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# PATHWAYS TO RESILIENCE IN RISK-LADEN ENVIRONMENTS: A CASE STUDY OF SYRIAN REFUGEE EDUCATION IN LEBANON

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## ABSTRACT

*Resilience is most often understood as the ability to achieve well-being in the face of significant adversity. It is both a dynamic process and an outcome that can be pursued by individuals and communities alike. Despite becoming an increasingly popular topic in policy fields such as education, development, and refugee studies, there is limited research into the promotion of resilience within refugee education. This qualitative study, which examines the experiences of Syrian refugee children who are attending a non-formal education center in Lebanon, seeks to understand the role education plays in fostering pathways to resilience in the children's lives. Half of the students in the study had chosen to drop out of the Lebanese formal schools they attended. This study argues that the students who chose to drop out felt that the risks they faced while attending Lebanese schools were not worth the rewards, thus they sought different pathways to resilience. Many chose to attend non-formal schools like the one involved in this study, which supported the students in finding pathways to resilience. The insights gained from studying these schools could help to improve education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, including how to provide safe, affordable, productive, and culturally relevant education choices for more children and their families, and to support more refugee children and youth in choosing education as a pathway to resilience.*

## INTRODUCTION

Since 2011, nearly five million refugees from Syria have fled the country and are now living in Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, and other countries. During the early years of the civil war, more than 1.2 million refugees registered with the UNHCR in Lebanon, itself a small country of only 4.5 million inhabitants; many more refugees remain unregistered (Watkins and Zyck 2014). Approximately 30 percent of these refugees are school-age children and youth (Watkins and Zyck 2014, 3). Access to quality education has been touted by researchers and policy-makers as a source of normality during a crisis, and as a valuable component of successful and sustainable peace and development. However, despite efforts to increase refugee students' access to schools in Lebanon, including implementing a double-shift school day, only 158,000 (20 percent) of the Syrian refugee children living in Lebanon have been able to secure spots in Lebanese public schools (Deane 2016; UNHCR 2015); moreover, many of those enrolled have struggled to remain in the classroom (Deane 2016).

Existing deficits in Lebanon's public education system, combined with significant funding shortages and allegations of discrimination and unfair treatment of refugee students, have created a challenging education environment (Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies [INEE] 2014; Watkins and Zyck 2014). Efforts to improve the quality of education in Lebanon will benefit from focusing on improving education resilience—that is, the specific ways education systems can support the needs of vulnerable learners, especially in contexts of adversity (Reyes 2013). This process involves examining the risks Syrian students face as a result of the adverse conditions they live in, particularly the risks they experience when attending Lebanese schools. This process also requires understanding the assets students can access through their families, communities, and schools that can help them access resources and navigate pathways to resilience (Reyes 2013). The education community's response to this process involves addressing students' learning needs and their socioemotional well-being while providing protection from physical or psychological harm in a context of adversity (Reyes 2013, 31).

This research study specifically explores the experiences of a group of Syrian refugee students who attend a non-formal education center in Lebanon. The study looks at that center's practices in order to determine how it has responded to the risks its students are facing, and how it has designed its programming to help the Syrian students find pathways to resilience.

Resilience is an increasingly popular topic in Western education literature (see Tough 2016; Dweck 2006; Yeager and Dweck 2012; Duckworth 2016). It has been defined by these U.S. authors as an individual's capacity to achieve in school and beyond in a context of adversity. Only limited scholarship on resilience is available in the field of refugee education. Indicators of resilience among refugee students may include attending classes, achieving academically, managing their behavior while in school, and integrating with classmates; however, these behaviors are not the only way resilience can manifest. Resilience is culturally and contextually based and thus can be developed via a variety of pathways.

The social-ecological theory of resilience recognizes that many elements of the complex environment surrounding an individual in both the present and the past—including family, school, community, and culture—are equally involved in developing resilience, as are inherent individual traits (Ungar 2012). These elements help people develop resilience by creating opportunities to choose the "psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that build and sustain their well-being" (Ungar 2012, 17). The values, morals, and cultural beliefs of an individual's social ecology help determine the meaningfulness of those opportunities. Thus, if a refugee student chooses to focus on school as a path to resilience and to make education a meaningful, beneficial, and healthy choice, they will need solid educational opportunities and significant support from their family, school, community, and culture.

Using participatory research methods, this study examines the experiences of Syrian refugee children attending a non-formal education center in Beirut. By uncovering the risks these refugee students face, as well as the assets accessible to them through the school and elsewhere, the study illuminates the complex influence of family, school, community, and culture on students who are navigating pathways to resilience. We define "assets" as positive individual characteristics such as self-regulation and cognitive skills, and as elements within their environment, such as supportive social networks and neighborhood characteristics (Schoon 2006). Risks, in contrast, are the negative elements that result from an external threat, such as a conflict, natural disaster, or public health crisis (INEE 2010, 122). In this study, the particular influence of experiences in pre-conflict Syria, especially family lifestyle and culture, played a multifaceted role in determining whether staying in a formal school was understood as a beneficial choice that supported the development of resilience within these children. Importantly, this study was carried out by a Syrian researcher whose access to the population and contextual knowledge of Syrian culture enabled her to conduct a deep and rich

analysis of data that could have been overlooked or misunderstood by another research team.

This article begins with a review of the literature, followed by a discussion of the context, including the complex risks faced by Syrian refugee students who are attempting to get an education in Lebanon, and the methods employed in the research. It then presents findings that show how a non-formal education center is attempting to mitigate the risks and assist students on their pathway to resilience. It concludes with suggestions on how to improve the quality and relevance of education for Syrian refugee children.

## SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL THEORY OF RESILIENCE: UNCOVERING CONTEXTUAL RISKS AND ASSETS

Resilience is a process of adapting well and achieving success in the face of adversity, trauma, violent threats, or other significant sources of stress (Ungar 2012; Lipsitt and Demick 2012). Although refugees often face significant adversity, only limited research has been conducted on social-ecological theories of developing resilience through refugee education. Studies on resilience have focused primarily on individuals' resilient traits or have analyzed refugees in Western host countries (Anderson 2004; de Heer et al. 2016; Dryden-Peterson 2015; Lenette, Brough, and Cox 2012; Masten 2001; Sleijpen et al. 2016; Weine et al. 2014). However, a focus on individual resilience does not recognize the important role environment plays in developing resilient behaviors and providing essential supports (Bronstein, Montgomery, and Ott 2013). More complex theories of resilience, which are being used increasingly in refugee studies (Anderson et al. 2004; Betancourt et al. 2013; Dryden-Peterson, Dahya, and Adelman 2017; Sleijpen et al. 2017), are beginning to recognize resilience as a dynamic process that involves various spheres of influence and support—families, schools, communities, and cultures (Lerner 2006; Luthar 2003; Olsson et al. 2003, Rutter 1987; Ungar 2008, 2010, 2011; Schoon 2006; Tol, Song, and Jordans 2013).

The evolution from focusing on individual resilience to focusing on dynamic, environmentally contextualized resilience was influenced by Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) ecological human development paradigm. Bronfenbrenner's theories emphasized the influence on human development of multiple interconnected systems: the microsystem (peers, family, teachers); the mesosystem (interactions between microsystem actors); the exosystem (societal structures and institutions, such as government or neighborhoods); the macrosystem (cultural, political,

historical influences); and the chronosystem (the influence of time and timing) (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Betancourt and Khan 2008; Dryden-Peterson et al. 2017; Ungar 2012). Social-ecological studies of resilience aim to understand the different ways risks and assets affect individuals and help to mitigate negative consequences by analyzing individuals' interactions and processes within their interconnected ecological systems over time.

Bronfenbrenner's discussion of the macrosystem and chronosystem is of particular importance to this study. The macrosystem's influence on creating meaning for individuals affects how they understand risks and access assets. The influence of the chronosystem, such as the age of an individual when a traumatic event occurs, the time of life in which significant experiences occur, or the "cumulative effects of an entire sequence of developmental transitions over an extended period of time" (Ungar 2012, 147), is also important to consider when trying to understand how an individual recognizes a pathway to resilience. The following definition provides a useful framework for investigating resilience:

> In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being and their capacity to individually and collectively negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways. (Ungar 2008, 225)

Thus, pathways to resilience may not always look the same, as the meaning of success, health, and happiness varies greatly from individual to individual. Behaviors believed to be positive or to promote resilience in certain contexts can differ or even contradict established beliefs in other contexts (Ungar 2012). Attending school, for example, is often considered a resilient behavior, but if attending school subjects a student to emotional or physical abuse, or if the school promotes a curriculum that challenges the cultural and religious beliefs of a students' family or community, quitting school could be the more resilient choice in terms of the impact on that student's overall well-being.

This study uses a social-ecological model of resilience to consider the argument that fostering resilience in refugee children is a complex and contextually based process that considers the interconnected effects that individuals, families, schools, communities, and cultures have on those children. The interactions within each of these spheres, the various risks and assets present in each context, the effects of past experiences, and concern for the future together create conditions in

which the pathway to resilience requires individuals to navigate to different sets of supports that are based on their unique needs.

## Risks and Assets within Refugee Education

A poor educational experience can increase the risks children face and raise major barriers to developing resilient behaviors. The specific challenges and drawbacks of refugee education in both camp settings and urban refugee situations have been well documented (Dryden-Peterson 2011). These studies have shown that refugee children have limited and often disrupted educational opportunities; face language barriers in trying to access education; receive poor-quality instruction in overcrowded, under-resourced classrooms; have high dropout rates; and encounter discrimination in school settings from both teachers and administrators (Dryden-Peterson 2011; Jones and Rutter 1998; UNHCR 2013). Refugee students also face challenges to learning, such as cultural disorientation, frequent relocation, and gaps in foundational skills (Yau 1996). One concern about the risks and challenges refugee students face is that they can become sources of resentment or conflict; this has been called one of the "two faces of education" (Bush and Saltarelli 2000). The other "face" is the positive, resilience-promoting aspect of education, which can boost self-esteem, encourage community participation, and enable children to build on their existing skills, knowledge, and abilities. Studies have indicated the importance of assets such as caring teachers, respectful relationships, peer support, and a welcoming, safe school environment (Cefai 2008; Gizir and Aydin 2009). Other factors are also important, such as spirituality and religion, ethno-cultural identity, and cultural beliefs about education (Zakharia 2013; Ungar and Liebenberg 2013). Schools also can promote resilience by protecting students from physical danger and exploitation; helping students strengthen their coping mechanisms; and mitigating psychosocial trauma by creating a sense of normalcy, stability, structure, and hope for the future (Tebbe 2009).

The value of different assets in supporting the development of individuals' resilience can vary greatly, depending on the strength of each sphere of influence (Panter-Brick et al. 2017; World Bank Group 2016). For example, a study of Syrian refugee youth interviewed in Jordan stressed the "paramount" importance of family in accessing resources, whether "social, emotional, or political," including emotional support, assistance with marriage, and employment or business opportunities (Panter-Brick et al. 2017, 14). These youth also were motivated by having positive relationships within their community, having role models, feeling secure, believing in education, and looking forward to a better future. Efforts to

support students' pathways to resilience should recognize the influences that are important to particular populations.

## Risks and Assets of Syrian Refugee Education in Lebanon

Numerous studies and reports have discussed the challenges of providing quality education for Syrian refugee students in Lebanon, including access, affordability, language, certification, curriculum, deficits in teacher training, as well as a lack of support in dealing with psychosocial trauma and discrimination by fellow students, teachers, and administrators (Ahmadzadeh et al. 2014; Culbertson and Constant 2015; Deane 2016; INEE 2014; Shuayb, Makkouk, and Tuttunji 2014; UNESCO 2013; Watkins and Zyck 2014). In the early years of the exodus, only about 20 percent of Syrian refugee children were enrolled in primary schools in Lebanon and as few as 2 percent were attending secondary schools (Shuayb et al. 2014). In 2016, five years into the crisis, despite great efforts by UNHCR and its partners, barely 50 percent of school-age Syrian refugee children in Lebanon were enrolled in some type of education (Human Rights Watch 2016). Many refugee families in Lebanon struggle with the cost of sending their children to public school, which includes uniforms and books, exam fees, and bus fares, as schools rarely provide transportation (INEE 2014; Sirin and Rogers-Sirin 2015; Shuayb et al. 2014). The cost of private school is nearly impossible for most Syrian refugee families to afford.

One of the biggest challenges for Syrian refugee students who do attend schools in Lebanon is the language of instruction (Culbertson and Constant 2015; Deane 2016; Shuayb et al. 2014; UNICEF 2015). Many Syrian students report struggling with the English or French language requirement, which contributes to dropout rates of up to 70 percent and a failure rate twice that of the Lebanese average (Shuayb et al. 2014). One explanation for students' difficulty with the requirement has to do with when and how language learning is introduced in the two education systems. Lebanese students receive English and French lessons beginning in lower primary school, and the languages are integrated more each year into core subjects like math and science; Syrian curricula, in contrast, treat French and English as supplemental foreign languages.

There is robust evidence for the importance of a supportive learning environment and good peer-to-peer learning relationships, thus the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) recommends that classrooms, curricula, schools, and communities provide psychosocial support for refugee students and teachers (INEE 2010; Burde et al. 2015). However, the majority of reports on Syrian

refugee education in Lebanon show not only that teachers have not been trained in providing psychosocial support for children but that they are often the source of the discrimination and bullying Syrian students experience, including verbal abuse, corporal punishment, and humiliation (Deane 2016; INEE 2014; Watkins and Zyck 2014; Shuayb et al. 2014).

Many non-formal education programs in Lebanon have become important assets to Syrian refugee children by providing English-language courses, remedial education, technical-vocational training, homework support, psychosocial support, and activities such as art, sports, and drama (Shuayb et al. 2014). Although non-formal education programs are not accredited and cannot offer a baccalaureate, many of these programs, including those run by Syrian, Lebanese, and international NGOs, reportedly have been important education providers for Syrian refugee children (Deane 2016; UNICEF 2015). Instability in the region, which causes the frequent opening and closing of schools, makes it difficult to measure the precise rates, but some non-formal schools are staffed by Syrian teachers, use the Arabic language, and follow the Syrian curriculum. Others focus on transitioning students into the formal Lebanese school system or offer accelerated learning programs to provide students with essential employment skills.

## METHODS AND SAMPLE

This qualitative study arose in response to the increasing challenges of educating Syrian refugee children and youth, both in Lebanon and around the globe. It was designed to uncover the particular obstacles these children face in developing resilience through education, and to discover the assets and opportunities that promote resilience (see Abu-Amsha 2014). The focus groups that were formed to be part of a transformative process of problem-solving within the Syrian community also provided rich observational data. Additional interviews were conducted with teachers and volunteers in order to deepen understanding and clarify some of the observations shared by the focus group participants, who also helped to identify key themes for further exploration.

### Jusoor's Non-Formal Refugee Education Program

Jusoor is an NGO established by globally dispersed members of the Syrian diaspora in 2012. Since 2013, Jusoor has operated an education program for Syrian refugees in Lebanon (Jusoor 2017). The program includes a non-formal education center opened in mid-2013 in Beirut, as well as a tent school and a brick-and-mortar school in the Bekaa Valley, a rural region of Lebanon. This study focuses on the experiences of Syrian students and volunteers in the Beirut center, hereafter referred to as Jusoor School.

Non-formal education programs that include community involvement and language support have been identified as important assets for Syrian refugee children in promoting resilient behaviors. During the 2013-2014 school year, Syrian volunteers at Jusoor School provided Syrian refugee children (up to age 14) with non-formal education and after-school support.[1] The primary objective of the school is to prepare students to integrate into Lebanese public and private schools. The Arabic word *"jusoor,"* which means "bridges," reflects this objective. The students are placed in four different levels according to their cognitive capacities, rather than their age. They are given a meal at lunchtime, and they also receive psychosocial support through the arts, sports, and mentorship. Four days per week, the school runs learning programs in accordance with the Lebanese Arabic curriculum, which includes Arabic, math, art, science, and sports. It also provides English-language and peace education programs.

Students who are already studying in Lebanese schools attend Jusoor School on Fridays, where they participate in extracurricular activities and get help with homework. At the beginning of the school year under study, Jusoor staff had arranged financial aid and tuition waivers that enabled many of the refugee children to attend Lebanese public and private schools. However, many of these students ended up leaving the Lebanese system within less than one semester. They either returned to the Jusoor School or abandoned their education.

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1      Jusoor has since changed its education strategy and now focuses on hiring teachers in addition to volunteer staff. Jusoor now employs 46 Syrian teachers in its three schools, which have a total enrollment of 1,700 students (Jusoor 2017).

## Participatory Research

The coordinators and volunteers at Jusoor School were greatly involved in the design of this research study, and in the collection and analysis of data. Involving the school community in the research put greater emphasis on local knowledge and perspectives, which were intrinsic to uncovering the challenges faced by the Syrian refugee children; it also put the power of the research process in the hands of the community (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; Mertens 2009). A local advisory committee (LAC) was established to support this community participation. The four members of the LAC—Jusoor School's education advisor and three Syrian volunteers—had considerable experience working with the refugee children and in-depth knowledge of the context. The LAC played an essential role throughout the study. To ensure that the questions asked were both relevant and appropriate, the interview protocols were discussed with the LAC, and those related to the children's focus groups (see below) were piloted with two 12-year-old children studying at Jusoor School.[2] The LAC and additional volunteers, including experts from the World Bank, were also involved in the analysis of the data collected. The findings resulting from the semi-structured interviews and focus groups were presented to and discussed with volunteers from Jusoor School in order to stimulate recommendations within the wider education community.

## Sample

With the assistance of the coordinator at Jusoor School, two focus groups of Syrian children were purposively selected, each including 12 students ages 8-12. Two groups were created in order to capture the diverse education experiences within the refugee community. One group contained students who were attending Lebanese schools and participating in Jusoor School programs that provided homework help and extracurricular activities. The other group contained children who had dropped out of Lebanese schools and were only participating in programs at Jusoor School. Including students who had successfully transitioned and those who had not was not intended to be a binary comparison but to reflect our intentional effort to find what Sanders and Munford refer to as "confirming and disconfirming cases that help to understand the circumstances under which troubled young people could find themselves able to strive and thrive and [those] under which they could be crushed" (2009, 83).

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2    See Abu-Amsha (2014) for the full interview protocol and questions.

The first selection criteria for the student focus groups was participation in a Jusoor School program. Beyond that, the groups were largely selected by the coordinator, based on her knowledge of each child's maturity level and ability to articulate what were likely to be difficult aspects of their lived experiences. Since some of the children were as young as eight, the Jusoor coordinator and Abu-Amsha sought to include children who would be willing to communicate during the focus group sessions and be able to answer questions about their educational experiences. By focusing on these criteria, the gender dynamics of both focus groups became unbalanced. The group of students attending Lebanese schools included ten girls and two boys, whereas the focus group of children who had dropped out of those schools contained ten boys and two girls.

A third focus group was composed of nearly every Jusoor School educator, including seven teachers and volunteers, primarily women, of different ages and experience. Three other interviews were conducted, with two Lebanese educators (a school coordinator and a staff member) and with a Syrian teacher working in a private school that catered to Syrian students in Beirut. Neither the Lebanese educators nor the Syrian teacher worked with the students who attended Jusoor School; however, the interviews provided valuable perspectives to compare with the focus group findings.

Finally, discussions were conducted with the Norwegian Refugee Council and REACH, an international humanitarian assessment and information management initiative, with local Syro-Lebanese NGO Basmeh & Zeitouneh (meaning "a smile and an olive"), and with several parents of Syrian children who were contacts of Abu-Amsha. These additional discussions were insightful, and they gave Abu-Amsha a supportive community of practice to refer back to and helped to motivate the study.

### Access and Positionality

Cultural competence has been defined as "a disposition that is required to understand how to approach communities in a respectful way, to invite participation and support that participation" (Mertens 2009, 231). It encompasses the attitudes and behaviors of cultural sensitivity and cultural awareness, but also the strategies and resources required to translate these skills into policy and practice that are representative of, and respectful of, the needs and rights of vulnerable communities.

Abu-Amsha is a relocated Syrian academic who first experienced the education system in Lebanon as a parent of school-age children. That this study was undertaken by a Syrian researcher facilitated access to the sample population and supported the data analysis and interpretation. Abu-Amsha's shared cultural understanding with the community allowed her to identify crucial cultural nuances that signal resilience among this population that another researcher may not have recognized. Some of the risks identified existed in Syria before the crisis and had been experienced by vulnerable communities, including those who were now refugees in Lebanon. Moreover, as a compatriot who had also been displaced, Abu-Amsha was able to have repeated contact with the Syrian stakeholders (children, parents, and school volunteers) and was able to work closely with the Syrian volunteers to validate the findings at the community level and to generate appropriate and meaningful recommendations.

Finally, all researchers need to consider sources of personal bias and prejudice. Reflecting on one's own class, culture, and gender is essential. Certain nuances may be reduced and others heightened when conducting research within one's own community. Moreover, the Syrian refugee population is far from homogeneous, and the children and volunteers at Jusoor School came from diverse backgrounds, which also differed from Abu-Amsha's background.[3] Abu-Amsha managed possible bias through critical self-awareness, by relying on participatory methodology to question assumptions and interpretations of the data, and by strongly emphasizing community validation of the data. This was achieved through the LAC and ongoing discussions with Jusoor School stakeholders, who were not only able to support the data analysis but also to use the results to provide useful recommendations.

## Data Collection

All of the focus groups, interviews, and subsequent debriefings, and the initial coding with the LAC, were conducted during the 2013-2014 school year, in Arabic. The three focus groups were held at Jusoor School. The school coordinator and an external Syrian young person took notes during all the focus group sessions. The presence of these observers did not appear to impede the responses of the children or the volunteers. The school coordinator's presence was important, as she had already built a trusting relationship with the children, their parents, and the community. Her participation also greatly facilitated the data analysis and interpretation by clarifying data and providing insightful reflections.

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3    Due to the sensitive nature of the conflict and the subsequent concern for privacy of the refugees and the purposefully non-political image of Jusoor, questions on political or religious affiliations were not asked.

The additional semi-structured interviews with a Lebanese school coordinator and staff member were also recorded and analyzed. These interviews were held at a public school in a nearby suburb of Beirut. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the student population of this school had become largely composed of Syrian refugees. In the afternoon, the school staff ran a non-formal education program funded by UNICEF for out-of-school Syrian children.[4] The interview location thus offered the opportunity to observe two educational environments for Syrian refugee students, which the researchers could use to triangulate the data from the focus groups.

Abu-Amsha's contacts helped facilitate an interview with a Syrian teacher who taught at a private school opened especially for Syrians living in Beirut. The interview was recorded and analyzed, and it contributed to understanding of the broader context within which Syrian children seek an education.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analyzed using a systematic, open-ended initial coding approach (Saldana 2009). Abu-Amsha transcribed the recorded interviews and focus group sessions and conducted an initial round of coding in the original Arabic. The preliminary coding of the qualitative data contained in the transcripts enabled her to identify a list of risks, assets, and opportunities across different levels of the social ecology, including individual, social (family, community), and education settings (Ungar, Ghazinour, and Richter 2013). In order to understand the context as related to the different social-ecological spheres, an individual unit of analysis was used to connect the interview subjects' specific past experiences to their present conditions. These data provided rich information about behavioral and relational risks, and about the difficulties refugee students in Lebanon experienced due to the educational foundations they had built in Syria.

To prepare for a second round of coding, Abu-Amsha translated the interview and focus group transcripts and the coding categories into English. During a secondary categorization of codes, it became clear that developing resilience is not a reaction to one adverse event but a dynamic process that is developed and adapted over a lifetime (Ungar 2012). A third level of analysis was conducted to synthesize the data into a broader conceptual story.

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4    The situation at this Lebanese public school has changed since the study was conducted. Syrian students are now encouraged to attend second-shift classes.

**FINDINGS**

Resilience is developed as a response to risk and adversity, but the way individuals understand and seek to become resilient depends on the context of their current experience, the influence of their social-ecological environment, and the influence of the chronosystem—that is, the timing of positive and negative events in one's life course. Our findings reveal that there were a good number of risks that hindered the education of the Syrian children included in our sample, many of which have been identified by previous studies of refugee education in Lebanon, including access, affordability, language challenges, deficits in teacher training, and an environment of intolerance and abuse, as previously discussed. The principal of her children's private school advised Abu-Amsha that she "should help [her] children to 'wear a shield' at school" to tolerate the insults tossed at them. This study revealed that, for many of these young refugee students, the combination of Syrian families' beliefs about education and the challenges facing those seeking an education in Lebanon had made it difficult for them to determine whether continuing their education was a resilient behavior worth pursuing. Due to the influence of family and culture, some youths felt that pursuing a Lebanese formal education was not worth the risk and that other pursuits such as employment were more likely to give them a greater sense of self-worth. The timing of when major events occurred in the life of the students also had an impact, as the changes individuals and families experienced over time, from wealth to poverty, security to uncertainty, and from familiar cultural and institutional norms into the confusion and distrust of a new system had an impact on them across the various ecological spheres.

The following sections describe how the influence of family and culture, combined with the experience of displacement, has created additional risks for students seeking to develop resilience through education. They also discuss how different education programs at Jusoor School and other non-formal institutions have responded to these risks.

## Pre-Crisis Experiences in Resilience Meaning-Making:
## A Harmful Mix

Ali and Ahmad[5] are two brothers who attended the Jusoor School's non-formal education program. They both chose to drop out of Lebanese schools. The boys and their 13 siblings come from a formerly wealthy landowning family from the rural region of Deir Ezorr in Syria. As a landlord, their father had a stable if not substantial income and he had not worried about his sons receiving a quality education, as he expected their future to be secure regardless of their studies. However, due to the crisis, the family was displaced and lost its income, and Ali and Ahmad's father has struggled in Lebanon to even pay the bills. For these brothers, the combination of limited financial resources in the present, together with the lack of meaning formal education held for their family in the past, created a situation in which the boys were unable to see attending a formal school as a resilient behavior that would help them and their family.

The combination of the risks facing refugee families and a lack of support for education has created an environment in which sustained school attendance has less meaning as a resilient behavior, especially in light of the discriminatory education system in Lebanon. The children who lacked certain assets, particularly academic and financial support from their families, were the most likely to drop out of school. Many were "trying to cope without success," as one young focus group participant put it. Children who had some family support for education reported being much more motivated to stay in school, even if financial resources were limited. Although the Syrian education system had near universal enrollment prior to the conflict, several teachers noted that the deficits of the education experience in Syria may be partly to blame for families' negative attitude toward public education.

Many of the adults interviewed discussed these deficits, such as tolerance for absenteeism and a lack of teacher training, which resulted in poor-quality instruction. Children from families that were supportive of education and emphasized its importance, including those whose parents had limited education or financial struggles, were believed to be more willing to sacrifice in order to pay for private lessons, to provide other support such as homework assistance, or to stay in communication with the school. By believing in formal education as a pathway to better opportunities, these children and their families found the resources they needed to be resilient and were able to avoid confrontations

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5    All names have been changed for confidentiality.

at school. The challenge for many families, however, even for those who placed high value on education, was that they had limited resources available. This forced many children, in particular boys, to drop out of school to help support the family's financial needs, including financing their siblings' education.

Jusoor School offered a variety of programs to help their students, such as psychosocial support and classes in developing academic skills to help youth who wanted to transition to Lebanese schools, as well as those who choose to drop out. Despite having dropped out of their formal Lebanese school, Ali and Ahmed were continuing their education four days a week through an accelerated learning program program at Jusoor School.

## Different Gender Experiences

In the sample interviewed for this study, more girls than boys were continuing their education and were attending classes at Lebanese public schools, a gender dynamic that was consistent across the regions hosting Syrian refugees. There may be a connection between the pre-conflict situation of gender and education in Syrian schools and the greater success Syrian refugee girls experienced relative to other refugee populations in schools across host countries. Syria had near universal primary enrollment for boys and girls before the conflict and close to equal gender enrollment at the secondary and tertiary levels (Education Policy and Data Center 2010), and in fact, women outnumbered men in university enrollment (Deane 2016). These numbers are quite different in other refugee situations; in Kenya, for example, girls represent only 38 percent of refugee school enrollments, and in Pakistan the dropout rate for girls is nearly 90 percent (UNESCO and UNHCR 2016). In contrast, girls in Syrian refugee communities are more likely to remain in school than boys, as most boys drop out to seek employment (CARE 2015). This exemplifies the effects culture and family have on the meaning-making of resilient behaviors for individuals, as abandoning school to seek employment may give young Syrian boys a sense of purpose and fulfilment in providing for their family and thus become a path to resilience that does not benefit from further education.

The experience of Salma and her family illustrates how Syrian refugee families' treatment of their male and female children differs from other refugees' experiences. Salma's father used to own a small workshop in Aleppo, where the family lived in a decent home and had a good financial situation until they were forced to leave Syria in 2012. Salma and her brother attended private schools in Syria, but in Lebanon Salma's father didn't earn enough even to cover the rent

of a modest apartment, so Salma's brother, Samer, worked from the time they arrived in Lebanon to subsidize the family income and help keep Salma in school. Salma's father explained: "Samer was not really willing to go to school here [in Lebanon, and] I didn't want him to waste his time. So, he started to work . . . back in Aleppo, and until the end I was sending my children to private schools, but here . . ." Salma's family has not registered as refugees and they do not receive any aid. Salma's mother was an English teacher in Syria, but she was unable to bring her diploma with her to become eligible to teach in Lebanon. Nevertheless, she has provided important academic support for Salma. Salma will need to find transportation to the high school when she completes primary school, and the family is worried about the extra cost. Like many Syrian families, Salma's is hopeful that they will soon be able to return to Syria and rebuild their lives. In Salma's and Samer's situation, education is a meaningful opportunity, but the family's immediate financial needs are equally important. Samer shows resilience in his ability to provide for his family and support his sister, whereas Salma demonstrates her resilience by succeeding in school. There are training programs that recognize Samer's resilience and can connect him to education resources that provide training and certification for gainful employment. These programs may help Samer pursue opportunities that enhance his ability to maintain an important and necessary role in the family.

The Syrian and the Lebanese teachers in the sample interviewed reported having more trouble with violent behavior among the boy students, and the boys in the sample reported experiencing more violence at school than the girls. The boys also reported using physical violence more often than the girls and expressed pride about standing up to humiliation; Syrian refugee youth in Jordan reported the same (Panter-Brick et al. 2017) and described being pressured by their families to solve their own problems and be "tough."

The adults who were dealing with these violent children said they had great difficulty managing their behavior. However, reactions to these violent children reported by Lebanese teachers and Syrian volunteers differed profoundly. The Jusoor School volunteers described attempting to deal with the violent students compassionately and to provide activities they felt would channel the children's anger. In contrast, the Lebanese teachers who dealt with the violent children in formal education settings expressed their weariness with this behavior and declared that these children would no longer be welcome in Lebanese schools. It was also reported that nonchalant Lebanese teachers sometimes allowed Syrian children to express themselves aggressively among their peers. When one young Syrian teacher who observed the children suggested providing some activities to

channel the children's energy with the help of older Syrian student participants, the Lebanese school staff rejected the idea and clearly did not welcome what they considered Syrian intrusion in their school system.

## A Major Asset: Psychosocial Support from Volunteers

Multiple child focus group participants shared stories describing the emotionally difficult experience of attending Lebanese schools. Many had suffered bullying and discrimination, as well as physical and verbal abuse from their classmates and teachers. One Syrian-Palestinian boy who attended a UNRWA-run school in Lebanon stated that "the verb 'hit' is not enough" to express the severity of the corporal punishment there. He had been deeply affected and literally whispered his story about leaving the school. He described how the principal hit him; at first he resisted and then he left the school. Another boy who left the same school described how the school threatened his parents, saying that the whole family would be banned from receiving humanitarian aid if he did not go back to school.

On the other hand, many child participants shared stories about the emotional support they received at Jusoor School, which they described as being instrumental in overcoming the harmful mix of having little family support for education and the difficult finances at home. One volunteer shared the story of Iman, a teenage girl whose mother was putting negative pressure on her and insulting her about continuing her studies. Volunteer teachers met with the mother, trying to explain that Iman needed encouragement and that verbal violence would affect her self-esteem and keep her from making any progress. Iman's mother insisted that she had her own way of raising her daughter. Following this, the volunteers decided to balance the negative influence of Iman's upbringing by giving her daily positive reinforcement and encouragement. The girl was able to overcome the negative effects of her mother's abuse and started having better results at school.

Iman's story shows the effective and psychologically supportive role played by the Jusoor School volunteers. They are committed to helping Syrian children, and they have deep understanding and empathy for the mentality of the Syrian parents, even those who come from different socioeconomic classes. In fact, Iman's mother was very willing to educate her daughter but she did not know how to support her; she (and her daughter) benefitted greatly from the constructive help the Syrian volunteers offered. Although teachers in the Lebanese schools should also have offered psychosocial support, many were not trained to do so; they also were under the strain of their professional obligations.

## Non-Formal Schools: Creating Pathways to Resilience

To establish attending and having success at school as meaningful opportunities to develop resilience among the Syrian refugee population, the education system serving them had to take account of the varied needs, beliefs, and values of the each student's social-ecological environment. From the focus group conversations, it was clear that children balanced a number of factors in making the decision to quit school, doing so only when that option was more beneficial to their well-being and that of their family. The combination of struggling to perform academically, facing discrimination in the classroom, and lacking family support, in addition to uncertainty about Syria's future, created a situation in which the meaningfulness of education as a pathway to resilience was muddied, and many individuals therefore chose alternative paths. The children interviewed for this study demonstrated the hidden and uncommon forms of resilience discussed in Ungar (2006), such as dropping out of school to avoid feelings of abuse, isolation, and discrimination, choosing to work to support their families, and deciding to study at non-formal education centers rather than at formal schools. Although these children recognized the importance of education, their decision to quit formal education showed that school had lost its meaningfulness as an opportunity to develop resilience.

By allowing students who had dropped out of Lebanese schools to attend non-formal education programs, Jusoor School helped these young people translate their alternative choices into resilient behaviors that would enable them to continue their formal education if they so desired. The Jusoor School's non-formal programming provided both psychosocial and academic support and fostered resilience in several key ways: by helping students make sense of difficult situations and find purpose in education; by helping them develop a sense of well-being and identity, even if that meant supporting the decision to temporarily leave a Lebanese school; by teaching students to develop sufficient control and competence to access the things they need for both immediate survival and long-term purposes; by keeping students connected with others; and by helping students be accountable and responsible to themselves by engaging them in decisions at the school and allowing them to make choices.

Much of the Jusoor School's ability to enable children to stay in school or to help students who had dropped out to re-enter the formal Lebanese system lay in its ability to communicate with families, understand the children's specific needs, speak in a familiar language, and maintain strong links with the Syrian refugee community. As an important part of the children's social-ecological

environment, along with family, community, and culture, Jusoor School reflected the community's values and beliefs while emphasizing the importance of education. The school provided an opportunity for the children attending its programs to access the resources they found most useful, whether it was psychosocial support and homework help for the students who remained in the Lebanese system, or language skills and basic education for the students who had left the Lebanese system.

One challenge for the school was that its educational programs remained unaccredited in Lebanon, and it had only limited success in getting refugee students back into the accredited education system in Lebanon. Nonetheless, Jusoor School helped families keep students in school by providing financial aid paid for by donor support and arranged for several private Lebanese schools to waive refugee students' fees.

At the time this research was conducted, the Jusoor School's program delivery was limited by its being fully dependent on volunteer educators and by the high rate of turnover among this volunteer staff. Although Jusoor School educators were highly committed and motivated, many did not have formal teaching credentials. The school eventually began to hire trained teachers and do more to support teachers' professional development, including additional training, shortly after the research project was concluded.

## LIMITATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

As a qualitative case study of experiences among children who attended one community-based education center in Beirut, the findings presented here are neither generalizable nor representative of the wider world refugee population. At the same time, the experiences described in this study may support program interventions within the greater Jusoor NGO community and spur further inquiry about the hidden risks of impeding education and the benefits of supporting education among the wider refugee community.

The fact that this study was undertaken by a Syrian researcher also created important limitations. First, the nature of the current conflict has generated significant mistrust among Syrians. The experiences refugees have suffered at the hands of their compatriots and the fact that many loved ones remain in Syria leave many wary of trusting others and of divulging too much information. Gaining access to refugee students in Lebanon proved a challenge and took numerous

attempts with several NGOs providing refugee education. Participatory research was important in gaining access and in mitigating concerns among the refugee population that their stories and experiences would not simply be taken from them and presented to an indifferent audience (Hugman, Pittaway, and Bartolomei 2011). It was critical that the community participated in creating questions and collecting data that were of immediate and relevant use to them (Jacobsen and Landau 2003). Consequently, it was crucial to remain transparent throughout the research process and about the purpose of the study. A participatory methodology supported this objective, as it ensured that the researchers and stakeholders were in continual dialogue throughout the process of shaping and articulating shared objectives.

We envision eventually conducting a quantitative phase of this study to determine if children in other Syrian refugee communities are experiencing the same risks, assets, and opportunities as the students now attending Jusoor School. Furthermore, because parents' participation in this study was limited to a few informal interviews, a qualitative phase that includes parents' perceptions could reveal other issues that this pilot study detected but did not have the resources to explore.

## CONCLUSION

Syrian refugee children and youth face a multitude of significant risks in nearly all aspects of their lives, and progress toward eliminating them is slow. Attending school can be a source of protection, as it offers Syrian children positive options for their future and helps them gain the skills needed to rebuild their society. Lebanon has generously offered room in their education system for many Syrian refugee youth; however, there are many drawbacks to this offer: a lack of space coupled with low-quality teaching and reports of discrimination and abuse in schools; overwhelming language hurdles; a lack of recognition of students' previous academic achievements; and uncertainty about the relevance and usefulness of gaining certification as compared to the immediacy of gaining financial security. This has created a situation in which the meaningfulness and benefits of attending school have been called into question, and children and families are making other choices.

Resilience is a complex set of behaviors that are influenced over time by an individual's environment, including their own characteristics, skills, and beliefs, along with those of their family, school, community, and culture. Fostering resilience through education requires creating opportunities for children and youth to make choices that include attendance and achievement at school as a meaningful pathway to the future, and then providing the supports necessary to maintain those choices.

For some Syrian refugee students, remaining in Lebanese schools is not considered a meaningful, healthy choice. For the children at Jusoor School who dropped out of Lebanese schools, their struggle to achieve in school was exacerbated by the lack of support within their social-ecological environment, including families who questioned the relevance of Lebanese schools, a community and culture that had little ownership or involvement in the Lebanese system, and schools that discriminated against them. This created a situation in which staying in a Lebanese school was no longer meaningful and not worth the struggle. Another challenging barrier to these Syrian refugee children receiving an education in Lebanon was the financial struggles of their families, the majority of whom live below the poverty line, are not supported by refugee organizations, and are working for extremely low wages. In contrast, students at Jusoor School who also remained in Lebanese schools had supportive families and reasonable academic success and stayed out of trouble. These assets, combined with the social and cultural support of the Jusoor School programs, enabled these students to see pursuing a Lebanese education as a positive decision that was worth the struggle.

To encourage resilience, children need to be given educational opportunities and supports that are meaningful to both the child and the environment they are part of. The children, families, teachers, and coordinators involved in this study identified the importance of school affordability, program choice, social and cultural support, and academic assistance as essential to students' success. Additional resources must be directed toward easing the financial burden education places on these Syrian refugee families. Education was highly valued in Syria prior to the current crisis, and many families recognize the importance of continuing their children's education. Eventually, enabling the Syrian community to be more involved in the schools, particularly allowing Syrian teachers to collaborate with their Lebanese peers, will increase the number of relevant educational opportunities available to Syrian children. Syrian volunteers also identified the importance of the psychosocial support and encouragement offered at Jusoor School and emphasized the need for Lebanese teachers to get more training in how to offer this support. They also noted the importance of the Syrian

community having an expanded role in Lebanon's public education system. By recognizing and implementing these suggested changes and interventions, officials in Lebanon can enact policies that emphasize the assets and mitigate the risks that make resilient education decisions a complex calculus for Syrian families.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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