

# The Early Childhood Education in Lebanon Project

## Stakeholder Policy Brief

The Research Team  
Rafik Hariri University and University of East London  
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### 1 The purpose of this brief

In the spring and summer of 2021, our research participants kindly agreed to contribute to a project exploring the provision of early childhood education in Lebanon. This is 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).

Policymakers, and NGO officials were interviewed by Lebanese members of this project's research team - Professor Hiam Loutfi, Dr Maha Broum and Dr Sally Hammoud. In addition, Mrs Fatima Shamdeen was also a Lebanese team member. The team members based in the UK were Professor Eva Lloyd, Dr Katie Wright, and Dr Heather Elliott.

This brief presents emerging findings from this research on which these stakeholders' views and those of the project Advisory Group were sought during summer 2022. The research team was keen for this project's recommendations to represent the voices of participants. Such comments informed the final version of this policy brief and they helped us draft recommendations arising from the research. This final version is being shared in Lebanon and in other child-refugee hosting nations in the Middle East and North Africa as well as in Europe and beyond.

## 2 Background

This research project was inspired by Lebanon's laudable decision to open its public education system to all, including non-Lebanese children. In 2016 the Lebanese Government's Ministry of Education and Higher Education published the [RACE II](#) strategy, aimed at reaching all children and youth aged 3 to 18 with education, including non-Lebanese children such as Syrian child refugees. This strategy built on the achievements of the 2013 RACE I strategy, which set out to improve access to formal public education for 460,000 Syrian refugee children and underprivileged Lebanese children.

The RACE plan was initiated at a time when Lebanon hosted approximately 1.5 million refugees from the Syrian conflict, about half of whom were children. Lebanon has the world's highest concentration of refugees, including Syrian refugees, per capita. This evolving situation provided the impetus for us to seek funding in 2019, enabling us to research the impact of RACE II's implementation. However, this implementation, and hence our project, has been adversely affected by several developments.

Since October 2019, economic, social, and political upheavals have continued to cause significant problems for Lebanon's population. A prolonged teachers' strike in 2021/22 affected pupils learning. Additionally, the population has suffered the Covid-19 pandemic's impact and, in Beirut, the tragic consequences of the August 2020 explosion in the port. The spring 2021 [Lebanon Economic Monitor](#) observed that: 'The Lebanon financial and economic crisis is likely to rank in the top 10, possibly top three, most severe crises episodes globally since the mid-nineteenth century.' (World Bank Group – Middle East and North Africa Region, 2021, p. xi). In a November 2021 report, [UNICEF](#) pointed out how the impact of this crisis on children was rapidly worsening.

## 3 The research project

Our project set out to explore strategies for achieving equitable access to early childhood education (ECE) for all Lebanese children and Syrian child refugees. As part of our research aims, we planned 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. We 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 our 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 RACE II:

1. 'Aligning with the SDGs' Goal 4 on Education, RACE II will seek to integrate human right, 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)

The impact of Lebanon's economic, social, political, and public health challenges set back the achievement of these RACE II strategic ambitions. This context also affected our methods for gathering research evidence. For example, since early 2020 public and private primary schools were closed for long periods due to the Covid-19 pandemic; children's virtual learning using digital devices was hampered by rising poverty among both Lebanese and Syrian refugee families; teachers staged a prolonged strike in response to growing pressures on their standard of living; and the research team was unable to visit early childhood classrooms in person or hold face-to-face focus groups with parents.

Notwithstanding the extent of these difficulties, almost 70 participants, including policymakers, NGO officers, headteachers, teachers, low-income Lebanese parents, and Syrian refugee parents, were willing to make time to speak to Lebanese team members via phone or face to face about their ECE knowledge and their own or their children's ECE experiences. The information they provided is reflected in the emerging findings listed below.

The team owes a profound thanks to all participants in our project. We are especially grateful since interviewees agreed to participate in this research while living and working under exceptionally difficult circumstances. Thanks to this, the research project was completed on time by late summer 2022.

Below we share some emerging research findings from our interviews, summarised for this policy brief.

## 4 Emerging findings

This section provides a selection of our emerging findings summarised here that all relate to issues that may need addressing to achieve the successful realisation in Lebanon of SDG 4.2 by 2030.

We appreciate the considerable challenge arising from the present socio-economic and political climate in Lebanon in determining which should be addressed to provide equitable

access to ECE for all children in Lebanon; and which should be addressed to move Lebanon towards achieving SDG 4.2 by 2030. We are also aware that the situation around the admission of Syrian refugee children to public school Kindergarten has changed since these data were collected. We acknowledge there are also other, crosscutting issues affecting ECE implementation in Lebanon.

For this brief these findings were grouped according to whether the reported issues affected the experiences of both Lebanese children from low-income families and Syrian child refugees or only Syrian child refugees. The findings are otherwise presented in random order.

## A Issues affecting both Lebanese children and Syrian child refugees aged 3 to 5 in kindergarten

- 1) While extensive power cuts due to the fuel crisis affected all children's access to Wi-Fi or digital devices, the digital divide between children from families with low incomes and their better off peers profoundly affected learning for many children whose parents we spoke to. Many children from low-income families were reported to be unable or hardly able to participate in virtual learning, as most families only had one digital device, usually a mobile phone, owned by one family or extended family member, while some were able to borrow such a device from neighbours. Wi-Fi and mobile charge cards costs were also problematic.
- 2) Lebanese children from low-income families and Syrian child refugees were generally living in cramped and overcrowded living conditions affording little room for doing homework. They also suffered poor sanitary facilities.
- 3) Five of the 10 Kindergarten teachers in our sample were specialists in early childhood education. Three had a primary education qualification.
- 4) Access to KG for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities was extremely limited. The extent of SEND problems among children of Syrian parents in our study was considerable.
- 5) Some parents were worried about the transport costs involved in getting their children to Kindergarten.
- 6) Classroom facilities for children aged 3 to 5 in public primary school Kindergartens appeared inadequate and not age appropriate, according to several of the teachers and headteachers and some of the parents we spoke to.
- 7) There is a lack of provision in public schools for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Children with SEND are often withdrawn by their parents who fear their stigmatization, or they do not start school at all.
- 8) To be allowed to register for Kindergarten, including non-formal educational facilities, children need a birth certificate. For a variety of reasons, many low-income families did not possess these.

## B Additional issues affecting Syrian child refugees in Kindergarten

9) Only one of the 10 Kindergarten teachers we interviewed had been trained to provide psycho-social support to child refugees.

10) Syrian child refugees in Kindergarten are having to learn in a new language, in most cases not shared by their Arabic speaking parents. The language of instruction is either English or French. This also made virtual learning more difficult since visual cues or ad hoc translations and other interactions would be absent, especially in pre-recorded classes.

11) Teachers with Syrian qualifications are not allowed in Lebanon to teach the afternoon public school Kindergarten sessions for Syrian child refugees, nor in any other part of the public education system. This is because, regardless of their qualifications, non-Lebanese citizens are not permitted to teach in Lebanese public schools. Syrian teachers can only teach in private schools, including some set up by Syrian refugees, and in non-formal education provided by NGOs.

12) As children tend to be less physically alert in the afternoons, the Syrian child refugees attending public school Kindergarten are at a learning disadvantage compared to their peers taught in the morning sessions. The length of the afternoon shift is also shorter than the morning shift for these children's Lebanese peers.

13) The poverty in which many Syrian refugee families live means young children often go hungry. This affects their alertness and ability to learn.

14) Some parents found it disturbing that some older Syrian child refugees were being put in kindergarten groups, which was stigmatizing. Pupils cannot progress to Grade 1 until they have a certificate of having passed KG3 and may have to repeat years until this is obtained.

15) Lebanese pupils in public schools aged 3-5 attend Kindergarten classes KG 1, KG 2, and KG 3, whereas Syrian child refugees only attend KG 3, which is a preparatory class that they must pass, gaining a certificate, to be eligible to join grade 1 of compulsory schooling.

Research participants did not only identify gaps and problems, however, but also suggested many ways in which the present situation for children receiving early childhood education could be improved.

## 5 ECE changes suggested by participants

Four of the five groups of participants, teachers, headteachers, NGOs and policymakers we spoke to were asked what changes to ECE delivery they would like to see. Where a

particular change was suggested by several interviewees, we mention it below. While not explicitly asked to, parents made a few suggestions, too.

### **Social conditions**

Teachers recommended that NGOs and government urgently address intolerable poverty, hunger and insanitary conditions that prevent Kindergarten and older children from learning. One headteacher reported children fainting with hunger in the school, while another ascribed this school's popularity with low-income parents to the daily distribution of one piece of fruit to all children. These suggestions corresponded to parents' top priorities for action, which were tackling hunger and inadequate housing.

Teachers were also concerned about the rise in child labour, affecting boys, but not exclusively.

Policymakers and NGOs highlighted the importance of effective needs assessment to aid the establishment of needs-focussed services.

### **Children's additional needs**

Several teachers and headteachers recommended the creation of more opportunities to provide psycho-social support to children traumatised by their own and their parents' experiences. A lack of provision for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities was mentioned primarily by parents, NGOs, and policy makers.

### **Educational infrastructure**

The need for more and better equipped playgrounds for Kindergarten age children was emphasized as a priority by both teachers and headteachers.

Classroom design and layout needed improvement. Colourful decoration, reading corners and learning stations were all recommended, as were digital devices for each child. In this context, an NGO official recommended capitalising on the IT skills that even young children had already acquired and suggested the creation of a charitable fund from which such equipment could be made available.

An urgent need was identified by teachers and headteachers for teaching aids, stationary supplies, and office equipment, as inflation was putting these out of reach of schools. Improving and reviewing the kindergarten curriculum were recommendations made by several teachers and headteachers, including allowing more space for teacher flexibility and creativity.

### **Parent teacher contacts**

The fact that Syrian children were not used to attending kindergarten at the same young age as Lebanese children was raised as an issue by several NGOs, policymakers, teachers and headteachers. They therefore recommended outreach work with Syrian refugee parents to highlight the value of kindergarten experience. Also, the provision of more opportunities for child refugees to attend KG 1 and KG 2 classes, not just one, compressed, kindergarten year (KG3) as at present. Help for low-income parents to enable them to support their young children's literacy was also recommended.

### Teachers' employment conditions

Teachers and headteachers strongly recommended fair pay, also help with transport and fuel costs. Teachers had not been paid for four prior semesters at the time headteachers and teachers were interviewed. Many of our interviewees were on strike at the time we spoke to them.

### Teachers' professional development

Continuing professional development training in English, online teaching, and student engagement were all high on teachers' agendas, while headteachers recommended the establishment of head teaching training on new technologies, administration and finance, and new teaching methods. Creating opportunities for headteachers pooling knowledge and mutual learning were also seen as important.

### Parents' suggestions

Online learning was generally seen as ineffective for kindergarten age children, and parents strongly favoured in-person learning for their children. Some Syrian parents had been required to take their children out of public-school kindergarten classes because of pressure on places. This appeared due to an influx of Lebanese pupils, who had originally attended private schools, when the economic situation deteriorated. Syrian parents recommended this should never happen. A risk of children experiencing racism and bullying in public school was mentioned by several Syrian parents and this parental view was also mentioned by teachers.

## 6 Next steps

In this policy brief we shared selected emerging research findings that relate to the early childhood education experiences of Lebanese and non-Lebanese children of Kindergarten age from low-income families. It appears that many of the issues raised by participants were already relevant pre-pandemic and before the economic upheavals of the last two-and-a-half years, and that they have become even more urgent today. We tried to do justice in this brief to all the thoughtful recommendations the team received.

The project team will be disseminating the findings of this research in academic and practitioner publications, both in English and in Arabic.

**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)**

Thank you very much.

The Early Childhood Education in Lebanon research team

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