

The Early Childhood Education in Lebanon Project

Report for Teachers and Headteachers

The Research Team

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Background

In 2020 – 2021, head teachers and teachers working in public and private schools or Non-Formal Education (NFE) were interviewed by the research team for The Early Childhood education in Lebanon project (2019-2022). The project was funded by the British Academy Early Childhood Education Programme in the UK and supported under the Global Challenges Research Fund which is part of the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA).

Project Aims

The Early Childhood Education in Lebanon project aimed to explore strategies for achieving equitable access to early childhood education (ECE) for all Lebanese children and Syrian child refugees. It set out to assess how far the current ECE system in Lebanon for 3 to 5-year-old children offers quality, accessible, and affordable provision for Lebanese and refugee children across three regions: Beqaa; Akkar and Tripoli in the north of Lebanon; and Saida and Tyre in the south, all refugee hosting areas. Being close to the border, Beqaa hosts the largest population of Syrian refugees. The research team also aimed to map the extent to which ECE

provision in these regions offers equal learning opportunities to Lebanese and refugee children of different ages, gender, and abilities.

Other project objectives were:

1. To employ evidence and knowledge about ECE in Lebanon to develop recommendations for feasible policies and strategies to enhance access to quality ECE in the three regions and beyond.
2. To support Lebanon in realising Target 2 of Goal 4 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. This SDG Goal 4 focuses on Education. [Target 4.2](#) aims to ensure 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.

These last two objectives are reflected in the project's title '*Towards early childhood education by 2030 in Lebanon for all children: exploring strategies for achieving equitable access for both Lebanese children and Syrian child refugees and realising Sustainable Development Goal 4.2.*' These broadly correspond to two policy shifts envisaged in the Lebanese government's 2016 Reaching All Children with Education (RACE II) strategy:

1. 'Aligning with the SDGs' Goal 4 on Education, RACE II will seek to integrate human rights, child rights, and child protection principles, as key to its interventions' and
2. 'Ensuring that quality education opportunities are available for the most vulnerable children and families, whether they be non-Lebanese or Lebanese.' (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Lebanon, 2016, p. 3)

This report presents emerging findings based on the information collected from teachers and headteachers providing their views and experiences in the delivery and implementation of early childhood education delivered in Kindergartens, and other education policies introduced by the Lebanese government.

Headteachers and Teachers

The research team interviewed headteachers and teachers from July 2020 to August 2021. We also interviewed Syrian and low-income Lebanese parents, policymakers, and NGOs. During this period, children's education was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, the August 2020 explosion in Beirut port, the socio-economic crisis, and teachers' strikes.

Emerging findings are organised below by first highlighting the broader economic landscape and next the specific insights from teachers and headteachers

Economic Deterioration and Political Unrest

The steadily worsening economic situation, which has deteriorated sharply since October 2019's political unrest started, has taken its toll on headteachers and teachers. Their salaries had not been raised in line with inflation, which had led to acute stress amongst teachers. Transport costs are a major challenge. For example, one teacher complained that she was not able to reach her school since she could not fill up her car with petrol, which has become unaffordable and had to take a tuk tuk (three-wheeled battery-operated rickshaw) to school. Many pupil and teachers had to walk to school with little or no streetlighting during winter.

Headteachers and teachers also had to deal with the fact that many children came to school without food and poorly clothed during winter. One teacher described how she gave her food to a child, whereas another reported encouraging children to share their food amongst themselves.

Poor Infrastructure

Teachers indicated that the physical setting of the schools was grossly inadequate. The classes were mostly crowded with little or no space for learning and the Kindergarten classrooms lacked washrooms and were dimly lit, especially in the late afternoon hours during winter, partly due to continual power cuts. The playgrounds were also unsuitable for small children.

Lack of Psychosocial Training

Teachers found themselves teaching Syrian children who were traumatized by scenes of war in Syria or who suffered as a direct result of their parents' experiences. Only one teacher interviewed by the team had received formal training on how to provide psychosocial support to young children affected by armed conflict.

Foreign Language Acquisition

Since Syrian refugee children learn in Arabic at school in Syria, teachers found it challenging to accommodate these children into classes where the language of instruction was often English or French, especially since their parents mainly only spoke and understood Arabic. As one teacher explained, she resorted to miming, acting out, and modelling to make sure her Syrian students understood. This contrasted with the case of children of Lebanese parents who, though also financially deprived, already spoke English with their children and could in most cases provide them with technology to support their studies, which was often inaccessible for Syrian children.

Discrimination

Some teachers voiced their concern about the discrimination that Syrian refugee students suffer from, even if it was implicit. One teacher explained that she often had to tutor Syrian children during the break to prevent any bullying to which they were likely to be exposed. Another teacher related how Syrian pupils often came to school every day wearing the same outfit and bringing the same food, which was stigmatizing, while their Lebanese peers came to school in different outfits and

enjoyed a wider range of snacks during the day. Given bullying based on these disparities, one Syrian headteacher highlighted that some parents withdraw their children from public schools and prefer to register them in Syrian NFE.

Challenges related to teaching/curriculum

Teachers explained that there was a discrepancy between the educational level of Syrian and Lebanese students. In Syria children would not attend Kindergarten at the same age as children in Lebanon. Further, teachers explained that they were under pressure to prepare Syrian students for Grade 1 in a single compressed preparatory year of Kindergarten, whereas Lebanese pupils attend three full years. What makes this discrepancy worse is that Syrian children are forced to attend the afternoon shift and are not as physically alert as their Lebanese peers who benefit from being taught in the morning, which poses yet another challenge for teachers. Also, some teachers felt overworked since many of those teaching in the afternoon shift also teach in the morning shift.

Some teachers mentioned they found it challenging to place older Syrian students with younger ones in the Kindergarten classroom. Teaching material was not always available, teachers had to devise their own and work with whatever limited resources they could get. Some teachers expressed their need for teaching assistants in Kindergarten classes as young children need monitoring and help in all class activities.

Impact of COVID-19

Teachers found themselves suddenly immersed in online teaching without prior training. Though some headteachers in NGO NFE provided this, teachers in public schools were mostly left to their own devices or received very little training. This difficulty was intensified during lockdown periods due to repeated power cuts. Generators became expensive to use and unreliable meaning that internet connections were often poor. Additionally, teachers explained that Syrian children often lacked internet access at home or digital devices to attend online classes. As one teacher explained, there is often only a single digital device available at home—usually belonging to the father, so used by him. Due to this situation, children often must wait until the evening when their fathers return from work before being able to do their homework or rely on getting an internet connection via their neighbours. The father of one of the children in one teacher's Kindergarten class reported that the child had to wait until their father had returned from work to go to an internet café to download the lessons, before the child could begin homework. He next described to the teacher how he then had to return to the café to upload the homework for her to receive it.

Internet costs and other problems

Some teachers also pointed out that not all students could attend the online classes due to the internet connection cost and had to wait till the beginning of the month to recharge their cards. Additionally, some teachers who worked with NGOs had to

work with Syrian children during the evening outside their contractual hours to answer their questions and support their learning, knowing that this was the only time when the child might be able to access a digital device, following their fathers return from work. One teacher explained how she would stay on the phone explaining the lesson to the mother so that she would be able to teach her son. Even when children could access devices and internet connections worked, teachers raised the difficulty of teaching young children online, given their short attention span. They also complained that parents often lacked the knowledge and skills to support their children at home and parents additionally often had to prioritize the learning of older children instead.

Recommendations from Teachers and Headteachers

Both headteachers and teachers shared their thinking on ways in which the early childhood education programme and the conditions under which it was delivered could be improved.

Training including in psychosocial support

Headteachers expressed their need for training on using digital tools and technology in education, having identified digitalization as key to administration. They also needed training on financial and administrative responsibilities. One headteacher raised the need for training on personal development and wellbeing, while another headteacher saw the need for more trained ECE teachers and specialist subject classroom teachers. A need for professional training in various areas was emphasized by several headteachers.

While many teachers showed their willingness to attend training sessions generally, especially in English, some expressed their desire to be trained in using more innovative teaching methods including strategies on how to make learning more enjoyable and engaging via interactive teaching pedagogies. The need for training workshops, for instance on teaching English to refugees; on dealing with behaviour problems, including violent behaviours displayed by some Syrian children even though they had been born in Lebanon, on providing psychological support to pupils, and on more general guidance and counselling, were all mentioned by interviewees.

Financial Support

Headteachers required greater financial support to pay for educational material such as e-learning devices, stationery, equipment, printing costs and maintenance of office equipment. One headteacher wished that transportation costs should be paid for by the state so that parents could ensure their children could attend school. A range of other needs with financial implications was mentioned by headteachers, such as: (i) having a smaller number of children per class so that children could be assessed and taught more appropriately, (ii) introducing a food programme to provide students with a daily meal or a snack, seen as vital to student's wellbeing, as well as basic hygiene items to be provided by schools for children such as soap and toothpaste since many children live in insanitary conditions; (iii) having access to

“good quality” teaching aids and equipment in the classroom as well as better access to online learning via providing each student with a digital device.

These research participants also saw the need for reliable power and Internet connections both in school and at home so that children could access online education; (iii) having a teaching assistant in each class, especially given that Kindergarten children usually need a lot of help and support, as well as other professional school personnel such as a nurse and a social worker; (iv) having more space for creativity and more flexibility in terms of scope to adapt teaching of the national curriculum where needed; (v) playgrounds specifically designed for ECE pupils, equipped with climbing frames, swings, slides, and sandpits. They also emphasized the importance of safer, cleaner, and paved areas for children to play and toilets to be available inside Kindergarten classes rather than much further away elsewhere in the school building. They suggested that classrooms needed to be more spacious to avoid overcrowding as well as to be more brightly decorated and welcoming. One Syrian headteacher suggested that NFE schools should not be set up inside informal refugee settlements but instead pupils should be taught in “normal” schools comprising a suitable building, classrooms, and playground. (vi) finally, headteachers suggested the need to be better paid themselves as educators, to be able to cope with worsening economic conditions in Lebanon.

Revisiting the ECE programme from the point of view of Syrian refugee pupils

Headteachers and teachers recommended that the curriculum needed revisiting. One teacher complained that the book contents are too old and outdated, suggesting that it was in 1997 that these were last updated. Some teachers also observed that the curriculum material and content needed to be reduced so that pupils were given more time to assimilate the material to support mental health outcomes. Teachers also emphasized the need for reviewing the programme activities, rather than just content, and adding out-of-school activities. Another important issue raised by headteachers was the need for including Syrian refugee children in all 3 Kindergarten classes and not just in Kindergarten 3, the final year of the early childhood education programme.

Outreach and Awareness Raising

Doing outreach activities and raising the awareness among Syrian parents of ECE as foundational was seen of paramount importance. According to one teacher, parents should also be supported in learning how to monitor their children’s progress through school. Some interviewees suggested that the government should ideally develop a database on Kindergarten pupils to enable policy makers to better support them, to determine the reasons for Kindergarten and compulsory school drop out in a more comprehensive way, to be able to provide educational progression for every child.

Programme Recognition

Finally, headteachers stressed the need for Syrian schools in Lebanon to be certified and recognized by the Ministry of Education (MEHE) in the same way as education programmes run by international NGOs (INGOs). They suggested that this was vital given that Lebanese public schools can no longer accommodate the volume of Syrian students. This is because of the growing exodus of Lebanese students from private to public schools because of the worsening economic crisis.

Next steps

This project's 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 for their Lebanese counterparts and the teachers and headteachers in the schools they attend.

We would be very interested in any comments you have on this report. **Please email them to Professor Hiam Loutfi at Rafik Hariri University: lotfih@rhu.edu.lb. or Dr Maha Broum at the Lebanese International University: Maha.broum@liu.edu.lb**

Your contribution to this project has been invaluable. We have greatly appreciated it. Thank you very much.

The Early Childhood Education in Lebanon research team (Professor Hiam Loutfi, Dr Maha Broum, Dr Sally Hammoud and Mrs Fatima Shamdeen in Lebanon and Professor Eva Lloyd, Dr Katie Wright, and Dr Heather Elliott in the UK).

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