



Episode 2: Educational Technologies in Refugee Camps

Portraits of Education Change combines education and media studies, feminist research methods, postcolonial theory, and critical race theories to identify the informal and emergent pedagogies that make the adoption of technologies by refugees in camps both possible and sustainable. In this episode, Sara chats with the project's Principal Investigator and expert on digital media and learning, Dr. Negin Dahya.

Sara Grimes 0:05

Over the past few months, I've heard and used the term "stuck at home" a lot to describe the social isolation measures brought on in response to COVID-19. It can come across as a complaint, but being stuck at home is also an inherently privileged position, at least for those of us whose homes are safe and comfortable. To be sure, many of us do feel stuck at times, as we face the challenges both big and small, of trying to do work, stay healthy, and live life from home. As a university professor teaching classes, and as a parent of two small children, for me many of these challenges involved learning to navigate the complex world of online education.

Well, I'm very grateful that so many schools have managed to pivot to remote delivery during the pandemic. I'm also very aware of the profound inequities and other problems involved in our sudden shift to virtual learning. This includes the enduring digital divide, which in Canada and elsewhere, has never been more prominent than it is right now. From vast disparities in terms of students access to computers and devices, to the lack of broadband internet service in many rural and remote parts of the country, including indigenous communities, the rise of technologically mediated learning has been problematic to say the least.

Just as being stuck at home is far from a universal experience, the virtual classroom

embedded in digital technologies and infrastructures is riddled with contradiction and variation, opportunities and barriers. Notably, this is something that people living in refugee camps have been confronting for years. Educational technologies are seen by many as providing a set of incredibly promising tools for children and young people living in refugee camps to access quality education, which is really important. As of last year 2019, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that there are now 26 million refugees worldwide. Around half of them are children and teens under the age of 18. Only a small percentage of refugees are resettled every year, and most people living in refugee camps are there for years. For child refugees, this can mean their entire childhood.

Dr. Negin Dahya, Assistant Professor in the Institute of Communication, Culture, Information and Technology at the University of Toronto, has been conducting research on the topic of refugee education and technology since 2011. Much of this work is done in partnership with two co-investigators, Dr. Sarah Dryden-Peterson of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Dr. Olivier Arvisais of the Université du Québec à Montréal. Together, they have collaborated on participatory research and fieldwork; much of it focus on the Dadaab and Kakuma camps in Kenya.

Reporter 3:11

About 350,000 live in the camp, near the Somali border. The Kenyan government opened the Dadaab camp designed for 90,000 refugees in 1991, as a temporary solution to the civil war in Somalia.

Sara Grimes 3:23

Dr. Dahya was recently awarded a Connaught New Researcher Award to return to Kakuma and extend their fieldwork to those Dzaleka refugee camp in Malawi. Their research explores how refugee communities adopt different and at times unanticipated technologies for educational pursuits. It has been published in several top-tier journals, including in an award-winning article that appeared in a 2017 issue of the *American Educational Research Journal*. This work is providing unique insight into the technological realities of everyday life in a refugee camp, with the potential to transform pedagogical approaches to this critically underserved population. It also aims to expand

our current definitions of what constitutes as an educational technology, something that many of us will need to consider and address more deeply in the months and years to come. I'm Sarah Grimes, Director of the Knowledge Media Design Institute at the University of Toronto, and host of the Critical Technology Podcast. Today I'll be talking to Dr. Negin Dahya, the team's expert on digital media production and learning among non-dominant communities.

It seems to me that within popular discussions of refugees, the primary focus is usually on what happens next, after that period of their lives has ended, after they've been released or resettled. Among other things, your research sheds light on the fact that in order to have job opportunities or a chance to pursue higher education later, we need to address the massive inequities that young people in refugee camps face now, specifically, when it comes to access to education and technologies. Can you describe what youth education looks like in a refugee camp?

Dr. Negin Dahya 5:19

I think that one of the biggest problems in refugee camps can be summarized in terms of instability, and that there are instabilities that come through in different domains. So, of course, people living in a refugee camp have faced conflict, and often violence, and political upheaval. And so they are dealing personally and psychosocially with their own. You know, well being, and mental health, and the well-being and health of their families. There are generally low resources in different refugee camp contexts, including a lack of access to, you know, basic school and materials, but certainly to technology and new technology. Where new technologies exist, there can sometimes be a lack of training, or lack of digital or technological literacy, as well as a lack of good and thoughtful ways of integrating these technologies into local cultural contexts. And part of that is related to the ways in which the teachers who are there already so overworked, and working to deal with the basic needs of their students. And adding on this technological piece can sometimes be more than what is manageable in that setting.

There are instabilities in relation to culture, and gender, and the ways in which the dynamics and expectations around gender align for girls in schools, from their local communities, and the pressures that they have to provide and support their families at home, and from the international community where we're also wanting to see, of course,

more gender equity. So there are really a range of different kinds of instability that make it very difficult to access and achieve that quality education so that people are ready to move on with their lives, if they have an opportunity to leave the camps. And of course, the bigger issue is that the average duration of stay in a refugee camp, once you have entered one, is around 17 years. So people are not actually moving through camp contexts very quickly.

Sara Grimes 7:51

What impact does this have on the everyday experiences and aspirations for the future among refugee youth?

Dr. Negin Dahya 7:58

In the research that I've done predominantly to date in Kenya, many of the young people have strong aspirations for contributing back to their communities locally within the camps that they live in, and improving their lives and the livelihoods in...in their homes and in their local communities within the camps. And many are also aspiring to the future where they will return to either their homelands or where they will be able to resettle somewhere else more permanently, and continue with their lives. So despite the long durations of stay, there, there is hope and hopefulness for moving on to, you know, bigger and better things, if you will. And the young people that are engaged in education and that are seeking better education, quality education, and eventually post-secondary and higher education opportunities in refugee camps are really seeing the ways that they can contribute to the world globally and locally, and that is something that is a motivator to continue working through education systems, and to engage in, you know, different types of teaching and learning that that might help them achieve those goals.

Sara Grimes 9:23

So in your work, you use an ecological systems model. And here I'll steal a quote from your 2017 article in an *American Educational Research Journal*. As quote, a framework for understanding social capital and the ways that may travel to and from refugee camps, end quote. What sort of technological ecosystems have you identified in your research?

Dr. Negin Dahya 9:48

What we've seen is a lot of different kinds of technology being used. So mobile phones predominantly are in use. There have been various efforts at various times to build computer labs. There have been a Internet cafes. There's a lot of e-commerce that is happening. So using mobile phones for mobile money transfer and to, you know, run businesses, right, local businesses. And you also hear about other kinds of technological infrastructure that has been built. So in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis, there have been, you know, eye-tracking devices, right, retinal scanners for identifying... identification purposes, right, of people in this Zaatari refugee camps, as an example. So I think the landscape can be quite large. In the context of education and in my research, we've really identified that while there have been various initiatives and different kinds of, you know, cloud services and different types of tools that companies have brought in to try to solve particular problems in refugee camp settings. Really, the mobile phone has been one of the game-changing kind of tools. So the tools that were already in the hands of community members for other reasons that were cheap and accessible, relatively cheap and relatively accessible in these environments, were sort of taken up in ways that could also be used to enhance their social and academic supports.

Sara Grimes 11:26

That's so interesting, and such a contrast to some of those computer lab type initiatives you've mentioned. Can you say a little bit more about how mobile phones are used as educational support technologies?

Dr. Negin Dahya 11:38

We've really been investigating the ways in which SMS messaging, so text messaging on a phone and group chats over WhatsApp, are being used to support young people who are pursuing higher education. So the first study that Sarah Dryden-Peterson and I conducted looked at how young people were using SMS and social networks, including Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp Messenger, to identify opportunities to go to university. So they were actually in that study. And that study, we were finding that these support networks that were both social and academic in nature, were happening through existing networks of other refugee community members who were already enrolled in university, who had maybe left the camps and are living somewhere where they were

attending university. And they were able to basically coach, and inform, and support people in the camps as to how they could also follow those pathways. And the subsequent study, we worked with Olivier Arvisais. We focused on WhatsApp Messenger and group chats in particular, and that study ended up being oriented around teachers who were in training, and that is still sort of following the trajectory of of young people, because often what happens in the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps is that a young person will graduate from high school, and then they will be the most qualified person to teach in that high school.

So often, what we have are extremely bright, hardworking individuals, who don't have any formal training in curriculum and pedagogy to teach high school. And so some of the post-secondary and higher education opportunities that are available in the camps are focused on this sort of capacity building, right, where if we can provide some formal training for teachers. This will, of course, improve the quality of schooling for larger number of people.

Sara Grimes 13:48

Amazing. ...usually think of WhatsApp as a platform for teacher training, expansion of that technology. What are some of the other unanticipated uses you've uncovered in your research?

Dr. Negin Dahya 14:00

The use of WhatsApp group chat in particular, both across teachers, but also teachers with parents and other community members, was really in high use, and really valuable for problem solving a situation with a young person who was, for example, not attending school. So someone who maybe was not showing up, and they wanted to figure out, well, what happened to this person? And how do we attempt to deal with this problem? A lot of these issues were gender-related. So perhaps a young girl was being kept home from school, because the family needed her to help take care of younger siblings, or to help with the cooking, and the cleaning, and the domestic chores. So the teachers would sort of navigate a balance of, well, do we penalize the student; how do we talk to the parents; how do we balance the needs of the home with the desire to have the student complete school. And because the teachers themselves or sometimes in different locations within

the camps that were not necessarily easy to convene in person, they would do a lot of this communication over WhatsApp chat groups.

And in other cases, there were teachers who were getting male community members, pair of fathers and brothers, who had some authority over the girls in their homes to participate in a male outreach program that was also building towards gender equity. And they would use also WhatsApp group chats to basically initiate some of the conversations around the importance of girls going to school. So there would be sort of, you know, knocking on doors and talking to people, asking people to come and meet for an in person workshop. But in between sort of the knocking on doors and then meeting for a workshop, there are examples of teachers and community, sort of educators and community outreach workers, sort of using group chats to prime the conversation, so initiating little chat groups to talk about the issue, so that when all of these people came together in a room, they were already a little bit further along. They had been sort of scaffolded towards that conversation, and towards thinking differently about the importance of gender equity. And so in these ways, the sort of technological ecosystem is both very refined in relation to the communities and how they're being used in this case, on mobile phones and WhatsApp as one example. And very large in scope in terms of the network, and the distribution, and availability of phones and chat applications for people to be able to participate.

Sara Grimes 16:41

So you mentioned gender equity is a key factor impacting young refugees access to education technology. Can you speak a little more about that?

Dr. Negin Dahya 16:50

There are definitely some sort of blank divisions around gender. So in the refugee camps, we know that girls, by the time you get to high school, for example, are really deeply under represented. So where in primary, the numbers might be a little bit more equitable, a little bit more equal. And in high school, they really plummet, and you have very low representation of girls in high school and in this region. And while many people, girls included, all have access to technology, in my studies to date, it has been shown that women have far less time to engage in a sort of multiplicity of functions using their

technology and using their devices. So whereas men interviewed in one study, for example, describe that, you know, they would googling things, and they would read the news. And, you know, they would communicate with friends, and they would try to prepare their courses, if they were teachers, and do all of these things sort of over their mobile phones at various times of the day. The women we mostly identified that they didn't really have that time, you know, that they were, you know, waking up in the morning, and they were cooking, and they were cleaning, and then they were going to school either to study or to teach, and then they were coming home to make lunch. And you know, they just didn't have the leisure time. And for those women, their social networks on their phones were quite critical and really important opportunities to get information about how to sort of navigate the pathways that they wanted to follow to improve their livelihoods and pursue higher education.

Sara Grimes 18:41

What roles do you think young people themselves might play? Or maybe are already playing in addressing some of these disparities and barriers to access?

Dr. Negin Dahya 18:53

Yeah, that question... sort of brings me back to a sort of North American context and to actually think a little bit also about refugees and resettlement. A study that I conducted last year based in Seattle, Washington, involved an inquiry into tech, women technology, and education, and resettlement. And one of the things that we identified there, that I think has proven very relevant at this time with the COVID-19 pandemic, is that young people are often the mediators of information, so as the state or ruling authorities, so in a refugee context that might be the the UNHCR, the humanitarian-aid organizations who are working with the government to create a plan for the health and safety protocols of that particular region. This information is, you know, often disseminated through young people. And this is true for a lot of immigrant families, for refugees, for people who have different levels of, you know, who are multilingual and who might be living in a country where their first language is not the primary language of use, right. So I think that there are many contexts where young people are the ones who are, you know, learning the language that is the government and schooling language of the place that they are living, when their parents might not necessarily know that language as well. And that's a really

big factor I think in the transference of really critical information.

And then, and then relatedly, that they are, the young people are also the ones who maybe have that, you know, interest or access or sort of aptitude in using these new and digital technologies, where a lot of that information is being spread. And in the, in the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become very clear how essential that is. And in the study that I conducted with my collaborators at the University of Washington in Seattle, it was very clear that for women, you know, learning how to use a mobile phone, and having autonomy over digital technologies, and knowing how to navigate the websites of the schools where their kids were going, and the information that was actually going through these, these systems that the schools were using, was really important to their ability to participate in the world, and also the world that they were living in, and also critical to being able to stay connected to their children's lives. And at the same time that the children were often the ones mediating that information. So I think it is ever more clear how important it is that you know, young that we really understand how technology is being distributed and who is using it.

I think in a, in a kind of counter example, I conducted a study last year in a juvenile rehabilitation center also in Washington State, also with collaborators from the University of Washington Information School and with the public library system in Washington state, in a tech-heavy region. And for those in particular who were inside the juvenile rehabilitation system for a long time, the access to technology was very poor. So they were getting like hand-me-down systems from their local school district; the teachers were similarly not very well-trained on how to use those, you know; they didn't have phones; they weren't allowed to use Internet. So they would really not be getting, they would be sort of the other side of this conversation, where in in that instance of confinement. These young people were actually being really left out and left behind this critical moment in technology. And, and it's an, it's necessity in keeping us really well-informed about what is happening in the world around us. And to my knowledge that that has not changed over the course of the pandemic.

Sara Grimes 23:19

So you mentioned the pandemic, and I did want to talk about that. COVID-19 has been a huge, challenging life-altering event that for many of us has been made a lot easier by

access to digital technology and high-speed Internet. But what has the global pandemic meant for those living in refugee camps, where access to technology, education, and resources more generally, was already insufficient and inconsistent?

Dr. Negin Dahya 23:48

And the short answer, which is a little bit terrifying, is that I have no idea, because there's been very, very little communication. And that is something that again is related to the dynamics and the positioning of me as a researcher. So there are certainly people who are working, you know, closely with the individuals, with the administrators, with the governments, who are all involved with these locations to ensure that you know, people are taken care of in the best ways that they can. But in the context of wanting to have community voices, speaking about their own experiences, this is something that in the context of the pandemic, and the lockdown, and the shift in priorities, and the lack of direct access to people because of lesser availability of technology, has created a real barrier to our ability to to communicate, to to listen, and to potentially, you know, share and collaborate on ways of having those stories and experiences heard directly from the people who are in those locations.

And I think technology, and a lack of technology whether that is by regulation, or because of just the the limitations of, you know, well, if if people aren't going to school, if teachers aren't getting paid, if you can't top up your cell phone, you know, then you can't use your data to even make that phone call or use your WhatsApp to communicate with the people that you normally communicate with. And so, you know, your framing around the privileges that some of us have had, the opposite end of that is the absence of all of the things, right, and and a lack of, a lack of visibility into the lived experiences of people who are hit hardest, I think, by the economic and the health factors of COVID-19.

Sara Grimes 26:09

You were recently awarded a new researcher grant to support one of your current projects called Portraits of Education Change, which includes a return to the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, and new fieldwork in the Dzaleka refugee camp in Malawi. How has that project been impacted by COVID-19?

Dr. Negin Dahya 26:28

I think, as we've heard, often in, you know, the news headlines, it is the most, the already marginalized communities, the already disenfranchised, and you know, under resourced communities that are hit the hardest by this kind of a crisis. And there has been a real halt in sort of moving sort of the research program forward. I don't necessarily, I don't necessarily think that that's a bad thing. So I think that it is important that people's immediate needs are prioritized, and that the research partnerships and collaborations are pursued and implemented in a way that is respectful of the community's needs. So for the type of work that I do, while it's important in a long trajectory of understanding how to build out programs and support education, putting a pause on some of this, at a time when people have more urgent needs related to health and safety, is not a problem. And I think we wait until the communities are ready to resume their own engagement with these research practices in a way that is safe, so that we can collaboratively figure out how to how to move forward.

Sara Grimes 28:02

Big thanks to Professor Dahya for joining us today. Please follow the links in the podcast description to find out more about Portraits of Education Change project, publications mentioned here today, as well as information on where to send any questions or comments you might have. The Critical Technology Podcast is produced by me Sarah Grimes, lots of support from the KMDI. Audio mix, music and sound design by Turner Wigginton. Theme song by Taekun Park. Please subscribe to stay up to date on new episodes and posts as they become available. And thank you for listening.