Belonging

WHEN IT COMES TO EDUCATING REFUGEE STUDENTS, IT’S NOT ENOUGH TO JUST TEACH THEM. SCHOOLS ALSO NEED TO HELP THEM FEEL WELCOME — AND SUPPORTED.

STORY BY JESSICA LANDER, ED.M.’15 PHOTOGRAPH BY TYLER HICKS
Throughout her life, no country has ever claimed her as theirs. Nowhere does she legally belong. And, sitting in the computer lab on that crisp fall afternoon, we realize that even the Common Application will not acknowledge Diane’s existence.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BELONG?
For nearly 26 million refugees across the globe, plus an additional 41 million internally displaced by conflict and millions more displaced by disasters, exclusion is a daily, lived experience. As Associate Professor Sarah Dryden-Peterson, Ed.D., 09, says, for refugees, “the foundation on which their lives exist is built on a lack of belonging.”

Dryden-Peterson has devoted her career to working with refugees and those who support displaced people. She is particularly concerned about the future of young people caught up in an eddy of conflicts, epidemics, and natural disasters. For the world’s 13 million refugee children, imagine a future when there is a very real worry that tomorrow they will no longer be welcome? As Dryden-Peterson puts it, “your sense of belonging is always tattered at the edges because you don’t know when someone else is going to make a decision that means you can’t stay.”

The vast majority of the globe’s displaced children will grow up with this uncertainty. According to the UNHCR, each year, less than 1% of the world’s refugees are permanently resettled, providing them the chance at fully belonging once more. But as Dryden-Peterson emphasizes, belonging requires more than just legal status.

This winter, she launched a new Ed School initiative, REACH (Research, Education, and Action for Change and Hope) in collaboration with Lecturer Elizabeth Ashley-Mann, Ed.M. ’08, Ed.D. ’14, and Colombia University postdoctoral research fellow Rocio Nava, Ph.D. Ed.M. ’13, Ed.D. ’14. Their hope: convene researchers, policymakers, and educators with the goal of sharing and amplifying best practices that create opportunities and futures for displaced young people globally. It is important to note that many of these considerations and best practices apply to all students with ambiguous legal status or other uncertainties connected to migration.

The three believe that schools have an essential role to play in welcoming and grounding refugee students — whether that classroom is in a bellowing tent in the middle of Kenya’s Kakuma Refugee Camp or in a cavernous New England public school. It is not enough that schools transmit academic content. For a refugee child, Dryden-Peterson explains, “If they don’t have the sense of ‘I am comfortable here, I can imagine myself here, I feel safe here,’ then very little learning can happen.”

Countries, communities, and classrooms across the globe are grappling with how to educate and integrate refugee children on a scale never seen before, but, as Adelman says, the work is often siloed.

"How can we connect and disseminate ideas?" she says. “How can we make central the often unheard but knowledgeable voices of practitioners?” With REACH, the three researchers see solutions in collaborations and valuing and elevating multiculti-racism academic studies alongside classroom-level lesson plans.

Through the choices we make in the classroom cultures we foster, our curriculum, and our school and state policies, educators and policymakers send refugee students a powerful message. It is our choice to decide whether that message is one of exclusion or inclusion.

For Diane it was in a Zambian school where she was told that she did not belong. Last winter, she shared part of her story in a book my class published, We Are America (which later grew into a national project). “My first day [of sixth grade] was horrible. … Kids in school called me a caturunda (a name they called all refugees and which meant you weren’t a part of the country). I was so mad. I always believed I was Zambian, even though I was born in a camp. But here in Schweiz, I realized that I was not. I started thinking, who am I? Where do I belong, if not in Zambia? I realized that if Zambia didn’t recognize me as its citizen, then I had no country to call my own.”

TURKEY WOULD NEVER BE HOME FOR Safiya. A week into seventh grade, her family fled Iraq after terrorists targeted and almost killed her brother for working with the U.S. Army. Eleven-year-old Safiya didn’t realize they were leaving forever. She was just excited — she had never traveled to another country before. Of course they would be coming home, she thought. In a large bag she packed clothes, a box of pictures, and her favorite stuffed animal, a gift her father bought in Syria when she was a baby. Her father packed a few carpentry tools. Her mom brought thick blankets and, carefully wrapped, her glass lemon squeezer — a wedding present from her mother-in-law.

After a multi-day journey on crowded buses, her family settled into a second-floor apartment in Tur- key and tried to reassemble a life. But when Safiya tried to enroll in school, she and her parents were turned away. Safiya knew not a single word of Turkish, and without the language, the schools would not allow her to study.

"More than half of all school-age refugee children around the world, roughly 4 million young people, are not enrolled in school. The reasons are varied: Parents might have safety concerns or lack the right documents; classrooms can be overcrowded; students might need to work. But even when enrolled, refugee students, too often, don’t feel safe in school,” says Professor Sarah Dryden-Peterson. “If they don’t have the sense of ‘I am comfortable here, I can imagine myself here, I feel safe here,’ then very little learning can happen.”

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Professor Sarah Dryden-Peterson

World refugee populations have been increasing for 10 years, with 80% of the world’s refugees coming from five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan. As these numbers continue to rise, there is an urgent need to understand how schools can better serve this population. The three believe that schools have an essential role to play in welcoming and grounding refugee students — whether that classroom is in a bellowing tent in the middle of Kenya’s Kakuma Refugee Camp or in a cavernous New England public school. It is not enough that schools transmit academic content. For a refugee child, Dryden-Peterson explains, “If they don’t have the sense of ‘I am comfortable here, I can imagine myself here, I feel safe here,’ then very little learning can happen.”

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feel they belong. How can schools welcome displaced students into their classrooms and truly instill in them a sense of belonging? Here are six steps schools and communities should take, based on my conversations with Dryden-Peterson, Adelman, Chopra, and other educators in the field, as well as my own work as a teacher working with refugee students.

1. Link language learning to community building. Safiya’s best and first teachers in Turkey were two teenage girls who lived in the apartment above them. Young people are most motivated to master a new language when they feel a sense of belonging. As refugee children grapple with the trauma of displacement and flight, often simultaneously they must master new languages to regain access to education — a daily reminder that language is not home. Research suggests that newcomers learn fastest when they have host-country friends they can practice their new language with, but they often have too few opportunities to make such connections.

2. Train teachers to know their students and give them tools to support their growth. When Safiya finally allowed to attend the Turkish school, she quickly realized that, despite her rapidly expanding Turkish, she would always be an unwelcome refugee. School was not nearly as strict as her all-girls school in Iraq. But more starkly, teachers just didn’t seem to care about her. If she showed up late or missed days of school, no one followed up. If other students forgot their homework, they got reprimanded; for her and the other refugee in class, the teacher never seemed to care if they did their work. That spring Safiya mastered the basics of the language. So much so that a year later, she was able to pass a Turkish test that allowed her access again to formal education.

3. Fostering responsibility in native-born young people. When Safiya was 14, her family was granted refugee resettlement in the United States. In early September they flew to Massachusetts. Within weeks, Safiya was enrolled in ninth grade. In Turkey, Safiya had sat at the back of the class, going whole days without saying a word. But in her new school, group work was the norm. Safiya was naturally outgoing, and with the encouragement of the class structure, she started striking up conversations with her new peers. What she learned surprised her. Although they might not be from Iraq, so many students shared her story of migration. Even most of her U.S.-born peers had immigration stories of parents, or grandparents, or great-grandparents. Through her class was filled with students of many nationalities, ethnicities, and religions, Safiya felt that she and her peers shared much in common.

As a junior in my class, I watched as Safiya quickly grew into a leader, as she and her peers tackled a semester-long civics project. Everywhere I looked, Safiya was there, organizing a letter-writing campaign to state representatives, reviewing proposal drafts, Petition signatures. Again and again that spring she was surprised when others — both peers and adults — listened and took her seriously. That spring Safiya and her classmates presented at the Massachusetts State House. That morning she spoke with pride about their work in her adopted community, realizing that America now felt like home.

For Chopra, belonging comes partly when refugee students “feel they have a voice and a stake in their community.” To accomplish this, schools and communities must foster an awareness of collective responsibility among their native-born young people the desire to connect with, welcome, and hear their refugee peers. Too often refugees (and immigrant-origin students, more generally) are “othered,” he says.

But migration, Strom argues, is a shared human experience. “Everyone, at some point in their family history, has a story of migration,” he says, “whether voluntary or forced. We should be using these experiences to build bridges.”

Dryden-Peterson, strengthening students’ feeling of responsibility to others not just locally, but globally, is imperative. “Without kids being able to imagine that broader sense of collective, there is no way to shift migration, politics, and policies away from exclusion,” she says. To this end, REACH is compiling resources for educators to help them foster welcoming classrooms. But she also recognizes this can be challenging, particularly in countries neighboring conflict areas that might suddenly be hosting huge populations of refugees while still struggling to support their own people. Here the global community has a responsibility to ensure that marginalized people in host countries and refugees both have opportunities, “jointly, rather than one at the expense of another,” she says.

On the first day of high school in the United States, standing in the middle of an enormous cafeteria, Robert felt very much alone. He knew he stood out with his clothes straight from a Ugandan refugee camp. He was positive everyone knew he was different, that he didn’t fit in. Robert was born into conflict. In 1998, the year Robert was born, his native country in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in central Africa erupted in war. When he was 12, his family was murdered, and Robert fled to Uganda, where he lived on the border and then in a refugee camp, before being resettled in Massachusetts.

When he arrived in the United States, Robert had been so excited about schools, he had been bubbling with nervous and excitement. “I am going to get the chance to study with white people!” he thought. But he quickly became deflated. His new school was huge — floor upon floor of classrooms, a warren of tunnels. On his first day, he quickly got turned around, barely found his classes, and felt too shy to speak. Weeks slipped by, and Robert struggled to find his footing. There was little he seemed to share with his new peers in common. In the refugee camp, it seemed so easy to forge friendships, even despite the dozens of languages and the hodgepodge of nationalities and ethnicities. Here, everyone seemed divided into settled groups.

“There was no group that I could fit into,” he says. For a young man who could converse in 10 languages, in his first months in America, Robert was practically silent at school.

4. Honor and include students’ cultures and histories. When Robert when he took my U.S. history class during his junior year, one year after he arrived in the United States. At the culmination of our immigration unit, I asked students to share a slice of their migration story, told through a favorite family recipe, which we’d then try to cook together. For two weeks they gathered, translated, and recorded recipes, then drafted and edited stories detailing food traditions and memories. We end-
ed with a global feast. Tanzanian chapati breads, Mexican tamales, Nepalese momo dumplings.

When I ask Robert this fall what class assignment he most remembered, he was quick to mention the cookbook.

“At school, I didn’t see any kind of representation [of my culture],” he says. No one dressed like his mother had in the DRC, no one cooked stews like his aunt. “You feel like there’s not space for [your culture].” As Robert explains, the cookbook provided an opportunity to share and be seen. “Somebody is learning about your culture. They want to know more. It makes you feel like your culture contributes something to a larger community.”

Refugee children work hard to mold themselves to new cultures, contort their mouths around new languages, adopt new mannerisms. But too often that comes at a high price — the feeling that belonging can only be gained by letting go of who they once were. Schools signal to refugee students they belong when they create ways to acknowledge and honor the histories and traditions of newcomers in classrooms and curriculum.

5. Give students the language to understand their past and imagine a future. In Robert’s senior year, he took a course on the literature of the Holocaust. He pored over the graphic novel *Maus* and was captivated by Christian Picciolini’s TED Talk describing his descent into the Neo-Nazi movement. For Robert, the stories and recollections were painfully palpable. Robert’s family had been murdered by a neighboring tribe, as part of an ethnic conflict that mirrors, in many ways, the horrific violence of the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

Seven thousand miles from home, Robert was gaining the language to begin to understand his own life’s story.

“I had faced terrible experiences of losing people, of oppression, of terror,” he says. “But in studying other people who had been through such terrible things, I realized that these things didn’t only happen to me.”

As Dryden-Peterson describes, often refugee students are not given the skills to make sense of the conflict or oppression that drove them from home. They study the history of their host or new country, but those curriculums rarely provide the tools needed to understand why they have experienced inequality and exclusion. Without the skills to process their past, it is hard to build a future.

6. Create opportunities and space for student-teacher connections. This past fall, four years after Robert landed in the United States, I had the opportunity to ask him about those first months of school, those months where he felt he didn’t belong. He stared for long moments into empty space before answering, his response thoughtful.

“Even though I felt sad, I still needed to live my life and accept whatever was happening. ... There’s so much that can put a hold on life. And if you let it, then you won’t get anywhere. ... If I felt like I didn’t fit in, then I wouldn’t want to come to school, or maybe I would hate my classes, I wouldn’t do the work. But somehow, I got along. There were some teachers and we talked sometimes. Those conversations gave me a little more confidence. Even though I felt different, I still felt like some people knew me.”

I was honored to be one of those teachers who got to learn with and from Robert. I grew to know him over conversations in class, but also in the in-between times. Robert often came early or stayed late, our conversations ranging over the political, the historical, and sometimes just the everyday.

Dryden-Peterson says that schools can help refugee students regain belonging by serving as spaces where teachers can listen and build connections. Impact lies, she says, in “the ways in which teachers are able to interact with kids that show that they actively want to understand what the child’s experience has been, who they are, what their hopes are, and what they’re bringing to the classroom.” For this, teachers and students need time and space to build these authentic relationships.

To make sense of learning, and also to make sense of their journey, refugee children (indeed, all children) need guides. They need teachers who they can ask hard questions of, who, as Dryden-Peterson describes, “can help them grapple with understanding the inequalities they have experienced.” And who can support them in fashioning their futures.

**LAST SPRING ROBERT** graduated from high school. His unfathomable discipline and resilience earned him a place at an elite New England university. When I come to visit campus, he shows me around confidently. I hear his excitement when he talks about his classes, the soccer team he’s joined, the fraternity he is considering rushing. But perhaps what makes me smile most is that when we walk across campus, every two minutes it seems, someone stops Robert to say hi.

Laughing, I point out how popular he has become. He smiles.

“I thought it would always be hard for me to make connections with American people,” he says, “but here in college, they want to know you, they care about you, they think you are great, and that empowers me.”

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