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Educational Challenges of Syrian Children in Lebanon: The Role of Non-formal Education in Enhancing School Attainment

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the role of alternative schooling systems in Lebanon, in breaking the structures that prevent Syrian refugee children from participate in the education process. Through in-depth interviews and participant observation carried out in 2018 in the Academic Centre of Minyara and the communities of displaced Syrians in the nearby area, I investigate the community-based approach to education in Academic Centre of Akkar. I argue that non-formal education, as it has been integrated into the formal schooling system of Lebanon, has the potential to challenge cultural and social reproduction and facilitate access to education for Syrian children.

Keywords: *Non-formal education; Syrian refugee children; Lebanon; schooling*

Introduction

The on-going Syrian conflict, which over the past ten years has developed into the largest humanitarian crisis of modern times, has had a great impact on the education of displaced Syrian children. Since the beginning of the war, around 6,7 million people have fled outside the Syrian borders, with the vast majority of them being displaced in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.[2] An estimated number of 1.5 million Syrians have been displaced in Lebanon, of which currently only around 887.000 are registered as refugees with the UNHCR.[3] The protracted nature of the crisis has overstrained the already weak infrastructures including the capacity of the education system to address the critical needs of Syrian students. Despite a series of policy changes and efforts to renew the education sector, Lebanon has not been able to accommodate and properly absorb Syrian refugee children into the schooling system. Because of a highly decentralized and privatized educational system and the sectarian political framework wherein it has developed, the role of non-state actors has become central to the provision of a comprehensive response to the educational needs of Syrian children. As a consequence, alternative education systems have emerged alongside formal education and

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[2] These figures only represent the number of registered Syrian refugees, namely those who have applied for the refugee status with the UNHCR. See UNHCR statistics: https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=Ncf11j. The number of unregistered Syrians varies. In Lebanon, it is estimated that between 300,000 and 500,000 nonregistered Syrians are displaced in the country. See Janmyr (2016). Lebanon is also hosting some 45.000 Palestinian refugees from Syria.

[3] See UNHCR Global Focus – Lebanon: https://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2520?y=2021#year (Accessed June 30, 2021). Lebanon is also hosting some 45.000 Palestinian refugees from Syria. See UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response – Lebanon: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71 (Accessed July 30, 2021).

intertwined with it to expand refugee children's access to education in Lebanon. One of these forms of alternative education is the community-based approach[4] implemented by the Reaching All Children with Education (RACE I) policy in 2014[5].

A number of studies have already investigated the access to quality education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon and the challenges that they encounter (Khawaja, 2016; Buckner et al., 2018; Bahou & Zakharia, 2019; Hamadeh, 2019; Akesson et al., 2020). A growing scholarship has also looked at the role of the private sector and non-state actors in providing non-formal education (NFE) (Shuayb et al., 2014; Karam et al., 2017; Hallak, 2017) and in supporting children's access to formal education (DeHoop et al., 2019). Nevertheless, less is known about the specific approaches and pedagogical methodologies of alternative education systems in promoting access to education for refugee groups especially when these are integrated into the formal education system, like in Lebanon.

In an attempt to fill this gap, this paper uses the lens of social reproduction theories to analyze alternative education programs in Lebanon and the potential of alternative schooling systems in deconstructing the structures that prevent refugee groups from participating in the education process. The research questions that have guided this study are as follows: What are the main barriers to education for Syrian children in Lebanon? What is the role of non-state actors and local communities in breaking those barriers and supporting Syrian children in attaining education?

In the following paragraphs, after introducing the methodology and the theoretical framework, I will present a brief overview of the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. I will then explore the challenges for education faced by Syrian children and the response of Lebanon to the educational need of Syrian students, including the implementation of non-formal education methodologies alongside standardized formal education. Finally, I will analyze the role of the bottom-up approach put into practice by non-formal education programs in breaking the barriers that prevent Syrian refugee children to access the schooling system.

Methodology

This paper is the result of fieldwork conducted in the region of Akkar, Lebanon, through qualitative methods. Primary data were collected in 2018 in the Academic Centre of Akkar in Minyara and the communities of displaced Syrians in the nearby area – including informal tented settlements, private homes, and temporary residences. I carried out fourteen individual in-depth interviews with Syrian families, teachers, and institutional and humanitarian actors. I selected my participants through existing networks. Individual interviews focused on challenges and obstacles of education for Syrian children, the potential of education policies to promote equity in accessing the school system to Syrian children, post-school plans and aspirations of Syrian children and their families. Additional informal talks and conversations were carried out randomly in Lebanon among the local population and the population of displaced Syrians. Participant observation, the main empirical tool used for this research, was

[4] The community-based approach is often supported by international organizations and top-down directed to lighten the load of their work. See: *A Community-based Approach in UNHCR Operations*: https://www.unhcr.org/publications/legal/47ed0e212/community-based-approach-unhcr-operations.html.

[5] Followed by the 2017-2021 Reaching All Children with Education (RACE II) policy. See: https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/lebanon_race-ii_2017-2021.pdf (Accessed July 30, 2021).

conducted in the Academic Centre of Akkar among Syrian students, their teachers and their families. Through this method, I sought to go deeper into the articulated nature of the topic and to have an insight into the children's perceptions and attitudes towards their education in Lebanon. This strategy was useful to better understand differences between inner and outer perceptions on the problem. For example, it was remarkable in the phase of local organizations' interrogation that the discourse around Syrian children's education was built on short-term objectives. This picture was in contrast with the children's perception of their educational path. They did not see this moment of their life in comparison with a potential future or alternative circumstances. Throughout the observation phase, I recorded data and personal observations through fieldnotes. Interviews and observations were carried out between May and September 2018. Data were interpreted using theoretical concepts of cultural and social reproduction, educational aspirations, and agency.

Theoretical framework

This article uses the concept of social and cultural reproduction as a lens to explore the role of alternative schooling systems of non-formal education, as the community-based approach, in promoting Syrian children's education in Lebanon. The work of Bourdieu on the role of schooling in perpetuating cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977) and unequal allocation of power (Bourdieu, 1977) can be helpful to explain why vulnerable groups like refugees remain excluded from the education processes (Naidoo, 2009). Bourdieu argues that the privileged social classes in society are those who transmit and legitimize the dominant culture, while disadvantaged groups do not have the same opportunities and resources to mobilize cultural and social capital. In particular, the school carries out a pedagogic action that transmits the dominant culture and contributes to the reproduction of power dynamics in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). In this sense, the school contributes to the reproduction of social opportunities and inequalities across different social classes. In other words, disadvantaged groups like refugees encounter several barriers in their participation in the education process, from which they remain marginalized. This marginalization contributes to shaping inequalities in the allocation of cultural capital. Bourdieu's concept of capital is handy in understanding the way individuals learn about cultural practices that can be performed within a social context. Capital can be described as the tools used by individuals within a field to acquire dominance and to reproduce themselves (Bourdieu, 1986). Among the categories of capital identified by Bourdieu, cultural capital refers to cultural resources like competencies, skills, qualifications, which enable actors to mobilize cultural authority, and also to put in practice symbolic violence. In light of this, the concept of reproduction lies in the struggle that takes place in the *field*, through which individuals can either maintain or alter their position (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The educational field is central in Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural reproduction as in the author's view the education system is responsible for the conservation and transmission of culture.

In this paper, I argue that, although cultural and social reproduction mechanisms are still dominant within local and refugee communities in Lebanon, alternative educational systems can help to overcome the reproduction of power dynamics and social inequalities. The experience of Syrian children in the Lebanese schooling system is very significant in exploring processes of social reproduction. In particular, I contend that the regulations enacted by the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), as described in the next sections, have shaped distinctive access to education for Syrian refugees in contrast to other

groups of refugees like Palestinians.[6] Through the involvement of local communities, parents, and teachers with the same background, this approach can help Syrian children to disrupt the power dynamics and symbolic violence that shape the reproduction of power relations between local communities and refugee communities.

Syrian refugees in Lebanon

Lebanon is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol and it strongly opposes the notion of "country of asylum" (Janmyr, 2017). In fact, it does not recognize the term "refugee" (*lāji'iyn*) to Syrians, who are rather addressed as "displaced persons" (*nazi̱ḥiyn*) (Mourad, 2017). As a result, Syrians are formally considered as *de facto* refugees only when they are registered with the UNHCR and instead as "economic migrants" or "foreigners" when they are not under UN protection (Janmyr, 2016). Lebanon's response to the refugee crisis is fragmented and often managed with informality (Janmyr, 2017). In particular, the government's decision of not setting up formal refugee camps dedicated to Syrians, the so-called "no camp policy" (El Mufti 2014), was taken in large part to prevent the Syrian presence in Lebanon from becoming permanent, as it had happened with the Palestinians, who are displaced in Lebanon since 1948. Until 2014, the Lebanese government maintained an open border policy whereby Syrians could live in Lebanon with no specific regulations applying to them. For this reason, the state response in the first phase of the crisis was also referred to as a "policy of no-policy" (ibid., 2014). While non-encampment may have allowed greater freedom of movement for refugees, the lack of adoption of an alternative protection and shelter policy created challenges for both the UN and the local communities who became the primary respondents to the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon (Boustani et al., 2018). In 2015, the UNHCR closed the registration for Syrians, which made all those who could not register before that year falling into the category of "foreigners" (Dionigi, 2016). At the same time, those who are officially registered as refugees are denied to work. In general, unless they have a sponsor (*kafeel*), Syrians are allowed to work only in certain sectors: construction, agriculture, and cleaning services (Tirado Chase, 2016).

This fragmented legal system, as well as the difficulties and costs associated with the residency renewal, have made many Syrian refugees on the Lebanese territory 'irregular'. Within this context, the consequences of displacement on children are still difficult to determine. What is known is that exposure to violence and conflict has damaging consequences for the well being of children and their long-term development (Yayan et al., 2020) and Syrian refugee children in Lebanon live in a state of distress and general insecurity generated by trauma and challenging dynamics associated with displacement (DeJong et al., 2017).

Lebanon's response to the educational needs of Syrian refugee children

In 2017, under the Back to School Campaign, Lebanon has taken on greater efforts to enroll around 400.000 Syrian children in governmental public schools with the support of UNICEF. Yet, the schooling system keeps being not inclusive for Syrian students. These latter are offered the same curricula as Lebanese children, but the majority of Syrian students are enrolled in the so-called "second shifts" namely in afternoon programs of public schools

[6] Palestinian children's basic education in Lebanon is provided by UNRWA. Palestinians students attend UNRWA's classes, which offer the same curriculum as Lebanese schools. See UNRWA: https://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/education. (Last visited 31 March 2020)

running only for them. Including refugee children in the education system has been one of the greatest challenges for Lebanon within the refugee crisis. The protracted nature of displacement has overstrained the system, which has appeared to be unable to address the critical education needs of refugees. In 2019, only 69% of children aged between 6 and 14 enrolled in primary schools, and only 11% of those aged 14-24 received formal education. Furthermore, the UNHCR has reported that 66% of Syrian refugees aged between 15 and 24 are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) – with the percentage of girls in this category being considerably higher than boys (respectively 78% and 52%, UNHCR, 2019).

The response of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) has changed consistently over the years. When the refugee crisis started, in 2011-2012, Syrians were not expected to stay in Lebanon longer than a few months, thus nor the government or the families expected or demanded formal education for refugee children. With the crisis becoming protracted, all the education sector actors started to look for solutions to better meet the needs of an increasing number of children. During the first years of the crisis, international and local NGOs and other entities handled Syrian children education by setting informal programs with different curricula in emergency schools. Although it is common that international humanitarian organizations often take charge of educational services for refugees (Chelpi-den Hamer, 2011), the system resulted to be very fragmented and no access to qualification recognition was given to Syrian children.

Education, in Lebanon, is highly privatized with less than a third of the Lebanese school-aged children enrolled in public schools (Hamdan, 2012). Until 2013, Syrian children were enrolled in public schools along with Lebanese students. In 2013-2014, when the number of Syrian students in Lebanese schools started growing, the MEHE, with UN funds, restructured the schooling system in Lebanon. In 2013, for example, in order to accommodate a greater number of students, the afternoon shifts were created for Syrians in public schools starting from the area of Arsal. This measure was designed to lighten schools from a load of enrolments, especially after the arrival of a large number of Syrians from 2014 onwards. In June 2014, the MEHE adopted the Reaching All Children with Education (RACE I) policy (Buckener et al. 2017), a three-year program with the goal of enrolling 470,000 Syrian refugees and vulnerable Lebanese children in formal and non-formal education by 2016.[7] The scheme aimed at ensuring free access to education for all children in the Lebanese territory up to grade twelve by improving the quality of teaching and learning, and strengthening national education systems, policies, and monitoring. In 2017, the RACE II Strategy (2017-2021) promised to take on greater efforts to enroll some 400.000 Syrian children in governmental public schools, with the support of UNICEF, in a longer-term vision in terms of financial response.

Access to formal and non-formal education

The improvements reached under the RACE plan served to standardize both formal and non-formal education. As for formal education, two main programs were put into action: the abovementioned second-shift program and the access to a formal qualification. Within the second shift program, Syrian children who joined public formal schools after 2014 were enrolled in afternoon classes established for them. While officially this action was mostly supposed to unburden schools with a load of students that they could not manage, unofficially

[7] MEHE officer. Personal interview. Beirut. August 24, 2018.

it was conceived to reduce conflicts between locals and refugee communities. In fact, it created a separation between groups and the isolation of refugee communities from the locals.[8] Syrian children's education is financially supported by the international community. This includes the UN with their private donors, which also cover the expenses for vulnerable Lebanese children.

Non-formal education was also standardized under the RACE plan. Several supporting programs have been created. For example, the Accelerating Learning Programme (ALP) for children out of school for two or more years; the Preparatory Early Childhood Education (PRE-ECE), a type of kindergarten that teaches a three-year KG program in one year – to make children able to read and write before starting grade one, like Lebanese children; the Retention Support Program (RSP), developed by the Ministry of Education and implemented by NGOs inside the schools; the Basic Literacy and Numeracy Programme (Basic BLN); and finally the Community-based Early Childhood Education (CB-ECE), developed by the Ministry of Education and implemented by NGOs in their centers, or in tented settlements where Syrian children live. According to Buckner et al. (2017), non-state actors played an important role in providing education services to Syrian refugees outside the public system. In particular small organizations providing community-based education worked harmoniously with the MEHE, supplementing the Lebanese national curriculum with the Syrian curriculum, language support, and psychosocial support (Hallak, 2017).

The challenges of education in Lebanon

One of the main issues generated by the Syrian crisis is the lack of continuity for children to attain education in displacement. Of 483,000 school-aged Syrian children currently displaced in Lebanon, more than half are out of school.[9] Due to the protracted nature of the "refugee crisis" many children were born in displacement or have grown up as refugees; some of them have never seen a classroom in their life.

Although Lebanon has taken important measures to give Syrian children access to formal education, there are several challenges still to overcome. The language gap is the main obstacle. Starting from grade seven (intermediate school), the main subjects in public schools, such as math and science, are taught in either English or French. In Syria, the teaching language is Arabic and the majority of children in displacement have no knowledge of foreign languages. Teachers have observed that the language gap compromises the understanding of basic concepts in many scientific subjects.

> "Our biggest challenge as teachers is to make lessons understandable for Syrian students. Because we have to teach in French, many Syrian kids are not able to understand the concepts. It is unfair because some of them are very skilled, but they do not understand the French language so they do not improve. […] Once they understand the exercise they have no problem in solving it." (Maher, Syrian teacher. Personal interview. Akkar, Lebanon, August 14, 2018).

[8] MEHE officer. Personal interview. Beirut. August 24, 2018.

[9] See RACE policy: http://racepmulebanon.com/index.php/features-mainmenu-47/race2-article and UNHCR: https://www.unhcr.org/lb/education. (Last visited 31 March 2020).

The basic condition to obtain a qualification that is valid in the country is to study under the same curriculum as the Lebanese. In order to enter secondary schools, students must take the state *Brevet* exam at the end of primary school and the *Baccalaureate* exam at the end of secondary school. The language gap has produced learning strains especially in those children who had started school before arriving in Lebanon.

The second challenge is the distance and the costs of transportation. Although public schools are free, sometimes they are too far from where Syrian families live to be reached by walking. Public transportation is expensive and many households cannot afford this extra expense in their budgets.

> "We are isolated here. Schools are too far from the camp. The van costs 1.000 Lebanese pounds, one way, for each person. I cannot afford to pay this amount every day for the four of my kids" (Samer, Syrian father. Personal interview. Akkar, Lebanon, August 20, 2018).

In this sense, cash transfer programs, as implemented by local and international organizations to overcome financial obstacles, appeared to be beneficial for educational attainment among Syrian children enrolled in an Lebanese schools (DeHoop et al., 2019).

The perception of insecurity is also an obstacle among Syrian families and when schools are too far from their residences they prefer not to enroll their children out of fear to be exposed to harassment by the authorities.[10] Discrimination also poses a barrier to the inclusion of Syrian children, especially to those students enrolled in the morning shifts along with Lebanese children.

Another major issue is the dropout, which becomes very significant starting from 11-12 years old. Boys this age are expected to start working to support their families. For example, some students leave school in the harvest season. Sometimes, with their work, children are the only breadwinners of their families because it is easier for them to work than their parents.

> "My son is 12 years old and he started working this year. He sells vegetables in a grocery shop. He was going to school before, of course. Then he left. We need his salary in the family […]. It is much easier for a kid to find a job than for an old man like me. Nobody would give me a job at my age" (Kareem, Syrian father. Personal interview. Akkar, Lebanon, August 20, 2018).

The main reason for girls that leave school is early marriage, which is often adopted as a survival strategy by families in vulnerable conditions (Yaman, 2020). The risk of dropout particularly affects older children. Of the 82,744 registered Syrian refugees aged 15-18 as of August 2015, less than three percent was enrolled in public secondary schools during the school year of 2015-2016 (UNHCR, 2019).

A bottom-up approach to improve Syrian children's education

I focused my analysis on a model of community-based approach applied in a school of Minyara, in the governorate of Akkar, which provides alternative education for Syrian children. The Academic Centre of Akkar, run by a local organization, has 22 classrooms and

[10] Reem, Syrian mother. Personal interview. Akkar, Lebanon, August 20, 2018.

provides more than 400 Syrian children aged between 6 and 16 years old with educational tutoring in the morning, before they attend formal afternoon classes in the public schools' afternoon shifts. Children are given support with the language and homework and along with the formal subjects they can attend art, music, sport and computer classes. The Academic Centre offers spaces for students to study and to be creative and express themselves, like a library, a music room, and an art room. It also provides children with books and stationary, a daily meal and a school bus service that takes them to afternoon formal school shifts.

The project supporting the Academic Center is based on a long-term plan created in 2012 by a local NGO and continued growing since then. The Center was able to engage its actors in a long-term commitment and so to ensure educational stability to children. In this sense, the Center is independent of international NGOs and UN agencies, and their shifting policies and fixed-term funding.

> "The main aim of the Academic Centre is to offer continuity for refugee children's education. For this reason, we rely on private donors that regularly engage in the project. Most of them are Syrian nationals who do not live or have never lived in Syria. We have also Lebanese and international donors" (Field manager. Personal interview. Minyara, Lebanon June 13, 2018).

According to interviewed field officers, the consistency is also ensured by the cooperation between formal and non-formal sectors. The Academic Centre operates in coordination with public schools where children are enrolled in afternoon shifts. Teachers work together to reduce learning discrepancies between the formal and non-formal system and to ensure that outcomes are standardized in order for refugee children to successfully pass their exams.

> "If even only one of the students passes the *Brevet,* I consider it a success because it means that despite the conditions Syrian students experience, they are able to get results. This is possible, also thanks to the cooperation of our center with the formal education of public schools. Children are taught full lessons in formal classes and we support them here in the morning and help them to understand the concepts that they did not grasp at school" (Field manager. Personal interview. Minyara, Lebanon, June 13, 2018).

Since the Academic Centre is run by a small-scale project, the teaching approach allows teachers to focus more on the needs of each student and to personalize the learning experience.

> "The best thing I like about teaching here is that I feel like I am helping students to improve, particularly those in grade 8 and 9. […] You actually feel that they are here to learn. I love teaching here even if it requires double the usual work and effort, for I know that eventually my work will pay off" (Abed, Syrian teacher. Personal interview. Minyara, Lebanon, June 13, 2018).

Another central point is that the community-based approach is able to create a system that promotes equity over equality, by shaping the education provision on special needs in order to overcome daily barriers that are specifically faced by Syrian children. Syrian students are supported to overcome these daily obstacles that may hinder their attendance in the short term so that they have the opportunity to reach the same levels as Lebanese students in the long term.

> "The center provides everything for the children: from transportation, to stationary. They have here a daily meal, which is often the only meal they have during the day. So we relieve the families from this load" (Field manager. Personal interview. Minyara, Lebanon June 13, 2018).

The academic project in Minyara involves the whole community around the children. For example, student's mothers and fathers are employed in the kitchen and in operative duties or transportation. Around twenty families were supported by the project at the time of my fieldwork.

> "This project is helping my family so much. I work here in the school's kitchen. In this way, I can be closer to my son, I can follow him in his learning path and at the same time, I feel useful for the community. I also have my own income, for the first time in my life" (Fadila, Syrian woman employed in the project. Personal interview. Lebanon, August 20, 2018).

Syrian students at the Academic Centre are offered an environment in which they are able to cope with the condition of displacement. This methodology makes the learning experience more comfortable for them, as students are included in a communitarian system that is shaped around them.

> "My son is very happy to study here. He is not afraid anymore of going to school in the afternoon because he has improved a lot. He also has more self-esteem, I think. Here in this center teachers are amazing, really. They also come from Syria and they help students a lot" (Nadia, Syrian mother. Personal interview. Minyara, Lebanon, June 13, 2018).

One of the most notable findings is perhaps that children's parents claimed that thanks to this program, they valued education more in Lebanon. This is perhaps due to the fact that the acquisition of cultural capital by their children was seen as a way to improve the future social position as a family in displacement. Hana, for example, a Syrian mother I met in the Academic Centre, claimed that she did not receive an education in Syria, nor did her husband. Nevertheless, she commented that she now greatly valued her children's education. In particular, she valued her children's education as the only option for them to have a better future in view of a migration project that could be reached only through education. In this sense, the education of her children would improve the social position of the whole family.

Previous studies have shown similar results. In Azaola's study (2011), the acquisition of cultural capital through education represents a way for the families to gain economic and symbolic power that could improve the social position of the household (Azaola, 2011: 90). Nevertheless, parents are still more supportive of boys' education than girls'. This is because, among poor families, getting married is still considered a desirable achievement in parent's view. Fadia, a woman from Syria I met in the Academic Centre, had three daughters. All of them were enrolled in formal schools in the afternoon and at the Academic Centre in the morning. She wanted her daughters to study because she claimed she valued education, but she seemed lacking a job-oriented vision of education for her daughters. She seemed to consider education as an improvement of their social status as a family in displacement rather than a tool to improve their economic capital through cultural capital.

Finally, as observed in my fieldwork, the community-based approach has a great potential in promoting aspirations. Although in different forms, in a community-based system parents are highly involved in children's learning path. Because students have a central position in the system of community-based learning, their future academic and non-academic aspirations are given more value. In this sense, the acquisition of cultural capital is linked to the improvement of economic and social capital. The parents of students involved in the project resulted being very supportive and encouraging.

> " I do help my kids with homework every day. Even when I have a lot to do in the house I always try to find one hour to study with them. I think this is helpful for their wellbeing. I want them to develop their own aspirations (Nadia, Syrian mother. Minyara, Lebanon, June 13, 2018).

Nonetheless, this does not mean that children's aspirations to continue their studies or pursue higher education are always met or that the post-school plans of students are more easily addressed. The financial difficulties brought about by the condition of displacement are still an obstacle for Syrian families and especially when it comes to children's aspirations. Achieving a higher education or pursuing educational aspirations is not a primary need for many families who struggle to survive in their daily life. This resonates with what other authors have found, namely that displacement has created an environment where the need to survive overshadows the long-term benefits of education (Charles & Denman, 2013). For this reason, school dropout is still very significant after primary school.

Discussion

The community-based approach to education, which has been standardized under the RACE plan, represents a potentially effective model of alternative schooling that promises to overcome the challenges of education for Syrian children in Lebanon. In a community-based approach, local communities have an active role in addressing and solving specific issues that concern the population. It is based on the idea that, through such an approach, people in fragile contexts are keen on (re)constructing networks and connections, which help them better face the challenges of displacement. At the same time, bottom-up strategies take into account changes in power relations and community structure, as well as the political context in which these changes occur. In the region of Akkar, in Lebanon, this approach has become a pedagogical methodology to promote sustainable educational standards and practices, in areas in which communities of refugees have no direct access to formal education. In this way, local organizations and communities have committed to support Syrian children's education through small-scale investments by local and international donors.

I identified three criteria through which the community-based approach helps to overcome obstacles for Syrian children to access education in Lebanon. Firstly, the community-based approach to education, as implemented in the Academic Centre of Akkar, challenges the temporary engagement of actors in the educational sector. It rather builds retention among its donors and distances itself from large funding that is less sustainable in the long term. In this sense, this approach overcomes the problem of continuity because refugees' education is no longer dependent on short-term projects based on limited funding. Secondly, the educational offer is modeled on the specific needs of Syrian children. Students are helped and supported in their learning path to be able to attain the education standards required by the Lebanese curriculum (e.g. the language requirements). By doing so, this learning methodology

helps to break the barriers created by the fragmentation of the educational offer and that are based on equality rather than on equity. For example, although Syrian children have access to formal public education, which in Lebanon is provided for free, they are often prevented from attending because they have to deal with practical obstacles that are difficult to overcome – e.g. the cost of books and transportation, the language gap, the need to help the family to earn an income, or simply the lack of a calm and peaceful environment where to study. By providing students with the learning material they need to attend formal classes, a meal, transportation services, and a place to study and express themselves, the model of community-based approach analyzed in this study promises to eliminate the practical obstacles to children's education. Moreover, by hiring some of the families into the project, this model also reduces the risks of child labor and child marriage, and as a consequence, of dropout. Finally, the methodology proposed by the Academic Centre of Akkar and the focus on children's artistic and individual aspirations intends to reduce the difficulties in addressing post-school plans and aspirations of refugee students, which are rarely addressed by the education system of a country of displacement. This is a central point in terms of cultural and social reproduction because not only public and private institutions do not address the long-term aspirations of refugee students, but rather, by doing so, they are likely to reproduce parents' feeling of not being "entitled" to progress at an academic level (Vincent & Martin 2005).

These results suggest that the success of such an approach strongly depend on putting the students, their needs, and their aspirations at the center of the programming. In particular, such pedagogy builds on the community to ensure that students receive all the practical and academic support to overcome the obstacles that limit their achievements. These finding resonate with what Azaola (2011) has found, namely that a community-based pedagogy seems to reduce poor achievement often associated with education in rural communities (2011, p. 89). This can even lead to better learning outcomes if compared to regular education in rural schools.

Nevertheless, although the community-based approach to education can be regarded as successful, limitations are still very consistent. In line with previous studies (Azaola, 2011; Vincent and Martin 2005) this research has noted that parents' support and expectations are an important aspect when it comes to achieving level of instruction that exceed the basic education. This limitation can be due to parents' taken-for-granted own social position or to their limited educational background and financial difficulties.

Conclusion

Forced migration can compromise not only the learning path of refugee students in the present, but when it is protracted it can also jeopardize children's future chances to have an education at all. For this reason, displacement has to be understood not as a temporary phase in children's lives, but as sometimes the only opportunity for a generation of refugees to attain an education. Finding alternative ways to tackle the problem can certainly be beneficial for the educational development of refugee children. The results of a community-based approach to education that have emerged from this study have a great potential in challenging cultural and social reproduction among refugee communities in Lebanon because they offer students the possibility to think themselves outside the given for granted system in which they are subordinated to the dominant social group. At the same time, they still act in the same system

as the dominant group, but with more awareness towards their possibilities. Unfortunately, real opportunities for improving people's lives through education also depend largely on policies and on the way the receiving country addresses the issue.

The education sector actors in Lebanon have failed in developing long-term plans and in engaging in long-term funding programs because they dealt with the refugee crisis as an emergency. Indeed, the discourse of the Lebanese government is more and more oriented towards the return of refugees to Syria. Policies and strategies are shaped accordingly to encourage the return and avoid permanent settlement of refugees in Lebanon. Nonetheless, there is no evidence that the return of Syrian refugees will be happening in the near future and with no real investment in their education, the future of Syrian children remains uncertain.

Alternative education systems based on community-based approaches that cooperate with formal education have a good potential in deconstructing at least two of the structures identified in this research. First, they call for a longer-term engagement of all actors to offer a longer-term provision of education to refugee children. At the same time, this methodology is able to shape the educational offer on specific needs of Syrian refugee children by creating a system where children are at the center. Nevertheless, although such systems play an important role in providing education for Syrian children, they are not able alone to address the post-school plans and aspirations of students. It can be argued that in order to break cultural and social reproduction processes as informed by Bourdieu's theory, formal and non-formal education actors should commit more to provide a comprehensive path to refugee children, by reinforcing existing services and create new ones, which are able to tackle post-school aspirations and needs of refugee children.

This article has not addressed the impact of the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the dire economic crisis of Lebanon on Syrian children's education. Nevertheless, it acknowledges that these unprecedented events may have disrupted the educational attainment of many students and exacerbated the already difficult conditions in which refugee children are forced to learn. In this sense, this article encourages further research along this avenue and especially advocates exploring a) how these events might have created new obstacles and b) how alternative schooling programs are dealing with these obstacles. This is of utmost importance in a time in which, as the recent 2021 Global Education Summit has recalled, 1 billion children worldwide have had their education interrupted during the pandemic, widening education gaps especially for girls in poorer communities and other disadvantaged groups.

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