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Barriers and Lifelines for Young Refugee Children's Education: The Experiences of One Young Iraqi Refugee Living in the Northern Suburbs of Beirut

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Abstract

This paper identifies key barriers to young Iraqi and Syrian refugee children's access to education in Lebanon and highlights how local initiatives serve as glimmers of hope, or 'lifelines', for their well-being and learning. Reporting on aspects of my doctoral study, the paper homes in on one case study with an Iraqi family and their 5-year-old son, Kefa. The 'Day in the Life' methodology enabled rich insights into Kefa's home life and the informal school he attended, supplemented by interview data with his schoolteacher and observation of his school. The paper also draws on questionnaire data to situate this case study in a broader spectrum of refugee children's experiences in Lebanon ($n=100$). Framed by sociocultural approaches to learning, the findings illustrate the interplay of social, economic and relational barriers that impede refugee children's access to quality education, and demonstrate how, despite limited resources, the informal school offered an inclusive and anti-discriminatory environment and pedagogy to break down barriers that bred racism, bullying and isolation. The paper argues that, although important, these lifelines are limited in their scope. State intervention is needed to build non-discriminatory systems that promote inclusive education, so all children can receive quality education, feel safe and belong.

Keywords Iraqi and Syrian refugee children · Inclusive pedagogy · Education · Barriers · Lifelines · Lebanon

Abstracte

Cet article identifie les principaux obstacles se présentant à l'accès de jeunes enfants réfugiés irakiens et syriens à l'éducation au Liban et souligne les façons dont les initiatives locales constituent des lueurs d'espoir, ou des « bouées de sauvetage », pour leur bien-être et leur apprentissage. Basé sur des recherches effectués lors de

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mes études doctorales, l'article se concentre sur une étude de cas avec une famille irakienne et de leur fils de 5 ans, Kefa. La méthodologie « Journée dans la vie » a permis d'obtenir un aperçu riche de la vie familiale de Kefa et de l'école informelle qu'il fréquentait, à laquelle s'ajoute les informations recueillies dans un entretien avec son professeur et une séance d'observation à son école. L'article s'appuie également sur les données recueillies dans un questionnaire ayant pour but de situer cette étude de cas dans un contexte plus large d'expériences d'enfants réfugiés au Liban (n=100). Encadrés par des approches socioculturelles de l'apprentissage, les résultats illustrent l'interaction des barrières sociales, économiques et relationnelles qui entravent l'accès des enfants réfugiés à une éducation de qualité, et démontrent comment, malgré des ressources limitées, l'école informelle offrait un environnement et une pédagogie inclusifs et anti-discriminatoires, faisant tomber les barrières qui engendrent le racisme, l'intimidation et l'isolement. Cette étude soutient cependant que, bien qu'importantes, ces bouées de sauvetage ont une portée limitée. L'intervention de l'État est nécessaire pour construire des systèmes non discriminatoires qui favoriseraient une éducation inclusive, afin que tous les enfants puissent recevoir une éducation de qualité, se sentir en sécurité et avoir leur place.

Resumen

Este artículo identifica obstáculos principales en el acceso a la educación de niños y niñas iraquíes y sirios refugiados en el Líbano y destaca el rol de las iniciativas locales en proveer un esbozo de esperanza en salvaguardar el bienestar y aprendizaje de estos niños. La investigación se basa en parte de mi tesis doctoral y centra el estudio de caso de una familia iraquí y su hijo de cinco años, Kefa. El método "Día en la vida" fue aplicado para obtener un profundo y valioso conocimiento sobre la vida de Kefa en su hogar y la escuela informal a la que asistía. Las observaciones se complementan con datos recolectados mediante entrevistas en profundidad con su maestro de escuela y observación no participante en la escuela. El artículo también se basa en información obtenida mediante una encuesta (n=100) que informa sobre la variedad de experiencias de niños refugiados en el Líbano en un contexto más amplio. Enmarcados por enfoques socioculturales del aprendizaje, los hallazgos ilustran la interacción que las barreras sociales, económicas y relacionales tienen en impedir el acceso de los niños refugiados a una educación de calidad. El artículo muestra cómo, a pesar de los recursos limitados, la escuela informal ofreció un entorno antidiscriminatorio y una pedagogía inclusiva para derribar las barreras que generan el racismo, la intimidación y el aislamiento. El artículo sostiene que, aunque son importantes, estos salvavidas tienen un alcance limitado. La intervención del Estado es requerida para construir sistemas no discriminatorios que promuevan la educación inclusiva, de modo que todos los niños y niñas puedan generar un sentido de pertenencia y recibir una educación de calidad e inclusiva.

Introduction

Lebanon, a comparatively small country in the Middle East, has become host to the largest number of refugees per capita in the world, with children constituting over half of its refugee population (UNHCR, 2022). This is largely due to the ongoing war in Syria that began in 2011, resulting in the displacement of over 1.5 million Syrian refugees into Lebanon. Iraqis have also been taking refuge in Lebanon since the 1990s, their numbers fluctuating over the years (Sassoon, 2009). Since 2014, Lebanon has seen a new surge in the number of Iraqi refugees, reaching over 14,000 in 2018 (UNHCR, 2019), following the emergence and advancement of the 'Islamic State' ('IS') across Northern Iraq (Oehring, 2017).¹

This large influx of refugees into Lebanon has resulted in already strained public services becoming dysfunctionally overstretched, including healthcare, education and infrastructure. Local, national and international organisations as well as the Government of Lebanon (GoL) have undertaken initiatives to attempt to fill the gaps in provision, but these initiatives have fallen short of meeting the basic needs of many Iraqi, Syrian, and Lebanese children and adults who are struggling to survive in Lebanon (UNHCR et al., 2018). In response to the growing need for support, many individuals, faith- and community-based organisations have attempted to provide much-needed support for refugee populations who are most in need.

Due to the scale of the Syrian refugee influx to Lebanon, Iraqi refugees' experiences have tended to become overlooked. This paper addresses a gap in research around the overlapping nature of displacement, where different groups of displaced people share the same asylum space (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016), with particular focus on Iraqi and Syrian refugee children, and how the behaviours, views and relationships between and among these two groups and Lebanese nationals shape young refugee children's access to and experiences of schooling. This paper focuses on two aspects of my doctoral thesis findings: key barriers that impede young Iraqi and Syrian refugee children's access to quality education in Beirut's northern suburbs; and how these barriers have begun to be broken down by local actors who offer 'lifelines to learning' through informal education opportunities built on principles of inclusion and belonging.

First, the paper reviews educational initiatives for refugees provided by the GoL, and considers key barriers that impede refugee children's access to formal schooling in Lebanon. My doctoral study methodology is outlined, and findings are presented to illustrate (a) the interplay of social, economic and relational barriers that impede Iraqi and Syrian refugee children's access to high quality education, including bullying and violence in schools, power imbalances and often subtle processes of exclusion, and (b) how one informal school set up by a nun offered learning opportunities and inclusive pedagogical practices for refugee children. Despite this lifeline, the paper concludes that without systematic change, and without substantial and committed state investment in education provision based on principles of inclusion and

¹ Palestinian refugees and refugees of other nationalities also reside in Lebanon; however, this study focuses solely on Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

diversity, such lifelines will only ever constitute a small drop in the ocean, unable to eradicate the fear, instability and threats to safety that characterise the childhoods of many young children who are temporarily or permanently displaced in Lebanon.²

Refugee Children's Education Provision in Lebanon

Throughout 2012, the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) took a 'hands-off' approach to refugee education while local and international NGOs intervened to provide informal educational opportunities (Buckner et al., 2017). However, in 2013 the GoL shifted its policy, deciding to 'lead the educational response' (p.452). Subsequently, in 2014, MEHE worked to develop the Reaching All Children with Education programme (RACE) (MEHE, 2014), 'an official policy framework to the Syrian refugee crisis' (Buckner et al., 2017, p.452). RACE I (2014–16) aimed to improve Syrian refugees' and underprivileged Lebanese children's access to formal education, introducing second shift afternoon sessions in public schools for Syrian refugees and other non-Lebanese children, waiving documentation requirements for school enrolment for non-Lebanese children, and ensuring the provision of MEHE regulated, non-formal education (NFE)³ programmes for children who did not qualify to enter into formal public schools (Crul et al., 2019). This provision was later amended and updated as RACE II (2017–2021) (MEHE, 2016).

Second-shift afternoon classes continue to this day and follow the Lebanese curriculum. As such, although Arabic is the national language, second-shift schoolchildren, like Lebanese schoolchildren, are required to learn Maths and Sciences through a foreign language of instruction (either English or French). This is problematic for most Syrian and Iraqi refugee children who do not share Lebanon's multilingual language heritage, and therefore struggle to access core curriculum subjects (Crul et al., 2019). These second-shift classes are also often led by contractual teachers with questionable qualifications (Shuayb et al., 2023). Although the establishment of diverse schools, institutions and educational programmes for refugee children in Lebanon is laudable, education provision has remained fractured and unequally distributed, reaching less than half of all refugee children in Lebanon (Crul et al., 2019). This may explain why, despite the RACE programme, many

² While this paper reports on data collected before 2019, Lebanon has witnessed three major interconnected events since 2019 that have led to 'a deepening crisis of child poverty': the economic and financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Beirut Port explosion (Nassar & Barakat, 2022). These overlapping crises have had major impacts on every aspect of life in Lebanon, with real GDP estimated to have dropped by about 40% between 2018 and 2022 (World Bank, 2023) and multidimensional poverty estimated to have doubled from 42% in 2019 to 82% in 2021 (UNESCWA, 2021). These changes have worsened child rights infringements, widened the barriers to young children's education described in this paper, and have led to further hardships and trauma among both refugee and Lebanese communities.

³ NFEs are educational programmes that support children who have been out of school for several years, allowing them to eventually reintegrate into formal schooling.

community-based organisations are still operating schools and providing informal education programmes in Lebanon (Buckner et al., 2017).

Although RACE I succeeded in increasing the numbers of Syrian children aged 3–18 enrolled in public schools, from 18,780 students in 2011–12 to 141,722 students in 2015–16 (World Bank, 2016), this drastic increase severely strained the education system and led to many problems, including over-crowding and poor quality education (World Bank, 2016). According to MEHE, ‘the magnitude of the Syrian refugee-influx significantly impacted the institutional capacities of an already-compromised Lebanese public education system’, and MEHE attributed the decline in the quality of provision to ‘dated approaches to pedagogy, unfavourable allocation of public resources to the education sector, low investment into education infrastructure and premises, and noticeably absent discourse towards investment in primary and post-primary education’ (MEHE, 2016, p. 6).

Public sector preschool education in Lebanon is similarly underfunded, plagued by a lack of qualified teachers, inadequate spaces and educational resources, and incoherent implementation of the curriculum (LAES, 2006). Lack of access to high-quality early education is particularly troubling in light of studies that highlight the many and long-lasting benefits of effective preschool provision on young children, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Taggart et al., 2015). In 2010, MEHE launched the national Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP) (2010–2015), an education reform strategy (MEHE, 2010; Shuayb, 2016), to increase the number of children aged 3–5 years enrolled in public kindergartens. Despite this, attendance of public preschools in 2016–2017 remained low at around 27% (CRDP, 2017). Moreover, compared to around 84% of 3–5 year old Lebanese children enrolled in pre-school (World Bank, 2016), only 20% of Syrian and around 24% of Iraqi 3–5 year old children enrolled in 2018 and 2017, respectively (UNHCR, 2018; UNHCR et al., 2018).

Practices such as violent discipline, corporal punishment and bullying have been found to be common in Lebanese educational settings (Shuayb et al., 2016), with many reported incidences of children experiencing ‘multiple and persistent displacement and violence’ (MEHE, 2016, p.9). These incidences are arguably unhampered by Article 186 of the Lebanese Penal Code, which states ambiguously that violent acts cannot ‘rise above the limits recognised by the customs for a safe punishment’. This wording is open to interpretation and places children at risk of corporal punishment, which perhaps not coincidentally is considered one of the main factors behind Syrian refugee children’s school drop-out (Shuayb et al., 2016). RACE II also reports poor relationships between schools and families in public schools, with no formal requirement for schools to inform parents of children’s development. MEHE attributes blame ‘for dropout and low learning achievement’ (MEHE, 2016, p.9) to lower levels of support from schools and families.

It is therefore clear that while MEHE may have nominally aimed to provide education for all children, regardless of nationality, its attempts have failed to overcome the multiple barriers that prevent more than half of the refugee child population in Lebanon from attending school. These multiple barriers include: the language of instruction; unqualified teachers; cultures of violent discipline and bullying; long-term lack of investment in resources and infrastructure; incoherent implementation

of the curriculum; poor relationships between home and school; and outdated pedagogical approaches. Wider barriers further impede children's access to education, as well as their many other human rights, including contradictions between child and refugee policies. For example, while Lebanon has signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, it has rejected the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. The GoL considers those seeking refuge in Lebanon to be 'temporarily displaced' persons rather than 'refugees', thereby attempting to re-categorise political refugees as economic migrants (Janmyr, 2018). This renders immigrant children's and adults' status in the country irregular, making them liable to arrest and deportation, and severely curtails their access to essential resources such as food, shelter, health, welfare and education (Chaaban et al., 2013; Sassoon, 2009).

A Sociocultural Perspective on Inclusive Pedagogy

In contrast to the poor educational relationships reported above, a sociocultural approach to learning suggests that children learn in a social matrix, through social interactions and supportive relationships with parents, peers and teachers (Vygotsky, 1978). In this education framing, teachers are encouraged to scaffold children's learning by supporting their skills, knowledge and understanding through pedagogic devices such as sustained shared thinking and dialogue (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). Through intellectual collaboration, children's thinking is extended, new perspectives are explored (Sylva et al., 2004), and parental support for learning is highly valued (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). This supportive framing is at odds with the conditions often found in the strained education provision in Lebanon, where refugee children who have been traumatised by the effects of displacement and conflict continue to experience violence, discrimination, insecurity, poverty and fear rather than educational experiences that enable them to begin to feel safe, included and develop a sense of belonging.

Abu El-Haj (2023) who conducted an ethnographic study in a kindergarten in Lebanon found that the Lebanese curriculum puts little emphasis on children's socio-emotional development, which makes it very difficult for teachers to listen and attend to ways in which children expressed their experiences of war, conflict, displacement and poverty in the classroom. The curriculum provided very little space for teachers and children to 'explore joy, play, and the pleasures of friendship in the course of everyday life in kindergarten' (p.247). Nonetheless, she argues that when teachers,

'... abandon what they are told to do by the ministry mandates, lean into what they believe is right to do, and improvise, we see glimmers of possibility for local actors to draw on whatever is available and piece together ways of being together that are responsive to the particular and immediate needs of the children.'

She therefore suggests moving away from the view of education in contexts of war and displacement as 'oriented to normative ideals and a bright future' and

instead making space to 'encourage forms of sociality built on care and love for and among the children, teachers, and families' (p.247).

A sociocultural approach to education is a critical component of inclusive pedagogies. Florian & Black-Hawkins (2011) argue that inclusive pedagogy is determined by teachers' attitudes, knowledge and beliefs about how children learn, as well as how they respond when children face barriers to learning. It is through a humanising pedagogy of 'critical and liberating dialogue', critical reflection and committed involvement, rather than through acts of violence, manipulation and coercion, that change can begin to happen, where children become agents of change and hope (Freire, 1970). Authentic thinking takes place through communication, and as seen in Abu El-Haj's (2023) example above, by moving away from the top-down 'banking' concept of education, and by moving towards dialogue *with* children to express their life experiences and the injustices they face, teachers can begin to respond to children in the ways they need (Freire, 1970).

Moreover, relationships between different groups of refugees residing in the same city 'are often framed by power imbalances and processes of exclusion and overt hostility' by one group of refugees towards another, and can be fractured and characterised by mistrust (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016, p.3). Inclusive pedagogic approaches could move towards building social bridges and friendships between Iraqi, Syrian and Lebanese children, which would in turn enhance all children's feelings of belonging. Such equitable and socially just pedagogical thinking and acting can lead to the creation of societies that value human diversity and where all children and adults can exercise their rights in non-discriminatory ways (Liasidou, 2015).

Methodology

This paper draws on data from my doctoral study investigating how armed conflict and forced displacement affected the childhoods and play of young Iraqi and Syrian refugee children living in Beirut, Lebanon. The research design was qualitative and comprised: a questionnaire, followed by in-depth case studies with 4 refugee families living in Beirut's Northern suburbs.

The questionnaire was distributed to Lebanese, Iraqi and Syrian adults who attended a medical dispensary run by nuns, where free medical advice and care was provided by medical professionals ($n=100$: 43 Syrian, 36 Iraqi, and 21 Lebanese respondents). It contained closed and open-ended questions about respondent demographic data, their living situation in Lebanon and (in the case of refugee respondents) their reasons for leaving their home country and residing in Lebanon. The findings offered telling insights into wider social and personal issues associated with high levels of poverty and low levels of state-funded education and healthcare provision for refugee and economically disadvantaged Lebanese communities. These findings are drawn on to illustrate how the lives of all study participants shared many characteristics, despite deep divisions between ethnic communities, and to reflect wider patterns of children's limited access to high quality education in Beirut's northern suburbs.

The in-depth case studies comprised two Iraqi and two Syrian child refugees (aged 4–8 years) and their families. Case study data were collected using a Day in the Life (DITL) methodology (Gillen & Cameron 2010), supplemented by three semi-structured interviews with professionals who worked with child refugees (schoolteacher, medical doctor, street and working children professional), and an observation in an informal school for Iraqi refugee children. Here, I draw on data from one case study with 5-year-old Kefa, a young Iraqi boy living with his mother, father and younger 3-year-old brother. Upon receiving their initial consent, I visited the family on three occasions (June–July 2017) in line with the DITL approach (Gillen & Cameron 2010). I first introduced myself and the study to them, reviewed the participant information sheets and explained the process of ongoing consent (El Gemayel & Salema, 2023; Flewitt, 2005, 2022). I then conducted semi-structured interviews with Kefa’s parents and an interview with Kefa using participatory methods (drawing, block play, and photographs) (Flewitt, 2022). On my next visit, I filmed a Day in the Life of Kefa (approx. 6 h) and later created a 30-min compilation video of the footage, which I rewatched and discussed with Kefa and his family on my final visit to their home to gain their insights into the episodes filmed.

Kefa’s case study is supplemented by data from a 3-h visit to the informal school that he attended, which had been founded by a Catholic nun, Sr. Mary, for Iraqi children who did not attend school. In this setting, I hand-wrote fieldnotes as a record of student–teacher and student–student interactions, as well as my observations of available play resources, and children’s play experiences in school. I also audio-recorded a 1½ hour interview with one of two teachers, Mariana, who had been at the school since 2013—initially teaching Arabic and Maths and more recently also teaching Science and Geography.

The study adhered to British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA 2011) and was approved by the university’s research ethics and governance committee. I obtained consent from all participants on an ongoing basis (El Gemayel & Salema, 2023; Flewitt, 2005) and anonymised participant data. Qualitative data were analysed in NVivo, using Thematic Coding analysis (Belotto, 2018) and quantitative data were analysed in SPSS using exploratory data analysis (Albers, 2017). All data were collected in Arabic, a language that all participants and I spoke fluently, and transcribed and translated into English as soon as possible after being collected to ensure data accuracy. Videos transcripts were initially transcribed using unfocused transcription with a time index (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Once data excerpts were selected for analysis, I then revisited the recordings to conduct a more detailed transcription of selected excerpts, which were then coded alongside other data in Nvivo.

Introducing Kefa

Until the age of 3, Kefa lived with his parents and extended family in Northern Iraq’s Nineveh Plains, where family and community formed a core part of their lives. Kefa and his family were Chaldean Christians. In August 2014, Kefa’s family made the difficult decision to leave their home as ‘IS’ had captured nearby towns

and villages and were about to invade their town. They were internally displaced for three months before seeking refuge to Lebanon. In Lebanon, Kefa and his family moved into a 1-bedroom apartment in a low-income, densely populated area in Beirut's northern suburbs, where they initially lived with Kefa's paternal grandmother, grandfather, and uncle until Kefa's grandparents and uncle resettled to Australia in 2017.

The data presented include many first-hand accounts of the various barriers to inclusion in Lebanese society that the family had experienced, including discriminatory views towards refugees, lack of affordable, quality education for refugee children, the prevalence of corporal punishment and bullying. These contrasted with the still imperfect and low budget education 'lifeline' for Iraqi children provided by Sr. Mary.

Findings

Findings from the questionnaire, observation, interview and case study data shed light on the diversity of children's multiple encounters with new facets of disadvantage including their educational experiences in Lebanon.

Barriers to Education and Relationships of Power and Exclusion

When questionnaire respondents were asked if their children attended school, the replies differed significantly between Lebanese, Iraqi and Syrian communities. While all Lebanese respondents' school-aged children attended school, 10 Iraqi and 10 Syrian respondents reported that none of their school-age children attended.⁴ Syrian and Iraqi respondents described barriers to school attendance and the poor quality of state-funded education as including: their child's inability to keep up with the curriculum; poor command of the language of instruction (English or French, rather than Arabic); lack of finances to pay the costs of transport and books; schools refusing to register 'displaced' children; families missing schools' registration deadline; children being put back a grade (making them several years older than other children in their grade, leading to demotivation and embarrassment which led to them dropping out); children's poor physical and/or mental health; families' need for children to work to help with household income; corporal punishment being used in school.

Moreover, several Iraqi and Syrian respondents cited bullying as a reason for their children not attending school. While many Iraqi respondents complained that their children were bullied and beaten by Syrian children, many Syrian respondents complained that their children were bullied and mocked by Lebanese children. As one Iraqi respondent recounted:

⁴ Thirty-two Syrian and 19 Iraqi respondents had children aged 0–18 years. Of those, 15 Syrian and 2 Iraqi respondents expressed the view that their children were too young to attend school (0–3 years).

[My children] used to go to school in Mosul. Out of everything that has happened to us, this is by far the worst thing that has happened. They started attending a public school (in Lebanon) but they were beaten and mocked so they stopped going. They used to be at the top of their class.

Similarly, one Syrian questionnaire respondent whose son attended afternoon sessions in a Lebanese public school recounted the bullying her son received and how it had affected him. She complained that her son, who ‘used to be so quiet and gentle’, had become ‘so aggressive’ since starting school in Lebanon because ‘Lebanese children bully him. They come out of their morning school session and taunt my child. They beat him’. She also criticised the teachers for not teaching the second-shift children properly since they are ‘tired after teaching the morning lessons’.

These data point to how relationships between Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi children attending the same public schools in Lebanon were ‘often framed by power imbalances and processes of exclusion and overt hostility’ (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016, p.3). The views and behaviours of children from different refugee groups and Lebanese nationals towards each other influenced exclusionary practices in schools, perpetuating a sense of fear and insecurity among refugee children, which were key barriers to their education. Fear of sending children to school was felt by Iraqi and Syrian parents and children, and parents were sometimes advised by friends and family not to send their children to public schools because of the conflict and poor treatment that they experienced in the hands of teachers and students.

These broad patterns of experience were reflected in Kefa’s family’s accounts of his education. Kefa’s parents had refused to send him to state schools due to his lingering fears of leaving the relative security of the family home, the reputed poor quality of public education in Lebanon, including the widespread use of corporal punishment, and their fear of Kefa mingling with and possibly being bullied by Syrian children. Instead, Kefa attended Sr. Mary’s informal school, where they hoped Kefa’s education could be sustained until they were resettled to a third country. Kefa’s mother, explained: ‘he was afraid of everything. If he went outside, he would be afraid. Very slowly he started gaining some confidence’. She added that starting the informal school had reduced his anxieties and he had begun to make friends.

These findings point to how schools’ reputation for poor quality provision along with violence perpetuated by students and teachers through bullying and corporal punishment resulted in many children avoiding state schools. Nonetheless, a lifeline for Kefa’s learning was offered by Sr. Mary’s informal school setting that promoted a sense of belonging and self-worth through critical dialogue and humanising inclusive pedagogy.

Lifelines: Kefa’s Informal Schooling

The informal school Kefa attended had been founded by Sr. Mary for Iraqi children who were not attending formal schooling. At the time of the study, it was attended by thirty-three Iraqi boys and girls aged 5–14 years, all of whom had experienced traumatic displacement from Iraq to Lebanon due to ‘IS’ invasion of their hometowns. The school’s location changed from year to year depending on which church

accepted that its meeting hall could be used as a makeshift classroom. During my visit, lessons took place in one large reception hall that was transformed into two classroom areas—one for 5–10-year-olds and one for 10–14-year-olds, each led by a different teacher (Mariana and one other female teacher). The venue was clean but resources were limited, with children in each class seated in ranks of plastic tables facing forwards towards a small white board. Knowing that parents could not afford costs of school transportation, books and stationery, Sr. Mary had managed to ensure these were provided free of charge.

The children who attended this informal school were taught basic literacy (English and Arabic), Geography, Maths and Sciences. Since Iraqi children had been out of school for a long time, Mariana explained that she ‘had to see what the children already knew and build [the curriculum] from there’. She added ‘the youngest children learn the alphabet, slightly older children learn words and build sentences, [...] and the eldest children (12–14-year-olds) are ‘at the level of 9-year-olds [in Lebanon], so [the equivalent of] grade three’.

In addition to lessons, at least one hour per day was dedicated to free play. Space and resources such as toys were limited, however Marianna noted: ‘The energy that the children release [in play], it is as if someone was in prison and was set free’. She added that the school was a safe haven for children who needed to escape from their small, overcrowded apartments, and the daily ongoing stresses they faced at home. At school, they celebrated birthdays and feast days, told stories, and played music for the children to dance.

The teachers played a pivotal role in promoting a sense of safety and inclusion by adjusting the curriculum to fit the children’s needs, creating opportunities for play and encouraging expressions of self and culture, allowing them to ‘explore joy, play, and the pleasures of friendship’ in their school (Abu El-Haj, 2023, p.247).

Informal Schools as Places for Inclusive, Anti-Discriminatory Pedagogy

As mentioned, fear of the ‘other’ was regularly brought up by Iraqi and Syrian questionnaire and case study respondents. All adult case study participants feared for their children’s safety and well-being in Lebanese state education, reporting that their children rarely mingled with people of nationalities other than their own. Although both Syrians and Iraqis were forcibly displaced from their homes and took refuge in Lebanon, the details and specificities surrounding these experiences were perceived as unique to each people’s religion and nationality. Mariana, the school-teacher, spoke of two examples from her school:

‘There were two Syrian girls here two years ago, they were not accepted by the Iraqis for a while. The girls are Christian, but [the Iraqis] have this enmity towards Syrians, it is in their heads, not for any other reason. But then we spoke to them a lot and got them to play together and then things were OK’.

‘Last year there was a Muslim boy, they also rejected him, they wouldn’t play with him. We (the teachers) used to tell them “Come on let him play with you, he is a human like you”. Again, the Muslim, because ‘IS’ are Muslim, they

immediately relate the two together. Immediately. They are one and the same to them' (Mariana, Teacher).

Mariana explained that the Muslim boy's mother had played an important role in his social integration in school, by making efforts to attend school trips and talk with and build relationships with other children, explaining that her son 'is like them' and that 'he wants to play with [them]'. After the teachers' and mother's continuous efforts, Mariana recounted that the children 'finally started to accept him'.

Mariana related how bullying, teasing, insulting each other and fighting not only took place between children of different religions and nationalities, but often also among the Iraqi Christian children themselves. She attributed these behaviours to how the children had been affected by their personal experiences of war, violence and injustices, describing how they are 'angry', 'afraid' and 'stressed', adding:

'I tell them beating and fighting does not resolve issues. You can talk, you can discuss. Take back your rights through words [...] we tell them love each other'.

She added that by promoting a pedagogy based on love and care, they 'see a big change in them from year to year'.

Displaced people have different experiences of displacement depending on 'intersecting and overlapping identity markers', such as gender, religion, ethnicity, nationality, legal status, and age, and based on different power structures, such as xenophobia, Islamophobia and patriarchy (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2017, p.1). These may lead parents, children and teachers to hold discriminatory views towards others. While most case study and questionnaire data pointed to parents tending to prevent their children from interacting with children of other nationalities and/or religions, the above findings indicate how teachers and parents can play a pivotal role in building relationships between children of different, and the same, nationalities and religions, and can help break down barriers that inhibit the development of children's integration—barriers that are built by fear and can breed racism, bullying and isolation. Through intellectual collaboration, critical dialogue and reflection, and inclusive pedagogies founded on emotional well-being, we see how teachers can work with very few resources to extend children's thinking and explore new perspectives, promoting a sense of safety, belonging and inclusion (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Sylva et al., 2004).

Shortfalls of Current Lifelines

While the informal school acted as a lifeline for Kefa and his classmates, providing them with a space where they felt they belonged, with teachers who loved and cared for them and worked to break down barriers to their education and build their sense of security and inclusion, this lifeline was not enough to eradicate the societally deeply-rooted fears, instabilities and threats to their safety that these children faced on a daily basis.

Although Kefa seemed to have gained some confidence since first arriving in Lebanon, school did not eradicate his feelings of fear. As his mother explained, Kefa always 'wants to [be in] control', which might have been a protective mechanism he had developed to counter uncertainty in his life (see Jones et al., 2021). Hearing fireworks explode on the street outside their home, and witnessing an inebriated and angry man break the window of a car that was parked immediately outside their home, are only two of many instances that I was informed of and witnessed first-hand while conducting the study with Kefa, as distress and fear overcame him and his family. As his mother explained, 'from the fear that we experienced before, we are now afraid of anything, even a low or loud sound, we are afraid that it will grow into something bigger and a problem will arise'.

Kefa's parents were similarly aware that although he was receiving some education in the informal school, this would not result in a formal qualification. This was a temporary solution as they awaited resettlement, indefinitely. One year after my visits to Kefa's family, rather than being resettled to another country, they had moved to a smaller, more affordable apartment. However, since his new home was much farther away from the school he had been attending, Kefa could no longer take the free bus to school and was forced to drop out.

Despite the comparatively positive school experiences that Kefa had, which may have boosted his confidence and reduced some aspects of his fear, he continued to wrestle with deep past trauma, fear and insecurity that characterised his life as a refugee in Lebanon. While the informal school acted as an important lifeline for those children who were excluded from state schools, wider structural and systematic change is required, with transformative change to pedagogy from punitive to inclusive, to ensure all children can participate as members of inclusive communities.

Discussion

This paper illustrates the interplay of social, economic and relational barriers that impede Iraqi and Syrian refugee children's access to high quality education. In line with previous research, it demonstrates how violence in schools perpetrated by teachers and children was a major barrier to education and inclusion in Lebanon (Shuayb et al., 2016). While other research focuses on experiences of Syrian refugee children (Buckner et al., 2017; Crul et al., 2019; Kelcey & Chatila, 2020; Shuayb et al., 2016), this study shed light on the overlapping nature of displacement (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016) in Lebanon by drawing on the experiences of Iraqi children and the relationships that played out between and among Lebanese nationals and Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

Although education was highly regarded among Iraqi and Syrian parents, many felt they had no choice but to refuse to send their children to low-quality schools in order to protect them, for although children might receive some form of education in these schools, their psychological, physical and emotional well-being was at risk of further harm by exposure to traumatic experiences caused by exclusion, racism, bullying, and corporal punishment (Shuayb et al., 2016).

This study also illustrates how one informal school set up by a nun in a comparatively small area of Beirut's Northern suburbs offered learning opportunities and inclusive pedagogical practices for refugee children, and was a lifeline for those children whose parents were too afraid to attend public schools. Although the school did not follow the Lebanese curriculum and did not provide children with a certified education qualification, it did provide children with routine, a safe space, a basic education, qualified and motivated, compassionate teachers, and friends and opportunities to play that Kefa's mother reported had had a hugely positive effect on Kefa. Initial barriers to accessing school were resolved by ensuring all children had free access to books, stationery, and a means of transport to and from school. Moreover, in line with Florian & Black-Hawkins' (2011) conceptualisation of an inclusive pedagogical approach, Marianna made a conscious effort to promote inclusion in her daily practice, by recognising and dismantling at least some of the many barriers that stood in the way of children's learning. She practised committed involvement and encouraged dialogue *with* children and their parents to respond to children's needs and promote a safe and inclusive school environment (Freire, 1970). She listened as children and their parents talked about the children's life experiences, and the injustices they faced. In turn, she encouraged children to learn to resolve their differences with others through words and dialogue, rather than violence. Her performance of inclusive pedagogy modelled behaviours that the children began to adopt in their own daily lives in the informal school, which offered a space that 'encourage[d] forms of sociality built on care and love for and among the children, teachers, and families' (Abu El-Haj, 2023, p.247). She recognised how power relationships were played out between children and how discriminatory and exclusionary practices were exercised. Rather than shying away from difficult issues, she addressed them by maintaining strong ties with parents, keeping parents informed of their children's progress and challenges in school, and involving parents in children's schooling experience with the understanding that children learn through a social matrix, through social interactions and relationships with parents, peers and teachers (Vygotsky, 1978). Through sustained shared thinking, teachers, parents and other children could help extend children's thinking around race, inclusion and acceptance, and open their hearts and minds to different possibilities and ways of perceiving things (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Sylvia et al. 2004).

Conclusion

Although the school described in this paper provided a lifeline for young refugee children who were either unable to access or were withheld from formal schooling, it was not adequate to meet their rights to high quality education. Refugee parents' hopes to leave Lebanon in the near future and be resettled in a third country may have influenced their decisions to opt for a temporary solution to their children's education by attending this welcoming but informal school with only basic education provision. However, parents sometimes waited years before receiving news of their resettlement, adding to their deep concerns for their children's futures. Moreover, as exemplified by Kefa, while attending the informal school helped him

be less fearful, trauma and injustice continued to shape his present life. Although there is global recognition that school, education routine and inclusive pedagogies are important and beneficial for all children, this study highlights the urgent need for systemic change, not only in Majority World countries such as Lebanon that are caught up in mass migration due to armed conflict in neighbouring countries, but also across the Global North and South, where higher levels of state-funded investment is constantly needed to support more equitable education provision that promotes and supports inclusive, non-discriminatory education and care resources based on socially just pedagogical thinking and practice. Only then can all children receive quality education where they feel safe, can begin to overcome their traumatic experiences, and feel that they belong.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest I have no potential conflict of interest to declare.

Ethical Approval The study presented in this article was reviewed and approved by the UCL Institute of Education Internal Ethics Committee. All adult and child participants were asked for their ongoing informed consent throughout the research.

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