

# The Webdah School

A Model School Program and Family Center  
for Iraqi Refugees in Jordan



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### **Introduction**

There may be as many as one million Iraqis living in Jordan. They are refugees who have fled the violence in Iraq. According to UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates, we can assume that more than half of this population are children. The care and protection of refugee children is a recognized priority for many international aide organizations, particularly for UNHCR. Their policy statements, such as the one below, from Refugee Children: Guidelines on Protection and Care, published in (1994) are clear and compelling. We share their assessment of why children's welfare should be of great concern.

Children are *vulnerable*. They are susceptible to disease, malnutrition and physical injury.

Children are *dependent*. They need the support of adults, not only for physical survival, particularly in their early years, but also for their psychological and social well-being.

Children are *developing*. They grow in developmental sequences, like a tower of bricks, each layer depending on the one below it. Serious delays interrupting these sequences can severely disrupt development.

The government of Jordan (GOJ) faces an enormous challenge: how to meet the needs of Iraqi refugee children while continuing to fulfill its obligations to Jordanian children and to other refugee communities in Jordan. We understand that possible solutions are complicated by the instability of the international situation.

We know children cannot wait for stability. Their developmental needs demand our attention in good times and bad. They cannot be put on hold indefinitely without dire consequences. Parents, teachers and other caring adults respond to the child's growth and development with a critical eye, measuring the positive along with the negative. When there are gaps, when basic needs for safety, food, health care or education are not being met, we become concerned and ask: What we can do?

**The Webdah School** is a response to that question. Fr. Nabil Haddad a Melkite priest and Executive Director of The Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center in Jabal Webdah, Claudia Lefko a US-based educator and Director of the Iraqi Children's Art Exchange based in Northampton, Massachusetts and the refugee families living in the Webdah neighborhood of Amman saw a pressing need. Without waiting for certainty or stability, working together, they devised a plan to meet that need-- creating a school for the children in their community.

**The Webdah School** is an informal, art-based education program in the Webdah

neighborhood of Amman. The school is open to all children ages four through fourteen, from 10:00 a.m. until 12 noon, five mornings and from 2:00-4:00 p.m. one afternoon each week. There are three permanent staff people in addition to parents and other volunteers.

What follows is an appeal for increasing the capacity and sustainability of this fledgling program and a proposal to use it as a model, creating other community-based schools to serve refugee children, youth and families in Amman.

The educational system in Jordan is facing a crisis. Its capacity cannot expand rapidly enough to meet the needs of the surging population of refugee children. Informal school programs that take advantage of under-utilized resources, that emerge from and actively involve the refugee community as partners with other agencies, are a good investment of financial, human and educational resources. Projects such as ours are a first step toward stabilizing education for all children in Jordan.

## **The Child's Right to Education**

*"School is one of the best ways to give children the structure and predictability they need. ...attending school provides continuity for children, and thereby, contributes enormously to their well-being." (1994 UNHCR Guidelines on Protection and Care)*

The importance of education is universally accepted. Every child's right to education is guaranteed under The Convention on the Rights of the Child, (Article 28). Refugee children are guaranteed the "same treatment" as nationals in primary education and "...treatment at least as favorable as that given to non-refugee aliens..." in secondary education (Article 22).

Educators recognize that school is not the only place where children learn. The home, family, nature and the built environment, the culture, resources and opportunities in the wider community are integral parts of every child's education. Organized school programs are important; at the most basic level they structure education, guaranteeing a designated time and place for learning under the supervision of a trained teacher.

The Iraqi refugee children in Jordan have, in the broadest sense, lost their access to education. Their formal schooling has been interrupted and nearly every aspect of their former lives has been left behind. Important people, perhaps even parents and family members, places and things that contributed to their education and overall well-being are no longer available. They are extremely vulnerable and in need of care and protection. Establishing a safe, dependable and predictable school program, overseen by a well-trained staff is seen as the best, and most effective way to begin to address the needs of refugee children and their families.

**About the Project: The Webdah School**, a model school program and family center for Iraqi refugees in Jordan incorporates established theory and practice in the fields of child development, education and humanitarian assistance for refugees.

### Parental Involvement:

Parental participation is seen as a vital component of quality education. Establishing a strong home/school connection is especially important in working with a refugee population.

- \*It ensures a measure of cultural continuity.
- \*It helps reduce both the parent and child's fears and anxieties about separation and safety.
- \*It creates something familiar in an unfamiliar place.
- \*Children are reassured to see parents assuming their expected roles as advocates, providers and transmitters of culture and values.
- \*It supports refugee parents in their traditional role as primary providers for their children's needs.

### Integrating across age groups

The benefits of age-integrated programs are well documented in educational literature. For a refugee population, one program, in one location, serving all the children in one family is a good first step.

- \*One school enrolling entire families of children can anchor and sustain community.
- \*Children find security with siblings and other refugee children to whom they may already be connected.
- \*One program designed to meet the specific needs of refugee children and their parents creates an opportunity for the entire family to make a solid and meaningful connection to school, teachers and other supportive adults and services.
- \* Children and youth can serve as tutors. This kind of mentoring reinforces academic skills for the tutor and often makes learning more accessible for the child or youth who is being tutored.

\*Multi-age grouping reduces age and grade-level expectations for cognitive achievement and social/emotional development. Children can “locate” themselves along a broad spectrum without feeling inadequate or embarrassed and can progress at their own rate.

\*Transportation is simplified.

### Curriculum flexibility within a clearly structured school program

Children need structure in any school situation. The combination of a safe physical space, consistent adults, rules and predictable routines enables them to engage in the educational tasks at hand. The goal of the informal school is to help children and youth ground themselves socially, emotionally and intellectually as they re-enter a structured school program. Standard academic subjects can be introduced over time and when appropriate.

The Webdah project is in its infancy, providing children and families with important basics: social contact, in a safe space, with a structured program. The art-based curriculum is very basic at this point and the staff untrained. There is a need for creative educators and trained professionals to guide the project into the next phase. The staff’s mission will be to help children establish themselves in this new environment, using art in whatever way works for the individual child. As time goes on and children become more secure and uninhibited, art can serve as a bridge to other areas of learning such as literacy, math, and science.

We will continue to provide support for the dedicated staff that has been at the school since September. In addition, we are aware that there are untapped resources in the refugee community--people who are well-trained professionals, eager to establish themselves in meaningful work. We are seeking both financial and human resources to move the Webdah project beyond its beginning phase.

## **The Role of Parents**

*“Refugee participation--or permitting refugees to take back control of their own lives--is fundamental to developing, or rebuilding, a healthy community. Through participation, refugees can regain influence and control over their lives, which in turn, will have a positive impact on the raising of self-esteem.” (1994 UNHCR Guidelines on Protection and Care)*

Like their children, Iraqi parents have left everything behind. They are refugees, struggling to find a meaningful role for themselves in a new reality. Parents depend on stable, predictable and organized programs for their children. They know that school helps organize the routines of the entire family. When presented with a concrete opportunity to create a school program that would stabilize this aspect of their lives, parents responded.

Parents were actively involved in the project from the very beginning. They helped with outreach, programmatic decisions, cleaning the space and setting up the rooms. They donated money for supplies and were there to celebrate the opening day. Other people from the neighborhood were there as well smiling and shaking hands as they inspected the space.

The success of this effort buoys the resilience of individual Iraqi refugees and of the community. It rekindles a sense of possibility that one success can lead to another. Despite the enormous uncertainty of their lives, Iraqi refugees can point to this school project as one reason for hope and some measure of optimism. This contributes in very significant ways to the psycho-social health and overall well being of their children.

### **Informal schools meet a specific need for refugee children and families**

*“Informal education has huge potential as a vehicle for protection and operational efficiencies for children and communities... This requires that education be more consistently considered in its broadest sense rather than traditional primary schooling.” Meeting the Rights and Protection of needs of refugee children, An Independent evaluation of the impact of UNHCR’s activities, 2002*

The notion of an “informal school” is associated with Maria Montessori, the educator whose observation and research led her to wonder why certain children were not learning in standard, formal school situations. Suspecting that the problem was with the educational system and the school rather than the child, Montessori set out to develop a more “informal” almost homelike, child centered environment with a different kind of curriculum.

We believe informal schools are a pragmatic and creative solution to the situation facing children, parents, humanitarian workers and policy makers in Jordan. By definition they encourage us to think outside the box, to discover people, materials and space that can be mobilized in times of crisis. **The Webdah School** is a good example. For a very small investment and with the help, consent and generosity of Fr. Nabil Haddad, we transformed formerly unoccupied and under utilized space in his church in the Webdah neighborhood into a safe, physical environment for children. We have continued to improve the classrooms, buying new desks and chairs, hooking up heat and electricity, repairing windows and painting walls.

The informal school speaks directly to an educational mandate and need for humanitarian protection and services for refugee children and youth in Jordan. Iraqis are fleeing to Jordan to escape the horrendous violence of the war and occupation in their homeland. Many children have been traumatized. Some children have been out of school for months, even years and most are coping with a host of displacement issues. They have special needs. If we are to accommodate them successfully in Jordan, even temporarily,

we must take their specific needs into consideration. Not bound by government standards, formal curriculum and tests, the educational program in an informal school setting can be flexible and focused on the unique needs of the refugee child.

Informal school projects provide us with an opportunity to meet our obligations to refugee children in both the letter and spirit of law embodied in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They help ease the educational crisis for all the children in Jordan, and have the potential to provide meaningful work and a meaningful role for adult refugees in their new community.

### **The Case for an Art Based School Program**

*“The child has a hundred languages... a hundred thoughts, a hundred ways of thinking, of playing, of speaking. ..A hundred worlds to discover; a hundred worlds to invent; a hundred worlds to dream.*

*The child has a hundred languages but they steal ninety-nine.*

*The school and the culture separate the head from the body. They tell the child to think without hands, to do without head, to listen and not to speak. To understand without joy.*

*They tell the child to discover the world already there, and of the hundred they steal ninety-nine.*

*They tell the child that work and play, reality and fantasy, science and imagination, sky and earth, reason and dream are things that do not belong together.*

*And, thus they tell the child that the hundred is not there. The child says “No way. The hundred is there.” Loris Malaguzzi, Founder of the Municipal Preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy (translated by Lella Gandini)*

The way in which the informal school program emerged in Webdah is very similar to the beginnings of the world-famous schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Named as one of the “...best ten school systems in the world...” by *Time* magazine, the program was built, like the one in Jordan, by parents eager to take back control of their lives and their communities after a devastating war. Out of the rubble of WWII, it is said, a school was built in just five days. These municipal schools serve preschool and kindergarten children, but inspire education throughout the grades and educators throughout the world. Two defining aspects remain constant: the art-based curriculum and strong parental and community involvement.

**The Webdah School** is a Reggio- inspired program whose goal is to meet the educational needs of the whole refugee child. We recognize that refugee children and youth need all of the hundred languages at their disposal if they are to make a positive, even temporary, transition into their new life in Jordan. An art -based curriculum, in a rich school environment is one way to explore, discover and learn about the new world they find

themselves in, and about their place in it. Art is an important educational tool. It encourages and supports certain important habits of mind that contribute to successful learning and educational outcomes: observation, reflection, expression, openness, creativity and critical thinking. The rich environment creates important opportunities for the refugee children and youth, and for the teachers as well.

Communication between parents and teachers and children and youth is critical throughout their development. Children and youth often find it difficult to talk with adults, but they use “a hundred languages.” to show us what they mean. Observing as they interact with other children and adults, with the environment and the materials, watching them draw, build with blocks, play with a friend or tutor another child, gives us information that helps us understand the child. It provides us with an important opportunity to hear what the child is saying and to respond.

Art is one way to give children and youth a voice. The literature on children in disaster situations stresses the need for their active involvement and participation in every step of the recovery process: planning, developing strategies and implementing solutions. Art is a vehicle for making this happen. It enables young people to transcend barriers of language and culture and find their voice.

### **The Webdah School: A cross-cultural partnership for children**

*“Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed” UNESCO Constitution*

Feeling the urgency of the situation created by the ongoing war and occupation in Iraq, **The Webdah School** acts on behalf of children on both sides of the conflict, those in the Middle East and in the United States. Children “...do as we do” more than they do as we say, so it follows that the best lessons are given by example. The great strength of this project is its ability to present children and youth with an alternative view: one of international cooperation, understanding and goodwill between people and institutions in the United States, Iraq and Jordan. And, most importantly, it involves them directly in this cross-cultural connection.

The governments of Iraq and the United States have been at odds since Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 leading to the first Gulf War. The years of debilitating sanctions that followed, and the current war and occupation have had serious negative consequences for children in Iraq. According to UNICEF, the overall well-being of children in Iraq, based on the Under 5 Mortality Rate--the most important indicator of the overall health and well-being of the children in a country-- declined 160% in the decade 1990-2000. While the crisis was somewhat stabilized by the Oil-for-Food Program, the overall status of children continued to



deteriorate. A December 2004 *USA Today* article quotes a Norwegian institute study showing the percentage of Iraqi children ages 6 months to 5 years suffering from malnutrition had nearly doubled between March 2003 and March 2004. In 2006, NGOs warned that infant mortality was on the rise in Basra as a result of water-borne diseases and a lack of medical supplies. (IRIN, April 11, 2006) The same article cited a survey conducted by London-based Mercer Human Resource Consulting ranking Baghdad as the worst city in the world in terms of the quality of living.

This ongoing crisis for children, which many in the Middle East attribute to US and US supported policies, is one factor that helps set the stage for a future of anger, mistrust, retaliation and conflict.

Throughout this period, the government of the United States and the mainstream media have portrayed Iraq and Iraqis as a dangerous and threatening enemy. This message, perhaps barely audible in the background of a child's life, nonetheless makes its way into the minds and hearts of children in the United States. Children born during the first Gulf War are now seventeen; they've come of age thinking of Iraq and Iraqis as enemies.

Children and youth on both sides have absorbed the messages of the conflict. We see it in their drawings and hear it in their speech. We watch it emerge in their play which is extremely worrisome: children's play is practice for their future role as adults. We see them preparing for a future that replicates the current reality of hatred, violence and war. In the ever-present childhood games of good vs. evil, the "bad guys" are identified by name: they are Iraqis, they are Arabs and they are Americans. Seeing this, **The Webdah School** took action, creating a small school program in Amman and connecting it to an existing program in the United States, creating a connection between children in the U.S. and Iraqi children.

This connection fosters mutual understanding, breaks down barriers and challenges stereotypes. We will nurture and support the very best instincts of children to love others, and to treat them as they would like to be treated. In the school program, and through the art exchange, we present a way to build understanding and new strategies for problem solving. Our goal is to prepare children for a better future, one of peaceful coexistence.

"Establishing lasting peace is the work of education; all politics can do is keep us out of war". Maria Montessori (1870-1952)

## **Future Plans: The Webdah School: April 2007 through June 2008**

Moving the project from start-up to a quality program for refugee children and their families will take work on a number of fronts. We have two goals for the coming year: staff and curriculum development and establishing an on-site family center.

We will hire two experienced teachers to work in collaboration with the three staff people who are currently at the school. In addition, we will hire an administrator/educational director for the program. Bringing professional educators and administrators into the project will enable us to develop a more comprehensive curriculum; the school will continue using art as a bridge to other subjects such as literacy, math and science.

We will hire one social worker whose area of expertise is children and youth. As they settle into the program, young people will begin to face the troubling past and uncertain present situation in which they find themselves. A trained and experienced staff working within the art-based school program will provide critical social/emotional support and guidance for the refugee students.

We are planning for enrollment to increase between April 2007 and June 2008, from thirty to fifty students. This will require hiring a third teacher. The hours of the school will be expanded gradually as training and acquisition of supplies and materials allows. Our plan is to be open year-round, on a standard school day schedule by the end of June 2008.

The project will develop a formal program for refugee families. A meeting room, where parents and adult family members can gather will be set up in the school. The social worker serving children and youth will work with this family project as well, developing the adult program from the expressed needs of the refugee community. We will create a regular schedule of hours, and staff the family program with people from the refugee community and the broader community of helping agencies in Amman who can provide guidance and services on a range of issues, from health and medical care to translation, housing, work and visas, domestic violence and job training.

**The Webdah School** will be transformed from a fledgling project to a professionally staffed school and family center in the Webdah neighborhood of Amman by the end of June 2008. With our program on solid ground, we will make ourselves and our staff available as a resource to other groups seeking to set up informal school programs.

**The Webdah School** is an international collaboration. Claudia Lefko, Director of the US -based Iraqi Children's Art Exchange will continue as a key partner, helping coordinate and develop educational and economic resources to support the project.

**About Father Nabil Haddad** The Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center, Amman Jordan [www.coexistencejordan.org](http://www.coexistencejordan.org)

Fr. Nabil Haddad is a Melkite Catholic priest who is a member of the Jordanian Royal Commission for Human Rights. He is the executive director of the Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center (JICRC) in Amman, Jordan. The JICRC is a non-governmental organization that promotes coexistence on national and international levels through the establishment of intercultural understanding between communities, groups, and individuals. Its work is based on the common values inherent in the Abrahamic faiths of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. JICRC has three educational programs: Imams for Coexistence, Women for Coexistence, and Youth for Coexistence.

**About Claudia Lefko**, The Iraqi Children's Art Exchange, Northampton Massachusetts. [www.iraqichildrensart.org](http://www.iraqichildrensart.org)

Claudia Lefko, M.Ed. is a long time educator and advocate for children and families. She founded (1980) and was the first director of the Hampshire College Children's Center, in Amherst Massachusetts, and has been involved in the successful start up and implementation of a number of day care, primary school and social service based programs for children and youth. For many years she facilitated an arts-based play therapy group for children of teenage mothers.

Ms. Lefko is involved in local, national and international efforts that seek to put the well-being of children and their education at the top of the public agenda. She served three terms as an At-Large member of the School Committee in Northampton Massachusetts where she lives.

She is the founder and director of the Iraqi Children's Art Exchange which began in 2001.

The Webdah School is a project of:

The Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center, Amman Jordan  
and The Iraqi Children's Art Exchange, Northampton Massachusetts, USA



For more information:

In the USA: [www.iraqichildrensart.org](http://www.iraqichildrensart.org)

In Jordan: [www.coexistencejordan.org](http://www.coexistencejordan.org)