

Tracking Drop-out Students in Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon

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This research paper examines the perceptions of students on the school drop-out problem in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon regarding (a) the social and economic causes associated with the phenomenon of school drop-out; (b) the educational policies and practices used in UNRWA schools and their relationship to student drop-out; and (c) the role that parents play in preventing Palestinian students from dropping out of school. Based on qualitative field data, the methodology is grounded in tracking the trajectories of five drop-out cases. These five cases were drawn from four carefully selected United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) schools in Lebanon. The cases provide ethnographic accounts of the risk factors underlying students' dropping out of school in these communities. Attention is paid to important issues, including socio-economic status, school curriculum and services, corporal punishment, and family involvement. The conclusion of this paper looks toward developing a plan to address the rate of early school drop-out in Palestinian refugee camps based on the findings of this report.

Introduction

The basic education system in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon is managed by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Palestinian families and civil society have raised concerns about the quality of education received by most Palestinian children, especially the rising percentage of early school drop-out. Structural and institutional factors have led to this. On the one hand, structural issues include the legal restrictions faced by Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, such as the limited opportunities to attend university (primarily because of lack of resources to pay for higher education and because, as noted, most jobs for university graduates are effectively

denied to Palestinian refugees in Lebanon). On the other hand, institutional issues include UNRWA's management of its educational programs. The lack of extracurricular activities, such as physical education and arts classes, provided in UNRWA schools, as well as the limited sports and leisure facilities, which are a result of the lack of space and resources, also contribute to high drop-out levels (Al-Hroub, 2014; CSUCS, 2007). This situation is intensified by poor sanitary conditions in the camps, which affects the morale and motivation of students, as well as undermining their performance (CSUCS, 2007; Demirdjian, 2007).

Much of the research on the UNRWA school drop-outs in Lebanon has been rooted in a desire to identify the causes, related factors or motivations underlying the act of dropping out. Most existing research takes as its starting point an examination of the characteristics of those students who drop out. Although much is known about the individual attributes of drop-outs in the UNRWA schools in Lebanon (e.g. Abdunnur, Abdunnur & Madi, 2008; CSUCS, 2007; Uglund, 2003; UNRWA, 2008), most research has not gone beyond a statistical account of the drop-out phenomenon. Studies which exclusively rely on statistical data to present a picture of drop-outs do not reveal to the researcher the motivations and experiences of those choosing to drop out. This study has adopted an alternative qualitative approach so as to attend to the micro-experiences of individual drop-outs, while at the same time enabling the construction of a macro-level understanding of the phenomenon.

The review of literature will be divided into three sections: (1) Palestinians' rights to education and employment in Lebanon, (2) General factors related to dropping out; and (3) Specific risk factors related to refugee students' dropping out.

Palestinians' rights to education and employment in Lebanon

In Lebanon, Palestinian refugee children and young people have restricted access to the public school system. Furthermore, the cost of private education in Lebanon is among the highest in the region, and most families do not have the financial resources to enrol their children in one of these institutions (Al-Hroub, 2014). For these reasons, UNRWA in Lebanon, in contrast to the organization's other field offices, provides not only basic education, but also secondary education and, to a lesser extent, supports access to university education through specific donor funding. The total number of students enrolled in UNRWA schools is 32,213 in 2012, down from 34,516 in 2009, 36,534 in 2008, and 38,370 in 2007. The figures show that enrolment has been on a steady decline despite a clear increase in the number of registered refugees, and Lebanon has the lowest enrolment rate out of all UNRWA fields of operation (UNRWA, 2013). Figures obtained from a 2008 UNRWA study put the enrolment rate in the elementary cycle (6-11 years) at 96 per cent, with 63.8 per cent in the preparatory cycle (12-14 years), and only 23.7 per cent in the secondary cycle (15-17 years) (Abdunnur et al., 2008). The enrolment rates of Palestinian refugees only differ significantly from those of Lebanese students in the secondary cycles according to the 2007 National Survey of Household Living Conditions (CAS, 2008); enrolment for the elementary cycle is at 93.1 per cent, preparatory cycle is at 72.0 per cent, and in the secondary cycle it drops to 53.5 per cent. As the figures show, the highest rates of school drop-out take place at the transition to the secondary cycle – it is at the age of 15 that students usually prepare for the official examinations (Brevet). The above figures shows that despite the high enrolment rates at the elementary level, there are still many challenges for Palestinian refugees with regard to completing

education in Lebanon, for example, (a) 8 per cent of the Palestine refugee population of school age (7- 15 years) was not enrolled in school in 2010; (b) 10 per cent of the population aged over 15 years has never attended school at all; (c) only half of young people of secondary-school age (16-18 years) are enrolled in schools or vocational training centers; (d) two-thirds of Palestinians above the age of 15 do not have the Brevet (Lebanese middle-school official examination); and (e) only 5 per cent of Palestinians hold a university degree (UNRWA 2011, p. 2). In addition, the facilities in UNRWA's schools are in a very poor condition and some school buildings are in need of repair or replacement. The average UNRWA classroom size in Lebanon is still higher than the classroom sizes in Lebanese government schools (Hillenkamp, 2008).

These alarming figures are attributed to the following interrelated factors, which are both causes for, and results of dropping out: (a) child labor, (b) early marriage, (c) unattractive school conditions, (d) lack of parental involvement, and (e) the Lebanese labor laws (Al-Hroub, 2014). Amjad, a boy from Shatila camp says, "I was working with my father for three to four hours every day...many of my friends [also] left school because they had to generate income for their families" (Al-Hroub 2014, p. 58). As is apparent from this example and others, poverty is frequently the main factor leading to children dropping out of school, since they feel that they should be contributing to the family income. Of course UNRWA education policies have contributed to low enrolment in a lot of cases, specifically with regard the use of corporal punishment (although this has technically been banned in schools), a school curriculum that ignores Palestinian history and experience, automatic promotion and grade repetition, overcrowding, double shifting and teachers' heavy load, poor parent-teacher

relations, and a lack of special education and counseling services (Al-Hroub, 2014).

With regard to employment, Palestinians in Lebanon are de jure and de facto discriminated against in relation to other non-citizens (CSUCS, 2007). Since 1948, the Lebanese labor law has prohibited Palestinian refugees from practicing around 72 trades and professions. In 2005, officially registered Palestinian refugees born in Lebanon were allowed to work in the clerical and administrative sectors for the first time (Shafie, 2006). In August 2010, Lebanon's parliament amended its labor law to enhance the ability of Palestinian refugees to obtain work permits by exempting them from reciprocity requirements, eliminating work-permit fees, and giving them limited social security benefits. However, the reform did nothing to remove restrictions that bar Palestinians from working in at least 25 professions requiring syndicate membership, including law, medicine and engineering (Human Rights Watch, 2011).

General factors related to dropping out

General research on the phenomenon of school drop-outs has shown that multiple factors are associated with dropping out and that such a phenomenon is a long-term process of disengagement that occurs over time and begins in the earliest grades. In the United States, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and private research organizations have identified two types of factor related to dropping out: those associated with families and those related to an individual's experience at school (Aud et al., 2011).

A number of family background factors, such as socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, single-parent families, siblings' educational attainment, and family mobility are correlated with the likelihood of dropping out (Abdunnur et al., 2008; Bilagher, 2006; Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006; Nicaise, Tonguthai & Fripont, 2000). Of these factors,

socio-economic status, most commonly measured in terms of parental income and education levels, shows the strongest correlation with dropping out. A number of studies have also found that dropping out is more likely to occur among students coming from single-parent families and those with an older sibling who has already dropped out, than among counterparts not possessing these characteristics (Berliner, Barrat, Fong & Shirk, 2008; Bridgeland et al., 2006). Other aspects of a student's home life, such as the level of parental involvement and support, parents' educational expectations, parents' attitudes about school, and the stability of the family environment, can also influence a young person's decision to stay at school.

Students' past school performance is also related to the likelihood of dropping out. For example, some research shows that students with a history of poor academic achievement, evidenced by low grades and poor test scores, are more likely to drop out than those who have a history of academic success (Ampiah & Adu-Yeboah, 2009; Nicaise et al., 2000). In addition, students who are older than the age of their grade level or have repeated a grade are more likely to drop out. Other school factors are related to dropping out include students having a history of behavioral problems and higher rates of chronic truancy and tardiness. Research also indicates that dropout rates are associated with various characteristics of the schools themselves, such as size of the school, level of resources, and degree of support for students with academic or behavioral problems.

Specific risk factors related to dropping out of refugee students

There are multiple factors associated with the phenomenon of school drop-out among refugee students. Some of these factors even intersect with those that are related to the drop-out of non-refugee students. In Lebanon, research has shown

several reasons for Palestinian students dropping out from UNRWA schools (Sirhan, 1996; Ugland, 2003). Bilagher (2006) found three main reasons for dropping out from school, which were confirmed by Ghosn (2007). Both findings revealed that the most common reason is the need to seek employment. Low achievement is the second most common, and engagement or marriage, combined, is the third most common. The findings of a recent study by Al-Hroub (2014) showed that “in Palestinian camps, many parents encourage the marriage of their daughters while they are still students in hopes that the marriage will benefit the parents and their girls financially and socially, while others hope to relieve financial burdens on the family” (p. 11).

The findings of Abdunnur et al. (2008) and Ghosn (2007) also identified secondary factors that were correlated with high drop-out rates, including the average age of teachers, average teacher seniority, average class size and student-teacher ratios. Alternatively, pass rates in the Brevet Examination, school size and shift type (single or double) did not show a statistically significant covariance. Furthermore, the following were found: (a) low scholastic achievement seems to be consistently part of the equation (it may lead to failure, social isolation and, ultimately, shame); (b) not all drop-outs are interested in returning to school; (c) not all drop-outs are characterized by problematic behavior, several are typified as ‘cute’, well-behaved and even ‘wonderful’; (d) poverty seems to be a consistent characteristic of those defined as early school drop-outs: most drop-outs live in adverse housing conditions (two rooms for up to 10 persons); (e) fathers often seem to be absent in situations in which students drop out; (f) the cultural environment seems conducive to early marriage.

However, most parents and teachers agree that the worsening socio-economic conditions of Palestinians in Lebanon, as well as the fact that people no longer see the

benefits of an education, given the labor restrictions imposed on them by the Lebanese government, are the main contributors to such poor educational attainment (Al-Hroub, 2014). The majority of studies on school drop-outs have found that the major reasons for the decreasing enrolment rates and increasing drop-out rates in UNRWA schools in Lebanon is poverty and the general socio-economic situation (Bilagher 2006; Ugland 2003). Other studies have related it to the educational attainment of the parents; the more educated the parents, the more likely it is that the child will stay in school (Ugland 2003). Other reasons given by dropouts themselves are desire to work, low achievement, repetition, teachers' behavior, marriage/engagement, and a lack of interest in learning (Al-Hroub, 2014; Abdunnur et al., 2008; Ugland, 2003).

In a study by Farah (2000) of refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the findings revealed that schools suffer from overcrowding in classes, small playgrounds and absence of facilities for extracurricular activities. In addition, teachers' physical and verbal abuse of students is common and is the predominant form of discipline resulting from the inability of teachers to control large numbers of students, lack of teaching skills and general frustration.

The Current Study

This study is part of a research program launched by UNRWA-Lebanon and the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) within the framework of the EU-funded project 'Support for Improving Living Conditions of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon.' The first stage of the program was a quantitative study based on a sample survey conducted by Abdunnur et al. (2008), which identified the incidence and distribution of school drop-out, as well as its main causes. The current study forms the second stage of the

research program, which is an in-depth qualitative analysis of the causes of, and possible remedies for, dropping out of school. It is based on one-on-one interviews with drop-out students, as well as, the tracking of the trajectories of five drop-out cases.

Research Aims and Questions

This study aims to describe and present the perspectives of Palestinian refugee students regarding (a) the social and economic causes associated with the phenomenon of school drop-out; (b) the educational policies and practices used in UNRWA schools and their relationship to student drop-out; and (c) the role that parents play in preventing Palestinian students from dropping out of school. Accordingly, the key question for this research is: ‘What are the social and economic causes of school dropout in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon from the perspectives of five drop-out cases?’ and emerging from this main question, a two further sub-questions:

What effect do UNRWA policies and practices have on the drop-out phenomenon in Lebanon?

What is the role that Palestinian parents play in preventing the occurrence of this phenomenon?

Methodology

One of the primary objectives of this research is to bring the voices of Palestinian drop-outs to the center of research on the topic, and thus go further than producing a merely statistical account of the drop-out phenomenon. We consider student drop-outs and their thoughts, feelings and ideas to be crucial in developing both a responsible research agenda and an effective intervention program.

The considerable number of Palestinian refugee drop-outs in Lebanon seems to carry more weight with educational administrators than personalized narratives of struggle. Studies that rely on statistical data alone (e.g. Abdunnur et al., 2008; Berliner et al., 2008) to portray the phenomenon of dropout do not provide—and are not meant to provide—either the researcher or the reader with a window onto the experiences of those involved and the rationales that guide their actions. Rather than placing statistics at the center of our research and working to contextualize the data using pre-existing narratives and conclusions, we firstly listened to stories of students, and related these stories to larger Palestinian issues behind students' decision to leave school early. Therefore our qualitative research gives a stronger voice to the collective struggles of our subjects, and brings to the fore the intersections of many complex issues.

Method and Participants

The methodology used to produce this paper is grounded in the form of data collection which involved tracing the dropout trajectory of five students. These five cases were drawn from four carefully selected UNRWA schools in Lebanon. The qualitative method provided ethnographic accounts of the factors underlying, and motivations behind, students dropping out of school in these communities.

Ideally, qualitative research identifying antecedents of school dropout should employ the method of a prospective longitudinal case study that involves selecting and tracking students in real time from an early stage in their educational careers until they leave school. In this way, it would be possible to state if differences between drop-outs and their classmates who remained in school preceded or followed drop-out. However, one of the UNRWA requirements was that the research be completed in 12 months, which ruled out this prospective longitudinal study. Therefore a retrospective

approach was adopted to identify the areas of inquiry, and a sample of five cases was tracked. In the process of selecting the five cases, eight drop-outs (four girls and four boys) were nominated by the UNRWA to participate in the study because they represented a wide spectrum of issues. Five dropouts agreed to participate in this study (four girls and one boy). All participants were allowed to choose the time and location of the interviews. Based on their choice, all interviews took place at their old schools.

Procedure and Interview

In designing the interview questions, we identified particular issues which we wanted to address, and this prioritization guided our research. For example, the results of the Abdunnur et al. (2008) survey suggest that economic, social and cultural factors, as explained in the earlier literature review, all contribute to dropping out from school.

These factors were the starting point for the interviews, which eventually covered a broader set of questions, including the value of education from the participants' perspectives.

Semi-Structured Interview

Although the semi-structured interviews used a common matrix in order not to overlook any key issues, they were kept sufficiently 'open' to leave room for additional input from the participants. The aspects that were explored include: the education system and the aspirations of young people and their parents; the quality of schools and the curriculum; teachers' workload; special education and counseling services; social barriers and perceptions; child labor; Lebanese legal exclusions of Palestinian refugees from many professions or property ownership. A team of two Palestinian ethnographers, who specialized in educational psychology and special education, together conducted the interviews,

which were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Each interview session lasted for almost one hour, with an average of two interviews with each student drop-out, taking approximately 10-12 hours over nine sessions. Exceptionally, two sisters, Nadine and Huda, were interviewed together over three sessions upon the request of the father, which took approximately four hours. The father believed that his daughters should not leave the home for long periods of time. The interview included general and specific questions about personal details and family background, experiences in elementary and middle school, and employment history. The first part of the interview illustrates the causes and challenges that resulted in students dropping out of their schools, and the number of times they dropped out and returned to school, in addition to the reasons for their decision to return to school at a particular grade level. The second part focuses on the re-enrollment policy, and administrative and educational issues. The third part discusses the relationship between drop-out students, their teachers and their peers and the impact of these relationships on their decisions about whether or not to leave school. The fourth part discusses future plans and personal interests of drop-out students. Participants were asked to provide suggestions and recommendations in order to develop a prevention plan to tackle the drop-out phenomena.

Results

Information about the familial, psychological, and educational histories of five drop-out students is presented below to assist in analyzing and interpreting the findings of this research. To maintain the confidentiality of data provided by participants, all names used below are pseudonyms.

Case 1: Marwa

Marwa is 23 years old. Her father is married to two women. Marwa has 12 siblings (six brothers and six sisters). In contrast to her full-siblings, all of her half-siblings left school due to poor academic performance. Marwa's father forced her to leave school during the eighth grade because he does not believe in educating girls. He believes that 'girls cannot be controlled unless they stay at home'. Marwa was frequently absent from school. As her parents' problems became more severe, her father forced her to leave school permanently. As a result, she left her father's house to stay with her mother. Despite this, Marwa did not attend school for two months, fearing that her father would come to the school and remove her. Marwa refused to return to school even when her parents were reunited. This was because she had had a previous painful experience when her father burned her books and school uniform as a punishment for her attempt to attend the school.

The headmaster made every effort to talk to Marwa's father, but he was always unresponsive to the former's calls. Finally, the headmaster was able to see Marwa with her mother when he was coincidentally notified that they had an appointment with a medical doctor in the infirmary. The headmistress discussed the problem with both of them, promising to facilitate Marwa's return to school. She provided Marwa with new books and a school uniform. Marwa stated, I felt that the headmistress and teachers treated me in a special way, and this is what encouraged me because I had found people who appreciated what I have to offer . . . when I returned home, I became convinced that if I were to stay at home, I might end up like my mother, [who is illiterate]... Despite my father's aggravation from time to time, I was determined to pursue my higher education... He did not pay any of my educational expenses, and in the meantime, he left our house.

What is significant, as noted in the above, was the prevalence family and economic factors and instability in the home environment, that were possibly beyond Marwa's control, but which would undoubtedly have led any student to be alienated, disengaged, and de-motivated, and which, in turn, would lead to dropping out from school. However, Marwa's high levels of perseverance, persistence and intrinsic motivation helped her to overcome instability in the home environment and economic obstacles, in order to pursue her university education. Marwa was determined to achieve admission to higher education. She registered at the university and contacted several non-governmental organizations to sponsor her study, with the results that she managed to secure a scholarship from the Norwegian People's Aid.

Despite her high level of motivation and positive attitudes towards education, Marwa complained about several issues relating to the UNRWA school system. She stated that she felt that,

UNRWA does not encourage [students] to study . . . When you enter school, you become under control . . . forbidden to breathe, forbidden to run, and forbidden to play. In the classroom, you are forbidden to talk . . . scorned if you laugh.

According to Marwa, the democratic atmosphere was absent in her school. Teachers exerted stringent control over their students. Also, teachers did not engage students in extracurricular activities, and they used to replace physical education and art lessons with academic subjects, which made school unattractive for many students. Marwa's school overemphasized academic performance and paid little attention to the non-academic social and emotional aspects.

The ongoing use of corporal punishment was Marwa's worst experience in the period when she was at the UNRWA school. She believed that victims of corporal punishment are more likely to drop out of school. Marwa

described her sisters' and brothers' experiences as well. She said,

My sisters complain about the way their teachers treat them . . . swearing and hitting [them]. Even my little brother suffers. He is in [the fourth grade], and despite the prohibition of corporal punishment, he comes home with bruises on his body.

Marwa suggested that UNRWA schools should be made attractive to students. Additional extracurricular and non-academic activities should be provided for them, and classroom walls should be clean and painted to provide a pleasant environment for students. With regard to school-parent relationships, she believed that there was a lack of communication, mainly because of what she viewed as the authoritarian school administration which did not listen to or meet parents' requests. Marwa urged teachers when meeting parents 'not only to complain about their children.' She also proposed that schools should organize 'trips for both families and children . . . [Such activities] resolve the problems of children who do not like school.'

According to Marwa, the main factor that causes school drop-out among girls is early engagement or marriage. She elaborated, 'We have around three to four girls [who are engaged] in each classroom . . . [sometimes] I said to myself, they are right, why I should study? . . . the [hard] conditions force a person to make wrong decisions'.

Marwa's case summarizes several factors associated with student dropout from UNRWA schools: (1) familial problems, such as parents' divorce; (2) financial costs that discourage many students from continuing their education at school and university; (3) the lack of extracurricular activities; (4) lack of communication between teachers and parents; (5) early engagement and marriage, which are considered the main factor associated with girls' dropping out from school; and (6) the impact of Lebanese labor law that prevents many

Palestinian students from finding jobs. This issue was raised indirectly. Marwa recalled several stories about Palestinian university graduates who could not pursue their careers due to their legal situation in Lebanon.

Case 2: Salman

Salman is 23 years old. He lives with his parents and four siblings (two brothers and two sisters). He left school when he was 14 years old. The main reason for his leaving school was his poor academic performance (final grade: 77/240). Salman stated, 'I wasn't a bright [child] and when I failed [the eighth grade] I decided to leave school.' He mentioned that his school never offered remedial classes or counseling for students with learning problems. They had no cultural and social committees, or school trips. The school used to celebrate 'teacher's day,' rather than any student-related event.

Salman's favorite hobby is playing football. He admitted that he would have stayed at school if it had allowed more time for sporting and artistic activities. He recalled many occasions when the teachers and headmaster allowed him and his troublesome friend to leave school. They had the complete freedom to leave school whenever they liked. Although teachers used to physically punish some students, Salman recalled, 'I didn't allow them to punish me. My personality was stronger than theirs. Teachers were happy and relieved when my friend and I left their classes.' Salman was pleased that his teachers allowed him to leave school whenever he chose. He was given the freedom to choose whichever seat he wanted in their classes, and his classmates were always frightened of confronting him. He admitted that he would have returned to school if his close friend, who had also left school, had agreed to return with him. Salman mentioned, 'My friend kept saying to me: if you return to school, I will return also.' Salman did not regret having left school, and he would make the same decision if he could turn

the clock back five years. He claimed that his father asked him to return to school, but Salman responded, 'If I had returned to school then I would have been wasting a whole year doing nothing . . . I wanted to learn carpentry and accounting! That would have been better than making trouble at school. . . . then he [father] accepted my decision.'

Salman's family had never attended any school party or festival, and he suggested that the teachers and administrators should focus more on social activities and should invite parents for folk dancing festivals, or organize a weekly art exhibition for artistic students. In his view, this would encourage parents and students to attend school.

Salman's case summarizes a number of factors associated with drop-out from schools as follows: (1) poor academic achievement of many students and the lack of appropriate educational and counseling services to help them overcome their academic, emotional and/or behavioral problems; (2) lack of extracurricular activities (e.g. trips, cultural, scientific, sporting and artistic activities); (3) use of corporal punishment in schools; (4) negative impact of peers; and (5) poor communication between the school and teachers, on the one hand, and the parents, on the other hand.

Case 3: Nuha

Nuha is 25 years old. She lives with her parents and siblings. Her father used to work as a cab driver, but is currently unemployed because of his diabetes. Her mother is a housewife. Nuha has three brothers and four sisters. Her elder sister completed her university higher education, while the others only reached the Brevet school level (grades 7-9). Nuha dropped out of school nine years ago, the main reason for which was that other students were also leaving school. She stated,

[I left school] because of my friends who began to leave school one after another at that time. Before [the eighth grade], I always succeeded. But when I failed in the last year, I told my family that I wanted to leave school and work as a hairdresser . . . They left the decision to me . . . My eldest sister was the only one who urged me to return to school because she likes education, but I did not want to.

The above statement shows that peer pressure had an extremely strong influence on Nuha's decision to leave her school. Nuha did not regret having left school because she was 'working now and can read and write . . . There are a lot of other girls who cannot read and write.'

Nuha explained that her parents had never been involved in school activities or meetings. They had never visited her school or attended any parents' school meeting. She stated that parents were mainly called to attend school meetings before examinations or when their children misbehaved or made trouble. Occasionally, some parents were pleased when they were shown their able children's names inscribed on the honors board.

During her school years, Nuha never participated in any school activities because there were no ongoing sporting, social or cultural activities at her school. She recalled, 'We had no [extracurricular] activities . . . only PE . . . I was the best player . . . My teachers used to say, 'We wish you were as good in your [academic] lessons as you are in sport.' . . . I hear nowadays that they organize such [social or extracurricular] activities.' Nuha added, 'If I were a teacher, I would ask my students about their areas of interest . . . 'What do you like to do?' I would then try to meet their needs.'

Nuha left school in 2001 and during the past 13 years she has worked for intermittent periods as a hairdresser, accountant, and a nursery teacher. Nuha attended training workshops for eight months at the UNRWA Women's Activity Center and then worked in a hairdressing salon for

only three months. Recently, she has worked at the Children of the Future Center.

Nuha's case summarizes the three main reasons for students dropping out from schools: (1) the negative impact of peers on one another, (2) poor communication between the school and parents; and (3) lack of extracurricular cultural, artistic and sports activities.

Cases 4 and 5: Nadine and Huda

Nadine, aged 21, and Huda, aged 20, are the eldest sisters in a family of eight. The mother had a baccalaureate diploma and the father had completed the tenth grade. They live with their father, aged 42, and four other siblings (three sisters and one brother). The mother had died 15 months prior to the interview, and the father was working as a cab driver. His relationship with Nadine and Huda worsened after the death of his wife. Nadine and Huda dropped out of their school during the eighth grade due to familial and school problems. Their younger sisters, Muna and Nour, also dropped out of their schools in the sixth and seventh grades, respectively. Nadine explained that the teachers' approach was the cause:

They didn't encourage us to remain at school . . . I was not good at biology and science [and] one teacher encouraged me to leave school. She said, 'Nothing [good] will come out of you.' In the meantime, my mother was sick, which made it impossible for me to do my homework . . . She [the teacher] knew that but never considered my condition.

Huda added, 'Because of my mom's health condition, I did not have the courage to ask for money as I knew in advance what the answer would be! The priority was for my mother's [medical] treatment.' However, Huda stated,

The sickness of my mother wasn't the only cause. We had familial problems between my mother's and father's relatives. There was more than one cause. This made me dislike studying . . . familial problems made me lose interest in

going to school. We experienced [severe] psychological conditions.

Unlike the father, their mother did not accept their decision. However, she was understanding and knew that family problems were the main factors affecting her daughters' dropping out of school.

Nadine and Huda explained that they live with their grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins in the same building. Their relatives were very religious and did not allow their daughters to attend school after the fifth or sixth grade. They valued marriage more than the education of the girls. They married their daughters simply because early marriage was the best option they knew for girls. They also taught them Islamic law and did not allow them to attend non-family functions. Nadine and Huda stated that their grandmother had turned their father against them. Nadine said,

The problem of the family is that they put pressure on my father. Generally, when I ask for my father's permission to go out, he doesn't object. But when his mother or sister talk to him, his answer to us would be, 'Sit at home and don't go out.' This is what used to happen when we wanted to go on a school trip. He changes his mind when my grandmother talks to him and prevents us from going out.

According to Nadine and Huda, none of the school administrators took the trouble to ask about their reasons for leaving school. They received one call only asking them to 'return the books to school.' However, the school unexpectedly became interested in discovering their reasons for leaving school. Nadine explained, 'They called us and we went there [to school] . . . that [call] was [initiated] by a foreigner.' She added, 'Now they have become more concerned . . . perhaps because of this foreigner, otherwise, nobody would call.' She elaborated, 'Probably, I would return to school if the school [staff] talked to me and tried to

persuade me to go back. But the school was not bothered, and neither were [my] parents.'

Nadine and Huda complained about certain issues relating to the educational policies at UNRWA schools. For example, one of the most humiliating experiences at school was the corporal punishment. They were beaten more than other students because of their low achievement. This made them hate their school, which also failed to provide any services for children with special educational needs. They said, 'Our school had no remedial classes for slow learners and students with learning problems'. The school also lacked counseling services and adequate resources, such as laboratories and computers. Nadine stated, 'We had a library, but we never used it. They even refused to give us books when we ordered them . . . We never had a reading lesson in the library.' Regarding sports and art lessons, Nadine said,

We had two periods of physical education but we had no physical education teacher. We used to go to the playground and do whatever we liked . . . it used to be the last period and we preferred to go home [rather than play sports] . . . Also, we had two periods for art . . . but just like PE . . . we never studied art.

One of the negative experiences that Nadine and Huda recalled was students being forced to clean the school. When it was their turn, Nadine and Huda used to wake up early at six o'clock in the morning in order to do the cleaning, and if they did not, they were punished by being forbidden to attend the first lesson.

The cases of Nadine and Huda summarize four factors associated with school drop-out: (1) familial problems, such as the loss of the mother, and their negative impact on the children; (2) the absence of a school plan to prevent student drop-out; (3) lack of educational and counseling services; and (4) lack of extracurricular activities at school.

Conclusion and Discussion

Most research conducted on UNRWA school dropout in Lebanon has emerged from the need to identify the causes and factors behind early school leaving, and most of the available research starts from the point of identifying the characteristics of students who drop out. The questions which have led the current research aim to identify the characteristics of Palestinian students who drop out from school that make them different from those who complete their secondary education. Despite the numerous research studies on the individual characteristics of the drop-outs from UNRWA schools in Lebanon (e.g. Al-Hroub 2014; Abdunnur et al., 2008; Bilagher 2006; Ghosn 2007; Sirhan 1996; Ugland 2003), most previous research has not gone beyond recording statistical data relating to the phenomenon of school drop-out. Based on the results of the current qualitative study, several conclusions can be drawn and discussed with regard to the results of previous studies:

First: Poor relationship between student drop-outs and their teachers

Dropouts perceived the educational system as being too keen to exclude them because of their poor academic achievement or behavioral problems. The stories told by the drop-outs revealed a lack of care towards these children on the part of some schools and teachers and showed how this has contributed to their dropping out.

Second: Corporal punishment and lack of extracurricular activities

Corporal punishment and lack of extracurricular activities were repeatedly cited as the most unpleasant aspects of schooling. Making school a safe and pleasant place for children is important in terms of reducing the risk of dropping out. Although corporal punishment is officially

banned in UNRWA schools, with severe consequences for any teachers who are reported for having used it, it is still widely practiced. It is believed that the lack of implementation of the UNRWA legislation on banning corporal punishment, inadequate teacher and counselor training in the use of appropriate behavioral modification strategies, and teachers' perceptions that corporal punishment must be used to teach students as it is already used at home, are all factors behind the widespread use of such punishment. In addition, the UNRWA school environment is not conducive to participation in cultural or sports competitions, school festivals or parties. The nature of any extracurricular activity should be drawn from the students' everyday life in order to reinforce the significance of knowledge acquired at school.

Third: The role of parents in relation to school drop-out

All five students acknowledged that there is little parental participation in the school system. There is also a lack of parent-teacher meetings, which has led to feelings of apathy among teachers and parents with regard to students' academic and emotional problems. Therefore developing positive relationships between families and schools could contribute to a student's sense of support and encouragement. There is strong evidence to indicate that children whose parents are meaningfully involved in their schooling achieve higher grades and test scores, graduate from school at higher rates, and are more likely to go on to higher education (Al-Hroub, 2014). Parent-teacher associations and meetings are seen as one way to discuss and resolve students' academic and behavioral problems.

Dropping out may be prevented by implementing a focused strategic plan that takes into account the multiple and interrelated external and internal causes. Based on the

findings of the current study, three main recommendations are proposed:

Community and family involvement in drop-out prevention

Participants in this research acknowledged that there is little parental participation in the school system. Obviously, schools need to make more of an effort to reach out to parents in order to form a strong partnership. Students need to feel supported and encouraged and the development of good relationships between families and schools would go a long way to achieving this. UNRWA schools need to provide parenting classes or support groups, and put more effort into communicating the benefits of education to parents. The findings also illustrate the general problem of some families' reluctance to recognise the value of educating women. This, I suppose, requires a cultural shift which can only be achieved by the combined efforts of the UNRWA and community leaders together with those of religious leaders.

Improving the school environment

Participants in this study who dropped out demonstrate an extreme lack of interest in, as well as a disengagement from, UNRWA schools (e.g., academic difficulties, and the lack of a sense of belonging combined with a general dislike of school). For example, there was no indication in some drop-outs' responses that schools employed counselors. Effective strategies to support students' engagement would help them to improve the learning environment, for example, prohibition of corporal punishment, and provision of extracurricular activities and counseling services for students.

Special education services

There are few special services provided to identify and address the problems of low achievers, slow learners or at-risk students. Teachers in all schools suggested that

systematic approach should be implemented to identify potential dropouts long before their entry into elementary and intermediate school. Teachers, educational specialists and policy-makers need to be encouraged to design and implement appropriate assessments during children's early development, preferably during the first five years of schooling. Trained and specialized teachers should teach students in special education and remedial classes in small groups.

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