The Use of Storytelling and the Experience of Teaching in a Syrian Refugee Camp in the Context of the Refugee Crisis in Lebanon, Its Various Actors, and Its Lasting Effects

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The beginning of this journey began with a jarring, but all too common image in Lebanon - refugee children walking the crowded streets of Beirut, selling items ranging from water to roses. Children as young as four were knocking on my car window as we drove through Lebanon to my family’s hometown of Aley. I had just graduated high school, and had my mind set on the future. However, the image remained.

Studying the Syrian refugee crisis and striving to make a difference was a goal from my first semester of college, and with the immense help of Drs. Aliza Wong and Gary Elbow, I began this project that consists of two sections: 1) a historical analysis on the implication of the refugee crisis in Lebanon, and 2) teaching through storytelling and self-narrative within a school in the largest Syria refugee camp in Lebanon: Jurahiye.
Historical Overview

- The refugee crisis began in 2011 with the Syrian Civil War and has continued to this day.[7]
- Lebanon has the most refugee concentration per capita worldwide, with over one million Syrian refugees. This represents more than a quarter of the Lebanese population.[8]
- The response included an influx in funding and the creation of a “national strategy.”[9]
- The NGOs and Lebanese government provide services ranging from education to healthcare for refugees across the country.[10]
- Most of the humanitarian organizations aiding the refugee crisis in Lebanon are non-Lebanese entities and consist mostly of UN organizations and international NGOs.[11]
- Lebanese government policy towards Syrian refugees is dangerously vague which puts the refugee population in a precarious and vulnerable position.[12]
- Refugees are restricted from practicing several occupations and do not enjoy the freedom to travel.[13]
- Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon are not officially sanctioned and size is limited due to government fear over camps serving as catalysts and magnets for terrorism.[14]
- Over a third of Syrian refugees in Lebanon live in housing that do not meet “minimum humanitarian standards”[15]
Healthcare

Humanitarian crises like the Syrian Refugee crisis require various social services from health care to education. With a population increase of over 30% due to the crisis, the health care system in Lebanon has been under increasing pressure. Various UN organizations including UNHCR, UNICEF, and the WHO have implemented an effective response with a robust vaccination campaign and an expansion of secondary care services. Funding is distributed from UN organizations to various NGOs; however, international donations were inconsistent and failed to meet the growing funding need. For example, when the situation worsened in 2013-2014; funding fell from about 50 to 33 percent of the needed monies required to offset the costs of healthcare. The implications with Covid-19 poses a serious danger to the already fragile healthcare system and potential for outbreak within these densely populated camps would be deadly not only for the refugees but for the already overworked medical personnel.
Along with the imminent healthcare concerns are the overwhelming obstacles in the struggle to meet the educational requirement for Syrian refugees. Even though UN organizations help provide education to children until the age of 12, less than 40% of Syrian children are even in the education system in Lebanon.[19] Many children are forced to go find work to help provide for their families; this issue is prevalent among all ages, but male teenagers are more disenfranchised from the educational system.[20] The Covid-19 outbreak has forced schools throughout Lebanon to close, so these children have been missing out on vital educational lessons and experiences.
Overview on NGOS

- Voluntary Social Service entities originated in Lebanon in the late 1800s.[1]
- Non-Government Organizations, or NGOs, began to grow after Lebanese independence, and a majority of NGOs came into fruition during and after the end of the Lebanese Civil War.[2]
- Since the civil war, these NGOs have been the primary humanitarian respondents to conflicts.[3]
- The services that NGOs provide to refugees range in their scope from the local to the national and international levels.[4]
- Due to lethargic governmental response, UN organizations and NGOs have inherited and shouldered the burden of many of the problems the refugee crises brought with them.[5]
- NGOs own and operate many schools and hospitals; furthermore, they own nearly 70% of the primary health facilities in the country[6]
Jusoor

Jusoor is a US 501c3 NGO that provides services to Syrian refugees throughout Lebanon. While they provide a variety of services, they focus on education and career advancement. They run three different schools either within or near refugee camps. The goal within these schools is to give the students sufficient education so they can pass the entrance exam for the Lebanese school system. I was selected to participate in a volunteer program organized through Jusoor where, along with a co-teacher, I taught and mentored a classroom of children aged 8-13 years old.
Experience with the teachers

Through the Jusoor Volunteer program, we were each assigned a co-teacher. The co-teachers were Syrian refugees themselves. Many of these teachers are on education quests of their own. Several were enrolled in university courses. One teacher was on the verge of founding a start-up. Many of these teachers could not return to Syria due to danger from the regime as men are required to enlist with the Syrian Army upon return.
Experience with the students

My students were overwhelmingly interactive, collaborative, and demonstrated a deep love for learning. I truly admired the resoundingly positive outlook they had towards education and life despite the trauma they had endured. Everyday they embraced the science, art, math, and English assignments I had prepared. They were brilliant and creative. Many of the children would work in the evenings while attending school in the mornings; however, they always had the energy to engage and learn. The care and compassion these children had was moving; they would selflessly try to give gifts and food to their fellow classmates and myself. It was a truly a privilege to teach these children. Their resilience, intelligence, and compassion were moving.
This project was carried throughout the entirety of the school session. The children within my class were taught about the importance of story, narrative, communication, and the act of telling. My co-teacher and I emphasized the writing process and the importance of creating and reading symbols. What follows are summaries of four of the stories created by our students.

*Please note that names, locations, etc. have been alternated to protect the privacy of the children.
This story revolved around a *ferris* on a white horse. In Arabic, the term *ferris* means a warrior or hero. This warrior would help people in need and therefore was beloved by all. One day, the *ferris* went to a small store to eat and while he was there, criminals attempted to rob the store. The warrior thwarted the burglary and saved the store owner. To thank him for his bravery, the store owner insisted that he receive free food.

The day only got worse when, after stopping the robbery, the warrior returned home to find that his town has been pillaged and his family killed. Devastated, he returned home to find a note from his mother that pleaded with him to avenge his family against the people who had destroyed his town. The hero made vengeance his mission, found the murderers, killed them, and rode off on his wife horse.
This story focuses on a family with two parents and four children. The mother becomes pregnant and to pay for her hospital bills, her father sells a family heirloom made of silver. The mother then passes away after childbirth. The father works to provide for the family, but passes away soon thereafter.

After his passing, the older brother must care for his siblings. He works in the streets selling gum and roses (a common job for refugee children in Lebanon). He also helps his siblings with their education. Once his siblings become educated, the older brother also completes his own education. The story ends with the siblings becoming successful and staying close.
Story 3 - Mohammed

This story revolves around a poor child and a rich child who look very much alike. These kids meet and become friends. They come up with a plan to switch lives. The poor child can live in a castle, eat as much food as he wants, and change clothes multiple times because his closet is overflowing. The rich child lives in the poor child’s home and notices the hardships he must endure. The rich child realizes that wealth is not that it appears to be as he is bullied by his new friends. The both children miss their families dearly. When the children return to their respective lives, they arrive with newfound knowledge. The rich child realizes how he could not adjust to the difficulties of poverty and live the other’s life. The poor child gains a new gratitude for his family despite their lack of wealth.
This story begins with a father who buys a piece of barren land. His daughter sees the potential of this parcel of earth and asks if she can cultivate it to its maximum beauty. With the daughter leading the way, the family plants flowers, trees, and vegetables. They also build a small home. Their land becomes renowned as one of the most beautiful throughout the region. The daughter is very happy that she was able to create a thing of beauty that is productive and pleasing. She is even more delighted that she is able to share this with her loved ones.
As this crisis moves into a new decade, fighting still rages in parts of Syria. The regime is expected to consolidate the few areas that remain. Many of the refugees in Lebanon fear jail or retaliation from the regime, while others look forward to returning. The Lebanese economy and political climate has been unstable for some time, and any political upheaval will affect the refugee population in Lebanon.
Bibliography

• [3] Bennett and Duffield, Meeting Needs: NGO Coordination in Practice, 123.
• [4] Bennett and Duffield, Meeting Needs: NGO Coordination in Practice, 123.
Bibliography


