

An emerging framework for designing and providing education to Syrian refugee children in Lebanon

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Introduction

The conflict in Syria that erupted in 2011 quickly transformed into an international humanitarian crisis. The violence including massacres of children and minority ethnic groups have left over 240,000 dead and over 4 million displaced beyond Syria's political borders. People fleeing the war have taken refuge in neighbouring countries like Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. They have also managed to find travel routes to European countries, mostly taking life-threatening journeys. As of 30 September 2015, Lebanon, with a population of 4 million Lebanese people, hosts 1,078,338 registered refugees from the last official registered figure of 1,183,327 on 6 May 2015 (UNHCR, 2015a). A more accurate number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, however, is estimated at 1,500,000 (Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, 2015; UNICEF, 2015).

Once to safety, the refugees immediately begin to secure basic necessities for living like shelter, work, food, and water. In Lebanon, the provision of education as a children's human right has also been a priority response by government, international and civil society actors. The Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) endorsed in January 2014 the "Reaching All Children with Education in Lebanon" working strategy. A report by UNICEF (2015) recognized that the registration of 88,000 SRC in 524 public schools by March 2014 as a "remarkable improvement" in ensuring access to education for SRC in Lebanon (p. 59). Moreover, the Government of Lebanon aims to provide all 489,145 registered Syrian refugee children (SRC) with access to learning, of whom 106,000 were reached by March 2015 (UNHCR, 2015b). Figures of SRC out of school are not only much higher than the official registers, but are also rapidly increasing as Syrian families grow in Lebanon. Still, an estimated 80% of SRC (registered and unregistered) do not have access to either formal or non-formal education. Those who do have access either struggle or drop out

due to difficulties in learning a compulsory second language; degrees of resistance to integration like bullying and marginalization from Lebanese students, teachers and principals; and inability to pay tuition and other costs for public education (e.g. REACH, 2014; Shuayb, Makouk, & Tutunji, 2014).

On 5 November 2014, a number of organizations presented their approaches, experiences and findings in providing education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon at a symposium entitled “Innovations for Syrian Refugee Education” hosted at the Center for Applied Research in Education, Notre Dame University – Louaize. This symposium aimed to create a space for actors in the field (e.g. education researchers, teachers, education program developers) to share what they have found to be critical in ensuring provisions of quality education specific to the population of SRC. We understand quality education as learning that takes place in an environment that is safe, inclusive, collaborative and supportive of various areas of human development.

We present the symposium proceedings below as a collective, co-authored framework of educational provisions for refugee children, particularly Syrian refugees in Lebanon. We are educationists, activists and researchers working in the field of education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon (see list of presentations below). The findings are based on observations, professional experiences and studies carried out across various Syrian refugee camps and schools that host SRC in Lebanon. We argue that the initial response of providing education to SRC has been delivered in forms of ‘schooling in a box’ and have, consequently, overshadowed basic developmental needs and intercultural dynamics. The evidence suggests a framework that could inform and appropriate educational provisions – formal and non-formal – for SRC in Lebanon.

Symposium presentations:

1. "Negotiating a future: Hidden barriers to refugee education", **Alexandra Chen**, *Specialist in child mental health and refugee education, Harvard University*
2. "Widening access to quality education for Syrian refugees: The role of private and NGO sectors in Lebanon", **Dr Maha Shuayb**, *Director, Centre for Lebanese Studies*
3. "How innovative could one be in an emergency situation?", **Khalil Miled Makari**, *Education Specialist, War Child Holland*
4. "Peacebuilding and education in emergencies: The work of Relief & Reconciliation in Syrian refugee camps of Akkar", **Friedrich Bokern**, *Director, Relief and Reconciliation for Syria.*
5. "Local responses to the gap in education: Basmeh wa Zeitooneh's experience in Shatila camp", **Fadi Hallisso**, *Co-founder and General Manager, Basmeh-Zeitooneh*
6. "Child-centered learning in a safe and enabled environment", **Amina Kleit**, *Program Director, Ana Iqra*
7. "Integrated approaches to technology and education responses for refugees", **Janae Bushman**, *Founder, Aliim* and **Dr Bassel Akar**, *Director, Center for Applied Research in Education*

An emerging framework of education for SRC

We present ten dimensions to providing educational opportunities to SRC in Lebanon. These ten are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. We encourage researchers and practitioners to critically examine this framework as an informed effort to develop approaches to designing and providing educational programs to refugee children in Lebanon and other parts of the world.

Parents as gatekeepers

Mothers, fathers and guardians of SRC, to a great extent, determine whether or not their children join or benefit from an educational program. Field workers carrying out home visits have found children with disabilities, especially from the war, sheltered from the community. Parents of children who have paid jobs, especially sons, and conservative parents, namely fathers of daughters, prefer not to send their children to school. In some cases, parents and widows were unable to care for their children (mainly daughters) and so sent their children out for prostitution or early marriage. For parents of SRC who do attend school, some parents apparently stigmatize school or the classroom by threatening children they will tell the teacher if they misbehave at home.

Educational programs for SRC must involve parents. To relieve children from underage employment, some programs have connected families with relief agencies who were providing food baskets so that children do not have to work. For children who do not [or cannot] attend school, the home becomes an alternative place for learning. So, some programs have tried to guide parents and older siblings, even if they never attended school, to stimulate the children's senses during their critical period of brain development.

Education perceived as low-stakes

When asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?", SRC expressed purposefulness in education to achieve their professional aspirations. However, their living conditions at home and in the wider community appears to have hurt any hope or perception of education improving quality of living or employability. SRC see their family members with written qualifications out of work and find that available work opportunities – legal or illegal – is a better investment than an education or going to school. In a few cases, the lack of

opportunities to work or start higher education has driven some to return to fight in Syria. For those not registered in schools, SRC and their parents and guardians see the alternative of non-formal educational programs as pointless if the program does not provide some formal or legal recognition of achievement like a certificate of graduation.

Children's mental health

Alongside ensuring that SRC access educational programs, equal if not greater efforts should focus on emotional and neurological rehabilitation. Young children from birth to three years are in the most critical period of brain development and, thus, are most vulnerable to toxic stress or prolonged exposure to stress. Toxic stress affects the parts of the brain responsible for memory (hippocampus) and higher level cognitive functions (prefrontal cortex). Furthermore, integration into a highly structured education system, living in hostile communities and exposure to verbal and physical abuse from parents and guardians further exacerbates the effects of stress and war trauma on children.

Due to brain plasticity, however, young children can respond positively to psychosocial rehabilitation. Reading research on brain development of children who have experienced trauma (i.e. The Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University) can inform the design of educational activities for SRC. Scores of programs in Lebanon for SRC have provided psychosocial support (PSS) through theatre, drawing and music. PSS activities provide SRC spaces to express and share their emotional pains as part of a process to deal with traumas.

Developing human resources into professionals

The special developmental and rehabilitative needs of SRC require people with specialised backgrounds to support such a vulnerable population of children. In the case of Lebanon, such professionals are an extremely limited resource. One group of professionals have been Syrians already residing in Lebanon who volunteer their professional services. Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have also sought out Syrian teachers who have taken refuge in Lebanon from the war in Syria and employed them as mentors, facilitators and directors of educational programs.

Many teachers, workers and volunteers, however, are neither prepared nor qualified to work the children who have experienced [and continue to experience even as refugees in Lebanon] war trauma, and suffer from toxic stress and symptoms of post-trauma stress disorder. Consequently, teachers have shown to channel out their frustrations on SRC through verbal and corporal punishment, turning the school into another harmful space. In contrast, a 14-year-old's girl's story brought the volunteers to tears who then stopped the activity and prompted a call for training sessions on how to manage activities where children voice their war-related stories. Furthermore, workers in the field found themselves unprepared to talk or negotiate with parents who did not support their children attending school. Some of the more difficult conversations emerged with conservative fathers or parents dependent on their child's income. In formal educational settings, like schools, teachers found it extremely difficult to facilitate learning activities for a diverse range of abilities and SRC who would inconsistently come to school.

One organization reported that setting up peer-mentors was a cost-effective and time-efficient approach to develop professional skills for managing learning activities with SRC. The teachers and program managers found that peer-mentoring was most convenient because teachers sometimes did not have time to attend workshops and workshops

sometimes did not appear to address their needs. Teachers from other schools were hired as mentors and paired with SRC teachers to observe their classes and give feedback.

Sometimes, the mentor would assist each the teacher by providing some students with one-to-one support. The organization could not afford discipline-specific mentors, so the support emphasized mostly pedagogies or approaches to classroom learning and teaching. Also, reading published documents and experiences from other NGOs and countries providing education in emergency situations emerged as critical to processes of monitoring and reviewing educational programs.

Integrating into an education system

The education system in Lebanon is highly structured and centralized. Therefore, researchers and education workers have found that public schools, to a large extent, de facto hinder or harm SRC. Grouping SRC in school according to age has increased the diversity of abilities in each classroom. Large numbers of SRC drop out of school because they struggle learning a second language to Arabic in Lebanon's trilingual curriculum and many continue experiencing forms of violence in schools (bullying, marginalization). Others get retained grade levels rather than given extra support when they fail exams. The current system as a whole, as one professional described it, is hostile because SRC do not learn anything about Syria, very little about Lebanon, and are in an environment where they are mostly not welcome.

Schools have introduced second shifts to accommodate for Syrian refugee children with some registering them morning (regular) classes. In some cases, SRC in morning shifts are placed in separate classes even though they are given the same curriculum as their Lebanese peers. This and having different playground times for Lebanese and Syrian children

raise concerns of segregation. Some justifications for segregated schooling include that Lebanese students will suffer academically if the classes mainstream SRC and that Lebanese students are not prepared to learn and live with children from different backgrounds so separating them is safer for the Syrian children. Moreover, many schools claim they cannot [or principals choose not to] accommodate SRC.

Sustainable programs

Educational programs cost money. Highly qualified psychotherapists and social workers are among the costliest resources. Organizations found that, during emergencies, funding is readily available, especially through UN agencies. However, initiatives starting off as aid suffer when becoming long-term development projects and, thus Relying on donors is unsustainable. In addition to raising funds through donations from Lebanese and Syrian families in and out of Lebanon, some organizations have sustained their programs by collaborating with other organizations and providing services in the private sector in Lebanon and other Arab countries.

Communities in conflict

The rapid influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon has introduced a more complex level of diversity in existing communities. Degrees of conflict have generated among various communities, namely hosting Lebanese, Syrian refugees, Palestinian refugees and long-established Syrian camps. The emerging tensions have threatened security forcing parents to restrict their children from leaving the camps to go work or attend school. Even the camps themselves appear equally dangerous as SRC live in poor living conditions or in Palestinian refugee camps where there is very little policing or law enforcement.

Based on the field experience of one organisation, a peacebuilding framework comprising three elements has helped manage and transform the dynamics that potentially fuel conflict into forms of empowerment and inclusive participation. The first element, conflict analysis, involves conducting an informed understanding or analysis of the (1) Syrian conflict and the traumas associated with it, (2) forms of violence between Syrian refugee and Lebanese host communities, (3) conflicts among Syrian refugees accessing limited resources provided by international organizations. The second element, community empowerment, aims to empower the communities by defining the [international] organisation's role as one that assists and offers solutions, expertise, and sometimes funding; but neither directs nor brands the services provided with logos. The third element, community involvement, requires that steering committees in local communities ensure that representing members include moral authorities, religious authorities and other influential figures from the different communities. Not only does wide representation bring the conflicting communities closer together, but strengthens degrees of trust when finding consensus on basic humanistic principles and values of equality and working for those in need.

Tailoring provisions of education

In contrast to working within established and highly structured education systems, non-formal educational programs (NFEP) have developed curricular content and approaches to learning that aim to support the developmental and rehabilitative needs of SRC. In addition to basic literacy, NFEP have focused on vocational training, raising awareness about health and hygiene and providing psychosocial support. Learning activities spend little time on instruction and more time giving children room to explore and practice independently. Teachers, therefore, support by answering questions and giving feedback to either children

individually or in small groups of 3-5. An NFEP director reported teachers were increasingly supporting learning and spending less time managing behaviour when children were given time to explore and discover independently. Furthermore, children in reading programs were grouped according to proficiency levels rather than age.

An extremely challenging component of adapting educational programs for SRC is the task of accrediting or awarding certificates for educational achievement. Some ad hoc, unofficial schools teaching the Syrian curriculum lost popularity because less than a third were able to return to Syria to take their official exams because of security. Even when private schools attempted to translated the Lebanese curriculum into Arabic, the official exams for sciences and maths remained in English and French. So, although the Lebanese government allowed SRC to respond in Arabic, SRC were still learning key English and French terms to at least decode or read the exam questions. Some organizations turned to other countries for certificating secondary education. Libya, for example, offered SRC its curriculum and administered its official exams in Turkey. However, less than a quarter of SRC studying the Libyan curriculum were able to travel while the others switched to the “coalition curriculum”, a depoliticised Syrian national curriculum that blacklisted families from returning to Syria.

Technology, mainly mobile phones, remains an alternative yet underdeveloped tool to providing all SRC access to learning activities and psychosocial support. About a third of SRC in Syrian school in Lebanon use a Smartphone at home. If one is shared among small groups of children (i.e. three or four), mobile phones can potentially connect all SRC in Lebanon to learning activities and allow for flexible learning schedules. They can provide learning activities for Arabic, second language learning and basic literacy and numeracy skills. With international partnerships like volunteer mentors around the world, learning

activities through mobile phones could provide learners with feedback to foster active learning and self-reflection.

Legal frameworks

Legal frameworks define the parameters of providing education to all SRC. Understanding local laws is critical, especially those decreed from government agencies like MEHE.

International legally-binding instruments like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) sometimes conflict with local laws. For example, Article 29 of the UNCRC states that all children are entitled to free primary education. However, in 1998, Law No. 686 amended article 49 of Decree No. 134/59 that ensured primary education for all children in Lebanon to specify such provisions for only Lebanese children.

Only since the influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon has MEHE tried to accommodate SRC into its public schools. MEHE with support from agencies like UNHCR and UNICEF launched an Accelerated Learning Program that allows SRC to learn basic subject matters in a short period of time. After successful completion of the ALP, they can then register in public schools. Still, access into public schools has been limited to the school's capacity to accommodate additional children and highly bureaucratic procedures of registration into schools. At the time of this symposium in November 2014, children who have been out of school for more than two years or have either lost or could not obtain a record of prior schooling were ineligible for registration. The legal framework in 2015 has been widened due to international donor support. For example, the 94 million USD donation for a "Back to School" campaign has covered all registration fees for Lebanese and Syrian children in public schools making public education free of charge for the first time in

Lebanon (Jaafar & Abou Khaled, 2015). Furthermore, only until the 2015/2016 academic year can SRC register in public schools without documentation of prior schooling.

Safety

Families of SRC want to make sure that travelling to school and the school itself protect the child from harm. Indeed, some SRC do not go to school because they cannot find safe and affordable means of transportation. Some SRC who are in school sacrifice safety to stay in school by not reporting incidents of bullying or physical and verbal abuse. Syrian private schools in Lebanon have begun to spread and are seen as safe places for SRC to learn.

Conclusion

The observations, experiences and findings from field studies begin to demonstrate the highly complex and fragile undertaking of providing all SRC opportunities to learn. Although this study is far from comprehensive, the evidence shows numerous variables that define “access to education” for SRC, including psychosocial support for post-trauma rehabilitation and involvement of parents. Education for all SRC requires more than just access. It needs phases of transition into schooling and learning.

In conclusion, we believe that ensuring all SRC are registered in accredited formal or non-formal educational programs is only one of many success indicators of providing all refugee children with an education. We argue that provisions of education may have adverse effects without simultaneous efforts to build capacity of teaching professionals, rehabilitating post-war trauma and working in tandem with parents of SRC.

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