

Navigating Remote Early Childhood Education in Hard-to-Access Settings: A Qualitative Study of Caregivers' and Teachers' Experiences in Lebanon

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Source: *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (February 2025), pp. 42-68

Published by: Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2451/74857>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33682/09ag-war7>

## REFERENCES:

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Abdulrazzak, Somaia, Duja Michael, Jamile Youssef, Lina Torossian, Ola Kheir, Diala Hajal, and Kate Schwartz. 2025. "Navigating Remote Early Childhood Education in Hard-to-Access Settings: A Qualitative Study of Caregivers' and Teachers' Experiences in Lebanon." *Journal on Education in Emergencies* 10 (1): 42-68. <https://doi.org/10.33682/09ag-war7>.

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# NAVIGATING REMOTE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN HARD-TO-ACCESS SETTINGS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CAREGIVERS' AND TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN LEBANON

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## ABSTRACT

*In this qualitative research article, we examine the feasibility and perceptions of a remote early learning program and the Ahlan Simsim Families parenting program in hard-to-access areas of Lebanon. Our research targets Syrian refugee families dealing with the economic aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the resulting social tensions and a recovering education system. We explore the experiences of teachers, facilitators, and caregivers in order to identify the key factors that contributed to the two programs' success. Data from 71 postintervention interviews and 9 focus groups conducted in July 2022 and January 2023 reveal that remote programs are viable in contexts with limited in-person access. Despite some challenges, both teachers and caregivers demonstrated their adaptability and commitment. Flexible programming that accommodated family schedules proved essential. The caregivers' engagement was driven by their recognition of the programs' value and embracing of play-based learning. Using Weisner's (2002) ecocultural framework, the study challenges the notion that education programs must align with family routines. It presents evidence from the Ahlan Simsim intervention that this program can have a positive effect, even in the absence of established daily routines. The study highlights the importance of program design, teacher training, and collaboration in meeting families' diverse needs, which has implications for creating flexible, engaging, remote early childhood education programs.*

Received July 21, 2023; revised May 13, 2024, and August 28, 2024; accepted October 16, 2024; electronically published February 2025.

*Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol. 10, No. 1.

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ISSN 2518-6833

## INTRODUCTION

Recognizing the importance of early childhood education (ECE), the United Nations included Target 4.2 in the Sustainable Development Goals (Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development and Sustainable Development Solutions Network 2014), which aims to ensure that all children have access to ECE by 2030. Despite global efforts, achieving this goal remains challenging, especially in low-income and conflict-affected areas, where 80 percent of children lack access to ECE (Muroga et al. 2020) due to limited resources, safety concerns, and difficulties in serving mobile populations (Dryden-Peterson 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the situation and increased existing disparities, particularly for children from poor families, and for those in rural areas and economically disadvantaged countries (Muroga et al. 2020; UNESCO 2023). The pandemic nevertheless offered an opportunity to reshape education. Two technology-driven approaches—phone call tutorials (Angrist et al. 2023) and calls combined with SMS messages (Angrist, Bergman, and Matsheng 2022)—showed promising results, including significant learning gains among primary-age students.

Several studies have examined the implementation and effectiveness of remote learning for students in the Middle East, especially in higher education (Weber 2019; Tamim 2017). They highlight the region's growing interest in remote education while emphasizing the need for more research (Weber 2019). Other studies point to the potential of remote programming to provide quality education to Middle East refugees (Tobin and Hieker 2021), but few studies focus on remote programming for preprimary-age refugee children (Issa et al. 2023).

Remote education solutions are often deemed implausible for preprimary children, due to their shorter attention spans and still-developing regulatory skills (Morpeth et al. 2009). However, these solutions are critical to expanding access in hard-to-serve areas that lack in-person ECE options. Thus, designing, developing, and evaluating remote ECE programs has the potential to increase access to ECE in a cost-effective manner during pandemics and natural disasters, in violent contexts, and with hard-to-reach populations (Bassett and Bradley 2023).

In this qualitative study, we examine the experiences of teachers, facilitators, and caregivers in two remote early childhood programs started in Lebanon in 2020: the Remote Early Learning Program (RELP) and the Ahlan Simsim Families (ASF) parenting program. Both programs were delivered by caregivers in the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdowns and subsequent severe financial crisis (World Bank 2021). We then propose context-relevant strategies to overcome the challenges they faced. The beneficiaries were Syrian refugee families (96% of program participants) in hard-to-access areas of the Lebanese governorates of the Bekaa, Baalbek-Hermel, the North (Tripoli), and Akkar. The children, who were five and six years old, had no prior ECE experience. A three-armed randomized controlled trial found that both the RELP alone and the RELP combined with the ASF program had a sizable

and significant positive impact on the children's development and learning interactions. The effect sizes were comparable to those achieved by nine-month in-person preschool programs (see Schwartz et al. 2024). In our quantitative paper, we quantified the programs' impact and drew from this study to interpret some of the findings, whereas in this article we delve into the qualitative data to explore how caregiver and teacher behaviors, contexts, and motives influenced the programs' effectiveness in the challenging context. While we focus primarily on the RELP, we include valuable insights from the ASF program that inform the challenges and opportunities of remote programming in emergency settings.

We begin with an introduction to the Lebanese context, including the status of ECE provision in that country, and provide information about the two programs. We then introduce a brief theoretical framework, which we used to think about the challenges and effects of remote early childhood programming in this context. We follow with a description of our methodology and a report of the findings, and close with a discussion of the findings and their implications.

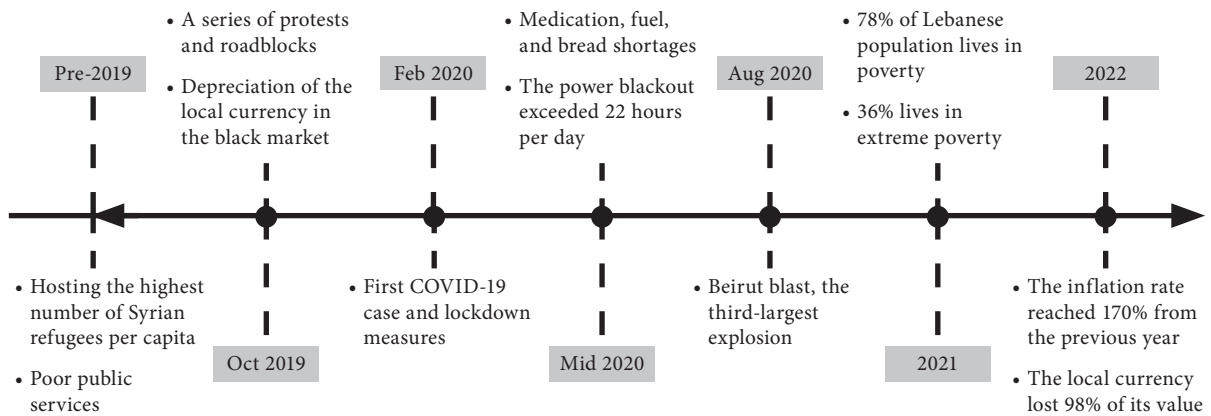
### **THE LEBANESE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND POLITICAL CONTEXT**

Lebanon, once an upper-middle-income country (World Bank 2022), has long grappled with governance challenges. This has led to high unemployment rates and inadequate public services, especially electricity, infrastructure, and education (Yacoubian 2021; Majzoub, Root, and Simet 2023). The influx of more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees since 2011 has exacerbated Lebanon's fragile infrastructure and governance struggles (UNHCR 2023; Alami 2020).

The country has been dealing with a triple crisis since 2019 (see Figure 1): a financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a devastating port explosion in 2020 (BBC News 2019; World Bank 2021). The financial crisis, triggered by widespread protests against corruption, caused soaring inflation and a drastic decline in per-capita GDP (World Bank 2021). The onset of COVID-19 in early 2020 worsened economic pressures, especially for the vulnerable daily workers affected by restrictions on movement (Kebede, Stave, and Kattaa 2020). The subsequent national lockdown also exacerbated education challenges, including distance-learning efforts that were hindered by longstanding infrastructure issues, such as power cuts (Moghli and Shuayb 2020). By June 2020, the already weak electricity sector faced intensified challenges, including daily blackouts lasting more than 22 hours (Ben Hassen 2020; Majzoub 2020).

In August 2020, Beirut was rocked by a catastrophic explosion in the port, which further strained the city's already troubled economic, social, and health sectors (El Zahran et al. 2022; WFP 2020). These shocks plunged much of the population into poverty and exacerbated shortages of essential goods, such as bread, medicine, and fuel (UNESCWA 2021).

Figure 1: Major Systemic Shocks in Lebanon



### ECE PROVISION IN LEBANON: DISCREPANCY BETWEEN LEBANESE AND SYRIAN CHILDREN

Lebanon lacks a comprehensive national policy for ECE. While various ministries have overseen different aspects of ECE since 2003, there is no unified regulatory framework that ensures consistent access, quality, and implementation (Anís and Chlela 2022). In 2023, the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and other agencies working in early childhood development, care, and education, established the National Group for Early Childhood Development to coordinate efforts and update the national strategy (ANECD n.d.). Despite this effort, up-to-date data and literature on the developmental challenges of preschool children or access to ECE remains scarce (World Bank 2021). It is evident, however, that Syrian refugee children are much less likely to attend ECE or to start preschool at between three and five years of age, which puts them at a distinct disadvantage relative to their Lebanese peers (UNICEF 2020). Recent reports show that the share of Syrian children attending preprimary was only 11 percent (UNHCR 2022), and only one in ten 5- and 6-year-old Syrian children in Bekaa and other governorates was attending kindergarten. In addition, most of the families who used ECE services relied on those provided by nongovernmental organizations and international organizations (UNICEF 2020; Anís and Chlela 2022).

## **INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE SERVICES AND THE PIVOT TO REMOTE DELIVERY**

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has been operating in Lebanon since 2012, where it provides aid to Syrian refugees and Lebanese communities in the form of economic support, legal services, and education, including preprimary education. Their early childhood programs and services focus on holistic child development and incorporate early literacy, numeracy, social-emotional skills, and motor skills. These efforts aim to enhance the children's school readiness through structured lesson plans and play-based activities, to foster their wellbeing, and to help them establish positive social relationships. Before the pandemic, the IRC preschool program ran three days a week for three or four hours a day. Monitoring data on that program showed promising improvements in various child development domains (Murphy 2022).

### **THE REMOTE EARLY LEARNING PROGRAM**

To ensure continuity in ECE services during the pandemic lockdown, the IRC began delivering remote services via WhatsApp in March 2020. Adapting the in-person program for remote delivery involved leveraging the technical team's experience, global insights on remote service delivery, and insights gained in interviews with teachers and caregivers. Adaptations included increasing session frequency, enhancing teacher training, and implementing caregiver-focused follow-up and support systems. These efforts led to the creation of the RELP.

The RELP is an 11-week play-based program for children ages five and six. Participants are sent a home learning kit at the beginning of the program, and they attend sessions in virtual classrooms via WhatsApp group calls. These sessions include five or six families, each with one caregiver and one child, and each teacher works with 10-12 such classrooms. There are three sessions per week, and each one introduces four or five activities that last 35-40 minutes (see Table 1). At the beginning of each call, the teacher greets the children for five minutes, recaps the previous session's content, and then introduces the new content. During the session, teachers guide the caregivers with links, direct them to the relevant worksheets, and help them engage successfully with their child through the learning activities.

Caregivers are asked to photograph and/or videotape their children doing the activities and to share the images on the group chat. They are provided with phone recharge cards (for calls and internet) to avoid an undue financial burden. A total of 1,015 families participated in this intervention, 96 percent of whom are Syrian refugees who live in hard-to-access areas of Lebanon that offer few ECE opportunities. The study targeted four governorates in Lebanon: the Bekaa, Baalbek-Hermel, the North (Tripoli), and Akkar.

The RELP also created resources for teachers, including lesson scripts and training materials focused on learning through play, child protection, remote teaching techniques, and child-focused multimedia materials. These multimedia materials include 43 learning videos, 8 read-aloud storybooks, and 7 songs from an ECE television show. The home learning kits include stationery, materials for hands-on learning, play, and art, and worksheets. These resources aim to help caregivers facilitate consistent formative interactions with their children, and to foster the children’s comfort, security, and confidence in learning.

Teachers undergo a two-day preservice training program that focuses on working with young children, play-based learning, communication, and remote teaching skills. They also receive ongoing in-service training, including mentorship and feedback from supervisors. In addition, supervisors hold regular meetings with the teachers to address emerging challenges, provide direction, and answer questions.

**AHLAN SIMSIM FAMILIES**

Remote ECE makes caregivers the children’s primary educators. To support caregivers in this role, the IRC adapted and delivered a parenting support program they had originally designed for conflict settings. This program, designed to be accessible for caregivers with low literacy levels and limited education, focuses on psychosocial support, the importance of early childhood development, positive parenting skills, coping strategies, mental wellbeing, safety knowledge, responsive relationships, and early learning practices. The ASF program, which is an add-on to the RELP, consists of 11 weekly sessions lasting 25-30 minutes each, which are delivered remotely by an early childhood development facilitator via WhatsApp calls. The ASF materials include 15 instructional videos, six informational booklets, and a poster. While the RELP and the ASF program contents are complementary, the ASF program is a general parenting support program not specifically aimed at enhancing caregivers’ skill in delivering ECE.

*Table 1: Comparison between the RELP and the ASF Program*

	RELP	ASF
<b>Focus</b>	Early learning	Parenting
<b>Modality</b>	WhatsApp audio calls	WhatsApp audio calls
<b>Total sessions</b>	31 sessions	11 sessions (3 optional)
<b>Frequency</b>	Three times per week	Once per week
<b>Session’s duration</b>	35-40 min per session	25-30 min per session
<b>Attendance/session</b>	5-6 caregivers-children	5-6 caregivers-children

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The impact of the RELP and the ASF program was quantitatively assessed in a paper published separately by our research team (Schwartz et al. 2024). To gain a more comprehensive understanding of this impact, this study employs the ecocultural framework (Weisner 2002) to explore the experiences of the teachers, facilitators, and caregivers involved in the two programs in Lebanon. We specifically seek to understand how these stakeholders navigated remote programming in hard-to-access settings, and during a pandemic. We also identify the key challenges these educators and caregivers encountered throughout the process. Finally, we examine which elements caregivers, teachers, and facilitators deemed critical to the success of remote education programming, particularly in emergency settings. To provide a comprehensive analysis, the following section delves deeper into the ecocultural framework and its application to our qualitative findings.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, we draw from Weisner's (2002) ecocultural framework of children's development in order to understand how caregivers integrated the RELP into their lives. The framework emphasizes the interaction between individuals and their environment and incorporates cultural dimensions like parenting styles and education norms (Weisner 2002; Bernheimer and Weisner 2007). Activities like family rituals crystallize culture in children's everyday experiences, which shapes their development by promoting positive values, goals, relationships, and emotions (Weisner 2002). Furthermore, the framework considers broader aspects of the environment beyond the immediate family, including neighborhood dynamics, societal structures, cultural norms, and available resources (Weisner 2002; Bernheimer and Weisner 2007).

While researchers from many disciplines have utilized Weisner's ecocultural framework, no study to date has applied it to remote learning for preprimary-age refugee children. Studies in various social and educational contexts, however, have highlighted family resilience, environmental factors, and social policies as important factors in child development and successful education programming (Bernheimer and Weisner 2007; Yoshikawa, Weisner, and Lowe 2006; Maynard and Martini 2005). One study on families of children with developmental delays argues that many interventions fail because they are not adequately integrated into the families' daily routines (Bernheimer and Weisner 2007). An intervention may fail because it is not aligned with a family's cultural norms or the concerns that shape their daily routines, which can lead to an unexpected disruption of the balance of competing priorities, family goals, or the predictability of daily life (Weisner et al. 2005). Moreover, a study by Lowe and Weisner (2004) concerning program-based child care among



low-income families reveals that many of the families had established routines, but their routines changed over time due to evolving circumstances. Lowe and Weisner conclude that programs that fail to acknowledge the inherent instability of the lives of low-income families often exacerbate the uncertainty. This is particularly relevant to families in humanitarian contexts.

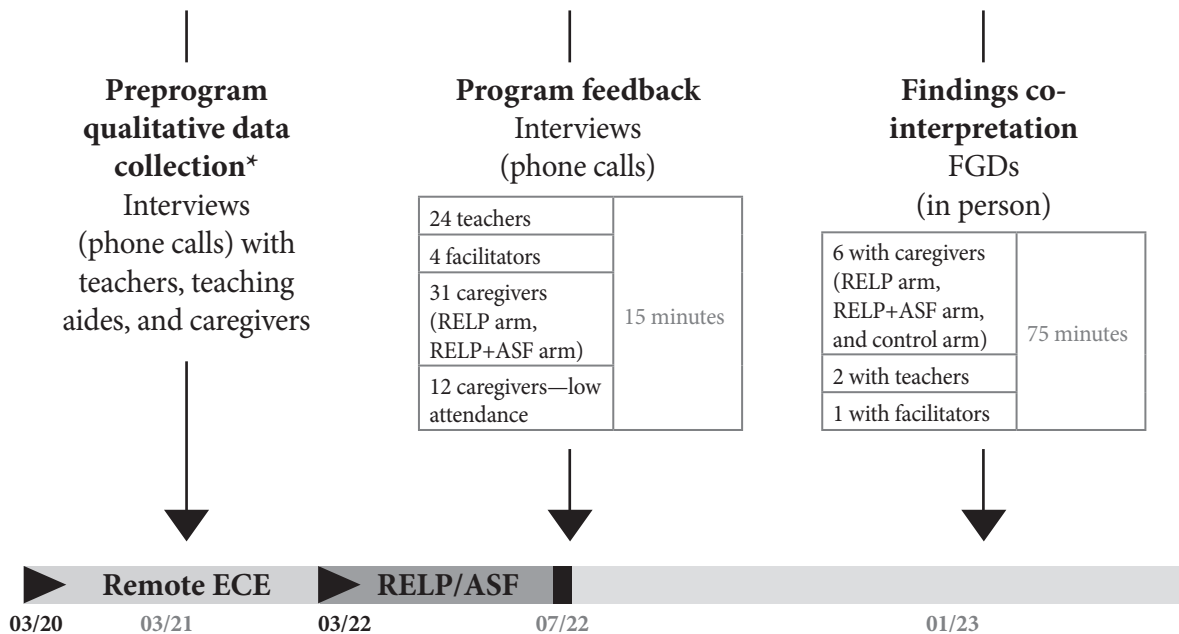
The ecocultural framework is relevant to understanding caregivers' experiences with remote ECE in addressing challenges and accessing resources and support, and in informing culturally sensitive interventions. It also applies to teachers, due to the role their ecoculture plays in program success (Maynard and Martini 2005; Schwartz, Cappella, and Aber 2019). These studies demonstrate the model's versatility in examining the relationships between teachers, environment, and children's learning outcomes.

## METHODS

### SAMPLE

We collected data from teachers and caregivers at various stages: during the program design, after implementation, and after analyzing the quantitative data (see Figure 2). We interviewed a total of 140 caregivers and 55 teachers for this work. However, this paper is primarily focused on the postimplementation data, including 24 interviews with RELP teachers (all participants in the evaluation cycle), four of the five ASF program facilitators, and a random subsample of 43 caregivers (about 5% of program participants), which we grouped by program treatment and attendance level. The teachers and facilitators were Lebanese women with at least one year of prior ECE experience, while most of the caregivers were Syrian refugee mothers. The caregivers were assigned randomly to the interviewers to mitigate potential bias. The sample consisted of 13 caregivers from the RELP alone and 18 total from the two programs; 12 of the caregivers interviewed had a low level of engagement with the program (less than 70% attendance). The interviews with caregivers who exhibited low-level engagement didn't yield new or significant insights, hence we did not address them separately.

Figure 2: Timeline of Data Collection Pre- and Postprogram Implementation



Note: \* This dataset is not included in the findings of this paper, as it pertains to teachers and caregivers who did not engage in the REL/ASF program.

To contextualize and enhance our understanding of the findings, the research team also conducted eight in-person focus group discussions (FGDs) with 14 teachers and 53 caregivers (by treatment group), and one remote session (using Microsoft Teams) with three facilitators. We chose FGDs for their ability to accommodate time constraints, promote diverse opinions, and enhance the credibility of the evaluations. The sessions took place in two regions where the program participants resided (Bekaa and North); transportation was provided. All teachers and assistants were invited, along with a random sample of caregivers who had a good attendance record (70% or higher).

### PROCEDURES

Trained interviewers who were hired by the IRC for this study conducted all the interviews via audio calls. The interviewers underwent a comprehensive two-day training program that encompassed a study orientation, ethical guidelines, and an in-depth overview of data-collection and transcription protocols. The interviews took place around four weeks after the completion of the program. The FGDs were facilitated by lead researchers from the IRC, in collaboration with researchers from the Global TIES for Children Center. The in-person FGDs took place in Lebanon six months after the program was completed, during a weeklong workshop where the preliminary findings were shared with the key partners and beneficiaries, and some of the program teachers, facilitators, and caregivers. The FGDs were held at the IRC offices in the Bekaa and Akkar regions, and at a local school building in Bekaa that was closer to the refugee camps than the IRC offices.

The research team included five Arab women from the Levant region (including two mothers) and a Syrian lead researcher (first author) with firsthand experience of the crisis. All five were native Arabic speakers, which was key to the analysis. The data collection in Lebanon was led by three analysts from the IRC, whose shared language, contextual familiarity, and social position as Arab women were a distinct advantage.

## MEASURES

All research protocols were designed with semistructured questions; however, the interviewers underwent comprehensive training on how to engage participants effectively, with emphasis on how to probe deeper when necessary. This training, which covered interview techniques and ethical considerations, also aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the study.

The interview protocols for the teachers and facilitators were adapted from those developed by Schwartz, Cappella, and Aber (2019) to investigate their experiences amid crises and remote learning challenges. These protocols focused on gaining insights into program delivery, on how to gauge perceptions of success, and on identifying areas needing improvement. The caregiver interview protocols, which were grounded in Weisner's (2002) ecocultural framework, investigated the intricate dynamics of child development within cultural and environmental contexts. With these protocols, we studied teachers' and caregivers' daily routines, the challenges faced during program implementation, and the programs' perceived influence on parent-child interactions. Meanwhile, the FGD protocols provided a platform for the participants to share their experiences, to offer suggestions for enhancing the programs, and to collaboratively interpret the preliminary quantitative findings that we shared to guide the FGD.

## DATA ANALYSIS

In this study we employ thematic analysis, a qualitative research method commonly used to uncover patterns and interpret data, which facilitated our in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and the challenges they faced in an inductive yet systematic manner (Kiger and Varpio 2020).

During the analysis, the analysts (five of them Arabic speakers) read a subset of the transcripts to identify themes and codes.<sup>1</sup> An initial codebook was developed after the analysts were sure that the themes identified were relevant to the study objectives and research questions. They used descriptive codes, which aligned directly with the research protocol. Examples of the codes used in the caregiver interviews include "biggest daily challenge" and "parent-child interaction after program." Examples from

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1 The FGD analysis relied on synthesizing field notes and transcripts without strictly following the aforementioned process, due to the limited number of transcripts. All researchers either attended the sessions or read the full transcripts.

the teacher interviews include “program feedback-efficient aspects” and “program challenges.” With a codebook at hand, the researchers used Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software, and its inter-rater reliability testing feature to achieve a good level of agreement between coders (with a predetermined cutoff of 0.80). Each coder then independently coded a different subset of interviews. The software was also used to code and analyze the transcripts (all of which were in Arabic). Only the quotations used in this article were translated into English.

### **LIMITATIONS**

The presence of social desirability bias in our data cannot be ruled out, as it was collected by the IRC, which was operating in the same geographic areas prior to the programs’ implementation and may have had existing relationships with some participants. Measures were taken to mitigate this bias as much as possible, such as training interviewers to avoid making judgments and to encourage honest responses by asking open-ended questions.

Recall bias may also be present, particularly in data from the FGDs, which were held several months after the programs ended, making it likely that participants over- or underestimated certain events. To minimize this, the participants were reminded of the programs and shown relevant content before the discussions began. Data triangulation from multiple sources and at different timepoints helped reduce recall bias, but it could persist to some degree.

There are also a number of methodological limitations, including sample homogeneity within the remote Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon, which possibly limits the broader applicability of our findings. Moreover, recruiting and collecting data from only one caregiver per family, as dictated by the program design, limits our view of changes in overall family dynamics, particularly when multiple caregivers are involved.

Lastly, it seems hard to separate the feedback in our findings on the RELP and the ASF program, since all participants in the ASF program also took part in the RELP. The two programs were delivered simultaneously, which added to the difficulty in differentiating program-specific feedback. Furthermore, the participants perceived the delivery of both programs to be similar in terms of the quality of communication and the level of professionalism and flexibility, which made it difficult for the research team to distinguish between the two. For future studies, having an ASF-only arm or conducting ASF-dedicated data collection before starting the RELP could be valuable and could help uncover program-specific learnings.

## FINDINGS

In this section, we present the important themes that emerged from our analysis. The findings come from postintervention data, and some interpretations draw from the FGDs with caregivers, teachers, and facilitators.

### PROGRAM BENEFITS AND CONCERNS

The first research question investigates how teachers, facilitators, and caregivers in Lebanon experienced the RELP and the ASF program. Our data shows that the participants observed improvements in children's literacy, numeracy, and communication skills, and that the caregivers appreciated the parenting program for providing a supportive space. However, some concerns were raised about the negative effects increased screen time would have on the children's wellbeing.

The caregivers, who observed significant improvements in their children's literacy, numeracy, and communication skills, reported that they spent more time on learning activities with their children during and after participating in the programs. Many caregivers felt that the RELP nurtured a love for learning in their children, which helped them become more organized and responsible. One caregiver shared their experience, highlighting the remarkable progress in their child's learning: "Before the program, [child's name] didn't know anything whatsoever. Now, he is capable of counting from one to ten, recognizing the letter "Alef" [first letter in the Arabic alphabet], vertical lines, and circular shapes" (caregiver, postintervention interview).

Moreover, caregivers reported that the programs enhanced their communication with their children and provided relief from daily challenges by offering support on parenting and education. They attributed this improvement to the programs equipping them with ideas and tools for teaching their children. Four caregivers also noticed an improvement in their overall relationships with their children after the program. Some reported spending more quality time together and becoming more engaged in their children's daily activities. One caregiver shared her experience: "I spend more time now with [child's name]. Before [the program experience], I used to come home to feed them [her children] and give them a shower. I wouldn't even sit down to eat with them. I would rather finish house chores in the meantime" (mother, postintervention interview).

Teachers also observed changes in the children's performance during the RELP. Almost all the teachers noticed improvements in children's literacy and numeracy skills, which they interpreted as a measure of their professional success, as one teacher explained: "A lot of the children showed remarkable improvement...They previously struggled with reading, writing, and holding a pen" (RELP teacher, FGD). Many teachers saw the RELP as a good choice for school readiness programs, especially in emergency settings

or when there wasn't enough space in the public classrooms. They also felt that the program was particularly helpful for families in hard-to-access settings who did not have other options for educating their kids.

Moreover, some teachers said that working with both the children and the caregivers while the caregivers were the primary implementers of ECE made the RELP even more effective, as one teacher expressed in an interview:

Something I liked about this program is that we gave parents all the responsibility; we are leaving the child in the most trustworthy hands. When the mother starts to play with him [her child], she realizes that her child is capable, and he starts to love her back. Yesterday, I gave them an activity to draw a person they love, and a child drew his mother. (teacher, postintervention interview)

Some teachers liked the RELP's focus on building character, communication skills, and social-emotional learning, which they identified as critical for children at a younger age and in a displacement context. They also valued the opportunity to show the refugees that they care about them, and they offer love and respect. In addition, some teachers noted that both programs brought children and parents closer together, leading to more positive interactions at home. As a result, they witnessed a reduction in parents' violent and aggressive behavior toward their children.

Importantly, the quantitative data showed that the RELP has a positive effect on children's learning and development, regardless of the caregivers' education or literacy levels (Schwartz et al. 2024). It was apparent in the interviews with teachers and facilitators that they were especially happy that the program worked for children whose caregivers were perceived as illiterate. One teacher shared an inspiring experience: "There was one parent who needed to learn first in order to be able to educate her child. This was the biggest challenge during the program and the one I liked the most. She [the caregiver] told me: 'I am very happy; I am now taking literacy courses myself.' Do you understand how amazing this is?!" (teacher, postintervention interview)

While the program provided valuable educational opportunities, some caregivers had concerns about their children's increased screen time and expressed a preference for in-person programming when possible. Many of these children did not have access to a smart device before engaging in the program. In some cases, the device was not owned by the parent but borrowed from an extended family member specifically for program participation, which made access to it limited and particularly important. As a result, a few caregivers were apprehensive that the remote program increased their child's screen time or heightened their interest in using phones. One caregiver explained:

He [the child] only wants to play and doesn't want to participate [in the RELP]. Using the phone for education doesn't yield results. The phone affects their [children's] concentration...I prefer that my son goes to school to be around other children. They get jealous of each other and eventually engage in drawing and other learning activities. (mother, FGD)

On another note, caregivers' comments about the ASF program included that they found solace and a safe space within the program. While the quantitative results (Schwartz et al. 2024) indicate that the RELP alone improved child outcomes more effectively than in combination with the ASF program, the FGD data indicates that the caregivers, mostly mothers, who also participated in the ASF program found that the sessions gave them a space in which to discuss their mental health and their feelings about the challenges they encountered. One caregiver described her experience: "Personally, I found the parenting sessions even more helpful. A space to vent and talk and take care of yourself. You feel valued and cherished" (caregiver, FGD).

The facilitators who delivered the ASF program confirmed receiving positive feedback from the caregivers, who shared that they found the program highly beneficial. Some caregivers even invited family and community members to join the sessions, as they perceived them to be valuable. One facilitator shared that the "parents were really happy. A caregiver used to tell me that he attends the session with his spouse, relatives, and neighbors; he would say that there were 5-6 of them sitting together and listening to me" (facilitator, FGD).

### **CONTEXTUAL CHALLENGES IN REMOTE PROGRAMMING IN LEBANON**

The second research question explores the primary challenges various stakeholders encountered during remote programming. The caregivers, teachers, and facilitators highlighted significant contextual barriers, such as the effects of Lebanon's economic crisis, unreliable internet connection, and frequent power outages, all of which hindered their participation. Despite these difficulties, many participants showed resilience by striving to adapt and find solutions; their success did vary across contexts.

Lebanon's economic crisis prompted shifts in caregivers' daily routines. This is consistent with Weisner's (2002) ecocultural framework, which emphasizes families' adaptation to environmental constraints. In contexts of displacement, these adjustments meant that other family members or siblings had to assume the program responsibilities when the primary caregivers were unable to participate. Many caregivers explained that the economic hardships often left them unable to fulfill their children's basic needs, let alone to support their learning. One caregiver shared her personal experience on this matter during the program implementation:

[The child] becomes frustrated when he asks for things that I cannot provide for him. When I invite him to join the session with me, he starts demanding specific things. When I explain to him that we are unable to afford those things and even struggle to get bread, he responds by threatening me, saying, “I don’t want to attend the session.” (caregiver, postintervention interview)

Challenges related to poor internet connectivity and electricity outages were considerable for the caregivers, teachers, and facilitators, and they came up in nearly every interview. As one caregiver commented, “Some days [are] without internet, and other days without electricity, and if there is internet, there is no electricity, and if there is electricity, there is no internet” (caregiver, postintervention interview). Many caregivers mentioned that these technical difficulties hindered their participation in the program in several ways, including making it difficult to attend the virtual session calls, download learning materials, or share videos and images of their children’s work. Some caregivers even had to travel to nearby villages to charge their phone batteries, due to the frequent and worsening power outages. Moreover, although the IRC provided recharge cards, many caregivers found them inadequate and resorted to alternative measures, such as relying on their neighbors’ wifi.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, the caregivers were strongly determined to engage fully in the program and to demonstrate their commitment to their children’s education. Some went to great lengths to secure the necessary resources and connectivity to support their children’s learning. As one parent put it, “In my case, I do not have wifi. I must stay beside the window or climb on something high to get a signal and be able to teach my daughter. And now I have battery issues because I do not have a generator; I must put my phone to recharge its battery at someone else’s home” (caregiver, postintervention interview).

As a result of these technical challenges, many caregivers had to miss some sessions, which led to nearly half (46%) of the teachers and facilitators conducting one-on-one or group follow-up sessions. To ensure that parents who missed sessions didn’t miss out on crucial content, the teachers had to follow up with them throughout the day and evening, or whenever electricity and the internet were available. As one teacher explained:

The biggest challenge was reaching parents at the appointed [session’s] time. For example, I would have a session at 2 PM, but not everyone would be able to join. I may have to reschedule for a second and possibly a third time due to internet issues, conflicts with work schedules, or not having a phone at home, and then we wait for the spouse to be back from work at 7 PM to take the call. (teacher, postintervention interview)



It is worth noting that, even though remote delivery posed challenges for the teachers and facilitators, some of them appreciated its advantages, especially those who were also parents. These advantages included spending more time with their children, and avoiding the high transportation costs and early morning commutes to the learning center.

### **KEY ENABLERS OF SUCCESS IN THE REMOTE PROGRAM**

The third research question focuses on the key elements perceived to be crucial to the success of remote programming in emergency settings. The participants highly valued the programs' flexibility in meeting caregivers' needs, the strong teacher-caregiver relationships, and the programs' thoughtful pedagogy and materials, such as the RELP home learning kits. These components were seen as instrumental in fostering positive engagement and learning outcomes.

Caregivers expressed their satisfaction with the teachers, including their interaction with the children and their detailed and patient explanations of how to introduce learning materials to children. Caregivers also reported that the teachers and facilitators interacted in a loving, caring, and professional manner, as one parent shared: "The teacher is very kind and understanding, which means that she doesn't have a problem with repeating for you once, twice, or even ten times, as long as you're following along with her" (parent, postintervention interview).

A large proportion of the caregivers were content with the pedagogical techniques employed in the program, explicitly citing the efficacy of play-based learning. One parent shared how the RELP program was informative:

Now that the teacher explained it, I know how to communicate things to my son. For example, when I wanted to teach him his name [before], I used to write it down and tell him, "Here, learn it." With the [RELP] teacher...I now know that I have to make shapes, maybe use some flour or playdough. I am now able to communicate better with my son. (mother, postintervention interview)

One teacher shared a similar observation:

At the beginning of the program, parents thought that play is irrelevant to education, they used to say that we [the teachers] don't know how to teach children, we only know how to play...They thought that if a child wants to learn, we have to give him a pen, a paper, and teach him lessons, but they eventually discovered that you can actually teach children through play. (teacher, postintervention interview)

Caregivers also expressed a strong appreciation for the RELP content in various subject areas, including math, language, and social-emotional learning. They particularly enjoyed the engaging way the materials were presented, such as through activities, songs, and other interactive content. A caregiver said that the “math [content] was excellent, for example, the drawing [activities] and the videos that explain to children what to do or what to make...The lessons were explained through videos; what we have taken today and what is expected of us to do” (caregiver, postintervention interview).

Many caregivers reported that receiving the RELP home learning kit, which included physical materials, instilled a sense of pride and ownership in their children. This in turn fostered a positive attitude toward learning and motivated the children to engage with the program activities. A parent described her child’s experience: “When she [the child] received the bag [the home learning kit] from the teacher, she wanted to jump off the car and kiss the teacher. She was very happy with the bag. She told her siblings, ‘I have a bag now!’” (mother, postintervention interview).

One caregiver mentioned how their children would use the crayons and paper from the home learning kit outside the designed program activities as a way to seek refuge from the challenges and difficult emotions they were experiencing daily:

Sometimes he [the child] would play with his friends and they would make fun of his clothes and that he didn’t have sandals. He would sit and cry. But now, when he feels a little upset, he asks me to give him colors and a notebook to draw or do something...He sits on his bag [kit] and starts scribbling on it, coloring things. (caregiver, postintervention interview)

On the downside, since the materials were intended for one child, their use sometimes sparked jealousy among siblings and other children in the household, leading to conflicts and competition for access to the limited resources.

Initially, the teachers doubted that the RELP was going to influence children’s outcomes because it was designed as a remote program and was targeting young children who had very limited access to resources: “At the beginning, I didn’t expect much of myself. I mean, how am I going to teach 5-year-olds without seeing them?” (teacher, FGD). The teachers overcame their initial skepticism about remote ECE and, along with the facilitators, successfully employed an understanding approach that accommodated the caregivers’ unique needs by building strong relationships with them and by providing supportive training and mentoring.

When the teachers first started to deliver the RELP, they found another reason to question its effectiveness: the program was designed to be delivered to caregivers, not directly to children, and this posed a potential challenge. During the program's first week, the teachers noticed that some caregivers were uneducated or illiterate, and some were skeptical of the play-based approach. According to the teachers, it took them a couple of weeks to convince the caregivers that the program was valuable and that it could work for them. Eventually, the teachers and the facilitators began to notice a positive change in the caregivers' engagement with the programs, which in turn led to the children's improvement. One teacher described this experience: "I used to believe that only educated mothers are capable of educating their children, but now I have discovered that this is not true; you can build a generation even when parents aren't educated" (teacher, postintervention interview).

Over time, the teachers and facilitators overcame such challenges by gaining a better understanding of the caregivers' circumstances and preferences, learning from their peers' experiences, and demonstrating the programs' value in increasing the caregivers' commitment. Teachers and facilitators mentioned that they did their best to simplify the content and be attentive to the unique needs of each caregiver. For example, they provided support to illiterate caregivers through WhatsApp voice messages, and they recapped the main lessons at several points throughout and after the sessions to maintain the caregivers' attention.

The teachers attributed the success of the RELP to the cooperation and involvement of the caregivers, who were open to learning and implementing new methods to support their children's development:

I felt that the communication between me and the parents was very positive. I built a good relationship with the children even though I didn't meet them in person...I was able to communicate the goals to the parents in a good way, so the parents knew all the activities they needed to explain to their children. I witnessed significant progress in the children. This is a success to me, and I am proud of it. (teacher, postintervention interview)

The training services the teachers and facilitators received from the IRC were another element that helped them overcome their initial doubts about the programs and the contextual challenges they faced. All teachers and facilitators reported finding the preservice training very useful, and some saw it as essential preparation for the job. Although all teachers had at least one year of previous ECE experience, they found the training very beneficial, particularly the recommendations on how to tailor the information delivery to caregivers, who in turn would teach their own children. Some reported that they learned tricks and tips on how to contact caregivers and children and keep them engaged during the program:

The training sessions were very helpful. They helped us understand how we can achieve our goals with and through the parents, especially in remote teaching. My [previous] work was primarily in person, and I didn't have experience in remote teaching. The techniques that they taught us during the training improved the quality of our work, in my opinion. (teacher, postintervention interview)

The teachers also said that they valued the feedback and in-service support they received from their supervisors and reported learning from one another's experiences through ongoing communication and regular meet-ups. One teacher shared: "As a team, we benefited from each other's experiences, and we learned from each other. I observed another teacher's approach and used the same method later on. It was a very nice experience." The same teacher later added: "When we [the teachers] had a problem, we would agree to talk to the supervisor, and they were very responsive. They told us not to hesitate to ask any questions, even at night, and they would really respond right away" (teacher, FGD).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, using our study on the RELP and the ASF program, we offer insights into the feasibility and effectiveness of remote ECE and parenting programs in hard-to-access settings. While the current situation in Lebanon is unique, it has many parallels with other emergency contexts in the region and around the world. The findings suggest that, despite a myriad of challenges, remote programming is a viable solution for contexts where sufficient in-person delivery is not feasible. They also provide insights into the lengths that teachers, facilitators, and caregivers who participated in the two programs went to make them a success, despite the challenging context. This clearly indicates the value such programs hold for them.

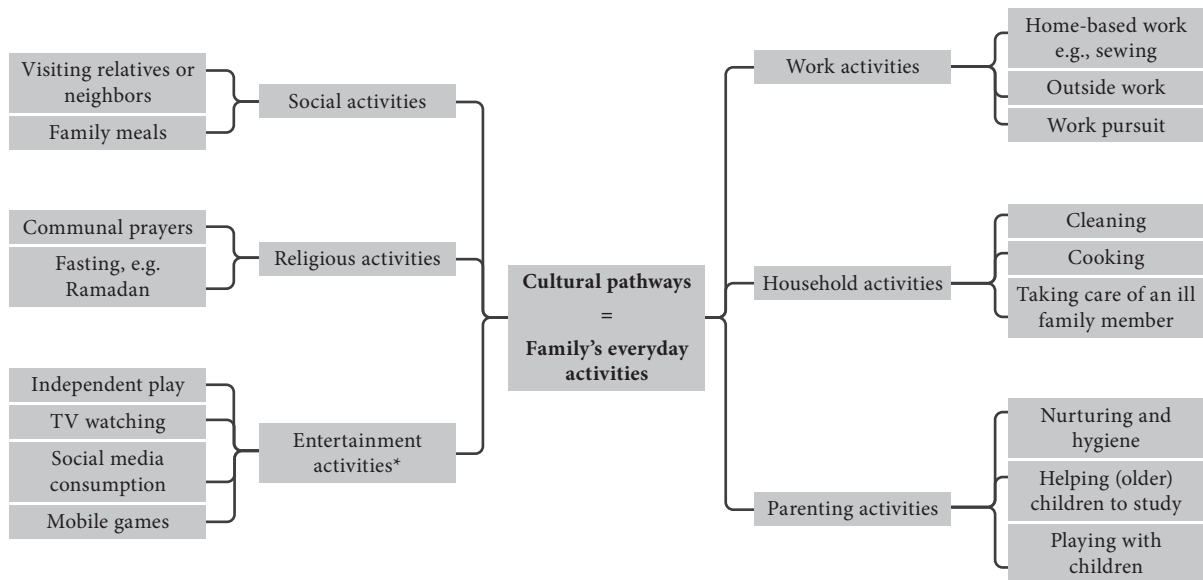
### PROGRAM ADAPTABILITY IN CHALLENGING CONTEXTS

The economic pressures and inflation experienced in Lebanon during this study created highly stressful daily routines for the participating caregivers, which were compounded by the pressures created by having to schedule and attend the remote program sessions. Despite these challenges, the caregivers made extra efforts to engage their children in the RELP activities. They were motivated by their strong belief in the importance of this educational opportunity, and by the results they saw throughout the program. The program also brought about a positive change in caregivers' perceptions of play-based learning, which made them challenge existing cultural norms about the academic content of preschools (Kabay, Wolf, and Yoshikawa 2017). The ecocultural model provides a framework for dynamic cultural change, including changes in parental beliefs (Weisner 2002). Although evidence of parental beliefs about something as fundamental as how

learning occurs is rarely reported in the literature (Kärtner, Holodynski, and Wörmann 2013), this type of change appears to have occurred for some caregivers through their engagement in the RELP.

Despite the expectation established in the theoretical section—that the success of an intervention relies on fitting the program into participants’ daily routines (Lowe and Weisner 2004; Weisner et al. 2005)—the programs highlighted in this study demonstrated their adaptability and success despite the disruptions in participants’ daily lives. The researchers identified a range of common activities that families engage in daily or weekly (see Figure 3), but our findings revealed a notable absence of structured routines or predictable order in families carrying out these activities. Economic, religious, and sociocultural factors all required teachers to be flexible when delivering the program. Ramadan, for instance, a Muslim celebration that entails a month of fasting and significant restructuring of daily routines, occurred in the middle of the intervention. This brought further changes in families’ daily routines that required scheduling adjustments and adaptations. Lowe and Weisner (2004) assert that families’ routines and circumstances evolve over time, and that instability affects many low-income households. While this perspective is relevant to our study, the frequency and impact of changes in the daily lives of displaced and refugee families may be even more pronounced.

Figure 3: Specifications of Activities Observed in Family Routines



Note: \* Mentioned primarily for children in the household

The teachers in our study were initially skeptical about remote ECE, a phenomenon we analyzed through Weisner's (2002) ecocultural framework, which highlights the influence cultural beliefs have on perceptions of education. The teachers adopted an empathetic approach in addressing caregivers' specific needs, which was supported by the training they received, as well as the robust relationships among the 28 teachers and facilitators, and between them and caregivers. Many of the teachers operated within an ecocultural frame that emphasized conventional in-person learning, which made it challenging for them to perceive the efficacy of remote modalities, especially for young children with limited resources. However, as they engaged with the program and observed the positive outcomes, their perceptions began to shift, which indicates that fostering strong relationships and providing tailored support are essential when implementing innovative educational strategies.

### **PROGRAM DESIGN INSIGHTS AND EFFECTIVENESS**

This study explored several themes related to the RELP's and the ASF program's roles in influencing child development, and how the ASF program contributed to mitigating RELP's effects on child development, as highlighted by the qualitative findings (Schwartz et al. 2024). One possible explanation for the observed growth in children's skills pertains to the significance caregivers ascribed to the RELP in educating young children. Most notably, as the researchers observed during the FGDs, caregivers viewed the program as "school"—that is, a serious official educational opportunity for their children—which motivated them to participate actively. This occurred in the context of the Syrian families' limited access to ECE in Lebanon (UNICEF 2020). The involvement of trained and certified preschool teachers in delivering the program marked a significant shift for the community, providing caregivers with access to quality early education and playing a crucial role in engaging them. The home learning kits were enthusiastically received and used by the children and the caregivers, which also contributed to their perception of the program as school. That said, the interviews indicated that the kits also created competition for access to the materials among the children in the households.

An additional aspect to consider is the content and teacher support that were built into the RELP. The program pedagogy drew from the IRC's extensive experience in providing holistic ECE services for families in Lebanon. This experience was supplemented by educational media content that was integrated into the curriculum, with an emphasis on language, numeracy, social-emotional skills, and motor development. The children engaged with the program media content, and their caregivers reported that the children were watching the content months after the program ended. This indicates that the RELP could have longer-term effects, which could be the subject of future empirical investigations. In addition, preservice training and in-service mentoring and collaboration were crucial to equipping the teachers and facilitators and supporting their ability to implement the programs effectively in the difficult Lebanese context.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM DESIGN

These findings have several implications for future program design and practice. One key implication is the importance of designing remote programs to be flexible and adaptable. Teacher training, mentoring, supervision, and collaboration are also crucial to a program's success. These elements can help ensure that a program can be adjusted to meet the specific needs and circumstances of the targeted households and communities. That said, flexibility in offering to run sessions outside of working hours has implications for sustainability and teacher burnout. Exploring these factors further in future research could provide valuable insights into how to balance flexibility with the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of remote learning programs delivered in emergency settings.

Another notable trend seen in the data is the fact that the RELP introduced some young children to smartphones. This included borrowing a phone from a relative when one was not available at home. According to one caregiver, this exposure to smartphones may have fostered a perceived need or sense of entitlement among the children, some of whom continued using the phones after the program ended. Some eventually began gaming or browsing social media. The low frequency with which this concern appeared in the data limited our ability to explore it in this article. This finding is nevertheless important for future research, as it highlights the potential long-term effects of early exposure to smartphones on the digital habits and development of young refugee children.

Finally, future programs need to explore how older siblings and other family members can support the learning of younger children while also adding to their own. This can be achieved by incorporating siblings into the program calls and activities, even those who are not the primary participants. This could be done by providing additional materials or resources tailored to different ages, which could accelerate learning for all children in a household (Bolisetty et al. 2022). By fostering a collaborative learning environment that includes the entire family, programs can maximize educational outcomes and strengthen family bonds, thereby ensuring growth and development for all children involved.

## AUTHOR NOTE

This research was conducted by Global TIES for Children at Steinhardt School, New York University, in partnership with the International Rescue Committee. Research analytical support was provided by Professor Hirokazu Yoshikawa, New York University. Funding for this research was generously provided by the MacArthur Foundation and LEGO Foundation. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Somaia Abdulrazzak (sa6870@nyu.edu) at New York University, 627 Broadway, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10012.

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