

Refugee Policies Between Legislation and Practice in Education and Social Integration: A Study of Lebanon and Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The Syrian refugee crisis has created major challenges for host countries, particularly in relation to education and social integration. In response, countries such as Lebanon and Turkey have developed different refugee education policies aimed at supporting access, inclusion, and long-term integration. This study examines the gap between refugee policies and their real-life impact on refugees' agency and social integration in education, using Lebanon and Turkey as comparative cases. The research is based on four semi-structured interviews with young Syrian refugees living in both countries. Although the policies in both contexts are designed to support access, inclusion, and integration, the findings show that refugees often face major barriers in practice. In Lebanon, these barriers include late enrolment, language differences, discrimination, and dependence on external organizations to secure access to school. In Turkey, the main challenges include age-based placement, limited academic and language support, and tuition fees in higher education. Across both cases, the study shows that policy is not only a written rule, but determination of access to education, how students experience school, and how much control they feel over their future. The findings also show that refugee students often have to rely on personal effort, family support, and outside help to continue their education. Overall, the study argues that refugee education policies should not be evaluated only by their official goals, but by how they work in everyday life and whether they truly support dignity, agency, and inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, refugee issues have become one of the most important topics in global politics and humanitarian debates because millions of people have been forced to leave their homes (UNHCR, 2024). Many host countries say they want to help refugees by giving them access to education and opportunities to integrate into society. On paper, these policies often sound fair and supportive. They seem to offer protection and a better future. However, the way these policies are carried out can be very different from what they promise.

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For this reason, it is important to look at policy not only as a written rule made by the government, but also as something that is experienced through schools, teachers, administrators, and local systems. Refugees may still face problems such as language barriers, financial stress, crowded classrooms, unclear procedures, or limited access to services. Because of this, the gap between what a policy says and what actually happens can have a major effect on refugee children and their families.

This study focuses on that space, especially in relation to refugees' agency. Agency means the ability of individuals to make choices and act within the social and structural conditions surrounding them (MDPI, 2024). For refugee families, especially Syrian families, decisions about education are shaped by many things. These include money, legal status, family responsibilities, social expectations, and the level of support available in the community. Education policy does not only affect whether children go to school. It can also affect how much control families feel they have over their own lives and future.

Lebanon and Turkey are useful countries to study because they have responded to refugee education in very different ways. Lebanon hosts one of the largest refugee populations relative to its size and has largely relied on international organizations, NGOs, and emergency-based educational support to respond to the Syrian refugee crisis (UNHCR, 2026). The Lebanese education system has faced major challenges including overcrowded schools, limited resources, double-shift schooling, and language barriers, since many subjects in Lebanese public schools are taught in English or French rather than Arabic (World Bank, 2020). As a result, access to education for Syrian students is often shaped by school capacity, administrative procedures, and local implementation practices.

Turkey, on the other hand, adopted a more centralized approach under its temporary protection regime. Since 2016, the Turkish government has increasingly integrated Syrian students into public schools instead of separate Temporary Education Centers (TECs). Turkish policies focused more strongly on long-term integration into the national system, including Turkish-language education and formal enrolment within public institutions (DGMM, 2014). However, refugee students in Turkey still face significant challenges related to language acquisition, academic adaptation, and unequal access to higher education.

These differences make Lebanon and Turkey a valuable comparison for understanding how different policy approaches can shape refugees' educational experiences, agency, and long-term social integration in different ways.

This matters because policy success should not be measured only by what governments say they intend to do. A policy may promise access, inclusion, or integration, but still leave refugees facing barriers that make education hard to reach or hard to continue. In this sense, implementation is not a small detail. It is the stage where policy becomes real, and where its strengths and weaknesses are most clearly seen.

This research asks: *How do refugee policies differ between their intended goals and their real-life impact on refugees' agency in education and social integration?* This paper explores this question because it helps explain why well-intentioned policies do not always lead to fair outcomes. By examining both

policy design and its lived implementation, this study shows how refugee education can either support or limit agency, and why that difference matters for integration in the long run.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing research on refugee education has looked at both policy and lived experience, especially in relation to access, integration, and long-term outcomes. A large body of literature shows that refugee policies are often created to support inclusion, but the results are often unequal across different countries and contexts.

For example, Will, Becker, and Winkler (2022) show that regional differences in education policy can strongly affect refugee students' access to schooling. Their study explains that things like enrolment timing, school placement, and the type of institution are often decided by policy systems rather than by a student's ability or family background. This means that education is not only shaped by personal effort, but also by institutional rules that can either help or block access.

Similarly, Wenger et al (2025) point out that there is often a gap between the goals of refugee support policies and the outcomes they produce. Their research shows that services like education, health care, and language support are often promised by policy, but not always carried out in practice. This can make it harder for refugees to benefit from these systems, especially when language barriers and limited resources affect learning.

To understand these gaps more concretely, it is important to consider the policy frameworks in Lebanon and Turkey, which shape the educational experiences of Syrian refugees in different ways.

In Lebanon, refugee education is mainly governed through the public education system under the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), particularly through the Reaching All Children with Education (RACE I and RACE II) strategies launched in 2013-2021. These strategies were developed in collaboration with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in response to the Syrian refugee crisis. The main aim of RACE is to expand access to public education for refugee children through measures such as double-shift schools, accelerated learning programs, and non-formal education initiatives. However, implementation remains uneven and highly dependent on school capacity, local administrative practices, and external funding, which results in inconsistent access across different regions.

In Turkey, the education of refugees, particularly Syrians under Temporary Protection, is governed by a long-term integration framework established under the Temporary Protection Regulation introduced by the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM, 2014). This regulation granted Syrian refugees legal access to public services, including education, and initially led to the creation of Temporary

Education Centers (TECs), which provided instruction based on a Syrian-Arabic curriculum with support from the Ministry of National Education (Turkey) and UNICEF Turkey.

Starting in 2016, Turkey began a gradual transition away from TECs toward full integration of Syrian students into public schools. By 2020, these centers were fully phased out, making the Turkish public education system the primary mode of schooling for refugee children. This shift reflects a broader policy goal of long-term social cohesion and integration. Within this framework, additional support mechanisms such as the PIKTES project (Project on Promoting Integration of Syrian Kids into the Turkish Education System), funded by the European Union, have been introduced to provide Turkish language instruction, learning materials, and school support services.

Despite this formal integration strategy, significant challenges persist in practice. Language acquisition remains one of the main barriers, as the transition to Turkish-medium instruction has been difficult for many students, particularly those entering the system at later stages. These challenges have contributed to learning gaps and, in some cases, dropout risks. In addition, adaptation to the Turkish academic system has been difficult for students who previously followed a different curriculum, particularly those affected by disrupted schooling during displacement.

Bendixsen and Sandberg (2023) also offer an important idea through the concept of temporal governance. They argue that short-term protection policies create uncertainty and instability, which affects how refugee families make decisions. In education, this uncertainty can make long-term planning harder and can reduce the ability of parents and students to make thoughtful educational choices. As a result, their sense of agency can become limited.

Broader global research also shows that refugee education policies usually focus more on access to primary education, while major gaps remain in secondary and higher education (Pacífico & Diazgranados, 2026). UNESCO reports have emphasized that many countries officially support inclusive education, but structural problems such as limited school space, language differences, and funding shortages still prevent refugees from reaching equal outcomes.

Even though this research is useful, much of it focuses either on policy design or on refugee experiences separately. Fewer studies look closely at how policy itself shapes the choices refugees are able to make in everyday life. In many cases, policy is treated like a background condition instead of an active force that affects opportunities and limits.

This gap is important for this study. By focusing on both policy design and lived experience, this research aims to better understand how refugee policies affect agency in practice. In particular, it looks at how policies in Lebanon and Turkey shape Syrian refugees' ability to access education, make decisions, and deal with their social environments.

METHODS

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study because it is especially useful for understanding people's lived experiences, opinions, and the ways they deal with challenges in daily life. The aim of this study is to understand how policies are experienced in real life. By focusing on personal stories, this method makes it possible to see the complexity of refugee experiences, including emotions, decision-making, and the limits people face in different policy settings.

This study analyses four in-depth interviews with young Syrian refugees currently living in Lebanon and Turkey. The participants were recruited through the podcast project, "The Refugee Voice", which focuses on giving refugees a space to share their lived experiences related to displacement, education, identity, and adaptation in host countries. All participants had experienced displacement and had interacted with education systems in their host countries, which made them relevant to this research. Before each interview, participants were informed that their interviews could also be used for academic research purposes, and consent to use the information gathered during the interview was obtained prior to recording and analysis. Even though the sample size is small, it allows for a deeper and more detailed understanding of individual experiences, which is one of the main strengths of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013).

The interviews were semi-structured, using guiding questions while allowing participants the flexibility to speak freely about the issues they considered most important. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes, was conducted online via Zoom, and, with participants' consent, was audio-recorded using Zoom's recording feature. This format helped participants feel more comfortable and encouraged open discussion of their experiences. All interviews were transcribed manually by the researcher to ensure accuracy and maintain participant confidentiality. Participants were young Syrian refugees aged between 18 and 22 years. They were given the option to speak in the language they felt most comfortable using. Three interviews were conducted in English and one in Arabic. The Arabic interview was translated into English by the researcher before analysis. Care was taken to preserve the original meaning of participants' responses, and the translation was reviewed during coding to ensure consistency.

This flexible approach helped create a more natural conversation and allowed participants to describe their experiences in greater depth. Ethical considerations were central to this research because refugee experiences can be sensitive. Before each interview, participants were told the purpose of the study and gave their consent to take part. They were also allowed to stay anonymous, and all identifying details were removed or changed to protect their privacy. In addition, they were told that they could skip any question or withdraw from the interview at any time. This helped make sure their participation stayed voluntary and safe.

The interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This meant coding for repeated ideas and patterns in the interviews, then grouping them into

wider themes. These emerging themes focused on access to education, language barriers, discrimination, and the gap between policy intentions and real experiences. The analysis also looked at how these experiences shape refugees' agency and affect the choices they can make in everyday life.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Lebanon

Access and Enrolment Policy

The Lebanese education enrolment policy is meant to organize access to public schools by setting a formal registration period at the beginning of the school year, while also allowing late enrolment depending on school capacity and administrative procedures. The policy is designed to support access for all children, including refugees, while also managing limited resources and avoiding overcrowding. However, in practice, this policy creates conditional access, where entry into education depends on timing, availability, and administrative approval.

One participant's experience provides insight into how administrative procedures surrounding enrolment may shape access to education in practice. Reflecting on her experience in Lebanon, Batoul said:

My registration was late in February while normal registration was in September. That put a lot of pressure on me because I was always comparing myself with my peers. They were practicing the normal right of any child to get education, while I was staying at home watching them from the window, that was a tough feeling.

Batoul's story highlights that access to education was delayed, even though the policy was supposed to provide it. Batoul's late enrolment meant that she remained outside the education system for several months, which she associated with administrative and capacity-related barriers. Although her interpretation reflects her personal experience and perception of the system, it still demonstrates how refugees may experience educational access as uncertain and beyond their control.

This delay affected her not only academically, but also emotionally and socially. Her comparison with other students highlights how policy implementation can create feelings of exclusion and inequality, even when the right to education formally exists. In this sense, delayed enrolment also affected Batoul's sense of agency, since decisions about when and how she could access education were shaped more by institutional procedures than by her own choices or efforts.

Language Barriers and Integration

In Lebanon, English, French, and Arabic are taught from the pre-school level onward. In math and science, English or French are used as the main languages of instruction (Science Education for Refugees 2025). This policy is meant to follow the national curriculum and prepare students for higher education and the job market. However, it does not take into account the needs of refugee students who come from only Arabic-speaking school systems.

There is a big difference between the Lebanese and Syrian curriculum, especially when it comes to language. The main language in the Syrian curriculum is Arabic, while in Lebanon it is English or French. Syrian students do not always have the language skills needed to deal with a new academic system, so even students who did very well in Syria can still face serious problems in Lebanon.

Batoul described how this language transition affected her daily learning experience:

I gave a lot of effort to study, I remember how I used to translate the bio and physics lessons word by word, I didn't have mobile that time so my father bought me a paper dictionary, and I was writing the words on my notebook then memorizing them, this took a lot of time.

Batoul's experience illustrates how language policy is implemented in practice. Although Lebanese schools follow a curriculum that uses English or French as the language of instruction, refugee students who previously studied only in Arabic often receive little structured support during this transition. As a result, Batoul relied on her own strategies, such as translating every lesson word by word with a paper dictionary, to continue learning.

Rather than enabling equal participation, the policy shifted much of the responsibility for adaptation onto the student. This demonstrates how institutional language requirements can shape refugees' educational agency by influencing the choices available to them and the effort required to remain in school.

Discrimination and Barriers to Educational Access

International and Lebanese education policies officially state that all children have the right to education without discrimination. For instance, the Lebanese Reaching All Children with Education (RACE II) strategy emphasizes inclusive access to education for all children living in Lebanon regardless of nationality or displacement status (MEHE, UNICEF, & UNHCR, 2017). Similarly, international frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child state that education should be accessible to every child without discrimination based on nationality or social background (United Nations, 1989).

Noura described an experience that she believed reflected a gap between these policy commitments and their implementation at the school level. Recalling an interaction with her school principal, she explained:

The principal told us that she hated Syria, that she did not want Syrian students to affect Lebanese culture, and that she did not care about our grades or success. She only cared about our accent and how

it would affect the Lebanese accent of other students

Noura's experience shows that access to education can depend on the discretion of school administrators. Although Lebanese education policies officially prohibit discrimination, the principal's comments indicate that personal attitudes toward Syrian refugees influenced how the policy was applied. In this case, nationality and accent became barriers to education despite the students' academic performance. This tells how refugees' educational opportunities may depend on institutional practices rather than on policy commitments, limiting their ability to exercise agency within the education system.

A similar experience was described by another participant, Montaha, who reflected on how everyday interactions at school affected her sense of belonging:

One thing I didn't like about school was that Syrian students attended afternoon classes. Sometimes you could feel discrimination in the way teachers spoke to us. There was a floor reserved only for Lebanese students, and we were told to stay downstairs. It made me feel like I didn't belong there, as if I was only there temporarily and didn't really have the right to be part of the school.

Montaha's account supports Noura's experience by suggesting that barriers to inclusion may extend beyond formal access to education. Although refugee students were enrolled in school, everyday practices and interactions sometimes contributed to feelings of exclusion and unequal treatment. Her reflection that she felt "like I didn't belong there" suggests that social integration depends not only on being admitted to school but also on feeling accepted within the school community. These experiences may reduce students' sense of belonging and limit their ability to participate confidently in school life, even when educational access has been formally provided.

Dependence on External Actors for Educational Access

Education policies in Lebanon, supported by the Ministry of Education and international organizations such as UNHCR and UNICEF, are meant to make sure that all children, including refugees, can access formal education. These policies promote inclusion and try to support refugee students through school access and extra programs (UNICEF, & UNHCR, 2017). However, access to education was not guaranteed by policy alone. The students had to seek help from outside the school system in order to get admitted. In practice, organizations like UNHCR often play a major role in helping with enrolment, solving access problems, and pushing for refugee inclusion in public schools (UNHCR, 2023).

Noura described how support from external organizations became necessary in order to gain access to school:

We were so strong and reached out to the UN and other organizations that can help, and yeah finally we were the first Syrian cohort in that school.

This means access was uneven and depended on support networks, awareness, and the ability to navigate the system. Refugees who do not have that kind of help may stay excluded even if the policy says they have the right to education. This reflects that policy success is not only about what is written, but about whether it is actually carried out in a fair and reliable way.

Turkey

Education Integration Placement Policy

Turkey's education policy aims to place Syrian refugee students in public schools according to their age group as part of its broader integration strategy under the Temporary Protection framework (DGMM, 2014). The goal is to include refugee students quickly in the national education system and support long-term social integration through formal schooling (UNICEF Turkey, 2023). However, the policy offers limited support for students who struggle with language barriers or curriculum differences during the transition process.

Salman, a Syrian refugee from Aleppo living in Turkey, described how this transition affected his academic experience:

The most challenging thing is that back in Syria I was one of the top students in my class, but in Turkey my grades became much lower because of learning the language and studying at the same time, that put a lot of pressure on me.

Salman's account highlights that placing students by age alone is not enough if they do not also receive academic and language support. The policy assumes that students are ready to join the school system right away, but many are not. Salman's lower grades show a mismatch between what the policy expects and what students can actually do. The burden of adjustment is placed on the student instead of on the system.

This also affected Salman's sense of agency within education. Although he had previously been a high-achieving student in Syria, the lack of institutional support in Turkey limited his ability to participate confidently and succeed under equal conditions. Instead of feeling in control of his educational progress, Salman was forced to focus much of his effort on basic adaptation and language acquisition. This suggests that integration policies can unintentionally reduce refugee students' agency by limiting their ability to make meaningful educational choices and fully engage with the learning environment.

More broadly, this finding reflects wider research showing that refugee students often experience reduced academic confidence and participation when integration policies focus primarily on rapid enrolment without sufficient linguistic or psychosocial support (Wenger et al., 2025).

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Higher education policies in Turkey first allowed Syrian refugees to attend university at low or no cost, which was meant to support long-term education and integration. Later, however, policy changes introduced tuition fees, which shifted the cost of education onto students. According to UNHCR, Syrian refugees in Turkey were formally allowed to access higher education, but they are now expected to pay foreign student tuition fees, which vary depending on university and academic programs.

Salman described how these policy changes influenced his plans for higher education and his future:

I cannot afford, so I'm returning to Syria, even though I know nothing about my country and the curriculum there, but I have no choice.

This finding highlights how financial barriers can create indirect forms of educational exclusion. Although the policy does not formally deny refugees access to university education, the cost of tuition can make higher education practically inaccessible for many students, producing outcomes similar to direct exclusion.

Salman's statement demonstrates how higher education policy can shape major life decisions related to education, mobility, and future stability. Rather than continuing his studies in Turkey, financial pressure pushed him toward returning to Syria despite his uncertainty about life and education there. His phrase "I have no choice" is particularly significant because it reflects a reduced sense of agency. Although the policy formally offers access to higher education, the financial conditions surrounding that access limited Salman's ability to make an independent educational decision based on his own goals and preferences.

This suggests that policy changes at the institutional level can become deeply personal constraints in refugees' everyday lives. Instead of expanding educational opportunity and long-term integration, tuition policies may pressure students to abandon higher education entirely or make difficult decisions shaped primarily by financial survival rather than personal aspiration.

Overall pattern in the findings

Overall, the findings from Lebanon and Turkey show a clear pattern: both countries have policies that are officially designed to support refugee education, but in practice these policies are not always implemented in ways that fully support inclusion and equal access. In Lebanon, the main problems were found to be: late enrolment, language barriers, and discrimination, which made access to school feel uncertain and dependent on outside intervention. In Turkey, the main issues appeared through age-based placement policies, limited academic and language support, and the financial pressure connected to higher education. Although the educational systems differ, both cases show that refugee students are often required to rely heavily on personal resilience, self-advocacy, and outside support in order to continue their education. Rather than being fully supported by institutional structures, students frequently had to solve problems independently, adapt to difficult conditions, or fight for access to opportunities that policies officially promised them.

This suggests that refugee students still exercise agency, but that their agency is often shaped by structural barriers and unequal conditions. Instead of using agency freely to pursue educational goals and personal development, many students are forced to use it defensively, simply to remain included within the education system. In this sense, refugee education is not only about being formally allowed into school, but also about whether students can meaningfully participate, succeed, and feel secure within the system over time.

DISCUSSION

The findings in this study suggest that refugee education policies in Lebanon and Turkey are formally presented as inclusive and supportive of educational access, yet their implementation often leaves refugee students facing major barriers in practice. Across the interviews, a repeated pattern emerges: refugees are officially told that education is available to them, but their actual experiences are shaped by delayed enrolment, language barriers, discrimination, financial pressure, and the need to rely on outside support systems. This reflects broader literature arguing that refugee policies frequently promise inclusion at the institutional level while producing unequal outcomes in everyday practice (Wenger et al. 2025).

Within this study, these barriers appear to extend beyond isolated administrative problems. They affect whether students can consistently access education, participate confidently in school, and imagine stable futures for themselves. In Lebanon, for example, delayed enrolment and discriminatory school-level practices created uncertainty around whether refugee students could access education fairly and on time. In Turkey, integration policies formally placed students into schools, but language barriers and financial pressures often limited their ability to fully benefit from educational opportunities. These findings support earlier research showing that refugee access to education is strongly shaped by institutional implementation, local actors, and structural inequalities rather than by policy design alone (Will, Becker, and Winkler 2022).

The interviews in this study indicate an important disconnect between formal educational rights and refugees' lived experiences within educational systems. Although both Lebanon and Turkey officially recognize refugee students' right to education, the interviews show that this right often becomes unstable in practice due to inconsistent implementation, limited support mechanisms, and unequal institutional responses. This reflects broader scholarship arguing that refugee inclusion cannot be measured only through formal policy commitments, but must also be evaluated through everyday educational experiences and outcomes (UNESCO 2019).

Rather than revealing a simple gap between policy and reality, this study points to a broader space between formal policy intentions and lived implementation. It is within this space that refugee students encounter uncertainty, exclusion, and pressure to continuously adapt to systems that are not fully designed

around their needs. These cases illustrate that formal access alone does not necessarily lead to meaningful inclusion or equal participation within education systems.

The Lebanese case suggests how access to education can become uncertain even when a policy exists to support it. Batoul's experience with late enrolment is a clear example of this, because it shows that being allowed into school does not always mean being allowed in at the right time or in a fair way. Waiting until February to register, while other students had already started in September, created stress, exclusion, and a painful sense of being left behind. This matters because school is not only a place where children learn academic subjects, it is also a place where they feel included, seen, and connected to other children. The language barriers in Lebanon made the situation even harder, because refugee students had to adapt to an education system that often uses English or French, even when their earlier schooling was mostly in Arabic.

That means the burden of adjustment was placed on the students themselves, rather than on the system that was supposed to support them. The case of discrimination also shows something deeper, which is that even when policies promise equal access, personal bias and school-level decisions can still block refugees from fully entering the system. In this sense, Lebanon shows that policy implementation can be just as important as policy design, because a good policy design does not necessarily guarantee good implementation if schools, administrators, or local systems do not apply it fairly. Researchers such as Dryden-Peterson (2016) argue that refugee education policies require not only formal access mechanisms, but also long-term institutional support, teacher training, and inclusive school environments in order to function effectively in practice. Similarly, UNESCO (2019) emphasizes that implementation gaps often emerge when schools lack sufficient resources, linguistic support systems, or anti-discrimination protections.

The Turkish case indicates a different kind of challenge, but the effect is still very similar. Turkey's policy seems more structured in the sense that students are placed into public schools according to age, which can make it look like integration is happening quickly and efficiently. However, Salman's experience shows that placement alone is not enough if students are not given enough support to cope with the language and curriculum differences. Being placed into school without a strong transition process meant that he had to learn a new language while also trying to keep up academically, which created pressure and lowered his performance.

This is important because it shows that integration can sometimes look successful from the outside while still being difficult at the level of students' everyday personal and educational experiences. Later, the problem becomes even more serious in higher education, where tuition fees turn access into something that many refugees simply cannot afford. Salman's statement that he had no choice is very powerful because it shows how policy changes can shape someone's future in a very direct and painful way. Instead of education opening opportunities, it starts closing them. The Turkish case therefore suggests that refugee education policy can sometimes shift from inclusion to exclusion not only through school placement, but also through financial rules that make continued study unrealistic. It also shows that the

emotional side of education matters, because repeated stress and pressure can affect confidence, motivation, and the ability to stay committed to school. This can also have broader social consequences, including increased educational inequality, reduced long-term employment opportunities, social exclusion, and weaker integration into host communities.

When both countries are analysed together, the strongest pattern is that refugee education is shaped not only by what is formally written, but by tensions that reveal themselves through the daily implementation of refugee policies. Lebanon and Turkey use different policy models, but the interviews show that both systems still leave refugees dealing with uncertainty and inequality. In Lebanon, these barriers appeared through enrolment delays, language mismatch, discriminatory attitudes such as when Noura described a principal saying she “hated Syria,” and the need for outside intervention from organizations like the UN in order to gain school access. In Turkey, the barriers appeared more through age-based placement, weak transition support, and later tuition costs. Even though the forms are different, the result is very similar, which is that students and families are forced to work much harder than they should just to stay in education.

These cases suggest that refugee education is not only about whether governments state that refugees have access to school. It is also about whether schools and institutions make that promise real in everyday life. Both cases show that refugee students are often expected to adapt quickly, speak new languages, handle emotional stress, and solve practical problems on their own. That is a very heavy expectation for young people who are already dealing with displacement, uncertainty, and loss. So, instead of seeing refugee education as a simple access issue, this study shows that it is a question of how much support a system gives people once they are inside it. Organizations such as UNHCR, UNICEF, and local NGOs have attempted to address these gaps through language support programs, accelerated learning initiatives, psychosocial services, and enrolment assistance. However, many of these interventions remain dependent on external funding and emergency-based frameworks, which can limit their long-term sustainability and consistency across regions (UNESCO 2019).

This study is especially important because it shows how policy affects agency. In the context of refugee experiences, agency is not only about individual freedom or personal choice. It is also shaped by family responsibility, displacement, financial survival, legal uncertainty, and the social expectations surrounding refugee communities. For many refugee students, decisions about education are rarely fully independent because they are deeply connected to family needs, institutional barriers, and questions of long-term security. Batoul did not choose to be placed late, and Salman did not choose to face language barriers or tuition fees that made university impossible. In both cases, the students had to respond to systems that were already deciding many things for them. Even when they showed strength, persistence, and effort, their choices were still shaped by things outside their control.

This is why agency cannot be understood only as personal determination. The findings show that students like Batoul and Salman demonstrated significant persistence and effort, yet their educational choices remained heavily constrained by institutional conditions such as delayed enrolment, language barriers,

and tuition costs. This suggests that agency is not simply an internal quality possessed by individuals, but something that is either supported or restricted by surrounding social and policy structures.

The findings also show that integration is not just about putting refugees into schools and saying they are included. Real integration happens when students can learn without constant barriers, feel respected, and imagine a future for themselves in the host country. If a student is always stressed, excluded, or unable to continue studying, then integration is only partial at best. In that sense, education becomes a key place where a person's sense of belonging is either supported or damaged. The findings indicate that policies are more likely to support agency and integration when they do more than open the door. They also need to make the space inside that door workable, fair, and stable. This could include stronger language transition programs, clearer and more consistent enrolment procedures, anti-discrimination monitoring within schools, expanded psychosocial support, and more affordable pathways into higher education for refugee students.

The findings of this study fit well with the literature that argues that refugee policies often look more successful on paper than they are in practice (Wenger et al. 2025). The literature also discusses the gap between promised support and actual outcomes, and that gap is very visible in both Lebanon and Turkey. The language barriers found in this study also match broader research showing that refugee students often struggle when host countries use educational systems that do not fully support linguistic transition (Dryden-Peterson 2016). The idea of temporal uncertainty, which appears in the literature, is also reflected here because late enrolment, shifting tuition policies, and unstable school access all make it hard for families to plan ahead.

This study contributes to the literature by suggesting how these issues are not only structural, but also deeply personal. They affect confidence, identity, family decisions, and the feeling of being welcome or unwelcome in a country. In other words, the study supports earlier research, but it also makes the emotional cost of policy failure more visible. That is important because refugee education is often discussed in technical or administrative terms, while the lived reality is much more human, much more emotional, and much more difficult than policy language suggests.

The main implication of this study is that refugee education policies should not be judged only by whether they exist, but by whether they actually work for the students they are meant to help. If a policy creates delays, language problems, discrimination, or financial barriers, then it is not fully serving its purpose, even if it looks inclusive in official documents. These findings also suggest that refugee education policies cannot operate as one-size-fits-all solutions, because refugee students experience different forms of displacement, financial hardship, linguistic adjustment, and educational interruption depending on their personal and social circumstances. Lebanon and Turkey both suggest that refugees need more than formal access. They need support that is practical, consistent, and sensitive to their real situations. This includes fair enrolment systems, stronger language support, protection from discrimination, and affordable paths to higher education. It also means that institutions should take refugee students seriously as people with abilities, goals, and potential, not only as numbers in a policy system.

Overall, the evidence presented in this study indicates that education can either help refugees build stability and agency, or it can become another space where they are forced to continue struggling for basic opportunities. The difference depends on how policies are implemented, how schools respond, and whether refugees are given the support they need to truly belong.

LIMITATIONS

This study has some limitations. First, it is based on only four interviews, so it cannot represent every refugee student's experience. The findings show important patterns, but they should be understood as a small qualitative study rather than a broad generalization. Second, the study has limited generalizability because it examines only two host countries. As refugee policies differ across contexts, the findings cannot be generalized to all refugee populations. Third, because the participants were recruited through a podcast project, the sample may reflect students who were already willing to share their experiences, which means other voices may still be missing.

Even with these limitations, the study gives a meaningful look at how policy and lived experience can differ, and why refugee education should be understood as both a political and a human issue.

CONCLUSION

This research explored how refugee education policies in Lebanon and Turkey affect refugees' agency and social integration. The main conclusion is that these policies may look supportive on paper, but in real life they often create barriers that make education harder to access and harder to continue. The interviews identified recurring challenges such as late enrolment, language difficulties, discrimination, tuition fees, and the need to depend on outside support to access education. One of the most important ideas in this study is that policy is not just a written rule. It works like an actor in people's lives because it shapes what happens at school, who gets accepted, who gets delayed, and who gets left out. In Lebanon, policy appeared through registration rules, language requirements, and school-level decisions that made access uncertain. In Turkey, policy appeared through age-based placement and university tuition fees, which created pressure and reduced the chance of continued study. In both cases, policy did not stay neutral. It directly affected the daily lives of refugee students and influenced the choices they could make.

The findings also indicate that agency is often limited when refugees have to fight the system just to stay in education. Instead of education providing them with stability and control, many of the students had to rely on family support, personal effort, or organizations like UNHCR to move forward. This means that refugees' ability to make educational decisions was heavily shaped by systems outside their control, rather than only by their own motivation or abilities. This matters because education is closely connected to future stability, employment opportunities, social belonging, and long-term security. When refugee

students lose control over important educational choices, such as when they can enrol, what language they must study in, or whether they can afford university, their future opportunities also become more limited. In this sense, restricted agency does not only affect individual students in the present, but can also shape their long-term integration, economic mobility, and sense of belonging within the host society. At the same time, this study indicates that social integration is likely to be limited when students feel excluded, pressured, or unable to succeed in school.

Overall, this research suggests that refugee education should not be judged only by whether a policy exists. It should be evaluated by how it actually works in practice and how it affects real people. If policies are to support refugees in a real way, they need to do more than promise access. They need to create fair, stable, and supportive systems that let students learn, belong, and build a future with dignity.

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

This research is closely connected to my own lived experience as a refugee. Having experienced displacement firsthand, I understand how education can provide not only academic opportunities but also stability, belonging, and hope during periods of uncertainty. While I approached this study through a qualitative research methodology and sought to analyze participants' experiences critically, my personal background motivated my interest in examining the gap between refugee education policies and their implementation. Conducting this research reinforced my belief that understanding refugees' lived experiences is essential for evaluating whether policies achieve their intended goals.

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