



PhD Final Report Form

- Name: Sandra El Gemayel
- Institution: UCL, Institute of Education
- Project title: Childhood and play 'in-between': Young Iraqi and Syrian child refugees' play in Lebanon
- Project start date: January 2016
- Project end date: December 2019
- Name of supervisor: Prof. Rosie Flewitt (1st) Prof. Phil Jones(2nd)
- Grant reference number:

- 1) **Summary of research.** Provide a summary outlining what you have achieved during your award and assessing the progress of your research in comparison to your original proposal, detailing any changes in objectives, procedures or locations (500 words maximum).

I had originally planned to submit my thesis within three years of the PhD start date (January 2016). However due to the extended period of fieldwork in Lebanon, the study period exceeded three years. I submitted my thesis to UCL on December 9, 2019, and successfully passed my viva with minor corrections on February 6, 2020. I have been granted 3 months to complete all corrections.

Outline of submitted thesis

Chapter 1: Literature Review

The thesis opens with a concise Introduction to the context of the research, followed by Chapter 1, the literature review. In this chapter, concepts and theories including Froebelian Principles, the new sociology of childhood, children's rights, Vygotskian sociocultural theory and Turner's theory of liminality are brought together to form a conceptual framework, providing a lens through which to study the three major interlinked themes of 'Childhood', 'Play' and 'Conflict and Displacement'. A critical overview of the literature addresses some key elements related to discourses around childhood in a Middle Eastern context and among refugee populations, the situation of children's rights in Lebanon, and the importance of play in times of adversity and liminality. Chapter 1 ends with a model of the study's theoretical framework. The model illustrates how the study, which looks through a Foucauldian critical lens, situates Froebelian Principles at its core, forming a weaving thread that binds together Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, children's rights, the new sociology of childhood, Vygotskian sociocultural theory and the theory of liminality.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Chapter 2 details the study's methodological framework, including the study's research design, data collection methods, and its approach to data analysis. Case studies were conducted with two Syrian and two Iraqi young child refugees and their families living in the Northern suburbs of Beirut/Mount Lebanon, supplemented by observations in a school for Iraqi children, interviews with three professionals who work with refugees in Lebanon and 100 questionnaires from Iraqi, Syrian and Lebanese respondents. Ethical issues are discussed in detail, including issues of gaining consent,

working with vulnerable participants and young children, and maintaining anonymity and confidentiality.

Chapter 3: War and displacement: From pre-liminal to liminal

In the first findings chapter, I present profiles of the four case study children and their families to portray their life experiences before, during and after the armed conflict that had led to their displacement. Following the case study profiles, demographic data of the questionnaire respondents is presented, followed by in-depth scrutiny of the reasons given by the questionnaire respondents about why they had left their home countries, supplemented with corroborating or divergent data from the case studies and interviews with professionals.

Chapter 4: Child refugees' lives in Lebanon: Continuing children's rights infringements

The second findings chapter picks up on issues raised in Chapter 3 and reports on the continuing violations of children's rights after seeking refuge in Lebanon. These include living in poverty, family separation, early marriage, child labour, lack of high quality education, and little or no access to essential healthcare.

Chapter 5: Play 'in-between' and the great escape

This chapter unpicks multiple aspects of the case study child refugees' play, including the resources available to them for play, the role of fear and surveillance in limiting their play opportunities, and gendered trends and expectations in their play. The chapter presents analysis of the children's play in physically confined and more open spaces, and illustrates how the children negotiated and manipulated play spaces, sometimes breaking boundaries imposed by their parents or by physical limitations. This leads into discussion of how play, both solitary and joint play with others, enabled the children to figuratively break free of the boundaries that constrained their lives, to escape (albeit temporarily) from their liminal state by imagining and transforming their lives through art, block play, imaginative play and digital media, and to connect with their heritage cultures through music, dance, rhymes and hand games.

Chapter 6: Lifelines

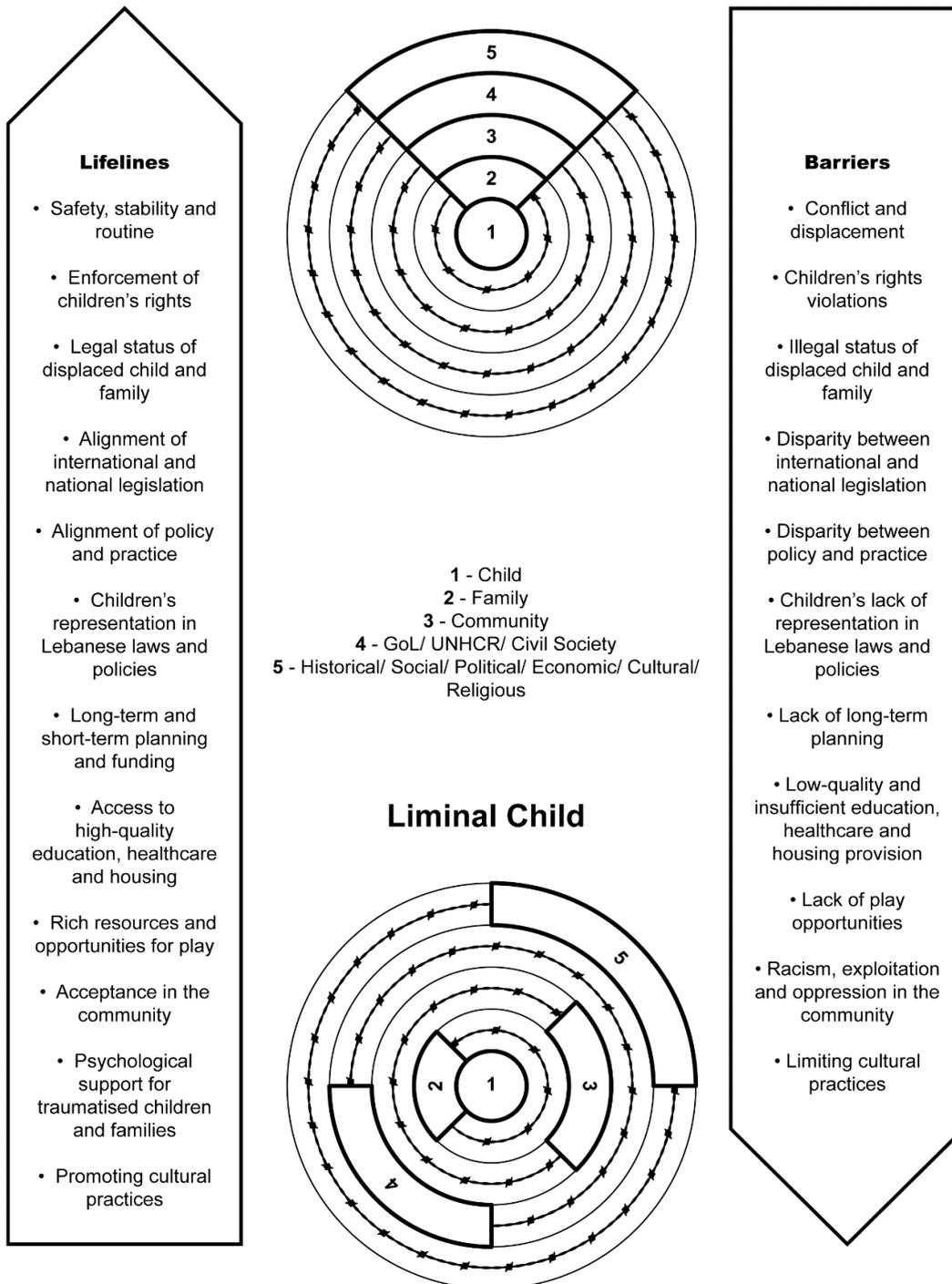
This chapter, acknowledging and building on the many violations of refugee children's rights in Lebanon, discusses formal and informal lifelines that have been set up for Iraqi and Syrian refugees as identified during the period of data collection in my study. These include lifelines provided by the UN, the church, other charitable organisations and NGOs, and the Lebanese Government. In this chapter, analysis is focussed on identifying how these lifelines provide or fall short of providing children with their basic human rights including their rights to education and play, and how young refugee families cope when lifelines fall short.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

This final chapter draws the main findings together and discusses them in light of the study's research design and conceptual framework. The chapter directly addresses the study's three research questions. It first discusses how barriers, such as armed conflict, Government of Lebanon policies, altered family structures, gender expectations, and lack of respect towards children's rights were found to reinforce refugee children's liminality and shape their childhood experiences. It then discusses how children's experiences of conflict and displacement combined with government policies, their illegal status, poverty, fear, and high levels of surveillance in Lebanon have led to severe limitations on Iraqi and Syrian refugee children's play opportunities and have reshaped how

children's play is constructed in Lebanon. Ways of improving children's play opportunities in Lebanon are proposed, and a conceptual model is presented that brings together all aspects of this study's key findings (see model below). The thesis concludes by considering the study's limitations, implications, recommendations and by offering some final comments.

Happy, Healthy, Playful Child with Rights



2) **Key findings.** Please provide a list of up to five of the most important research conclusions you have reached during this work.

- **Children and families' status as 'temporarily displaced persons'** The overarching parameter affecting children's experiences of childhood and consequently their play was their own and their families' status as 'temporarily displaced persons' rather than as refugees. This status is enforced by Lebanese Government policies. It constrains families' and children's rights and entraps them in a liminal state.
- **Infringement of human rights** Iraqi and Syrian children experienced continuing infringements of their rights even after seeking refuge in Lebanon. Children's 'liminal legality' stripped them of their rights to a happy and carefree childhood, high quality education, play, and protection from harm and abuse. As temporarily displaced persons, children's parents did not have the legal right to work, so the children were growing up in poverty, often in unsanitary living conditions. Poverty led to many additional rights infringements including inability to access open spaces or essential healthcare. Fearful of widespread animosity towards 'displaced' populations amongst local inhabitants, parents closely surveilled their children, and spent a high proportion of time indoors, which limited children's play spaces, resources and opportunities. Other rights infringements included illegal child labour, early marriage, and family separation. Key barriers that led to children's rights infringements and reinforced their liminal, 'in-between', state were: children's lack of representation in Lebanese laws and policies, poor enforcement of the UNCRC, contradiction between policy and practice, ignoring the inter-relationality of rights both within and between conventions, inefficacy of international aid in the face of such a large scale crisis, refugees' 'liminal legality', and increased surveillance by local authorities who set curfews and raided refugees' houses at night, neighbours who wanted refugee children to remain hidden and did not want to see or hear them, and parents whose fears and ideas about gender led to increased surveillance. Due to lack of legal status, parents feared arrest and imprisonment. This led to increasing levels of exploitation in the workplace, poverty, child labour, and child marriage.
- **Separation from extended family and poverty** Families transformed from being stable entities, as they had been in their home countries, to volatile, trapped and in a state of flux. This profound change in family life and status negatively affected children's experiences of childhood and play. Separation from their extended families caused children great pain and sadness and led to changes in ECEC provision, as children's extended family members had previously played an important role in children's care, upbringing, and access to formal and informal education. As a result of displacement, children were separated from key adult figures in their lives, such as their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins etc, at a time when they arguably needed them most. Familiar social and cultural communities were also dismantled, bringing culturally imbued community practices to a halt. Children and parents were no longer able to rely on family support when lifelines were failing them, leading to increased stress among children and parents. Poverty also led many families to cohabit, leading to overcrowding in small unsanitary and sometimes dangerous apartments, bringing forth a new wave of problems. Living in confined space with extended family shifted power dynamics and put children in dangerous situations that affected their mental and physical health, and limited their access to space for play. This led to behavioural changes in children like aggression, fear and developmental problems such as enuresis. Forced displacement and lack of legal status led to a change in power balance among families. As displaced parents could not work legally, and risked arrest should they be found to be working, some

children became the breadwinners of the family and worked illegally to help support their families, such as selling flowers to passing cars at busy road intersections. This placed children's lives and wellbeing at risk for the betterment of the family unit. Very young children were sometimes seen as powerful tools for parents to get access to more lifelines such as help in cash and in kind from UNHCR.

- **Constraints on children's play** Although all the case study children had time to play, lack of other resources (space, materials, play partners) limited their play opportunities. All case study children mentioned feeling bored at home, leading to feelings of anger, frustration, and resentment. Children's play was also limited by parents' and children's fears, and by state, neighbour and parental surveillance. Gender was also used as a justification to limiting freedom of movement, expression, and play. While girls of all ages experienced restrictions to freedom of expression (expressing opinions and making noise) and movement, young boys experienced restriction to freedom of movement and making noise, whereas older boys were granted much more freedom to leave the house and express themselves. Case study children spent most of their day at home and had limited access to outdoor space. Children continued to play indoors, and, although they had limited access to space, restricting their physical movements, and toys, they were highly imaginative, transforming objects and spaces in their play. Children also exhibited high levels of enjoyment, imagination, and cooperation when playing with peers.
- **Limited or no access to high quality education** School helped children overcome fear when their teachers were qualified and when they made friends. However, low-quality schools, where bullying, racism and corporal punishment were common, increased children's fears and led to additional traumatising of children. This led many children to drop out of school and to miss out on the positive aspects of school that might have helped them recover from their traumatic and extremely difficult experiences. Moreover, while high-quality schools helped children overcome some fears, this was not enough for all children who remained fearful and had a need to stay in control, suggesting that some children require specialised help so they may feel safe again.

3) **Obstacles.** If you have encountered any obstacles, intellectual or practical, how serious were these and how did you overcome them? (500 words maximum)

During the period of data collection, many challenges were encountered with regard to accessing hard-to-reach Iraqi and Syrian refugee populations, and gaining consent for the study to take place. This resulted in an extended period to secure the consent of four families to be included in the vitally important case study aspect of the study. Case studies were begun with more families, but in each of these cases, the researcher had to withdraw gently from the site, either due to turbulence in the family, or due to risks to the researcher's personal safety.

Conducting research in the homes of the traumatised families was emotionally challenging, and the researcher was grateful for supportive and regular counselling, which was generously funded by the Froebel Trust.

Developing a suitable and robust theoretical framework for this study was an intellectual challenge, as the data – and the many facets of the children's and families' lives – are so complex. However, meeting with my supervisors to discuss and develop the study's framework, in addition to regularly referring back to the literature and attending seminars and training sessions offered across faculties at UCL, proved helpful and fruitful.

4) **Outputs.** List any publications which have already appeared, been accepted for publication or are to be submitted for publication and give details of any other sort of dissemination of the results of the research, which has taken place or is planned (i.e. lectures, seminars, conferences, exhibitions). Copies of publications should include acknowledgement of FT support and should be as attachments with the report.

Presentations & Dissemination

Oral Presentations: Conferences and Workshops

- A 'Day in the Life' of four young child refugees in Lebanon: Ethical and practical challenges. Presented at the UCL Centre for Global Youth's 'researching with/ for/ about youth and young people' workshop (London, UK – January 15, 2019).
- Play between armed conflict and displacement: The cases of Ahmed and Maria. Presented at the 8th International Froebel Conference 'Education for peace: Froebelian contributions at global and local level' (Hiroshima, Japan – September 6-8, 2018)
- The impact of armed conflict and displacement on the play of young Iraqi and Syrian child refugees in Lebanon. Presented at the APAD Conference- International Conference on Migrations, Development and Citizenship (Roskilde, Denmark - May 23-25, 2018), at the 7th Ethnography and Qualitative Research Conference (Bergamo, Italy - June 6-9, 2018), and at the IOE Summer Conference (London, UK - June 21, 2018)

Oral Presentations: Lecture

- Ethical issues: Researching the play of young child refugees in Lebanon. Presented on the Education, Ethics and Imagination MA Module at UCL, IOE (London, UK - June 14, 2018)

Poster Presentations

- The impact of armed conflict and displacement on the play of young Iraqi and Syrian child refugees in Lebanon. Presented at the UCL, IOE Doctoral Poster Conference 2017 and at the UCL 2017 Doctoral School Research Poster Competition; awarded Runner-Up Prize. Poster can be viewed on the UCL website: <https://www.grad.ucl.ac.uk/comp/2016-2017/poster/slash-ru18.html>

Publications

Book Chapters

- Jones, P., El Gemayel, S.M., Salema, Y., and Flewitt. R. (2020) [forthcoming]. Play and childhoods: How are the relationships between researching play and children changing? In S. Jennings & C. Holmwood (Eds.), International Handbook of Play, Therapeutic Play and Play therapy. London, UK: Routledge.

Blog Posts

- El Gemayel, S. M. (2019, March 12). The colouring book information sheet: Involving young children in the research process through informed assent [Blog Post]. Retrieved from <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/global-youth/2019/03/12/the-colouring-book-information-sheet-involving-young-children-in-the-research-process-through-informed-assent/>

I plan to publish two journal articles arising from this project by the end of the year. I also plan to apply for the ESRC Postdoctoral Research Fellowship in December 2020 with the hopes of starting the Fellowship in September 2021 to produce additional publications and advance my academic career.

5) Activities. Please provide details of any activities such as field trips, conferences, etc which you have undertaken during this grant period.

I conducted voluntary fieldwork with Refugee Rights Europe from February 14-18, 2019, distributing questionnaires to refugees and asylum seekers in Madrid.

In January 2020, I attended a two-day 'Women in Research' workshop designed to support leadership development and career planning of female researchers.

I started attending Spanish courses at UCL and have completed two semesters to date.

6) Ethical issues. Did you encounter any ethical issues over the past year, and if so, what action was taken?

Numerous ethical issues were encountered throughout data collection, but these were resolved with support from my supervisors, and from the UCL IOE Ethics Committee. As this past year has been principally focussed on data analysis and write-up, no further ethical issues have arisen.

7) Future plans. Please provide any details of your future plans. Do you have a job arranged?

I passed my viva with minor corrections on February 6, 2020 and have three months to complete the corrections.

I am currently working as a Research Consultant with CatalyticAction and UCL on the 'Codesigning social infrastructures with children affected by displacement' project. I am also applying for other research jobs both within and outside academia.

I plan to publish two journal articles arising from this project by the end of the year. I also plan to apply for the ESRC Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at the end of the year with the hopes of starting the Fellowship in September 2021 to produce additional publications and advance my academic career.

8) Other matters. Are there any other matters which you would like to draw to the attention to the Froebel Trust, whether positive or negative?

I am truly grateful for all the help and support offered to me by The Froebel Trust over the last four years. The generous bursary for university fees and maintenance stipends, grants for conference attendance and grants to cover fieldwork costs and counselling fees provided me with the opportunity of a lifetime to complete a study that is highly important and relevant, and very close to my heart. Through the conferences and seminars organised by the Trust, I have learned a lot, met wonderful people, and have made memories that will last a lifetime.

9) Other funding. Have any other funding bodies supported your PhD study? If yes, please provide details.

I was in receipt of the Froebel Trust Bursary which covered part of my university fees (4,052GBP per year over three years) and maintenance costs. As I was required to pay international fees at UCL, I applied for and was awarded the UCL Overseas Research Scholarship (ORS), which covered the remainder of my university fees (approx. 10,000 GBP per year over three years).

10) Endorsement. Your report must be endorsed by an appropriate academic (i.e. your supervisor). The endorser should read the report and add a short paragraph on what has been achieved and sign and date the report.

Sandra's doctoral dissertation investigates the play of young refugee children in Lebanon whose families have been displaced by armed conflict in their home countries. An overarching qualitative framework was adopted to investigate this topic. Given the uncertain circumstances and transitory nature of the refugee families' lives, an ethnographic Day in the Life method was used and adapted to suit the context of this study. This involved Sandra getting to know each family over a relatively brief period of time until the family seemed comfortable with her presence in their homes, then conducting a full day of video recorded observations of one day in each child's life, followed up by an extended visit to share extracts of the video and discuss their significance with the family members, including children. This data was supported by parental interviews, field notes, a reflective diary and documentary evidence, as well as interviews with NGO workers and teachers in the local area, and a questionnaire conducted with 100 Iraqi and Syrian refugees and local Lebanese who all attended a local, free medical dispensary run by nuns.

Sandra's fieldwork focused on detailed case studies of 2 Iraqi and 2 Syrian children aged between 4-8 years living in a Christian area of Northern Beirut/Mount Lebanon. The findings trace different aspects of their childhood as displaced children growing up in this host area, focussing on how they and their families conceptualised childhood and play, and how the children played. These case studies are situated within the broader findings from questionnaire respondents and interviews with NGOs and teachers. Sandra built a robust conceptual framework for the study, which informs a set of recommendations on how refugee children's lives could be improved in Lebanon.

The examiners described the thesis as 'interesting and important', and recognised this is an under-researched areas in refugee studies. They also commended the 'very interesting' debate constructed in the thesis, and referred to the findings as 'highly relevant to contemporary debates in this field'. The examiners applauded the ways in Sandra deployed interview quotes, extracts from field notes, reflections from observations and filming, drawings and photographs to build her argument and address the core research question underpinning the project, and commented: 'The student should be commended for the clear writing style used throughout the thesis: it is written well as a whole, with only a very small number of typos' (only 2 small typos in approx. 100,000 words!).

Overall, completing this project has been a labour of commitment to child rights. Sandra is now in an excellent position to take forward this extremely important work as she builds an academic career in a field that is of global importance. Sandra, myself and my co-supervisor Prof Phil Jones are very grateful to the Froebel Trust for supplying the generous doctoral study funds that made the study possible.

Supervisor signature: Prof. Rosie Flewitt

Date: February 28, 2020