From Displacement to Possibility: Teachers' Roles in Restoring Hope for Refugee Students

Leila Kajee

University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Abstract

Refugees, unlike immigrants who relocate voluntarily, face challenges that are distinct and often severe. These include educating children who have endured sustained trauma, the loss of family members and social support networks, health vulnerabilities, and significant cultural and linguistic barriers. Global incidents have intensified the urgency for teachers, school leaders, and policymakers to be adequately prepared to serve refugee learners. While schools may function as safe spaces for many students, they can represent either a source of stability or an additional site of distress for refugee children. Globally, nearly 50 million children are refugees, and almost half remain out of school. For those who do access schooling, new difficulties emerge the moment they enter the classroom. This paper is anchored in the theme of restoring hope (Karkouti, Wolsey, & Toprak, 2019) to the context of schooling for refugees. This work explores how hope is lived, contested, and cultivated. Within this landscape, teachers confront significant challenges in responding to the diverse needs of refugee learners. Drawing on a case study framework, 20 high school teachers were interviewed, and the findings demonstrate the following themes: Teachers as Emotional First Responders; Language as Both Barrier and Resource; and Schooling as a Site of Either Hope or Harm. The paper concludes that there is a need for Reflective, Hope-Oriented Pedagogy. The findings suggest that refugee education in South African high schools is shaped more by systemic constraints and limited professional preparation than by teachers' willingness. The study positions teacher wellbeing and reflective practice as central to restoring hope and fostering inclusive, humane educational spaces.

Keywords: *refugees, displacement, teachers, restoring hope*

1. Introduction

"Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle," (Paulo Freire, 1992).

The current global geopolitical landscape is defined by uncertainty, political strife, and rivalry between major world powers. As a result, those affected are forced to flee their countries, often at great personal cost. Consequences include translocality, or human relocation, and the need to rethink the spaces we occupy. Translocality refers to the way in which displaced populations become "regrounded…because of the new space of mobility" (Appadurai, 1996, as cited in [1} Zembylas, 2012, p. 165). A translocality, then, "is a space grounded in the daily lives, activities and social relationships of migrants" (Appadurai, 1996, as cited in Zembylas, 2012, p. 165). Migrants and refugees are often made to feel unwelcome in host countries, particularly in contexts of conflict. Educational organisations are obligated to address the needs of refugees and migrants and to mitigate the concerns and prejudices of local communities, yet little is known about how teachers may address these challenges. Since South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994, the influx of refugees has increased rapidly. African refugees in South Africa have become the new "other" and most likely occupy the lowest rungs of the new social order, facing severe issues of exclusion and marginalisation. When people arrive in a new country, the pressure to adapt is immediate. For children, this means attending school. For teachers, the responsibility of teaching children who have experienced sustained trauma—such as forced displacement, the possible loss of family members, the loss of social support networks, health challenges, and cultural and linguistic barriers—can seem insurmountable. While school can be a safe space for many students, for refugee learners, it can either provide a sense of stability or become a source of enduring distress. Nearly 50 million children worldwide are refugees, and almost half of them do not attend school [2](UNICEF press release, 2016). This growing crisis paints a bleak picture

of the lives and circumstances of millions of children and their families affected by violent conflict and instability, often making perilous journeys seem safer than remaining in their home countries.

In this context, teachers face significant difficulties in responding to the diversity introduced by refugee learners. Social legacies of disempowerment and dehumanisation persist despite global efforts to transition towards more socially just political orders. With human relocation occurring at unprecedented levels worldwide, it is imperative that educational organisations address the needs of refugees and migrants while also mitigating the concerns and prejudices of local communities.

Current educational settings in diverse societies often provide limited support for students from varied backgrounds. Preconceived notions about the cultures and identities of diverse communities, coupled with limited understanding of students' needs and traumas, may further marginalise them. This results in the creation of vulnerable student populations. What becomes evident is a "divide that exists between many educational institutions and the students they are supposed to serve" [3] (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 95). This divide intensifies when students do not feel that their identities are affirmed in the curriculum; instead, they may perceive it as irrelevant, impractical, and exclusionary of their backgrounds, experiences, and lived realities.

These are the 'ethnoscapes' and 'translocalities' to which [4; 5] Appadurai (1990, 1996) refers. This is particularly relevant for refugee children; therefore, schools cannot disregard issues that contribute to classroom diversity. Such considerations are deeply embedded in social justice. The work of [6] Karkouti et al. (2019) with Syrian refugee children is instructive in this regard. Their findings reveal that teachers and administrators are primary providers of the social support children need to succeed academically. However, when such support is absent, children are likely to adopt coping strategies such as independence, perseverance, self-efficacy, and peer teaching. These findings are highly relevant for education systems and schools. Clearly, as teachers, we need to commit to more than just teaching content. The multiple complexities and disconnects related to language, culture, and identity—which contribute significantly to dehumanising practices in classrooms—require careful consideration.

[7] The South African Constitution (1996), [8] the Bill of Rights, and the [9] Refugees Act (1998) collectively protect the rights of all children in South Africa, including refugee children. All children are entitled to quality education. However, with the increasing number of refugee and migrant youth in South African schools, questions arise regarding how they experience these spaces, including the impact of language barriers, bureaucratic processes, and challenges related to cultural and social integration [10] (Harju, 2018). According to [11] Cerna (2019), refugee children are particularly vulnerable for two main reasons: forced displacement and the failure of education systems to adequately meet their needs. This undermines their potential for academic success, as well as their social and emotional well-being. My experiences as a researcher, teacher, and teacher educator have prompted me to explore how [12] Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy can deepen our understanding of teaching refugee learners. This article therefore examines how concerns about refugee children's experiences of schooling may be addressed through a pedagogy of hope, offering a framework for responding to these dissonances.

2. Theoretical framework: Hope

Hope is the capacity to look beyond the present and imagine futures that do not yet exist. It is not neutral; rather, it is shaped by history, culture, and politics, as well as by the realities of race, class, and gender. In contemporary contexts, hope is a site of struggle. Yet it endures as a belief that new worlds can be created and that understanding across difference remains possible [13] (Mongane, 2025).

A 'pedagogy of hope' draws on the work of critical theorists such as [14] Paulo Freire, and [15] bell hooks. Freire emphasised hope as a critical dimension of teaching, enabling educators to confront dominant forces that disrupt lives and to work towards positive social change. In *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1992), [14] Freire underscores that hope is essential for challenging oppression. In education, this requires critical consciousness and deliberate action to transform social realities. Hope is not passive; it demands engagement. Education must therefore be rooted in learners' histories and cultures, particularly in the case of refugee learners. A pedagogy of hope supports education for social change by addressing issues such as racism, xenophobia, and inequality, thereby contributing to the creation of inclusive societies.

Similarly, [15] hooks (2003) argues that inclusive communities generate hope through pedagogy [16] (Carolissen et al., 2011). She emphasises the importance of fostering inclusive spaces that challenge

systems of oppression, encouraging teachers to move from critique towards active, hopeful, and democratic educational practices. For [18] Freire (1994), it is impossible to think about education without first acknowledging the power of hope. Hope is fundamental to human existence, and its educational implications are well established [17] (Webb, 2013). [16] Carolissen et al. (2011) suggest that a pedagogy of hope is grounded in both students' and teachers' awareness of themselves as practitioners and as human beings, particularly if education is to be non-threatening and anti-oppressive. Freire also highlights the importance of dialogic relationships between teachers and learners, where knowledge is co-constructed rather than imposed. Such interactions foster reflexivity, dialogue, and critical engagement, enabling students to recognise both their own humanity and that of others, and to become critical citizens capable of effecting change within their communities.

[6] Karkouti et al.'s (2019) study, referenced earlier, explored Syrian refugee students' perceptions of the individuals who provide them with social support for academic success. Ten male Syrian eighth-grade students in a public middle school in Lebanon were interviewed. The participants expected teachers, supervisors, and administrators to offer such support; when it was lacking, they adopted coping strategies such as independence, perseverance, self-efficacy, and peer teaching. The perceived absence of support caused students to fluctuate between hope and hopelessness. Thus, the presence or absence of support directly influences experiences of hope or despair.

3. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on teacher narratives to generate data.

3.1 Narratives:

Narratives are commonly used in qualitative research to elicit participants' stories and personal accounts of experience, "as told by them in their own words and worlds" [19] (Ntinda, 2020, p. 1), thereby placing people at the centre of research 20] [(Connolly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry reflects how individuals experience the world, recognising that education and educational research involve the "construction and reconstruction of stories" (Connolly & Clandinin, 1990). Research on narratives is well established. [21] Hull and Katz (2006), for example, draw on [22] Ochs and Capps's (1996) work on personal storytelling to illustrate how narratives function as social practices. Their research with families from diverse backgrounds also demonstrates how children participate as co-storytellers.

3.2 Participants:

The participants comprised 20 English teachers from high schools in Johannesburg. They were purposively selected, and all were enrolled in postgraduate education programmes at a university in Johannesburg.

3.3 Data Analysis:

Narrative analysis was used to interpret the data. This approach involves examining stories shared within research contexts or everyday life. Researchers employing narrative analysis generate diverse yet meaningful interpretations by focusing on different elements within the stories.

4. Findings

The findings are presented across three themes: Teachers as Emotional First Responders; Language as Barrier and Resource; and Schooling as a Site of Hope or Harm.

4.1 Teachers as Emotional First Responders

Teachers consistently described their roles as extending beyond academic instruction, positioning themselves as emotional first responders to learners who have experienced trauma, displacement, and loss. Many participants reported encountering learners displaying anxiety, withdrawal, or aggression, often

linked to past experiences of violence or instability. Such circumstances made teaching and learning particularly challenging.

P3 noted, “You can’t just walk into the class and start teaching content. Some of them are carrying things we don’t even fully understand. You first have to stabilise the child emotionally.” Similarly, P7 explained, “Sometimes I feel like a counsellor more than a teacher. They come to you with stories—about losing parents, about moving from place to place.” P11 added, “These are serious, damaging experiences; we cannot expect work to continue as normal.”

This theme highlights the labour of care that teachers perform, often without formal training in trauma-informed pedagogy. While teachers expressed strong commitment, they also reported emotional fatigue. P1 reflected, “You want to help, but it becomes overwhelming because you are not trained for this.” Emotional responsiveness is therefore central to teaching refugee learners, yet it remains under-recognised and insufficiently supported within formal schooling structures.

4.2 Language as Both Barrier and Resource

Language emerged as a complex and ambivalent factor in refugee education. Teachers identified language barriers—particularly for English First Additional Language learners—as a major obstacle to comprehension and participation.

P4 observed, “They struggle with the terminology. Even if they understand the concept in their own language, they can’t express it in English.” P8 noted, “Assessment becomes unfair because they know the work, but they can’t show it.” Teachers emphasised that learners who cannot engage in the language of instruction are significantly disadvantaged, making learning extremely difficult.

However, teachers also recognised the potential of linguistic diversity as a resource. Some described using translanguaging strategies or encouraging peer support. P6 explained, “Sometimes I let them explain to each other in their own languages. You can see the understanding improve.” Translanguaging refers to hybrid language practices rather than strictly monolingual approaches. García (2009) describes it as the way bilingual and multilingual individuals draw on their full linguistic repertoires to make meaning and interact with the world. Greater accessibility to language can therefore enhance learning.

Despite these efforts, teachers reported limited guidance on effectively integrating multilingual practices. While language is often framed as a deficit, it holds significant transformative potential when used strategically. This requires both professional development and systemic recognition of multilingualism as an asset.

4.3 Schooling as a Site of Hope or Harm

Teachers described schooling as a space that can either restore hope or reproduce harm for refugee learners. Positive experiences, characterized by inclusion, recognition, and support, were viewed as transformative.

P2 reflected, “When they feel safe and accepted, you can see the change. They start to believe in themselves again.” P6 added, “School can give them a sense of normality, something stable.” P11 stated, “School can be a safe space, given all these children have been through. We cannot make it stressful.”

Conversely, negative experiences such as exclusion, discrimination, or repeated academic failure can deepen feelings of alienation. P8 noted, “If they are constantly struggling or being left behind, school becomes another place where they feel they don’t belong.” P12 stated, “School can become additional stress, an unnecessary burden.”

This duality underscores the critical role of teachers and school environments in shaping refugee learners’ experiences. Hope is not inherent in schooling; rather, it is actively produced—or undermined—through everyday practices, relationships, and institutional structures.

4.4 Synthesis of Findings

Across all themes, a consistent pattern emerges: teachers demonstrate a strong willingness to support refugee learners, yet their efforts are constrained by systemic limitations, lack of training, and gaps between policy and practice. Restoring hope in refugee education therefore requires more than individual

commitment; it demands structural change, sustained professional support, and pedagogical approaches that centre care, reflection, and inclusivity.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shown that refugee education in South African high schools is shaped by a complex interplay of care, constraint, and possibility. While teachers demonstrate a strong ethical commitment to supporting refugee learners, often acting as emotional first responders and creating moments of inclusion and stability, their efforts are consistently limited by rigid curriculum demands, linguistic challenges, and uneven institutional support. The findings highlight that schooling is not inherently a site of hope, but one that can either enable belonging or reproduce marginalisation depending on how it is enacted. Central to addressing these tensions is the need for a reflective, hope-oriented pedagogy that recognises the emotional and professional labour of teachers, values multilingual resources, and is supported by coherent policy and targeted professional development. Ultimately, restoring hope in refugee education requires systemic shifts that move beyond individual teacher resilience towards more humane, responsive, and inclusive educational structures.

REFERENCES

[1] Zembylas, M. (2012). Translocality, critical pedagogy and the politics of emotion in education. *Globalisation, Societies and Education, 10*(2), 163–179. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2012.677707
[2] UNICEF. (2016). *Nearly 50 million children uprooted worldwide* [Press release]. https://www.unicef.org
[3] Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2017). *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world*. Teachers College Press.
[4] Appadurai, A. (1990). Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy. *Theory, Culture & Society, 7*(2–3), 295–310. https://doi.org/10.1177/026327690007002017
[5] Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. University of Minnesota Press.
[6] Karkouti, I. M., Wolsey, T. D., & Toprak, M. (2019). Syrian refugee students' perceptions of the social support needed for academic success. *International Journal of Educational Research, 98*, 49–58. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2019.08.004
[7] Republic of South Africa. (1996). *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*. Government Printer.
[8] Republic of South Africa. (1996). *Bill of Rights*. In *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*. Government Printer.
[9] Republic of South Africa. (1998). *Refugees Act 130 of 1998*. Government Printer.
[10] Harju, A. (2018). Understanding the educational experiences of refugee students. *Education Inquiry, 9*(3), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2018.1461497
[11] Cerna, L. (2019). Refugee education: Integration models and practices in OECD countries. *OECD Education Working Papers, No. 203*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/a3251a00-en
[12] Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
[13] Mongane, S. (2025). *Hope as a site of struggle in contemporary contexts*. (Unpublished manuscript / conference paper).
[14] Freire, P. (1992). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
[15] hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. Routledge.
[16] Carolissen, R., Keet, A., McKay, V., & Nkomo, M. (2011). *Discipline and transformation in education: Reflections on pedagogy and social justice*. African Sun Media.
[17] Webb, D. (2013). Pedagogies of hope. *Studies in Philosophy and Education, 32*(4), 397–414. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-012-9336-1
[18] Freire, P. (1994). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. Rowman & Littlefield.
[19] Ntinda, K. (2020). Narrative inquiry in qualitative research. *Journal of Research in Education, 30*(1), 1–10.
[20] Connolly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher, 19*(5), 2–14. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X019005002

[21] Hull, G., & Katz, M.-L. (2006). Crafting an agentive self: Case studies of digital storytelling. *Research in the Teaching of English, 41*(1), 43–81.
[22] Ochs, E., & Capps, L. (1996). Narrating the self. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 25*, 19–43. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.25.1.19