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Syrian refugees' vision for quality education in a Lebanese public school: a participatory visual research

BASMA HAJIR [a], WILLIAM W. MCINERNEY [b] AND NOMISHA KURIAN [c]

aDepartment of Education, University of Bath, Bath, UK; bCentre for Women, Peace and Security, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK; cFaculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

This study explores the quality of education delivered to Syrian students in a public school in Lebanon. Concepts of agency and empowerment are at the heart of this discussion. To address the current lack of student-centred perspectives on schooling in this context, this study supplements the Capability Approach (CA) with a social justice framework and uses visual and art-based methods to gain insights into what these young people have reason to value. It examines the value of combining theoretical insights, analytical approaches and methods that share a commitment to honouring participant agency. Analysis of input from children advocates considering the concept of 'care' as an integral dimension to social justice in the context of this study. It also suggests the need for implementing negative and positive peacebuilding strategies and contemplating the relationship between art education and school violence. We argue for a whole-child approach to refugee education, drawing connections between cognitive academic learning and affective embodied wellbeing. We conclude the study by discussing these findings and shedding light on the significance of our theoretical and methodological choices and their potential to inspire future research endeavours and explorations.

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates there are over 100 million people forcibly displaced worldwide, including more than 32 million refugees (UNHCR 2023a). 41% of all refugees are children under the age of 18 (UNHCR 2022), nearly all of whom face prolonged disruptions to their schooling (UNHCR 2019).[1] Leading scholar-practitioner groups like the Inter-agency Network for Education in

Emergencies (INEE) argue there is a need for increased access and quality of education for refugees because it provides a safe space for learning, skill development, and socialisation, reduces the risk of exploitation and forced child labour and marriage, and supports refugees' self-sufficiency and resilience (INEE 2021). Thus, refugee education can be understood as a humanitarian necessity, a human rights requirement, and a long-term human developmental investment and accelerant (Hamadeh 2019).

In response to the increasingly protracted nature of the conflicts causing forced displacement, the UNHCR's refugee education access strategy has shifted from a parallel approach (refugees attend separate temporary schools) to an inclusion model (refugees are integrated into the national education system of host countries) (Dryden-Peterson et al. 2019). In addressing quality of education, UNHCR (2019; 2022) has emphasised the importance of holistic approaches that ensure refugee students receive both academic and social emotional learning support. Yet, despite progress being made, refugees' access to quality education that is holistic and responsive to their needs remains limited and tenuous. In response, scholars (see Dryden-Peterson et al. 2019; Taylor and Sidhu 2012) and key policymakers (see UNHCR 2019) have called for more direct community engagement and localised refugee-led education policies to support the development of quality, inclusive, and sustainable refugee education. Engaging beneficiaries, particularly children and youth, in designing and implementing services during emergencies can empower them, build on local resilience, and prevent contextually inappropriate programming (Mosselson, Morshed, and Changamire 2017, 22).

Basma Hajir Basma is a Lecturer in Education at the University of Bath. She received her MPhil and PhD in Education and International Development from the University of Cambridge. Basma's research interests lie in Education and Conflict, Higher Education, Refugee Education, Education in Emergencies, and post-colonial and de-colonial theories.

William W. McInerney William is a Research Officer in the Centre for Women, Peace and Security at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He received his PhD in Education from the University of Cambridge and his master's in Conflict Resolution from the University of Bradford. William's research interests include arts-based peacebuilding, peace education, women, peace, and security (WPS), and engaging men in violence prevention.

Nomisha Kurian Nomisha is a Teaching Associate at the University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education. She received her PhD in Education from the University of Cambridge, where she also completed her MPhil and BA, specialising in education and international development. Nomisha's research interests include child and youth wellbeing, inclusive education, and ethical technology.

This study responds to the calls above by employing the Capability Approach (CA) (Sen 2005) and supplementing it with Tikly and Barrett's (2011) social justice framework with its three principles of inclusion, relevance and democracy to explore the quality of education offered to Syrian refugee students attending a public school in Lebanon. Syria has been suffering from a severe and complicated war since 2011. 6.8 million Syrians are officially registered as refugees, and about 6.9 million others, including about 2.5 million children, are internally displaced (UNHCR 2023b). Lebanon, a small, middle-income country bordered by Syria to the north and east, has a total population of about 4 million. Hosting over 1.5 million Syrian refugees, it has become the largest hosting country per capita (UNHCR 2023c). About 55% of the Syrian population in Lebanon are children aged 0–17 years (ibid.). Most school-age children rely on Lebanon's public schools, which were already weak before the current situation (Human Rights Watch 2016). Before the Syrian crisis, only 30% of Lebanese students went to public schools, with associated problems of high dropout and grade repetition (ibid). Several studies have investigated Syrian children's education in Lebanon (Buckner, Spencer, and Cha 2018; Hamadeh 2019; Parkinson 2014; Shuayb, Makkouk, and Tutunji 2014) and successfully unearthed important issues. However, hardly any research has explored what Syrian students, who are directly affected by education policies and practices, value for themselves. This study aims to bridge this gap.

At the conceptual level, we employ the CA and supplement it with Tikly and Barrett's (2011) social justice framework. In this way, while the CA allows us to illuminate what Syrian students 'have reason to value' (Sen 1992), the three main principles of inclusivity, relevance and democracy offer a foundation for understanding the extent to which the quality of Syrian students' education reflects social justice concerns in the context of this study. To effectively operationalise this conceptual synthesis, we weave these two frameworks through the research design and in the presentation and discussion of the findings.

We use a multi-method qualitative and art-based design employing photo-elicitation interviews with Syrian students. We see value in combining the capability approach with visual methods, given their mutual emphasis on voice and agency. The capability approach seeks to emphasise individuals' personal understandings of what they value. As a framework, it was deliberately kept open-ended by its pioneer (Sen 2005) to emphasise the importance of individual agency and choice in determining what is valuable in one's life. Similarly, visual methods engage in a dialogue with participants and allow them to speak out about matters they value and deem relevant. When participants create art, rather than shaping their responses around a predefined list of interview questions, they are able to express their own understandings of how they experience the world around them. As a result, visual methods can support the emancipatory orientation of the capability approach by foregrounding participant agency, helping to challenge the politics of knowledge production, and countering the devaluation of marginalised voices in research.

In summary, the overarching purpose of this study is twofold; first, to involve Syrian students in the process of delineating a set of valued capabilities. Second, to assess the relevance of identified capabilities to Tikly and Barrett's (2011) three dimensions of social justice. To satisfactorily realise this aim, we seek to answer the following research questions.

(1) What education capabilities are valued the most by Syrian students?
(2) How do these capabilities relate to the three dimensions of inclusion, relevance and democracy?
(3) What is the value of combining the capability approach with visual methods?

In what follows, we first provide more information on the Lebanese context. Next, we elaborate on the conceptual framework of this study, review our methodology and discuss the analytical framework. Finally, we share our research findings, discuss the implications and present some conclusions.

CONTEXT

This study has been conducted with Syrian students in a public school in Beirut, Lebanon. The education system in Lebanon faced deep challenges and limited resources before the Syrian crisis. The situation has become more precarious with the addition of many Syrian students. Despite this significant pressure, the government of Lebanon has publicly committed to the right to compulsory education for children under 15. In 2012-2013, it opened Lebanese public schools to Syrian children (Lebanese Centre for Human Rights 2012). Due to school-age Syrian children exceeding the capacity of Lebanese public schools, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) introduced double school shifts as a solution to enrol more students (Watkins and Zyck 2014). However, various negative impacts were reported, especially relating to the quality of education in the second shift, where instruction time is shorter (Culbertson and Constant 2015).

Distinctive about public schools in Lebanon is the high drop-out rate of Syrian students, especially 15 to 18-

year-olds (Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2018).[2] Reasons include a lack of support with language acquisition (Parkinson 2014); newly qualified teachers employed in the second shifts who lack experience in dealing with challenging classroom situations (Culbertson and Constant 2015); and wide-scale discrimination, bullying, and violence in schools (Shuayb, Makkouk, and Tutunji 2014). With regard to the latter, Shuayb, Makkouk, and Tutunji's (2014) study of 13 schools in Lebanon found that Syrian students in Lebanese public schools were 'near-certain' to experience physical and verbal abuse from teachers and peers; moreover, they faced a dilemma where reporting abuse risked further harm while silence perpetuated violence (10). Academic barriers and interpersonal discrimination can intersect in such cases. Parkinson's study found that one Syrian mother was eager for her 9-year old son to attend school but he was 'humiliated and beaten there' (1). He was struggling in Mathematics and Science subjects that he used to learn in Arabic in Syria but were now taught in English or French in Lebanon; he was unfamiliar with the latter languages and given no extra support to understand them. In turn, he was targeted by Lebanese peers for achieving lower grades. Existing literature on Syrian students in Lebanon thus shows a range of ways in which exclusion can manifest and deepen.

Research in this context also shows the ways poverty and violence disproportionately impact Syrian women and girls and mediate their access to schooling (Lorraine and Denman 2013). In particular, Syrian girls high drop out rates have been connected to fear of harassment in schools (Roupetz et al. 2020) and increased rates of child marriage practices in Lebanon (Bartels, Michael, and Bunting 2021; Mourtada, Schlecht, and DeJong 2017).

We note that tensions within schools cannot be separated from the broader social context Syrians experience in contemporary Lebanon. It has been documented how Syrians endure pervasive hostility, stigma, and violence in Lebanon, amplifying the hardships they face as refugees. The discrimination they face manifests in various forms, from limited access to employment and education to prejudice in healthcare to arbitrary detention and deportation (Gjertsson 2020; Janmyr 2016; Khalifeh et al. 2023). Some studies suggest that Syrians often bear the brunt of scapegoating for Lebanon's economic and social challenges, exacerbating tension and resentment. In addition to social exclusion, this hostile environment also frequently escalates into violence and harassment (Syam et al. 2019). The student experiences reported within this study are thus situated within a broader landscape of discrimination, stigma, and violence experienced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

In coordination with the MEHE, this study was conducted in one single school in Beirut, Lebanon. The starting point for our selection was our preference for researching a school that operates on double shifts and that includes a large number of Syrian students. The intention of our selection criterion was to exemplify a range of Syrian students' experiences, including those who attend school with Lebanese students in the morning shift and those who attend the exclusively Syrian afternoon shift.

It is important to note that the findings reported here constitute part of a larger study that also sought insights from parents and staff members on the issues identified by students. However, we have chosen to concentrate this article on students' perspectives only to allow for a more detailed exploration of their experiences and voices.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: CAPABILITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

The Capability Approach

While Amartya Sen (1980; 1987) is widely recognised as the pioneer of the CA, the approach was later developed by Nussbaum (2000). Two main concepts in the CA are 'capabilities' and 'functionings'. Capabilities are the opportunities that assist individuals in realising different 'functionings' that they have reason to value (Sen 1999; 2009). Thus, a capability is a potential functioning. The CA takes account of the external circumstances that impact people's lives, hopes, and abilities. It recognises that unequal political and social circumstances lead to unequal chances and unequal capacity to choose. For example, girls are not able to convert the resources that they receive into the same functionings as boys when they are constrained by social or cultural barriers (Otto and Ziegler 2006). 'Conversion factors' (Sen 2005) mediate between capabilities and functionings, suppressing or enabling desired change. The CA is grounded in notions of freedom – the options a person has (or does not have) when deciding the life they wish to lead.

The CA has been widely used within the field of education. It has proven to be particularly helpful in considering the different needs, interests, values and abilities of learners and the extent to which their capabilities enable them to achieve their functioning (e.g. Walker 2006). Exposing such layers of complexity renders the CA a worthy tool with a potential that extends beyond what quantitative analysis can capture (Robeyns 2005). Of note for this study, the CA does not confine itself to substantiating the agency of adults but acknowledges children's active roles in improving their lives (Saito 2003).

Having recognised the importance of agency and voices, Sen (2005) deliberately left his approach incomplete. He chose not to enlist a set of capabilities. He only alluded to the necessity of defining basic capabilities that will be useful to decide on a 'cut-off point' to assess deprivation and poverty (Sen 1987, 109).[3] Sen (2005) acknowledges the challenges and complexity of making empirical use of this approach. This has led some to critique the CA as difficult to implement in practice (Sugden 1993). In light of this, Robeyns (2006) explains the need for making decisions on whether to focus on capabilities, functioning or both and for deciding whether prioritising is necessary. Robeyns (2006) also highlights the need for a clear rationale in weighing capabilities.[4] Another larger issue is whether or not the CA can be applied independently. Some scholars call for integrating it with other approaches (Norwich 2014; Walker 2006).

In this study, we attend to the concerns raised about the CA. First, starting with the belief that students have different needs, perspectives and ideas of what to do or be, we follow Robeyns's (2005) recommendations and choose to focus on capabilities, not functionings.[5] Second, we choose to follow a 'social choice procedure' (Robeyns 2006) where participants decide on the weights of capabilities themselves. Robeyns (2006) explains how using participatory techniques and methodological tools that enable the researcher to mitigate their biases in selecting capabilities is one way of putting this procedure into practice in small-scale projects. Finally, we supplement the CA with another theoretical lens, namely Tikly and Barrett's (2011) social justice framework for understanding education quality, thus responding to calls to integrate the CA with other theoretical lenses.

TIKLY AND BARRETT'S (2011) Social Justice Framework

Tikly and Barrett's (2011) framework incorporates and extends insights from both the human capital and rights-based approaches. Indeed, Tikly and Barrett lay out their own definition of good quality education and conclude that quality education is premised on three interconnected principles of inclusion, relevance, and democracy.[6] They argue that these principles offer a basis for evaluating policies relevant to education and social justice within education systems. Table 1 elaborates on these three principles.

We find Tikly and Barrett's (2011) social justice framework useful, especially for its potential to reflect the complexity of issues around quality education. It also enables an appreciation of the importance of context and acknowledges the different forms of disadvantages faced by different learners throughout their education experiences (Tikly 2013).

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted over seven school days. Access to the research setting for more than that was not possible due to the complex nature of the context and considerations of limited allowed time. Despite this, we were able to become immersed in the life of the school and to observe the setting, take field notes, look for patterns, generate in-depth multi-layered data and collaborate with participants to interpret the findings. We employed a multi-method qualitative inquiry design with participants who used digital cameras to take photos in response to a given task. We followed that with photo-elicitation interviews.

Rationale for Visual Methods

Our rationale for visual methods is three-pronged. We consider that visual methods help to honour children's styles of communication and allow them to express their lived experiences on their own terms; destabilise power dynamics between the researcher and the researched;

TABLE 1.   Tikly and Barrett's (2011) social justice framework.

Inclusion	Relevance	Democracy
The inclusion dimension related to the distribution of resources. It recognises the different socio-cultural identities of different groups, and calls for an understanding of how past injustices might create different needs for different groups of learners. It also draws attention to the cultural dimension of schooling that involves values and norms that could prevent disadvantaged learners from converting resources into capabilities and functionings.	The relevance dimension focuses on the extent to which learning outcomes are meaningful for all learners, how much they contribute to their well-being and to a sustainable livelihood, and how consistent they are with national development priorities in a changing global context.	The democracy dimension discusses how much of a 'voice' different individuals and groups enjoy in educational debates. It aims to identify strategies for increasing that voice.

and offer a trauma-informed tool to communicate difficult life experiences, a crucial ethical consideration when working with marginalised learners.

For one, visual methods can be an ideal approach for marginalised and less-heard groups, such as children, who might find it difficult to express their ideas through verbal interaction (Reavey and Johnson 2008). Traditional research methods, such as questionnaires and interviews, tend to make implicit assumptions that all participants are willing and able to verbalise their life experiences and emotions in carefully structured, coherent linear narratives. Such assumptions favour adult styles of engagement and expression. A standard oral interview, where the researcher and the participant sit and converse for prolonged periods of time, is not necessarily experienced by children as comfortable or engaging. As a result, if their oral narratives are brief or disjointed, there is a danger of their accounts being dismissed or devalued, reinforcing the historical devaluation of children's voices in research. Visual methods thus become valuable for helping children express their life experiences more tangibly and concretely on their own terms, generating rich and vivid data. This aligns with the emphasis that the capability approach places on foregrounding marginalised communities' own understandings of what they value (Sen 2005).

Visual methods are also less obtrusive and more effective in dismantling power relations between the researcher and the participants. We draw here on the concept of reflexivity, intended to make researchers self-critical about inequalities, power imbalances and biases tucked into their methodologies. Reflexivity evolved in the 1970s in response to criticisms of colonising or exploitative anthropology that claimed to produce objective knowledge of its subjects (Pillow 2003). The interpretive turn in social science shines light on the power dynamics underlying research and portrays knowledge as socio-culturally constructed, disrupting the idea that social scientists offer a dispassionate, purely rational 'view from nowhere' with 'all of its rights and privileges' (McCarthy 1994, 15). As Lynch (2000) notes, reflexivity has consequently been seen as an emancipatory tool that can foreground forgotten voices and expose alternate ways of knowing.

Art might be a stepping stone to these alternative imaginings because children who create visual artefacts are not simply following a predetermined schedule or answering a list of predesigned questions set by another person. Rather, they are 'designers and experts' as they generate their own symbols and meanings (Roberts and Woods 2018, 639). Letting children remain 'designers and experts' in their

artwork all the way through to the data analysis stage seems important to challenge not only the power imbalance between researchers and participants, but also the broader politics of *knowledge* produced through that encounter. As Sriprakash and Mukhopadhyay (2015) argue, second-order reflexivity goes beyond individual researchers' engagement with their participants and involves interrogating how 'truths' are produced and circulated in a given field.

This second-order reflexivity seems especially relevant to research on refugee children. As communities which are often construed as objects of statistical analysis, exercising voice through visual methods might yield richer accounts of lived experience than 'terse, impersonal reports' and thereby 'trouble settled worldviews and values by posing questions about who has the power to speak' (Burge et al. 2016, 731). The crisis of representation in social science has meant questioning whether speaking about others risks 'speaking in their place' (Alcoff 1992, 5). The capability approach places value on marginalised communities' own understandings of their lived experiences. Visual expressions of participant agency might thus help complement the capability approach and challenge 'inequities of power in the production of 'knowledge' about the other' (Sriprakash and Mukhopadhyay 2015, 233).

Lastly, visual tools are helpful for engaging with children's difficult experiences sensitively. Relying solely on verbal questioning is ethically problematic, given that talking about a distressing experience can re-traumatise children (Malchiodi 2014). Hence, inviting children into open visual spaces to express and reflect on their lives at their own pace seemed potentially conducive to their sense of privacy, comfort and control. These potential benefits of art make it a well-established method for creating safe spaces for children who have undergone or witnessed traumatic experiences (Malchiodi 2014).[7]

Data Collection

24 students, 12 males and 12 females, participated in the study by taking photos and participating in subsequent photo-elicitation interviews. The students were all 11 and 12-years-old. A maximum variation sample strategy was followed to select 12 Syrian students from each shift (Maxwell 2012). With the help of the school supervisor, we ensured as mixed a group as possible. Students worked in pairs, and every pair was given a digital camera. Pairing up students followed a flexible approach where students were given a chance to work with whoever they chose.[8]

We met with each group of students three times for approximately two school periods each. In the first meeting, we introduced the study, opened a discussion, and worked to create rapport. We showed them the digital cameras and gave them time to practise using them. Students confirmed their consent to participate, and consent was also received from their parents. In the second meeting, we introduced a task that required students to respond by taking photos. Students were given a hypothetical scenario and told to imagine they had been asked to help with a new school development plan. The goal of the scenario was to improve the school so that everyone could achieve their best. Students were asked to take photos of anything at the school that they would like to highlight and include in this new development plan (See appendix 1 for more details). After explaining the scenario, we gave the students the cameras with 45 min to go around the school in pairs and take photos. In our third meeting, we provided students with printed versions of their photos. We also gave them scrapbooks, glue, scissors and coloured paper. Each pair worked together again, pasted their photos and added captions (See appendix 2 for examples). After that, each pair did a three-minute presentation where they displayed their photos to their peers and commented briefly on what had propelled them to take them. Three pairs from each shift (a total of 12 students) were then selected for photo-elicitation interviews. This was done based on pairs who stood out as motivated and keen to elaborate further on their perspectives. We were sensitive to context and to the extent to which young people were able to assert their agency.

Data Analysis

Data were systematically analysed and thematically coded using a deductive approach. This entailed exploring emergent themes and connections, and categorising valued capabilities chosen by students under the dimensions of inclusion, relevance, and democracy. Anything that belonged outside these areas was analysed separately.

The decision about whether or not to directly involve children participants in data analysis was carefully considered and ultimately led by ethical and practical considerations. The circumstances faced by the child-participants were highly precarious. Many of them were already experiencing immense challenges. Asking them to engage in data analysis would not only demand additional time, but also impose emotional and intellectual labour that could potentially exacerbate the pressures upon them. We thereby felt ethically bound to prioritise their wellbeing and protection above all else, mindful of existing critiques of participatory

methodologies that may seem empowering, yet unintentionally extract unsustainable levels of emotional and cognitive labour from an already marginalised group (Faulkner and Thompson 2023; Frazier 2020; Hayward, Simpson, and Wood 2004). Also, on a practical level, conducting data analysis directly with child-participants required time, sustained engagement and robust internet connectivity. These conditions were not achievable within the confines of the research timeline or resources, due to the context of the fieldsite, where instability and displacement were prevalent. Instead, we relied on the lead researcher's cultural expertise and familiarity as an insider Syrian researcher herself.

ETHICS

We were mindful of ethics, power dynamics, and the duty of care on our part throughout the study. We explained the purpose of the research in-depth to all involved parties. We built rapport, opened discussions and answered any kinds of questions they had about the study. We were also particularly attentive to some complexities associated with employing visual methods. For example, we talked to participating students about the importance of third-party consent when taking photos of other people. Pairs were encouraged to discuss their decisions about taking photos beforehand, so that a degree of reflexivity and ethical decision-making was introduced into their process. This consolidated pair cooperation and autonomy and decreased the possible influence of other pairs. Pseudonyms were used, and all non-essential information on and from participants was discarded to protect the children's privacy. Finally, this study has obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Committee in the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In the following, we present a tentative list of capabilities identified by students. Findings are categorised under Tikly and Barrett's (2011) three main dimensions of inclusivity, relevance and democracy, plus an additional two that we could not categorise under these headings. We begin with the two dimensions that are outside of Tikly and Barrett's original framework; values of love and care and lack of rule-keeping.

Values of Love and Care

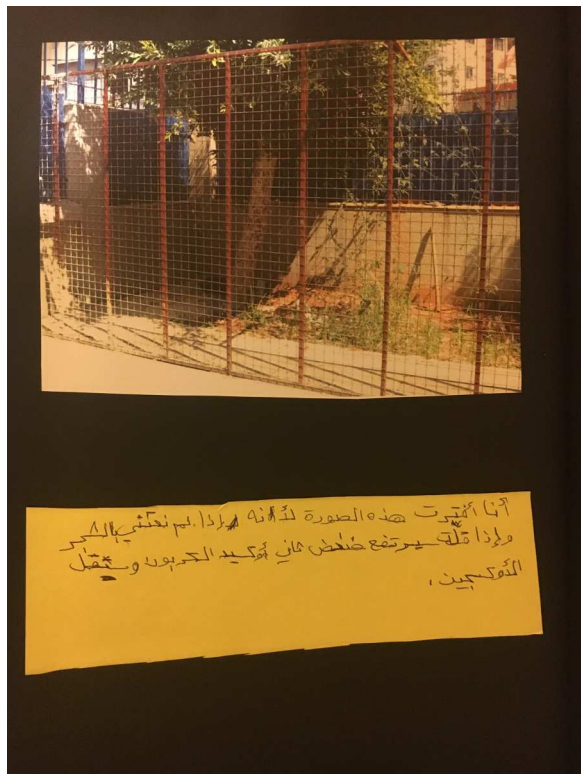A wide variety of photos taken by students were about the values of love and care. Nine of the photos taken

FIGURE 1.   Small garden in the school yard.

FIGURE 2.   Notebook.

were about how much students value the trees and plants at school. They also chose captions that demonstrate their awareness of the importance of looking after the environment.[9]

Eight photos were about how much they appreciate having a clean playground and classes when they arrive at school. 18 other photos reflected how they cherish the values of care, love and friendship. For instance, they expressed their annoyance with teachers' cars that are parked in the schoolyard, not because they are taking a space from their playing field, but mainly because they are worried they might damage the cars while playing. Figure 2 is presented by a girl who wanted to express the sentimental value of this notebook, which is a gift from her best friend. She then illustrated that such friendships are what make her experience at school amazing.[10]

Lack of Rule-Keeping

Participating students expressed their frustration with some other students' irresponsible behaviour of writing on the walls or throwing trash around the schoolyard. They blamed the school management for not setting clear rules and consequences for such violations. They also talked about how much they would appreciate a rule that required students to stand in queue when buying their snacks from the school catering shop (Figure 3).[11]
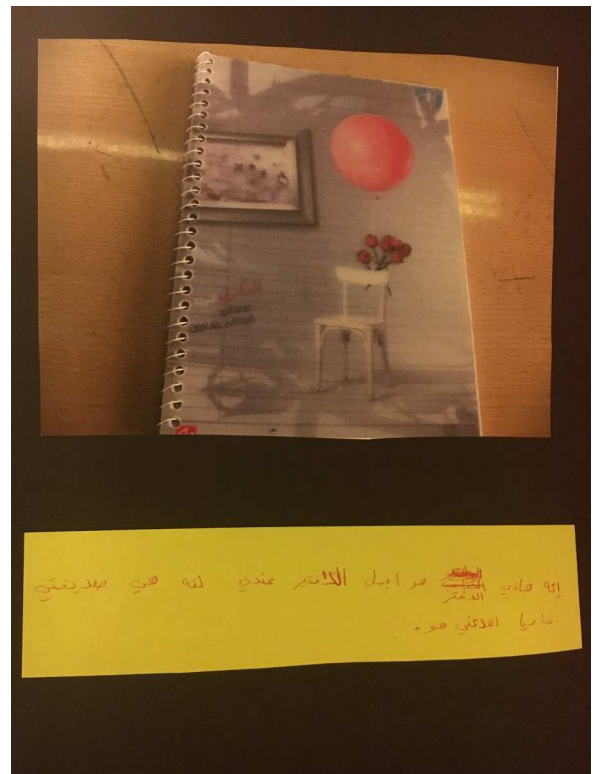
Proceeding now to the findings relevant to Tikly and Barrett's three main dimensions, the following research findings start with 'inclusivity'.
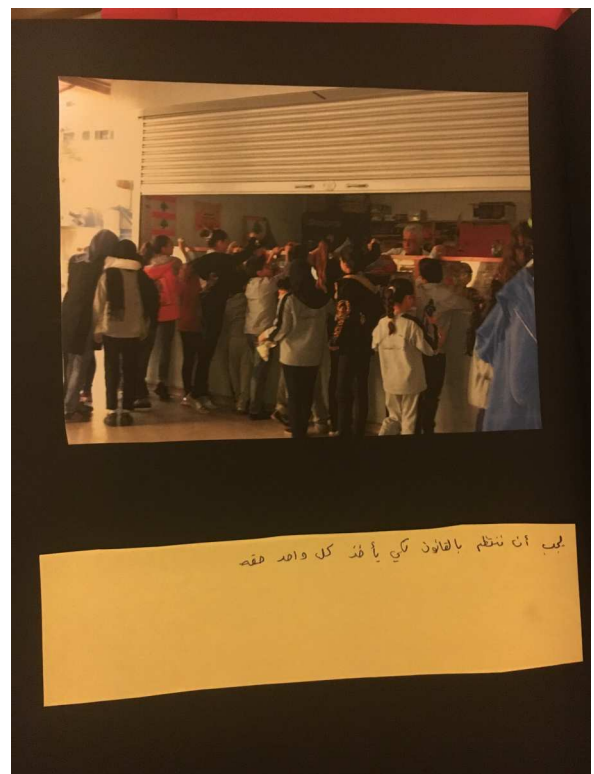

FIGURE 3.   A group of students buying from a school shop.

Inclusivity

It is important to bear in mind that the inclusivity dimension covers the impact of both the distributional and cultural aspects of schooling. One issue dominated in this dimension for the students: the effect of violence on their feelings of personal safety. The list below presents this issue, the school shift where it was identified and the relevant identified capability.

Identified issue: Violence amongst students

School shift concerned: Both shifts

Capabilities affected:

1. Opportunity for bodily safety
2. Opportunity to study in a peaceful environment

Violence

Four out of six pairs in the morning shift chose to simulate situations of violence through posing for photographs to represent an aspect of their school life. In the afternoon shift, all six pairs took photos that express this theme (See Figures 4 and 5 for examples).

The issue of violence was also substantiated by our own observations. Table 2 presents a relevant field note.
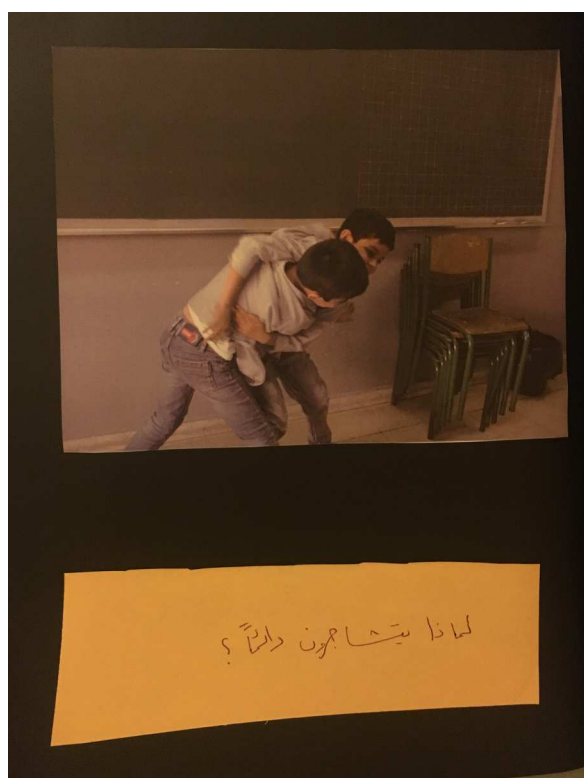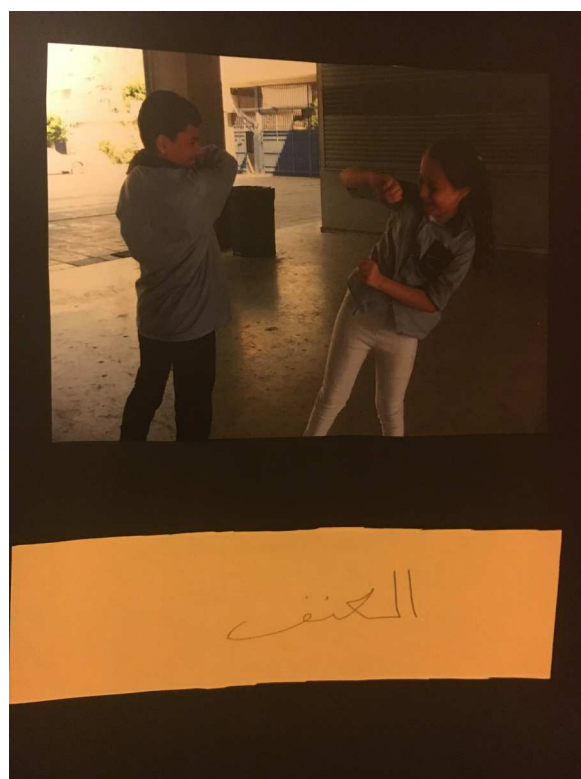

FIGURE 4.   Students fighting.

FIGURE 5.   Students fighting.

Overall, students reported a sense of frustration with a school environment that seems to be disrupted by frequently occurring fights among students. Most participating students attributed this to two main reasons. First, the lack of clear and consistent measures taken when incidents are reported. Second, peer pressure to get involved in fights and to defend friends. One of the students noted:

> **Extract 1: D** – 'When someone beats up my brother, I can't but fight back because I know teachers won't do anything.'

Another student said:

> **Extract 2: M** – 'Students are always fighting, and teachers do not do anything about it. We end up solving each other's problems. Last time, I myself kept apart two students fighting.'

Upon asking him how he did that, he continued:

> **Extract 3: M** – 'I beat up the student involved and asked him to apologise.'

Extract 3 sheds light on a critical facet to the problem. Students are not happy with the fights occurring, and they do have a willingness and intention to stop them. However, their good intentions are distorted within the borders of what seems to be an environment of normalised violence.

TABLE 2.   Field note.

Day 4, walking in the school year at 1.35 pm

Syrian students were congregating in the school yard, waiting for their school shift to start at 2pm. Suddenly, a fight erupted there. Distinctive about this fight was the large number of students involved. There was at least 20 students fighting, and there was one single teacher around who arrived in school at the time of the fight. The teacher was helpless. The fight was finally sorted when older students (8th and 9th graders) interfered and stopped it. Next day, we heard that one of the involved kids had his arm broken.

Commenting on this, a student said:

> **Extract 4: F** – 'You saw Miss what happened yesterday. Unfortunately, this is a repeated scene in our school. If older kids did not interfere and force the fight to stop, they could've killed each other.'

Student F is referring here to a group fight that happened the day before (field note – Table 2). This kid saw the researcher witnessing the fight in the school yard, so he was reminding her of it.

Another student commented on the lack of consequences to getting involved in fights saying:

> **Extract 5: E** – 'If I complain to the teachers, they do nothing. It happened to me three times. I really hope they set firm rules.'

Students were also clear about another exacerbating factor for fights at school, namely peer pressure, masculinity norms and friendship expectations. They argued:

> **Extract 6: A** – 'When our friends get involved in a fight, they embarrass us, so we have to join and defend them.'
>
> **Extract 7: D** – 'The thing I like the most about friendship in this school is that if someone beats you up, your friend has your back, and he is there to defend you.'

Like extract 3, extracts 6 and 7 demonstrate how good intentions are disrupted and how elements of friendship and violence have become intertwined in students' minds. The value of friendship is perceived through the lens of securing bodily safety and saving face. This issue is particularly resonant for young boys who seem to be influenced by masculinity norms associated with a gendered desire not to appear weak and always to be able to defend themselves and others. We now introduce some other identified issues that we categorised under the 'relevance' principle.

Relevance

Identified Issue: No sport or art classes

School shift concerned: Afternoon shift

Capabilities affected:

1. Opportunity to have leisure activities
2. Opportunities to benefit from a rounded curriculum.

Sport and Art Classes

Students from the two shifts took photos of artwork and sport-related photos. However, photo-elicitation interviews revealed that while those on the morning shift wanted to express how happy they were with these classes, students on the afternoon shift wanted to express their disappointment and frustration with the fact that they do not have these classes. Two out of six pairs in the morning shift took photos of sport studios (Figure 6 is an example)[12] and commented:
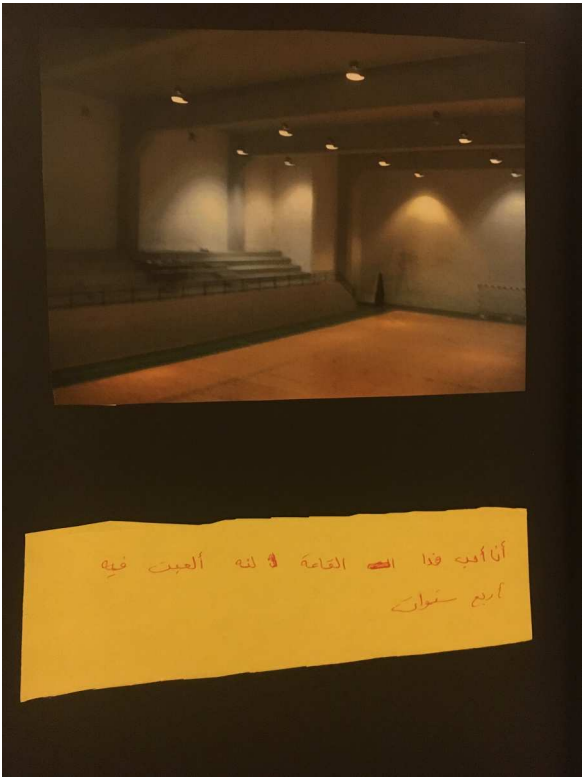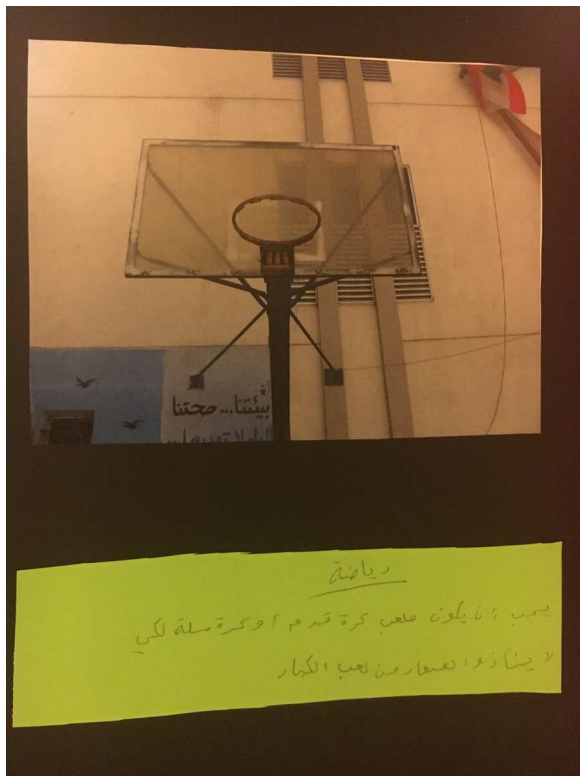

FIGURE 6.   Sports studio.

FIGURE 7.   Basketball hoop.

FIGURE 8.   Bird painting.

Extract 11: 3 – 'We have two sport classes a week and I am excited about that because I want to be a footballer in Spain when I grow up.'

Regarding art classes, two pairs out of six in the morning shift took photos of artwork around the school. Upon asking for details, one said:

Extract 15: 6 – 'We enjoy it when we have art classes as we know we might participate in exhibitions. It feels great to do that!'

A completely different sentiment was expressed in the afternoon shift. With nine photos taken about sport and art, (Examples are Figures 7–9)[13], and very different comments followed:

Extract 16: 13 – 'I wanted to express that we want to play football and basketball. I wanted to take a photo of a ball, but there is no ball, so I took a photo of the basket instead.'

Extract 17: 16 – 'We do not have football or basketball. Students play with a bottle of water instead.'

Extract 18: 20 – 'We've never played sport since we joined this school.'

On the topic of art classes, the students from the afternoon session said:

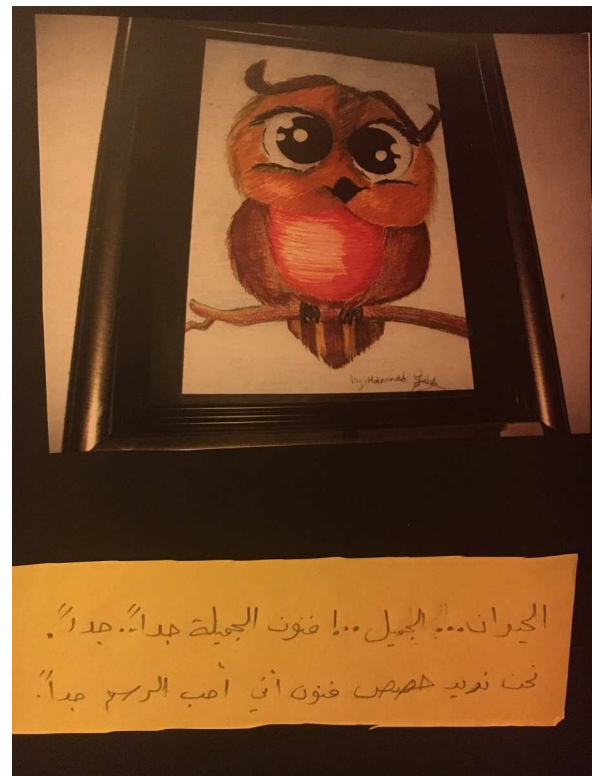Extract 21: 19 – 'I like to have art classes, and that's why I took a photo of this bird

(Figure 8).[14] I think I love drawing, and I want to be an architect, but I am worried I might never know how to draw.'
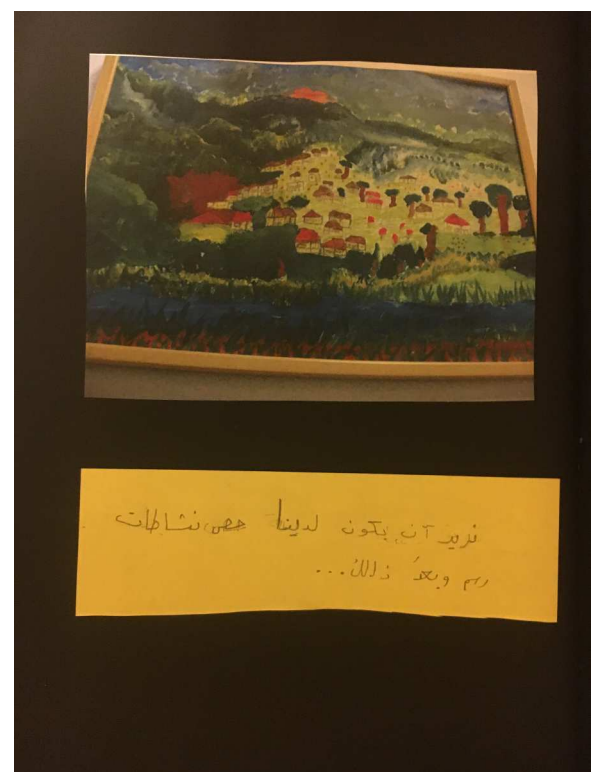

FIGURE 9.   Painting of nature scenery.

Extract 22: 17 – 'This painting is drawn by a student in the morning shift (Figure 9).[15] I took a photo of it to say that this is unfair. We should have art like them. They shouldn't be treated any differently from us.'

In summary, a main theme emerging within the dimension of 'relevance' is the absence of arts and sports activities in the afternoon shift. We heard many students reflect on this issue and found it particularly resonant as the students were using an art-based process, photo-elicitation interviews, to reflect upon their desire for more opportunities for art at school. The following section now presents findings in relation to the principle of 'democracy'.

Democracy

Identified Issue: Lack of students' voice and representation

School shift concerned: Both shifts

Capabilities affected: Opportunity to have a voice and participate

Students' Voice

While students did not take photos that represented a lack of voice in the school, they tapped into this issue when talking about related matters in our discussions. For example, one of the students expressed his dissatisfaction with the old toilets in the school, so he said:

Extract 25: 18 – 'They do not ask for our opinion. I really hope they listen to us. I very much wanted to complain about the old toilets, but nobody cares about what we want.'

When talking about the fighting issue, another student said:

Extract 26: 16 – 'We just wish they listen to us. We want better rules that help decrease fighting in our school.'

Upon seeking further clarification, students revealed that there is no students' council or students' committees. There is no official channel for their voices to be heard.

DISCUSSION

To summarise, Tikly and Barrett's (2011) framework has proved useful as an entry point to exploring students' capabilities. The following list attempts to combine capabilities directly identified and valued by Syrian

students. As can be seen in Table 3, a 'social choice procedure' (Robeyns 2006) was employed, and the number of photos taken was considered to involve students in deciding on the weights of capabilities. A large number of photos taken (44 photos) relate to the theme of 'creating a culture of care'. This area is strongly associated with the inclusivity dimension. However, it does not fit with Tikly and Barrett's original articulation, which is more associated with the distributional aspects of schooling and the socio-cultural backgrounds of students. Therefore, we chose to include it separately. Furthermore, discussing the issue of 'violence' with students shows that 'bodily safety' seems to be a focal constituent without which no further steps towards creating a 'culture of care' can be taken.

In short, we have chosen to enlist the concept of 'care,' together with its constituents and implications, as an additional dimension to Tikly and Barrett's conceptual framework. We contend that having approached this study from a social justice perspective, it is justifiable to analyse results in a way that acknowledges participants' agency and their own weighing of capabilities. The surprising number of photos taken by students about the concept of care renders it a 'cut-off point' (Sen 1987) to assess education quality in this specific context. This, combined with what the students told us about a lack of enforcement of rules and regulations and the resulting violence, is an important area for consideration. It seems to us that an inadequate and harmful version of care is emerging in this context in response to a perceived need to use violence to protect the safety and face of close friends and family. This was particularly true for some of the boys in this study whose justifications for violence were rooted in masculine norms about never wanting to appear weak (McInerney and Archer 2023; Stoudt 2006). While not the focus of this study, the example highlights the many ways violence is influenced by gender dynamics in education contexts around the world. It also draws attention to the need for nuanced examinations of

TABLE 3. Capabilities identified by students.

Care: Opportunity to enjoy a school culture of care (Both shifts)	
Values (love, friendship, care)	38
Clear school discipline	6
Relevance (Afternoon shift)	
Opportunity to have leisure activities	12
Opportunities to benefit from a rounded curriculum	
Inclusivity (Both shifts)	
Opportunity for bodily safety	10
Opportunities to study in a peaceful environment	

how men and boys experience humanitarian care, or the lack of it (Turner 2019).

Turning to the principle of 'relevance', it is clear that Syrian students in our study felt that their education in Lebanon lacks physical and art education, which they perceive as unjust. Indeed, our own observation reveals that the curriculum of these Syrian students in Lebanon focuses almost exclusively on literacy and numeracy, thus reflecting a narrow, instrumentalist view of education quality. While literacy and numeracy are clearly important capabilities, our research here, employing participatory methods through an art-based approach, provides a new angle from which to start evaluating the content of Syrian students' education.

Tikly and Barrett (2011) draw attention to the importance of making wise and effective use of scarce resources in ways that not only guarantee access to the same quality inputs but that acknowledge that learners have different educational needs due to disadvantage and injustice. Indeed, students in the morning shift and afternoon shift have been through different experiences. Years of conflict and displacement have created a context whereby many Syrian children have directly or indirectly experienced violence and trauma. The students' reflections in our interviews seem to indicate the trauma these students have experienced is not being adequately addressed in the school context. Instead, they have become further aggravated by their exposure to feelings of injustice whereby students who attend the morning shift in their same school enjoy physical and art education while they do not. This reflects research on how trauma-affected students find it even more difficult to endure the effects of trauma when their school environments remain inequitable or discriminatory (Kurian 2022) suggesting the interconnectedness between individual wellbeing and the levels of inclusion in the social context (Hajir, Clarke-Habibi, and Kurian 2022).

It is important to reflect here that both sport and art can act as protective factors for students exposed to trauma and violence. Sport enables a level of physicality and teamwork that can be healing, whilst the expressive possibility inherent in artistic endeavour has been highlighted as a way of helping students to process traumatic experiences and develop empathy for the other (Heise 2014). Such research findings support sport and art education that encourage dynamic, flexible thinking and original and adaptable choices when confronting a traumatic event. This further affirms the value of arts-based research when working with children in these contexts.

Thus, a conceptualisation of education quality for Syrian students in the context of this public school in Lebanon might acknowledge the following:

> A good quality education for these students promotes a culture of care and goes beyond a narrow focus on literacy and numeracy to involve more recreational and developmental activities.

As reported by Shuayb, Makkouk, and Tutunji (2014), the issue of violence in public schools in Lebanon existed before the Syrian crisis. Accordingly, the role of the school system and policy cannot be set aside. Regardless of this, however, the safety of students at school is a human right, and schools are required by international law to achieve this fundamental right which is laid down by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (1989). It seems clear that more effort and resources must be invested into the home, policy, and school contexts. Furthermore, building a school community that is oriented towards achieving the basic state of 'negative peace' should be prioritised. As explained by Galtung (1969), who first introduced the term, negative peace is an important first step that is reached through stopping direct violence such as physical harm. However, negative peace is followed by a second step of 'positive peace'. Reaching a state of positive peace is a more complicated process, which implies working to remove structural and cultural violence, understanding their precise causes, and promoting social justice (Hajir and Kester 2020). We find it significant that the students in our study not only seem to value a negative peace at school but that they also indicate a valuing of a broader positive peace as well.

Implications for Refugee Education

Refugee education policy has recently focused on promoting the integration of refugees in national education systems. The provision of 'quality education' has also increasingly become central to debates on education for refugees. However, this study shows that school-level experiences of Syrian children underscore that where refugees are included in national schools, they continue to feel excluded from some opportunities that might improve their psychosocial well-being. Findings also reveal that establishing a school culture of care, in addition to physically and psychologically safe environments with a clear set of shared norms and rules, is crucial in addressing students' perspectives on 'quality education'.

Due attention needs to be given to fostering a more caring and equitable school climate. Refugee students

have different educational needs due to disadvantage and injustice. From the lens of trauma-informed education, quality education cannot be delivered without an adequate understanding of how students' adverse experiences and exposure to violence have cognitive, emotional, and social effects on their learning (Kurian 2022; Kurian, Hajir, and Kester 2024), as well as the ways gendered dynamics influence students' access and perceptions of safety within school (Bartels, Michael, and Bunting 2021; Mourtada, Schlecht, and DeJong 2017; Roupetz et al. 2020). Participants in this research expressed their need for healing and skills for community building. Therefore, in the context of this study, a singular focus on refugee students' academic learning in detriment of the psychosocial is accompanied with feelings of exclusion, injustice, and a lack of safety at school. While building competencies in foundational literacy and numeracy is undoubtedly foundational to refugee students, this research enhances Taylor and Sidhu (2012) and Dryden-Peterson et al. (2019) and shows that quality education, a school culture of care, and the psychosocial well-being of students are closely interconnected. It has been argued before that attending to both academic and social-emotional needs of students is positively correlated with an improved overall school learning environment, a better classroom engagement, and a higher level of academic achievement (Côté-Lussier and Fitzpatrick 2016). More work is thus needed to address the frequently invoked dichotomy in debates on refugee education between supporting children's wellbeing and promoting their academic learning. A quality learning environment is one that assures the safety of those within it (Brooks and Hajir 2020).

Further, this study helps make clear that there is a need for more critical examinations of the ways inclusion is implemented and the actual inclusion of more refugee voices in the decision-making process itself (Brun and Shuayb 2020; Hajir, Clarke-Habibi, and Kurian 2022). Shifting power and including more refugee voices in policy planning and implementation is also essential to counter the common homogenising portrayals of refugees and refugee students (Taylor and Sidhu 2012). As Mosselson, Morshed, and Changamire (2017) note, 'They [refugees] do not share, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns us, a single story.' (17). Participatory research and policy is especially crucial in the case of refugee children, as their voices may go overlooked due to both their lessened social power as individuals navigating conflict *and* the historical devaluation of children's views. Close attention to their 'embodied everyday lives', including the concrete material-tangible struggles they face as a result of injustice, is thus crucial (Hajir 2023, 8).

Limitations

Given the small scale of this qualitative study that explored the experiences of Syrian students in one public school in Beirut, it is important to note that the findings presented here are neither generalisable nor representative of the wider public schools in Lebanon. While some of the findings highlighted here (especially the violence issue) enhance others previously reported, further inquiry is necessary to determine if Syrian children in other public schools are experiencing the same issues. There seems to be a need for a larger scale qualitative work so comparative analysis can be done to explore the trends of violence and peace in public schools in Lebanon. Further, more research is needed on specific thematic aspects of this study, such as a more detailed gender analysis that unpacks the intersection of masculine norms and peer-violence and examines girls' experiences of gender-based violence and harassment and its impact on their perceptions of safety and quality education.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study suggest that adding the dimension of 'care' to a CA understanding of social justice in education is analytically helpful when attempting to include and address students' needs and perspectives. The students in our study aspire to a school culture of care. They appreciate the values of love and care. These students value friendship and are frustrated with the frequent fights and violence among some students. In this context, there is a pressing need to collaborate with the MEHE and invest in developing and implementing peace education programmes that promote peace interactions, increase tolerance, and teach skills of dialogue and nonviolent ways to resolve tension. In addition, it is important to recognise the multidimensional nature of these reported issues. While seeking more developmental peace work through proactive peace-building might be challenging in a context fraught with direct violence, findings suggest considering the relationship between school violence and art and sports education. Again, participants in this context express their needs for 'healing', 'catharsis' and skills for 'community building'. Investigating the available options to reintroduce art and sports education could be worthwhile.

On the conceptual and methodological level, this study provides one example of how to employ Tikly and Barrett's social justice framework. While Tikly and Barrett (2011) contend that their three identified

principles of inclusivity, relevance and democracy would help to assess how much an education reflects social justice concerns, we have shown here that this benefits from a supplemented art-based method that centres the voices and experiences of students and helps identify the capabilities that they have reason to value. Moreover, our use of visual methods allowed us to elicit highly sensitive data. It is striking that four out of six pairs of student-participants in the morning shift, and all six pairs of children in the afternoon shift, chose to simulate situations of violence in their photographs. Significantly, these children took the initiative to disclose lived experiences of conflict and fear in complex visual representations with no prompting from adults. The effort they put into creating convincing poses and simulations underscores the importance of visual methods in giving children engaging and creative ways to express their experiences, especially when it comes to sensitive topics that may be difficult for them to discuss verbally.

While a small body of research has begun to combine the capability approach with creative methods (e.g. Kellock 2020), this study is, to the best of our knowledge, the first to integrate the capability approach, Tikly and Barrett's social justice framework, and visual, child-centred methods. We thus call for further research to deepen this intersection between theories and methodologies that share a commitment to honouring participant agency. In turn, we aim for this integrated approach to prioritise the voices and needs of refugee children. This research suggests that setting out with the intention to inform policy and practice, integrating Tikly and Barrett's social justice framework with the CA can yield invaluable insights related to issues of care, inclusivity, relevance and democracy.

NOTES

[1] Only 61% of refugee children attend primary school (compared to 92% global average), 23% attend secondary (compared to 84%), and only 1% later go on to attend tertiary education (compared to 27%) (UNHCR 2022). These gaps can create severe and long-lasting impediments to refugees' ability to live safe, prosperous, and fulfilling lives.

[2] Only 3% of 15 to 18-year-old Syrians are enrolled in secondary public schools. Another 3% attend Technical and Vocational Education public (TVET) schools (LCRP 2018).

[3] A basic capability that can be used as a benchmark against which the quality of education can be assessed.

[4] A variety of weighing systems can be found in the literature. For example, researchers can allocate and explicitly justify certain weights (This has been done by UNDP in the construction of the Human Development Index.). Another way is to employ statistical measures where weights are decided on according to the variance of the indicators (Some criticisms targeted the validity of the normative assumptions beyond these statistical methods.). There is the 'social choice procedure' that we opted to and explained above.

[5] In the larger study, we also sought the perspectives of parents and staff and explored 'conversion factors', i.e. the various personal, social, economic, and environmental circumstances that influence identified capabilities.

[6] 'A good quality education is education that provides all learners with the capabilities they require to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods, contribute to peaceful and democratic societies and enhance individual well-being' (Tikly and Barrett, 9). They emphasise that their definition is tentative, abstract and situated within their own understanding of education quality in Africa.

[7] A caveat: academic research cannot aim to be therapeutic, as the knowledge, expertise and aims of therapists are specialised and distinct from those of researchers. Rather, arts-based methods might simply ease participants into a greater sense of comfort.

[8] Those who did not choose a partner for themselves were paired up randomly. However, we allowed the students to switch pairs if any of them were not happy. All students indicated that they were satisfied with their pairs, so no changes were necessary.

[9] The caption reads: 'I chose this photo because if we do not look after the trees, Carbon dioxide will decrease, and we will have less Oxygen.'

[10] The caption reads: 'This is the most beautiful notebook I have. I got it as a gift from my best friend.'

[11] The caption reads: 'We should stand in queue so that everyone gets their right'.

[12] The caption reads: 'I love this studio because I have been playing in it for four years.'

[13] The caption for figure 7 reads: 'We should have a Sport class.'

[14] The caption reads 'A beautiful bird! Art is very beautiful. We want Art classes. I love to draw very much.'

[15] The caption reads 'We want Art and Drawing classes'.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Basma Hajir http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1388-3282
William W. McInerney http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9985-5030
Nomisha Kurian http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6862-0543

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APPENDIX 1: SCENARIO PRESENTED TO PARTICIPANTS TO PROMPT THEM TO TAKE PHOTOS

Your School Development Plan

Thank you all for agreeing to work with me further in this study. As mentioned before, you will help me to complete a project that will involve you taking photos. To understand your task, imagine the following scenario.

Your school leadership decided to put together a new development plan for the school. The goal of the development plan is to improve and be the best that we can be. The head teacher decided that they want to hear your own perspectives on things. We believe that your input will help us better understand the things that seem to be working well for you and the things we should aim to improve or maybe completely change to improve your learning.

- We will present your ideas to the school leadership in scrapbooks.
- Today, I need your help to finalise the first stage of the project which is taking the photos that we want to include.
- You will work in pairs and each pair will take six photos.
- Don't feel constrained. There is no right or wrong photo. Your photos could be of anything at all if you think it is worth highlighting.
- The photo you are going to take might not refer directly to what you want to talk about. You might want to introduce an abstract idea. Feel free to express yourself metaphorically.
- The cameras will have a small note with a letter. Remember the letter on your camera as you will be later given a scrapbook with the same letter to paste the photos you took in. No one outside this group will know who took what photos.
- Your opinion on the following points are of specific interest to me. Still, you are free to go off the list and highlight any other topics.

  - ❑ Anything that facilitate/obstruct receiving a good quality education (financial issues, school/ home distance, gender, classes, teachers, books, resources)
  - ❑ Anything that facilitate/ obstruct your feeling of belonging to/ being included in the school environment.
  - ❑ Curriculum and language of instruction
  - ❑ Your voice and participation in decision making

- Discuss your ideas with your partner and agree on what you want to highlight.
- Please ask if you are unsure about anything.
- You have 45 minutes to discuss and take the photos. When you are done, I will be here in the same room waiting for you to collect the cameras.
- Remember, you will have a chance to talk to your friends and me about your photos you took next time we meet.

APPENDIX 2: EXAMPLES OF SCRAPBOOKS CREATED BY STUDENTS