



# International Journal of Leadership in Education

## Theory and Practice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tedl20>

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To cite this article: Khalid Arar , Deniz Örucü & Duncan Waite (2020) Understanding leadership for refugee education: introduction to the special issue, International Journal of Leadership in Education, 23:1, 1-6, DOI: [10.1080/13603124.2019.1690958](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2019.1690958)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2019.1690958>



Published online: 19 Dec 2019.



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## Understanding leadership for refugee education: introduction to the special issue

Khalid Arar, Deniz Örucü and Duncan Waite

The earth is awash in human movement of an historically unprecedented scale. At last count, nearly 71 million people were uprooted from their homes by famine, war, state terrorism and oppression, an inequitable global economy, and climate change, among other precipitating conditions (Edwards, 2019). Children make up fully half of those on the move, looking for refuge. Earlier in this same journal, Waite (2016) wondered about these children's education, in essence, their future and life-chances, and the effects of what he termed their 'disrupted education' on them and for the world. *Seventy-one million people!* And that's likely a low estimate, especially as the data are now a bit old and events around the world continue to broil, displacing more and more of our fellow human beings.<sup>1</sup>

### What are we to think of this? How are we to respond?

This special issue of the *International Journal of Leadership in Education* represents our collective, and initial response. We, the guest editors, have invited the best, most responsive educational leadership scholars to share their recent research and to share their thinking. These scholars were perhaps the first in educational leadership to recognize that such untold mass human migration was having a tremendous impact, not only on the migrants and refugees themselves, but on the systems and structures of the nations that took them in.

This human flow affected the proximal nations and their systems and structures first. As an example, consider the stress put on the human services systems of Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey when suddenly faced with millions of people seeking refuge from the Syrian civil war. Of course, the initial effect was felt in simply taking care of these people's humanitarian needs for food and shelter. So-called refugee camps sprung up, in this case, throughout the Middle East. As these systems and these countries were so suddenly overwhelmed, it is perhaps understandable that education and schooling was not the primary concern at first. Only later did the children of these travelers make their way into the schools of the host countries. This is the focus of some of the stories presented here. Others deal with the schooling and its leadership in the countries where many of these travelers eventually resettled.

As many of those displaced by the war in Syria made their way to more distant countries – to Germany, to Sweden and Denmark, to Norway and the UK, even to the US, their plight was realized in more distant nations. People from sub-Saharan Africa

crossed a Libya riven by political and military chaos and risked everything in attempting the dangerous Mediterranean Sea crossing. Many completed the crossing, many perished in the attempt. News headlines and cable channels told of daring and heroic sea rescues by those on the ships of relief agencies and of the Greek, Maltese, Italian and other coast guards. In this geopolitical drama, the numbers overwhelmed even the most humane, welcoming nations, Germany chief among them. In other nations, rising nationalist movements (sometimes termed 'populist', but we have to wonder what is so popular about them) used these people and their dire situation in political games. Leaders in Hungary constructed barbed-wire fences to deter the human flow. Those in search of refuge were forced to take other, longer and more dangerous routes. These travelers were set upon by thieves and rapists, some wearing the uniforms of the military service of the nations through which they were traveling. Some risked helping those in need and some were arrested for rendering assistance, for example in Hungary, in Denmark and in the US.

In other areas of the globe, similar scenarios played out, with masses of people used as political pawns. Millions of Rohingya were harassed by the Burmese military and the mobs they fomented. Their land was stolen, their temples burned, their children killed in front of their eyes. Many Rohingya were forced out of Burma (aka Myanmar). Initially they were welcomed by those in Bangladesh, but the numbers proved too much for this relatively poor country. There were some who denounced the heinous crimes of the Burmese military and its ethnic cleansing of the country's minority population, but in large part, the world was silent, and the response too little and too late, and hence we all became complicit in their persecution.

In the Western Hemisphere, similar scenarios have played out: The political class uses nationalistic and demagogic discourse and tactics for their own advantage. The discourse of the right is vitriolic and hateful. People are likened to disease, to infestations: They were going to invade America! Immigration was framed as a national security issue. The president of the US claimed that there were murderers and rapists among those coming to the US. The president declared a crisis, a national emergency at the US-Mexican border and marshaled the national guard and ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), and fought Congress to build a wall along the southern border.

In an utterly despicable and inhumane policy, the president directed his minions to begin separating the families who presented themselves for asylum. As US law limits the amount of time minors can be held, children as young as infants, and those up to the age of 18, were sent to facilities and later foster homes in states far removed from where their mothers were being held. Children of migrants ended up in Wisconsin or New York, hundreds of miles from their mothers, unable to speak English, and fearful and traumatized. In many cases, the mothers were 'processed' through the US immigration courts and deported back to their country of origin – El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras. The systems were haphazard and bureaucratic in the worst way. Many times, recordkeeping was sloppy or non-existent. Names were garbled. Contact information was missing. Some mothers were returned to the *pueblito* or isolated rural village from which they came where cellular service was spotty, if there was any at all. Lawyers representing these families in the US, often on pro bono bases, had difficulty finding the parents once they were returned. Due to the cruelty and ineptitude of the administration and its

bureaucrats, there are some children who will never be reunited with their mothers or fathers ever again. Shameful!

As educational researchers, we cannot remain indifferent to this state of global crisis regarding the immigration patterns and the growing adverse political and social frictions. Our fellow human beings are suffering prejudice, racism and alienation (Arar, Brooks, & Bogotch, 2019; Brooks & Watson, 2019). What is to be our response? We will not stand idly by while people, no matter where they are, no matter their material conditions, are persecuted, hounded and hunted like animals, caged and mistreated in our name.

We know the strong correlation between discrimination, ineffective policies for the integration of immigrants, foreigners, and refugee students, and integration of native ethnic, religious and national minorities and equal access to education (Arar, Örucü, & Ak Küçükçayır, 2018; Banks, 2017; McCarthy, 2018; Norberg, 2017; Waite, 2016). Often the children receive the harshest treatment, learn the harshest lessons from their experience. Many are traumatized, and for life. Clearly, the dynamics of the global village have exacerbated these phenomena (Banks, 2017) and they demand greater scrutiny from educational scholars (Arar et al., 2019). Yet educational policy makers, politicians and educators act as if the sole remedy needed is to reduce uncertainty at the first point of contact of care and rehabilitation for the refugee children (Arar, Örucü & Ak-Küçükçayır, 2019). The fragile state of these children calls for urgency, especially from the host countries, in developing new and appropriate educational opportunities for these students (Arar et al., 2019; Şirin & Sirin, 2015). Yet despite the complex and worrying global reality, the issue of the effect of migration on schooling has received scant attention (Banks, 2017; Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Waite, 2016).

As members of the educational leadership and research community, our focus is on the most vulnerable group, that is, children among the displaced populations. Their psychological, economic and social needs are serious and varied (Şirin & Sirin, 2015). Most of the time, policy gaps, vague bureaucratic guidelines and poor infrastructure leave the school leaders with the dilemma of finding school placements, trained teachers, and learning materials for the numbers of newcomers, most of whom do not speak the language of instruction.

The role of the school leaders and teachers is paramount, as they are the social actors who encounter refugee children early on at the school level. Little research has focused on the role of leadership in providing and/or preventing equitable access for refugees and migrants to appropriate education and the dynamics that affect their choices and opportunities (Arar et al., 2019, 2018; Brooks, Normore, & Wilkinson, 2017; Norberg & Gross, 2018). Practitioners seek assistance, especially regarding pedagogical approaches (Arar et al., 2018).

Although national policies seem to signal some desire for inclusion, access and opportunity for the refugees, contradictions in practice (Arar et al., 2019) and wider societal concerns and effects (Brooks & Watson, 2019) can hinder educators. Confronted with these issues, educators often have only their moral compasses and humanitarian values to guide them (Bogotch & Kervin, 2019).

In an effort to understand and conceptualize the issues surrounding refugee education, we aim to illuminate the research in educational leadership for refugee education in different national educational systems. Specifically, our goal is to understand the role of leadership in education as it influences (and is influenced by) an increasing number of

transnational refugees. We aim to understand the link among policy, practice and leadership concerning refugee education and integration in different countries. Some of the questions we consider are: What are the challenges school professionals and students face related to refugee student intake? How do different countries respond to refugees in terms of educational provision? How do national and global educational policies differ and how do they affect praxis at school sites? What is the role of the school leaders in this respect and what ought it to be? And how are issues such as integration, inclusive education, equity and social justice addressed in different countries?

This special issue explores some common themes regarding refugee education in different contexts. The authors represented here are informed by their geographical location, the public administration systems in which they operate and study, and local approaches. For example, those in the US, Australia, Canada, Germany and Sweden are familiar with refugee education, whereas Turkey and Lebanon have experienced an unexpected and sudden influx of Syrian refugees. One common theme is the challenges and precariousness of schools and systems in the face of refugee intake on such an unprecedented scale. Differential responses by system actors (policy makers, school leaders, teachers etc.) at all levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) emerged as a theme, reflecting humanistic and/or systematic approaches in different national agendas. Another theme across the articles here is the strategies and interventions used by school professionals at the school sites.

Considering the focus of this special issue, the contributing authors provide us with a critical examination of leadership for refugee education in different contexts, including refugee education policy, the psychologization of refugee management, and cutting edge social and pedagogical praxis in refugee integration. We lead with the contributions from two countries neighboring Syria. Arar and his team paint a holistic view of policy, practice and school leadership in Turkey as those there respond to the mass influx of Syrians since the start of the civil war. They show how school principals find themselves entangled in central policy decisions, policy-practice gaps, the various interests of NGOs, the social pressures exerted by the Syrian and Turkish communities, and teachers' diverse needs, while trying to do what's best for a vulnerable student community.

Mahfouz and her team tackle the challenges faced by Lebanese school principals when responding to the large numbers of Syrian refugees in that country. Principals deal with spatial, socio-emotional, cultural, and academic challenges daily. In both cases, Turkish and Lebanese school principals prioritize attending to the basic needs of students and more urgent issues over leadership and academic performance.

Educational leaders in European countries were deeply affected by the influx of refugees, as demonstrated by Merchant and her team through a comparison of the Europeans' response and that of those in the US. Focusing on the leadership challenges faced by American and Swedish school superintendents in communities experiencing an unexpected increase in the number of refugees being placed in their towns, the authors show how the Swedish social system provided significantly more support to the public schools for the resettlement and education of refugees than did the American system.

Bogotch and his team provide a vivid comparison of the German and Canadian cases, explicating the dynamics in the integration of Syrian newcomers, using a political and economic lens. Their argument is that local jurisdictions within bureaucratic structures can be more flexible and adaptable than centralized authorities and propose that the

higher degree of autonomy in Germany and the discretion afforded those in Canada contributed to the success of innovative efforts to meet the challenges presented by the large numbers of Syrian newcomers. Each of these articles examines policy, practice and leadership at different ecological levels, although there are stark policy contrasts across these geographies. Lopez and her team focused on a language program for displaced adolescents in the US. In their article here, we witness how a program can provide an equitable education for newcomer students.

Wilkinson and Kaukko underscore the rationale of this special issue – meeting the needs of the vulnerable children who arrive to the foreign lands traumatized. They emphasize educational leading as pedagogical love. They suggest that this needs to be imagined as a co-constructed praxis between refugee children and educators, informed by philosophy and practice. Framing educational leadership as pedagogical love shows how love as a practice unfolds within the practice architectures of specific educational sites, in this case an Australian school.

The authors in this special issue discuss the applicability of a welcoming educational agenda for refugee integration, the intersection of educational policy and regulation, principals' and teachers' reactions toward refugee inclusion, social justice, school-based interventions, and the various policy landscapes of refugee education. Together, the articles contribute new knowledge on refugee education and educational leadership by illuminating new conceptual frameworks and methods used to explore refugee inclusion in different educational systems around the world.

This special issue of the *International Journal of Leadership in Education* is our initial contribution to the ongoing dialogue concerning refugee education. We have documented within these pages the heroic efforts of our colleagues in dealing with what is likely to be a persistent, nearly intractable situation, as global politics swirl about us and our schools, affecting our teaching, leading and relationships with those for whom we have an ethical responsibility: not just for our children, our students, but for all children, all students in the world over. There is nothing less at stake than our future, our world. We sincerely hope that history will not judge us and our efforts unkindly.

## Note

1. Editors' Note: It's not only humans who are affected by climate change: Climate change is altering the whole planet and its eco-systems, causing catastrophic die-offs of marine and terrestrial life, and causing whole animal populations, such as the polar bear, to have to range more widely in search of ever scarcer resources. These too are affected by human geo politics, and without a representative voice in the decisions that affect them.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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