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The Childhoods and Play of Young Iraqi and Syrian Refugee Children Living in Lebanon

Keywords:

Iraqi and Syrian child refugees
Children's rights

Early childhood
Liminality

Play
Lebanese policies

Objectives

Armed conflict and displacement have immeasurable effects on children and their families. They disturb and alter children's childhood experiences, strip children of their rights, and constrain children's opportunities to play, to learn and recover through play, and for their unique potential to flourish. However, there is a lack of in-depth research into how armed conflict and displacement affect young refugee children's play and experiences of childhood in different host environments. Addressing the need for in-depth understandings of young refugee children's experiences and perspectives, this paper presents findings from a study that investigated how armed conflict and forced displacement affect the childhoods and play of young Iraqi and Syrian children living as 'temporarily displaced' (Government of Lebanon & United Nations, 2019, p.4) persons in Beirut's northern suburbs. Key objectives of this paper are to 1) identify how the childhoods and play of young Iraqi and Syrian child refugees are affected by armed conflict and their forced displacement to Beirut's northern suburbs, and 2) how young refugee children's play opportunities might be improved in Beirut's northern suburbs.

Theoretical framework

The research brought together a matrix of theoretical perspectives to study the interlinked themes of Childhood, Play, War and Displacement, including Froebelian Principles (Bruce, 2020; Froebel, 1887), Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, the new sociology of childhood (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Qvortrup, 2009), children's rights (United Nations, 1989), Vygotskian sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), Turner's theory of liminality (Turner, 1969) and Foucault's (1986) concept of 'heterotopias'. The resultant conceptual framework shed light on the complex intersection of factors that reduced the refugee children's childhoods and play in Lebanon to the status of 'invisible' and 'polluting'. The paper argues that bringing together diverse theories helped to illuminate aspects of the children's lives 'that might otherwise go unnoticed' (Maxwell, 2005, p.43), and provoked interdisciplinary dialogue that offers new conceptualisations of the lives of young refugee children.

Methods of inquiry

Data were collected in Lebanon between May 2017 and January 2018, including in-depth case studies with two Syrian and two Iraqi young child refugees and their families living in the northern suburbs of Beirut using a 'Day in The Life' (DITL) approach (Gillen & Cameron, 2010). The case studies were supplemented by a questionnaire completed by 100 Iraqi, Syrian and Lebanese respondents, observations in a school for Iraqi children, and interviews

with professionals who work with refugees in Lebanon including a schoolteacher, a medical doctor and a street and working children programme manager. Following DITL procedures, the researcher visited each case study family on four occasions to get to know each family, interview the parents and interview the children using participatory methods, observe and video-record one day in each child's life, and re-watch and discuss a compilation video of the footage with the parents and children. Ethical approval was obtained from the host academic institution, with careful consideration to obtaining the vulnerable child and adult participants' voluntary consent/assent, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, and the avoidance of risk for participants and researcher.

Data sources & evidence

Data included responses to 100 questionnaires from Iraqi, Syrian and Lebanese respondents, audio recordings and transcripts from 8 semi-structured interviews with parents and practitioners (total approx. 7 hours) and 11 semi-structured interviews with children using participatory methods (total approx. 2 hours), approximately 5 hours of video footage and transcripts of each case study child (total approx. 20 hours), as well as field notes and a reflective research journal.

Both Iraqi case study children were Christian. In August 2014, the families of Kefa (male, 5 years old) and Maria (female, 7 years old) had fled their homes in northern Iraq because ISIS was on the verge of invading their villages. They left with nothing but their documents and some money. Both families had been internally displaced in Iraq for a few months before moving to Lebanon.

Both Syrian case study children were Muslim. In mid-2017, the families of Ahmed (male, 6 years old) and Muna (female, 4 years old) had fled their homes in North-West Syria fearing for their lives as their villages were being bombed. Desperate to find safety, both Syrian case study mothers had travelled with their young children to Lebanon to be reunited with their husbands who had been living and working in Lebanon for many years. The only route was to be smuggled across the Lebanon/Syria border, crossing over the mountains on foot at night, and carrying nothing but their documents and whatever money they could access in war-torn Syria.

In Lebanon, all four case study children lived with their parents and sibling(s) in a studio or one-bedroom apartment. While both Iraqi children attended school in Lebanon, neither of the Syrian children attended school. None of the case study children or their families had legal refugee status in Lebanon.

Findings/Results

Children and families' status as 'temporarily displaced' persons: The overarching parameter affecting children's experiences of childhood and consequently their play was their own and their families' status as 'temporarily displaced' persons rather than refugees. This status is enforced by Lebanese Government policies which seek to ensure that Syrian refugees do not stay permanently in Lebanon, a response that is strongly linked to the history of Palestinian refugees' presence in the country (Janmyr, 2016). This constrains families' and children's rights and entraps them in a liminal state (Turner, 1969).

Limited or no access to high quality education: High quality education with well-qualified teachers can help children to overcome fear and make friends. While the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) had attempted to provide education for refugee children, provision and implementation were profoundly lacking at the time of this study, for both practical and political reasons. While MEHE aimed to prioritise children's right to education and integrate all children in school, this was negated by the Lebanese Government's residency policy that left most Syrian and Iraqi refugees without legal residency. Moreover, low-quality schooling, where bullying, racism and corporal punishment were commonplace, increased children's fears and led to additional traumatising. Consequently, many refugee children dropped out of school and did not have access to potentially beneficial educational environments that might have helped them recover from their traumatic and extremely difficult experiences.

Infringement of human rights: Iraqi and Syrian children experienced continuing rights infringements even after seeking refuge in Lebanon. Refugee families' lack of legal status stripped children of their rights to a happy and carefree childhood, high quality education, play, and protection from harm and abuse. As 'temporarily displaced' persons, children's parents did not have the legal right to work, so the children were growing up in poverty, often in unsanitary living conditions. Lack of legal residency combined with poverty led to many additional rights infringements including inability to access open spaces or essential healthcare, child labour, exploitation in the workplace, early marriage, and family separation.

Separation from extended family and poverty: Families transformed from being stable entities in their home countries, to volatile, trapped and in a state of flux. As a result of displacement, children were separated from key adult figures in their lives at a time when they arguably needed them most. Separation from their extended families caused the children in this study great sadness and fundamentally changed their Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provision, as their extended family members had previously played an important role in their care, upbringing, support, and access to formal and informal education. Familiar social and cultural communities were also dismantled, bringing culturally imbued community practices to a halt. Poverty also led many families to cohabit in overcrowded, small, insanitary accommodation, which led to emotional and social tensions, as well as mental and physical health risks. Living in confined space with extended family shifted power dynamics and put children in highly vulnerable situations that affected their mental and physical health and limited their access to space for play.

Constraints on children's play: Although all the case study children had time to play, lack of other resources (space, materials, play partners) limited their play opportunities. All case study children mentioned feeling bored at home, leading to feelings of anger, frustration, and resentment. Children's play was also limited by parents' and children's fears, and by state, neighbour and parental surveillance, with a constant threat of deportation or imprisonment should a family be deemed to be infringing their 'temporarily displaced' status. Gender was also used as a justification to limit freedom of movement, self-expression and play. All the case study children spent most of their day at home and had limited access to outdoor space. Although they had limited access to play spaces, they continued to play within the physical constraints of their homes in highly imaginative ways, transforming objects and spaces in their play. The children exhibited the highest levels of enjoyment, excitement, imagination and cooperation when playing with their peers.

Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work

This study addresses a research knowledge gap about the childhoods and play of young Iraqi and Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. It is highly significant as Lebanon hosts the highest number of refugees per capita in the world, half of whom are children. The inestimable benefits of play are crucial for refugee children to begin to recover from the unimaginable atrocities and disruptions they have witnessed and experienced. This study offers unique insights into the damaging consequences for refugee children when their rights continue to be abused through the misalignment of international, national and local policies, through their lack of legal status and the constant state of liminality in which they are forced to live in Lebanon which profoundly affect their experiences of childhood and constrain their opportunities to play.

The study found that certain conditions were necessary for the children to feel free, safe and comfortable enough to play, and although they did play, their moments of play were often fleeting and vulnerable to change. When the children's stress-response system was continuously activated, when they were on high alert, constantly monitoring their surroundings, worried about their family members who were separated from them, concerned about their and their family's safety and legal status, taking on the responsibility of providing for their families, and unable to access healthcare when needed, the children had very little mental, physical and emotional capacity to relax into play.

Moreover, although the children transformed spaces and objects in their play, the physical constraints of their home environments severely restricted their play and the physicality of their play, particularly given their cramped and insanitary accommodation with no access to the outdoors, to nature, or to wider play spaces. Isolation from the communities they had known in their native countries, coupled with being treated as 'polluting' beings in the host nation, further restricted children's play.

In summary, multiple barriers (represented by concentric circles of barbed wire in Figure 1) obstruct the relationship between the child and the family, community, civil society, UNHCR and the Government of Lebanon, underpinned by wider historical, political, cultural, economic, religious and social systems. These barriers force the child into an insecure state of liminality, with no pathway out. While some social and health lifelines have emerged within these overlapping and interrelated systems to help children overcome these barriers, misalignment between the lifelines forced the case study children and their families to remain in a state of liminality.

The paper concludes by identifying specific factors that could ameliorate children's childhood experiences and play opportunities in Lebanon. These include recognising refugee children's human rights, ensuring UNCRC is integrated into Lebanese law, ratifying the 1951 convention and its protocol and amending policies to include children's voices. By prioritizing refugee children's child status over their 'temporarily displaced' status, by providing refugees with opportunities to maintain livelihoods and to form communities, by making high quality educational opportunities freely available and accessible to children in Lebanon, refugee children could begin to feel a sense of belonging and community that would help them along the journey to recovery from their past experiences, allowing them a permanent escape from liminality and emotionally and socially safe spaces to play.

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Happy, Healthy, Playful Child with Rights

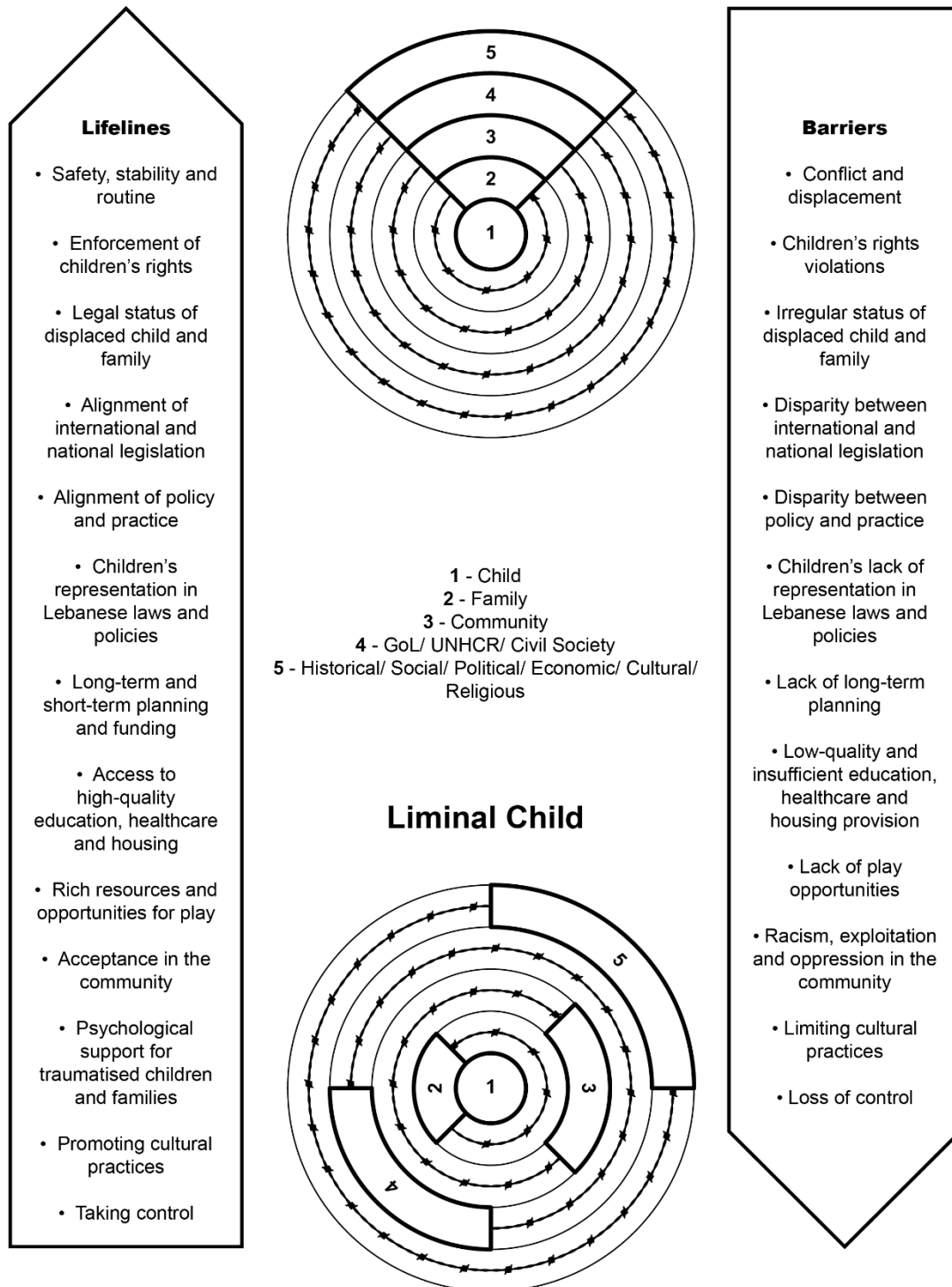


Figure 1: Model of study findings in light of conceptual framework