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Cover Page Footnote
I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Aliza Wong, Dr. Gary Elbow, Jusoor, and the Texas Tech Honors College for the immense support and collaboration in this project. I would also like to express my thanks to the children in my classroom at Jurahiya who truly inspired me with their resilience, love of learning, and selflessness. Finally, I would like to thank my grandfather, Wadih, my father, Fadi, and my mother, Rania. They escaped Lebanon during a war of their own, the Lebanese Civil War in the 1980s. Their sacrifices have provided me the opportunities I have today and driven my passion to help others affected by conflict.

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

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Abstract

The Syrian refugee crisis provides a modern context for a very old problem. One of the smallest and most financially and politically unstable nations, Lebanon has become one of the largest receivers of Syrian refugees. While Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) have served a leading role in responding to the crisis in Lebanon by providing services including healthcare and education, their efforts have been hindered due to economic and political instability in Lebanon. With a massive refugee crisis underway that has displaced families around the world due to violence, persecution, and crippling poverty, much of the world has been complacent. This paper delves into the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon from two perspectives. The first is a historical overview of the Syrian Refugee crisis, the role of NGOs within Lebanon, and the underlying educational and health effects of the crisis. The second perspective delves into my work in the Jurahiye refugee camp in the Bekaa valley as part of the Jusoor Summer Volunteer Program. Specifically, I look into the role of storytelling and narrative as historical artifact and act of witnessing. I challenged my students, ranging in age from nine to fourteen, to tell a story and believe that in the process of writing their lives they might find a moment of healing and an outlet of control.
**Keywords**: Syrian Refugee Crisis, Storytelling, NGOs

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**Brief Synopsis of the Syrian Refugee Crisis**

In order to understand the Syrian Refugee Crisis, it is paramount to understand the civil war that caused it. The Syrian Civil War began in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2011; the protests in Syria were against the authoritarian Assad regime. The Syrian regime responded with a violent crackdown on protesters, and the protests quickly escalated into an armed sectarian conflict (Rabinovich 45). The war escalated into a proxy war with various sectarian actors like Hezbollah, Saudi Arabia, and Russia, all while the Islamic State took over vast swaths of land. This escalating violent conflict resulted in a mass exodus of Syrians fleeing their country; furthermore, millions of refugees settled in countries in the surrounding countries of Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey (Rabinovich 45-46).

In Lebanon, the refugee crisis has been particularly vast in the scope of its small population. It is estimated that 1.5 million refugees are in Lebanon; this refugee population represents 25 percent of the total population in Lebanon (Refaat and Mohanna 763). The Lebanese government, compared to other countries, has been particularly unspecified in their initial response. Their policy towards the crisis has been utterly vague and intentional. Lebanon did not sign the 1951 Refugee Convention; furthermore, the Lebanese government recognized the Syrian refugees as “guests” (Nasser and Stel 47). Equally concerning was the Lebanese government’s refusal to establish formal Syrian refugee camps; all the Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon are recognized as informal, illegal settlements. This policy standpoint can be likely attributed by Lebanese governments experience with Palestinian refugee camps (Nasser and Stel...
47). By 2014, the Lebanese Government introduced the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), a formal policy of the Lebanese government concerning the Syrian refugee crisis. This document outlined the Lebanese government’s stance on curtailing the flow of refugees while encouraging the return of these refugees to Syria, many of whom are dissidents of the regime (Nasser and Stel48).

The influx of Syrian refugees in Lebanon has caused a strain on the Lebanese health and educational infrastructure; however, outside groups have played a major role in providing both of these essential services to the refugee population. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and various Non-government organizations (NGOs) have provided numerous public health resources (Amar et al. 3-4). Vaccination rates have been especially successful; both Syrian and Lebanese populations have maintained vaccination rates above a 90 percent for Polio, DPT, and measles from 2009 to 2014 (Amar et al. 4). Primary healthcare is particularly supported by NGOs in Lebanon; 68 percent of primary health care clinics are owned by NGOs while the UNHCR can cover up to 75 percent of a Syrian refugee health care expense for secondary services (Amar et al. 2, 4).

Low education rates are also a prevalent problem among Syrian refugee populations in the Middle East. Many children are pressured to work rather than go to school to help support their families; less than 40 percent of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon are enrolled in school (Chatty 341). Education efforts for Syrian refugees have culminated into the “No Lost Generation” initiative, where UNICEF has led an effort supported by various NGOs and UN agencies to increase access and quality of education (Visconti and Gal 106-107). Lebanon has incorporated a strategy that allows refugee children to attend public school; furthermore, they have accounted for this increase by implementing morning and afternoon classes. One of the
largest problems among Syrian students is the language disparities; much of the curriculum in
the Lebanese system is based on French or English, not Arabic (Visconti and Gal 106-107). This
puts the Syrian students at a particular disadvantage because they are not nearly as familiar with
these languages as Lebanese students. This disparity further exacerbates the probability refugee
students will perform poorly.

**Setting the Scene: Jusoor and the Refugee Education Program**

The role of non-government groups, especially religious groups, has been prevalent in
Lebanon since the days of the Ottoman empire. As Lebanon gained independence, and
eventually went through a long and brutal civil war, NGOs have provided substantial social
services to the people of Lebanon (Cammett 74). In the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War,
establishment of NGOs grew at a quick pace. By 2009, over 5000 NGOs were active throughout
Lebanon (Jones et al. 49). As with most organizations in Lebanon, many NGOs are openly
sectarian. There are, however, large international NGOs that operate in Lebanon like the Red
Cross. All of the NGOs in Lebanon are governed by the Ministries of Public Health, Social
Affair, and Education (Jones et al. 65-67). The role of NGOs in Lebanon is especially important
to refugee well-being compared to other host countries. They take a leading role in healthcare,
education, and basic essentials. In countries like Jordan and Turkey, primary healthcare is free of
charge while healthcare in Lebanon must be covered by non-state actors like the United Nations
(UN) or NGOs (Ngo 36).

In this paper, I will focus on the NGO Jusoor Syria, a group I worked closely with in a
volunteer internship program in Summer 2019. Jusoor is a US 501c3 NGO that provides various
services to Syrian refugees with a special concentration on education and career advancement.
They focus on three major academic programs: for college-aged students, Jusoor has a
scholarship program and a mentorship program for students attending university across the Middle East, North America, and Europe (*Jusoor*). The third program, and the one in which I had the privilege of participating, is the Refugee Education Program. The goal within these schools is to give the students sufficient education so they can pass the entrance exam for the Lebanese school system. The student population ranges in age from three years of age to fourteen years of age. They run three different schools either within or near refugee camps and/or populations. The three schools they operate are the Beirut school with about 200 students, the Jurahiya school with over 300 students, and the Jeb Jannine school about 900 students (*Jusoor*). Jusoor’s school curriculum is based on the Lebanese education system, while incorporating innovative classes revolving around the arts and peacebuilding (*Jusoor*).

In the summer of 2019, I worked with Jusoor in the Jurahiya school. Built within the Jurahiya settlement, considered the largest Syrian refugee camp in Lebanon, the Jurahiya school is a small school situated at the front of the camp. The administration and teachers at Jurahiya are all Syrian refugees themselves. Jusoor has made a point to provide Syrian refugees employment opportunities within their education program (*Jusoor*). The program in which I was involved allows two co-teachers, one English-speaking undergraduate or postgraduate student and one Syrian Arabic-speaking teacher to collaborate creatively and holistically to offer the children in the school a unique educational experience. The school day began at 8:00 a.m. and ended at 1:00 p.m., and the class size ranged from 25 to 30 students on any given day. Attendance in the class varied because many of the children were expected to work in order to help supplement the family incomes. Also, the precariousness of the living situation in the refugee camp also sometimes prevented students from attending on a regular basis, although certainly the students...
made every effort to attend as the school was viewed as a possible vehicle for change and opportunity.

As an undergraduate teacher who could speak both Arabic and English, I was assigned to the oldest class (9-14 years of age). Each English-speaking co-teacher was tasked with developing his/her/their own curriculum for the three-week summer school program. As part of work for the Texas Tech University Honors College Undergraduate Research Scholars Program, I developed a curriculum that incorporated elementary level science, math, and reading. I also insisted on including a story-telling component to the instruction wherein students could learn about the writing and communication process. This storytelling project encouraged students to use narrative, whether in the form of theatrical productions, songwriting, visual arts, or traditional storytelling, as a form of expression of talent, history, legacy, and culture.

**Plot Twists: The Players and the Stage in a Refugee Camp**

Most of the students enrolled in the summer program were familiar with the structure of this summer program and the incorporation of an English-speaking co-teacher. The students were surprised to discover that I was a native Arabic speaker and could communicate with them more directly than the other English-speaking co-teachers and this ease of communication allowed my class to become a more collaborative and engaged group. While the class built fast friendships, the practical challenges to teaching in a school in a refugee camp soon revealed themselves. School supplies were scarce, sometimes non-existent, and even when available, some students adamantly refused to share what few supplies existed. The classroom itself was quite small; it could comfortably hold 15 students, but some days nearly 30 students would be expected to learn in the classroom space. But the most heartbreaking and severe obstacle in teaching was the fact that despite my students’ overwhelming desire to learn and grow, they
would frequently miss school because they played a vital role in the domestic income of their families. The average starting work age for Syrian refugee children in Lebanon is less than 11 years of age, but there are cases where children as young as 4 years old are expected to work to help their families. Furthermore, three-quarters of working children work in the back-breaking agricultural sectors (Habib et al. 1).

During the first week of the camp, my co-teacher and I focused on understanding the baseline of knowledge and skills amongst the students. The broad educational disparities within the classroom became apparent almost immediately. A few students were already enrolled in the Lebanese educational system and were therefore much more proficient in Arabic, English, and mathematics; however, while the vast majority of students had some educational experience, much of the Arabic literacy stemmed from a weekly study of the Qur’an. A couple of students, both older than 12 years of age, had not been in an educational setting since escaping Syria. These students could not read Arabic and struggled with the assignments and lesson plans. After taking stock of these varying skill levels, the co-teacher and I worked to modify the curriculum to ameliorate some of these differences. Those students who could finish their lessons quickly and easily were given more difficult assignments, while those students who struggled were taught basic concepts like the English alphabet and simple mathematics.

Even during this first week of assessment, students were introduced to the concept and process of story writing and storytelling. Students became familiar with idea formulation and the basic structure of a story. The storytelling project became part of the everyday curriculum and as the teachers explained the expectations of the project, they asked students to consider whether they preferred to write a non-fiction or fiction piece. The overwhelming majority of students chose to create a piece of fiction. In the two weeks that followed, students brainstormed, mapped
their stories, wrote, drew, created, revised, and edited their individual works. The stories were all written in Arabic; furthermore, students were giving complete freedom in terms of story length, topic, and format. The story length and complexity varied, but most students wrote at least a full page, and for many, this represented the longest piece of writing they had been tasked to complete in their educational careers.

**Telling the Story of Trauma: A Brief Theoretical Review**

In order to discuss the role of narrative in the context of potential healing among refugee students, we must understand the state of their psychological well-being. In Jordanian Syrian refugee camps, students were found to have an overall low self-efficacy both inside and outside their refugee camp. Additionally, a positive correlation was found between self-efficacy and psychological security (Alharbi 63-65). The rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among Syrian refugee children in Lebanon is particularly high at over 45 percent; the varying causes of this include traumatic experiences associated with the Syrian Civil War, relocation, and discrimination (Khamis 35-36). The role of storytelling, particularly in a work of fiction, can be a useful coping mechanism for those who have experienced trauma; the use of “Virtual Fictional/Factual Positioning” allows the storyteller to incorporate some actual representation form their own life into the fictional story and the characters they identify with (Barani 376–379). The use of storytelling can help combat and reduce stresses and lead to a positive approach in dealing with these past traumas (Barani 381-382, 390). The main hope through the storytelling project was for students to have an outlet for expression where they could potentially combat a past trauma through fiction.

There has been specific action already in using the power of storytelling among Syrian refugee youth. Two Syrian youth started a “#MeWeSyria” movement where they shared their
own stories; this movement grew to encompass over 700 refugees who decided to tell their own stories (Mohi Ud Din). One of the main goals through this storytelling project within the “#MeWeSyria” project was to improve mental health, provide psychosocial support, and engage in community building (Mohi Ud Din). These were some of the very same goals that were carried through my own storytelling project.

Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET) has also been studied and implemented as a treatment for PTSD for decades; furthermore, it allows the survivor of the trauma to approach the experience from power and collaboration. There is even potential to incorporate narrative therapy from a family perspective which could help improve recovery (Merscham 283). Narrative Exposure Therapy has been shown to be beneficial in improving PTSD symptoms while forming these past traumas into a clear narrative; NET has been shown to be effective in foreign countries that experience war (“Therapy” 367).

Letting the Stories Tell Themselves

Students submitted more than two dozen stories during their time at the school. I have selected four to outline and evaluate in this section. It should be noted that in order to protect the privacy of these children, many of whom face personal danger should they be forced to return to their home country, some personal details within the stories have been omitted.

The Ferris by Bader

The first story revolves around a “Ferris” who is riding on a white horse. The term “Ferris” in Arabic means a warrior or hero. This warrior was a revered individual who would help and defend people in need. One day he had gone to a small store to eat, where he witnessed a robbery. In a moment of bravery, the “Ferris” stopped the robbery and saved the store owner. Due to this bravery, he received free food. The story then takes a turn when the warrior returns to
his town and discovers that the entire area has been pillaged and his family have been killed. As he examined the ruins, he found a note from his mother that told him to avenge his family against the people who destroyed his town. The note gave the warrior insight as to who had committed these atrocities. The story concludes when the “Ferris” then goes on to avenge his town: He finds the culprits, avenges his family, and rides off into the sunset on his white horse.

When I asked him if he is the “Ferris” in the story, he proudly said yes. It seemed the common theme throughout his story was the importance of bravery, strength, and virtue. Some of the scenes in the story, like the town being destroyed, can be mirrored with the horrific events of the Syrian Civil War. Through this story, it seems that the “Ferris”, representing the child, feels a responsibility to avenge the travesties against his family and community. However, heroism is not the main idea in this story; it is the virtue and determination to do right by his family’s honor and seek justice for those who have wronged him.

*Older Brother by Hadeel*

The next story involves a family of two parents and four children. The story begins with a mother who becomes pregnant. In order to pay for her hospital bills, her father sells a family heirloom made of silver. Tragically, the mother passes away after childbirth. The father then works to provide for the family, but he also tragically passed away soon thereafter. After the father passes, an older brother becomes the focus of the story. The older brother becomes a protagonist as he solely provides for his four siblings. He works in the streets selling gum and roses (a common job for refugee children in Lebanon). After work, the older brother also helps his siblings with their education and schoolwork. As time passes, his younger siblings become educated and are able to find their footing in school. With less responsibility, the older brother
also completes his education. The story concludes with the siblings growing old, becoming successful, and staying close.

The theme throughout this story revolved around perseverance and overcoming terrible obstacles; however, the resilience proves worthwhile in the end. The resiliency shown in this story can be mirrored with the resiliency of being displaced and having to grow up within a refugee camp. This story also serves as a clear viewpoint of the importance of education and the upward mobility it offered. The author discusses all the sacrifices of the older brother in the context of preserving the education for his siblings. The importance of education is seen as an opportunity to gain highly skilled jobs; however, refugees in Lebanon are barred from certain professions. These professions include engineering, healthcare, and law (“Dignity”). The hope among many refugees is to pursue higher education and go to the west for employment. Hadeel maintained that she wanted to return to Syria and help rebuild her country.

*The Switch by Mohammed*

The next story by Mohammed revolves around a poor child and a rich child who look very much alike. These kids meet and become friends over time. As they both grow frustrated with their own lives. The friends devise a plan to switch places and live each other’s life. They put the plan to action and the poor child travels to live in a castle, eat as much food as he wants, and has a closet full of clothes. The rich child lives in a small impoverished home, and quickly notices the hardships he must endure; the rich child is also bullied by his new friends. Both the children miss their families dearly, and both decide to return to their original homes. The rich child realizes how he couldn’t adjust and live the other’s life. The poor child gains a newly found gratitude for his family and realizes that wealth is not as important as he once thought.
In Mohammed’s telling of this story, the themes of poverty and wealth did not determine individual contentment and satisfaction. Could Mohammed’s story represent a commentary from the perspective of the refugees who may seemingly have lost everything, from home to family, from possessions to land, from freedom to independence, from livelihood to lives? In the end, the protagonists of the story value family and friendship more than material wealth. Must the refugee be satisfied with his/her/their plight? Is this story an allegory that reminds Mohammed that despite war and poverty and death, he must be grateful for the life he has been given?

*The Beautiful Land by Zahraa*

The final story revolves around a father who buys a piece of barren land. This barren land is not wanted by others and viewed as impoverished. The father has a daughter who loves the land and vows to provide the land with an “uplift”. With the daughter leading the way, the entire family plants various flowers, trees, and vegetables throughout their cherished land. The family takes pride in growing and improving their land. They also build a small home and live on the land. As time passes, their land becomes among the nicest throughout the region. People admire the beauty of this once barren land. The daughter is truly happy with the land and family. As the story concludes, the daughter is grateful that she can share this new home with her close-knit family.

The themes of family are apparent throughout this story; the importance of family in this story can also be mirrored with the integral role of family within the Arabic culture. The author also discusses themes of rebuilding and pride. The role of making a new home in a foreign place is common for refugees in Lebanon, and this is paralleled in the story. Like the daughter in this story, Zahraa must make a new land, a new home for her family. She, through hard work and
determination, can also create opportunity for her family and build a new future for her community.

**Denouement and Conclusion**

I returned home buoyed by the incredible experience of teaching these children of war-torn Syria. In the process of trying to educate them, they had, in fact, educated me. They had been the ones, through their stories, to make me protagonist, reader, audience, and author. In continuing my work as an Undergraduate Research Scholar and in preparation for the writing of an Honors College thesis, I reached out to faculty and advisors for ideas as to how to continue this powerful and empowering work or storytelling. In my hometown of Lubbock, Texas, I have worked as an Honors College mentor at Bayless Elementary School for two years, serving in a program that mentors students who come from their own unstable, impoverished, and sometimes traumatic backgrounds. With the support of the principal of the elementary school and the TTU Honors College, I founded a program that will allow students from the Jurahiya school in Lebanon and Bayless Elementary in Texas to share their stories, learn to communicate across cultures, and understand both difference and consistency. This program will connect these students across the world and share stories, ideas, and culture. Most importantly, this program will help students to use narrative in creating community support networks, even across oceans and continents, to help each other heal. The program was set to begin in late February of 2020, but as the COVID-19 outbreak and civil unrest took hold of Lebanon, the program was delayed. As the COVID outbreak progressed across the world, the program is on hiatus until the outbreak is contained and schools reopen.

The Syrian Civil War has resulted in a large loss of human life, and its long-lasting effects will continue to adversely impact this generation of refugees. Even after escaping the
violence of the war, refugees have faced problems such as food insecurity, poverty, and coerced child labor. NGOs and UN organizations provide much needed aid, but more is needed. Their role, especially in Lebanon, is essential to refugee wellbeing. As economic turmoil takes over the country, more support will be needed. The children I had the privilege of working with expressed profound emotion in their stories; they highlighted their resiliency and bravery, many indirectly, through narrative. These emotional stories should not just be admired; they should be used to express the need for economic, educational, and mental health support for this vulnerable population. Refugee populations are at an even greater risk of suffering during this pandemic and growing economic instability; they must not be forgotten or further left behind.
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