

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: INCLUSIVE REFUGEE EDUCATION PRAXIS:  
EXPLORING REFUGEE-LED EDUCATION  
FOR CHILDREN WITH LEARNING  
DIFFICULTIES

Elnaz Safarha,  
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Dissertation directed by: Dr. Zeena Zakharia & Dr. Steven Klees  
International Education Policy, Department of  
Counseling, Higher Education, & Special  
Education

In the context of forced displacement, inclusive education (IE) remains a critical yet elusive concept, particularly when refugeehood intersects with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Despite global frameworks recognizing and advocating for inclusive refugee education, implementation continues to fall short, most acutely for refugees with SEND. Key challenges include ambiguous definitions of inclusion (El Ahmad, 2022), insufficient funding (Crea et al., 2022), inadequate teacher training (Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015), and a lack of inclusive curricula responsive to refugees' needs (Shuayb et al., 2016). Refugee children with SEND face compounded marginalization, as social narratives often depict refugees as burdens on social and economic systems (Kiwani, 2019) and portray children with SEND through a deficit lens that denies their capacity to benefit from education (IASC, 2019).

Global frameworks have increasingly emphasized the integration of refugees into national education systems, particularly UNHCR 2012 and 2019. However, in practice, inclusion

is often reduced to structural access, overlooking the relational and contextual dimensions that shape meaningful inclusion of refugees. These limitations are particularly evident in non-formal education (NFE) settings, especially those led by refugee communities, that frequently serve as primary access points when formal systems fail to include refugee learners. Refugee-led educational NFE initiatives play a vital role in addressing these gaps, drawing on community knowledge and social proximity to respond to learners' needs. Yet, despite growing advocacy for shifting powers toward refugee communities through their direct engagement, these initiatives often lack financial support and recognition from the international humanitarian actors (Aden, 2025). At the same time, empirical research on how inclusion is conceptualized and enacted for refugees, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities, remains limited, especially in the Global South, where most refugees reside.

Using a critical ethnographic design grounded in decolonial feminist epistemologies, critical pedagogy, and critical refugee studies, the research positions refugee educators as knowledge producers rather than passive beneficiaries. Fieldwork was conducted between 2023 and 2025 across two schools within the organization, referred to here as the Hope Center. Data sources included immersive in-person and virtual observations, as well as ethnographic interviews in multiple formats with teachers, special educators, school leaders, and social workers. The study captures inclusive practices not only during routine schooling but also during periods of disruption, including the shift to remote learning amid Israeli strikes and school closure in Fall 2024.

Findings reveal that inclusion, as defined and practiced by refugee educators in this context, is a systemic and evolving process, not a static goal. Rather than focusing solely on student access or barrier removal, inclusion is conceptualized as relational, holistic, and

responsive to both learners' and teachers' needs. Through strong interpersonal trust, adaptive communication, and collaborative leadership, teachers exercise situated agency in ways that humanize education for children with and without SEND. This is while educators are also being supported, held accountable, and recognized as professionals with their own lived realities.

By adopting a bottom-up lens, this study reframes inclusion as a dynamic, humanizing process shaped by educators' knowledge, values, and relationships. It challenges dominant models that position inclusion as a policy mandate handed down from above and instead highlights inclusive practices already working on the ground. This study contributes to emerging alternative discourses on inclusive refugee education by offering a reimagined understanding of inclusion by centering refugee educators' knowledge, lived realities, and shared values in shaping inclusive pedagogies.

**INCLUSIVE REFUGEE EDUCATION PRAXIS:  
EXPLORING REFUGEE-LED EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH  
LEARNING DIFFICULTIES**

By

Elnaz Safarha

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Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Zeena Zakharia, Co-Chair

Dr. Steven Klees, Co-Chair

Dr. Mark Ginsburg

Dr. Veronica Kang

Dr. Sahar Khamis

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## **Dedication**

To those people who were displaced or compelled to immigrate to an estranged world in search of a “normal life,” leaving their hearts behind and carrying their bodies across the borders.

## **Acknowledgement**

One of the critical lessons that I have learned through research in Education in Conflict and Emergencies contexts is that the work extends far beyond technical or research-driven engagements. This dissertation reaffirmed for me that for ethical, high-quality research to be possible, it has to remain grounded in human connection, care, and mutual understanding. For that, I am forever grateful for the amazing team I worked with at the Hope Center, including the management team, school principals, teachers, and the social workers. I am deeply grateful that they allowed me to travel to their world, embraced me into their community with open arms, and cared about the completion of my research when I could not do anything but worry about their safety during intermittent Israeli airstrike in Lebanon. This dissertation came to life because of them and their continuous support, even when they were living under airstrikes.

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your busy schedules to serve on my committee and provide me with feedback. I particularly would like to thank Dr. Kang for giving me the opportunity to work in her Autism, Family, Culture, and Communication Education Lab, an experience that helped me guide my path toward focusing on inclusive education in this dissertation.

This journey was never a steady path for me after I began my Ph.D. in 2021. It began during the COVID-19 pandemic. It continued alongside multiple social and political events in Iran, my home country, including two social movements and two wars, as well as the violence that my people and loved ones in Iran had to endure; events that I could only witness as a diaspora member in the US, feeling helpless. The psychological weight of this journey, amid all these events, was made tolerable by my husband, Ahmad. For that, and for his unwavering support throughout this journey, I am deeply grateful. He made home a safe, fun, and loving environment for me where I could focus on my dissertation and helped me see the light at the end of the tunnel when I was at my lowest.

I would also like to thank my parents and brothers, who believed in me and never stopped supporting me. To my father, who taught me how to see humanity and community through the lens of love and unity. And, to my mother, who gave up her dream of pursuing higher education to raise us, and who raised me to be persistent in following my passion and becoming the first woman in my extended family to earn a Ph.D. I also want to extend my gratitude to my cousins, Mona and Monica, who never stopped believing in me and supporting me emotionally, as they always have, like sisters. To all my friends and family who offered encouragement and support throughout this journey through constant check-ins, thank you for making this path possible for me.

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# Table of Contents

<b>Dedication</b> .....	ii
<b>Acknowledgement</b> .....	iii
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	vi
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	ix
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	x
<b>List of Abbreviations</b> .....	xi
<b>CHAPTER 1: Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Research Purpose and Rationale</b> .....	6
<b>IE for Refugees with SEND</b> .....	10
<b>Refugee Education for Syrians in Lebanon Context</b> .....	17
Lebanon’s Education Structure and Systemic Inequalities.....	20
Refugee Education Policy and Institutional Response .....	22
Legal, Social, and Intersectional Barriers to Inclusion.....	23
Inclusive Education for Children with SEND in Lebanon .....	23
<b>Conclusion and Organization of Dissertation</b> .....	26
<b>CHAPTER 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Frameworks</b> .....	30
<b>Inclusion</b> .....	32
Centering Critical Pedagogy.....	34
Decolonizing Pedagogies through Love.....	35
<b>Refugeetude</b> .....	38
Politics of Citizenship, Vulnerability, and Representation .....	39
Critical Refugee Studies Framework.....	42
<b>(Dis)ability through Critical and Feminist Frameworks</b> .....	44
Medical Model of Disability.....	45
Social Model of Disability.....	46
Cultural Model of Disability and Crip Theory .....	48
Black Feminist Frameworks: Intersectionality and DisCrit .....	52
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	54

<b>CHAPTER 3: Research Methodology</b> .....	56
<b>Research Design: Critical Ethnography</b> .....	57
<b>Research Setting</b> .....	59
The Hope Center Community and Services .....	61
Ethnographic Setting, its Evolvement, and Data Sources Over Time .....	67
<b>Data Management, Translation, and Analysis</b> .....	77
Data Management and Documentation .....	78
Language and Translation.....	78
Data Organization and Coding .....	79
Analytic Synthesis and Writing Preparation.....	79
<b>Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations</b> .....	80
<b>Positionality</b> .....	85
<b>Limitations</b> .....	88
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	89
<b>CHAPTER 4: Hope Center History: Braiding Adaptability, Responsibility, and Love</b> .....	91
<b>The Hope Center and Syria Refugee Education in Early Years</b> .....	94
<b>The Hope Center and Inclusive Education for Children with SEND</b> .....	104
<b>Social, Political, and Economic Climate of Lebanon in Recent Years</b> .....	110
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	117
<b>CHAPTER 5: Multidimensional Inclusion as Praxis</b> .....	121
<b>Conceptualizing Inclusion: Refugee Educators’ Perspectives</b> .....	124
<b>Inclusion as a Dynamic, Relational Process</b> .....	131
<b>Leadership Pragmatism in Enacting Inclusion for Children with SEND</b> .....	139
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	143
<b>CHAPTER 6: Enacting Inclusion Praxis: Mechanisms, Relationships, and Teacher Agency</b> .....	147
<b>A Shared Leadership Approach, Grounded in Trust</b> .....	150
<b>Relational Work in Special Learning Difficulties (SLD) Program</b> .....	155
<b>Teachers’ Inclusion</b> .....	159
Engaging Teachers in Decisions about their Own Learning .....	159
Shared Responsibility: Collaboration, Learning, and Accountability .....	163
Teachers’ Situated Agency – Teacher Activism.....	173
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	178

<b>CHAPTER 7: Discussion and Conclusion .....</b>	<b>183</b>
<b>Implications of the Findings, and Future Directions .....</b>	<b>193</b>
Revisiting Inclusion through a Critical Human Rights Lens.....	193
Inclusion as a Relational, Dynamic, and Multidimensional Practice .....	195
Love, Engaged Pedagogy, and the Humanization of Learning .....	197
Refugee-led Education, Relational Accountability, and Sustainability .....	198
Teachers’ Inclusion Central to Children’s Inclusion.....	199
<b>Future Directions.....</b>	<b>202</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>204</b>
<b>Appendix A .....</b>	<b>206</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>208</b>

## List of Tables

Table 1. Summary of Data Methods and Sources .....	77
Table 2. Data Methods and Sources by Phase.....	206

## List of Figures

Figure 1. A Student Exchanging Coins for School Supplies at the School Market .....	130
Figure 2. Donated literacy puzzle to the Center.....	135
Figure 3. Jad’s literacy puzzle artifacts.....	135

## List of Abbreviations

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
ALP	Accelerated Learning Program
BLN	Basic Literacy and Numeracy
CB-ECE	Community-based early childhood education
CODA	Children of Deaf Adults
CPRD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CSOs	Civil society organizations
DisCrit	The Dis/Ability Critical Race Studies frameworks
ECE	Early childhood education
GES	Global Education Strategy
HRE	Human rights education
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IE	Inclusive Education
INEE	The Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies
INGOs	International non-governmental organizations
LCPR	The Lebanon Crisis Response Plan
NFE	Non-formal education programs
NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
MEHE	Ministry of Education and Higher Education
MOSA	Ministry of Social Affairs
PD	Professional Development
PDW	Persons with disabilities
RACE	The Reaching All Children with Education
SE	Special Education
SEL	Social Emotional Learning
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SLD	Special Learning Difficulties
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TPAR	Teacher Participatory Action Research
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	The United Nations Children's Fund
UNRWA	The United Nations Relief and Works Agency

## CHAPTER 1: Introduction

A refugee child should receive their rights like all children, one of those fundamental rights is education. The child has no control over the circumstances they are living in, nor over the conditions of displacement. Even adults often cannot control the circumstances of their displacement, especially that the refugee journey has been difficult.

I'm speaking here as a refugee, myself, and I understand very clearly that each person has their own unique experience of displacement. So how much more difficult it is for a child who has lived through these hard conditions.

I feel that a child must have access to their rights to education, and that there should be organizations and institutions that support this right and make it possible. Even in host countries, where legally a child might not have the right to education, support should be still provided regardless of such laws, just as non-formal and community organizations, and associations, like [the Hope Center], are doing by creating environments that uphold this fundamental right to education.

[...]

This is especially important for children with learning difficulties, because not all places can accommodate them. For example, in public schools, not all schools are able to or willing to accept them. – The principal interview at Noor center

We were sitting in the principal's office discussing what comes to mind when thinking about the *inclusion* of refugees, with and without special educational needs (SEND), with Sahar, the school principal, and Wasim, the vice principal. As Wasim spoke in English, Sahar listened attentively before responding in Arabic to share this reflection with me, as if English could not

capture the bitterness of refugees' journeys, and the moral weight of realizing such a fundamental right.

Her reflection underscores a critical reality: access to quality education for refugee children, particularly those with SEND, cannot be morally assumed as a given right or merely through their integration into national education systems. Rather, its realization is shaped by layered political, structural, and social constraints.

In contexts such as Lebanon with overlapping crises, formal education systems are strained, exclusionary, or inaccessible. Although the country is not a signatory to the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, also known as 1951 Refugee Convention, and its 1967 Protocol, Lebanon has claimed to have an “open-door” policy toward refugees, who constitute 1.3 million Syria<sup>1</sup> refugees, alongside smaller population of Iraqi, Palestinian, Sudanese, and other nationalities, as of mid-2025 (UNHCR, 2026a).

Yet, in such conflict-affected settings marked by economic collapse and political instability, legal and institutional systems frequently fail to uphold such commitments, pushing refugees further to the margins. Even in more stable contexts, limited political will often constrains access to quality education for refugees, as host countries may perceive refugee inclusion as a potential ‘pull factors’ that could encourage long-term settlement and reduce incentives for return (Nilsen et al., 2023).

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<sup>1</sup> I purposefully use the term ‘Syria refugees’ instead of ‘Syrian refugees,’ except when quoting others, to be mindful of the politics of citizenship and refugeehood, recognizing diverse ways of self-identification by refugees. Additionally, I believe the refugee status produced by the war is a byproduct of conflicts and actors that extend beyond the borders of Syria. Hence, I prefer the usage of ‘Syria crisis’ over ‘Syrian crisis,’ despite the common usage in academic publications and grey literature.

As a result, a critical question remains: how are educational rights enacted in practice, particularly for refugee children with SEND, and especially within refugee-led non-formal education initiatives.

This question is particularly urgent given the significant evidence gaps in non-formal educational (NFE) settings (INEE, 2023), which often serve as primary access points when formal systems fail to include refugee learners. These gaps are even more pronounced in refugee-led initiatives, which frequently lack financial support, institutional recognition, and sustained engagement from donors and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) (Aden, 2025). This occurs despite growing global rhetoric around localization (i.e., shifting powers toward affected communities through their direct engagement) and reflects a persistent deficit framing of refugees as passive recipients of aid rather than active agents in educational provision (Aden, 2024, 2025; Zakharia, 2024). While research on refugee-led education is emerging, empirical evidence remains limited.

At the same time, inclusive education (IE) in context of forced displacement remains a crucial yet elusive concept, particularly when refugeehood intersects with SEND. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization defines inclusion as the process of dismantling barriers to access, participation, and achievement for learners excluded from educational opportunities (UNESCO, 2017). While multiple global frameworks, such as 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015), emphasize the importance of IE for refugees, its conceptualization and implementation remain uneven, especially for children with SEND.

This gap is shaped by multiple factors, including ambiguous definitions of inclusion in both national and international settings (El Ahmad, 2022; El Ahmad, 2023; Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015; Kelcey & Chatila, 2020), insufficient funding (Al Khateeb et al., 2015; Crea et

al., 2022; El Ahmad & Kawtharani, 2022; IASC, 2019), inadequate teacher training (El Ahmad, 2023; Crea et al., 2022; Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015), and a lack of inclusive curricula (El Ahmad, 2022; 2023; Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015; Shuayb et al., 2016) that address the needs of refugees. Furthermore, societal attitudes often view refugees as burdens on social and economic resources (Kiwani, 2019), and regard children with SEND through a deficit lens, assuming they cannot benefit from education (IASC, 2019).

Recognizing the impracticality of separate schooling for the growing number of refugees, and the need for sustainable solutions, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Global Education Strategy 2012 shifted the global policy from separate schooling to integrating refugees into national education systems (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; UNHCR, 2012). Dryden-Peterson (2020) interprets this shift, particularly in the UNHCR 2012 Strategy, as encompassing two dimensions of inclusion: (1) “structural inclusion,” or access to education, and (2) “relational inclusion,” which focuses on sociocultural inclusion and a sense of belonging. However, in practice, inclusion is often reduced to access alone (its structural aspect), overlooking the complexities of refugees’ experiences and their needs for comprehensive, relational inclusion (Kelcey & Chital, 2020).

While extensive literature has explored the structural and, to a lesser extent, the relational dimensions of inclusion for refugees, the concept and practice of inclusion when refugeehood intersects with disability, gender, race, ethnicity, and/or age remain underexplored (Crea et al., 2022). Moreover, research continues to be concentrated in formal education and in the Global North, despite the fact that approximately 71 percent of the world's refugees reside in the Global South with significant different political and economic structures (UNHCR, 2026b).

To bridge these gaps between research, policy, and practice, this study employs a critical ethnographic design, conducting virtual and in-person immersive fieldwork in Lebanon between 2023 and 2025. Grounded in critical theoretical frameworks and decolonial feminist epistemologies, this interdisciplinary research conceptualizes refugees and individuals with SEND as cultural and political actors within the sociopolitical landscape they live in. By centering the voices of refugees, this study aims to disrupt conventional policy implementation dynamics and highlight the significance of local contexts in promoting inclusive education.

Before proceeding, a brief note on terminology is necessary. While inclusive education is often used to refer to the integration of children with SEND into mainstream classrooms, in refugee contexts it is also used to describe the inclusion of refugees into national education systems. The Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies addresses this dual usage through the term *disability-inclusive education for refugees*, which captures both dimensions (INEE, 2023). In this study, I do not rigidly distinguish between these terms; rather, I use inclusive refugee education, inclusive refugee education for children with SEND, and inclusion interchangeably to maintain an intersectional focus on the compounding forms of marginalization experienced by refugee children, particularly those with SEND.

This Chapter proceeds by outlining the purpose of this research and its rationale. It then introduces the concept of inclusive education for refugees with SEND in the global context, followed by a focused discussion on Lebanon and Syria refugees. These sections further elaborate the study's rationale and contextual grounding. This Chapter concludes with an overview of the dissertation structure.

## Research Purpose and Rationale

This study aims to address critical gaps in literature regarding the conceptualization and implementation of inclusion for children with SEND within refugee-led non-formal educational settings in the Global South. More specifically, through critical ethnography, working closely with refugee educators, this research seeks to answer the question: How do educators at a Syrian refugee-led organization in Lebanon conceptualize and integrate disability and inclusion within their refugee education practices?

I conducted the research at the Hope Center that serves Syria refugees in Lebanon. Most of the educators and school leaders at the Hope Center are refugees themselves, primarily delivering instruction in Arabic, which is Syria's official language of instruction. Although some students are overaged and the Center might be their only educational opportunity, being enrolled at the Center helps them foster a sense of belonging and normalcy despite the lack of formal accreditation due to Lebanese regulations.

Engaging closely with refugee educators to theorize their inclusive curricular and pedagogical practices from a bottom-up perspective is vital for three main reasons. First, educational discourse often treats teachers as mere implementers of policies, excluding them from decision-making processes and positioning them as passive recipients of training and reform (Henderson, 2023; Tuhkala, 2021). This framing is evident in refugee education, where teachers are frequently reduced to system inputs and policy objects within broader international humanitarian regimes (named after their geopolitical humanitarianism) (Bengtsson, 2023; Mendenhall, 2023; Shah, 2023). This contrasts with the reality of educators in conflict and emergency contexts, where they often act as agents of change in students' lives, serving as second parents, role models, mentors, and stabilizing figures for refugee children (Adebayo,

2019; Kurian & Kurian, 2023; Spear, 2019). This contradiction obscures the complex and expanded roles teachers play in contexts of displacement, where responsibilities extend far beyond curriculum delivery to include addressing students' psychosocial needs, navigating trauma, and fostering belonging under conditions of precarity (Adebayo, 2019; Henderson, 2023).

These multi-layered responsibilities are further intensified by systemic constraints, including overcrowded classrooms, sometimes with ratios reaching as high as 180:1, teaching material shortages, and the emotional burden of working with students experiencing trauma (Mendenhall, 2023; Rodriguez, 2021; Sharif, 2020). While there is increasing recognition of the need to equip teachers with skills to support refugee learners, including those with disabilities, evidence shows that teachers frequently feel unprepared to respond to the complexity and evolving needs of their students (Başaran, 2021; Özçürümez et al., 2025; INEE, 2023). This perception of unpreparedness also points to critical gaps in both pre-service and in-service training (Başaran, 2021).

Professional development (PD) in these contexts is often fragmented, lecture-based, and overly theoretical, failing to respond to classroom realities or to the specific learning needs of refugee students and educators themselves (Abu Moghli, 2023; Akin-Sabuncu, 2022; Bengtsson, 2023; Brown, 2023). At the same time, teachers' own learning needs are frequently overlooked, despite calls to recognize them as professionals and lifelong learners who must continuously develop pedagogical, psychosocial, and reflective capacities (Bengtsson, 2023).

Despite these constraints, refugee educators continue to act as agents of change, drawing on their own experiences and engaging in ongoing inquiry to adapt their practices to complex and shifting realities of their students (Bengtsson, 2023; Ozmantar et al., 2023). Their work often

involves understanding learners beyond academic performance, responding to psychosocial needs, and maintaining a commitment to student well-being (Bengtsson, 2023). Involving them in decision-making can enhance the social and emotional belonging of refugee children while providing praxis-oriented theories to inform policymakers at the macro level.

Second reason is that the exclusion of teachers from education policy discourse is further compounded when those teachers are refugees themselves. The global refugee narrative has been critiqued for portraying refugees as depoliticized and ahistorical, oscillating between constructions of vulnerability and as self-resilience (Espiritu, 2006; Krause & Schmidt, 2019; Maalki, 1995). This duality fails to account for the complex sociopolitical contexts shaping refugees' experiences (Nguyan, 2019), leading to top-down policies that generalize their struggles (Krause & Schmidt, 2019). These dynamics extend into education systems, where refugee teachers' prior professional experience is often unrecognized, and they are positioned as assistants, translators, or surplus labor within formal systems, with limited access to certification or career progression in nonformal settings (Bengtsson, 2023; Ozmantar et al., 2023; Mendenhall, 2023; Shah, 2023).

At the same time, refugee educators operate within politically fragile environments where their positioning within host-communities and their professional responsibilities within schools are continuously negotiated and redefined. This ongoing negotiation shapes a distinct experience of being a refugee teacher, marked by both constraints and possibilities (Ozmantar et al., 2023). Host-country teachers working with refugee students may also grapple with internalized prejudice, difference-blindness, or limited understanding of refugees' lived experiences (Cohen, 2023; Karali-Calamak & Mazzanti, 2025; Özçürümez et al., 2025; Saldıray & Meydan, 2023).

However, despite this deficit-based framing of refugee educators, they frequently draw on their lived experiences, community ties, and sense of responsibility to tailor their teaching to students' needs, build relationships with families, and prioritize student welfare (Bengtsson, 2023; Imperiale et al., 2023; Özçürümez et al., 2025). Their familiarity with displacement contexts enables them to provide culturally responsive and socially grounded forms of support that are often absent in standardized systems. However, this reliance on personal experience underscore but not replace the need for structural support, including meaningful professional development, accreditation pathways, and inclusion in policy discourse (Bengtsson, 2023; Edwards, 2023; Imperiale et al., 2023; Stapleton, 2021).

Third, the dual marginalization experienced by refugee educators often transforms them into teacher-activists within their communities. These educators navigate exclusion not only due to their legal and social status but also through their association with the challenges faced by their students, subjecting them to the same stigma and social exclusion. In response, teaching becomes more than a profession. It becomes a form of advocacy and resistance, through which educators work to secure students' right to education, and challenge dualistic narratives such as learnings/achievement, ability/disability, and success/failure (Danforth & Naraian, 2015; Imperiale et al., 2023).

This is particularly evident in NFE settings, which offer greater pedagogical flexibility, such as mother-tongue instruction and socio-emotional support, while also operating under conditions of precarity, including irregular compensation and limited formal recognition (Cohen, 2023; Falk, 2023; Tyrosvoutis et al., 2023). In these contexts, teachers often take on expanded leadership roles, responding directly to community needs and navigating ongoing social and political changes (Imperiale et al., 2023).

Reflecting on this form of teacher-activism provides critical insights into how inclusion is enacted in practice for refugees, particularly when refugeehood intersects with disability. It also highlights the importance of centering teachers' voices in research and policy, not only as implementers of inclusion but as key actors in shaping its meaning and practice. By engaging with refugee educators as collaborators and knowledge producers, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to humanize refugee education and to challenge top-down, decontextualized approaches to policy and practice.

## **IE for Refugees with SEND**

Refugee children face a myriad of challenges that disrupt their formal education and impact their psychosocial development. These challenges are often compounded by structural violence, such as poverty, discrimination, and statelessness, as well as psychological violence, such as bullying and social exclusion. These issues are compounded when resettling in and/or staying in transit countries with unfamiliar languages and cultures, which can impact children's social and emotional development, as well as their sense of belonging (Saldiray & Maydan, 2023). However, education as a basic human right can provide refugee children with a safe space to learn; a sense of normalcy and belonging; and the opportunity to gain knowledge and skills for self-sufficiency (INEE, 2019). Despite its importance, access to education for refugee children remains significantly lower than the global average, with disparities increasing as children age (Crea et al., 2022; Kelcy & Chatila, 2022). These challenges are exacerbated when refugeehood intersects with factors such as disability, gender, and poverty, complicating access to inclusive educational services (Crea et al., 2022).

IE in conflict and emergency contexts is touted as a transformative and peace-building force, offering psychosocial and cognitive support, sustaining educational progress, and creating opportunities for out-of-school refugees (IASC, 2019). By definition, IE asserts that all children, regardless of their characteristics, disadvantages, or difficulties, have the right to education (UNESCO, 2001). UNESCO (2017) defines inclusion as the process of dismantling barriers to access, participation, and achievement for learners who have been excluded from educational opportunities. These systematically excluded individuals include students living in poverty, linguistic minorities, refugees, and children with SEND (UNESCO, 2001; UNICEF, 2022).

Multiple global conventions and strategies emphasize the importance of IE for children, though often without an intersectional lens or a unified definition. For example, the World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990) emphasizes universal access to education for all learners. The Salamanca Statement (1994) and Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) focus on mainstreaming<sup>2</sup> education for children with SEND. The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) highlights IE for children, youth, and adults, emphasizing sex and disability in separate targets (2015).

Article 22 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol acknowledges the right to education for refugees on par with national students. However, global attention to IE for refugees increased significantly following the release of the Global Education Strategy (GES) in 2012 by the UNHCR, which aimed to integrate refugee learners within national systems (UNHCR, 2012). The primary objective of this strategy was to reduce the number of out-of-school refugees. Then, the 2019 *Refugee Education 2030: A*

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<sup>2</sup> Mainstreaming education for children with SEND refers to the practice of integrating students with SEND into general education environment rather than enrolling them in separate, specialized settings. The aim of this approach is to enhance inclusion for children with diverse learning needs.

*Strategy for Refugee Inclusion* expanded the focus from access to improving the quality of inclusive education for refugees, considering gender and disability. However, the inclusion of these factors is primarily in the wording of the key strategic objectives with minimal elaboration on the methods (the *how*) and rationale (the *why*). Other agencies related to refugee education, such as the Inter-Agency Networks for Education in Emergencies (INEE, 2010), and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee provided relatively clearer vision and guidelines for inclusion of refugees with SEND, aligning with global strategies (IASC, 2019).

Despite these strategies, the recognition, perception, and provision of IE in mainstream classrooms for refugees with SEND remain limited and lack empirical evidence. Most literature focuses on countries in the Global North, while 71 percent of the world's refugees reside in the Global South (UNHCR, 2026c). Only one to two percent of refugee children with disabilities are enrolled in education systems in these countries (UNICEF, 2022). Kiwan (2019) argues that the lack of legal recognition positions refugees, particularly those at risk of multiple axes of exclusion such as gender and disability, as outsiders to the political community. Consequently, they are neglected in public and policy discourses, especially concerning educational ones. Rfat et al. (2022) reveal inconsistencies in the definitions of disability among refugees, which may lead to the perception that disability is not a high priority, further excluding these children from policy discourses.

As evident in global strategies concerning IE, there is a lack of consensus on the definition and underlying motivations for IE, particularly for refugees with SEND, within and across national contexts (El Ahmad, 2022). National educational policies often lack clear definitions of inclusion, disability, and the associated educational needs, especially for refugee children with SEND (Kelcey & Chatila, 2022; Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015). Furthermore, at the

local level, inclusion is often perceived merely as the physical integration of students with SEND into mainstream classrooms, with minimal attention to other dimensions of inclusion such as social acceptance (El Ahmad, 2023).

Empirical studies show that ambiguity in the perception of inclusion results in inconsistencies in IE implementation, especially by policy actors such as educators and communities. Educational laws often conceptualize disability within a medical model, which widens the gap between policy and practice. Consequently, attitudes towards inclusion within society and educational providers adopt a deficit-based lens, assuming children with SEND cannot benefit from education (IASC, 2019). This approach exacerbates stigmatization and marginalization of refugee children with SEND in schools (Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015; Kiwan, 2019).

Social stigmatization and negative attitudes towards learners with SEND are critical barriers to IE. Eliminating stigma and discrimination for children with SEND is a human rights imperative (UNICEF, 2022). Rfat et al. (2022) highlight the importance of social acceptance and destigmatization as critical objectives for connecting refugees with SEND and mainstream societies. Hadidi and Al Khateeb's (2015) literature review on the challenges of IE for children with SEND in Middle Eastern countries underscores the widespread social stigma and dehumanizing perceptions associated with disability. It also notes a lack of awareness about the rights of individuals with SEND among the general public, educators, and senior-level school administrators.

In addition to attitudinal barriers, other factors cause inconsistencies in the implementation of IE, raising important questions about the nature and quality of IE provisions in schools (Crea et al., 2022). Khochen-Bagshaw (2023) argues that decisions on the level of

inclusiveness often fall to school principals and teachers, whose decisions are influenced by the type and severity of children's disabilities and the availability of support. Studies exploring educators' attitudes toward IE for children with SEND have yielded mixed results. Even those reporting positive perceptions express concerns about various factors impeding consistent IE (Al Khateeb et al., 2015; Khochen & Radford, 2011).

Reflecting a social model of disability, IASC (2019) classifies these factors into institutional and environmental barriers. Institutional barriers include insufficient funding and resources to support inclusion (Al Khateeb et al., 2015; Crea et al., 2022; Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015; El Ahmad & Kawtharani, 2022; IASC, 2019), inadequate teacher training both at pre- and in-service levels (El Ahmad, 2023; Crea et al., 2022; Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015), heavy teaching loads (Al Khateeb et al., 2015; El Ahmad, 2022), lack of political will, contradictory educational policies, and technical capacity at policy and programming levels (Buckner et al., 2017; El Ahmad, 2023; Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015; IASC, 2019), absence of inclusive educational curricula and materials (El Ahmad, 2022; 2023; Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015; Shuayb et al., 2016), and the educational needs of parents of refugees with SEND (El Ahmad, 2023; Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015; Rfat et al., 2022).

Lack of data on the prevalence, type of disability, and diverse experiences of exclusion for children with SEND is a significant institutional barrier, which both empirical and pragmatic strategies have pointed out. This challenge is intensified if the host country does not assume a legal status for refugees or has a quota for registered refugees. The scarcity of data hinders understanding the needs of refugee children with SEND, leaving the appropriate planning for IE provision underdeveloped (Rfat et al., 2022). Furthermore, environmental barriers, such as inaccessible school buildings (El Ahmad, 2022; Al Khateeb et al., 2015; Crea et al., 2022; Hadidi

& Al Khateeb, 2015), lack of transportation (Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015; IASC, 2019), large class sizes (Crea et al., 2022; El Ahmad, 2022), and unavailability of assistive services (El Ahmad, 2023; IASC, 2019), further hinder access to IE for refugee children with SEND.

In addition to those categorical barriers, the lack of early intervention programs, particularly in West Asian (the Middle Eastern) countries, is another significant barrier to early identification of children's needs and timely action (Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015). Additionally, although some parents actively engage their children with SEND in educational programs, their full engagement requires enhanced awareness or training on the needs and rights of their children (El Ahmad, 2023; Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015; Rfat et al., 2022). This awareness and engagement are complicated when parents themselves face multiple challenges, such as lack of legal protection and structural violence, including poverty.

El Ahmad (2023) also points to challenging socio-economic conditions, poor communication between parents, schools, and local communities as external barriers to IE for refugees with SEND. This awareness is necessary not only for parents of refugee children with SEND but also for parents of children without SEND, as their attitudes towards inclusion can be negative. In Khochen and Radford's (2011) study, interviews with teachers show that parents of children without SEND often oppose the inclusion of students with SEND in the same classrooms (Khochen & Radford, 2011). Similarly, Buckner et al. (2017) highlight negative attitudes of parents towards the integration of refugees into local schools.

Systematic reviews exploring IE for refugees with or without SEND reveal that the main focus of limited available studies is on barriers to IE, attitudes towards IE, and interventions and evaluations of IE. Much of the existing literature on the benefits of mainstreaming IE has been conducted in countries from the Global North, and their findings are generally not applicable to

refugee contexts in the Global South, where political and economic challenges are prevalent. Additionally, while there is a growing body of literature on social inclusion in IE for refugees, evidence is still lacking on other dimensions of inclusion when intersecting with disability, gender, race, ethnicity, and age (Crea et al., 2022; Kirwan, 2019). Studies employing an intersectional lens have often been conducted in private mainstream schools practicing inclusion or in schools operated by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) serving only Palestine refugees (El Ahmad, 2022; El Ahmad & Kawtharani, 2022; Khochen-Bagshaw, 2023).

On the other hand, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) providing NFE to refugees are seen as valuable supplementary resources to formal education systems. Their proximity and social connections with refugees uniquely position these NGOs to deliver IE in ways that formal schooling often cannot (Buckner et al., 2017). However, evidence is particularly thin concerning the mainstreaming of IE for refugees with SEND in NFE settings and during their transition from NFE settings to formal education systems, where IE measures are often minimal or nonexistent.

Scholars and practitioners have advocated for the involvement of children with SEND, their parents, classmates, teachers, school leadership, and other stakeholders in designing the dynamic process of IE (Crea et al., 2022). IE for children with SEND, particularly for refugees, has been conceptualized as a holistic approach that cannot be isolated from social, cultural, political, economic, and educational factors in society (Al Khateeb et al., 2015). Effective IE provision requires communication, commitment, and collaboration among all related stakeholders, including educators, school leadership, parents, students with SEND and their peers, government officials, NGOs, and local communities. This collective effort is essential to

enhance access, address educational needs, and maximize participation of refugee children with SEND (El Ahmad, 2022; El Ahmad & Kawtharani, 2022).

Taken together, this body of literature highlights that while inclusive education for refugees with SEND is widely recognized as a global priority, its conceptualization and implementation remain fragmented, uneven, and insufficiently grounded in the lived realities of displacement, particularly in contexts shaped by intersecting forms of marginalization. Despite extensive attention to structural and institutional barriers, there remains limited empirical insights into how inclusion is understood and enacted in practice, especially within refugee-led and non-formal education settings in the Global South. This gap underscores the need to examine inclusive education not only as a policy objective, but as a socially and contextually embedded process shaped by local actors, relationships, and constraints.

Lebanon provides a critical context for examining these dynamics given its complex education system, high refugee population, and long-standing structural inequalities shaped by overlapping crises, and political and economic instability. The next section delves deeper into the context of Lebanon and its provision of inclusive refugee education. More details on historical evolution of refugee education in Lebanon are discussed intentionally in Chapter 4 along with the history of the Hope Center to better put its operations into context.

## **Refugee Education for Syrians in Lebanon Context**

The Syria crisis began in 2011, inspired by the Arab Spring, with pro-democracy protests against state violence. The government's harsh crackdown on these protests quickly escalated into a brutal civil war (Human Rights Watch, 2012). This conflict resulted in the largest displacement crisis globally (UNHCR, 2024). Approximately 5.5 million Syria refugees reside in

neighboring countries like Türkiye,<sup>3</sup> Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt, while another million are in non-neighboring countries, with Germany hosting the largest number. The crisis intensified in 2023 due to powerful earthquakes affecting Türkiye and Syria, leaving over 16 million Syrians in need of humanitarian aid (UNHCR, 2024). Despite their resilience, over 90 percent of these Syria refugees now live in poverty.

This study focuses on Lebanon and Syria refugees in the country. Lebanon provides a critical context for examining inclusive education for refugee children, given its complex social, political, economic landscape. Moreover, Lebanon hosts the highest per capita number of refugees worldwide,<sup>4</sup> including over 1.5 million Syria refugees, nearly a third of its own population (UNHCR, 2024). This number has been affected by the fall of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024 that triggered both voluntary returns and new refugee arrivals in Lebanon, particularly from minority groups fleeing renewed violence, bringing the number to 1.3 million as of mid-2025 (UNHCR, 2026c). Regardless, conditions for Syrians remain challenging in Lebanon.

Since 2015, the Lebanese government has stopped registering new refugees, resulting in only 780,000 officially registered Syria refugees in Lebanon (UNHCR, 2024). Most refugees reside in vulnerable areas with low educational attainment rates due to limited socioeconomic resources and poor-quality public schools (Shuayb et al., 2016). The high cost of transportation and school materials are common barriers to access to education. From statistical standpoint, half

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<sup>3</sup> The country rebranded its name in 2021 from Turkey to Türkiye to better reflect Turkish culture and values. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/03/turkey-changes-name-to-turkiye-as-other-name-is-for-the-birds>

<sup>4</sup> While Türkiye hosts the highest number of Syria refugees (approximately 2.6 million registered by UNHCR (2026)), Lebanon hosts the highest number of Syria refugees per capita. One contributing factor might be Lebanon's open-door policy for refugees between 2011-2014, which facilitated a significant influx of Syrians, despite the country ranking fourth in terms of shared border length with Syria.

of Syria refugee population in Lebanon (approximately 715,000) are school-aged children (LCRP, 2023; UNHCR, 2024), but about 60 percent are out of formal schooling, of whom around 30,000 are enrolled in NFE programs, with 57 percent of them being girls (LCRP, 2023). The Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) report (2023) indicates that 300,000 children, including Lebanese and non-Lebanese (such as Syria and Palestine refugees), are identified with disabilities. However, only one percent of these children is enrolled in the general education system (i.e., mainstream public schools that are not special education). These figures highlight the compounded barriers faced at the intersection of displacement and disability.

At the same time, Lebanon's ongoing economic crisis, exacerbated since 2019 by overlapping crises, including political instability, social tensions, the collapse of the banking sector, the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 Beirut port explosion, fuel crisis in 2021, and intermittent Israeli strikes, has intensified the challenges faced by Syria refugees (LCRP, 2023). These crises have pushed 90 percent of Syria refugees into extreme poverty (UNHCR, 2024), complicating efforts to address their needs. The economic downturn has also significantly impacted various sectors, including education, hindering Syria refugee children's ability to access to and retention in quality education, especially those with disabilities (LCRP, 2023).

Therefore, working with Syria refugees as agents of change and cultural actors in their own complex lives is crucial in ameliorating their challenging situations. It is particularly important as Syrians encompass the largest population of refugees in recent history, profoundly influencing international responses, educational policies, and global discourses on refugees.

## Lebanon's Education Structure and Systemic Inequalities

To understand these patterns of exclusion, it is essential to situate refugee education within the broader structure of Lebanon's education system. The quality of public education in Lebanon has been significantly affected by overlapping crises listed earlier after the Civil war, which led to various reforms in the country (Al Hroub et al., 2023). Public education spending accounts for only 2.6 percent of the national Gross Domestic Product, reinforcing the dominance of private provision and limiting the capacity of public schools to deliver equitable education with shortage of qualified teachers and aging infrastructure (Doecke, 2019).

Of the 2,832 primary and secondary schools in Lebanon, over 43 percent are public schools under the direct management of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE),<sup>5</sup> while the majority of students, approximately 71 percent (out 1,083,849 enrolled students) are in private sector, which includes both subsidized (11.62 percent) and fee-paying (42.76 percent) institutions (Al Hroub et al., 2023; CRED, 2023-2024). This distribution reflects a stratified system in which access to quality education is closely tied to socioeconomic status. Similarly, the majority of qualified teachers (about 59 percent) are employed in private institutions, further reinforcing disparities in resources and in structural quality.

Lebanon's education system is structured across four main stages, including two years of preschool (ages 3-5); nine years of compulsory basic education (ages 6-14) with three cycles (cycle 1: Grade 1-3, cycle 2: Grade 4-6, and cycle 3: Grade 7-9); and (3) three years of secondary

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<sup>5</sup> MEHE is the primary entity in Lebanon in charge of the entire education sector, from authorization of national policies to service delivery in public schools, in along with overseeing private schools and other educational institutions such as NFE programs (Al Hroub et al., 2023). The Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD) is also another critical entity in Lebanese education sector, under MEHE's umbrella. CERD, which is a self-governed entity, is primarily responsible for national strategic planning, the development of curriculum and textbooks, educational research, teacher training, and evaluation.

education (ages 15-18), also known as cycle 4. There are two curriculum-based national examinations: one at the end of cycle 3 (Grade 9), known as Brevet exam, which controls the flow of students into the upper secondary tier; and termination examination at the end of cycle 4 (Grade 12), called Baccalauréat (or Terminale), which serves as university admission qualification (Al Hroub et al., 2023). Schools are coeducational and approximately 50 percent of students are girls (Al Hroub et al., 2023), with majority of teachers and school administrators (81 percent) being women (out 95,950 educators across all school types).

Additionally, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is considered as part of formal education as a parallel option to cycle 4, which is usually an alternative pathway for those who want to enter workforce earlier or those who do not pass the Brevet exam. This is the stage that enrollment dropped significantly for both Lebanese and non-Lebanese; however, it is more profound for refugees (Shuayb et al., 2016), because even with passing the Brevet exam without obtaining a form of documentation, they are not allowed to enroll in cycle 4.

Both public and private schools follow the national curriculum mandated by MEHE, although private schools supplement it with additional programs and resources, especially in preparation for Brevet exam (Al Hroub et al., 2023; Shuayb et al., 2016). This again ties the passing of Brevet exam to socioeconomic status, making it more challenging for low-income families, including refugees. Additionally, instructions in multiple languages in Lebanon in addition to Arabic, particularly French and English for science subjects, creates additional barriers for Syrian students, many of whom are only used to Arabic as their language of instruction (Shuayb et al., 2016).

## Refugee Education Policy and Institutional Response

Before 2012, education for Syria refugees was provided through NFE programs by local and international NGOs (Shuayb et al., 2014). However, as the refugee population grew, pressure mounted from international donors with their promises of financial support for Lebanon's MEHE to take the lead in addressing refugee education in the country.

This takeover resulted in launching the Reaching All Children with Education (RACE) initiative by MEHE. RACE aimed to integrate Syria refugees into Lebanon's public education system, free of charge, through a double-shift model, where Lebanese students attend the morning classes (first shift), and Syrian students attend the afternoon sessions (second shift).

While this model expanded access<sup>6</sup> to 42 percent by 2016, it also institutionalized forms of segregation with significant barriers persisting in quality of the provided education (Kelcey & Chatila, 2020). Second-shift schooling is often perceived as lower quality and offering limited opportunities for meaningful social inclusion (Shuayb et al., 2016). Moreover, qualified Syria refugee teachers are excluded from teaching roles in formal setting, further exacerbating teacher shortages and limiting culturally responsive instruction (Kersting & Najdi, 2023). MEHE's restrictions on NFE programs also constrain their potential, relegating them to transitional roles without formal accreditation, which discourages enrollment among Syrian families (Shuayb et al., 2014).

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<sup>6</sup> According to the 2023-2024 statistical bulletin by CERD, approximately 126,500 Syrian students are enrolled across Lebanon's formal education system. Within each school type, Syrian students constitute an estimated 10 percent of public school enrollment, 11.9 percent of private subsidized schools, and 12.8 percent of private fee-paying institutions. These figures represent the proportion of Syrian students within each sector rather than their distribution across school types and therefore do not sum to 100 percent. However, the report does not disaggregate these figures by students' legal status, which limits a deeper understanding of how legal precarity shapes access to different types of schooling.

## **Legal, Social, and Intersectional Barriers to Inclusion**

Legal and societal barriers further shape access to quality education for refugee children and to work for refugee teachers. As Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Syria refugees lack formal legal status<sup>7</sup> and associated protections (Kelcey & Chatila, 2020; Shuayb et al., 2016). Although Syria refugee children have, at times, been allowed to enroll in schools regardless of legal status, their parents' lack of legal residency and employment restrictions, create additional economic and psychosocial pressure that create the risk of school dropout and child labor (Kiwani, 2019; Shuayb et al., 2016).

These challenges are further compounded by intersectional factors, including disability, gender, religion, and age. Kiwan (2019) identifies legal status and disability as the most significant drivers of exclusion for Syrians in Lebanese education systems. Additional barriers to the inclusion of Syria refugees, both with or without SEND, includes the absence of an inclusive and adaptive curriculum that are responsive to their unique needs in classrooms.

## **Inclusive Education for Children with SEND in Lebanon**

At the same time, the exclusion of children with SEND from mainstream schools in Lebanon reflects broader systemic constraints rather than a complete absence of legal framework. Lebanon has formally recognized IE for children with SEND as a human right through international commitments and national legislations, including Law 220 and alignment with global frameworks, such as the 1994 Salamanca Statement, the UN (2015) Sustainable Development Goal 4 (El Ahmad, 2022, 2023; Khochen & Radford, 2011).

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<sup>7</sup> Palestine refugees are an exception to this rule. They are the only group with refugee status in Lebanon (Buckner et al. 2017).

However, there remains a significant gap between policy commitments and implementation. Data on children with disabilities in Lebanon, like any other countries, are inconsistent and likely underestimated. While approximately 8,558 children aged 5-14, representing about two percent of the population that recognized as having disabilities, this figure is likely an underestimation (Al Hroub et al., 2023). This is partly due to Lebanon's reliance on a medical definition of disability, which tends to capture specific types of disability or formally diagnosed cases. By contrast, global estimates suggest that between 5-10 percent of children may have disabilities (Human Rights Watch, 2018; UNICEF, 2022). If these global prevalence rates are applied to the Lebanese context, the number of school-aged children with disabilities could exceed 45,000, and potentially reach up to 74,000 when broader, more inclusive definitions are considered.

Building on the legal commitments, MEHE has introduced few initiatives to advance inclusive education to integrate children with SEND in mainstream classrooms in public schools, including the National Educational Plan in 2012 and subsequent inclusive education pilots in 2018 and 2021. In 2018, inclusive education was formally adopted within the public education system, initially through a pilot in 30 schools (out of 1,230 public schools), later expanded to 90 first shift and 20 second-shift schools (MEHE, 2023).

Despite this expansion, these efforts remain limited in scale and unevenly distributed. The concentration of inclusive education programs in first shift schools serving Lebanese students, compared to the significantly smaller number of second-shift schools serving Syria refugees, highlights disparities in access to inclusive services across populations. In practice, this means that inclusive education opportunities in the formal schooling system remain structurally less accessible to refugee children.

This shows that historically, children with SEND were excluded from public education in Lebanon before 2018, and even after the introduction of inclusive education initiatives, their inclusions remain limited. Estimates suggest that only between 2.4 and 7 percent of children with SEND are included in mainstream public schools, reflecting the constrained reach of current reforms (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Al Hroub & Jouni, 2023). Many schools, both public and private, remain physically inaccessible and lack the pedagogical adaptations necessary to support diverse learners (Al Hroub & Jouni, 2023). In this context, a small number of private schools have begun to develop IE programs, but they are often financially inaccessible to many families, effectively positioning IE as a privilege rather than a universally accessible right.

As a result, many children with SEND are placed in specialized institutions run by civil society and non-governmental organizations free of charge, often with financial support from the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) (Al Hroub & Jouni, 2023). These institutions provide alternative pathways, including primary and TVET education, operating parallel to mainstream setting.

These structural implementation challenges are further reinforced by how disability itself is conceptualized in policy. Law 220 is grounded in a medical model of disability, emphasizing diagnosis and impairment rather than social and environmental barriers. This approach shapes identification processes, which are often unethical, limited, costly, and reliant on clinical assessments, thereby excluding many children from formal recognition and support (Al Hroub & Jouni, 2023).

For non-Lebanese children, particularly Syria refugees, these challenges become even more pronounced. While Palestinians receive IE provisions through UNRWA (El Ahmad, 2022; El Ahmad & Kawtharani, 2022), there are no clearly defined or systematically implemented

inclusive education provisions tailored to Syria refugees. Estimates suggest that approximately 22.6 percent of Syrian refugee children may have disabilities (Humanity & Inclusion, 2023), yet there is limited data on their educational participation. Even MEHE's latest National Policy on Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs (MEHE, 2023) in Lebanon does not account for displacement as a cross-cutting factor, overlooking how refugeehood intersects with disability, poverty, and legal precarity. As a result, Syrian refugee children with SEND experience multiple and compounding forms of marginalization within Lebanon's education.

In summary, Syria refugee children in Lebanon face significant barriers to education due to historical, social, and policy factors. Despite initiatives like RACE and stated commitments to inclusive education, systemic challenges and discriminatory practices persist, particularly for children with SEND. While Lebanon's engagement with international human rights frameworks and MEHE-led reforms demonstrate a willingness to address these challenges, the gap between policy and practice remains substantial.

## **Conclusion and Organization of Dissertation**

Despite growing attention to inclusive education in Lebanon, significant gaps remain in the empirical literature, particularly at the intersection of refugeehood and disability. This is expected as the IE concept is nascent in the country. Existing studies have largely focused on inclusive education within national contexts, particularly the private sector (Al Hroub et al., 2023; Deocke, 2019), often overlooking refugee populations or treating their inclusion as a secondary concern.

Available systematic reviews limiting their geographical search to West Asia, which included Lebanon, reflect minimal number of studies focused on IE for refugees with SEND (Rfat et al., 2022). Where research on refugees exists, it tends to focus on access, policy

implementation, or attitudes toward inclusion, with limited attention to how inclusion is enacted in practice, particularly from the perspectives of educators. Moreover, much of the available research has been conducted in formal education settings or in private schools, with minimal focus on refugee-led or non-formal education contexts.

While extensive research has been done on refugee inclusion in Lebanon, studies that adopt an intersectional lens remain scarce, often focusing on refugee status and disability as separate categories rather than overlapping forms of marginalization. As a result, there is limited understanding of how inclusive education is experienced and practiced by those most directly involved in these contexts. This study addresses these gaps by offering a bottom-up, empirically grounded research on inclusive refugee education, within a refugee-led, non-formal education setting in Lebanon. Rather than examining inclusion as a policy framework or outcome measure, it focuses on how inclusion is conceptualized and enacted in practice by refugee educators working within contexts of constraint and marginalization.

By centering refugee educators as knowledge producers and people with agencies, this study contributes to shifting dominant narratives that position refugees as passive recipients of aid. It also extends existing scholarship by adopting an intersectional lens that attends to the overlapping dimensions of exclusion experienced by refugee children with SEND.

Furthermore, this study responds directly to calls in the literature for greater attention to inclusive practices, teacher agency, and contextually grounded approaches to education in displacement settings (El Ahmad, 2023; Crea et al., 2022). In doing so, it provides new insights into how inclusive education can be reimagined and enacted in contexts where formal systems fall short.

The organization of the remainder of this dissertation is as follows. The next chapter explains the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of this study, clarifying how terms such as inclusion, refugee, and disability are defined and conceptualized separately and together through an intersectional lens. The third chapter describes the methodological approach, detailing research design, setting, fieldwork and data methods, data management and analysis, ethical and credibility considerations, positionality, and limitations of the study. Chapters 4 through 6 describes the findings, with an overall discussion of the results in Chapter 7.

More particularly, Chapter 4 draws on the oral history of the Hope Center as narrated by its director, along with the history of refugee education for Syrians in Lebanon. By doing so, this chapter situates the organization's work within a broader context of political instability, shifting and often exclusionary policies, and structural constraints shaping Syria refugees' access to quality education in Lebanon. It shows how the Center's practices have continuously evolved in response to these conditions, reflecting that inclusion does not emerge as a fixed policy outcome, but as an ongoing process shaped by refugees' lived realities. In this sense, inclusion at the organizational level at Hope Center is understood as a series of situated decisions made within constraints, rather than an abstract or universal principle.

In this Chapter 5, I draw on my in-person immersive fieldwork and interviews with refugee teachers to explore inclusion at classroom level. I argue that inclusion at the Hope Center is conceptualized by educators as a holistic and context-responsive process, grounded in the right to education but shaped by the lived realities of their students. I further explain how this relational conceptualization is enacted through dynamic and adaptive pedagogical practices and sustained through pragmatic leadership that aligns teachers' capacity and action within conditions of constraints.

In Chapter 6, I then attend to the mechanisms and relationships across different actors at the Hope Center that not only allow inclusion praxis to take place but sustains it as well. In other words, this chapter argues that inclusion praxis at the Hope Center is enacted through relational mechanisms, including leadership, communication systems, and teacher inclusion, that collectively create a shared professional culture of collaboration, responsibility, and accountability. Within these systems and through their interactions, refugee teachers' inclusion becomes foundational to students' inclusion as they enable the educators to exercise a situated agency that approach teaching as a form of activism.

Finally, in Chapter 7 on discussion and conclusion, I connect these discussions with the underpinning elements of my conceptual framework to discuss the implications and contributions of this study to the fields of critical refugee studies and critical pedagogy.

## **CHAPTER 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Frameworks**

This study draws on a set of interconnected conceptual frameworks, including critical pedagogy, critical refugee studies, and an intersectional lens, grounded in decolonial and Black feminist epistemologies. By conceptualizing refugees and persons with disabilities (PWDs) as cultural and political actors and agents of change, this research pays close attention to their historical and sociopolitical contexts that shape their lived realities. Situated within Lebanon's socio-political landscape, hosting a large Syria refugee population amid ongoing economic crisis, this study uses theoretical frameworks that challenge deficit-based views in both refugee education and disability studies. It also incorporates a dynamic form of intersectionality to understand how interwoven systems of power and oppression shape individuals' experiences and educational trajectories.

Across these frameworks, this study is guided by a decolonial epistemic and methodological commitment, understood as an effort to disrupt dominant hierarchies of knowledge production, challenge whose knowledge is valued, and center relational, lived ways of knowing that emerge at the intersection of refugeetude and (dis)ability.

This chapter begins by exploring the concept of inclusion, offering an alternative perspective that moves beyond access, participation, and achievement to emphasize emotional belonging, love, and healing in education. These elements are central to holistic and engaged pedagogies that unsettle outcome-oriented, neoliberal approaches to education. Next, it shifts to the concept of refugeetude, an epistemological approach within critical refugee studies that understands refugees as continuous and dynamic sources of knowledge, creativity, and resilience.

The chapter then introduces intersectionality as its overarching analytical orientation, drawing on Black feminist frameworks to examine how systems of power operate simultaneously and relationally. Within this framing, I conceptualize (dis)ability through a cultural model, including Crip theory, which understands (dis)ability as relational, political, and socially constructed within broader systems of ableism and neoliberal norms of productivity and normalcy. To extend this analysis more directly into education and refugee contexts, I draw on Dis/Ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit), which highlights how racism and ableism intersect within educational structures and practices. DisCrit further emphasizes the importance of historical, legal, and sociopolitical contexts, as well as the need to center the voices and agency of populations that have been systemically excluded from knowledge production and decision-making.

The chapter concludes by bringing these conceptual perspectives together through an intersectional decolonial lens. This synthesis seeks to unsettle prevailing systems of knowledge by centering the lived realities of refugees as sites of meaning-making and analysis. In doing so, it aligns the study's conceptual framework with its critical ethnographic design, grounding the research in relationality, reflexivity, and the co-construction of knowledge with participants.

## Inclusion

The first thing that I do when working with each student is to help them have friends. Once accepted and loved, everything would change. *Everything* would change (emphasis original). This is one of the main rules in my work.

— The Social Worker Interview, July 2023

The literature on inclusion does not seem to have an internationally agreed upon definition. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) provides a relatively clear definition, describing it as a process to overcome barriers of access, participation, and achievement for learners traditionally excluded from educational opportunities (UNESCO, 2017). However, global entities like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which mainly focus on refugees, often imply two dimensions for inclusion: (1) “structural inclusion,” meaning integration or access to education, and (2) “relational inclusion” that is primarily concerned with social inclusion and sense of belonging (Salidray & Maydan, 2023).

In practice, national education systems, particularly in formal settings, often adopt an integration approach that prioritizes a “child-rights lens” over a “refugee-rights lens.” This approach tends to overlook essential aspects and multilayered needs of refugees, such as psychosocial support for children who have experienced structural and psychological violence (Buckner et al., 2017; Kelcey & Chital, 2020).

While extensive literature has explored these dimensions of inclusion, little evidence exists on inclusion’s other dimensions when refugeehood intersects with disability, gender, race,

ethnicity, and/or age (Crea et al., 2022). Notably, the incorporation of emotional belonging and the elements of love and healing in pedagogy is underrepresented in literature, creating a gap in the holistic understanding and implementation of inclusive education (IE). At the same time my observations, and interviews in Lebanon during the Summer of 2023 revealed a common theme in educators' practices for me: a focus on humanizing education for refugee students across the Hope Center.

The notion of a humanizing education, influenced by Freire's critical pedagogy (1970), necessitates recognizing the entirety of children's being, paying careful attention to their unique backgrounds, experiences, individual needs, and inherent dignity. This humanizing pedagogy appeared in four ways in my interviews and observations in the summer: (1) promoting respect and trust between educators and students, (2) creating a safe learning space that encourages creativity and critical thinking, (3) respecting students' cultural backgrounds and individual needs, and (4) reflecting care for students' well-being and integrity.

Building on these insights, I decided to rethink the concept of inclusion for refugees with and without special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This reconceptualization does not ignore the importance of dismantling barriers to access and participation for children systematically excluded from education. Instead, it extends them by framing inclusion as a humanizing and decolonizing pedagogical practice. This approach situates inclusion within a holistic poetic education lens that integrates critical pedagogy, aesthetic peace education, and decolonial feminist epistemologies, foregrounding healing and love as central to educational practice.

## Centering Critical Pedagogy

To transform outcome-oriented global educational policies, influenced by neoliberal and globalized capitalism (Cremin, 2016; Harris, 2008), the need for critical and engaged pedagogies grounded in a practice of freedom (Freire, 1970; hook, 1994, 2000) and love (hook, 2003; Rangel, 2016) is more crucial than ever. Critical and engaged pedagogy emphasizes dialogical encounters in the classroom based on profound love, humility, faith in humanity, mutual trust, and hope, activating critical thinking and actions – praxis (Freire, 1970). While Freire focuses on the consciousness of the mind, hooks (1994) expands this to include the engagement of mind, body, and spirit, all dimensions of being, drawing on Eastern spiritual philosophy.

Aligned with decolonial epistemologies and Indigenous knowledge, Rangel (2016) argues that “by integrating mind, body, and spirit, a person can understand with their whole being how states of frustration, depression, and anger can serve as catalysts for healing and social change.” This healing is only possible through the practice of love, which fosters “emotional, spiritual, psychological, and physical wellness” for both students and teachers (Barcelos, 2016; hooks, 2003). In other words, it is the “act of love that promotes spiritual and mental growth in our learners and in ourselves as teachers” (Barcelos, 2016).

McInerney and Cremin (2024) argue that the path toward sustainable peace and education involves shifting away from “[o]thering, mechanistic learning, and hyperrational modernity” (p. 301) toward a collaborative, innovative, and relational pedagogy that engages body, mind, and spirit. Lin et al. (2023) contend that modern education, deeply rooted in Western ideologies, promotes individualism by focusing primarily on development of the *mind* while neglecting to cultivate a sense of love and connection among students and with their surroundings, including

non-human kin. Barcelos (2016) further points out the absence of love in the curricula, school leadership, and in the language of teaching and learning.

In this study, I draw on this perspective to conceptualize refugee learners as *refugee bodymindspirit*, emphasizing the interconnected dimensions of their learning and well-being, rather than treating learning as a purely cognitive process. This builds on Rangel's (2016) use of "bodymindspirit" to highlight holistic, engaged pedagogy, which I extend to reflect the lived realities of refugee learners beyond academic performance (See Refugeetude Section).

## **Decolonizing Pedagogies through Love**

Within the above-mentioned framework, love emerges as a central pedagogical and epistemological principle. According to hooks (2003), love in teaching is "a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust," (p. 131) which all work interdependently. Barcelos (2016) demythologizes the implications of love in teaching, arguing that affective approaches bring joy and unity to learning unlike the assumption that assumes it impacts the seriousness in learning. As bell hooks (2000) states, "when we choose to love, we choose to move against fear—against alienation and separation" (p. 93). This is consistent with what Mariam, the social worker at Hope Center told me in July 2023 (see the epigraph) as her ground rule in her work with refugee students. Similarly, despite the objection toward this approach, caring relations are fundamental for effective pedagogies and do not impair professionalism (Barcelos, 2016). Instead, teaching with love helps teachers better understand their students' unique needs and base their lessons accordingly (Barcelos, 2016; hooks, 2003).

When the fundamental principles of love underpin the teacher-student relationship, the shared quest for knowledge fosters an ideal learning environment. In this setting, teachers learn

alongside their students, who are also learning and contributing (hooks, 2003). This aligns with Freire's assertion (1970) that education is constantly made in praxis.

Barcelos (2016) names such love in teaching and learning, as "attentive love," which goes beyond merely seeing the good in students to a desire to "reach beyond ourselves" and explore what it means to "be human." In other words, it allows to see "students' realities in their own terms" (p.134). Incorporating attentive love into the concept of inclusion is critical and organic, as empirical studies in education in emergency contexts have already shown that teachers serve as agents of change in students' lives, acting as second parents, role models, and more (Adebayo, 2019; Spear, 2019).

Feminist scholar, Chela Sandoval, frames this concept as a "methodology of the oppressed," a system deregulator that serves as "a postmodern decolonizing activity," or a "methodology of love in the postmodern world" (2000, p. 10). Sandoval views love as a hermeneutic, political technology, body of knowledge, arts, and practices that allows exploration of self and the world around us. For hooks (2003), "the act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own. In such knowing we know and are known as members of one community" (p. 132).

Moreover, love as a hermeneutic refers to interpreting and engaging with the world through a lens of compassion, empathy, and deep respect for the inherent dignity of every creature (hooks, 2003). Thus, defining inclusion through love as a hermeneutic enhances effective learning and a sense of community. It also promotes resilience in students. By choosing to love and moving against the culture of fear, dominant in the competitive educational environment, "students are encouraged to trust in their capacity to learn and can meet difficult challenges with a spirit of resilience and competence" (hooks, 2003). Furthermore, by seeing

love “in the context of inquiry, discovery, and creation a way to reach beyond ourselves,” students find room to expand their curiosity, active listening, and critical thinking skills as well (Barcelos, 2016). Barcelos (2016) further explains that this embodied love in pedagogy is also crucial for teachers as it allows them to engage in active listening and remain receptive to emotional communication with their students (Barcelos, 2016).

Theorizing inclusion through the concept of love and emotional belonging is crucial for understanding the realities of refugee bodymindspirits, particularly for those with SEND. This approach involves a set of practices and procedures that transform people individually and collectively, fostering a differential mode of knowing and being (Sandoval, 2000). By emphasizing relational care and mutual respect, love as a hermeneutic helps to create inclusive environments that recognize and value the diverse experiences and needs of refugee bodymindspirits, promoting their holistic development and well-being (Barcelos, 2016).

Having a conceptual understanding of love as an integrative way of being (1) ontologically, as the universal force; (2) axiologically, as the source of joy and unity; (3) epistemologically, as the source of knowing and being, and (4) methodologically, as a pedagogical imperative (Lin et al., 2023; Rangel, 2016), can play a critical role in facilitating the inclusion and healing for refugee bodymindspirit, while decolonizing holistic pedagogies. This aligns with the concept of “emotional belonging” (p.139) that Barcelos (2016) suggests is essential for individual and collective learning. I seek to extend this notion of love to the refugee context, proposing it as a necessary element for fostering inclusion and a missing piece in inclusive education discourses and academic research on IE.

Fostering emotional belonging and empowering refugees as active agents of their own learning does not absolve national and global policymakers of their responsibilities. This

reimagined inclusion is a dynamic micro-level practice that must be supported by macro-level initiatives such as what UNESCO's definition has to offer. Conceptualizing inclusion through "attentive love" provides a robust framework for reimagining refugee education. By emphasizing emotional belonging, love, and healing, this approach creates a holistic and inclusive educational environment, supporting both the academic and social integration of refugee children while empowering them as agents of their own learning.

## Refugeetude

“[R]efugee is a substantial experience that can be the basis for the formation and development of a way of being in the world or, in Jean- Paul Sartre's words, “a certain affective attitude towards the world.”

— Nguyen, 2019, p. 117

The prevalent narrative about refugees often depicts them in a binary image: either as passive victims in need of humanitarian aid, labeling them as *vulnerable* or *at risk*; or as unique self-reliant actors capable of resilience in their local context, romanticizing their success (Krause & Schmidt, 2019). These portrayals reduce refugees to bodies whose needs are measurable and can be met through experts [read international refugee regime]. Such perspectives fail to acknowledge the full political and social lives, as well as the body/mind/spirit experiences of refugees, thus erasing their political subjectivity and agency (Krause & Schmidt, 2019; Nagar, 2019). This depiction also perpetuates the asymmetry between aid givers and aid recipients, with refugees seen as dependent on assistance (Krause & Schmidt, 2019). Espiritu (2006) refers to this milieu as the “International Refugee Regime” (p.422), defined as a type of “geopolitical humanitarianism” that ultimately reinforces the existing state-citizen hierarchy.

To move beyond dominant narratives and break the view of refugees as a problem to solve, in this study I rely on critical refugee studies, proposed by scholars such as Yen Le Espiritu in her work on Vietnamese refugees in the US. Drawing on this framework allows me to conceptualize the experiences of refugees through the lens of “refugeetude,” a concept advanced by Khatharya Um and Vinh Nguyen. Nguyen (2019) uses this concept to redefine the “refugee category” beyond narrow legal definitions, temporal limitations, and deficit-oriented representation, by emphasizing on their state of being and agency. To better explain the concept of refugeetude and the rationale for its application in this study, it is necessary to first outline the politics of representation for refugees and the current policies aimed at addressing refugee issues.

### **Politics of Citizenship, Vulnerability, and Representation**

The concepts of citizenship and vulnerability are central to the current understanding of refugees in international education policy and humanitarian aid arenas. Vulnerability is tied to human security discourses, which shifted in the 1990’s from a state-centered approach to focusing on the security of vulnerable populations. This person-centered security has been adopted by the United Nations (UN) and other international organizations (Kiwan, 2019). While it acknowledges the state’s role in providing security, this approach also recognizes the contributions of other actors, such as individuals and their communities,<sup>8</sup> highlighting their agency in this provision (Kiwan, 2019). These security discourses often equate movements and displacements with instability, thereby linking vulnerability to a lack of human security (Kiwan, 2019).

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<sup>8</sup> The increased role of private and nonstate actors in refugee provision is part of a larger neoliberal approach that emphasizes market-based solutions and reduces the role of the state in welfare provision. This shift often leads to a fragmented system of support where private entities and NGOs play significant roles in service delivery, sometimes prioritizing a narrow notion of efficiency over comprehensive care.

As Agamben (2008) explains, this discourse presumes refugees disrupt the linkage “between the human and the citizen[,] and that between nativity and nationality” (p. 93). In other words, in this discourse, refugees through their stateless condition become sources of disruption to the principles of the modern nation-state. As a result, refugees, by being “out-of-place” and lacking the protection of the state, are considered “an anomaly whose status needs to be brought back into place by either naturalization or repatriation” (Espiritu, 2006, p. 422). Similarly, Kiwan (2019) points out that controlling people’s movement through “technologies of power” (p. 3), such as border sealing and refugee camps, reinforcing nation-state sovereignty and citizens’ rights. Espiritu (2006) refers to this process as ideological externalization of refugees. In this view, refugees are perceived as threats to national security and are marginalized not because they are vulnerable “but because they make visible a transgression of the social contract between a state and its citizens” (Espiritu, 2006, p. 422).

The linkages between vulnerability and movement, as well as identity and movement, promote the understanding that refugee identity is fixed and lost through movement. This notion is embedded in citizenship laws, practiced through humanitarian acts, and perpetuated in public imagination through mainstream media (Kiwan, 2019). The perception of identity loss and the legally out-of-place status of refugees are further complicated by psychological and physical vulnerabilities, particularly for children (Kiwan, 2019).

As Maalki (1995) argues, the common construction of the refugee as a depoliticized, ahistorical body in need of humanitarian rescue is a modern phenomenon. This construction legitimizes the governmentality of people's movement, reinforcing state power, as explained in Foucault's (1976) accounts of biopower. International refugee organizations and humanitarian aid agencies have been critiqued for depoliticizing the “refugee,” reducing the human being to “bare

life” (Agamben, 1998). This bare life is exacerbated by being “out of place” or out of law, not being recognized as part of the political community (Kiwani, 2019).

According to Krause and Schmidt (2019), UNHCR has begun to address the critiques of imposing meanings of vulnerability to refugees and depicting them as helpless victims without considering their agency. In other words, they argue that UNHCR seems to follow new approaches that oppose that negative image. This includes policies aimed at promoting refugees’ self-reliance and resilience. UNHCR refines self-reliance as “refugees' capabilities to satisfy their crucial needs sustainably and resilience as refugees' and host countries' abilities to cope with hardships and adapt to conditions” (Krause & Schmidt, 2019, p.23). Through their interpretive content analysis of UNHCR policies about self-reliance and resilience, Krause and Schmidt (2019) confirm a shift from vulnerabilities to portraying refugees full of ideas and skills - as “resourceful actors, ... agents of development, ... or as active and creative agents” (p. 26).

However, they highlight that these policies create dualism, where refugees are either seen as vulnerable or self-reliant/resilient. This constructed duality leaves no room for vulnerability and self-reliance to co-exist, and ignores the complex, dynamic, and social process of self-reliance and resilience. This binary reinforces the notion that refugees are in need of humanitarian aid to either address their vulnerability or help them become self-reliant, without changing the perception of their state of being as a refugee (Krause & Schmidt, 2019), or the social political context that shapes them. The persistence of vulnerability attached to refugee status prevents the creation of alternative narratives where refugees can cope without humanitarian aid.

Furthermore, these policies have economic empowerment at their core, reflecting neoliberal paradigms that shift gradually responsibility from governments to individuals. This

shift further depoliticizes and ahistoricizes the struggles of refugees, focusing on individual responsibility rather than structural changes. At the same time, this approach also protects the Global North from perceived “security threats” while ignoring the broader political, historical, and economic contexts that shape refugees’ experiences (Kiwani, 2019). In this context, I use the term “refugeehood” to capture refugees’ lived realities as a state of being shaped by these intersecting systems.

### **Critical Refugee Studies Framework**

To move away from these limiting narratives, this study relies on the concept of “refugeetude,” introduced by Critical Refugee Studies. More specifically, I apply Nguyen (2019) conceptualization in this study. Nguyen (2019) describes *refugeetude*, as an epistemological shift, which views refugees as continuous and dynamic sources of creativity and resilience, recognizing their enduring contributions and complex relationships. This perspective sees refugees not as temporary crises or legal categories but as subjects with rich, multidimensional experiences. The consciousness, experience, or knowledge related to refugees’ subjectivity does not end when the legal status is recognized or is in process but persists across time and space. In other words, “it is psychic, affective, and embodied, enduring in time and space” (Nguyen, 2019, p. 114), embedding itself in what I would call *bodymindspirit* of “refugees, former refugees, and subsequent generations.”

This epistemic model allows for a broader understanding of refugees, acknowledging their political, social, and historical contexts. It challenges the fixed notion of refugees as either vulnerable or resilient, recognizing the fluid and embodied nature of their experiences. This concept shifts the focus from seeing refugees as depoliticized, ahistorical objects of investigation

to highlighting their agency and capacity to create meaning and imagine futures. In fact, refugeetude acknowledges the political and relational ideologies that refugeehood carries, thereby creating room for dialogical interactions, intergroup solidarities, and contestation. By adopting the concept of refugeetude, this framework allows me to provide a more comprehensive and empathetic understanding of refugeehood, moving beyond reductive and binary narratives to appreciate the full humanity and potential of refugees.

In this conceptualization of refugeehood, I also draw on Nguyen's idea of "refugee subjects," as opposed to the commonly used term "refugees," to be inclusive of those:

who are legal refugees, those who were at one point in time refugees, those who sought or are seeking refuge, those who have been persecuted and forcibly displaced from their homes but did not (or could not) acquire official refugee status, those who are culturally understood as refugees even though they were never legally refugees, and those who are at the threshold of resident and refugee, living with the imminent threat of being refugeed by the forces of war, capitalism, and globalization. (Nguyen, 2019, p. 116)

This is not to generalize the lived experiences of refugees into one catchphrase or ignore the value of legal definitions. Instead, Nguyen (2019) explains that it aims to reflect the complex, embodied nature of migration for refugees and their corresponding struggles and realities that do not fit within the available bureaucratic definitions. It challenges the fixed notion of 'refugee' to rethink its temporal aspect and consider the various subjectivities or psychological states associated with it (Nguyen, 2019).

However, instead of using the term ‘subjects,’ which in the context of research might imply being objects of investigation, I use “refugee bodymindspirit” and refugees interchangeably. This choice aligns with the refugeetude framework while also reflecting a holistic understanding of refugee learners, grounded in engaged pedagogy, which described earlier.

This distinction is particularly important in the context of Syria refugees in Lebanon, where only a fraction of the 1.3 million refugees is registered with UNHCR, and where legal recognition remains limited regardless of registration. In this context, refugee bodymindspirit offers a more inclusive and holistic framing. This is especially relevant for this study, which focuses on an educational setting where many children are second-generation refugees, holding refugee status without having directly experienced displacement themselves.

## **(Dis)ability through Critical and Feminist Frameworks**

“Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the “real” world unless it happens in the images in our heads.”

– Gloria Anzaldua, 1999, p. 92

Kafer (2013) argues that the way we understand disability in the present shapes our imagination of disability in the future. In other words, “one’s assumptions about the experience of disability create one’s conception of a better future” (p. 2). In refugee contexts, this question becomes especially important, since displacement is often studied through legal status, vulnerability, and access, while the role of ableism and neoliberal measures of normalcy in shaping refugee lives and educational trajectories receives far less attention (Kiwani, 2019). Yet,

refugees, particularly those with SEND, encounter education through the intersecting dynamics of displacement, poverty, citizenship, and (dis)ability.

To engage these entanglements, this study draws on feminist frameworks on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Schalk, 2018) as its overarching epistemological orientation, while using the cultural model of disability, Crip theory (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006, 2018) and DisCrit (Annamma, 2018; Annamma et al., 2018; Hanebutt & Mueller, 2021), to conceptualize (dis)ability as relational, political, and culturally produced. In this section, I begin by briefly describing the more frequently used medical and social models to explain why this broader framing is necessary.

### **Medical Model of Disability**

Despite its emergence in the 1800's, the medical model of disability remains prevalent today. This model views disability as a medical problem, a defect, or a failure of a bodily system, sometimes referred to as the “personal tragedy model” (Retief & Letsosa, 2018, p. 3). Consequently, it assumes the solution to disability is to fix the defect and impairment, or to prevent it medically, if possible, rather than addressing the social processes and policies that disable lives of PWDs (Kafer, 2013; Retief & Letsosa, 2018). In this model, a “good” future for PWDs is conditional upon the eradication of disability, perpetuating histories of ableism and disability oppression (Kafer, 2013).

This conceptualization of disability reinforces ableism and assumes able-bodiedness and able-mindedness as the norm, creating a dualism and hierarchy where the able-bodiedness/able-mindedness are considered superior. As noted by Hanebutt and Mueller (2021, p. 6), “this deficit framing of disability as an atypical burden needing care or dependence on others is paternalistic

and further frames disability as detraction from able-bodied, heterosexual maleness.” Retief and Letsosa (2018) argue that this model empowers medical professionals, who have developed their diagnosis and methods based on what is considered normal in the body and mind. However, Kafer (2013) clarifies that this connection is not limited only to doctors and health service providers. She argues that the defining feature of the medical model is not who applies it, but rather the prevailing perception that characterizes it as objective and common sense.

In short, this model has a deficit-based perspective which focuses on limitations and shortcomings of PWDs. It imagines the future of disability more in terms of “medical research, individual treatments, and familial assistance than increased social supports or widespread social change” (Kafer, 2013, p. 5). Since this model assumes disability to be a self-evident, unchanging, and purely medical phenomenon, it leaves no room for questioning or debating the meanings, histories, and implications of disability, nor for activism aimed at changing social barriers (Kafer, 2013).

## **Social Model of Disability**

Inspired by disability movements in the 1960’s and 1970’s, and in response to the limitations of the medical model, the social model of disability emerged. According to the social model of disability, also known as minority model, disability is a socially constructed concept (Retief & Letsosa, 2018). This model does not consider the problem of disability in the body or mind but is in the ableist social and environmental factors, which exclude and stigmatize certain bodies, minds, and ways of being (Kafer, 2013). Thus, this model distinguishes between disability and impairment, suggesting that people with impairments are disabled by their social environment, not by the impairments themselves (Kafer, 2013). Consequently, it recognizes the

solution in addressing those social attitudes and societal barriers to participation experienced by PWDs (Retief & Letsosa, 2018). Hence, an imagined future is a socially transformed one, where access and participation of PWDs are no longer a challenge.

Although this model of disability has significantly influenced national and international policies and strategies regarding disability (Retief & Letsosa, 2018), including those from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and UNSECO, it has been criticized by some disability activists and feminist scholars. In other words, critiques of the social model of disability acknowledge the social construction of disability and the need for social transformation. However, they highlight its problematic distinction between disability and impairments for various reasons. Firstly, while some individuals acknowledge having an impairment, they might not necessarily identify themselves as a disabled person (Retief & Letsosa, 2018). Secondly, understanding impairment can also be characterized as a social construct by the efforts that try to determine what constitutes impairment and its limits; or, as Retief and Letsosa (2018) ask, “where does impairment end and disability start?” (p.5). This social construct is specifically critical because the impairing conditions, socially, physically, mentally, or otherwise, are not static or fixed, they are fluid and shifting across time and space (Kafer, 2013).

Additionally, the distinction between the two concepts of disability and impairment ignores the lived realities of impairment and its corresponding challenges for PWDs and their families. Kafer (2013) further explains this oversight to highlight how it can marginalize individuals that are interested in medical interventions. She argues, “in a complete reversal of the individual/medical model, which imagines individual cure as the desired future for disability, a

strict social model completely casts cure out of our imagined futures; [as if] cure becomes the future no self-respecting disability activist or scholar wants” (p. 7).

Finally, the emphasis on this distinction does not give space to explore how able-bodiedness/able-mindedness and disability affect one another beyond individuals with impairments. For example, Hearing Children of Deaf Adults (CODA) are not disabled themselves, but their lives are influenced by cultural ideals of normalcy (Kafer, 2013). These cultural ideals of normalcy are tied to what McRuer (2006, p. 2) defines as “compulsory able-bodiedness,” which assumes that society expects everyone to be able-bodied, perpetuating ableism by framing disability as deviant and undesirable.

These critiques do not dismiss the importance of the social model. Instead, they point to the need for a more expansive framework that can hold together the social construction of disability, the lived realities of bodyminds, and the cultural and political norms through which disability becomes meaningful.

## **Cultural Model of Disability and Crip Theory**

Developed within the North American context, the cultural model of disability views disability as a value-laden cultural site, but not merely synonymous to social disabling processes (McRuer, 2018). Extending the previous single-focused models, the cultural model acknowledges that medical and social factors are two of the defining factors of disability, while a wide array of cultural factors also matter. Consequently, it does not have a clear-cut definition for disability but rather focuses on “how different notions of disability and non-disability operate in the context of a specific culture” (Retief & Letsosa, 2018, p. 6).

Drawing on Foucault's notion of cultural locations, Snyder and Mitchell (2006) argue that specific cultural locations of disability have been established for PWDs, while placing them in these settings against their will, such as charity systems, the international disability research industry, and current academic trends on disability research. From this perspective, the issue with these constructed locations is in the modernist assumptions that underlie them, particularly the approach of classifying and pathologizing human differences, referred to as disabilities, and then managing them through various institutional settings (Retief & Letsosa, 2018; Snyder & Mitchell, 2006).

This understanding has been further expanded by disability studies and feminist scholars, such as Alison Kafer and Robert McRuer, through a theoretical framework that is known as Crip theory. Closely linked with Queer theory and aligned with cultural studies, McRuer popularized the term in his book, *Crip Theory*, to explore "how and why it [disability] is constructed and naturalized; how it is embedded in complex economic, social, and cultural relations; and how it might be changed" (2006, p. 2).

Crip theory recognizes the socially constructed nature of disability while highlighting the prevailing systems that shape the subordination of disability. McRuer (2006) specifically identifies neoliberalism and global capitalism as the key contributors to this representation politics, sustaining a compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness. For this reason, Kafer (2013) argues that in addition to social change, reimagining the future for disability requires a political transformation, acknowledging that disability is a political ideology, hence contestable and contested.

Using crip (as a noun, adjective, and verb), originating from the word cripple, McRuer hopes (1) to "open up capaciously the many generative ways the term disability has functioned

or might function” (2018, p.14); (2) to “crip” compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness that are entrenched in the cultural logic of neoliberalism by incorporating PWDs and queer perspectives; and (3) to reflect on traces of painful history of stigma and oppression, beneath the historical connections of crip to cripple, and beyond its traditional ties to mobility and other forms of impairment.

In this study, however, Crip theory is not used in isolation, but as part of a broader intersectional and decolonial lens that helps conceptualize disability as culturally produced, politically contested, and embedded in broader systems of power. Conceptualizing disability through this theoretical framework allows me to go beyond the social model of disability, which is prevalent in international strategies regarding disability, especially in educational settings. Crip theory enables this study to apply a critical lens to challenge societal norms, explore new perspectives on disability, and center the views and experiences of people with disabilities as active agents. This reflective process helps me engage with and transform my understanding of disability in the process of this research.

By situating disability within political and cultural realms, I contextualize its meanings historically and politically, thus positioning disability as a concept that can be actively reshaped and redefined. In other words, it helps me reimagine disability as a relational, dynamic space, and outside of Western binarism (ability vs. disability). As noted by Schalk (2018), understanding disability as a “complex embodiment” is crucial because it helps remain “attentive to positive, negative, and ambivalent aspects of disability (physically, mentally, and socially), as well as the relationship between all three” (p. 24).

In this conceptualization of disability, I also employ the bodymind concept, introduced by Margaret Price in feminist disability studies, referring to the intertwining of the mind and

body, encompassing different dimensions of the whole being, unlike Western philosophy that assumes them as separate entities (Schalk, 2018). Bodymind is an essential concept that highlights how processes within our being influence its various dimensions in a way that distinguishing between physical and mental processes becomes challenging. This is crucial in conceptualizing disability because it not only helps understand how disability affects the bodymind of persons with disabilities but also emphasizes the importance of exploring the physical and sociocultural environments that shape the way PWDs experience their disabilities within a specific context, spaces, and times.

Finally, following Schalk (2019), I use (dis)ability to “reference the overarching social system of bodily and mental norms that includes ability and disability” (p. 6). This term allows me to highlight the interdependency of disability and ability, which mutually define one another. If I refer to disability or ability, it is in reference to that specific part of the wider social system – (dis)ability.

At the same time, I do not approach Crip theory uncritically. Critiques of Crip theory also point to its more limited engagement with race and other axes of marginalization, centering white disabled experiences (Bell, 2006). Also, they caution that the reclaimed term crip does not travel innocently: it can obscure classed, racialized, gendered, and sexualized privilege; privilege physical impairment; and fail to fully account for intellectual, less visible, or otherwise differently experienced disabilities (Hanebutt & Mueller, 2021; Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2013). These critiques are especially important in refugee education, where disability cannot be examined apart from displacement, citizenship, poverty, and broader forms of structural exclusion. Thus, Crip theory is valuable in this study but not as a complete framework. It serves as a valuable resource that unsettles dominant societal norms, interrogates neoliberal measures of

productivity and normalcy, and enables disability to be understood as a relational, political, and culturally constructed formation rather than an individual lack. For this reason, I bring Crip theory into conversation with Black feminist frameworks, particularly intersectionality and DisCrip, as discussed in the next section. This framing is particularly important in this study because disability cannot be examined in isolation but must be understood in relation to broader forms of structural exclusion shaping refugee education.

### **Black Feminist Frameworks: Intersectionality and DisCrit**

To better understand the relationships and interdependence of the concepts of inclusion, refugeetude, and (dis)ability in practice, I apply an intersectional lens, grounded in Black feminist epistemologies. Introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in *Legal Studies* and advanced by feminists of color, this concept has its roots in understanding the ways women of color experience racism and sexism simultaneously in their daily lives. Intersectionality refers to the concept of understanding how individuals experience multiple social systems simultaneously and serves as a political and activist approach to studying and analyzing the complex interplay of various identities, oppressions, and privileges (Schalk, 2018).

I rely primarily on Sami Schalk's conceptualization of intersectionality in *Bodyminds Reimagined*, as an epistemological orientation and practice invested in resistance to dominant structures of power. Schalk (2018) defines an intersectional framework as:

[I]dentities, experiences, system of privilege and oppression, and historically situated social constructions with material effects. I understand intersectionality as an epistemological orientation and practice that is invested in coalition building and resistance to dominant structures of power. (p. 8)

In this sense, intersectionality is not simply a matter of listing identities or disaggregating data through measurable factors within a positivist lens, critiques often noted by feminist scholars. Rather, it seeks to understand the deeply entangled systems of power that cannot be neatly separated by categories such as sex, gender, race, and (dis)ability. This approach is especially important for this study because refugee learners' educational experiences cannot be understood through refugeehood alone, nor through (dis)ability as a separate category. Rather, refugeehood and (dis)ability are shaped through intersecting relations of ableism, citizenship, poverty, gender, and broader sociopolitical exclusion.

To extend this intersectional attention more directly into education, I also draw on DisCrit as an analytical lens. DisCrit is rooted in Black feminist and critical scholarship and activism and further informed by critical race theory and disability studies. It was developed as an explicitly intersectional framework to account for how racism and ableism circulate together in educational structures, discourses, and practices, shaping the trajectories of learners at the intersection of multiple forms of marginalization (Annamma, 2018; Annamma et al., 2018; Bell, 2006). Extending DisCrit to refugee context is particularly important because it brings attention not only to the social construction of disability, but also to the historical, social, political, and economic interests that limit educational equity at both macro and micro levels. Bringing DisCrit into conversation with refugeehood allows me to remain attentive to how disability, displacement, citizenship, and poverty are lived together in refugee education, particularly for learners with SEND.

Taken together, these frameworks move this study toward a decolonial feminist epistemological approach that centers relationality, lived realities, and alternative ways of knowing and being. Rather than treating refugees and individuals with disabilities as objects of

intervention or investigation, this approach understands them as cultural, political, and epistemic actors whose educational experiences are shaped through intersecting structures of power. In this sense, inclusion, refugeetude, and (dis)ability are not separate conceptual concerns, but interconnected and evolving formations through which refugee-led education can be understood and reimaged.

## **Conclusion**

Drawing on theoretical and conceptual frameworks outlined above, this study remains attentive to the dualisms that shape dominant discourses and representation politics that affect participants experiencing multiple forms of systemic marginalization. These discourses often position individuals either as passive recipients of aid or as exceptional figures who overcome adversity, whether as refugees or individuals with disabilities. Both framings are rooted in deficit-based perspectives that focus on individuals rather than structural conditions that shape their lives. Those who succeed are often celebrated as resilient or hardworking, while others are implicitly seen as lacking, obscuring the broader political, economic, and institutional constraints that produce and sustain inequality.

In this sense, such narratives reflect a neoliberal logic that prioritizes individual responsibility and success, while diverting attention from structural conditions that constrain refugees and individuals with disabilities. By applying an intersectional lens, this study challenges and destabilizes these existing understandings without completely dismantling them. It helps me move beyond the dualisms of Western knowledge and recognize the embodied complexity of participants' lived experiences and struggles. This approach also requires ongoing reflexivity, prompting me to confront my own biases related to able-bodiedness, nation-

citizenship politics, and representation. In doing so, it creates space to engage alternative ways of knowing and being, and to foreground the strengths, agency, and knowledge of the communities at the center of this study as active participants in shaping inclusive and meaningful educational practices.

## CHAPTER 3: Research Methodology

The purpose of this intersectional and inter-disciplinary study is to explore the conceptualization and implementation of disability and inclusion at a refugee-led non-formal educational (NFE) organization in Lebanon, referred to as the Hope Center (pseudonym). More specifically, I seek to answer the following research question: *How do educators at a Syrian refugee-led organization in Lebanon conceptualize and integrate disability and inclusion within their refugee education practices?*

To address this research question, the study employs critical ethnography utilizing both in-person and virtual interactions during the Center's summer camp in July 2023, and throughout the academic year from September 2024 to May 2025. The methodological choice allowed for a deep understanding of the culture-sharing of inclusive education (IE) within Hope Center.

In this chapter, I first clarify the rationale for choosing critical ethnography for this study from a theoretical standpoint. Next, I describe in detail the research setting in two sections. First, I begin with the Hope Center's community, the services it provides, the description of its centers, and the composition of its educators. The second section delves deeper into the ethnographic setting, its evolution over time, as well as the teams and centers I have engaged with. This part also describes different phases of my immersive fieldwork, political events that shaped those phases, and conclude with a summary of my data collection methods and sources.

Next, I discuss data management, translation, and analysis, followed by steps that I took for ethical considerations and quality assurance. Finally, I point to my positionality and its engagement with this study and conclude with some limitations.

## Research Design: Critical Ethnography

Rooted in cultural anthropology, ethnography as a research process and product is concerned with human society and culture (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Culture, which refers to the diverse ways in which different groups make meaning in their lives and the belief systems associated with those behaviors, is the core defining feature of ethnography (Wolcott, 2008). Ethnography emphasizes understanding shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language within a culture-sharing group over time (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which in this context focuses on the culture-sharing of the Hope Center community in practicing IE.

Immersion as a participant observer in the site is the primary method of data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, this immersion and interpretation cannot be isolated from broader socio-political contexts and power dynamics. Critical ethnography addresses this by not only sharing similar methods with conventional ethnography, such as long-term immersion and detailed descriptions of daily life, but also incorporating a political purpose/lens (Palmer & Caldas, 2015; Madison, 2005). Critical ethnography seeks to understand how marginalized individuals and communities engage in praxis and exercise agency for cultural production and transformation (Palmer & Caldas, 2015).

Expanding on conventional ethnography, critical ethnography integrates theory and context to ensure that lived experiences are not overwritten by theoretical frameworks. This approach aligns with Black method-making introduced by feminist of colors, including Katherine McKittrick, in which stories are considered theories (McKittrick, 2021). In the context of ethnographic work, lived experiences become stories, and serve as a “verb-activity that invites engagement, curiosity, [and] collaboration” of the ethnographer (McKittrick, 2021, p. 9).

Therefore, each observation is theory-laden, reflecting on the produced knowledge of the community (Fitzpatrick & May, 2019).

An essential tenet of critical ethnography is the acknowledgment that researchers cannot separate themselves from the spaces, contexts, histories, and people they study. The researcher's integration as a complex, flawed being is embedded throughout the project, although the researcher's self is not the focus of the research questions or the dominant narrative. Instead, the emphasis is on engaging with issues important to the participants and their community while challenging prevailing understandings and practices of knowledge production (Fitzpatrick & May, 2019; Palmer & Caldas, 2015). Additionally, Fitzpatrick and May (2019) discuss that a lived, embodied, and personal methodology, connected to notions of power, is vital for understanding social and political issues in educational studies. This approach, central to critical ethnography, addresses and questions power dynamics, injustices, and inequities in educational research.

The Hope Center community has long been established, sharing a co-created vision and mission to educate Syria refugee children in a caring and inclusive community. Critical ethnography is well-suited for this context as it goes beyond merely studying the culture; it seeks to understand the working patterns within this specific shared culture (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In international aid discourses, where refugee actions are often defined within humanitarian frameworks with strong economic tendencies and assessed through "objective" measures, the existing power asymmetry between aid givers and aid recipients is reinforced (Krause & Schmidt, 2019). Critical ethnography fits this context well as it challenges this power dynamic, which reinforces the dispositional reality of refugeetude through top-down policies of the global

refugee regime that often exclude refugee bodymindspirits from decision-making processes (Krause & Schmidt, 2019).

Moreover, critical ethnography incorporates an advocacy dimension into the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018), attempting to connect with the complex realities of people's lives and engaging with individuals and communities both reflexively and reciprocally (Fitzpatrick & May, 2019). This approach allows for the inclusion of the messiness and complexities of social and political concerns, such as neoliberalism, globalization, data, and accountability regimes, influencing realities of people's lives to be included in depth in analyses of educational sites (Fitzpatrick & May, 2019).

Given that inclusion, refugeetude, and (dis)ability, the key concepts in this study, are intertwined with socio-political and historical ideologies, applying critical ethnography is well-suited to this context. It is process-oriented, collaborative, and culturally situated, allowing for a relational and historical worldview that questions common-sense understandings (Palmer & Caldas, 2015).

## **Research Setting**

This study was conducted at Hope Center's school sites (referred to as centers) in Lebanon. Hope Center is a non-governmental organization (NGO) founded by members of the Syrian diaspora in 2011, providing Syrian students in Syria with scholarships and support for access to higher education through online services. However, following the escalation of Syria crisis in 2012 and increasing challenges of delivering services through online platforms, the organization shifted its provision of services from Syrians in Syria to those in Lebanon, regardless of refugee status. By late 2013, while continuing with the scholarship program, the

Center expanded its work to include refugee education, offering out-of-school Syria refugees' access to learning opportunities from pre-K to Grade 3. The Grade selection in this expansion was shaped by regulatory environment, as the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) restricted local NGOs and International NGOs (INGOs) in provision of accredited refugee education.

Until recently, the organization was not formally registered as an NGO in Lebanon to be able to provide formal accreditations. Initially, this was due to the assumption that its work would be temporary, given the early expectations surrounding displacement. However, the lack of registration was also linked to structural requirements, including the need for a Lebanese sponsor. This absence of formal recognition further constrained the Center's relationship with MEHE and posed additional challenges to its educational provision.

This section describes the Hope Center's community and its services in general, and in each of its three centers (Forsa, Noor, and Ufugh Al Jadid<sup>9</sup>). The Center's community, many of whom are refugee bodymindspirits themselves, consists of its management team, their social worker(s), school administrative teams, teachers, and students across the Center's locations, which is described in detail in the following sections.

After that, I explain in detail my ethnographic setting and my engagement with the two centers (Forsa and Noor) as part of the immersive fieldwork, along with data sources. However, the oral history of the Hope Center' refugee education, establishment of its centers since 2013, and their added services over time in response within sociopolitical refugee education landscape

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<sup>9</sup> I intentionally selected these pseudonyms, meaning Opportunity, Light, and New Horizon, respectively, in Arabic to reflect the mission of the Hope Center as I conceptualize it.

of Lebanon are all detailed in Chapter 5 as part of the findings. Similarly, Chapter 6 provides more visual description of the centers as part of analyses.

## **The Hope Center Community and Services**

Hope Center refugee education operated in three<sup>10</sup> different locations: Forsa, Noor, and Ufugh Al Jadid, providing educational services to refugees spanning from Pre-K to Grade 3, each grade with a mixed age range.<sup>11</sup> The curriculum in all centers across all grades are aligned with Lebanese national curriculum, focusing on Arabic, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), and English. Hope Center is also certified to provide early childhood education services (ECE) to refugee children in all the centers. Except for English, and in some cases STEM, Arabic and Mathematics are usually taught by one teacher (referred to as mainstream teacher hereafter) in each Grade (Grade 1-3).

Classrooms are coeducational with a size ranged between 20 to 25 students, depending on the physical capacity of classrooms, and included students of different ages sitting at one Grade level but more or less balanced gender ratios. The main language of instruction is Arabic at the Center, similar to Syria, but teachers use a combination of English and Arabic, particularly for science and mathematics, to prepare students for Lebanese public schools in case they are given the opportunity of fully transitioning to public schools.

Each center runs two shifts: a morning shift from 8 to 11:30 AM and an afternoon shift from 12 to 3:30 PM. However, unlike Lebanese public schools that segregate students into two shifts by their citizenship status, the reasoning behind the two shifts at Hope Center are twofold.

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<sup>10</sup> From 2023 to 2024, they had to close down their fourth center for financial challenges.

<sup>11</sup> The age range for each grade was different, but I do not have the accurate range to specify.

First, it helps enroll more refugees who are out of school, given the limited capacity of the classroom sizes. Second, it also allows older children who have to work in the morning to have a chance to learn in the afternoon shift. That said, both shifts serve refugees in each center, with primary aim of enhancing the access to learning opportunities for them.

In addition to educational services (pre-K to Grade 3 and ECE), the Hope Center also provides children with transportation services and light school meals to support and sustain attendance across its centers. Furthermore, since 2023 the Hope Center has started the Special Learning Difficulties (SLD) program in Forsa, which was expanded to Noor center in 2024, to support students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) through targeted instruction outside of mainstream classrooms to enhance their learning (see Chapter 6 for their identification process). Also, SLD provision varied across the two centers depending on staffing, resources, and students' needs, as illustrated below. At the same time, both centers experienced fluctuations in the attendance of the identified students, which posed challenges for continuity of their learning in these sessions.

#### *Breakdown of Hope Center by its School Sites*

Ufugh Al Jadid is located in an urban area where students and their families live among Lebanese and other populations, often engaging in street jobs or working in local shops. The diversity of refugee's spoken languages in this center is higher than Forsa and Noor with students speaking different dialects of Arabic coming from different locations in Syria, as well as Kurdish.

As the oldest center at Hope, Ufugh Al Jadid initially started its services by providing play-based activities, such as singing songs and playing games, with refugees in 2013 merely to

hold a safe space for refugee children to feel the normalcy after displacement. With official addition of refugee education at the Hope Center, it then shifted its services to ECE and pre-K along with Grade 1 and 2 in 2014. Each academic year, approximately an average of 160 students is enrolled in this center, approximately 53 percent of them girls, with six teachers. At the time of this study, SLD services were not yet formally established in this center.

Forsa center is located in a semi-urban setting, where students and their families live in informal tented settlements of Syria refugees or small nearby towns. In these areas, students primarily are engaged in agricultural activities, supporting their parents in the field. Forsa is the largest center with over 20 teachers, serves as the hub for all teacher training and workshops annually held in September, hosting educators from other centers. Given its physical size, Forsa also enrolls more students in two shifts, an average of 770 students per year with about 54 percent girls, providing pre-K to Grade 3.

SLD provision at Forsa is more established, reflecting its earlier implementation and greater staffing capacity. Some students were first identified during the 2023-2024 academic year (eight in total), but this number decreased to four in the 2024-2025 year after several families returned to Syria following December 2024 (the fall of the Assad regime).

With the identification of one additional student with SEND in 2024-2025 academic year, Salma, the special education teacher at Forsa, worked with five students: three in the morning shift and two in the afternoon shift, aligned with students' regular school schedules. The SLD sessions in Forsa consist of two periods per shift, one for Arabic and one for English, held five days a week for one hour, for a total of 10 sessions per week for each group. Moreover, Salma, prior to the introduction of the SLD program, served primarily as an English teacher while also supporting other teachers as needed. With the SLD program, however, she shifted her focus

primarily to these sessions, while also continued teaching English to pre-K students. Unlike mainstream teachers, she did not have a designated classroom to herself and therefore held her SLD sessions in different spaces in the morning and afternoon shifts, alternating between school's conference room and a pre-K classroom, depending on availability.

Finally, the third center is Noor which is located in a rural area inside a camp for displaced Syrians. Because of its proximity to refugees' informal tented settlements, students usually walk to the center with their families. The main economic activities of Syria refugees in this area are engaging in farm and agricultural activities. The center enrolls approximately 350 students on average per academic year, with similar girls' ratio to other centers (53 percent). Twelve teachers work in this center teaching ECE programs and Grade 1 to 2.

SLD provision in Noor differs from Forsa due to staffing constraints and organizational structure. The assigned special education teacher, Zahraa, also serves as Grade 1 teacher in the morning, teaching a full class. As a result, she relinquished her afternoon mainstream teaching responsibilities to conduct SLD sessions for the three students identified with SEND at the time of my fieldwork. At the same, this arrangement enabled her to conduct the SLD sessions in her own classroom, providing a more stable consistent learning environment for students.

This arrangement meant that SLD provision in Noor was more limited compared to Forsa, with a total of 10 periods per week (two sessions per day), both focused on Arabic: one with two students and the other with one student. In some cases, students enrolled in the morning shift remained at the center to attend SLD sessions in the afternoon.

## *Composition of Educators at the Hope Center*

In this dissertation, *educators* at Hope Center refers to all individuals directly or indirectly are involved in students' learning and inclusion. These individuals can be grouped into three categories, as outlined below.

The first group consists of teachers across all centers. Teachers across three centers are primarily refugees, mainly from Syria (35 teachers), one from Palestine, and the rest from Lebanon (14 teachers), or who hold a dual nationality of Syrian and Lebanese (3 teachers).<sup>12</sup> The majority of educators are women (approximately 70 percent) across the centers. Educators are officially hired by the Center on a salary-based system and receive professional development training for 2-5 days annually in September, before the academic year begins in October.

Following Henderson (2023), I use the term “refugee teachers” to refer to both teachers who are themselves refugee bodymindspirits, and those who teach refugee students, reflecting their shared engagement with the challenges faced by their refugee students. Chapter 6 discusses refugee teachers in greater detail.

The second group includes the school administrative teams, consisting of one principal and one vice principal in each center, with the exception of Forsa, which also includes a third administrator member given its larger school size. In all centers, school principals were women, and vice principals were men, all Syria refugees.

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<sup>12</sup> The total number of teachers reported here exceeds the figure noted in the “Breakdown of Hope Center by its School Cite” sub-section. The total of 53 teachers was reported by the Center’s administrator assistant in May 2025, while the figure of 38 was drawn from the Center’s website, last updated in March 2026. The discrepancy may reflect changes in staffing over time, such as the return of Syrian teachers, relocation to other countries, or similar transitions.

The third group refers to the management team. The two education directors, Leila and Samaya, are Lebanese women who manage the refugee education services at the Hope Center, along with the support of their administrative assistant, Mahmoud - a Lebanese man, who supports and oversees all centers at an overarching level. The reason I include Leila and Samaya in the classification of educators at Hope Center is because they are significantly engaged in planning, training, and coaching teachers across centers, drawing heavily on their extensive experience as former educators in the Lebanese public and private education sectors. Their role and relationship as educators within the Center are further discussed in Chapter 6 in the findings.

Finally, the Hope Center also employs an on-site social worker who rotates across centers and works closely with all three groups, serving as a bridge among them. Amal provides psychosocial support to students, and in some cases to teachers, and also connects parents, teachers, and students to support their mental well-being. Prior to Amal, Mariam held this role for three years (2020-2023), sharing a similar profile with Amal, as a Lebanese professional woman with an academic and practical background in Special Education Psychology.

Since 2023, Amal has taken on a leading role in supporting the preparation and implementation of inclusive pedagogies for children with SEND across the centers. In particular, she leads the SLD program, coaching and collaborating closely with the assigned educators in Forsa (Salma) and Noor (Zahraa) to support children with SEND outside mainstream classes, with the three of them referred to hereafter as the SLD team. The SLD team represents a cross-collaboration among educators, functioning as a subgroup within my broader educator classification (see Chapter 6 for more details).

Together, the management team, social worker, and school administrator team share leadership responsibilities, which are discussed in detail in Chapter 6. Moving forward, the term

“leadership team” refers to this collective unless specified otherwise (e.g., school administrator team, management team, or social worker). Having clarified the Hope Center context and community, the next section focuses more on the ethnographic fieldwork setting.

## **Ethnographic Setting, its Evolvement, and Data Sources Over Time**

This study was conducted in Forsa and Noor centers, utilizing both in-person and virtual interactions during the Center’s summer camp in July 2023, and throughout the 2024-2025 academic year. This section describes in detail the rationale for this ethnographic setting and its evolvement since 2023 in response to evolving needs of Hope Center and political events that took place during this time in Lebanon; both of which have shaped my fieldwork and data collection methods for this dissertation.

For a better description of the setting, its evolution, and data sources used in the study, this section is organized in three phases: (1) Summer 2023 that served as my preliminary fieldwork to lay the foundation of this study; (2) Fall 2024 and my virtual engagement with their digital learning platforms during Israeli attacks; and (3) Spring 2025 when centers resumed their in-person activities, and I engaged with educators remotely throughout the semester and in-person in May 2025.

While these three phases reflect the main fieldwork activities of my ethnography, my ongoing engagement with the Hope Center’s management team has never stopped in between, even up to date. This ongoing engagement helped with cultivating a strong relationship with their team, maintaining the rapport and care among us, as well as sustaining the continuity and relevancy of the fieldwork even during the Israeli attacks and Lebanon’s school closure.

### *Summer Camp – July 2023*

Before describing my preliminary work in July 2023, which became part of my ethnographic data, I should provide a bit of context to Hope Center’s summer camps, held annually in July to reduce the time away from school between Spring and Fall for refugees.

Hope Center accepts volunteers for these camps across different centers. The objective of this collaboration in their 2023 invitation was described as, “contribut[ing] to [Hope Center’s] mission to help maximize the potential of all Syrian children and youth through education.” They emphasized engaging with Hope Center’s community through play-based activities inside and outside of classrooms by proposing a planned activity to implement in collaboration with centers’ teachers under the supervision of Hope Center’s team. In return, outside volunteers would get a chance to discover new cultures, gain field experience and insights into lived realities of refugees, as described in the Center’s invitation.

My entry point to Hope Center was through this voluntary-based work in July 2023, receiving their forwarded invitation from my advisor, Dr. Zakharia, who had collaborated with them in different capacities in the past. However, unlike other volunteers with proposed play-based-activity plans, communications with the Center through Dr. Zakharia decided for me to intern for them offering my research skills to explore areas that they need to expand their work through research. At the same time, I was paired with one of Forsa’s teachers who spoke English to facilitate play-based learning activities with other volunteers and mainstream teachers, as needed. Little did I know that my English-speaking partner, Salma, would become one of the key educators to pilot the SLD program in Forsa in 2023-2024 academic year: hence, one of the main collaborators in my work.

This three-week long collaboration/internship primarily took place in Forsa, starting with receiving training from the Hope Center on how to engage with children in the summer camp, and allowed me to get familiar with teachers available in Summer.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, it became the preliminary ethnographic work of my dissertation, where I served as a participant observer at Forsa. It also gave me an opportunity to rotate across centers to observe classrooms in Noor and Ufugh Al Jadid, have dialogical conversations with educators across centers, and to conduct unstructured interviews with management team, and Mariam, the social worker at the time, to better understand their context and research needs.

These insights helped lay the foundation for this study in different ways. Firstly, it provided insights into the specific needs and goals of the Hope Center. More particularly, it enabled me to align my research and its guiding question with their visions to enhance their inclusive pedagogical practices for children with SEND, starting with those already enrolled at Hope Center to expand their reach to out-of-school refugees because of SEND. This also determined the centers that I selected to work with, upon suggestion of the management team, to narrow them down to Forsa and Noor, where the SLD program first started, and expanded next, respectively.

Secondly, my preliminary findings from summer revealed that educators at the Hope Center prioritized a humanizing approach to education, emphasizing emotional belonging and love. This perspective prompted me to reconceptualize inclusion for refugees, with and without SEND, moving beyond traditional definitions to adopt a critical, culturally relevant lens that

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<sup>13</sup> While participation in summer camp for teachers is optional, they get paid for their engagement. However, the optional basis means less teachers are available during summer despite the centers' open doors to all enrolled students. Therefore, the interested volunteers become a solution to fill for the shortage of teachers during summer as well.

aligns with local practices (See Safarha & Zakharia, 2024). This reconceptualization along with drawing on critical pedagogies (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994, 2003) are explained in detail in previous chapter.

Finally, insights from my summer work prompted a shift in my methodological approach from critical ethnography to a multimethod design that incorporated a Teacher Participatory Action Research (TPAR) project with SLD team, in order to further engage educators in the process. While I designed a TPAR plan and workshopped with the leadership team to finalize it with their input during the Summer 2024, the political events of Fall 2024 changed the direction of my design and fieldwork, leading to removal of TPAR component. Next sub-section focuses on this shift and re-shift in greater detail.

Taken together, Summer 2023 set the groundwork for my dissertation in defining my research question, developing my conceptual framework, navigating my methodological design, and selecting my school sites, based on the needs and work of the Hope Center. At the same, my classroom observations as the participant observer in Forsa and Noor centers, dialogical discussions with educators across the three centers, unstructured interviews with the management team and the social worker, along with my field notes all became part of my ethnographic data sources in the analysis.

#### *Fall Semester – October – December 2024*

In July 2024, I met with the leadership team to plan for the TPAR four phases: (1) Reflect that intended to explore the existing inclusive practices for children with SEND across centers; (2) Plan, which focused on identifying areas of improvement with SLD educators and them planning how to implement them; (3) Act, which was supposed to be led by Amal to oversee

Zahraa and Salma to implement their own plans; and (4) Observe phase which was a revisit time to see what worked and not to revise, reflect, and act as needed. This cycle (Reflect, Plan, Act, and Observe) was supposed to be conducted in two loops to make the praxis engaging and meaningful. I was planning to visit Lebanon in mid-September to participate in their annual training and start the Reflect phase during that time.

However, with the escalation of political tensions between Israel and Hezbollah in August 2024, which led to Israel launching airstrikes in South of Lebanon and Beirut, my plan for school visit in Lebanon was postponed conditional on further monitoring of the situation for future visit. Yet, I met twice with the management team and Amal over Zoom to get updates from them and assess the feasibility of my virtual engagement. Given they planned to continue with the teacher training in mid-September, and opening schools as usual in October, they offered to accommodate my virtual presence in meetings and the training over Zoom and immersive fieldwork through recorded videos by teachers. While the internet connectivity did not allow my full presence in the training on September 12 to 13, I received the recorded sessions along with workshop materials from Amal.

However, shortly after the training, on September 17, 2024, Israel engaged in explosion of pagers nationwide, including Beirut, which escalated the violence to its peak by their invasion of Lebanon on October 1, 2024. With the expansion of the war in early October, as reported by France 24 (October 25, 2024), 75 percent of the schools were out of service or turned into shelters for displaced people, along with 45,000 teachers and over 500,000 students who were not able to reach school or were displaced. During this time, my interaction with the Hope Center was limited to checking in on the safety of their community and their loved ones.

In one of our interactions with Leila in early November, she notified me that while they tried to keep centers open in October, with minimal attendance of students, they decided to shift their classrooms to virtual learning platforms (Chapter 4 details the virtual platform services as part of the Center’s oral history). With this format, she offered to meet and resume our conversation to conduct my immersive fieldwork by observing their digital learning platforms.

As a result, I met with the management and SLD teams over Zoom on November 8, 2024, and soon after was added to their WhatsApp classrooms (Grade 1-3) as an observer on November 12, 2024. We decided to push the TPAR project for Spring semester as they were hopeful the classes would become in-person by then. While a ceasefire agreement came into effect on November 27, 2024, given Israeli strikes continued along with their presence in the country, the in-person classes did not resume until January in Hope Center. Correspondingly, my virtual immersive fieldwork continued until the end of December before the Holidays started.

Taken together, during Fall 2024, my engagement with the Hope Center was primarily virtual, and my data sources were limited to our check-in meetings and online immersive fieldwork as an observer between November and December in the three WhatsApp classrooms, Grade 1-3. At this time, my TPAR project was still a viable option to pursue but was postponed to Spring 2025 and conditional on resuming in-person classes.

#### *Spring Semester – January – May 2025*

With the ceasefire deadline for Israeli forces to leave the country by January 26, 2025, all schools resumed their in-person operations in Lebanon in January, including the Hope Center.<sup>14</sup> That was when I met with Leila again over Zoom to receive updates on the centers, and discuss

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<sup>14</sup> The ceasefire deadline for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon was due on January 26, 2024, but their full exit was not achieved until mid-February 2024.

how to approach the TPAR project remotely, as I was still not sure if it is safe to travel for school visit.

During the month of March, we/I had series of online meetings with the leadership team and the SLD educators almost once a week, discussing TPAR project in general and running the Reflect phase workshop online, using a possibility tree exercise in our last meeting on March 19, 2025. The possibility tree<sup>15</sup> refers to a metaphorical and visual tool that maps a concept from underlying causes to observable outcomes, helping participants connect everyday practices to broader structural conditions. I designed the possibility tree with three main components: (1) the leaves, to document their current inclusive practices; (2) the trunk, to reflect on factors that facilitated or impeded those practices; and (3) the roots to examine the underlying causes or systems that either supported or constrained their work.

Participants included Leila and Samaya (the management team); Sahar and Fatima (principals at Noor and Forsa, respectively); and the SLD team, including Salma (Special Education teacher) from Forsa, Zahraa, who worked simultaneously as a mainstream (in the AM shift) and special education teacher (in the PM shift) in Noor, as well as Amal (the social worker). Another mainstream teacher from the Beirut center (Rania) also joined the Reflect workshop as Leila insisted on including her because of her extensive experience teaching children with learning difficulties, despite not being formally part of the SLD team.

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<sup>15</sup> The possibility tree builds on the concept of a probability tree commonly used in mathematics to map potential outcomes of sequential events, with branches representing different possible paths. In applied contexts, such as conflict analysis, UNICEF (2016) adapts this metaphor to visualize how complex conflicts can be disaggregated into underlying causes and observable effects. In this study, I extend this approach as a participatory reflection tool to examine inclusive practices at the Hope Center, along with the enabling and constraining factors and broader systems that shape them.

In this reflective exercise, we took advantage of Zoom's whiteboard to use sticky notes actively to pin on different parts of the tree, which I prepared for the workshop, and then discussed the educators' responses in English or through translation in English. The workshop served as a great source of data but also revealed good information that shifted my methodological directions yet for another time to accommodate the reality of Hope Center's needs and my work constraints.

Firstly, I learned that the needs of children are too diverse and complex to group the SLD educators together to co-create action plans and follow them in parallel. Each educator needed an individual approach for themselves, while tailoring their work for each student separately, as well. But more importantly, the workshop made me realize that Amal already had an effective system in place internally for her SLD educators, similar to my TPAR cycle design, to meet and revisit plans on a weekly basis. Chapter 6 explains their relational system in greater detail.

These insights not only made TPAR project unnecessary for the needs of Hope Center's that were met internally but it would have been an additional burden to the teachers. As a result, to remain flexible to their needs and faithful to core elements of critical ethnography (i.e., engaging with individuals and communities both reflexively and reciprocally), I decided to remove the TPAR project component from this study. However, all our dialogical discussions in March and the Reflect workshop, including the possibility tree exercise remained part of my data sources.

Furthermore, with the limitation of language which needed to account for translation time during the workshop, even though I was meeting with them at Lebanon's time from Washington, DC, holding remote workshops appeared as an unsustainable approach to continue for meaningful participatory activities. To allow more time for educators to reflect and respond, we

decided to continue the possibility tree exercise offline with the SLD team (Salma, Zahraa, and Amal). Each educator completed the exercise on their own time and shared it with me in Arabic, and I followed up with them either over a Zoom call, like Zahraa, or in-person in cases of Salma and Amal in May 2025, to clarify some of their responses.

On the other hand, amidst these exercises, the travel restrictions to Lebanon started to be loosened, creating an opportunity for in-person immersive fieldwork. With consultation of Leila and Samaya to pick the best time for visiting schools in terms of educators' workload and the Center activities, I traveled to Lebanon in mid-May 2025 for ten days, rotating between Noor and Forsa centers from one day to another.

During this trip, I conducted unstructured interviews with Leila, Samaya, and Amal; semi-structured interviews with the school administrative teams in Forsa (Fatima, Khaled, and Muhammad) and Noor (Sahar and Wasim); and semi-structured interviews with mainstream teachers (Ja'd in Forsa and Hadi in Noor), who had students with SLD working with Salma and Zahraa outside their classes. I also interacted closely with Salma and Zahraa separately during their SLD sessions, their weekly meeting with Amal, and after their SLD sessions to debrief and converse. Furthermore, I conducted classroom observations in each of the above-mentioned educators' classrooms during my site visits in Forsa and Noor.

### *Summary of Data Methods and Sources Across the Three Phases*

Overall, the critical ethnography was conducted across the three phases (Summer 2023, Fall 2024, and Spring 2025) and involved a combination of different data collection methods and sources. Immersion as an observer was the primary method, as is typical in ethnographic research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, immersion took multiple forms, including in-

person classrooms observations, virtual observation of digital learning platforms, engagement in participatory activities, and attention to physical materials (i.e., learning materials, students' and teachers' artifacts). This immersive fieldwork was accompanied by detailed field notes capturing daily events, interactions, and my own reflections.

While immersion remained central, I triangulated these observations with ethnographic interviews. As Madison (2012) notes, ethnographic interviews “open realms of meaning that permeate beyond rote information or finding the ‘truth of the matter,’” positioning participants as subjects (rather than research objects) with agency, history, and their own ways of telling their stories (pp. 27-28). In this study, interviews took multiple forms, including dialogical conversations, as well as unstructured and semi-structured interviews. These encompassed oral histories of the Center and educators' pathways into it; personal narrative of educators' experiences teaching refugees with and without SEND at Hope Center; and their perspectives on refugee inclusion and inclusive refugee education for children with SEND. Drawing on Madison (2012) distinctions, these forms included oral history (recounting socially situated experiences), personal narrative (individual interpretations of lived experiences), and topic-based interviews (focused on specific issues such as inclusion and inclusive education).

The triangulation of the immersion and ethnographic interviews enabled a holistic understanding of how inclusive pedagogies were perceived and practiced at the Center for refugee bodymindspirits. Table 1 provides a synthesized overview of data collection methods and sources across the three phases; detailed descriptions are provided in the preceding section. See Appendix A for a detailed breakdown of data sources and participants.

Table 1. Summary of Data Methods and Sources

Data Collection Phase	Data Methods	Data Sources
Summer (July) 2023	Immersive work as a participant observer, informal conversations, unstructured interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In-person classroom observations for three weeks</li> <li>- Students Artifact</li> <li>- Unstructured interviews with management team (twice) and social worker (twice)</li> <li>- Dialogical conversations with educators across three centers</li> <li>- Field notes</li> </ul>
Fall Semester 2024 (September – December 2024)	Virtual immersive work as an observer; dialogical conversations online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teacher training (recorded)</li> <li>- WhatsApp class observations for two months</li> <li>- Students’ online assignments</li> <li>- Zoom meetings with management and SLD teams (three times)</li> <li>- Field notes</li> </ul>
Spring Semester 2025 (January – May 2025)	Immersive work as an observer, participatory activities, dialogical conversations, and interviews (unstructured and semi-structured)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Zoom meetings with management and SLD team (four times)</li> <li>- Possibility tree activity (collective and individual)</li> <li>- In-person classroom observations (mainstream and SLD) over one week across two centers</li> <li>- Teaching materials and classroom artifacts</li> <li>- Semi-structured interviews with mainstream teachers (two), SLD educators (two), school administrative teams (one per center)</li> <li>- Unstructured interviews with management team (once with Leila), and Amal (twice)</li> <li>- Field notes</li> </ul>

## Data Management, Translation, and Analysis

This section outlines the data management and analytic approach of the study. In qualitative research, data collection and analysis are discrete stages but happen recursively and in dialogue with one another (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Accordingly, this section describes how

data were documented and managed, how language and translation were addressed, and how data were analyzed and prepared for writing.

## **Data Management and Documentation**

Effective data management was central to ensure the integrity, depth, and reliability of data for this study. In ethnographic work, any interactions, from a single word or gesture to extended field notes, can create a unit of data, defined as a meaningful segment that contributes to understanding social processes and shared cultural practices (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). To capture these moments, I maintained detailed handwritten notes during fieldwork and developed digital memos organized by date to document observations, reflections, and emerging insights. During in-person visits, I also used a structured daily matrix to plan activities, track observations, and record reflections, which facilitated both documentation and ongoing sense-making. The subsequent digitalization of these materials became an important analytic step, allowing for iterative reflection and the generation of preliminary insights.

## **Language and Translation**

The nature of fieldwork in this study was multilingual. The data collection occurred in English, Arabic, and a combination of both, reflecting everyday communications in Lebanon. While most interviews were conducted in English, many interactions involved fluid movements between languages. In all interviews, at least one bilingual participant or interpreter was present to facilitate the translation, as needed. I also relied on my own Arabic listening skills, which helped with the rapport and connections with the educators.

I audio-recorded most interviews and later transcribed them manually. In cases where participants preferred not to be recorded or during informal discussions, detailed notes were

taken during and immediately after conversations. For interviews conducted partially or fully in Arabic, I used a combination of tools, including Cockatoo transcription and real-time captioning to generate transcripts, which were then translated using Google Translate and ChatGPT. I reviewed these translations alongside field notes and contextual knowledge to ensure their accuracy. Translation, therefore, was not merely treated as a technical step but as part of the analytic process.

## **Data Organization and Coding**

Following my fieldwork, I organized all data sources into three primary categories to facilitate analysis: (1) dialogical conversations and unstructured interviews; (2) observational notes across settings; and (3) semi-structured interviews. As noted earlier, transcribing interviews and digitalizing field notes functioned as an initial stage of inductive analysis, allowing for early identification of patterns and themes.

In this study, I employed a thematic analysis approach, involving iterative cycles of inductive and comparative coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through repeated reading and re-reading of transcripts, notes, and memos, I engaged in open coding to identify emerging patterns, while also using my research questions and conceptual frameworks to guide more focused, deductive analysis. Throughout this process, I maintained analytic memos to capture reflections, connections, and evolving interpretations.

## **Analytic Synthesis and Writing Preparation**

As themes began to emerge, I engaged in an iterative process of organizing and sequencing ideas through what Madison (2012) refers to as a “muse map.” A muse map provides a conceptual mapping of the core insights and relationships within the data. Rather than serving

as a fixed outline, the muse map functioned as a dynamic approach for structuring analysis, enabling me to identify central themes, refine their relationships, and organize the narrative of the findings. This process required continuous engagement with the data, including revisiting memos, refining themes, and aligning emerging insights with the study's research question and conceptual framework.

Together, these processes, data management, translation, coding, and conceptual mapping, enabled me to follow a layered and relational analysis of inclusive pedagogies as they were perceived and practiced within the study context.

## **Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations**

All research aims to ethically produce valid and trustworthy knowledge, especially when working closely with communities. However, because qualitative approaches are grounded in different philosophies of knowledge and meaning making, the criteria used to assess quality must align with their underlying assumptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In critical ethnography, this is particularly important because the research process is collaborative, process-oriented, culturally situated, and often politically contentious (Palmer & Caldas, 2015; Madison, 2012).

To address these concerns, Palmer and Caldas (2015) suggest extending Herr and Anderson's (2015) quality criteria for action research to critical ethnography, given the similarities between the two approaches in their emphasis on transformation, collaboration, reflexivity, and critical stance. Following this suggestion, I draw on Herr and Anderson's five criteria, dialogic, catalytic, process, democratic, and outcome validity, to assess the ethical quality of this critical ethnographic work in relation to what was actually carried out on the

ground. Because the TPAR project was removed in response to the community's evolving needs, only four out of five criteria are applied selectively rather than in full.

**Dialogic validity** refers to peer review process, which requires collaborative involvement of other colleagues to thoroughly review and scan some of the raw data and discuss the plausibility of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study the dialogic validity was addressed through ongoing conversations with my co-chairs, Drs. Steven Klees and Zeena Zakharia, who reviewed my early work and interpretations, and supported me in thinking through the plausibility and coherence of my findings. This was especially important because Dr. Zakharia brings deep knowledge of the Lebanese context and long-standing engagement with refugee education, including having interacted with staff at the Hope Center. Additionally, I engaged in dialogue with educators at Hope Center, sharing some of my reflections with them to ensure my understanding resonated with their lived realities. This is a process that Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe as member checking.

**Catalytic validity** refers to the extent to which the research process generates deeper reflection or reorientation among those involved. Throughout my fieldwork since 2023, catalytic validity was present through ongoing reflective conversations with the management team and the Center's social worker about their practices, challenges, and possibilities. These conversations created space for collective sense-making and critical reflection on inclusive pedagogies, even if they did not lead to immediate action. Rather than functioning as a structured intervention, these moments reflect the study's contributions to deepening participants' engagement with their own practices within a complex and shifting context. It also has transformed my own understanding of their context, sharing reflections of the educators with them.

**Process validity** is concerned with a strong methodology that allows for triangulation of data and is carried out in a way that allows for ongoing learning and reflexivity. In this critical ethnography, process validity was addressed through multiple forms of immersion and ethnographic interviews across three phases, triangulation of multiple methods and sources, and recursive movements between observation, reflection, transcription, translation, and analysis.

**Democratic validity** refers to extent to which the research includes those with a stake in the issue under investigation and remains responsive to their needs. Democratic validity was central to this study as it centered the perspectives and priorities of the Hope Center in shaping the research question, methodological decisions, and overall design. The decision to remove the TPAR component is a concrete example of this commitment, as it emerged from listening to the community practices and ensuring that the research remained useful and in service to their needs in the evolving context rather than imposing an unnecessary framework onto their work.

Furthermore, **external validity**, or transferability, in qualitative research is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be relevant in another context or generalizable. While generalizability is neither possible nor desired within the transformative paradigm embodied in this critical ethnographic research, I relied on thick descriptions to address transferability concerns. Thick description is central to ethnographic methodology, providing “enough description to contextualize the study such that readers will be able to determine the extent to which their situations match the research context and, hence, whether findings can be transferred” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259).

The writing part of ethnography goes beyond merely thick descriptions; it involves conveying the meanings that participants make along with the researcher’s interpretations. While this strategy addresses transferability, it may raise ethical questions about the researcher’s biases

and experiences of power and privilege. This critique has been particularly highlighted by feminists from the Global South, such as Ahmed (2000) and Spivak (1988). To address this concern, I focused on two concepts connected to my positionality.

The first concept is self-reflexivity, which I employed by writing self-memos throughout my fieldwork. I tried to interrogate my own positionality and reflections in the context that I worked, while embracing my own transformation as the researcher within the research by constant dialogues and interactions with educators. As Madison (2012) argues, it is essential for critical ethnographers to embrace vulnerability through self-reflexivity about their positionality, developed in dialogue with participants.

The second concept is related to translation and interpretation of stories, lived experiences, and meanings that are created and communicated within this study. Acknowledging my position in this research from what Nagar (2019, p. 27) calls an “unequal location,” I sought to apply the concept of “hungry translations” in thick description and analysis of the data. Nagar (2019) defines hungry translation as telling and retelling, where the narration passes along and is “negotiated afresh in each round” of telling as an enterprise of ethical and ever open mediation across space, time, and struggle” (p.27).

By applying the concept of hungry translation in this study, I consciously avoided “perfect translation” of the complex lives and struggles of Syria refugee bodymindspirits. Instead, I acknowledge the relational dynamics inherent in this retelling as an ongoing struggle. I highlight the reciprocal nature of such retelling and the shared responsibilities it entails, including my own role, where, as Nagar states, “[t]hese stories interpret and theorize the narrator as much as the narrator theorizes the content and cast of the stories” (p. 32). Madison (2005) also emphasizes embracing vulnerability and political responsibility through critical ethnography.

Finally, consistent with ethical research practices, this study took multiple steps to ensure confidentiality and protection of participants' identities. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained through clear communication about the purpose of the study, with participants able to opt out at any time without consequence.

Given the fluid and often volatile context of Lebanon and refugee education at the Hope Center, ethical considerations extended beyond procedural requirements. A central priority throughout the study was to minimize any additional burden on educators, who were already navigating significant personal and professional challenges within the complex political and economic environment of Lebanon. This required remaining flexible, responsive, and attentive to participants' realities as they evolved over time.

In this context, I sought to cultivate a research relationship grounded in trust, care, and mutual understanding, positioning myself not only as a researcher but as someone attentive to the humanity of those I worked with. This relational approach aligns with Lather's (1991) notion of reciprocity, understood as a "mutual negotiation of meaning and power," in which both the researcher and participants transformed through the process.

This reciprocity became evident in moments of everyday interaction among us too. For example, in a conversation with Samaya in November, I expressed my hesitation to ask for anything from the team given the ongoing war at the time. She responded by acknowledging that they, too, were concerned about how the situation was affecting my work. This *simple* exchange reflected a shared sense of care and accountability, illustrating that the research relationship was not extractive but relational and mutually attentive.

Through these commitments, this study aimed to uphold ethical rigor not only through formal procedure but through sustained attentiveness to participants' wellbeing, dignity, and evolving circumstances. In doing so, it contributes to the credibility and trustworthiness of the research.

## **Positionality**

I acknowledge my positionality in this study without adhering to the prevalent system of compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, which views societal norms through the lens of ableism and its duality. Rejecting such duality, I identify as an able-bodied and able-minded Iranian American woman who has experienced migration, though not as a refugee. This positioning places me both in proximity to and at a distance from the community that I have worked with, showing how I access, interpret, and represent their experiences.

In ethnographic research, the researcher's positionality and relationship with the community they work with play critical roles in gaining insider trust. Such trust relationships are crucial for establishing reciprocal connections for ethical reasons and collecting high-quality data. My access to the Hope Center was facilitated through an existing relationship with Dr. Zakharia, a trusted member of the Hope Center community, and it was further developed during our joint visit to Lebanon in July 2023. My role as an intern that summer was situated within a reciprocal partnership between the Hope Center and the University of Maryland, where I contributed to their research needs while laying the foundation for my dissertation. From the outset, my engagement with the Center was shaped by reciprocity, collaboration, and a commitment to building trust rather than extractive research practices.

At the same time, I remain conscious of the power asymmetries embedded in my position as an American-based researcher trained at a U.S institution conducting research in Lebanon. These asymmetries are further shaped by my lack of lived experiences as a refugee bodymindspirit or as a person with disabilities. However, my positionality as an Iranian woman also created unexpected points of connection. While I initially feared that my Iranian identity might complicate my entry into the field given regional political dynamics, it instead helped reduce social distance in meaningful ways. Sharing aspects of my own lived experiences, drawing on cultural familiarity within West Asia, and engaging in Arabic communication allowed me to build relationships with the Hope Center community beyond formal research roles.

My gender, in particular, played a significant role in sharing these relationships. Given that the majority of educators were women, shared cultural norms facilitated deeper connections grounded in care, trust, and mutual respect. These relationships extended beyond professional interactions into more personal forms of sharing meals, exchanging gifts, and, at times, being hosted in community members' homes. At the same time, my interactions with men educators remained more professional, bounded by shared cultural norms.

Importantly, these relationships were not unidirectional. While I often felt responsible for ensuring that my work and presence did not burden my participants, particularly given the political and economic instability shaping their lives, the educators at the Center consistently expressed care and concern for my well-being and the continuity of my research. This reciprocity shaped the ethical foundation of this study and reflects what Lather (1991) describes as a mutual transformation between researcher and participants. It also reinforced for me that work in

Education in Conflict and Emergencies extends beyond technical or research-driven engagements and must remain grounded in human connection, care, and mutual understanding.

My positionality is also shaped by my prior experiences in refugee and inclusive education. My engagement with these topics began during my master's thesis fieldwork in Iran in 2014, where I worked as a teacher and participant observer with undocumented Afghan students. Similar to the Hope Center, the organization I worked with supported undocumented students' transition to formal schooling while navigating legal precarity. This experience informed my critical understanding of structural inequalities, systemic racism, refugees' dehumanized lived experiences, as well as the importance of socioemotional well-being and teacher support in inclusive refugee education. My subsequent research in conflict-affected contexts such as Burkina Faso, Liberia, and Mali further deepened my awareness of how inclusion is often reduced to access, while broader structural factors, including ethnicity, gender, and displacement, continue to shape exclusion.

Additionally, my experiences working with children with autism, including classroom support and participation in research on communication skills, contributed to my understanding of disability beyond clinical frameworks and reinforced the importance of relational and context-responsive approaches to inclusion.

Taken together, my positionality reflects a set of intersecting identities, experiences, and relationships that both shape and are reshaped through this research. These interactions allowed me, in Madison's (2012) terms, to "travel across worlds," engaging in processes of mutual learning and transformation. This positionality informs the critical lens I bring to this study, guiding both my analysis and my commitment to centering participants' lived realities as sites of knowledge production

## Limitations

Most of the challenges this study faced, and approaches taken to mitigate them, are described in the evolvment of the ethnographic setting in relation to full immersion. However, a few limitations warrant further elaborations.

The first limitation was my limited Arabic proficiency, which necessitated reliance on an interpreter or bilingual participant to engage in more in-depth conversations with educators for whom English was not a viable option. To mitigate this challenge, I undertook Arabic lessons for two years prior to my site visits. As a result, my listening skills became strong enough to follow conversations and respond in English; however, this language barrier still may have influenced the depth of my immersion, particularly in conducting direct conversations with educators and fully capturing classroom interactions. As is common in cross-language research, certain nuances may have been lost in translation.

At the same time, based on my experience working closely with the Hope Center over the past two years, language did not appear to create a sense of disconnection with educators. My positionality, as discussed in the previous section, facilitated relational trust and communication beyond linguistic boundaries. As Rumi writes, “Kindred hearts are closer than shared words.”

Secondly, the escalating security situation in Lebanon, which peaked with the Israeli invasion beginning in October 2024, significantly affected my immersive fieldwork. I had originally planned two extended site visits: one at the beginning of the academic year 2024-2025, including teacher training sessions, and a second in June-July 2025 to engage in follow-up data collection, participate in the summer camp, and workshop preliminary findings with the

leadership team. However, the escalation of political insecurity and school closures in Lebanon, disrupted these plans and constrained sustained in-person engagement.

Research in emergency contexts demands continuous adaptability, reflecting its inherently volatile nature (Barakat & Ellis, 1996). In this case, the insecurity not only posed logistical constraints but also raised ethical considerations regarding engagement with participants experiences heightened precarity. During several periods, my primary concern was the safety and wellbeing of the Hope Center's community. For ethical reasons, I refrained from initiating research-related discussions, even when virtual communication remained possible.

These disruptions required methodological adjustments while preserving the study's rigor and integrity. Specifically, I shifted portions of my immersive fieldwork to virtual engagement during periods of restricted access and reduced the duration of in-country fieldwork once travel resumed. While the adjustments allowed for continuity, they also limited opportunities for prolonged in-person observation and informal interactions that are central to ethnographic immersion.

Despite these constraints, the overall research timeline and core data sources remained aligned with the original design. The strong relationships I have cultivated with the Center's educators and leadership, alongside the study's relevance to their ongoing educational efforts, supported sustained participation and enabled me to continue data collection across multiple modalities.

## **Conclusion**

A critical ethnographic framework, incorporating multiple modalities of immersion and ethnographic interviewing, opened pathways to understanding educational conceptualizations and

practices at the Hope Center. Fieldwork was conducted between 2023 and 2025 across two of the Center's schools. Data sources included immersive in-person and virtual observations, as well as ethnographic interviews in multiple formats with teachers, special educators, school leaders, and social workers. A thematic analysis approach was used, engaging iterative cycles of inductive and comparative coding. The study captured inclusive practices not only during routine schooling but also during periods of disruption, including the shift to remote learning amid Israeli strikes and school closure in Fall 2024.

This approach enabled a comprehensive engagement with both theoretical and practical dimensions of inclusive refugee education, ensuring that the research remained contextually grounded, ethically responsive, and practically relevant.

## CHAPTER 4: Hope Center History: Braiding Adaptability, Responsibility, and Love

“History makes subjects and subjects make history, and the dynamics reciprocity of this present subjectivity and past materiality is witnessed through oral history performance. What the narrator remembers and values and how [they] express memory and value takes precedence over validity.”

– Madison, 2012, p. 35

This chapter discusses how the Hope Center was established within the social, political, and economic context of Lebanon. To do so, I primarily draw on an unstructured interview with Leila, the education director at the Hope Center, which evolved into an oral history of the Center. This conversation took place unplanned in May 2025, the night before traveling to the region where Forsa and Noor centers are located. As Madison (2012) puts it, it became a kind of “mise en scene” through which the Center’s history was narrated prior to the start of formal fieldwork. I intentionally retain this temporal and narrative ordering, as understanding how the Center’s history is told provides a critical foundation for examining the shared culture of inclusion that unfolds across the study.

The objective of beginning the findings with retelling of this narrated history is not to establish a singular or objective account of events, but to engage with how the Center’s history is remembered, valued, and expressed through Leila’s subjectivity. In this sense, I seek to “present ... one moment of history and how that moment in history is *remembered* through a *particular* subjectivity... to signify its embedded implications as well as the complexities of its surface (or obvious) meanings” (Madison, 2012, pp. 34-35). Accordingly, analysis in this chapter does not

take the form of extracting or imposing interpretation, but rather of carefully attending to the narration itself as a site of meaning.

This approach responds to critiques within critical ethnography regarding the analysis of narrated histories, including (1) silencing the narrator's effect through analytical intrusion, (2) distorting intended meanings, and (3) privileging theoretical abstraction over lived experiences. To mitigate these risks, I follow Madison's (2012) approach engaging narration as something "rich with possibilities and thick with description" (p.36), allowing meaning to emerge through its retelling rather than being overdetermined by external frameworks.

To situate this narration within its broader context, I integrate the literature on refugee education in Lebanon and its historical evolution into this chapter, placing it in dialogue with Leila's account. To further thicken the description, I also incorporated news articles on relevant socio-political events in Lebanon, documents shared by the Center, and interviews with other educators, including Amal, the social worker, where relevant. These sources are not used to verify or correct the narration, but to deepen its context and illuminate its multiple layers.

In doing so, this chapter seeks to amplify both the visible and taken for granted details of the Center's history, in order to "defend the complexity and dignity of multiple truths and paradoxes below the surface but holding the surface in place" (Madison, 2012, p.36).

This chapter is divided into four main sections. First, it traces the early years of refugee education in Lebanon for Syrians and the growth of the Hope Center serving Syria refugees, focusing on the period following the Syria crisis in 2011 through 2018. Second, another section examines developments from 2019 onward, a period marked by overlapping crises, including COVID-19, economic collapse, and political instability, that significantly reshaped Lebanon's

social, political, and educational landscape. This temporal distinction allows for a more nuanced understanding of how shifting conditions influenced refugee education over time.

Third, between these two sections, the chapter also examines the introduction of the Special Learning Difficulties (SLD) initiative at the Hope Center in 2023. Interwoven within these two, this initiative is treated as a distinct focus for two reasons: first, it represents a central component of this ethnographic study; and second, it emerged not in response to external policy mandates, but through a reflective engagement with the broader needs of refugee communities. As such, the SLD initiative reflects the Center's commitment to addressing exclusion through an intersectional and context-responsive approach.

Finally, the last section concludes by synthesizing these developments to highlight how the Hope Center's practices evolved within, and in response to, the broader constraints shaping refugee education in Lebanon. Drawing on the oral history of the Hope Center, as narrated by its director, this chapter situates the organization's work within a context marked by political instability, shifting policies, often unfavorable to refugees, and structural constraints affecting Syria refugees' access to quality education in Lebanon.

Through this account, the chapter demonstrates that inclusion does not emerge as a fixed policy outcome, but as an ongoing, contextually grounded process that shifts alongside refugees' lived realities. In this sense, inclusion is understood as a series of situated decisions made within constrained conditions, rather than an abstract principle.

At the core of this process is the Hope Center's sense of responsibilities toward its community, reflected in its responsiveness to the evolving needs of both students and teachers through praxis, an ongoing interplay of reflection and action. This approach is characterized by

commitment, care, and respect for lived experience as a valid source of knowledge in incremental progress, reasoning with hooks' conceptualization of love as an ethic.

## **The Hope Center and Syria Refugee Education in Early Years**

We were sipping our tea while sitting in Leila's living room on a cozy Sunday night with the mountain breeze of May in northern Beirut and talking about Monday's plan and which school I should start first for my work. Leila, with over 18 years of experience working as an educator, has become the director of the refugee education division at Hope Center since 2013 when the Center reached out to her to initiate this line of services with her support, two years after the Center was founded.

She started the division with the support of her two other colleagues that took care of the administrative process, while she focused on the planning of the education services alone. She was hired as a part-time employee by the Center at the time, spending the other half as an education policy researcher with a focus on Lebanon. It was in January 2014 that she officially started full time to kick off refugee education at Hope Center. Her work at that research center focusing on Lebanese public schools proved beneficial for her deeper understanding of refugees' needs in the education system of Lebanon, emphasizing that access to education and qualified teacher shortage have been two of the biggest challenges for Syria refugees in Lebanon.

The Hope Center, established in 2011 by Syrians diaspora, focused primarily on a scholarship program for Syrian youth to help them with study abroad opportunities and their applications through online services. However, after the Syria crisis began, in response to the rise in the number of Syria refugees and the prolonged disruption in their schooling, the Center shifted their focus to support Syrian students in a different way. This led them to initiate the

refugee education division late in 2013 in Lebanon, hiring someone who was bilingual (Arabic and English) and had an extensive background in education. This line of service was in addition to the scholarship program that now is for Syrian youth (refugees or not) in Lebanon. For over nine years, Leila was the only staff member in charge of educational services until 2022 when they hired another education expert, Samaya, so that Leila was able to delegate some of her responsibilities to her as another education director.

Understanding the needs of Syrian students and shifting services to accommodate their needs by the Hope Center was concurrent with the shift at national and international level toward refugee education. Before 2012, community-based Syrian, local, and international NGOs provided non-formal education (NFE) programs for refugees in Lebanon, assuming the conflict would be temporary and that Syrians would soon return to their country. These programs ranged from remedial and catch-up classes to fully fledged educational services in schools (Buckner et al., 2017; Shuayb et al., 2016). The Hope Center itself had a center in southern Beirut for displaced children that offered play-based activities with the support of volunteers (Ufugh Al Jadid center).

It was mainly in 2014, with the rise in the number of Syria refugees and increased international donor support and external pressures, particularly from UNHCR, UNICEF, UNESCO, and bilateral donors, that Lebanon's Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) took control of the educational responses for Syria refugees (Shuayb et al., 2016). The engagement and financial support of those UN agencies were evident in the provision of educational services (formal or non-formal) across Lebanon, particularly in support of Syria refugees, while also benefiting Lebanese communities. However, as noted by Human Rights

Watch (2023), some politicians have portrayed these programs as exclusively benefiting Syrians, despite evidence that they also benefit Lebanese populations.

Through two phases of the Reaching All Children with Education (RACE) initiative, RACE 1 (2014-2016) and RACE 2 (2017-2021), the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) sought to expand pathways to schooling for Syria refugees by implementing a double shift system in public schools (World Bank, 2016), where Lebanese students attend the first shift in the morning, and Syrians attend the second shift in the afternoon. It was during this period, particularly the first phase of RACE, that Leila noted MEHE would “accept everyone: they [Syria refugees] would sit for a placement tests, and they would accept them” at their grade level. This decision aligned with the UNHCR’s Global Education Strategy (2012), which aimed to integrate refugee students into host education systems to address the increasing number of out-of-school refugee children in Lebanon (Kelcey & Chatila, 2020).

However, despite the alignment of MEHE’s approach with international strategies, the integration of Syria refugees into the Lebanese education system has yielded mixed results in terms of access, quality, and social inclusion. The RACE program significantly increased access to formal schooling for out-of-school Syria refugees, with 42 percent of school-aged children enrolled in public schools by 2016 (Buckner et al., 2017). However, despite these improvements, enrollment rates have not exceeded 50 percent since then (Kelcey & Chatila, 2023; Shuayb et al., 2016).

Several factors contribute to this persistent gap in access to quality education. The legacy of the Lebanese civil war, which devastated the public school system, has left physical infrastructure limited, even with the introduction of the second shift (Buckner et al., 2017). Leila

emphasized that also the shortage of qualified teachers was a big challenge, especially that Syria refugee teachers are not permitted to teach in public schools, or any programs run by MEHE. This is a challenge that Shuayb et al. (2016) report exacerbating the teacher-student ratio and impacting the quality of education in public schools of Lebanon.

At Hope Center, Leila explained that her recruitment of educators began with refugee teachers, acknowledging their availability given their exclusion from formal teaching positions. However, the decision to hire Syrian teachers was not driven by an economic rationale of exploiting a surplus labor force, nor from a humanitarian impulse out of pity. Rather, it emerged from a needs-based assessment conducted through direct interviews with refugee students.

This assessment revealed that students consistently preferred Syrian teachers, often citing discriminatory attitudes they had experienced from Lebanese teachers in public schools. In response, Leila, in collaboration with colleagues from other non-governable organizations (NGOs), sought to convey these concerns to MEHE. While these efforts did not lead to change within public schools, they directly informed hiring practices at Hope Center, where the majority of educators became Syria refugees. This process reflects how Leila's vision for the Hope Center was grounded in students' expressed concerns from outset, demonstrating a commitment to responding to them both within and beyond the organization.

The results of Leila's needs-based assessment align with existing research on educational experiences of Syria refugees in Lebanon. These studies documented pervasive violence and discrimination against refugee students, identifying corporal punishment as one of the primary drivers of their school dropout (Shuayb et al., 2016).

Leila further noted that refugees enrolled in the afternoon shift of public schools were particularly exposed to school-based violence, which was often not physical but psychological in nature, such as bullying and verbal humiliation. These experiences prompted a large-scale advocacy campaign directed at MEHE. As a result, Leila explained that MEHE then agreed to designate a parent representative within schools and establish a hotline through which students could report incidents, even though the measures might not have ensured full protection. She said, “it was [still] a good move. They [MEHE] did a few good moves, but it is the politics that mostly interferes and spoils the good work.”

The role of “politics,” as Leila repeatedly pointed here and throughout our discussion, is closely tied to the broader legal and structural conditions shaping refugee education in Lebanon. The Lebanon's government has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol and therefore does not grant Syrians official refugee status<sup>16</sup> or corresponding protections (Buckner et al., 2017; Kelcey & Chatila, 2020; Shuayb et al., 2016). This lack of legal status affects Syria refugees' access to services, including education, in different ways. For example, in the absence of clear legal framework, decisions regarding inclusion of refugees in Lebanon’s public schools are often left to regional and local actors (e.g., teachers and administrators) who may hold discriminatory views, sometimes shaped by historical tensions between the two countries (Kelcey & Chatila, 2020).

However, navigating these legal constraints in order to respond to students’ needs and preferences was neither straightforward nor immediate, requiring sustained patience and persistence. Leila explained that the Center undertook a lengthy recruitment process to identify

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<sup>16</sup> Palestine refugees are an exception to this rule. They are the only group with refugee status in Lebanon (Buckner et al. 2017).

*potentially* (emphasis original) qualified teachers who could commit to the Center's vision for delivering an engaged pedagogy that is child-centered and based on children's needs. Then, she went through a month-long training of teachers to get them ready for teaching. She said:

So, before we started in February [2014], I did a whole month of workshops. *Every day*, every day, *baby steps* (emphasis original). I told them how to write an objective from scratch, how to write a lesson plan, they did not know. I got them the Lebanese curriculum, I gave it to them, went over it, how to do it, how to use it and all, all *step by step*. And then, we started a month after all this training in February, [because] although the school was ready, the teachers were not ready. So officially, we started in February 2014 in Noor center.

After that, she repeated this process to train recruited teachers and opened Forsa school in April 2014, and in less than a year, changed the function of the center in Beirut, from play-based activities to an education center in 2014, establishing three schools with NFE services for refugee students. However, the process of establishing these schools (see Chapter 6) and maintaining the quality of their education services have never followed a linear path since 2014. Constant changes in MEHE's policies, evolving students' needs, as well as progression of the Center's learning at the organizational level over time demanded continuous adaptability, reflecting the inherently volatile nature of refugee education (Barakat & Ellis, 1996).

Amid these shifts, one factor has remained constant: the Center's commitment to being responsive to the needs of both refugee teachers and students through praxis, meaning reflecting on needs and acting upon them within their existing capacities. This praxis-orientation approach emerged as a foundational principle guiding the Center's work, including its inclusive pedagogies (see Chapter 5).

For example, another challenge noted by Syrian children in the initial needs-based assessment was incorporating English into the curriculum in addition to Arabic and Mathematics, which the Hope Center took into consideration in their initial planning. Leila also mentioned that teachers requested learning English as part of their annual training a few years ago to be able to both prepare their students for public schools, and for their own professional development. This was an important move given that the language of instruction in Lebanon include not only Arabic but also French and English, particularly for science courses, which the literature refer to as one of the challenges of full inclusion for refugees in public schools (Buckner et al., 2017; Kiwan, 2019; Shuayb et al., 2016).

But the Center did not limit its language support to students while they were enrolled at the Center. Leila explained that she had to step in to support some of their students who had transitioned into public school, particularly those preparing for the Brevet exam, the official national examination at the end of Grade 9 (cycle 3) in Lebanon. This exam plays a critical role in shaping students' trajectories, determining whether they can continue into secondary education, transition to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), or drop out altogether. As Leila explained:

When we realized that children's English is weak, but they [are] good at math; we said, why should they suffer because they can't speak English. We taught the skills in Arabic, and some [of the math] terminology in English. So, the year after, the Syrians who were old enough to sit for the Brevet exams at the end of grade 9 wanted [to take it] because they [were ready], but they couldn't speak English. So, I [consulted] with a group of people to ask the government to [allow] them to sit for the exam in Arabic [because] by law in Lebanon, you can sit for the exam in English or in Arabic or in French. But no one chooses

Arabic, you know, the Lebanese pride themselves on the language. So, we had to reopen it [for Syrian children], but they [the government] had a challenge. They didn't have anyone to translate the exam into Arabic, so they had to use the Syrian teachers to translate the exam into Arabic. So, we had to go to the Ministry [MEHE] and write a request that I have X number of students who want to sit the exam in Arabic and they placed them all in one center when they translated the exams into Arabic and a lot of them *passed* because [she emphasized on “passed,” showing her disappointment at negligence of such a rule of thumb not being a known option]. So, this helped a lot. It was a win situation for us!

This example of extended support is especially significant in light of MEHE’s 2014 policy shift, which restricted the NFE programs run by local and international NGOs to function primarily as a bridge to the formal sector. In this sense, Leila’s account illustrates how the Center actively expanded its role beyond these formal limitations, responding to students’ evolving needs even after they had transitioned into public schools.

More broadly, this example also reflects the political and structural dimensions of refugee inclusion within national education systems in Lebanon. The availability of this option in policy, yet its limited awareness and implementation among Syrian students, might partly explain the high dropout rates beyond grade 6 students. In fact, Syria refugee students experience nearly twice the dropout and failure rates of their Lebanese peers in public schools (Shuayb et al., 2016). This also highlights how access is shaped not only by formal policy provision, but also by their interpretation, visibility, and enactment, extending beyond the structural focus emphasized by the UNHCR 2019 Strategy.

While MEHE restricted the NGOs in Lebanon to issue certification for their NFE programs upon transition to public schools, which discouraged some families from utilizing

these services (Shuayb et al., 2016), they still allowed them to follow a few paths in serving out-of-school refugees in forms of NFEs. First, it was the Basic Literacy and Numeracy (BLN) program that started in 2014, which MEHE delegated<sup>17</sup> to the NGOs with financial support from the UN agencies (UNHCR, 2023). The BLN purpose was to educate refugee children and youth without prior learning and school dropouts (UNHCR, 2023). Leila explained that this two-year program also was a way for MEHE to give NGOs “a legitimacy to teach children” as they were allowed to issue a certificate verified by MEHE. But she continued with a bit of disappointment at MEHE saying, “It was not schooling though.” The Hope Center, unlike many NGOs, did not go after this funding, especially since they were not a registered NGO at the time and continued with their NFE services (i.e., informal school, teaching in parallel with public schools up to grade 3).

However, a year later in 2015, with support of the UN agencies (such as UNICEF and UNHCR), MEHE regulated another pilot, ALP – Accelerated Learning Program. ALP was designed for refugees who were out of school for over two years to catch up in an intensive program of four months to be able to enroll in public schools in the afternoon shift at their grade level (UNICEF, 2015). Leila further clarified that the ALP program was only for registered refugees by the UNHCR. If they did not have any form of “iqama” [a residency permit, either by UNHCR or the Lebanese government], they could not do the ALP. However, she continued, “we were happy with it honestly, because our students who would graduate [from the center] would

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<sup>17</sup> The available resources online on BLN, and the modalities that NGOs approaching it varies diversly and dated for different years. But what has been in common in all of them was that it was financially supported by UN agencies and started in 2014 onwards. UNHCR fact sheet confirmed their partnership with MEHE, as Leila also noted on the delegation.

[be sent] to ALP centers, and they were doing very well. In a few months, they would join schools. *But then COVID happened [in 2019] and it stopped*” (emphasis original).

In 2018, the Hope Center made yet another adaptation to their refugee education services to address MEHE’s policy change. The change mandated the completion of community-based early childhood education (CB-ECE) programs to be able to enroll in formal schools. The mandatory CB-ECE was a form of regulated NFE for refugees across Lebanon, meaning it targeted the consistent audience of children age 3 to 6, and had to provide structured play and learning opportunities around six domains of child development, including Arabic, math, science, social-emotional, physical and artistic lessons, psychosocial support, and introduction to foreign language (either French or English) to prepare them for transitioning to primary school (Dressen et al., 2021). However, Leila explained that NGOs pushed MEHE on the CB-ECE mandate as not all communities could provide those kinds of services and leave refugees out of school. While the Hope Center became an official NGO to run CB-ECE, the mandate became “recommended” after NGOs’ pushback.

Taken together, the Center’s engagement with initiatives such as ALP and CB-ECE reflects a pattern of continuous adaptation to shifting policy environments in Lebanon. Rather than passively complying with these frameworks, the Hope Center actively navigated, negotiated, and at times reshaped their approach in order to sustain and expand learning opportunities for refugee students.

Another area in which MEHE permitted NGOs to engage with Syria refugees in public schools was the provision of non-educational services, including school meals, transportation, and limited psychosocial support through social workers in the afternoon shifts (Shuayb et al.,

2016). However, Leila clarified that social workers were only authorized to meet with students in school courtyards or in separate rooms, but were not permitted to provide support inside classrooms, even when students had special educational needs. In contrast, Lebanese students enrolled in the morning shift were able to coordinate directly with MEHE to access such support.

Recognizing these constraints and the unmet psychosocial needs of refugee students, the Hope Center adopted a different approach to social and emotional support in its own schools. Alongside providing daily snacks and transportation to mitigate attendance barriers, the Center moved beyond a narrow focus on hiring subject-matter experts. Instead, it recruited teachers with backgrounds in social work and/or psychology and trained them to serve as educators. In addition, the Center formally hired Lebanese social workers with Special Education backgrounds, Mariam in 2020, followed by Amal in the 2023-2024 academic year, who worked closely with teachers, students, and parents to provide psychosocial support within and beyond classroom spaces (see Chapter 6).

Overall, these adaptations highlight how the Hope Center extended its role beyond the formal boundaries set by MEHE, developing integrated educational and psychosocial responses to address the multidimensional needs of refugee learners. This approach further underscores the Center's praxis-oriented commitment to responding to students' needs through contextually grounded and evolving practices.

## **The Hope Center and Inclusive Education for Children with SEND**

While legal status and politics of citizenship have created significant challenges for the integration and social inclusion of Syria refugee children in the Lebanese education system, various intersectional factors, including disability, have further complicated the process of

inclusion. Yet, as Leila emphasized, exclusion of children with disabilities is not necessarily rooted in the absence of legal recognition.

As she explained, “By *law* [emphasized], it [mainstreaming education for children with SEND] is a must; you cannot refuse [to enroll] a child if s/he has a learning difficulty.” In fact, Lebanon recognizes the right to education in mainstream learning environments (both public and private) for children with SEND in articles 59 and 60 of Law 220 (El Ahmad, 2022; Kiwan, 2019; Khochen & Radford, 2011).

Leila continued: “[Schools] have to accept them [children with SEND], .. and inform MEHE, and they [MEHE] would send special education specialist to help... with children who have learning difficulties.” However, when I asked whether this provision extended equally to Syrian children in the second shift, she clarified: “No, the Syrians in the afternoon don’t have such support.”

However, MEHE’s commitment to promoting inclusive education for children with SEND has evolved over time. The ministry established the National Educational Plan in 2012 with explicit inclusive education (IE) goals to integrate children with SEND in mainstream classrooms (Deocke, 2019). The objective of this initiative included capacity enhancement for educators, raising awareness among caregivers, and provision of necessary educational means to teach these children.

In 2018, with support from UNICEF, a pilot program was implemented in 30 public schools across the country (out of 1,230) to operationalize the plan, which has since extended to 90 morning shifts for Lebanese students and 20 afternoon shifts for Syria refugee students (MEHE, 2023). Humanity and Inclusion (2023) reported that this initiative has served

approximately 3,000 children with disabilities with an inclusive education in public schools. This number could be out of the 8,588 registered school-aged children with disabilities; but neither MEHE's nor UNICEF's reports on the outcomes of this initiative specified the total student population to put the scale of these served learners into context.

In 2021, the Government of Lebanon endorsed the establishment of a unified information management system (MEHE, 2023) and a Five-Year General Education Plan (2021-2025) aimed at strengthening inclusion and removing barriers to participation for children with SEND (Humanity & Inclusion, 2023). The 2023 National Policy on Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs further envisioned transforming public and private schools into inclusive environments by 2030 (MEHE, 2023).

Given the limited scale and uneven distribution of IE initiatives by MEHE, national and international NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs) have provided IE services for children with SEND in both formal and non-formal educational settings, including the Lebanese Center for Special Education and the National Inclusion Project, mainly in private setting (Deocke, 2019; Khochen & Radford, 2011; MEHE, 2023). Yet policy recognition has not translated into consistent implementation.

Despite these limited commitments, enforcement of IE for children with SEND often falls short in Lebanon. Inadequate funding, limited resources, and insufficient teacher preparation are frequently cited as primary barriers (El Ahmad, 2023; El Ahmad & Kawtharani, 2022; Khochen & Radford, 2011). Moreover, there are no binding mechanisms requiring schools (public or private) to accept children with SEND, whether Lebanese or refugee (El Ahmad, 2023; Kiwan, 2019). Consequently, decisions about enrollment of these students often fall on

principals and teachers, influenced by perceived severity of disability and the availability of support (El Ahmad, 2023). As Leila noted, “a lot of principals don’t enroll [children with SEND] because they do not have the capacity.” She shared a story how they accepted a Lebanese child with Down Syndrome years earlier because no other school would enroll her. This shows that regardless of the child’s legal status, her exclusion on the basis of disability did not deter the Center from upholding its commitment, beyond rhetoric, that every child has a right to education.

Moreover, part of the structural challenge might lie in the definition of disability embedded in Law 220, influenced by the World Health Organization, and grounded in a medical model of disability (Kiwani, 2019). This deficit-based framing overlooks social attitudes and societal barriers in understanding disability. When disability intersects with citizenship status, the implications for refugee children become even more complex. As Kiwan (2019) notes, legal status, and disability as the most significant factors of exclusion for Syrians in both public and private schools in Lebanon. Even MEHE’s latest National Policy on Inclusive Education does not explicitly or implicitly consider displacement within its cross-cutting themes for children affected by crisis and conflict (MEHE, 2023).

It was within these overlapping structural limitations that Hope Center began to rethink its role. In response to these systemic limitations, Leila’s attitude was, “why not have children with special learning difficulties, who have been rejected” from learning opportunities to be included at the Center.

During the 2022-2023 academic year, the Center began assessing teachers’ knowledge and attitude towards teaching children with learning difficulties through a survey. They also

examined available resources and internal capacities, while engaging in collective brainstorming, including discussions with me and Dr. Zakharia in Summer 2023. These efforts aimed at determining how such an initiative could realistically and sustainably be implemented.

As reflected in their concept note to the board of directors, shaped by logistic, financial, and professional considerations, they formally initiated the Special Learning Difficulties (SLD) initiative with the objective of “cater[ing] a specific cohort of students” with: (1) language and communication needs; (2) behavioral, emotional and social difficulties; (3) specific learning difficulties, such as Dyslexia and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder); and (4) multi-sensory impairments.

Correspondingly, they incorporated SLD topics into the September training for the 2023-2024 academic year, supporting mainstream teachers in identifying children with learning difficulties and modifying curriculum and pedagogy accordingly. In parallel, during the 2023-2024 academic year, the Center launched a small-scale pilot in Forsa. One English teacher (Salma) volunteered to work closely with the social worker (Amal) to conduct separate learning sessions for students with learning difficulties, identified by teachers and verified by the social worker. The next year (2024-2025), the pilot was expanded to Noor following the same model, engaging a mainstream teacher (Zahraa), who held separate sessions in the afternoon shift after her own class in the morning. Zahraa was selected by the school principal based on her demonstrated pedagogical expertise to work with diverse learning needs in her classroom.

Leila reflected on the phased approach, saying: “We piloted this last year and this year we started in small numbers at [Noor]; but it's good [she said with a happy voice]. It's better to start with small [numbers].” Her optimism was combined with realism, an acknowledgment of

limited resources and context. She noted that after several rounds of training over two years, more teachers had expressed interest in participating in the SLD initiative, reflecting a gradual shift in attitudes toward supporting children with SEND.

The introduction of the SLD initiative at the Hope Center illustrates several important dimensions of the organization's approach to inclusion. First, this initiative did not emerge as a direct response to external policy changes, but rather from a reflective engagement with the broader educational context in Lebanon. More particularly, it was shaped by an effort to reach those who are most likely to remain out of school due to intersecting forms of marginalization: refugee children with SEND. In this sense, the initiative reflects the Center's commitment to addressing exclusion at its intersections, extending its support to those facing compounded barriers to education.

Second, while this commitment is evident, the Center also remained realistic about its own constraints. Rather than attempting to scale prematurely, it approached the initiative with a pragmatic ethos, seeking to operate within its capacities.

Finally, the development of the SLD initiative, like other activities at the Hope Center, began by working with teachers to assess their capacities, understand students' needs, and collectively explore what forms of support could be realistically implemented. In this way, planning for the initiative was not imposed from above, but co-constructed with educators in response to students' lived realities through praxis.

## **Social, Political, and Economic Climate of Lebanon in Recent Years**

Between 2019 and 2024, various events, including COVID-19, the Beirut port explosion, civil unrest, and public school teachers' strikes in response to economic crisis, and Israeli attacks, caused consecutive years of school disruption for school-aged children in Lebanon. Discussing the full picture of the learning loss over these years is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but indeed what has been evident is their disproportionate impact on children's education, particularly for refugees and children with SEND (Shuayb et al., 2024).

During COVID-19, the Hope Center was able to secure funding from different donors for a digital learning program over WhatsApp. The program sought to maintain the continuity of students' learning and mitigate the disruption's impact (Zakharia, 2024). The success of this digital learning program allowed the Center to build on this experience and reintroduce it again during the Israeli attacks in 2024 that led to school closures across Lebanon from November 2024 to early January 2025.

While the transition appeared rapid, it was supported by various layers of planning and close collaboration among the leadership team, including management, school administrators, and Amal, the social worker, who led the initiative. Amal coordinated a team of eight educators with strong expertise in social emotional learning (SEL) skills to co-develop online materials. Centering SEL as a central organizing theme was in response to the compounded stress children experienced during the airstrikes in their settlements.

The process of planning and developing materials was highly collaborative and iterative. Leila, Samaya, and Amal each paired with teachers to co-design content, observe delivery, and

provide continuous feedback, while refugee teachers worked collectively to refine materials in alignment with students' evolving needs. The program was organized through grade-level WhatsApp groups (one for each Grade 1-3). Each group was facilitated by a designated teacher, while maintaining cross-team coordination to ensure coherence across lessons. At the same time, support structures extended beyond instruction. Amal remained actively involved in observing sessions and supporting both teachers and parents, while Zahra and Salma, the special education teachers, in each center provided targeted support to students with SEND through dedicated communication channels.

Despite these efforts, leadership remained acutely aware of the limitations of digital learning in this context, including unequal access to devices, challenges in sustaining student engagement, and the difficulty of identifying and supporting children with SEND remotely. Yet, rather than abandoning the effort, educators approached these constraints pragmatically, focusing on what was possible. As Samaya reflected, the goal was to “provide some sort of education” under the circumstances. In some cases, this approach even created unexpected openings for inclusion, as previously identified students with SLD were able to engage with materials at their own pace, free from the pressures of classroom climate. In this sense, the digital program not only reflects the Center's adaptability, but also illustrates how its relational and inclusive approach to learning was reconfigured, rather than suspended, in times of crisis.

Also, in relation to other events, financial struggle was a recurring note raised by many teachers that I spoke with, both formally and informally. However, the Center appeared to have buffered its educators from the scale of disruption experienced in formal school settings, particularly in public schools. Following the Beirut port explosion, the destruction of several schools initially triggered an influx of donor funding for rehabilitation. Yet, mismanagement,

corruption, and MEHE's deepening budgetary crisis left many public-school teachers in morning shifts unpaid for extended periods, promoting repeated teacher strikes and school closures. This was mainly an issue in the morning shifts, where MEHE had to pay teachers' salaries, given that donor funding was available for teachers in the afternoon shifts, attended by Syria refugees. As Human Rights Watch (2023) documents, MEHE suspended afternoon shifts too, citing it as a need for equality, largely attended by refugees, even when there were dedicated donor funding available to cover their salaries. These dynamics further reveal how structural fragilities within the public education disproportionately affect refugee education.

As mentioned in first Chapter, public schools in Lebanon have historically been underfunded and staffed with poorly compensated teachers, leading the majority of Lebanese children to attend private or semi-private schools (Kelcey & Chatila, 2020; Buckner et al., 2017). This leaves public schools primarily serving Syria refugees and Lebanese children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Even among those who access public schools, Syria refugees, except for the highest achieving students, are typically placed in the second shift, which is perceived to be of lower quality with fewer resources (Kelcey & Chatila, 2020; Shuayb et al., 2016).

The second shift is often staffed by newer, less experienced teachers, despite MEHE's efforts to improve teaching quality. The perception of the second shift's quality is generally negative, as first-shift classes are staffed by tenured teachers (Kelcey & Chatila, 2020). In an interview with a Lebanese public-school principal, Kelcey and Chatila (2020) found that "access to the first shift provides Syrian students with acceptance and inclusion within Lebanese society, while access to the second shift tends to reify differences and inequalities between Lebanese and Syrians as well as among Syrians" (p. 16). Some Syrian parents choose not to enroll their

children in the second shift, when unable to secure a place in the first shift, due to concerns about the quality of education (Shuayb et al., 2016).

However, amidst those years of compounded crisis and mounting challenges faced by public schools, the Hope Center sought to mitigate some of the resulting educational gaps for refugee students in public schools by mobilizing externally secured funds. For example, lack of an adaptive curriculum has been cited as one of the common challenges of inclusive refugee education in the host country's education systems, including Lebanon (Kiwani, 2019; Shuayb et al., 2016). Leila explained after securing a large external funding, they partnered with three public schools, where the ratio of enrolled Syrians to Lebanese in the second shift was almost 1:1. They worked closely with teachers to enhance their teaching capacity to follow an adaptive pedagogy that could accommodate refugees and Lebanese learning together in the classroom. The program continued for three years until the funding was over. But even after that, they were able to secure fundings from different sources to support those schools with textbooks purchases. This initiative reflects again how Hope Center's effort extends beyond the formal boundaries in support of Syria refugees.

While limited resources is a universal challenge to inclusive refugee education (El Ahmad, 2023; El Ahmad & Kawtharani, 2022; Kelcey & Chatila, 2020; Shuayb et al., 2016), particularly provision of textbooks is a known challenge in Lebanon. Leila further explained, textbooks are super expensive in Lebanon, particularly for refugees and Lebanese with vulnerable socioeconomic status in a way that can keep them out of school. So, since the arrival of Syrians in 2012, multiple donors covered the textbooks expenses for MEHE to provide students in both shifts free of charge. Leila provided more details, saying:

It was actually the UK first, and then Germany. They would pay for the books for both Lebanese and Syrians, which is something really good that they were able to cover the books for both morning and afternoon shift. Then, the Saudi Arabians took over and then there was the big fight in Lebanon, so they never paid for books and now we don't publish books anymore... So, children don't have books with them. They're all online now. You can [either] project them online or you get a photocopy.

The “big fight” she referred to emerged from diplomatic tensions between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, which escalated rapidly following public political statement from Lebanese Information Minister implicitly criticizing Saudi’s engagement in Yemen war and resulted in the withdrawal of Saudi ambassadors and suspension of key trade and limited political and humanitarian assistance to Lebanon in late 2021 (Ghaddar, 2023). While rooted in long-standing regional power struggles, this moment illustrates how a seemingly contained diplomatic dispute could trigger cascading effects far beyond the political sphere.

While these tensions also affect Lebanese society and an already-collapsed economy, their consequences are especially acute for refugees living in Lebanon. For refugees, such tensions translate into heightened economic instability, policy uncertainty, and shrinking space for humanitarian response, despite having no role in the political decisions that triggered the situation. Reflecting that geopolitical dynamics in these contexts often have disproportionate impacts on refugees and their access to basic learning resources, such as textbooks.

In addition to challenges of access to quality education for refugees in the second shift, the post 2016 period has also been marked by anti-refugee rhetoric and policies, which focused on returning Syrians to Syria as the number of refugees increased (Kelcey & Chatila, 2023). These dynamics not only influenced access to schooling but also the everyday climate in which

Syrian and Lebanese children encountered one another in public schools. Some communities, particularly Lebanese parents, resist the integration of Syria refugees into Lebanese schools even when school administrators open enrollment to Syrians (Buckner et al., 2017).

For example, in one of three public schools that Leila supported their teachers through the Hope Center on adaptive curricula, she mentioned that the percentage of Syrian students relative to Lebanese students increased from approximately 80 percent to nearly 100 percent. She explained:

The Lebanese dropped out. They did not want to study with Syrians there, it is sad. It's their parents' fault. *Haram!*<sup>18</sup> It is not children's fault; it is their parents.' *Haram!* The owner of the school is very nice person; they are worried about what will happen to [them] next year. Because if the Syrians leave, then we will have to close down the school. They don't have any money to run the school.

Beyond the moral dimension of exclusion, the latter part of her account pointed to the indirect but critical role Syrian enrollment played in sustaining public schools themselves. Leila reflected that this was a reality MEHE overlooks when making it increasingly difficult for Syrians to enroll in public schools: “they are shooting themselves in the foot, because Lebanese will also be hurt” if funding, from international donors, tied to refugee enrollment were to stop.

Policy instability further compounded tensions. With the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 in Syria, many Syrians began considering a return, particularly if employment opportunities become available. At the same time, MEHE's policies increasingly constrained the options of those who wished to remain in Lebanon. As of 2024, Leila explained that Syrian

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<sup>a18</sup> Haram has different meanings and functions in different contexts in Arabic language. Here, the use is similar to the expression “for shame” in English. Leila uses it to emphasize something that is unfortunate or unethical.

students are required to hold a valid residency permit or UNHCR identification (iqama) in order to enroll in the afternoon shifts (public or private) (Human Rights Watch, 2025). She emphasized, with disappointment, that these policies had changed repeatedly over the years and that schools and NGOs had to adjust accordingly.

Over time, regulations shifted from an open-door policy, where Syrian students were allowed to enroll at age- and grade-appropriate levels (within a two-year margin), to requiring iqama by Grade 9. At some point, students were permitted to sit for the Brevet exam, but certificates were released only to those who secured residency status. For a brief period, the policy was loosened, and the minister would announce the release of certificates two-three months after the Brevet exam regardless of residency status, making students anxiously wait for the announcement. However, this exception was short-lived. Subsequently, students were barred from sitting for the Brevet exam altogether without residency status, a change alone led to significant school dropouts. As Leila stressed, “Now, they *can't even enroll*.... and UNHCR could not do anything about it” (emphasis original).

These shifting policies also affected some of the Center’s refugee teachers, several of whom were compelled to send their families back to Syria for schooling, while the primary breadwinner remained in Lebanon to work. Leila continued, “They [MEHE] changed their policies every year, and we had to accommodate.” In response, the Center continually adapted its programming to address widening educational gaps within their control, ranging from play-based activities for younger children, to STEM initiative (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) for older students, identity-focused courses to reconnect children with their cultural roots, and Special Education and Learning initiative. Reflecting on these efforts, she

noted, “over the years, they [also] made several good moves. But it is this politics that interferes and spoils things.”

As our conversation was coming to an end, Leila began preparing snacks for my trip to take on Monday morning. She said,

After teaching mainstream [classrooms] for 18 years, this work is more meaningful to me. Now I feel that this is what I want to do. I mean, it is nearly 12 years [since I started this line of work], but I feel these 12 years have been more rewarding than the past 18 [with a smile on her face]... the crisis in Syria [was sad] but there was a need, a big need, and to give it the big push.

After this conversation, in my field notes I wrote, *she pours her blood, sweat and tears into this work, reflecting the love, care, and responsibility she carries, rarely stated explicitly, but visible between the words and stories she tells; in the joy she expresses over small wins and the disappointment she conveys when speaking of the setbacks.*

## **Conclusion**

This chapter traced the oral history of the Hope Center by its director along with the evolution of Syria refugee education in Lebanon, situating the Center’s work within a broader political, social, and economic landscape marked by instability and constraint. Taken together, these episodes underscore how refugees’ lived realities are disproportionately shaped by layered geopolitical dynamics that operate beyond the education sector itself. Shifts in regional politics, national policy, international funding streams, and moments of crisis, ranging from anti-refugee rhetoric and restrictive education policies to external forces such as the Beirut port explosion and the COVID-19 pandemic, repeatedly reshaped the conditions under which refugee education was

possible. Yet these forces did not affect all actors equally. As this chapter shows, their consequences were felt most acutely by refugees.

Against this backdrop, the Hope Center's trajectory illustrates why responses to displacement in conflict-affected contexts like Lebanon, or any context for that matter, cannot be approached as technocratic or apolitical analysis and interventions; ways that appear to be the dominant approach by the global refugee regime. Despite making incremental gains amid repeated setbacks, the Center continued to operate, adapt, and reimagine its role as policies shifted and resources contracted. Decisions of government, or at times, its international partners, not only failed to mitigate many of the challenges facing refugee learners, but often added new burdens, such as the removal of ALP program, the tightening of residency requirements (*iqama*), and restrictions on certification upon transition. Rather than withdrawing in the face of these constraints, the Center repeatedly recalibrated its programming to mitigate their effects, accommodating children pushed out of formal schooling and responding to emerging gaps in access and quality.

Importantly, this responsiveness was not limited to a focus on the Center's enrolled students but extended beyond the organization where possible. Through efforts such as advocating for refugee students' access to Brevet exam and working with public schools to further enhance inclusion of Syria refugees, the Center demonstrated a broader sense of responsibility and activism grounded in its connection to refugee communities.

Central to this adaptability was Leila's leadership approach, in which vision, action, and realism remained closely aligned, embedded within *hope* of change. She consistently articulated an ethic of doing-what-is-possible regardless of its scale, refusing to allow financial limitations,

shifting government regulations, or political uncertainty to become reasons for abandoning refugee students altogether. This orientation shaped the backbone of the Center' culture through the services they provided within and beyond their own schools, such as the Center's work with public schools. Inclusion, in this sense, emerges as a series of situated decisions made within constrained conditions, rather than an abstract principle.

Also, at the organizational level, the Center evolution reveals a culture of learning characterized by openness to change, reflection, and recalibration. Programmatic shifts, from play-based learning and ECE to adding STEM initiatives, identity-focused courses, and SLD program, emerged not as linear expansions, but as responses to changing student needs, teacher capacities, and policy requirements. This iterative process suggests that adaptability itself became a defining feature of the Center's educational approach, blurring the boundaries between formal planning and responsive practice, consistent with the core nature of education in emergency and conflict-affected settings.

Finally, this chapter highlights how political instability consistently trickled into everyday educational work. In a single conversation, Leila referenced multiple political and social disruptions, anti-immigrant attitudes within MEHE, policies designed to pressure Syrians to leave the country, the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on refugee communities, regional diplomatic tensions, and the Beirut port explosion, all of which directly affected refugee education. These moments were not peripheral to school; they structured what could be taught, who could enroll, which certificates would be recognized, and whether institutions could continue operating at all. In this sense, the history of the Hope Center is inseparable from the broader history of refugee education in Lebanon. It is within the climate of uncertainty,

constraint, and persistence that the Center's contemporary vision and practice of inclusion took shape, providing the foundation for the analyses that follow in subsequent chapters.

Ultimately, the Hope Center's work illustrates how inclusion at organizational level can be enacted through a praxis-oriented approach grounded in responsiveness, care, and responsibility (i.e., love as a hermeneutic), where meaningful change is pursued not through ideal conditions, but through sustained engagement within constraints.

## CHAPTER 5: Multidimensional Inclusion as Praxis

“The essence of dialogue itself: the word...within the word we find two dimensions, reflection, and action....There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis... Thus, to speak a true word ... – which is work, which is praxis, is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone.”

– Freire, 1970, p. 87-88

It was my last day of school visit in Noor in May 2025. I had my interview with Hadi to complete before saying goodbye to everyone and leaving the day after for Beirut, and for home after the weekend. Among the educators I spoke with, Hadi’s reflections captured particularly well their perception and approach to inclusion in everyday practice at the Hope Center. I wrote in my notes after translating his interview, *“he defined inclusive education in few sentences in a way that the global frameworks on inclusive refugee education often fail to capture in their full complexity.”*

We left the interview for last, because Hadi asked me to share the questions with him through the school administrative team and meet him on Thursday after his morning shift class was over. While being new to the Center (having been hired for only three months at the time), Hadi had been teaching refugee students, as a refugee himself, for over 11 years, since leaving Syria in 2014 after completing his BA in Education. He was a mainstream classroom teacher who had two of his students in Special Learning Disabilities (SLD) classes working with Zahraa, the special education (SE) teacher that the Center included in the SLD program during its expansion from Forsa to Noor in the 2024-2025 academic year.

He preferred to read the questions on his own and respond in Arabic, as I told him I would understand. He occasionally switched to English but largely continued in his own language, carefully noting which question he was responding to as he spoke. He began by saying,

How do I define inclusion in refugee education? Inclusive education in refugee education is [an] approach that aims to provide equal and equitable learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their social and cultural background, or their legal status. It is a concept that seeks to meet the educational and pedagogical needs of refugee students with high quality, without discrimination or exclusion. For the second part that asks how does your definition change when thinking about refugee children with special educational needs, inclusive education is really important for all students. When it comes to [refugee] children with special educational needs, inclusive education takes on a more specialized approach in how to work with them. It provides teaching methods and educational strategies tailored to their specific needs, which helps them progress in a well-planned way.

What motivates me in adopting inclusive pedagogical practices? It stems from a deep belief that education should be an opportunity available to everyone. Education is a right for children and a responsibility for those who are able to provide it, including teachers, educators, administrators, and others. It is also responsibility of society to ensure [achievement of] this right for children, regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances.

Inclusive education is not limited to delivering the academic content or school subjects, it also includes providing psychosocial support, and adapting to the special needs of each student, including refugees who face diverse and unique challenges. The reasons that led me to adopt this approach are to achieve educational justice, promote cultural diversity, and improve future opportunities for these students, for their future. It also helps reduce

the educational gap caused by interruptions in [these children's] schooling, as inclusive education helps them access compensatory educational opportunities that support continuation of their educational journey. Additionally, when refugee children are given their right to education, this strengthens social stability, reduces social tension, and creates a supportive learning environment for them, and for the community, and for everyone.

My perspective on inclusive education has evolved through gaining more experience and research.... Now, I see inclusive education as a means of ensuring that everyone has access to high-quality education that meets their needs. Inclusive education, as a dynamic approach, aims to create a learning environment that promotes cultural diversity and takes into account individual differences among children.”

The first ten minutes of our conversation on my last day at Noor captured, perhaps better than any formal description, how educators at the Hope Center conceptualized and approached inclusion for refugees with and without special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) through what Freire would call a “true word.” In Hadi’s account, inclusion emerged as a multidimensional concept beyond structural access. It was grounded in a critical human rights education lens, which required attending to refugees’ diverse and complex needs. It was understood as relational and dynamic praxis. Rather than a fixed outcome, inclusion appeared as a *process* that attends to refugees’ progress in relation to their differences, their psychosocial well-being, and social inclusion beyond their academic learning. At the same time, inclusion was understood and practiced as a *responsibility* that requires a whole system of actors to play their respective roles interactively for access to quality education and social stability to be sustained.

This chapter unpacks these dimensions of inclusion as they are reflected in educators' perceptions and enacted in everyday pedagogical practice at the Center, by drawing on in-person immersion in Summer 2023 and May 2025, and ethnographic interviews with educators in different modalities.

To do so, I begin by showing how educators at the Hope Center conceptualize inclusion as a holistic and context-responsive process, grounded in the right to education but shaped by the lived realities of their students. I then draw on practical examples from both SLD and mainstream classrooms and their interviews to explore how this understanding is enacted in practice through relational and adaptive pedagogies. Next, I examine a dimension of Hope Center's leadership that is particularly central to sustaining this approach, showing how inclusion is pragmatically framed and operationalized through teacher preparation, capacity-enhancement, and an asset-based perspective. I conclude by arguing how this multidimensional and dynamic inclusion praxis, grounded in refugee children's lived realities, challenges dominant access/outcome-oriented models of inclusion. This is critical as relationality, responsiveness, and care emerged central to meaningful learning at Hope Center within conditions of constraints.

## **Conceptualizing Inclusion: Refugee Educators' Perspectives**

In every formal or informal conversation that I had with the educators about inclusion, they immediately made a note of education *and* access to learning opportunities as a fundamental right for children, regardless of their backgrounds and differences. They consistently framed inclusion in parallel with the right to education, and their descriptions aligned with what UNESCO (2017) defined as removing the barriers of access, participation, and achievement for learners traditionally excluded from educational opportunities for inclusion.

There were commonalities among educators at the center in noting those differences that complicate their students' right to education and inclusion, including (dis)ability, language, age, cultures, legal status, and poverty. However, the emphasis on these differences could vary based on the educator's role at the Center. For example, special education teachers, Zahraa in Noor and Salma in Forsa, specifically spoke to different abilities and learning styles of children more often; the mainstream teachers spoke to different learning difficulties, language, and age; and the leadership team at school or organizational levels mainly noted the legal status of refugees.

What distinguished this rights-based lens from global inclusion frameworks, however, was the way educators situated the fundamental right to education within the sociopolitical realities of refugees' lives. In other words, educators did not approach the right to education as apolitical and static, but as a dynamic concept evolving in relation to lived realities of learners. As Hadi noted, inclusion is an approach that "seeks" to meet refugees' pedagogical and social needs. The evolving history of the Center, discussed in the previous chapter, illustrates this orientation, as its practices shifted or expanded in response to the needs of students and teachers while adapting to frequent and inconsistent policy changes. Beyond organizational adaptation, educators' everyday pedagogical practices also sought to create a learning environment in which children felt safe, confident, and motivated to learn, strengthening their self-efficacy and psychosocial well-being. As Sahar, the principal at Noor, noted:

It's not only [about] the right to education. These children are living in very difficult conditions, in their homes or tents, so they also deserve to go out, to meet peers, to build friendships, to meet new people and to learn about new cultures. I firmly believe that all of this should be provided without conditions, meaning regardless of being a refugee or a citizen of this country, or because of their specific nationality.

Sahar's reflection underscores how educators understood social belonging as a central dimension of refugees' inclusion that cannot be addressed through access to schooling alone. As I noted in my field journal while in Lebanon, *it seems teachers and leadership team consistently spoke of education not only as academic learning, but also as a process of social learning*. This understanding was later echoed in my conversation with the administrative team at Forsa. When I asked what came to mind when they heard inclusion of refugees, Khaled, Forsa's vice principal responded, "inclusion is about requiring the skills that they [the refugee children] need to be in the society, which is very important."

Supporting children's integration into society, however, requires attention to students' needs, and underlying drivers of those needs. Challenges related to communication skills for children emerged repeatedly in my fieldwork and were not always linked to developmental disabilities or war-related trauma. In one of our online meetings in Spring 2025, Amal, the social worker, explained that communication challenges sometimes stemmed from poverty-related trauma, such as "not having anyone to speak at home," often because parents working multiple shifts or dealing with their own psychosocial challenges. In other cases, she noted, children "did not feel the need to say a full sentence to anyone orally let alone in writing," pointing to unmet social emotional needs rather than academic deficits.

Mariam, the former social worker, shared similar observations in 2023, explaining that some children were "more used to physical communication," which could manifest in aggression or physical tensions between children. "They are not aggressive," she clarified, "but this might be the only language they learned from their family," or their surrounding shaped by experiences of discrimination and exclusion linked to their refugee status. In fact, bullying was another recurring challenge that educators actively sought to address. As Mariam emphasized, "They use

it, because it is the only language of communication that they know, not because they prefer it or want to.”

These dynamics were also evident in students’ creative storytelling during the summer camp. While working with a volunteer to produce short “movies” with students’ ideas, we asked them to come up with a story, develop its characters, name them, and role-play their narratives. Across all three classes that engaged with this activity, the stories consistently centered on themes of bullying and inequality, for example, a rich boy bullying a poor girl, or fights emerging from arguments or perceived wrongdoing. Reflecting on these narratives helped contextualize the emphasis I observed across lessons, in person, online, or even during the summer camp, on teaching social emotional learning skills (SEL), that focused on how to name emotions, when to anticipate them, and how to manage and regulate them.

This emphasis also highlights why SEL became the central focus of the learning materials developed by Amal and eight other educators for the digital platform during Israeli strikes in Fall 2024, as discussed in the previous chapter. For example, one of the lessons shared in WhatsApp classrooms was an animated story about a child’s fear in response to bombings and airstrikes, which aimed at guiding students in recognizing and coping with such emotions. This also reflects how the focus on SEL was not static but continuously adapted to reflect students’ evolving contexts and needs.

Behind these carefully planned lessons were experienced teachers, many of whom had background in psychology or social work, overseen by school administrative team and the on-site social worker. Amal, and before her, Mariam, both collaborated closely with teachers and families beyond classrooms to mitigate children’s psychosocial needs. As Mariam once

explained, “we usually observe students’ aggression, once it is higher or increased, we suspect that something has happened,” prompting conversations with both the child and caregiver to understand the underlying issue. This approach reflects an orientation toward understanding behavior rather than punishing it.

Before the Center formally employed a social worker, responsibility for addressing these challenges fell largely on educators themselves. The administrative team at Noor, Sahar and Wasim, both former teachers before stepping up to their roles as principal and vice principal, described how children, exhibiting behavioral challenges, were sometimes reassigned to a class taught by more experienced teachers after careful deliberation (considering the context and speaking with both teachers). Wasim shared one such experience:

“I had a student who was always scared with communication issues. Once he was [reassigned] to my class, he started [feeling more] relaxed and participating in the class, but with zero [level of] academic. We [kept] him in my class for two years just to [help] him communicate and improve his social skills, not only for [academic learning].

When I asked what enabled this change, Wasim responded:

“Maybe, it was the trust, which motivated and encouraged him [to engage in class] and [the trust] also helped me. I think maybe the other teachers became frustrated, as he did not work with them in class. I was like, you can attend my classes, you can participate if you want, and if not, don't worry, just sit at your desk; if you need any help, I'm here. The smiling, the body language from me all helped him not to feel afraid. And, [I] encouraged him in activities, that you can do this, you can achieve this. So over time, he became an active member of the class, and even his academic learning started to improve.

Wasim then explained that when Mariam joined the Center, the child refused to attend her sessions until Wasim accompanied him, reinforcing a sense of safety. “We first focused on his communication, gained his trust, and made him feel confident that he deserved to be in the class,” he said, and “then encouraged him to socialize with peers.”

This account illustrates how educators understood the right to education as inherently holistic, extending beyond literacy and numeracy to include emotional safety, trust, and social participation; or, in other words, humanizing the learning experience for children. Such an understanding stands in contrast to the dominant neoliberal frameworks that prioritize test scores and assessments (Ball, 2012; Biesta, 2009); as well as global humanitarian approaches that reduce refugee education to basic literacy or structural access (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

Finally, teaching life skills and social values emerged as another recurring dimension of refugee inclusive education. Jad, a mainstream teacher in Forsa with a background in psychology and years of work experience with children with SEND, described inclusion as extending beyond subject instruction: “I’m not just teaching them Arabic; sometimes I’m also instilling values and life skills through the lessons.” The expectation to teach life skills in class was also echoed by the leadership team at organizational and school levels.

These life skills were reinforced beyond the classrooms. For example, students earned coin-shaped stickers as positive reinforcement for behaviors such as turn-taking and respecting opinion of their peers. Over the course of the week, students could collect these coins and use them as a currency in the school “market” to purchase items such as pens, notebook, or soap based on the number of collected coins. Educators acted as vendors, while students practiced lining up, exchanging currency, negotiating purchases (Figure 1). Through this activity, students practiced everyday social rules and responsibilities, while developing confidence and agency in supportive environment.

Figure 1. A Student Exchanging Coins for School Supplies at the School Market



Noor center, photo taken by me, May 2025

Taken together, these accounts reflect how refugee educators at the Hope Center conceptualize inclusion as a holistic and context-responsive process, grounded in the right to education but shaped by the lived realities of their students. Rather than limiting inclusion to access or academic achievement, they extend structural understandings of inclusion to encompass social belonging, emotional well-being, and meaningful participation in learning. In their framing, addressing students’ psychosocial needs, fostering trust, and supporting communication are not peripheral, but central to inclusion.

This understanding aligns with key elements of engaged pedagogy, grounded in hooks’ work on teaching with love (hooks, 2000, 2003), which emphasizes affective approaches that bring joy, connection, and unity into the learning process (Barcelos, 2016). In this sense,

inclusion is not only about being in school, but about being recognized, supported, and able to engage fully and meaningfully in the learning environment; or, as one of the artifacts in Forsa's hallway states, "Education is not preparation for life. Education is life itself."

## **Inclusion as a Dynamic, Relational Process**

"Education is constantly remade in praxis. In order to be, must *become*."

– Freire, 1970, p.84

I sat in Salma's class in the morning shift to observe her SLD session for the second time in May 2025, which was held in a pre-K classroom. Each wall had either students' artwork, like colored fishes that they made, or teachers' work, like red mushrooms displaying numbers. The thin space above the whiteboard, visible to students every time they faced that direction, had a smiley train, with each wagon carrying an emotion name with a matching emoji. The teacher's table stood in front of the board, with a long cabinet in the corner and two large baskets filled with toys and colorful learning materials. You could immediately tell that this was a pre-k classroom.

The classroom setting was very different from the conference room where I observed her first SLD session the other day. When I asked her about the room, she explained that while they try to provide routines to minimize distractions, inconsistency in the physical space is inevitable given their limited rooms. She had to use the conference room for SLD sessions whenever the pre-K students were in class. Yet it was still her classroom, as she also taught English to the pre-K students in the same space. The classroom was on the first floor, adjacent to a hall connected to the courtyard, so we had to close the back windows from time to time to reduce outside noise. The seating arrangement also differed from other classrooms: four round tables and small

individual chairs were arranged so that all students faced the board. As Amal had shared with me earlier, one of her hopes for the Center's inclusive program was to have more space to allow seating arrangements better suited to play-based, engaged learning that they were implementing.

The three first grader boys arrived,<sup>19</sup> and Salma asked them to bring their chairs in front of the whiteboard as she played an animated story using presentation slides projected onto the board. The story was about a penguin going out to eat with his friends to teach the Arabic letter "B" (penguin in Arabic is *bitariq*). She told the story while facing students, moving through the slides using her hands, body, different voices, and exaggerated lip movements. The projector kept crashing, but everyone sat still, as if the interruption was part of the routine, while Salma tried to fix it. After the story ended, she asked comprehension questions, still using the images on the slides. She ensured that each child responded, but one of them appeared shy. She invited him to the board and asked him to circle the letter in the word projected on the whiteboard. She then gave him a coin-shaped sticker for his effort and asked him to return to his seat.

After the story and comprehension questions ended, she asked students to take their seats back at their table and distributed small whiteboards for practicing the new letter. Next, she asked the shy boy and another student to stay at the same table, while the third child, who had low vision and wore thick glasses, sat at a different table. Salma wrote the letter "ba" in large size on the floor with chalk and placed some blue funnels beside it. She repeated the same activity at a smaller scale on the table<sup>20</sup> for the other two students, using a marker and colored stones. She then asked the two students at the same table to fill in the marked letters using stones

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<sup>19</sup> I do not have an information about their age, but Grade 1 usually had students between 6-9 years old.

<sup>20</sup> The tabletop had a writable surface that she used as a teaching material. Students desk in other classes did not have that feature.

and funnels on the floor for the third child. Afterward, they gathered again in front of the whiteboard, listening to different syllables and sounds of the same letter, while Salma used flashcards to repeat them multiple times. She then ended the class with a song that students were familiar with to sing along.

With support and supervision of Amal, Salma developed this lesson carefully, not only to teach the letter *ba*, but to engage in multiple learning skills and senses while tailoring the activity to each child's needs. After the class, she explained, "Some of them have difficulties with their memory span, so I need to repeat everything in different ways. But since the day we started [when classes resumed in January/February], they have progressed a lot." She then pointed to the child who appeared shy and added that although "he is super quiet in his [mainstream] class, here, he is very active and engaged."

Salma's session illustrated how inclusion at the Hope Center was enacted relationally, through continuous adjustment to children's responses rather than fixed categorizations. These adjustments were not limited to her classroom; she revisited her lesson plans with Amal every week based on each student's individual progress, which Amal and Salma documented on a regular basis in an excel sheet. Her work with a small group of students with different learning difficulties reflected an understanding that children's learning difficulties are not monolithic and might have shared similarities for reasons beyond disabilities, underscoring the need for varied approaches to teaching. Reflecting on these differences, Salma and Zahra, Special Education teachers, with support from Amal, repeated the same activity using different strategies and materials so that students could acquire the targeted skill in ways that worked for them.

However, adapting lessons to diverse learning abilities and styles, while engaging multiple senses (visual, sensory, and motor) was not limited to SLD sessions with small groups. The same logic of inclusion extended into mainstream classrooms at the Hope Center, which typically included 20-25 students. Jad, the mainstream teacher at Forsa, offered a concrete example of this practice.

To accommodate his schedule, Jad and I conducted his interview in two parts. While the first conversation felt formal, his facial expressions shifted noticeably when we began discussing his classroom practice. His eyes lit up as he spoke, and he pulled out his phone with a big smile to show me a video of a play-based literacy lesson he had recently tried using the newly donated jigsaw puzzles, received through a teacher-collaboration initiative with another non-governmental organization (NGO).

In the video, the desks in the middle column had been pushed aside to create open space for movement. At front of the class, his table was covered with the top pieces of the puzzle, each displaying a colorful image, arranged in a way that students could see them easily. By the back window, Jad stood between two lines of students holding the matching word pieces. When he called their names, the first pair ran to the table, found the matching picture, said the word aloud, and returned to the end of their lines. The students who found the match first won. The children jumped up and down with excitement, encouraging each other in finding the matching piece, and Jad laughed along with them, smiling as we watched the video together.

Knowing that one of Salma's students with SEND was in his class, I asked how he participated in this activity. Jad explained that the student also waited in line holding the word piece. When his name was called, Jad read the word aloud and asked what letter it started with

and what sound it made. He then invited the student to run to the table and find any picture that began with the same letter and sound. Through this adaptation, the child participated fully in the activity and the learning process, without being set up for failure, by building on what he already knew. Afterward, Jad showed me the donated puzzles, and said, “before these, I was using my own puzzles” and showed me the puzzles that he made manually. This was a common approach among educators at the Center working with their limited resources, which I observed Zahraa had her own version too (Figure 2 and 3). Jad then explained how grateful he was for these new materials given how they saved time and facilitated his inclusive practices.

Figure 2. Donated literacy puzzle to the Center



Figure 3. Jad’s literacy puzzle artifacts



Together, these practices highlight how supplementing mainstream classes with SLD sessions strengthened students’ confidence and motivation to learn while supporting their academic development. This reflects another dimension of refugee inclusion at the Hope Center, one that differs from global frameworks narrowly focused on the removal of barriers to “achievements.” When describing his experience with the student with high anxiety, as noted in previous section, Wasim explained that the child’s academic learning progressed over time. But

first, he prioritized addressing his psychosocial needs and eventually engaged him in learning process. The student's school performance "is now good," he clarified, "I mean, it is average, *but* he is in the process of learning."

Entering the process of learning, or as Amal put it, "making learning enjoyable for children," by using various methods and materials so that students "feel confident, that they are good at something, even if they have learning difficulties," was itself understood as *achievement*. In this context, overcoming barriers to achievements meant that "learning should reduce their [already] stressful lives rather than adding more to it," as Amal further explained. Achievement was assessed through engagement and progress (the process of learning) relative to each child's learning abilities and styles, rather than through comparison with peers or test scores alone. Even for final tests, Amal was responsible for tailoring them to the learning of students with SEND in collaboration with their mainstream teachers.

Within this understanding, students' learning differences were incorporated into how achievement itself was defined. As noted earlier, the Hope Center follows the Lebanese curriculum, and the SLD sessions are designed in parallel with what is taught in the mainstream classes at the Center. To implement this curriculum, educators, both mainstream and special education teachers, work toward clearly defined weekly and monthly objectives. At the same time, they work with flexible plans, created on their own, that allow them to address students' diverse and unique academic needs. This flexibility, encouraged by the leadership team and enacted by teachers, is consistently one of the defining features of the Hope Center. As Hadi noted:

The curriculum at the Center is very *very* flexible [and] allows [us] to manage the differences in [children's] learning. It is something that might not be available at many other NGOs, public or private schools at this level. This is very important, and a strength for the Hope Center. (emphasis original)

As Amal said, “inclusion means having the same lesson in class but at different levels so the child won't feel excluded.” While this may sound straightforward, teachers emphasized that it required patience, time, proper planning, and appropriate materials. Jad explained, “With students without learning difficulties, the lesson could be completed in one or two days but students with difficulties need more time to master writing and distinguish the shape of the letter.” This deliberately paced approach, however, was not perceived as a constraint. For some educators at the Center, it offered a different way of thinking about time and efficiency in teaching. As Hadi explained:

We should look at the inclusive education as an opportunity for us to save time, to invest in our students, and also to create a positive noise in our classroom. When we have this kind of mindset, half of our problems in our pedagogical practices can fade out.

Hadi's reflection does not suggest that inclusive education saves time in a literal sense, meaning reducing teacher's workload or speeding instruction. On the contrary, it often required more time, labor, and emotional investment. What his statement redefined instead was the meaning of efficiency in teaching. From this perspective, efficiency was no longer tied to fast-paced coverage of school plans or expected academic outcome, but to investing time in understanding students' needs to support them more effectively. This form of efficiency, grounded in attentiveness and relational engagement, was what Hadi referred to when he spoke of “saving time.” It aligns with what Barcelo (2016) describes

as attentive love and active listening: remaining receptive to students' emotional communication for meaningful learning.

Also, Hadi's reference to allowing "positive noise" in the classroom further reflects this reorientation. Rather than signaling disorder or loss of control, "positive noise" appeared as an acceptance of messiness as part of the learning process. In other words, embracing this climate enables him to step back from pressures beyond his control and focus on cultivating an environment that supports engagement and learning.

Taken together, these examples and accounts reflect how educators' everyday practices, supported by leadership, translate inclusion from an abstract principle into a lived, relational, and adaptive process enacted across both SLD and mainstream classrooms. Through continuous adjustment to students' diverse needs and abilities, flexible lesson planning, and the integration of various learning strategies, educators actively reshape teaching in ways that accommodate and value students' differences. Recognizing that this approach requires additional time, effort, and creativity, they frame adaptive teaching as an investment in their students to support them more effectively, as Hadi noted. In this sense, inclusion is not implemented as a fixed model, but emerges through ongoing interactions, responsiveness, and pedagogical decision-making in context.

The following section turns to the role of leadership in orchestrating and sustaining this humanized learning environment through an asset-based approach.

## **Leadership Pragmatism in Enacting Inclusion for Children with SEND**

Before visiting the schools in May 2025, I held an online reflection workshop with a group of educators to explore how inclusion was perceived and what complicated its enactment in the Center. As noted earlier, participants included Leila and Samaya (the education directors); Sahar and Fatima (principals at Noor and Forsa); the SLD team, including Salma, Zahra, and Amal; and Rania, a mainstream teacher from the Beirut school, whom Leila insisted on including because of her extensive experience teaching children with learning difficulties, despite not being formally part of the SLD initiative.

Across the discussion, participants repeatedly referred to special educational needs and disabilities using the term “learning difficulties.” At one point, Samaya corrected my use of the term SEND and explained that the Center does not work with all types of disabilities, as doing so would exceed their available resources and institutional capacity. As explained in previous chapter, the Center initiated the SLD program to focus on a specific cohort of students with: (1) language and communication needs; (2) behavioral, emotional, and social difficulties; (3) specific learning difficulties such as Dyslexia and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder); and (4) multi-sensory impairments. In this sense, while SEND refers broadly to the full spectrum of special educational needs and disabilities, SLD at the Hope Center reflects a more targeted subset, summarized in the above-mentioned four points, shaped by the Center’s capacity and pragmatic focus.

At the same time, leadership's preference for the term learning difficulties goes beyond a technical distinction. Amal later emphasized that the use of this umbrella term did not imply homogeneity,

Although we refer to these students all under the umbrella of learning difficulties but that does not mean their difficulties are monolithic. Each child has a different learning challenge for different reasons. Some dealing with short memory spans, have developmental delays, low vision, deafness, etc. But even though they are all under one umbrella, they are different in their own ways.

In other words, using "learning difficulties" as an umbrella term was not an attempt to flatten or overlook children's differences. Rather it functioned as a pragmatic and relational strategy by the leadership toward inclusion to hold together diverse learning difficulties, whether related or unrelated to (dis)abilities, displacement, or other lived experiences, in order to create a space for responsiveness rather than rigid, deficit-based categorizations.

As Wasim said, "maybe we can say all of our students have difficulties in learning, because of their difficult situation." This framing intentionally blurs rigid distinction between 'refugee students' and 'refugee students with SEND,' while acknowledging that some children are affected more severely and require additional support. In doing so, it encourages educators to reflect on complexity of refugees' needs rather than approaching learning challenges through fixed or deficit-based labels.

At the same time, leadership was aware that working with children with SEND adds another layer of complexity to an already demanding classroom with limited resources. In conversations with social workers, they noted that sometimes not becoming overly attached to

some specific terms (i.e., disability), particularly when teachers are navigating large class sizes, can reduce the moral and emotional weight that the terms might carry with them, while keeping the door open to support rather than avoidance.

This realism was paired with intentional action. As Leila mentioned in a 2023 conversation, before launching the SLD initiative, the Center conducted a survey to assess teachers' knowledge and attitudes towards special educational needs, as well as their ability to identify learning difficulties in the classroom. The findings revealed that teachers lacked a comprehensive understanding of what special educational needs and disabilities entail in their context and had limited knowledge of how to identify learning difficulties in their classroom.

As a result, the leadership recognized that any effort to initiate the SLD program with existing students with SLD would first require systematic teacher preparation, both in understanding special learning difficulties and in developing strategies to support them.

Since 2023, and in parallel with the creation of the SLD initiative and separate sessions with children, the Hope Center has dedicated sustained training time to familiarizing all teachers with identifying and responding to learning difficulties, as well as working closely with Mariam, and now Amal, to support students in mainstream classrooms. The use of “learning difficulties” thus did not signal avoidance or ‘sweeping issues under the carpet, but rather reflected leadership’s refusal to romanticize teachers as universally prepared, willing, or free of bias. As in other contexts, social barriers to teaching children with SEND exist, whether due to lack of capacity, training, or willingness, a challenge documented in Lebanese public schools (Al Hroub & Jouni, 2023; El Ahmad, 2023), especially when intersecting with refugeehood (Kiwani, 2019). This is something that was also echoed by the Hope Center’s leadership team.

While, these progressive practices highlight the Center's strengths, they coexist with ongoing constraints, including limited resources, inconsistent students attendance that disrupt continuity of their learning, uneven teacher preparedness, potential educators' biasness in working with children with disabilities, and limited access to formal health services that many of these children experienced; all within the broader structural and political challenges shaping refugee education in Lebanon.

What distinguish the Hope Center in Lebanon's context is not the absence of challenges, but leadership's conscious engagement with them. Rather than denying or bypassing teachers' limitations, leadership actively sought to raise awareness, provide training, provide on-site social workers, and encourage curricular flexibility. Across conversations with the leadership team, a consistent message emerged: progress matters more than outcomes, and learning is defined by engagement in the process rather than mastery of standardized benchmarks. Even small gains, measured against a child's own starting point, were treated as meaningful achievements.

This orientation speaks to the broader organizational approach of the Hope Center, discussed in the previous chapter, in which vision, action, and realism remained closely aligned. Rather than romanticizing the context of refugee education, leadership embraces its messiness, acknowledging its limits, acting within them, while celebrating incremental wins along the way. This emerged as a distinctly asset-based approach that Leila has cultivated from the beginning and promoted it with educators as part of the Center's organizational culture, shaping how inclusion was understood not as an ideal state to be reached, but as an ongoing, relational practice of doing what is possible.

This asset-based orientation, flowing from leadership to teachers and, ultimately, to students, forms a shared culture at the Hope Center in which responsibility for inclusion is collectively carried. As Mariam explained in 2023 when speaking about teachers, “I always repeat this statement to them that you should find a way to love these children. Once you do, you can figure out what is it that they needed, and they would listen to you.” The relational and inclusive pedagogical practices described in the previous section can be understood as manifestations of this leadership translated into everyday teaching.

The asset-based approach described here represents one dimension of leadership’s role in sustaining inclusion as praxis. Additional dimensions, particularly how interactions and everyday relationships give meaning to this work, and how this shared responsibility for inclusion is carried collectively are explored in the following chapter.

Taken together, this section highlights how leadership at the Hope Center actively shapes both the conceptualization and enactment of inclusion. In this sense, leadership approaches inclusion as a relational and pragmatic practice by recognizing and working within teachers’ capacities to support children with SLD, while fostering a shared responsibility for inclusive pedagogy across the Center.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined how inclusion is conceptualized, enacted, and sustained within the Hope Center, revealing a relational, dynamic, and context-responsive practice, shaped by the lived realities of students. Across the findings, educators defined inclusion not primarily in terms of access or academic achievement, but through social belonging, emotional well-being, and meaningful participation in learning. This understanding extends dominant structural definitions

of inclusion by centering the lived realities of refugee children and prioritizing their psychosocial needs as integral to learning process. As also conceptualized in Chapter 2, based on my preliminary findings from Summer 2023, this meant refugee educators actively approached inclusion for refugee learners by humanizing their learning experiences.

At the level of practice, inclusion emerged as a form of relational praxis, enacted through continuous adjustments to students' needs, abilities, and responses across both SLD and mainstream classrooms. Educators' use of flexible lesson planning, differentiated instruction, and multi-sensory engagement reflects a pedagogy grounded not in standardization, but responsiveness to students' diverse needs and abilities. Within this approach, achievement itself is redefined as engagement in the process of learning relative to each child's unique needs rather than mastery of predetermined benchmarks. As Amal described, making learning enjoyable and fostering confidence in students, even in small ways, creates meaningful educational progress. Additionally, it helps create inclusive environment that recognizes and values the diverse experiences and needs of refugees, promoting their holistic development and well-being, an important concept highlighted in critical, engaged pedagogies (Barcelos, 2016).

In addition to aligning with engaged pedagogies, this reorientation from outcome-oriented to process-oriented learning is also important when situated within the cultural model of disability. Neoliberal logics that equate learning with measurable performance and efficiency (Ball, 2012), are often set with an assumption of a standardized, able-bodied, and able-minded learner, shaping representation politics. Within such prevailing systems, refugee children with their complex needs that are further intensified intersecting with their learning or behavioral difficulties, are then structurally positioned as failing or falling behind, regardless of access to schooling.

In contrast, the Hope Center's relational approach disrupts this logic by tailoring both pedagogy and assessment of students' lived realities, histories, and capacities. However, it is important to note that this disruption became possible as Hope Center does not operate within the formal system, reporting to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. Yet, this notion reveals the important role that leadership at the Hope Center plays in enabling and sustaining this alternative approach with their assess-based perspective.

Additionally, leadership at the Hope Center does not impose inclusion as a fixed model, but rather frames and approaches it programmatically, grounded in an awareness of institutional limitations and teachers' capacities. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the introduction of the SLD program, for instance, was not driven by external policy mandates, but by a reflective assessment of students' needs and teachers' readiness. Leadership's decision to prioritize teacher preparation before implementation reflects a commitment to inclusion as a process that must be built rationally.

However, these practices must also be understood within their constraints. The Hope Center operates within a context marked by limited resources, inconsistent student attendance, uneven teacher preparedness, and limited access to external health support services. Its success, therefore, should not be romanticized as a scalable model, but understood as a context-specific, bottom-up response to complex conditions of refugee learners, while seeking to reimagine education where formal systems fall short.

Taken together, this chapter contributes to rethinking inclusion in refugee education by showing it is only about access, but a relational and dynamic process that requires continuous care and responsiveness. It shows how refugee educators, supported by pragmatic leadership,

translate inclusion into everyday inclusive pedagogies that prioritize dignity, belonging, and possibility, humanizing refugees experience in learning. In doing so, it highlights the importance of recognizing refugee educators not merely as implementers of policy, but as epistemic actors whose knowledge and practice offer critical insights for reimagining inclusive refugee education.

## CHAPTER 6: Enacting Inclusion Praxis: Mechanisms, Relationships, and Teacher Agency

“With Massey’s (1994) definition of place, the local perspective of refugees should be analyzed through the particularity of the social interactions that intersect at the location where the refugees are present. The intersection of these social relations at that location will produce new social processes.”

– Brun, 2001, p.20

After the online reflection workshop in March 2025, I worked more closely with the Special Learning Difficulties (SLD) team, including Amal, Salma, and Zahraa, to continue the reflective *possibility tree* exercise offline. As described earlier, the possibility tree is a metaphorical and visual tool that maps a concept from underlying causes to observable outcomes. I used the possibility tree as a participatory reflective exercise with three parts for them to focus on: (1) the leaves, to document their current inclusive practices; (2) the trunk, to reflect on factors that facilitated or impeded those practices; and (3) the roots to examine the underlying causes or systems that either supported or constrained their work. The purpose of this exercise was to unpack inclusive practices as they were enacted within the Hope Center. It also sought to understand the mechanisms of their inclusive pedagogy, from visible practices to underlying drivers, within the Center, in which educators operate individually and collectively, and through which they give meaning to that shared social environment.

Across this reflective exercise with SLD team, educators consistently pointed to cooperation among the management team, school leadership, and teachers, grounded in a shared

understanding of students' needs, as a driving force behind inclusion praxis at the Hope Center. This shared emphasis was evident in everyday practice and articulated explicitly by educators as well. As Hadi explained:

The collaboration happens through working as a team for the benefit of the children. I share my experience with the social worker and the administration. Each of us, from our respective roles, tries to provide the most important information that helps with better planning for inclusive education and achieving the greatest possible educational benefit for that student.... For example, I share notes with Ms. [Amal] about the learning materials that I use in class. It is very important to share our reflections on how positively this material supported the children's learning process.

Hadi's statement illustrates that what gives meaning to the Hope Center is not only the availability of physical space that provides structural access to schooling for refugees. Rather, it lies in the active collaboration organized around a shared value, i.e., the wellbeing and learning of students, which gives meaning to that structural inclusion. Through the circulation of observations, reflections, and materials across roles, and acting upon them, inclusion praxis takes shape as a collective practice rather than an individual effort within a merely occupied space.

My fieldwork revealed that an effective communication system exists, within the Hope Center, built on trust, shared responsibility, and respect. This system is dynamic and evolving, grounded in a shared culture of learning, and operates across leadership, teachers, parents, and students. This interconnectedness among Lebanese and Syrian educators (refugees or not), working toward a shared goal, as Hadi described it, "for the benefit of the children," stood in contrast to the broader hostile social climate toward Syrians outside the Hope Center.

Within this context, the Hope Center functions as a relational cocoon of care and accountability, sustaining through communication and mutual responsibility rather than formal structures alone. This chapter unpacks how these relational processes operate as the mechanism through which inclusion praxis is enacted and sustained at the Hope Center. To do so, I primarily draw on my ethnographic interviews in all its modalities (unstructured, semi-structured, meetings, and dialogical interviews) between July 2023 and May 2025, along with immersive fieldwork, particularly observations of the Center's materials, structures, and teachers' artifacts.

Starting with the leadership, I first describe how the management team (Leila, Samaya) interacts with the school administrative teams at both Forsa and Noor centers, along with Amal, who engages directly in decision-making as a social worker and educator. I then examine the mechanisms within the SLD team to capture their relational work for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and their shared culture of learning. Next, I focus fully on the relationships between leadership and teachers to show how refugee teachers' inclusion emerges as a necessary condition for children's inclusion praxis. Teachers' inclusion is explored through three interrelated dimensions: (1) their involvement in professional development (PD); (2) their shared responsibilities as active agents of change; and (3) their space to exercise "situated agency" as teacher-activists.

Across these sections, I attend to visual, interactional, and evolving features of these practices. I then conclude by showing how, collectively, they contribute to a sense of community and inclusion praxis at the Hope Center while keeping an effective accountability system in place. In this sense, inclusion is practiced and sustained through relational processes, such as shared leadership, effective communication, and teacher inclusion. Within these systems, the inclusion of refugee teachers becomes essential to students' inclusion, enabling them to exercise

situated agency and activism. In other words, this chapter discusses how these mechanisms and relationships bring structural inclusion to life, or as a Persian saying puts it, “breathing life into it.”

## **A Shared Leadership Approach, Grounded in Trust**

It was one of the hottest summer days anyone could remember, as noted by everyone who tried to make small talk with me in July 2023. That was my first day visiting the Forsa center to meet with the staff and educators from different schools who gathered there to kick off the summer camp before it started the day after. Leila drove me and Samaya to the school. It was a routine activity for them during both the academic year and summer program to visit each school at least once a week and meet with the school administrators to discuss schools’ updates, progress, and needs.

After a 45-minute drive from Beirut, I knew we were getting closer to the school when the director made a left turn onto a narrow, dusty road and all the refugee tents appeared. She said, “Here, you have to slow down because there are many unattended children that could randomly jump into the road.” We passed the tents and turned onto another bumpy road that cut through a large farm where children and parents were working together in the field. The director said “this year is potato harvesting! I hope children still show up for school tomorrow.”

Forsa was located in Beqaa district, a farmland Southeast of Beirut, in proximity to informal tented settlements. While close to plantation farms, most enrolled students came to school by bus, provided by the Center, from semi-urban areas, in addition to the tents we saw on the way. As noted by Leila, the proximity of the tents to the farms made attendance a challenge during the harvest seasons.

Leila told me that Forsa used to be a painting factory, and “it was just a big hole,” as she described it. The owner rented the shutdown factory to the Hope Center. Together with one of her colleagues, she worked on redesigning the building layout to transform it into a school, all while she was simultaneously training teachers in Noor back in February 2014.

The school was a two-story white building. The courtyard was big and had a small playground separated from the surrounding farm by fences. The wall that connecting the outside to the classrooms was decorated by a large word in Arabic made of colored mosaic, reading “Forsa,” a word that can mean both recess and opportunity. It stood above the water fountain where children passed multiple times during the day, appearing as a daily reminder of the opportunity this school thought to create. Had Leila not told me the story of the building, I would not have guessed that it was once an empty industrial structure, not merely because of the architectural redesigning, but because of the warmth I sensed, especially when children were at school: a feeling of care woven into its layout and echoed in the laughter of children filling the space.

When we finally arrived at Forsa, the school administration team was waiting outside to greet us. The interesting thing was that even when I came back in May alone and arrived around 7:30 AM, right before school started, the school administration team was still standing outside, this time waiting for school buses to arrive and greet children. There was a warmth in that moment, which made me reflect on how this practice extended beyond formal leadership interactions. Whether for the director of the Center or for students, the school administrator team positioned themselves at the entrance with smiles, enacting leadership through presence, care, and visibility.

Even when upon our arrival in July 2023, their smiles and the gentle bowing of their heads reflected the deep respect they held for Leila and Samaya. Yet, this respect did not translate into rigid hierarchy; rather, it reflected a relationship grounded in mutual respect. When we entered the hallway, teachers came to greet Leila and Samaya before we stepped into the principal's office, which was located right next to the entrance. The principal office had big enough room to store teachers' learning materials in long storage cabinets on the left and three desks, which were arranged along the middle and right walls for the principal (Fatima), the vice principal (Khalid), and another administrative staff member (Muhammad). Although Leila was offered the seat, I never saw her sit at the principal's desk, a gesture that reflected her mutual respect for Fatima. The same was true during visits to Noor.

Fatima has been with the Center since 2014, bringing with her 12 years of experience as a principal in Syria before arriving in Lebanon. Although her academic background was in Engineering, she explained that the Center encouraged and facilitated her pursuit of certifications in business management and refugee education during her years at the Center. Sahar, Noor's principal, shared a similar experience, noting that she was part of the same group of educators who received courses on refugee education from a Lebanese university in collaboration with the Center to enhance leadership capacity at school level. This shows that at Hope Center there are PD opportunities not only for teachers but also for school administrative teams.

Except for Fatima, who joined as an experienced principal, the rest of the school administrative team across the two schools began as teachers at the Hope Center, most of them with prior teaching experience. The examples they shared with me about inclusive practices during our interviews often stemmed from their own classroom experiences at the Center. They began as teachers and moved up to vice principal and then principal roles, as in Sahar's case.

At the same time, Wasim’s stories, as mentioned before, illustrated his capacity in classroom management and supporting children with behavioral or learning challenges. He explained that, before the recruitment of the social worker, he had been one of the mainstream teachers assigned to work directly with children who had learning difficulties in his classroom. His experience was an example that reflects how teachers’ demonstrated capacities were recognized and later shaped their movement up the ladder into leadership roles.

This acknowledgment was also noted by the management team. When I commented to Samaya in 2023 that it is fascinating how all the principals were women, she responded, “we are really happy with them. Sahar, [for example], had to step up to fill in for the former principal on an interim basis right after she was promoted from teacher to vice principal, and she proved so successful that we decided to keep her as the headmaster.”

In addition to recognizing the strengths and capacities of educators and creating space for their advancement within the Hope Center, this practice carried another important implication. Both Samaya and Leila had previously served as teachers themselves before joining the Hope Center and understood classroom- and school-level challenges. The same was true for school administrators and social workers, who had direct experience teaching children with learning difficulties. This meant that the Center’s decision makers were familiar with educators’ realities rather than operating from a distant, top-down position. This understanding, however, was not left to experience alone. The school administrative team also received structured professional development opportunities, to enhance their educational leadership, including the refugee education certifications that Fatima and Sahar referenced.

All of this reflects a relationship grounded in rapport and trust between the Center’s managing directors, Leila and Samaya, and the school principals, enabling shared leadership

responsibilities. When the Hope Center began to grow and Leila's responsibilities expanded, she started delegating her responsibilities to school principals and Samaya, when she was hired in 2022. She explained:

I used to do everything, everything that had to do with education. But then, like three years after, because we had the same principles, they did a lot of the work that was like checking the lesson plans, the weekly plans, I stopped doing them and the principals took over those. Every once in a while, I would check on them to make sure that they're doing well. But they did a good job. So, they took some of that load, kind of delegated them to each center, which was also helpful.

This trust and delegation created a shared leadership approach, trickling down from organizational management to Leila and later Samaya, and then to school leaders.

This shared leadership approach and trust appeared to be part of the organizational culture. When I asked Leila whether she ever faced challenges from the board regarding her decisions, she responded firmly, "No, never." The only challenge she noted was financial before Samaya joined. She continued:

They never interfered at all. And that's what I like about [them]. It is just like, "do what you think should be done." No questions asked. ... They [give me] the space, the time... I'd change [things] and I don't even tell them. You know, if I want to change [a thing] here, add this change to the curriculum, etc. The only time I ask them is if I needed extra funds. I would tell [them], listen I have this project and we need extra funds, and then they have to meet to decide whether we do it or not, [meaning] we get the funds, like the [WhatsApp learning program] because of COVID. We did it and we continued, [and] we've learned

from it. [So], they said why don't we continue? Why don't we upscale it, change it, and continue. And they said, yeah, go ahead.

Reflecting on these accounts, leadership at the Hope Center appears less as centralized, top-down authority, and more as the creation of space for others to exercise agency toward a shared value – the wellbeing and learning of students. Here, agency is understood as the ability to decide and act flexibly in accordance with values and beliefs within constrained conditions, which is line with how Imperiale et al., (2023) describe in refugee educator context.

At the same time, this account shows that trust, delegation, and shared responsibility at Hope Center were not abstract principles but enacted practices. In broader sociopolitical context of Lebanon, where refugee educators are often excluded from the education system and are rarely positioned within leadership structures alongside Lebanese counterparts, this shared leadership model carries particular significance.

This flow of trust and the deliberate creation of space for professional agency did not stop at the level of school administration. It extended further to teachers through an asset-based lens that recognized their capacities and supported their growth. The next two sections focus on how this shared leadership ethos is enacted in interactions with and across teachers, and in relation to inclusion of children with SEND.

## **Relational Work in Special Learning Difficulties (SLD) Program**

Like Forsa, Noor was also located in Beqaa, closer to Syria's border, and in proximity to an informal tented settlement in a rural setting. When you entered the narrow, dusty alley leading to school, it was not hard to spot it with its giant, blue container structure. The container was intentionally designed and donated to the Hope Center for schooling with high ceilings,

windows, and a well-built circulation system that reduced the feeling of heat or cold while seated inside without a need for electricity. Leila told me that before receiving this donation, they had started Noor with two large tents divided into four classrooms using cardboard partitions. She described those early days smiling, as if recalling the journey from provisional beginnings to the present space.

The school walls seemed to work like magic: once inside, the smell of farms stayed behind the door, and the joy of students' voices filled the air. From time to time, students could be heard singing out loud along with their teacher in class. This sensory shift marked a transition not only in physical but also in emotional atmosphere. The school was small, accommodating approximately 350 students across two shifts, a number that often shrank over the academic year, as attendance was one of the most cited challenges by school administration teams across both centers. The courtyard was surrounded by six classrooms; a school administrator office that teachers frequently passed through; one large multipurpose room used for play-based activities that could easily be converted into a classroom; unisex bathrooms with locks; and a storage space that also functioned as the social worker's office.

I entered Amal's office during the transition from the morning to afternoon shift. She greeted me with smile, apologizing for the mess in the room, as it was filled with printed materials, learning tools, and office supplies. Her table sat in the middle with two blue chairs on each side, and I noticed my name written in Arabic in her notebook as part of her agenda for the day. She mentioned that she hoped for a more dedicated office space to reduce distraction during her sessions, given that her room was located directly by the school entrance. Yet she quickly added that she still did her best to make it work with what was available. This moment echoed

earlier conversations with Leila about how limited resources or setbacks had never been used as reasons to stop trying, reflecting an ethic of doing-what-is-possible in practice.

Amal was waiting for Zahraa to have their weekly touch-base meeting. Zahraa taught a mainstream classroom in the morning, which required the school administration to coordinate teacher schedules flexibly so she could conduct SLD sessions in the afternoon. As Sahar and Wasim explained in their interview, this coordination was far from simple, involving not only teacher schedules but also parental consent for students to remain longer at school and during transition between shifts if they were enrolled in the morning. These logistical arrangements were part of the invisible labor that sustained inclusion across classrooms, or as Sahar said, “helping teachers to focus on the job.”

Amal met weekly with Zahraa and Salma individually at their respective schools to discuss students’ weekly progress. She had developed a detailed matrix for each special education (SE) teacher to document attendance, lesson plans (for the day and week), daily progress, what worked or did not from the planned activities, and additional communication notes. Zahraa and Salma completed the matrix daily for each student in a shared folder with Amal. Amal reviewed the entries on a daily basis and used them to prepare an agenda for weekly reflective meetings with each teacher and revised the plans with them, as necessary. She explained that this living system emerged as a lesson learned for her from the previous year’s SLD pilot at Forsa, and she found it more effective for supporting students’ learning.

In these communications, Amal discussed areas of improvement for each child and offered suggestions regarding possible approaches and materials; however, the responsibility for developing and implementing lesson plans remained with the teachers themselves. In other words, Zahraa and Salma retained autonomy to design, practice, and revise their strategies, while

being supported through ongoing reflection sessions with Amal. This communication method helped Amal to create an effective accountability system for SE teachers that helped with the progress of both children and educators themselves. At the same time, the balance between autonomy and support reflects an asset-based approach toward educators, positioning them not as mere implementers of prescribed strategies but as reflective practitioners engaged in continuous learning.

As Salma mentioned in our first conversation in May 2025, she learned with her students as they progressed. She explained, “at the beginning of the SLD pilot in 2023, I struggled to see progress, which made me feel like a failure, especially that my academic background was not in Special Education.” Over time, however, with sustained training and Amal’s close supervision and encouragement, “I was able to see a path forward and develop greater patience and confidence in my practice.” Together, Salma and Amal also learned that focusing simultaneously on Arabic and English could overwhelm students, particularly those with attention-related challenges, which led them to revise their approach and prioritize Arabic instruction.

At the same time, while Amal had the autonomy to make direct decisions regarding SLD sessions, she also met weekly with the school leadership team every Friday to share updates, challenges, and areas requiring further attention. These meetings ensured that responsibility for inclusion did not rest with a single role but circulated across leadership and support structures. Importantly, these sessions were not limited to SLD topics alone but were embedded within broader weekly school updates between the management team and Amal.

Although Amal served as the direct supervisor for Zahraa and Salma’s SLD work, both teachers also received ongoing support and supervision from their school administration teams, including coordination with parents. In our interview, Zahraa spoke highly of Sahar, saying “I am

really satisfied with the process and going to Sahar for support, as I feel I can communicate everything with her.” This trust-based relationship illustrates how inclusion was practiced first among adults, then students.

Reflecting on these iterative adjustments and communications shows that learning at the Hope Center is not limited to children alone. Rather, educators themselves are engaged in a shared culture of learning, learning *with* students, *from* students, and from *one another*, across roles and levels.

## **Teachers’ Inclusion**

### **Engaging Teachers in Decisions about their Own Learning**

We were sitting in the teachers’ lounge at Forsa during recess in the summer of 2023. Forsa is the largest of the three schools within Hope Center, with around 700 students enrolled across morning and afternoon shifts. Given its previous history as a spacious factory, and the attention Leila and her colleague gave to transforming it into a school, the layout of the space was intentional. To me, it came across as deliberately planned to create opportunities for interactions among teachers, leadership, and students.

Beyond classrooms, there were rooms dedicated to other purposes. For example, in addition to principals having their own office, teachers had a lounge with a small kitchen beside it. The second floor, which housed higher-grade classrooms, also included a library at the end of the hallway, a counseling room (Amal’s office), separated by a partition from another classroom to create two sufficient size rooms, as well as a conference room that hosted teachers’ workshops from all three schools each September.

In the teachers' lounge, Yasmina, a Syrian teacher who later moved to Europe and was no longer at the Center when I returned in 2025, sat sipping her coffee as we spoke. Losing her was described as a loss by both Leila and Samaya during one of our drives to the school, as she had been among the most experienced teachers at Forsa. That day, I asked Yasmina about her experience at the Hope Center and how it compared to other organizations she had worked with. She explained:

I have been a teacher at [the Hope Center] for six years now, but in my 20 years of teaching both in Syria and Lebanon, I love working at [this Center] because of its professional development and the notion that they [the leadership] have an ear to listen to teachers. I also feel like I am learning more from students.

Yasmina's account points to one of the central aspects of teachers' interactions with the Hope Center that reflects their own inclusion praxis: PD opportunities grounded in responsiveness to teachers' needs. Across interviews and conversations with educators and leadership at different times, PD was repeatedly cited as a defining feature of working at the Center, not merely because training existed, but because teachers were actively consulted in shaping them. Jad described this process clearly:

Yes, the trainings are always based on surveys. It depends on what kind of training you need at work. First, they [the leadership team] do a survey to see what kind of training you need. [Then], based on classroom observations [conducted by the leadership over the academic year], they design the trainings according to what they notice and what ... educators need.

As Jad described, each September, teachers receive training whose content is determined primarily through two mechanisms: (1) teachers' needs and reflections collected at the end of

each academic year; and (2) yearlong observations conducted by the leadership team documenting both teachers' and students' needs. Training sessions are primarily delivered by the leadership team, including the social worker, but also may involve external organizations when specialized expertise is required, such as awareness sessions on autism and developmental disabilities.

This dual mechanism, listening to teachers through surveys while observing classrooms, which discussed in more detail in the following sub-section, constitutes a locally grounded structure for aligning professional development with evolving needs. In wider contexts, Lebanon and globally, sustaining continuous, context-responsive PD that meets evolving needs of students for refugee teachers remain a challenge (Henderson, 2023). Within such landscape, the Hope Center's practice reflects an effort to institutionalize praxis (reflection and action) as part of their yearly cycle for teachers, which makes PD relationally constructed.

Importantly, PD at the Center was not approached as remedial but developmental. In other words, in this refugee context where teaching children often involves navigating various challenges, these PD opportunities appeared to function as more than routine training. They strengthened teachers' sense of preparedness and confidence, allowing them to approach classroom challenges not as overwhelming burdens but as sites of professional growth.

Hadi captured this orientation when he reflected, "viewing any difficulty as an opportunity is key. Any challenge in your classroom with your students is an opportunity for you, as an educator, to learn." This perspective was also echoed in Yasmina's account, mentioned earlier, when she emphasized learning from her students at Hope Center. Together, these accounts also reflect a key dimension of critical and engaged pedagogy: the recognition of teaching and learning as a mutual, relational process, where knowledge is co-created with

students. In doing so, pedagogical relationships are shaped through attentive love and care rather than hierarchy.

Secondly, the mechanism of surveying teachers and incorporating their reflections into training content represents a form of inclusion at the organizational level. In this sense, teachers were not positioned as passive recipients of training, but as reflective practitioners continuously engaged in their own learning. This stands in contrast to global approaches towards refugee teachers that have been critiqued in the literature. At the Hope Center, educators consistently shared with me that they felt being heard as noted in Yasmina's account and appreciated the usefulness of these PD opportunities. Even as someone who had recently joined the Center, Hadi noted, "in the three months that I have been working with [the Center], there have been three workshops that I did with them, which were very, *very* [emphasis original] important."

While teachers came with different backgrounds, and levels of prior training, these PDs became an avenue for expanding and deepening their practice. Salma, for example, shared her appreciation for being part of the SLD team despite not having had a chance to pursue a graduate degree in Special Education. She joined the SLD initiative voluntarily and out of passion. The leadership took the passion seriously and helped her to improve this path with Amal. She reflected, "The training I have received and the support I get has helped me expand my practice and knowledge."

These PD opportunities were also not limited to September's workshops or their refreshers in February. As noted earlier, the Center facilitated external learning opportunities, including refugee education courses at a Lebanese university for some educators and principals. More recently, teachers such as Jad and Zahraa were selected to participate in a play-based learning program offered by another non-governmental organization (NGO). While participating

in such programs were usually open to interested teachers, like in Salma's case, leadership decisions regarding selection appeared intentional, aiming at strengthening already demonstrated capacities in inclusive pedagogies through in-service learning beyond routine training cycles. The customization of professional learning opportunities for teachers mirrors the differentiated approaches teachers employ in their classrooms with students with different abilities.

### **Shared Responsibility: Collaboration, Learning, and Accountability**

I was interviewing Sahar and Wasim in their office at Noor, while occasionally Sahar was being pulled away from different directions by other school staff or a parent's visit. The office was a small room with three desks, two of which faced the school door, belonging to Sahar and Wasim, as well as a third desk and a comfortable two-person couch facing each other, occupying the remaining space in the room for whoever stopped in the office. We were at the end of our interview when I asked them about what support from the Hope Center has facilitated their work for more effective inclusion of refugees with learning difficulties. Sahar reflected, with a combination of hope for change and realism:

I truly feel that [the Hope Center] has provided an important opportunity for children with learning difficulties, and I really hope it continues to grow, develop, and expand its support in this area, so that we can accommodate a larger number of students.

When I asked what would help sustain and expand this work, she emphasized the shared nature of responsibility:

These students spend one hour [per day] with Zahraa, but for the rest of their time, they are in the mainstream classrooms with other teachers and in interaction with their classmates

outside of Zahraa’s class. So, I believe that these [mainstream] teachers also need to be actively present and engaged with these students in their classroom.

Conversations with leadership at both the organizational and school levels illustrated that they act upon such reflection in practice by putting systems in place that ensure the responsibility for inclusion does not rest on SLD teachers alone. This points to another dimension of teachers’ inclusion praxis: the collective structures through which teachers and leadership team collaborate to address students’ learning challenges. Jad articulated this clearly when answering my question about how the Center supports mainstream teachers like him in inclusive pedagogies. He explained, “They [the Hope Center] always provide us with the resources we need, and even guidance. They truly provide us with any guidance that we need. I mean the school atmosphere is good, there's always cooperation.” These aspects were repeatedly noted by teachers and observed in their interactions at the Center.

While Jad’s account illustrates his appreciation for leadership support, it also speaks to a healthy collaborative culture, promoted by leadership. This collaboration had two dimensions: one between teachers and leadership team, and another among teachers themselves, woven together with their learning and accountability as educators. Beyond the SLD team and their relational work, discussed in the previous section, a structured mechanism was in place for mainstream teachers working with students with learning difficulties.

### *Teachers and Leadership Interactions*

Since 2023, mainstream teachers have been trained to identify children with learning difficulties one to two months after the school year begins once attendance becomes more consistent. At that point, teachers initiate a structured assessment process. They complete a form

and share it with the school administrative team. In some cases, teachers notice children's challenges later in the year and follow the same process. The school administration shares the report with the social worker, who sets up a session with the child to conduct diagnostic assessments.<sup>21</sup> Either the social worker or the school principal then observes the child in the classroom. This shared responsibility and communication does not stop at the identification of the student with challenges but continues through collective reflection on the source of difficulty in order to determine a responsive course of action.

As Sahar and Wasim explained, "sometimes we realize that the challenge is not the student but the teacher." This statement reflects leadership's refusal to automatically attribute classroom challenges to the child or reproduce power dynamics that privilege teachers' interpretations. Instead, it acknowledges the relational nature of classroom challenges. Observations were therefore used to determine the source of the difficulty before deciding on an appropriate course of action.

If the child qualifies for SLD sessions, the school administrative team meets with parents to explain, engage them in the conversation, and obtain consent. The child then begins sessions with Amal, as well as Salma or Zahraa, depending on the school they are enrolled in.

In some cases, conversations with parents reveal additional dimensions of a child's challenges. For example, when the school raised concerns about one student's writing difficulties, their parents shared that the child had weakness in the muscles needed to hold objects, including a pen. This insight helped the teacher plan more effectively, beginning with

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<sup>21</sup> Getting medical consultation is not possible given the limited resources they have.

playdough activities to strengthen fine motor skills before gradually moving toward more advanced writing tasks.

However, parental engagement at this level was not always possible. Parents' demanding schedules, due to multiple job shifts, or dealing with their own displacement traumas, often limited the possibility of observing their child's challenges closely to report to school. Amal noted that this sometimes complicated the diagnostic process, as she had to rely primarily on her own sessions with the child and the teacher's observations, especially that official medical records might not have been available because of their displacement. She expressed this not as blame, but as recognition of the complexity of refugee families' realities and refugee children with SEND, as well as the broader messiness of refugee education. Nonetheless, as Sahar mentioned, parents generally trusted the school's professional judgement and provided consent for recommended interventions.

On the other hand, if observations revealed that the source of the challenge lay in classroom management or teacher practice rather than the child's SEND, school administration team met with the teacher. Rather than offering unsolicited advice after the observations, they would ask teachers what they perceived as the difficulty for the child and what kind of support they needed. Support could take the form of principal guidance as an educator with prior experience managing a similar situation; collaboration with Amal to receive relevant teaching materials to facilitate the challenge in class; or, in some cases, peer observation, allowing teachers to sit in another classroom to observe how similar challenges were managed (this is discussed in greater detail later in this section).

When I asked how receptive teachers were about these observations and their following debriefs and actions, school administrative team shared their positive thoughts but noted that newly hired teachers sometimes take them harder than those who have been with the Center longer. Our conversation with Sahar and Wasim captured this fully and reflected on a few dynamics that are important to unpack:

*Elnaz:* How receptive are teachers about this?

*Wasim:* Most teachers are [fine] with that, but I think the new teachers are the ones who need some time to get acquainted with the process.

*Elnaz:* So, do they not take it personally?

*Wasim:* Yeah, they do not take it personally.

*Sahar:* I want to add something. Sorry if I am talking about this, but I want to talk about [the notion that] *sometimes* [emphasis original], not all the time, the nationality of teachers, [is important]: how the teacher knows the culture [SWITCHED TO ARABIC], how close the teacher is to students, and how well they understand refugees. This is very important. Of course, it is not the only factor, but it has a big impact. For example, once I entered a classroom where a comment had been made about one of the girls. The teacher's reaction showed that he didn't really understand her context and treated her as if she were just a "typical case," without recognizing her unique background or circumstances.

*Elnaz:* Having cultural connections with children is important...

*Wasim (interrupted me to clarify):* because these teachers are new and need time to get [acquainted] by the policies at [the Hope Center].

*Sahar:* And new to the school and its rules.

Elnaz: Are you saying that the new teachers need to adjust to the culture of [the Hope Center] and everything that's already been established here? Also, are these new teachers necessarily Lebanese or it's like a mix of Syrians and...

Sahar: I see two driving factors in this point. *Sometimes* [emphasis original], they are Lebanese, and sometimes they are new.

Wasim: But, I would say, it is more about them being new than Lebanese. We have [Lebanese] teachers who are very good.

Sahar: Yeah, that is why I said *sometimes*, not all the time.

This conversation offers several important insights into the relationship between teachers and school administrative team. First, it highlights that the primary focus of leadership is helping teachers understand the nuances of refugees' learning needs. Because newly hired teachers might often be unfamiliar with these complexities and with the Center's internal culture and expectations, leadership provides closer observation and coaching to support them in this learning process. As Sahar and Wasim suggested, some teachers may initially be less receptive to these observations, not because they resist feedback, but because they are still becoming familiar with the Center's culture and its approach to teaching refugee students. At the same time, the way the Center communicates these observations plays an important role. Rather than offering unsolicited advice, leadership creates a space for teachers to comment and reflect on their own practice during observation debrief, framing these interactions as part of teachers' professional learning rather than criticism.

Similarly, these observations are not limited to new teachers. As Fatima and Khaled, the school administrators in Forsa, explained, every teacher is observed at least once a year, and a

report is prepared for the management team on their performance. Newly hired teachers simply receive more frequent observations and more interactions with the administrative team as part of this familiarization process. This also helps explain the repeated emphasis on “newly” hired teachers by Sahar and Wasim’s explanation, either explicitly through words or implicitly through their social cues, like interrupting with more explanations.

Furthermore, the way Sahar carefully unpacked this notion is also noteworthy. She switched to Arabic in the middle of the conversation to ensure that the intended message was clear and repeatedly emphasized that the challenge was being new to the Center and its culture, rather than teachers’ nationality. Her example, her shift in language, and Wasim’s repeated clarifications all pointed to the importance of understanding refugees’ learning realities, regardless of whether a teacher was Lebanese or Syrian.

In practice, this interaction also signals an awareness of the broader racialized hierarchies that often shape relationships between Lebanese and Syrian communities. With both Syrians and Lebanese educators working in leadership and teaching positions, the Center promotes an asset-based approach that trusts teachers as professionals and active agents of change, provides them with the support needed to better understand refugees’ learning needs, and holds them accountable for their work. Through this approach, the Hope Center creates a professional space within the Center where educators can build a community and actively resist the racial hierarchies that often shape wider Lebanese society’s attitudes towards Syrians.

Beyond this observation mechanism, leadership also invested significant efforts in strategic teacher placement and scheduling, so that educators “can focus on the job.” School administrative team explained that, based on ongoing observations and learning throughout the

year, they would identify where children faced challenges and which teachers had particular strengths in addressing them, while ensuring that no single teacher was overloaded. Even for Zahra, as an example of an educator who taught mainstream classes in the morning shift and SLD sessions in the afternoon, schedules were carefully coordinated to make the arrangement sustainable. As I noted in my field journal, leadership demonstrated a systemic vision: *observing students' needs, recognizing teachers' strengths, and intentionally matching them to ensure that children were placed in supportive learning environment.*

### *Collaborations Among Teachers*

The second dimension of the cooperation Jad pointed to as helpful support for their inclusive practices relates to the collaboration among educators themselves, which leadership actively promotes and sustains it. This collaboration represents another important stream of learning for teachers that has shaped their sense of belonging and confidence at the Hope Center and has multiple forms. As mentioned before, identifying a teacher's struggle in class by the leadership, and sending them to observe colleagues' classrooms where similar challenges were successfully managed is one key stream. But sometimes also, teachers themselves requested to visit a colleague's class and to observe and learn how to deal with a particular problem in their own classroom. This shows the healthy comradeship among educators, and their attitudes and appreciation towards these observational sessions.

An expanded version of this learning stream was a practice that they called "teachers' community of practice." This practice often took place once a month with participation of all teachers in their respective center. However, Sahar noted that the play-based initiative offered by one of the NGOs that engaged some of the educators, including Zahraa and Jad as noted before, slowed down this monthly group meetings because of participating teachers' workload.

In this community of learning, one teacher would share a specific classroom struggle, showing a video recording of the challenge in their classroom to other educators. As Wasim explained, they would sit “as a community, with all teachers, playing the video... see where the problem was, have discussions about them and provide their feedback. At the end of the group session, [they] would come up with a solution to help the teacher” with their problem.

In addition to promoting the shared culture of learning among educators, this peer-based classroom observation and “community of practice” offers two insights. First, it reflects an asset-based lens, in which the Center trusts refugee teachers as active agents of change who have something to offer to their own peers, drawing on their capacities and experiences, while strengthening their confidence in their work. It also promotes their sense of belonging in a community in which they are actively engaged with and contribute to its progress and sustainability collectively. Second, involving educators in their own learning, such as the community of practice, or the peer-led co-production of learning materials for digital learning platforms with social emotional focus during the war, mentioned in Chapter 4, shifts attention away from nationality differences, often emphasized in wider Lebanese society, toward the skills and experiences teachers bring to addressing refugees’ learning needs.

The final stream of learning among educators is through Amal and her close communications with teachers beyond the SLD team. While the expected scope of her work focused on working with students with learning or behavioral difficulties and improving the SLD initiatives alongside Zahraa and Salma, she remained an important resource for mainstream teachers.

In our first conversation in Forsa in May 2025, she explained that there are different ways she interacts with mainstream teachers. First, as noted earlier, through observing their classroom

when assigned by school administrators during the student identification process. If the child had a learning difficulty, she would stay in touch with them to (1) follow up on the progress of the child; (2) provide customized materials aligned with what SLD team worked on with the child; and (3) support teachers in adapting their tests and exams to the child's level - a concrete example of inclusion praxis in practice. If her observation revealed the teachers to be the source of struggle, she would similarly meet with them to discuss how she could support them or what learning materials help minimize that struggle.

But beyond the classroom support, what stood out was her psychological support to teachers. She said, "If I knew a teacher needs a mental break, I would take over their class for a day or hold a special session to speak with the teacher." This illustrates the trust she established with teachers to feel close enough to share their personal challenges with her and seek her advice. It also reflects the Hope Center's recognition of the complexity of refugee teachers' lived realities and its efforts to create a space that humanizes their own experience. In doing so, these interactions further strengthened the sense of community and belonging among teachers.

But she also supported any teachers who reached out to her for help with no judgement. For example, during the Israeli attacks in Fall 2024 and the shift to virtual classrooms, she had a teacher who wanted to enhance students' self-esteem but had no idea how to approach it online. The teacher reached out to Amal via WhatsApp, which led to several back-and-forth exchanges between them to clarify the context and what the teacher had in mind. Amal then offered ideas for how to approach the activity and suggested appropriate learning materials, remaining available while the teacher implemented the activity. Amal explained, "This was an extreme case that the teacher had no idea what to do and I was there for her from the beginning, but often teachers had questions or need support here and there," which she also supported.

Taken together, these mechanisms illustrate how inclusion for refugee children with and without learning difficulties at the Hope Center is sustained through a shared professional culture of collaboration, learning, and accountability. Leadership structures the space through which teachers reflect on their practice and support one another, while educators themselves actively contribute to this collective process of professional growth. Through these interactions, shared responsibility for addressing refugees' learning needs becomes embedded in the everyday organizational life of the Hope Center. At the same time, these practices also foster teachers' own inclusion within their professional community, illustrating how the inclusion of students and teachers becomes mutually reinforcing.

### **Teachers' Situated Agency – Teacher Activism**

The first day I visited Forsa center in July 2023, the hallway walls were mostly empty, cleared in preparation for repainting at the end of summer. Yet one message remained pinned to a green bulletin board near the entrance that said, "Education is not preparation for life. Education is life itself." When I returned to Forsa in May 2025, the bulletin was still there, but the once-empty hallways were filled with students' artwork on both floors.

What most caught my attention, however, was the decoration of classroom doors by teachers' handcrafts. These creative works ranged from colorful designs, such as a tree with books as its leaves or the solar system, to powerful affirmations in Arabic or English. For example, one classroom door, decorated in English, with a rainbow on top and few smiley bears on the bottom, and read,

“When you enter this classroom

You are brave

You are a Friend.

You are a creator.

You are an eXplorer.

You are important.

You can change the world.

You are a leader.”

In both Forsa and Noor centers, I also noticed maps of Syria posted on walls in classrooms. This aligned with the introduction of a new “identity” course, added to the curriculum after summer 2023, designed to teach children, many born in Lebanon to refugee parents, about their cultural roots.

The consistency of these visual messages across the centers, including the mosaic figure above the water fountain, reflected how even mundane spaces carried affirmations for students that reminded them of their humane value, and integrity on a daily basis. While such practices align with what policy literature defines as symbolic representations (Malen and Knapp, 1997), their role at the Hope Center extends beyond psychological influence. They reflect educators’ intentional efforts to co-create and embody an inclusive space that counters the discrimination and dehumanization refugees experience in wider society in Lebanon.

In this sense, these practices can be understood as forms of teacher-activism, enacted through everyday pedagogical and special decisions; or, as Imperiale et al. (2023) put it, a form of “resistance to the precarity and loss of control that displacement entails, both in the act of teaching itself and in advocating for education rights” (p.67),

In other words, teachers did not approach inclusion as neutral or apolitical. Rather, they drew on their own lived realities to create spaces that affirmed students' identities, dignity, and potential. Their activism was not limited to classroom decoration but extended to relational pedagogies and everyday interactions with students, which was discussed in full in Chapter 5.

This became particularly visible during moments of crisis. During the Israeli attacks in Fall 2024, when teaching shifted to WhatsApp, many students faced limited access to smartphones. As Salma explained, one child with learning difficulties could not consistently access a phone, as the father owned the only device at the household and was unavailable during the day. In response, Salma and Amal worked with the family, offering to drop off material at their tent and remain available at any time. These actions illustrate how teachers extended inclusion beyond the classroom, adapting their practices to meet students where they were.

Through such efforts, educators exercised what can be understood as *situated agency*, the ability to navigate complex sociopolitical realities and engage in creative, context-specific actions that prioritize equity and inclusion (Danforth and Naraian, 2015). At the Hope Center, this form of agency is deeply shaped by teachers' own lived experiences.

More specifically, many teachers at the Hope Center fit what Stapleton (2021) describes as a position of dual marginalization: (1) their own marginalization; and (2) because of their professional role serving refugee children (marginalization by association). In this context, Syria refugee teachers face structural constraints due to their legal status, limiting access to formal employment and confining them to non-formal education setting in Lebanon, which lack the same formal recognition and career advancement potential. At the same time, they experience social marginalization similar to their students, which can lead to reduced access to resources,

diminished professional respect within the broader educational landscape. Lebanese teachers at Hope Center, while differently positioned, may also experience this marginalization through their association with refugee students, but also through gendered and socioeconomic constraints. While economic challenges noted explicitly by most teachers, domestic challenges were something implicitly noted by Leila and Samaya in between our conversations when we were talking about Lebanese teachers' challenges.

Yet, rather than positioning teachers as passive victims of these conditions, the Hope Center creates space for them to exercise agency within these constraints. Teachers draw on their own experiences to humanize students' learning, reminding them of their value and potential, viewing them beyond passive victims. Visual messages such as "you can change the world" are not abstract ideals, but reflections of teachers' own commitments to reclaim dignity and possibility within constrained circumstances.

For some educators, this agency manifests through emotional labor and self-consciousness. As Hadi shared:

There are many challenges, sometimes, you don't have enough time to plan for your students; [for example] economic situations, because you know here at the Hope Center, we work from 7:30 AM to 3 PM. The [schedule] is full and you are consumed. [...] But I always try to have a funny personality and be flexible. This is very important for us as an educator to have that kind of personality. This is what reflects on our student.

Hadi's reflection illustrates how teachers consciously manage their own emotions to avoid transferring stress to students, who are already going through a lot themselves. This form

of care, while meaningful, also reflects the additional labor teachers undertake to sustain inclusive environments.

As for many, like Jad, teaching at the Hope Center is experienced as deeply meaningful and rewarding. He said, “It makes me happy to feel that I am helpful to children who are traumatized by war and been through a lot...to teach them everything from scratch, even sometimes how to hold a pen.”

Similarly, Wasim’s trajectory, from imprisonment in Syria and coming to Lebanon as a refugee to becoming an educator, illustrates how teachers’ lived experiences inform their commitment to inclusive education.

As Sahar noted, each refugee carries a unique journey, which by drawing on that they serve their community at the Hope Center. In this sense, teachers’ work can be understood not as heroism as depicted in some global humanitarian frameworks, but as a form of everyday resistance, a way of reclaiming life and dignity within constrained conditions and the wider discriminatory environment they live in. It reminded me of Iran’s Woman, Life, Freedom movement, where its key transformative message was that living with dignity, without even seeking activism, becomes an act of resistance (Safarha, 2024).

Importantly, this form of teacher activism is not incidental; it is enabled by the leadership. The Hope Center acknowledges teachers’ marginalization while refusing to reduce them to it. Instead, leadership creates space for them to participate in decision making, supports their professional growth, and fosters a culture that values their agency. At the same time, systems of accountability and support remain in place, ensuring that agency is exercised within a structure of shared responsibility.

In doing so, the Hope Center becomes a site where both teachers and students can enact their agency in a context that otherwise offers limited space for either. It is a space of inclusion, not only in terms of access to education, but as a relational and organizational practice that restores dignity, agency, and belonging.

Taken together, teachers' situated agency represents a critical dimension of inclusion praxis at the Hope Center. Within the structures and relationships described throughout this chapter, teachers are not merely implementers of inclusive practices but active agents who interpret, adapt, and enact inclusion in ways that respond to their own realities and those of their students.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined how inclusion enacted in practice at the Hope Center through a set of interrelated mechanisms, relationships, and forms of teacher agency. Taken together, the findings suggest that inclusion cannot be merely defined or practiced as structural access to education or a static outcome. Its sustained praxis requires a collective and relational system with interconnected components that dynamically brings structural inclusion to life.

At the core of this system is collaboration across all levels of the organization. What gives meaning to the Hope Center is not merely the provision of physical space that enables refugees' access to schooling, but the shared commitment among educators to focus on the wellbeing and learning of students. Through ongoing communication, the circulation of observations and reflections, as well as collective action, inclusion emerges as a shared responsibility rather than teachers' responsibility alone, which is usually the case in educational

settings. In this sense, implementation of inclusion goes beyond access, and is enacted and sustained through everyday interactions.

Leadership plays a central role in enabling this process at Hope Center. Rather than operating through centralized, top-down authority, as some international non-governmental organizations do in working with refugees, the Center is characterized by the deliberate creation of space for its refugee educators to exercise agency. Trust, delegation, and shared responsibility are not abstract principles but enacted practices at different levels (management, leadership, and educators alike) that shape how decisions are made across roles. This approach is particularly significant in the Lebanese context, where refugee educators are excluded from formal workforce let alone leadership roles. By positioning both Syrians and Lebanese educators within shared decision-making processes, the Center also disrupts dominant hierarchies rooted in citizenship status and professional recognition in the wider societal context of Lebanon.

At the same time, leadership does not operate in the absence of structure. Instead, the Center maintains a system of communication and accountability across different levels, among management, school administrators, teachers, and special interest groups (e.g., SLD group or the digital learning preparation team). These mechanisms enable coordination, reflection, and responsiveness, while holding educators accountable to sustain the relational practice of inclusion. In this way, the Hope Center, as a refugee-led organization, organically counters the conventional systems practiced within international humanitarian organizations, which prioritize upward accountability to donors through technocratic monitoring and reporting mechanisms.

This emerging system at the Center is aligned with how Aden (2025) conceptualized relational accountability in the context of refugee-led educational initiatives, describing it as an

alternative form of “accountability governance” grounded in shared responsibility and social relations toward (a) shared goal(s).

Within this system, the SLD initiative provides a particularly important site for understanding how inclusion is enacted at Hope Center. The relational work within the SLD team demonstrates how trust-based communication and shared learning contributes to both student progress and educator’s development. Importantly, inclusion is practiced first among educators and then extended to students. This highlights that inclusive practices are not only pedagogical but relational processes embedded within organizational culture.

More particularly, the inclusion of refugee teachers emerges as a necessary condition for children’s inclusion within this framework. Through professional development, shared responsibilities, and opportunities to contribute to decision-making, teachers are positioned not as implementers of predetermined curricula and policies but as active agents of change. Professional development at the Hope Center is tailored to both teachers’ and students’ needs, reinforcing a culture of mutual learning in which educators learn from one another, from students, and through practice. This approach challenges deficit-based framings of refugee teachers and instead adopts an asset-based perspective that recognizes their knowledge, experiences, and capacities.

These conditions enable teachers to exercise what can be understood as situated agency, defined as the ability to navigate complex sociopolitical realities and practice context-driven responses that prioritize equity and inclusion (Danforth & Narayan, 2015). At the Hope Center, this agency is deeply shared by teachers’ lived experiences as refugees, which help them respond to students’ need with a level of understanding and adaptability that formal systems often lack.

Importantly, this form of teacher activism is not incidental. It is practiced organically by teachers, and promoted by leadership that created space for participation, growth, and recognition, while maintaining structures of accountability.

Beyond professional practice, the Hope Center also functions as social and relational space for educators. In a broader context marked by economic hardship, displacement, and social exclusion, the Center has provided a sense of community and belonging where teachers can sustain their professional identities as well as their personal lives. Through shared experiences, mutual support, and everyday interactions, educators develop what Nagar (2019) refers to as a form of situated solidarity. It means a collective response to the challenges they face uniquely both within and beyond the classroom. This space allows them not only to teach, but also to heal, rebuild, and sustain their sense of purpose.

Taken together, these mechanisms and relationships illustrate how inclusion at the Hope Center is sustained through a shared professional culture of collaboration, learning, care, and accountability. Leadership structures the mechanisms for communication through which teachers reflect on their own practice and support one another, while educators themselves actively contribute to this collective process. In this way, the inclusion of students and teachers becomes mutually reinforcing, with each shaping and sustaining the other.

This chapter contributes to critical refugee studies by challenging dominant humanitarian narratives that position refugees as passive recipients of aid. Instead, it demonstrates how such refugee-led organization enacts inclusion through dynamic relationships, shared responsibility, and context-driven practices. In doing so, it contributes to the epistemological shift offered by critical refugee studies that recognize refugees as active producers of knowledge, capable of

generating innovative and responsive approaches to education within constrained environments, which is known as the concept of refugeetude (Nguyen, 2019). At the same time, the Hope Center's practices offer an alternative model of accountability that is relational and grounded in a shared responsibility and learning to practice and sustain inclusion praxis for refugees.

## CHAPTER 7: Discussion and Conclusion

In the context of forced displacement, inclusive education (IE) remains a crucial yet elusive concept, particularly when refugeehood intersects with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). While multiple global frameworks recognize the importance of IE for refugees, its conceptualization and practical implementation remain limited, especially for children with SEND.

The limited implementation of inclusive education is shaped by multiple challenges, including unclear definitions of inclusion across policy frameworks (El Ahmad, 2022; El Ahmad, 2023), insufficient funding (Al Khateeb et al., 2015; Crea et al., 2022; IASC, 2019), inadequate teacher training (Crea et al., 2022; Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015), and a lack of inclusive curricula (El Ahmad, 2023; Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015; Shuayb et al., 2016) that responds to refugees' needs. These structural constraints are further compounded by societal attitudes that frame refugees as burdens on economic resources (Kiwani, 2019), and view children with SEND through a deficit lens, assuming they cannot benefit from education (IASC, 2019).

As the number of refugees around the globe has increased, separate and temporary schooling models became increasingly impractical, prompting a shift towards sustainable solutions to fulfil the rights to education for them. In response, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Global Education Strategy 2012 moved global policy directions toward the integration of refugees into national education systems to reduce the number of out-of-school refugees. While this shift in policy has increased structural access to schooling in some contexts, in practice, inclusion is often reduced to access alone. This narrow focus neglects the complexities of refugees' experiences and their comprehensive needs for

relational inclusion, which takes into account sociocultural inclusion and sense of belonging (Kelsy and Chatila, 2020).

While extensive literature has explored the structural and, to a lesser extent, the relational dimensions of inclusion for refugees, the conceptualization and practice of inclusion when refugeehood intersects with disability remain underexplored (Crea et al., 2022). Much of this scholarship is concentrated in the Global North and within formal schooling. However, significant evidence gaps persist in non-formal education (NFE) settings (INEE, 2023), despite their crucial role in refugees' education as primary access points when formal systems fail to include refugee learners.

These gaps are even more pronounced in refugee-led initiatives, which frequently lack financial support and institutional recognition from donors and international non-governmental organizations, despite the global rhetoric of advocating for localization (Aden, 2025). This underscores a persistent deficit framing of refugees as passive recipients of aid rather than active agents in educational provision (Aden, 2024, 2025). Although research on refugee-led education is growing, empirical evidence remains limited.

The purpose of this study was to address these critical gaps in the literature regarding the conceptualization and implementation of inclusion for children with SEND within refugee education in non-formal educational settings in the Global South. More specifically, through critical ethnography and working closely with refugee educators, this research addressed the question: *How do educators at a Syrian refugee-led organization in Lebanon conceptualize and enact disability and inclusion within their refugee education practices?*

To address this question within a critical ethnographic design, this study engaged closely with refugee educators to understand and theorize their inclusive pedagogical practices from a bottom-up perspective for three main reasons. First, these educators often act as caregivers, advocates, and social workers in addition to their teaching roles (Spear, 2019), yet they are sidelined from decision-making processes and policy discourse (Tuhkala, 2021).

Second, this exclusion is further intensified when teachers are refugees themselves, as dominant global narratives tend to portray refugees with duality of either being passive victims or self-reliant subjects, overlooking the complex sociopolitical realities shaping their experiences (Espiritu, 2006; Krause & Schmidt, 2019). In contrast, recognizing refugee educators as knowledge producers foregrounds their agency in developing contextually grounded and culturally responsive pedagogies.

Third, their dual marginalization often positions them as teacher-activists, navigating structural constraints while advocating for their students and challenging dominant binaries such as success and failure. Thus, engaging with their perspectives not only recenters refugee educators in educational discourse as knowledge producers, but also offers critical insights for reimagining more humanizing and inclusive approaches to education for refugee children, including those with SEND.

Grounded in critical theoretical frameworks (Annamma et al., 2018; Espiritu, 2006; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; McRuer, 2018; Nguyen, 2019), and Black feminist epistemologies (McKittrick, 2020; Nagar, 2019; Schalk, 2018), this interdisciplinary research conceptualized refugees and individuals with SEND as cultural and political actors within their sociopolitical landscapes, challenging deficit-based perspectives in refugee and disability education. Extending traditional models of inclusion beyond access, participation, and achievement, this research

proposed a humanizing educational framework for inclusion that prioritizes love, care, and emotional belonging (Barcelos, 2016; hooks, 1994, 2000). This process-based approach allowed me to reimagine inclusion as an ongoing journey aligned with decolonial and Indigenous knowledge systems (Kimmerer, 2013), emphasizing relationality and holistic development.

The study also utilized Nguyen's (2019) concept of "refugeetude"—an epistemological shift that views refugees as continuous, dynamic sources of creativity and resilience. By recognizing refugees' enduring contributions and complex relationships, this lens shifts focus from viewing refugees as passive recipients of aid to cultural agents engaged in knowledge production and meaning making.

Additionally, this study drew on intersectionality concept from Black feminist frameworks as its overarching epistemological orientation (Crenshaw, 1991; Schalk, 2018). I used this concept within the cultural model of disability, together with Crip theory (McRuer, 2006, 2018), to conceptualize (dis)ability as a relational, political, and culturally construct shaped by ableism and prevailing neoliberal measures of normalcy, productivity, and value (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2018). Attending to critiques of Crip theory's limited engagement with race and other axes of marginalization, the study drew on the Dis/Ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit) frameworks to extend it to refugee context in this study as an analytical lens. This approach enabled me to stay conscious of how intertwined dynamics of refugeetude and (dis)ability shape the lived experiences of refugees, particularly those with SEND, and their educational trajectories (Annamma et al., 2018; Hanebutt & Mueller, 2021; Migliarini, 2017; Schalk, 2018).

Through these frameworks, the study sought to redirect toward a more decolonial lens that centers the knowledge of refugees and their lived realities, as alternative way of knowing

and being. This direction enabled me to deepen my understanding of inclusion, refugeetude, and disability as interconnected and evolving concepts in education provided by a refugee-led organization in Lebanon for children with and without SEND.

Aligned with my conceptual frameworks, I used critical ethnography to investigate the inclusive practices at the Hope Center that serves Syria refugees in Lebanon. Lebanon provides a critical context for examining these practices given its complex education system, high refugee population (about one third of its own population), and long-standing structural inequalities shaped by overlapping crises, and political and economic instability.

Also, Syria refugee children in Lebanon face significant barriers to education due to historical, social, and policy factors. Despite initiatives like Reaching All Children with Education (RACE) and stated commitments to inclusive education, systemic challenges and discriminatory practices persist, particularly for children with SEND. While Lebanon's engagement with international human rights frameworks and reforms, led by the Ministries of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), demonstrate a willingness to address these challenges, the gap between policy and practice remains substantial.

This study was conducted at Hope Center that provides non-formal education across three centers, from pre-K to Grade 3, along with a newly added special learning difficulties (SLD) initiative that provides additional support for children with SEND outside mainstream classrooms. Most of the educators and school leaders at the Hope Center are refugees themselves, primarily delivering instruction in Arabic, which is Syria's official language of instruction. Although some students are overaged, and the Center might be their only educational opportunity, it helps them foster a sense of belonging and normalcy despite the lack of formal accreditation due to Lebanese regulations. Conducting critical ethnography at this refugee-led

organization in Lebanon, enabled me to center refugees' bottom-up approach to inclusive pedagogies for learners with and without SEND within such social political context.

Focusing on two of three centers based on the Hope Center's preference and their research needs on centers with SLD initiatives, this study was conducted in Forsa and Noor centers. The fieldwork spanned across three phases (Summer 2023, Fall 2024, and Spring 2025) and involved a combination of different data collection methods and sources. Immersion as an observer was the primary method, which took multiple forms, including in-person classrooms observations, virtual observation of digital learning platforms, engagement in participatory activities, and attention to physical materials (i.e., learning materials, students' and teachers' artifacts). This immersive fieldwork was accompanied by ethnographic interviews in forms of unstructured, semi-structured, and dialogical interviews, along with detailed field notes capturing daily events, interactions, and my own reflections.

By triangulation of the immersion and ethnographic interviews between 2023 and 2025, I applied a thematic analysis approach, involving iterative cycles of inductive and comparative coding. This process enabled a holistic understanding of how inclusion and disability were integrated, perceived, and practiced within the Center's refugee education practices. The data analysis of the findings revealed important themes, which were displayed in three chapters in this dissertation.

Chapter 4 started the findings by retelling the oral history of the Hope Center, narrated by Leila, the education director at the Center, who established the refugee education services at the Center late in 2013. This narration was thickened by interviews with other educators and Center's resources, along with refugee education literature in Lebanon. In this chapter, I aimed to engage with how the Center's history was remembered, valued, and expressed through Leila's

subjectivity, while situating this narration within broader social, political, and economic landscape of Lebanon. This historical narration was critical in setting the stage to understand the context where inclusive pedagogies for refugees (with and without SEND) were conceptualized, practiced, and sustained at the Center. More particularly, as Madison (2012) put it, it sought to highlight “the complexity and dignity of multiple truths and paradoxes below the surface but holding the surface in place” (p.36).

The chapter synthesized how the Hope Center’s practices evolved within, and in response to, the broader constraints shaping refugee education in Lebanon. Through these accounts, the chapter discussed that inclusion does not emerge as a fixed policy outcome, but as an ongoing, contextually grounded process that shifts alongside refugees’ lived realities. Hope Center approached this through an ethic of doing-what-is-possible regardless of its scale, refusing to allow financial limitations, shifting government regulations often not in favor of refugees, and political uncertainty to justify withdrawing support from refugee students. This mindset became central to the Center’s culture, shaping its services both within its own schools and in its engagement with public school systems in the country. In this sense, inclusion is understood as a series of situated decisions made within constrained conditions, rather than an abstract principle, at Hope Center’s organizational level.

At the core of this process was the Hope Center’s sense of responsibilities toward its community, reflected in its responsiveness to the evolving needs of both students and teachers through praxis, an ongoing interplay of reflection and action. This approach is characterized by commitment, care, and respect for lived experiences as a valid source of knowledge in incremental progress, reasoning with hooks’ conceptualization of love as an ethic. For hooks (2003), “the act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the

other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own. In such knowing we know and are known as members of one community” (p. 132).

Chapter 5 examined how inclusion was perceived and practiced as a dynamic, praxis-oriented process at school level, drawing on immersive fieldwork and ethnographic interviews with educators across centers between 2023 and 2025. It showed refugee educators conceptualized inclusion as a holistic and context-responsive process, grounded in the right to education and shaped by refugee students and educators’ lived realities. Drawing on examples from observing both SLD and mainstream classrooms, the chapter demonstrated that such perception is enacted in practice through relational and adaptive pedagogies. Through continuous adjustment to students’ diverse needs and abilities, flexible lesson planning, and the integration of various learning strategies, educators actively reshaped teaching to accommodate and value students’ differences in their everyday practice. In this sense, as Amal, the social worker, put it, inclusion meant “having the same lesson in class but at different levels so the child won’t feel excluded.”

At the same time, leadership (the management team, school administrators, and the social worker) played a key role in shaping how educators conceptualized and practiced inclusion in this way, particularly for children with SEND. By cultivating an asset-based approach that emphasized what students can do rather than what they cannot, leadership pragmatically framed inclusion through teacher preparation, capacity-enhancement, and a shift in terminology to “special learning difficulties.” This shift was not intended to flatten students’ diverse needs and abilities, but rather to create space for responsiveness and flexibility, moving away from rigid, deficit-based categorizations.

Overall, this multidimensional and dynamic inclusion praxis, grounded in refugee children's lived realities, challenged dominant focus on structural access and outcome-oriented models of inclusion. It reflects a context-specific, bottom-up response to complex conditions shaping refugee learners' educational experiences and reimagines inclusive refugee education where formal systems fall short. In doing so, it disrupts the prevailing neoliberal, outcome-driven approaches to education, particularly for children with SEND, by promoting relationality, responsiveness, and adaptability, as well as by tailoring both pedagogy and assessment to students' lived realities, histories, and capacities within non-formal educational settings.

Chapter 6 explored how inclusion was enacted and sustained in practice at the Hope Center through a set of interrelated mechanisms, relationships, and forms of teacher agency. Drawing primarily on ethnographic interviews conducted between July 2023 and May 20225, this chapter showed that inclusion praxis at the Center was not sustained by structural access alone, but through a collective and relational system that brought such access to life in everyday practice. At the core of this system was collaboration across all levels of the organization, where inclusion emerged through shared responsibilities, ongoing communication, and the circulation of observations, reflections, and action among educators. In this sense, what gave meaning to the practice of inclusion at the Hope Center was not merely the provision of physical space for refugee students to access schooling, but the shared commitment among educators to students' wellbeing and learning.

At the same time, leadership played a key role in enabling this process. Rather than operating through centralized, top-down authority, the Hope Center was characterized by a shared leadership model grounded in trust, delegation, and mutual respect among the management team, school administrators, the social worker, and teachers. This was particularly

significant in the Lebanese context, where refugee educators are often excluded not only from formal teaching workforce but also from leadership structures. Alongside this horizontal leadership model, the Center maintained effective systems of communication and accountability across different levels and teams, such as the SLD team. These mechanisms enabled coordination, responsiveness, and reflection, while also holding educators accountable to sustain the relational practice of inclusion. In this way, the chapter showed that the Hope Center's refugee-led structure countered dominant humanitarian models of technocratic, upward accountability by enacting a more relational form of accountability governance grounded in shared responsibility and social relations.

Finally, the chapter demonstrated that teachers' inclusion was central to students' inclusion. Through (1) professional development tailored to both teachers' and students' needs, (2) shared responsibilities with leadership, and (3) opportunities to contribute to decision-making, refugee educators were positioned not as implementers of predetermined curricula, but as reflective practitioners and active agents of change. These conditions enabled them to exercise situated agency in responding to students' needs through context-driven, equity-oriented practices shaped by their own lived experiences as refugees. Beyond professional practice, the Hope Center also emerged as a social space in which educators could sustain their professional identities and build community.

Looking back at the literature on refugee education and the conceptual frameworks that positioned this research from a critical and decolonial perspective, the next section contextualizes these findings into scholarly conversation, their implications, and future directions.

## **Implications of the Findings, and Future Directions**

The findings of this study illustrate that inclusion for refugees, particularly for children with SEND, is best understood not as a fixed policy outcome, but a dynamic and relational praxis-oriented process. Across the three chapters of the findings, inclusion emerged as something continuously made and remade through reflection and action, and as responsive to shifting realities of refugees. At the Hope Center, this praxis-oriented process operated across various levels. At organizational level, it was manifested through situated decisions about what could be achieved and sustained for refugees' educational needs under existing constraints. At the school level, it was practiced through collaboration, communication, and shared responsibilities among refugee educators and leadership. Finally, at the classroom level, it was shaped and reshaped through adaptive pedagogies attentive to children's diverse needs, histories, and capacities.

In this sense, the findings do not simply provide empirical evidence to the literature on refugee education in Lebanon. Instead, they invite us to rethink what inclusion means, how it is practiced, and what kinds of educational futures can become possible when refugees are centered not as passive recipients of aid, but as knowledge producers and active, cultural agents of change.

### **Revisiting Inclusion through a Critical Human Rights Lens**

The first implication of the findings is conceptual. This study highlights the need to extend the definition of inclusion beyond structural access, and removing barriers to access, participation, and measurable achievement although all remain important. Educators at the Hope Center grounded inclusion in the right to education, yet they perceived and practiced it in ways

that exceeded formal rights discourse. This formal discourse has been shaped by the United Nations (UN) documents of the 1990s–2000s. It codified about/through/for human rights education (HRE) in a top-down, declarationist mode, which aimed at national policymakers and institutions, depoliticizing HRE, sustaining binary distinctions and one-way knowledge transfer, and disregarding alternative knowledge systems (Abu Moghli, 2020).

At the Hope Center, inclusion emerged to include social belonging, emotional well-being, safety, confidence, and meaningful participation of refugees in learning, including those with SEND. This was especially evident in moments when inclusion was situated differently under different conditions. For example, as Samaya noted during school closure amid Israeli attacks, simply providing “some form of education,” while prioritizing psychosocial support was itself an inclusive act. In SLD sessions, inclusion could mean empowering a child to feel capable of something and helping them learn at their own pace. In mainstream classrooms, as Amal noted, it could mean being excited to learn, “having the same lesson but at different levels,” and having space to simply be a child. These findings therefore point toward a more critical human rights understanding of inclusion, one that remains committed to education as a right while also insisting that rights must be interpreted through the lived realities of those who are most marginalized (Abu Moghli, 2020; UNESCO, 1974, 1978).

This has implications for how a right to education should be theorized in refugee contexts. What distinguished the Hope Center’s approach was not countering the global frameworks but taking a critical turn within them. Indeed, the educators’ perception of inclusion aligned with structural concerns around access and participation; however, it also highlighted dimensions that are often overlooked in institutionalized human rights discourse. These dimensions include history, politics, context, and the everyday realities of learners. In other

words, they refer to contextualization of HRE as a concept, as articulated in UNESCO's 1978 International Congress on Teaching Human Rights, where HRE was understood not as a distant script, but as something that must be interpreted through local realities and marginalized lived experiences. However, this orientation excluded later from UN's revised version in 1990's (Abu Moghli, 2020; Becker, 2021).

In this sense, the findings resonate more closely with critical and decolonial approaches to HRE than with top-down, declarationist versions of rights implementation. They suggest that in refugee contexts, inclusion must be understood as a situated practice of making rights meaningful under unequal conditions rather than merely complying with abstract definitions.

### **Inclusion as a Relational, Dynamic, and Multidimensional Practice**

The second implication is related to practice. The findings suggest that inclusion at the Hope Center was relational, dynamic, and multidimensional. It was relational as it was carried out through communication, collaboration, and attentiveness to students' and teachers' experiences alike. It was dynamic because it evolved with shifting needs and realities rather than following a static model. Additionally, it was multidimensional because it held together structural access, emotional belonging, psychosocial support, academic learning, and meaningful participation of refugee children, including those with SNED. Inclusion, then, was not approached as a fixed outcome to achieve but an ongoing educational process shaped by lived realities of the learners.

This multidimensionality was especially evident in pedagogies of both centers. Through both SLD and mainstream classrooms, refugee educators continuously adjusted lessons, methods, pacing, and assessment of students in ways that respond to their diverse abilities and

learning needs. In this process, achievement itself was redefined at the Center. It was not only about meeting standardized thresholds or fast-paced curriculum coverage, but also about engagement, confidence, progress, and joy in learning. As both social workers said, making learning enjoyable, helping children feel that they are good at something, and ensuring that school did not add to children's already stressful lives were all embedded within educational achievement.

This shift from outcome-oriented to process-oriented education is especially important as it counters the prevailing neoliberal frameworks in education, which commodify education and tie its value to efficiency, productivity, and standardization (Ball, 2012; Biesta, 2009). In the context of refugee children, particularly those with SEND, such frameworks are profoundly exclusionary. The Hope Center's practices instead illustrate that inclusive pedagogy requires educators to assess learning in relation to students' needs, diverse abilities, and lived realities.

Reflecting on Black feminist concept of intersectionality and DisCrit in education, as well as the cultural model of disability, these findings show that educational exclusion cannot be reduced to the presence of individuals impairments or to social barriers considered in isolation. Instead, exclusion is reproduced through intersecting relations of ableism, citizenship, poverty, and institutional norms, which determine whose learning counts, whose learning pace is acceptable, and whose bodymindspirit is recognized to benefit from education.

The Hope Center's approach to inclusive refugee education was not to flatten differences among children, but to loosen the grip of rigid deficit-based categories in order to create more flexible and responsive educational possibilities. The shift from special educational needs and disabilities to special learning difficulties could be understood in this light, in addition to its technical distinction noted in chapter 5. It did not remove the challenge, nor did it pretend that

teachers' biases no longer existed. Instead, it opened space for educators to reflect on those biases, talk about them honestly, and work through them in practice. This is where the Center's approach most clearly challenged dominant norms of ability and normalcy, not by denying difficulty, but by refusing to let deficit-based categorizations fully define the child or foreclose the possibility of learning for them.

### **Love, Engaged Pedagogy, and the Humanization of Learning**

Another implication is pedagogical. Across chapters, an affective and relational orientation to teaching emerged as central to how inclusion was conceptualized and sustained at the Hope Center. Refugee educators' practices illustrate that love as hermeneutic (i.e., interpreting and engaging with the world through a lens of compassion, empathy, and deep respect for the inherent dignity of the learner) (hook, 2003), should be at the core of pedagogy. What appeared repeatedly in the findings was not love as an abstraction in teaching, but as attentiveness, commitment, care, respect, and responsibility, aligning with conceptualization of love in engaged pedagogy (Barcelos, 2016; hooks, 2003).

At the organizational level, this love was manifested in the ethic of doing what was possible, however small, in order to keep children in the learning loop. At the classroom level, it appeared in teachers' efforts to know students, build their trust, create safety, and respond to their psychosocial and educational needs with flexibility, responsiveness, and dignity. In this sense, the findings strongly support an engaged pedagogy that counters the culture of fear, dominant in the competitive educational environment, and encouraged students to trust in their capacity to learn with a spirit of resilience and competence (hooks, 2003).

Conceptualizing inclusion through this lens of attentive love also extends inclusive education discourse. It highlights emotional belonging as central to learning itself. This matters particularly in refugee education, where children's learning is inseparable from their histories of displacement, uncertainty, and trauma. It also matters for children with learning difficulties, whose educational experiences are too often shaped by comparison to able-bodied and able-minded students, stigma, and failure. At the Hope Center, inclusion became possible not only because students were admitted into classrooms; but because educators worked continuously to create conditions in which they could feel recognized, capable, and connected, promoted by leadership and their support to educators. This suggests that affective pedagogies are not peripheral to inclusive refugee education; they are one of its conditions of possibility.

### **Refugee-led Education, Relational Accountability, and Sustainability**

A fourth implication concerns sustainability and the broader contribution of this study to critical refugee studies. One of the strongest patterns across the findings was that inclusion at the Center was sustained through a refugee-led professional culture of collaboration, learning, and accountability. This accountability was not defined in the narrow humanitarian aid sense of upward reporting to donors or compliance with formal indicators. Instead, it was practiced through everyday relationships, open communication, as well as shared responsibility and commitment to students' well-being and learning. The management team's physical presence, regular follow-up between and within educators at different levels (management, school administrations, and teachers), creation of spaces for educators' reflection, and trust-based delegation all helped build a system of shared leadership and responsibility in which educators felt supported. As a result, inclusion was sustained not through rigid oversight, but through what Aden (2025) conceptualizes it in refugee-led education as relational accountability.

This has important implications for how refugee-led education is understood in policy, practice, and research. What might appear from international humanitarian actors as informal or insufficiently institutionalized might in fact reflect a different accountability logic that is grounded in proximity, trust, reciprocity, and responsiveness (Aden, 2024, 2025). Such mechanisms are especially relevant in displacement contexts where needs evolve quickly and cannot be adequately addressed through distant bureaucratic structures alone. In this sense, the Hope Center offers an alternative approach to dominant humanitarian governance models of accountability by foregrounding sustainability in refugee education through community, accountable to those they serve, and responsive to changing realities of refugees.

This concept contributes to critical refugee studies and the concept of *refugeetude*. Countering the dominant framing of refugees, the Hope Center's work illustrates refugees not as passive recipients of aid, but as active producers of knowledge and practices in educational setting, organizational systems, and pedagogical alternatives. Refugee educators in this context were not merely implementing predetermined curricula. They were actively interpreting students' needs, reflecting on constraints, adapting practices, supporting one another, and co-constructing an inclusive culture within the broader hostile societal climate in Lebanon. Therefore, their work embodies the epistemological shift that *refugeetude* concept invites: seeing refugees as dynamic sources of creativity, active producers of knowledge, and with political agency (Nguyen, 2019).

### **Teachers' Inclusion Central to Children's Inclusion**

Furthermore, this study shows that children's inclusion cannot be fully understood apart from refugee teachers' own inclusion. One of the important contributions of the findings to refugee teacher literature is the recognition that the Center operated not only as a space for inclusion of students but also as a space in which refugee educators could sustain their

professional identities, exercise situated agency and find community. In a context where refugee teachers are often excluded from the formal education system and denied recognition as professional actors, this matters deeply. Professional development, coaching, everyday collaboration, and less hierarchal relations among educators all contributed to a shared culture of responsibility in which refugee teachers were not assumed as mere implementers, but as reflective practitioners and agents of change. In other words, the Center acknowledged their dual marginalization while refusing to reduce them to it.

This helps explain why inclusion at the Hope Center was mutually reinforcing across roles. Trust-based relationships among adults enabled the relational inclusion of children. Teachers' learning was treated as integral to the work and not separated from it, a critical aspect of refugee teacher literature noted by Bengtsson (2023). Their strengths were recognized in the same-based mindset that leadership sought to cultivate toward students. Even communal practices, such as ending school on Fridays by going together to the mosque, while not emerged relevant to other findings to note in chapters 4-6 but they appeared relevant to note here as they took on significance as a shared routines of belonging, normalcy, and healing within a wider environment marked by precarity and exclusion.

In this sense, the Hope Center emerged as a social location of restoration and solidarity for both students and educators, as Biglin (2020) shows how embodied experiences could constitute how places act therapeutically. This is also an important contribution to the growing literature on refugee-led educational initiatives. It is because it shows that such spaces can function not only as service provides, but as community hubs in which educational, social, and affective forms of inclusion are intertwined.

Taken together, all these findings point to a broader overarching implication for policy, research, and practice, and that is to highlight the significance of a decolonial lens in this context. This study illustrates the significant role refugees play in serving their communities creatively within the existing constraints if they are given the space. Therefore, for inclusive refugee education policies, this study emphasizes an urgent need to revisit inclusion in ways that do not treat refugees in a tokenistic manner, but center refugee-led initiatives as legitimate educational actors and knowledge producers. Additionally, policies that aim to support inclusive refugee education should learn from their contextually grounded practices rather than merely seeking to absorb them into top-down generalized models.

Moreover, regarding practice, the findings highlight the importance of affective, critical, and engaged pedagogies that recognize emotional belonging, healing, and dignity of learners and educators as central to refugee education. They point to the value of supporting teachers not only as implementers of curriculum but as learners, collaborators, and agents whose own inclusion matters. Finally, for research in this context, decolonial and reciprocal approaches matter. They enable refugee educators to shape what counts as meaningful knowledge and what research can be beneficial to their lives, rather than merely serving as subjects of analysis. Such approach not only leads to richer analysis but also offers a more ethical way of knowing. Future research in this context can benefit from approaches that remain accountable to participants' lived realities and to the knowledge they are already producing. Next section further discusses future directions of this study.

## **Future Directions**

There are a few future directions that this study can offer. Some emerged directly from the findings themselves, while others remain important areas for further inquiry that were beyond the scope of this dissertation. First, the findings point to the importance of parents and caregivers as a dimension of inclusion that warrants further study. Across the fieldwork, interaction with parents repeatedly surfaced, often through their uneven engagement in children's learning for reasons connected to broader refugee precarity. This suggests that children's inclusion does not rest only on school-level practices and teacher inclusion, but also on the inclusion, support, and participation of families within refugee educational spaces. Future research could explore how parents' own experiences of exclusion, mobility and legal constraints, labor demands, and educational histories shape children's opportunities to learn and belong.

Additionally, future studies should explore gender more explicitly as another intersecting factor. Gender was my "researcher's bias" in which I expected to see its intersecting impact in the results, and as a theme. However, it was not fully borne out in the classroom in the ways I had initially anticipated. I did not observe strong gender segregation in everyday classroom interactions, or teachers' gender norms shaping their participation. In coeducational context of the Hope Center, I saw both girls and boys appear to take up leadership and participation in fluid ways, while intentionally grouped based on strengths to support one another.

At the same time, the interviews with both social workers, Mariam and Amal, suggested that there is more gender dynamics in home environments and broader societal context than at school. While not a recurring theme, however, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and conservative family norms were discussed. My language barriers might be a factor for not fully

capturing the gender dynamics in the classroom. Regardless, future studies could explore explicitly how gender operates across home, school, and community, and its intersection with refugeehood and (dis)ability in ways that may not be immediately visible in classrooms. Furthermore, given that most leadership positions at the Hope Center were held by women, future research could more closely examine how gender shapes the practice of inclusion, as well as the forms of relational accountability that sustain it in refugee-led education.

Beyond the areas that surfaced directly through the fieldwork, this dissertation also points to two additional directions for future research. First, working directly with refugee children, particularly those with SEND, was beyond the scope of this study. Yet, understanding their perceptions and lived experiences of inclusion remains critical, and is still underexplored in refugee education literature. Future studies should pay closer attention to how refugee children perceive belonging, participation, learning, and exclusion in their everyday educational lives. Centering the lived realities of refugee bodymindspirits through decolonial and participatory approaches would deepen our understanding of inclusive refugee education and strengthen its policy relevance. More importantly, it also creates space for children to exercise their agency in matters that concern them directly.

Second, while relational accountability within the Hope Center emerged in the fieldwork as an important mechanism for sustaining inclusion, how the organization navigated accountability to donors at organizational level was neither a direct focus of this study nor something that surfaced strongly in the data. Still, given that donor priorities and funding structures often constrain grassroots humanitarian work (Zakharia, 2024), this remains an important area for future research. I noticed, for instance, that several major international donor organizations commonly active in Lebanon were not listed among the Center's sponsors in its

annual reports. While this observation alone cannot explain the organization's funding relationships, it may suggest a degree of selectivity in how the Hope Center has navigated its funding streams over time in order to operate in ways that align with its values and its practice of inclusive refugee education. Future research could examine more directly how refugee-led organizations negotiate donor relationships, and how such dynamics shape their autonomy, sustainability, and inclusive educational practice.

Overall, the implications of this study do not lie in offering a model of inclusion to be generalized on a scale, but in opening a different way of thinking. The Hope Center shows that inclusive refugee education can be reimagined through relationality, attentive love, shared responsibility, and refugee-led agency. At the same time, these practices must be understood within the structural constraints in which they operate, including limited resources, inconsistent student attendance, uneven teacher preparedness, and broader forms of exclusion beyond the school itself. Inclusion, then, is not merely the removal of barriers, but the ongoing work of creating educational spaces where children and educators can learn, feel belonging, heal, and act with dignity within their social, political, and economic complexities and constraints. Thus, the broader contribution of this study is both empirical and political as it offers evidence that alternative educational futures are already being practiced from the margins.

## **Conclusion**

This study advances scholarship on inclusive refugee education by providing empirical insight into how a refugee-led organization in the Global South conceptualizes and implements inclusion for refugee children with and without SEND. In doing so, it challenges deficit-based frameworks and approaches in refugee and disability studies in education and shows that

inclusion is not merely a policy outcome or technical intervention, but relational, culturally situated, and humanizing process shaped by lived realities, values, and everyday praxis.

By adopting a bottom-up lens, this study highlights refugee educators not as implementers of externally defined models, but as knowledge producers and active agents in reimagining inclusive education within complex social, political, and economic contexts, and constraints they create. In this sense, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonize refugee education by showing that alternative, context-responsive, and more humanizing forms of inclusion are already being practiced from the margins.

## Appendix A

Table 2. Data Methods and Sources by Phase

Data Collection Phase	Data Methods	Data Sources
Summer (July) 2023	Immersive work as a participant observer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In-person classroom observations in Forsa and Noor in different play-based activities</li> <li>- School visit at Ufugh Al Jadid</li> <li>- Artifact of students made through play-based activities in Summer</li> <li>- My own field notes and reflections</li> </ul>
	Dialogical conversations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Informal interviews with various teachers from Forsa and Noor during recess, or after class time</li> </ul>
	Unstructured interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Multiple discussions with Leila</li> <li>- Two interviews with Mariam, the social worker</li> </ul>
Fall Semester 2024 (September – December 2024)	Immersive work as an observer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Virtual observations of Grade 1, 2, and 3 classes conducted via WhatsApp. These sessions consolidated students across centers at each grade level</li> <li>- Students’ assignments shared over WhatsApp between November and December 2024</li> <li>- Remote participation in a teacher training session on September 12, 2024, led by Amal, along with access to the recording and presentation slides</li> <li>- My own field notes and reflections</li> </ul>
	Dialogical conversations over Zoom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Multiple meetings in September and November, 2024, with the management team alone, and together with the SLD team</li> </ul>
Spring Semester 2025 (January – May 2025)	Immersive work as an observer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In-person classroom observations in Forsa and Noor in May 2025, particularly Grade 1 mainstream classes with Ja’d in Forsa and Hadi in Noor, as well as multiple SLD sessions with Salma in Forsa in both morning and afternoon shifts, and Zahraa in afternoon shift in Noor</li> <li>- Teachers’ handmade decorations of the hallway, classrooms, and doors</li> <li>- Learning materials crafted by teachers in Grade 1 and 2</li> <li>- Learning materials donated to the Hope Center, used in the observed classes and SLD sessions</li> </ul>

Data Collection Phase	Data Methods	Data Sources
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Artifact of students made through play-based activities in class</li> <li>- My own field notes and reflections</li> </ul>
	Participatory Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Meetings in March 2025, discussing TPAR feasibility and components</li> <li>- Possibility tree activity created at Reflect Workshop collectively with management team, principals of Forsa (Fatima) and Noor (Sahar), educators (Salmaa, Zahraa, Amal, and Rania)</li> <li>- Individual possibility tree activity by Salma, Zahraa, and Amal, and their corresponding debriefs</li> </ul>
	Dialogical conversations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Multiple informal conversations with Amal (Social worker), Leila, Samaya (the management team) online in March 2024, and in person in May 2025</li> <li>- Multiple informal conversations in-person with educators, including Salma and Zahraa (SLD educators), as well as their mainstream dyads Ja'd and Hadi, respectively, after their class was over or during the recess in May 2025</li> </ul>
	Unstructured interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- An in-person interview with Leila about Hope Center's history in May 2025</li> <li>- Two over two hours in-person interviews with Amal, the social worker in May 2025</li> </ul>
	Semi-structured interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In-person interview with school administrative team at Noor, including Sahar and Wasim</li> <li>- In-person interview with school administrative team at Forsa, including Fatima, Khaled, and Muhammad</li> <li>- In-person interview with Ja'd, mainstream Grade 1 teacher at Forsa, who teaches some of Salma's students with SLD</li> <li>- In-person interview with Hadi, mainstream Grade 1 teacher at Noor, who teaches some of Zahraa's students with SLD</li> <li>- Online interview with Zahraa, who serves both as the SLD and mainstream teacher in different shifts</li> </ul>

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