

# Early Childhood Education in Lebanon Research Project Report on the Experiences of Syrian and Lebanese Parents

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## 1. Project Aims

Syrian Refugee and Lebanese Parents were interviewed for The Early Childhood education in Lebanon project (2019-2022), which is funded as part of the [British Academy Early Childhood Education Programme](#). This report summarises the team's emerging findings from the parent interview data.

The Lebanese Government's Ministry of Education and Higher Education's [RACE II](#) strategy (2016) set out to ensure that quality public sector education is available for all children and youth aged 3 to 18 including both Lebanese and non-Lebanese children. This includes access to early childhood education.

The objectives of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Lebanon project included:

1. To assess how far the current early childhood education (ECE) system in Lebanon offers quality, accessible and affordable provision for Lebanese and refugee children in three regions: Beqaa; Akkar and Tripoli in the north of Lebanon and Saida and Tyre in the South.
2. To examine extent to which ECE provision in these regions offers equal learning opportunities to Lebanese and refugee children of different ages, genders, and

abilities. The team's focus was on Kindergarten classes KG 1,2 and 3, which prepare children for compulsory schooling and in principle cater for children aged 3 to 5.

The broader aim of this project was to make suggestions to support Lebanon in reaching the UN target that by 2030, all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education - [Target 4.2](#) of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

## 2. The Parents

The team interviewed 29 Syrian parents and 9 Lebanese parents between July 2020 and August 2021. All parents had at least one child who was attending or had recently attended Kindergarten. Twenty-six of the Syrian parents were mothers and three were fathers. Of the Lebanese parents six were mothers and three were fathers. Seventeen of the Syrian children attended public schools. The remaining twelve attended Kindergarten in schools run by NGOs that offer Non-Formal Education (NFE). Of the nine Lebanese families three had children attending private school Kindergarten.

## 3. Emerging Findings

### ***Early Years Education Access***

Lebanese parents were broadly familiar with school systems and able to make informed choices about schooling. By contrast, Syrian parents (some of whom had only recently arrived in Lebanon or those who had moved frequently within the country) often lacked access to information on how children in Lebanon start Kindergarten, part of school, aged three. Similarly, undocumented Syrian migrants struggled to provide birth certificates and proof of address required to register their children in public school but were allowed to attend NFE. This meant that Syrian children were often out of school requiring outreach from NGO providers, from schools as well as wider support from extended family or the wider community.

### ***Syrian refugee aspirations for their children***

Parents highlighted the importance of play and socialization in Kindergarten education noting behavioral improvements and enhanced self-esteem leading to greater ability to focus and more knowledge of hygiene practices. Syrian refugees who were mothers had often exited school prematurely due to early marriage. They prioritized literacy and basic academic skills acquisition for their own children to interrupt the intergenerational transfer of poverty and inequality.

However, they were also acutely aware of their children's status as second-class citizens in Lebanon revealing how, in the context of widening poverty private schools were becoming unaffordable for many Lebanese children who were increasingly entering the public system. (In two cases this had led to Syrian refugee children once settled in Kindergarten being forced to leave to make way for Lebanese populations). Some parents also lamented that whilst Lebanese children in public schools are eligible for three years of Kindergarten

education Syrian refugee children are only entitled to a single (albeit intensive) year to prepare them for elementary school.

### ***Online Learning***

A major challenge for children in public schools was that the language of instruction was either English or French for both their child at Kindergarten as well as for other children in their family. Further, in the context of the Covid19 global health pandemic in cases where online education was offered teachers were unavailable to provide face to face language support. When Kindergarten was closed due to the Covid19 global pandemic and due to extended teacher's strikes, Syrian refugee children became reliant on older siblings, neighbours, or the wider community to support them with language acquisition. Where this was not possible in two cases parents suggested that their children who had been previously attended Kindergarten had dropped out of online education due to not understanding the language of instruction.

Even for children who could understand the language, lack of Wi-Fi and power cuts undermined their ability to engage meaningfully in online education. Though all the children in the families interviewed used mobile phones for online learning, (except one who used a tablet), phones were often outdated and dysfunctional. Similarly, where there was only one mobile phone per household, families had to juggle online education for their Kindergarten and other children whilst managing other priorities including parental employment. In this context families were forced to prioritise their older children's' homework over the needs of their younger children.

Parents explained that very young children found it particularly hard to participate in online classes that were seldom interactive requiring children to focus for long periods. Some Kindergarten children were particularly ill prepared for online learning having only recently started face to face schooling. Parents reported that online education was stressful for children in Kindergarten as well as labour intensive for parents as it required parents to sit with their children and support them to complete tasks.

Syrian refugee parents often lacked formal education themselves or did not speak the language of instruction and were unfamiliar with the technology required to access materials or upload tasks. Similarly, parents lacked the financial resources to repair phones when they broke or to upgrade phones where needed, leading to their child at Kindergarten missing lessons or, in one case, losing all contact with school.

### ***Key Barriers to Accessing Kindergarten***

- 1. Lack of access to education for children with special education needs and/or disabilities (SEND).** Of the six parents who had children with SEND only two were able to access Kindergarten education as parents assumed their children could not benefit due to their SEND status or would lack access to specialist support. In two households their SEND children had left Kindergarten due to being bullied and stigmatized.
- 2. Gendered Educational Impacts and Safety Issues Accessing School:** Though girls and boys attended public schools and schools run by NGOs offering NFE, older boys'

education was often prioritized over girls', particularly among poorer families. A lack of safe and affordable transport to school was a major barrier to accessing Kindergarten. Syrian refugee children were more likely to have to travel long distances to access schools that accepted them, and transport costs could be prohibitive, leading some families to be forced to choose which of their children to send to school. One mother delayed sending her child to Kindergarten until she was six due to her having to travel unaccompanied. Even short journeys could be treacherous for young children with one father expressing concerns about his children returning on uneven terrain after dark and through deserted streets. (More broadly, parents suggested that boys were also often forced to exit school to engage in paid employment and that girls were also vulnerable to this as parents felt more generally that there was little future for their children even having attended school).

### **3. Financial crisis and Rising poverty**

Economic deterioration in Lebanon according to the World Bank's [Lebanon Economic Monitor \(2022\)](#) has worsened conditions for families leading to widespread unemployment, fuel shortages, sharp increases in food prices and pervasive hunger. Families were focused on survival and unable to prioritise education in this context.

## **4. Further Parental Perspectives and Changes Participants Proposed**

- Notwithstanding the extent of the difficulties, Syrian parents welcomed outreach initiatives run by NGOs offering NFE for children commencing Kindergarten including how to access local schools, support to register with them and awareness raising about the benefits of Kindergarten for very young children. Syrian parents suggested that they had been highly resourceful in mobilising family and community networks to seek support.
- Parents suggested that online education was less available for Kindergarten children and lamented having to prioritise the education of their older children given limited resources.
- They suggested that access to Kindergarten and to education in general was inadequate for SEND children and families who lacked information and support to access existing provision.

## **5. Next steps**

We would like to express our grateful thanks to parents who took part in this study. These findings will be shared widely with government departments, national and international NGOs and academic researchers to inform measures aimed at improving conditions for Syrian child refugees and their families as well as their Lebanese counterparts.

Please email any comments you may have on this brief to Professor Hiam Loutfi at Rafik Hariri University: [lotfihr@rhu.edu.lb](mailto:lotfihr@rhu.edu.lb) or Professor Eva Lloyd at the University of East London: [e.lloyd@uel.ac.uk](mailto:e.lloyd@uel.ac.uk)

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