

Early Reading and Mathematical Skills Among Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon (ERMP)

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Research Focus of ERMP

The ERMP survey aims to collect a data set among the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon according to the parameters of the first phase of the Swiss longitudinal study conducted in 1995 in various cantons in Switzerland, called 'Frühlesen und- Frührechnen als Soziale Tatsachen?' ('Early Reading and Mathematical Skills as social reality?') by Prof. M. Stamm, University of Fribourg, Switzerland. Given the scope of the ERMP survey, first elementary pupils in the UNRWA schools¹ in Lebanon shall be comprehensively tested with regard to their specific knowledge in reading and mathematics four weeks after school entry (first elementary class, six years of age). Respective instruments for testing reading and mathematics will be adapted from the Swiss study. From this survey, those children who complete entirely and without mistakes either the test for reading ('Early Readers'; ER) or mathematics ('Early Mathematics'; EM) or both of the tests ('Early Readers and Mathematics'; ERM) shall be filtered. Teachers of UNRWA schools and the pupils' parents shall be involved in the study in order to assess the pupils' social background and school environment with respective questionnaires (to be adapted from the Swiss study). The cooperation with UNRWA in this setting is crucial, as the UN organization is the main service provider in the educational domain for Palestinian refugees in the Middle East and thus in Lebanon. This survey is to be considered the first step in a longitudinal study that shall portray the personal development and schooling careers of successful and/or gifted Palestinian pupils in Lebanon from first elementary class over several years (future phases to be specified upon agreement).

Thus, this data collection in Lebanon shall enable the comparison of the two data sets (Lebanon and Switzerland) with a view to its cultural specific environment. Additional surveys in various geographical regions and cultural settings around the world could follow within a long-term perspective.

¹ UNRWA stands for United Nations Relief and Works Agency in the Near East. UNRWA is responsible for the Palestinian Refugees compulsory education in Lebanon. See background paper for further information.

Justification and Importance of Study

This study is important from various perspectives:

- *From the Perspective of International Educational Science Research:* In industrial countries, the focus on giftedness has emerged as field of educational science research over the past ten years only. Previously, little attention was given to especially talented children, their needs and their personal development respectively. While it was tacitly assumed that pupils of over-average giftedness would not be in need of any particular attention or support, today the understanding prevails that gifted children deserve the same level of individual fostering as average and under-average gifted children. Along with the newly acquired knowledge, a myriad of government initiatives to support gifted children have been created in western countries. Yet unfortunately, giftedness has also become a matter of to social class and status. Most of the participants in talent schools and particular giftedness programs in industrial countries are situated in the middle or upper class of society. Rarely, immigrants' children or children from lower class families with poor financial conditions are found among those to be supported and fostered. Thus, the relationship between social status and giftedness remains very much an open question. It is, for example, unclear how children from underprivileged societies develop given their particular talent. It could be assumed that gifted children of underprivileged social status, who develop successfully in terms of schooling and professional career, show a remarkable capacity of resilience. The question therefore to be asked is whether gifted children in underprivileged societies do predominantly rely on specific protection mechanisms that allow their outstanding performance. It is thus imperative to amplify upon above-mentioned issues by conducting surveys in various cultural and geographical settings and in societies of various stages of development.
- *From the Perspective of Educational Institutions for Palestinians in Lebanon:* So far, educational issues are rarely studied in the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon. In particular, no focus has been given to especially gifted children and their schooling careers. This survey will allow a comprehensive overview of the Palestinian refugee children's knowledge upon school entry. It will provide guidance for the improvement of the educational situation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and serve as an incentive to teachers to more actively support their students' schooling careers (i.e. especially gifted students could be supported in specific ways). This study shall provide teachers and parents with information on the children's performance in school and thus point out their specific potentials to be developed. Furthermore, the study will give an overview of the status quo of skills among first class students for headmasters and teachers who participate in this survey. It is therefore important to emphasize that this study has a strong focus on the field and aims to incorporate all partners (teachers, headmasters, parents, UNRWA) in this study for future collaboration.
- *From the Perspective of the Palestinian People:* The Palestinian people are predominantly perceived in a context of disrupted emplacement, political conflict, emotional despair and poverty. This study shall establish a different focus and instead portray the Palestinian people's potential to develop skills profitable to their country and people encouraged by the power of knowledge and education. Thus, the general concerns in the Palestinian diaspora concerning education will be addressed.

Research Focus and Question

The undertakings of the research pointed out earlier in this paper try to answer the overall question whether or not school success can be predicted. This approach is relevant for the survey at hand. In general, experts agree that there is a multitude of factors determining school success. The model below depicts 4 independent variables (*predictors*), 3 interfering variables (*moderators*) and one dependent variable (*criteria of excellence/school success*). The model is a basic structure that presents the background along which this study shall be conducted. The assumption is that the manifestation of excellence follows the individual performance conditions of pupils of cognitive predictors (to the left in the model: intellectual skills, pre-school knowledge, socio-economic background variables, family expectations) and non-cognitive personal characteristics (moderators).

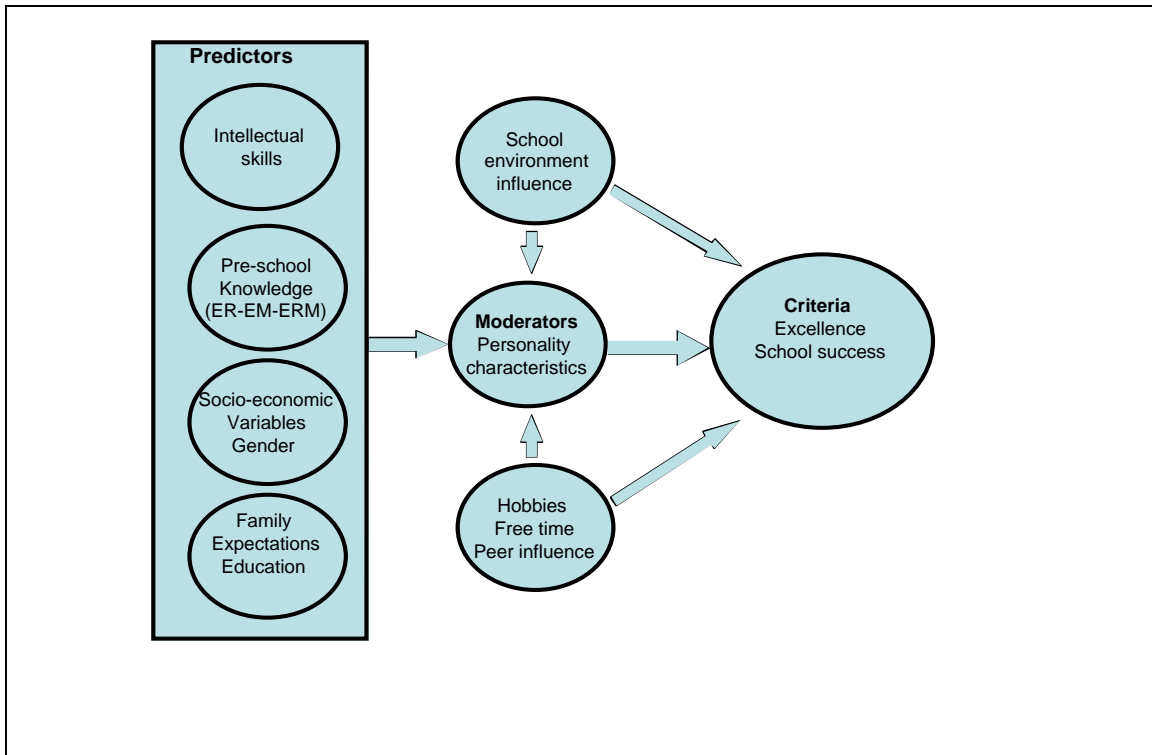


Table 1: Analysis of Giftedness-Performance-Relationship of ER and EM

The survey to be conducted in Lebanon among the Palestinian refugees is the first step to assess the status quo of skills among first elementary class students (Lernstandserhebung). The general question along which this survey shall be conducted reads as follows:

What is the overall status quo of Palestinian refugee pupils’ knowledge upon school entry (first elementary class) in Lebanon with regards to reading and mathematical skills?

Given the data set collected in Lebanon, a comparative analysis of the Swiss and Palestinian data set shall be conducted along the following question:

How does the pupils’ knowledge in reading and mathematics differ in their culture specific setting?

In addition, the following questions shall be answered regarding the survey in Lebanon:

1. What is the quota of ER/EM and ERM children? ('Alleskönner')
2. How do these competences relate to gender and social/family background?
3. How do these competences depend on the pupils' extra-curricular activities?
4. What is the extent of supporting teaching facilities that students receive prior to school entry?

Methods

Variables

The variables shown in the previous model shall be measured as follows:

- *Intellectual skills* are measured by CFT tests (intelligence tests). Intelligence tests used in the Arab world must be found and assessed. Intelligence tests shall follow as a second step, and be conducted only with the especially gifted pupils filtered.
- *Pre-school knowledge* is measured by testing pupils in reading and mathematics upon school entry in first elementary classes in UNRWA schools (survey to be conducted in October 2006, tests to be adapted).
- *Socio-Economic Variables* as well as family expectations are collected through questionnaires given to parents and teachers (survey to be conducted in October 2006, questionnaires to be adapted). Furthermore, sampling methods shall allow the filtration of specific factors (camp population vs. gatherings, rural vs. urban areas etc.).
- *School environments* as well as *hobbies* are measured through the teacher's and parents' questionnaires (survey to be conducted in October 2006, questionnaires to be adapted).

Instruments

The instruments to be used for the data collection in Lebanon are the same instruments that were applied during the data collection of the Swiss study 'Frühlesen und Frührechnen als soziale Tatsachen?' by Prof. M. Stamm in 1995 (Lernstandserhebung). The instruments will be adapted to the cultural context with specific explanation as to what has been changed, how and why. In essence however, the instruments do not differ significantly from the base instruments as will be shown in due course.

Statistical Data on Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon

Please refer to document 'Information on the Palestinian Refugee Population in Lebanon' drafted by DROPS in February 2006.

Sample

The representative sample shall be composed according to the parameters of the overall population of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. For this, several factors need to be taken into consideration with regard to geographical and social economic determinants. Statistical data on these variables are available at the time as specified in the background paper. Further data must be collected. In particular, access to UNRWA statistics may facilitate this mission.

Sampling Details

The sample target is 2700 pupils in equivalence to the Swiss study. The average of the students in UNRWA schools is 40 per class, thus the study will cover an estimation of 67 classes. As the majority of the Palestinian pupils are enrolled in the UNRWA

schools, the research will exclusively focus on UNRWA schools throughout the country. It is impossible to identify Palestinian pupils who do not follow UNRWA schools as specified further down under point 3.

Sampling considerations are specified as follows with regard to five parameters:

1. *Gender (male/female percentage)*: Representative gender distribution will be automatically achieved in the sample, as the UNRWA schools have an average 50/50% attendance of boys and girls in first elementary class and the gender distribution in the overall population of under six years old Palestinians is almost equal (see background paper).
2. *Mixed classes/gender separation classes*: In general, UNRWA classes are gender separated. Some mixed classes however exist where the overall number of first year pupils does not allow the formation of two separate classes. A few mixed classes shall thus be included in the sample.
3. *Living area (camp/gathering/cities population; rural/urban population)*: According to UNRWA statistics, approximately 50% of all Palestinian refugees in Lebanon live inside the 12 officially registered refugee camps. The rest of the Palestinian population lives outside the official camp borders, in so called ‘gatherings’ and in the Lebanese cities (i.e. Beirut, Tripoly, Saida, Tyre). There are no statistics or reliable estimates to identify the number of Palestinians according to their distribution in specific gatherings and even less in the cities, as they live scattered throughout the country. The term ‘gathering’ was created by UNRWA and refers to a situation where a high density of Palestinian population is found living outside the camp borders anywhere throughout Lebanon among the Lebanese population. Furthermore, in many cases, Palestinians who can afford move to an area just a few meters outside the official camp borders and are thus technically registered as living outside the camp. However, their children equally follow UNRWA schools inside the camp or on the camp borders of their former habitual camp residence. In other cases, Palestinians live outside the camp borders and their children do not follow UNRWA schools at all but instead government or private schools. It will therefore be impossible to select a sample that is equally composed of Palestinian pupils originating from inside versus outside camp borders. Palestinian children who do not follow UNRWA schools will therefore drop out of our sample entirely as they are impossible to locate. Nevertheless, there are a few UNRWA schools far from official camps that are followed by Palestinian pupils living outside camps. Thus, it shall be tried to include as many such schools as possible in the sampling, while the rest (and highest number) of the schools in the sample will be located inside camps or on camp borders. In the parent’s questionnaire however shall be included a question asking the parent of the pupil to specify their living area.
 - As for schools that are built in areas far from the camps, the study will cover
 - one school in Beirut (for Dbayeh camp) is considered geographically separated from the other Palestinian gatherings.
 - one school in Nahmeh gathering, outside Beirut city towards the south
 - another school in the mountains of Lebanon close to Saida city in the south
 - three schools in the north in Tripoly city.

- This list is not exhaustive and shall be complemented when further data on UNRWA schools is available.
- The research will include all areas in Lebanon as follows:
 - The *South of Lebanon* contains the biggest quantity of Palestinian refugees, and in the percentage balance it represents almost 50% of all camps refugees. Thus, the south will cover 40 to 50% of the total sample for gatherings and camps, i.e. around 1200 students around the cities Saida and Tyre.
 - The *North of Lebanon* is the second largest area inhabited by the Palestinians and will cover 20 to 30% of the research sample, i.e. around 300 to 400 pupils. 50% will be collected from Nahr Elbared refugee camp (i.e. 150 to 200 pupils) as this camp is the biggest in number according to the overall population in the north. The other 50% will be distributed as 35% in Baddawi refugee camp (i.e. 100 to 140 pupils) and 15% for the gathering in Tripoly city.
 - The *Bekaa area* is the only rural area in Lebanon and will be covered with almost all the pupils of the first class, i.e. 150 children
 - The rest will cover *Beirut area* and its gatherings, i.e. around 800 to 900 pupils.
- 4. *Employment of parents* (UNRWA jobs, stable jobs, unstable work, unemployment): Background information on this subject is given in the background paper attached. However, specific sampling can only be applied following the data collection (parent's questionnaire).
- 5. *Religion (Christians/Muslims)*: The religion segregation of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is difficult to estimate. While sampling, it can merely be assured that the main Christian camp of Dbayeh will be included.

The questionnaire for teachers will cover 70 teachers, taking into consideration that a few classes are supervised by two teachers. As for the parents' questionnaire, the parents of all pupils participating in the study will be asked to fill a questionnaire, thus the number of parents' questionnaires expected amounts to 2700.

Organisation of Data Collection

School days in the Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon are Monday to Thursday and Saturday. Friday is a holiday, as is Sunday. The collection of the data shall thus be organized as follows:

- *Reading and Mathematics Tests of Pupils*: the pupils will be tested four weeks after school entry during a period of four weeks. School starts September 18th 2006, thus the data collection will start on October 16th 2006 and will last until 18th November 2006. It is noteworthy that the holy month of Ramadan shall start around September 20th 2006. However, school runs normally and no specific problems are to be expected because of this.
- *Questionnaires Parents*: within the camps, the plan is to collect the data from the parents' questionnaires in May/June 2006, as the majority of kindergarten children will be following the same schools at 1st elementary level. Thus, it can be expected that the pupils from the kindergarten can be easily identified in first class.

- *Questionnaire Teachers*: The data from the teachers' questionnaires will be collected during the data collection period between 16th October and 18th November 2006.
- *Pictures*: a picture of each pupil will be taken during data collection in October 2006. (Digital) cameras for the project collaborators need to be organized.

The study area will be organized as follows:

- *North of Lebanon*: Beddawi Camp and Nahr el Bared camp in the far north as well as gatherings in Tripoli city
- *Beirut Area*: Sabra camp, Shatila camp, Bourj el Barajneh camp, Mar Elias camp, Dbbayeh camp and Beirut gatherings/Area of Nameh gatherings south of Beirut
- *South of Lebanon*: including Tyre and Saida, Iklim elKharoub (north of Saida)
- *Beqaa*: Wavel camp

Several project collaborators will be trained in several training sessions in April 2006 and will then be responsible for the data collection in their designated areas. Project leader Ayman Abdul Hafiz will officially introduce them as collaborators to the headmasters of the schools as well as camp officials. He will be in regular contact with all collaborators and supervise the data collection.