certain rigidity within humanitarian institutions, limiting their ability to critically reflect and adapt based on change or new learning, and to diminish opportunities to highlight and learn from failure (Arshad-Ayaz et al., 2020). Existing "feedback loops" in education in emergencies programming often neglect to account for the perspectives and views of the populations being served, and assumptions are made about what refugee learners desire or want from education, or what they gain from being part of the education system (Taka, 2023; Burde and King, 2023). From a regenerative development perspective, there is a need to move beyond externally and accountability-driven "feedback mechanisms", and instead, prioritise reflective and introspective learning practices within the ways we (re) design and evolve in our work (Sanford, 2018).

4.3. A paradigm shift: from problems to potential

An ecosystems approach thus requires important shifts in internal mindsets, beliefs, and relationships for transformative changes in the education in displacement ecosystem, as it represents a fundamentally different ontology to problem-oriented approaches (Kania, Kramer and Senge, 2018; Milligan, Zerda and Kania, 2023; Mang and Haggard, 2016). There is significant potential in deep relational work where systems actors can gather to express themselves freely and be vulnerable. Such engagement needs to include those with institutional power, such as funders and large international organisations. An important element of this ecosystem approach is the belief that, "change must begin from within", which involves "examining biases, assumptions and blind spots; reckoning with privilege and our role in perpetuating inequities and creating the inner capacity to let go of being in control" (Kania et al., 2023). Such inner reflection affords space for the ecosystem actors to find their collective shared vision, and to identify potential for systems to evolve. In addition, and as highlighted under the *reflective learning for emergent change* section above, efforts must move from jumping from one solution to another, to learning from and engaging in the process of change itself. It necessitates exploring and developing new and difficult questions throughout the journey and using each of these moments as an opportunity for learning (Arranz et al., 2023).

5. What might this look like in practice within the education in displacement community?

5.1. The nurturing care framework

In contexts of displacement, the value and importance of quality learning which supports the development of the whole child and is both learner and future-centred is seen recognised by practitioners and policymakers (Flemming et al., 2021). UNHCR (2019b) has advocated that

refugee learners require education that can support their cognitive and socio-emotional skill development and help them bond and belong. These interactions can form a supportive and protective ecosystem around refugee learners, helping them to develop so called '*bonding social capital*' that includes their immediate family and classmates but also other members of their new communities. While this is recognized, models of practice which show how this can be done in the education in displacement community are still scarce.

There is, however, the possibility to learn from other parts of the education ecosystem.

The Nurturing Care Framework (NCF) developed and used by practitioners and policymakers in early childhood development including in humanitarian contexts, exemplifies a useful framing and approach in working with some of the key dimensions of the ecosystem approach we outlined above (World Health Organization WHO et al., 2018). In terms of **connectedness and nestedness**, the NCF implicates no less than three humanitarian sectors – health, nutrition, and education - and has a key focus on relationships and interlinkages between and within them. Relationships are strengthened on numerous levels: between actors within sectoral institutions such as health, nutrition, social protection and other family and children's services, especially front-line workers having direct contact with children and their caregivers; between front line workers and families receiving services; between members of a family implementing what they were learning and, between young children and their caregivers.

The NCF has since been extended into a more expansive framework for child and adolescent wellbeing extending to age twenty, led by health but with the same whole of government approach that includes education (World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). Educational facilities, alongside health facilities, offer a space for community to meet and foster social cohesion. As more refugees are integrated into national service systems, those systems that have embraced the NCF and the foundation laid by the early childhood development community can continue the model from age three through the school age years.

5.2. Accelerating change for children and youth's education through systems strengthening (ACCESS)

Within the education in emergencies community, models are also arising of realising the potential for **emergent and whole systems change**. The ACCESS project was a multi-stakeholder partnership between a research team based at the University of Auckland and the Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG), which sought to improve educational opportunities for out of school children and youth. To begin, a political economy analysis of current provision was carried out in five country contexts with sizeable numbers of displaced and out-of-school learners. Across all five contexts, it was identified that that processes of systemic change need to: (a) create enabling conditions for evidence to be demanded and where there is accountability for using evidence to drive decision-making; (b) create alliances and partnerships which take a learner-centric approach to engagement and action within education systems for displaced learners; (c) build on foundations which are already in place, rather than starting from scratch (Shah and Boisvert, 2022). Based on these learnings, alliances were intentionally forged in three countries (Jordan, Colombia, and Nigeria) to strengthen opportunities for learning, dialogue and change between policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and young people themselves. As these groups continue to work together, they have developed strategies for how to better advocate for relevant, meaningful, and impactful learning opportunities for learners in displacement, and are managing to make impactful change on policy and practice, including ensuring adoption of sustainable funding models for flexible and accelerated education programmes, and adoption of a common approach to implementation and monitoring of such programmes. A significant success of these nationally-led groups has been an ability for stakeholders to work on meaningful **connectedness** and move beyond proprietary interest towards a common, collective vision of change.[3]

The ACCESS project has also been important for **moving beyond problems to identifying new potential**—within the research team itself, for the AEWG, and for the nationally-led teams in country. The research team made a commitment to both decolonising traditional research-practice partnerships and to engaging in authentic and meaningful co-production of knowledge and evidence. Guided by this shared purpose, the team has continuously examined its own practices to enabled this, and transparently highlighted how regimes of power, and assumptions of expertise are difficult to disentangle, but also how important relationships, trust and authenticity are to working on this collectively (Shah et al., 2023). ACCESS has also instigated significant opportunities for learning within the AEWG and led to the group shifting its strategic priorities and approach. As noted by the AEWG coordinator in a recent blog, it has led to the group focussing on activity at the national level with Ministries of Education and other key stakeholders. This is a significant shift from the AEWG's prior focus on developing tools, measures, and good practice approaches to be implemented globally. It has also highlighted to the group the importance of contextualisation and the need to move beyond and challenge the expectation of standardisation around best practice. Importantly, it has helped the group to acknowledge the many systems, structures, and models of alternative and flexible education that are already in place for learners unable to access formal education, and how important it is to understand and acknowledge whether and why these opportunities are available, accessible, adaptable, and acceptable to learners and their communities (Hewison, 2023).

6. Conclusion

Despite widespread knowledge on the science of child development, what we see in most education systems is, in fact, anti-nurturing care. Systems that focus on narrow educational outcomes at the expense of deeper needs and approaches that would serve refugee learners as well as other groups remain widespread. But children and young people are not a problem to be solved – if the services they have a right to, and the systems providing them, don't meet their needs, how can we move from solving problems within existing systems to exploring the fuller potential of such services and systems to better serve the needs, talents, and potential of displaced and other learners?

In conclusion, education provision for displaced learners, rather than being a 'problem to solve', may offer us new pathways towards co-creating the education systems we want and that *all* children and young people deserve – one that suits their needs and prepares them to take their place in an equally complex 21st century society and unknown future challenges ahead. To serve their needs, the education in displacement sector can take inspiration from multisectoral and new forms of collaboration already taking place. We must change the processes through which we currently approach education provision for the hardest to reach to achieve the lofty and transformation aspirations of the SDGs – not in isolation, but in connection to each other and the systems we are all part of.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ritesh Shah—Conceptualisation, methodology, writing (original draft and review/editing); **Mieke Lopes Cardozo**—Conceptualisation, methodology, writing (original draft and review/editing); **Jessica Hjarrand**—Conceptualisation, writing (review/editing).

[3] See access-education.auckland.ac.nz for more information on the work and achievement of these groups to date.

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