



Perspectives of school dropouts' dilemma in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon: An ethnographic study[☆]



Anies Al-Hroub^{*}

American University of Beirut, Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

This research article explores the perspectives of students, administrators, teachers and parents on the UNRWA school dropouts' dilemma in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Based on qualitative methodology, field data are grounded in two forms of data collection: one-on-one interviews with 11 dropout students; and focus group discussion interviews with students, parents, teachers, and school administrators. These stakeholders were drawn from four carefully selected UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) schools in Lebanon. The qualitative study provides ethnographic accounts of the factors underlying and motivations behind students dropping out of school in these communities. More specifically, attention is paid to important issues, including socio-economic status, school curriculum and services, family involvement, and domestic laws governing the participation of Palestinian refugees in various professions. Beyond simply listing these factors, this study amplifies the voices of students, parents, teachers, and school administrators to highlight the different and detailed ways in which such issues interact with the decision to drop out of school.

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1. Introduction

Dropping out of school has become a major concern in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. A review of available data on student dropouts in the Palestinian community reveals several inconsistencies in the calculations of school dropout rates. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) figures indicate that the dropout rate for the elementary and preparatory levels are 2.1% and 3.9%, respectively (UNRWA, 2008). However, UNRWA calculations are confined to the number of students who register and leave within the annual academic year. Other reports indicate that the dropout rate is much higher when one considers students who did not register at all during an academic year or have yet to register for school. For example, according to a 2003 FaFo study, 18% of Palestinian refugees aged 10 years or older in the Palestinian camps and gatherings are no longer in school and have not completed any education, 13% of the population have never attended school, and another 18% dropped out of school before

completing elementary education (Ugland, 2013). A 1998 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) survey revealed that the dropout rate among Palestinian children in Lebanon reached 29.2% at the preparatory level and 18.9% at the elementary level. According to recent estimates, school dropout for Palestinian refugee children of 10 years and older is 39%, ten times that of Lebanese children (CSUCS, 2007). In a more recent UNRWA-funded study by Abdunnur et al. (2008) the dropout rate among Palestinian refugee children aged 6–18 years reaches 18.3% (21.7% male, 14.8% female).

The basic education system in the Palestinian refugee camps is managed by UNRWA. Palestinian families and civil society have raised concerns over the quality of education received by most Palestinian children, especially with the rising percentage of early school dropouts. 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 of attending university (primarily because of lack of resources to pay for it 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 scarcity of extracurricular activities, such as physical education and arts classes, provided in UNRWA schools, as well as the limited sports and leisure facilities resulting from a lack of space and resources, also contribute to high dropout levels, which

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^{*} Correspondence address: American University of Beirut, Department of Education, P.O. Box 11-0236, Beirut, Lebanon. Tel.: +961 70 132636; fax: +961 1 744461.

E-mail addresses: aa111@aub.edu.lb, anies74@hotmail.com

probably apply equally to many public sector schools. 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). UNRWA operates in an extremely difficult environment, but there is much that can be improved while awaiting a just solution to the legal restrictions faced by Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

Much of the research on the UNRWA school dropouts 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 dropouts in the UNRWA schools in Lebanon, most research has not gone beyond a statistical account of the dropout phenomenon. Studies which exclusively rely on statistical data to portray a picture of dropouts do not provide the researcher with the motivations and experiences of those choosing to drop out. As an alternative, this study has adopted a qualitative approach so as to attend to the micro-experiences of individual dropouts, while at the same time enabling the construction of a macro-level understanding of the phenomenon.

2. The status of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon: a special case

UNRWA defines a Palestine refugee as “any person whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946–15 May 1948 and who lost their home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict”. UNRWA’s definition of a refugee also covers the descendants of persons who became refugees in 1948. UNRWA’s services are available to all those living in its five area of intervention (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Gaza and the West Bank), who (1) meet this definition, (2) are registered with the Agency, and (3) need assistance (Shafie, 2006).

Lebanon has been hosting Palestinian refugees since 1948, when around 100,000 from the areas of northern Palestine were forced to leave their homes, due to the Arab–Israeli war. Currently, there are approximately 425,000 in Lebanon registered with UNRWA; only 260,000–280,000 reside in Lebanon (about 7% of the country’s total population) in 12 camps and a number of unofficial gatherings (Chaaban et al., 2010). There are about 15 Palestinian armed factions operating in the camps, although their freedom of movement is restricted (Shafie, 2006). It is estimated that there are around 100,000 Palestinian refugees from Lebanon who, since the 1980s until 2003, have emigrated to Arab Gulf countries and northern Europe, mainly to Germany, Denmark and Sweden (Dorai, 2003).

Although most of the refugees were born and raised in Lebanon, they have been denied Lebanese citizenship, even those children born to a Lebanese mother and a Palestinian father. The Lebanese government has given Palestinian refugees the legal status of foreigners. This means that they are denied major civil rights, including ownership of property, access to employment and access to public social services (Hanafi et al., 2012). This leaves the majority of registered refugees completely dependent on UNRWA and other NGOs. In this paper, we will focus on Palestinians’ rights to education and employment: the two main issues relating to the UNRWA school dropouts.

2.1. Palestinians’ rights to education and employment

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 enroll their child in one of these institutions. For these reasons, UNRWA in

Lebanon, in contrast to UNRWA’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. In the 2010–2011 school year, 32,191 students (53.5% of whom are females) were enrolled in 74 schools, including eight secondary schools. Despite high enrollment rates at the elementary level, there are still many challenges for Palestine refugees with regards to completing education in Lebanon, for example (1) 8% of the Palestine refugee population of school age (7–15 years) were not enrolled in school in 2010; (2) 10% of the population aged over 15 years have never attended school at all; (3) only half of young people of secondary school age (16–18 years) are enrolled in schools or vocational training centers; (4) two-thirds of Palestinians above the age of 15 do not have the Brevet; and (5) only 5% of Palestinians hold a university degree (UNRWA, 2011, p. 2). In addition, the facilities in UNRWA’s school are in a very poor condition and some school buildings are in need of repair or replacement. Palestinian schools in Lebanon have among the highest class sizes and dropout rates in all of UNRWA’s areas of operation. There is also an overall lack of recreational space for students. The poor socio-economic conditions of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon compel many students to leave school and seek work in order to support their families (Shafie, 2006).

Since 1948, the Lebanese labor law prohibited Palestinian refugees 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 facilitate 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).

3. High school dropout and related factors

3.1. Definitions of “school dropout”

There is no universal consensus on the exact definition of a “school dropout.” However, most researchers have adopted the definition used by the federal government of the United States of America:

A dropout is a student who leaves school for any reason, except death, before completing school with a regular diploma and does not transfer to another school. A student is considered a dropout regardless of when dropping out occurs (i.e., during or between regular school terms). A student who leaves during the year but returns during the reporting period (including summer program) is not a dropout (Ireland, 2007, pp. 6–7).

This paper adopts Bilagher’s (2006) definition of the UNRWA dropout, which states that “an UNRWA dropout is a refugee—not necessarily a registered refugee—who meets all of the following criteria:

1. The refugee student was at one stage registered with the school that registered him as a school leaver, and has taken part in education or was intending to take part in education.
2. The student has: (a) been absent from school for more than twenty school days without a valid or any justification, or (b) left school formally.
3. The student has not completed his/her education at the school of enrolment or elsewhere (that is, he/she is not in possession of a

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