

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL LITERACY AND THE NON-FORMAL EDUCATION SECTOR IN LEBANON'S REFUGEE POPULATION



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This paper lays out the role that technology, as a tool, and non-formal schools, as enablers, can play in addressing the challenge of educating refugee children in Lebanon as the Syrian crisis enters its eighth year.

The Problem

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The toll that armed conflict has on a society is enormous, acutely impacting the children displaced by it. In addition to the physical, psychological and economic damages wrought on everybody, conflict and displacement additionally rob children of their

future by disrupting, and often ending, their opportunities for education—and education is indisputably the key to unlocking a child's future potential.

Refugees spilling over the borders of neighboring countries can quickly overwhelm the host's ability to absorb the children into their domestic school systems. In most situations governments and international aid organizations step in first to respond with emergency measures to provide education. However, with protracted instability and bleak prospects of a quick return to their home country, these emergency education measures have needed to shift to long term and sustained measures, putting an added strain on host country governments to tackle this challenge.

Lebanon, a small country facing its own economic and political issues, started absorbing a disproportionately large

number of Syrian refugees across its porous borders from the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011. While Turkey eclipses Lebanon in the total number of Syrian refugees accommodated (3.6 million¹ registered Syrian refugees; 4.5 percent of the Turkish population), Lebanon has taken on the biggest burden *per capita* of accommodating displaced Syrians. There are almost one million² registered refugees. And these are only the documented numbers. There are many that remain undocumented and unofficial estimates are more like 1.5 million³, or 25 percent of the total Lebanese population.



Estimates are that six out of ten⁴ Syrian children in Lebanon, approximately 500,000, are not in school. Children who are out of school, alone or with families suffering intense financial hardship, are intensely vulnerable to exploitation. At best they sit idle, work, or roam the streets, at worst they fall victim to prostitution or child marriages, join gangs or fall prey to extremist groups. They are quickly becoming a lost generation without education and thus with very limited prospects for their future.

The Lebanese government was quick to respond in the face of this crisis⁵, establishing a model of emergency response that has been emulated in the neighboring countries of Jordan and Turkey. In 2013, Lebanon started an

1) UNCHR's Operational Portal - refugee situation (Turkey): <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/113>. June 2018 figures

2) UNCHR's Operational Portal - refugee situation (Lebanon): <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>. April 2018

3) "Lebanon working for return of thousands of Syrian refugees." Middle East Eye, 31 May 2018. <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/lebanon-working-return-thousands-syrian-refugees-172807475>

4) "59% of Syrian children in Lebanon out of school." Middle East Monitor, November 1, 2017. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20171101-59-of-syria-children-in-lebanon-out-of-school/>

afternoon, or second, shift within Lebanese public schools as an action of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other International Non-governmental Organizations (INGOs) to accommodate a higher number of Syrian refugee children in Lebanese public schools. There are many opinions on the effectiveness of this system⁶, but at the heart of it is the goodwill to get these vulnerable children off the streets and up to a certain standard of literacy and education such that they can reintegrate effectively into a normalized life.

Despite these significant efforts by the formal education system, the number of children who are still out of school remains disconcertingly high. There are a number of observations that shed some light on the education of Syrian refugees in the second shift public school system⁷:

- The second shift for Syrian students is led by Lebanese teachers who would have already taught the first shift, hence they are quite exhausted and over stretched.
- The Lebanese public school system is already a matter of concern with dropping quality over the past decade, accounting for the provision of less than 30 percent of Lebanon's education⁸.
- While the public schools usually offer seats for Syrian refugees through the second shift, many Syrian refugee parents find the system substandard and therefore opt for different schooling opportunities offered by non-formal schools, even if at a financial cost to the families.
- The dropout rate is high and attendance of registered students in the afternoon shift is low.

The Role of Non-formal Schools

The non-profit sector has stepped in to help fill the gaps left by government ministries and INGOs by establishing non-formal schools and education programs⁹. These are defined as schools and education programs where neither the

schools themselves nor the curriculum provided are recognized by the relevant national educational authorities¹⁰. They offer relevant learning material but not necessarily comprehensively or consistently, and they are not recognized for diploma and advancement purposes.

The nature of the crisis and response is that while most non-formal education facilities are being established and run by people seasoned in education, if not in operations, there is a wide variety of other professionals becoming involved. Some of them have backgrounds from sectors outside of education and bring a non-traditional entrepreneurial mentality to the issues and challenges of this very critical and unique situation. Traditional innovation and commitment from the formal education sector, have proven insufficient to address the scale of the problem, and fresh ideas within an environment of collaboration are required.

The non-formal education sector that has developed in Lebanon and elsewhere in the region and the world brings certain advantages to the table:

- The non-formal sector has more liberty and flexibility in incorporating innovative educational tools into their curricula than do government schools since they are not rigidly bound by the established standards and do not issue diplomas.
- Non-formal schools have more liberty in scheduling their curricula and can put such elements as e-learning, psychosocial learning and trauma therapy into their curriculum—critical elements for the refugee children.

The following is a sample of non-formal schools that were founded as a result of the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon and embody the points raised above:

- Social Support Society runs five schools in the Bekaa educating 3,000 Syrian refugee children. Their programs include trauma therapy workshops for

5) UNHCR Lebanon. "Back to School.". 2016. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Backtoschoolbrochure2016portal.pdf>

6) For a discussion of the response of MEHE and other players see Jalbout, Maysa. "Reaching all children with education in Lebanon: Opportunities for action." *Their World*, September 10, 2015. <http://gbc-education.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/LEBANON.pdf>

7) Feedback from those working with refugees in Lebanon.

8) See Jalbout, Maysa. "Reaching all children with education in Lebanon: Opportunities for action." *Their World*, September 10, 2015. <http://gbc-education.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/LEBANON.pdf>

9) Anecdotally, some bad reputation has sprung of some non-profits in Lebanon claiming that they act as fronts for work that does not really happen and collect funds for ineffective or incomplete work. However, that is an unfair tarnish to those who are leading monumental efforts to make a profound impact on vulnerable communities.

10) See: <http://glossary.uis.unesco.org/glossary/map/terms/176>

11) Per Thaki partners who are recipients of Thaki computers. See www.thaki.org

12) The use of technology in the form of products/apps/tools to enhance learning, pedagogy and instruction. It is not replacing any current practices, but it is the use of those tools that aids the delivery of education. See "What is EdTech?" EdTechReview. <http://edtechreview.in/dictionary/119-what-is-edtech>

13) Kolibri, Internet In A Box and, Rumie and Thaki are a few such organizations that offer offline ed-tech solutions.

14) Survey issued by Thaki to 7 partner non-formal schools in December 2017 and June 2018 for teacher feedback.

teachers and trainers, a drop-in literacy center for out-of-school older working children, a computer lab to introduce digital literacy to elementary children, parenting workshops, as well as a vision and dental screening initiative for 5,000 children in the community.

- Jusoor runs three centers in Lebanon: One in Beirut and two in the Bekaa. While they follow the Lebanese Arabic curriculum for math, science, physical education, art and Arabic, they have introduced non-traditional elements into their program that include peace education classes, psychosocial activities for both the children and their families, as well as hygiene sessions and basic medical support.
- Malaak is a gap school in north Lebanon focused on tackling trauma and ending illiteracy of refugee children as well as providing self-sufficiency programs for the children's families. Children's programs include digital literacy delivered in a computer lab and creative expression and trauma therapy through art, music and theater. Women-centered programs focus on skills building and income generating projects in cooking, tailoring and artisanal creations.
- Sonbola, also based in the Bekaa, runs programs in computer education, robotic programming, psychosocial support through art, music and drama and citizenship education as a complement to formal education.

These non-formal schools must fend entirely for themselves for all facets of life including finance, staffing, training, equipment, and facilities. These education centers see the role that technology can play in enhancing learning and are quick to introduce e-learning and digital literacy into their programs, offering, in the process, a refugee child's exposure to computers¹¹.

The Role of Education Technology

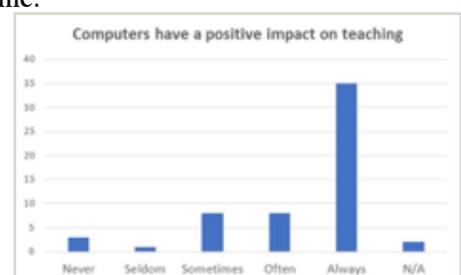
Organizations that work in the education technology (EdTech¹²) sector are bringing leading edge solutions in education and technology to play an important role in

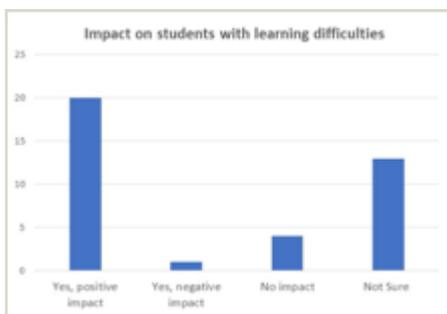
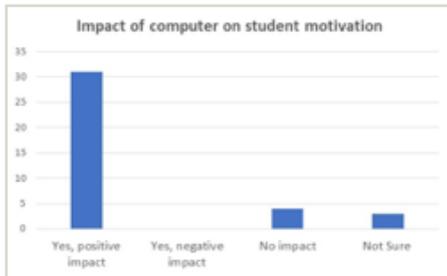
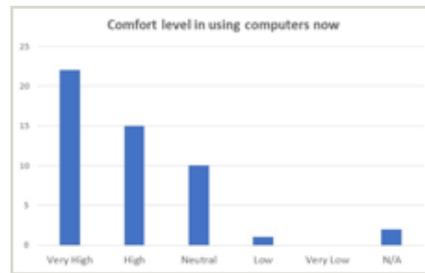
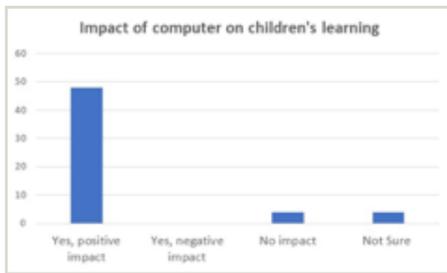
resolving the education crisis among refugees. They act quickly and nimbly, apply a lean entrepreneurial approach to implementation, and pivot and adapt solutions to changing conditions.

EdTech can play a fundamental role in effectively delivering education for the following reasons:

- Technology can efficiently and effectively deliver educational content—as supplementary, core, or blended learning, particularly when traditional classroom learning is unavailable or even impossible due to security.
- Technology can improve children's level of engagement and motivation to learn. This, in turn, positively impacts school retention rates and extra-curricular development.
- Having digital literacy and technology skills is critical for modern workforce integration. The younger a child learns how to use technology, the easier his or her learning curve when entering the workforce.
- With Internet connectivity, personalized and adaptive educational content can be accessed from anywhere through electronic devices, allowing migrant children on the move to continue their education. In Lebanon, this poses a challenge since Internet speeds are slow and connectivity costs high (there are efforts among several international organizations to tackle this challenge¹³).

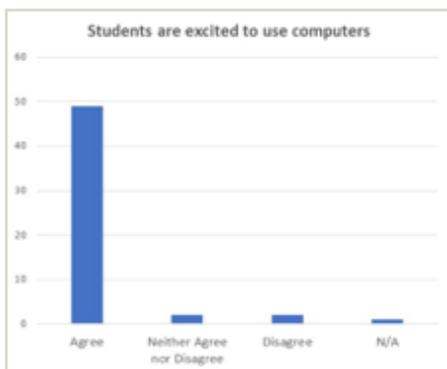
User feedback from Thaki's non-formal school partners¹⁴ who recently started incorporating computers into their curriculum supports a positive impact of the use of EdTech on the learning environment of children who are being introduced to technology for the first time:





“Because of computers, students like to practice more and they are more attentive to the lessons explanation.”

“With computers they better understand because they can see live examples.”



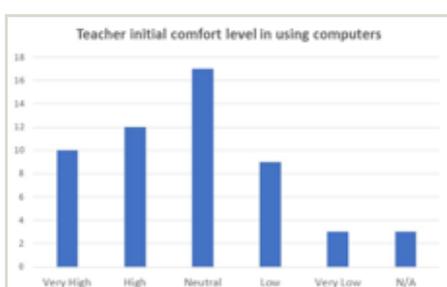
Challenges in Incorporating EdTech Solutions

Getting technology, with linguistically and culturally appropriate content, in the hands of any learner is just the first step to a successful learning experience. Training for the instructors is an essential component since many teachers are themselves not comfortable with the use of technology or do not know how to optimally use it in their lesson planning and lesson delivery. The children also need guidance—more intensively initially when they are still being introduced to the computer environment. The need for guidance decreases once users become more confident with e-learning tools and able to work independently on the computers.

“Using computers makes students feel safe, encouraged, motivated and they can keep going according to their level.”

“The children enjoyed exploring the computers and working on them.”

“Just learning how to work on a computer and enhancing technical skills makes them feel empowered.”



Technical support, for both software and hardware, is another important challenge, as hard usage by children and non-IT savvy teaching professionals takes a toll on computers and other devices. All of these points require resources—partnerships, expertise, funding—and resources are most often in short supply. The absence of training or support can easily render an otherwise technically sound initiative ineffective.

15) Breen, Chris. "REACT platform launched to mobilize corporate support for education in emergencies." Global Business Coalition for Education. April 19, 2018. <http://gbc-education.org/react-platform-launched-to-mobilize-corporate-support-for-education-in-emergencies/>

16) There are countless examples in which for-profit enterprises contribute their products and services for social value. In the case of Thaki's partner's alone, Cerego provided its platform to test the self-guided digital learning model; Oxford University Press provided digital content that is placed on Thaki computers targeted at English language learners; Big Bad Boo provided its multi-lingual Oznoz cartoons which are geared towards psychosocial learning; Sayegh Publishers provided e-learning Arabic books.

17) The pilot for this program was still in process at the time of this writing.

18) Lebanese Alternative Learning/Tabshoura: "Kindergarten Impact Study Report 2015/2016".

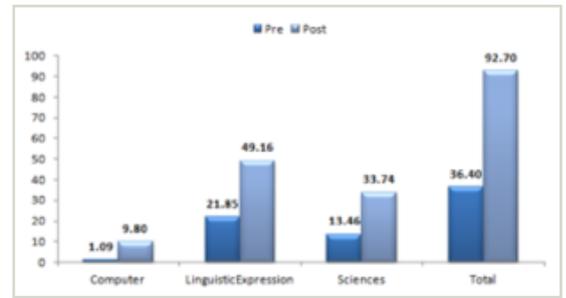
19) See UNCHR. "Figures at a glance". <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

Tackling the EdTech Challenges

Digital skills training for teachers who have never utilized digital tools in their teaching style can (arguably) be delivered most effectively through in-person facilitator led training. The teachers also need training on how to guide their students to become digitally literate. Such training, however, requires extensive resources (trained personnel, funds, logistics to get to the teachers) and these resources are in short supply.

Leveraging corporate social responsibility goodwill and innovative solutions—and from the private and non-profit sectors—can contribute greatly to the challenges noted here. For example, one partnership forged through Global Business Coalition for Education's REACT platform¹⁵ to address the teacher training challenge is between Thaki, an NGO that brings e-learning to refugee children through content-rich computers, and Cerego, a personalized learning platform¹⁶. Through Cerego's platform Thaki is creating digital, self-paced teacher training courses that will provide basic guides for navigating a computer and becoming familiar with the educational content that is loaded on the Thaki computers. The intention is to give teachers (and users) confidence in using the computers and utilizing the supplementary educational content as they find appropriate¹⁷.

On the content side, the non-profit organization Lebanese Alternative Learning (LAL) is developing Tabshoura, a self-paced learning platform of the Lebanese curriculum developing alternative educational resources through technology and creative interventions. They evaluated the impact of e-learning on early childhood education (ages from 3--5), specifically the impact of the Tabshoura Kindergarten platform on young Syrian refugees in three centers in the Bekaa¹⁸. These results compare the scores of the Pre and Post program tests for the experimental group and show a marked impact of the Tabshoura program:



The results also showed, among other things, a very positive impact on children's motivation and eagerness to learn, and a big impact on learning and increased collaboration and interaction in having two children work together on the same computer. Their findings also support the fact that increasing digital capability of teachers is essential to succeeding in implementing EdTech in classrooms and teaching practices.

Conclusion

Today there are 68.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide¹⁹. Governments have an obligation to serve the needs of their citizens and international humanitarian aid organizations exist to serve those whose needs are not otherwise being met. Both these entities put tremendous, yet strained, resources towards the education of displaced children. These efforts, however, are falling short of addressing the ever-escalating scale of educating refugee children. Other efforts and players are needed to bring lasting and sustainable solutions.

This paper has laid out the role that technology (as a tool) and non-formal schools (as enablers) can play in addressing this difficult challenge. Operators of non-formal schools must fend for themselves, often leveraging financial and other support from the private sources to conduct their business. Similarly with those running technology enterprises that emerged in response to the Syrian refugee crisis. They do not compete with public resources. Promising initiatives should be given sufficient time and resources to prove themselves. There is a need to evaluate which programs, and which elements of which programs,

are leading to measurable success and incorporate these elements, as applicable, to other programs.

Certainly not all of these efforts and innovations will succeed but they are poised to bring new ideas and paradigms that can even influence how existing establishments operate. The risks are low: These efforts are filling in gaps and picking up the education of children who will otherwise become a lost generation.