

# Hard lessons

**Eva Lloyd** and **Hiam Loutfi** report on their study looking at early education in Lebanon amid ongoing political and socio-economic turmoil and a refugee crisis

**S**itting between the eastern Mediterranean and Syria, Iraq and Jordan, Lebanon is a tiny country with the world's highest concentration of refugees – one for every four nationals. Since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, it has taken approximately 1.5 million refugees, about half of whom are children.

In 2016, the Lebanese Government's Ministry of Education and Higher Education published the Reaching All Children with Education, RACE II, strategy. One of the aims of this ambitious endeavour is 'ensuring that quality education opportunities are available for the most vulnerable children and families; whether they be non-Lebanese or Lebanese.' Under it, all children between the ages of three and six are entitled to a nursery place in the public (state) school system. The RACE II plan also intended for Lebanon to achieve target 4.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals to ensure that, by 2030, all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education.

Impressed with the vision this strategy embodied, I and two colleagues, Professor Hiam Loutfi at Rafik Hariri University in Lebanon, a specialist in psycho-social support for children affected by trauma, and Dr Katie Wright, an international development specialist at the University of East London, designed a study of early childhood education in Lebanon.

Starting in November 2019, our project set out to explore how RACE II promoted equitable access to high-quality, affordable and accessible early childhood education for three- to five-year-olds. That is both for Lebanese boys and girls from low-income families and with different abilities, and for Syrian child refugees. Coinciding



with the first phase of our research, however, Lebanon was hit by a serious socio-economic, political and public health crisis. This set back the achievement of the RACE II strategic ambitions and affected our research plans.

17 October 2019 saw the start of Lebanon's popular uprising in protest at deteriorating living conditions and political corruption. As early as February 2020, the pandemic closed schools, universities and other public organisations. On 4 August 2020, a terrible explosion in the port of Beirut killed over 200 people and injured 7,000, leaving an estimated 300,000 people homeless.

From summer 2020 onwards, inflation rose to well over 100%. Poverty levels had reached a staggering 80% by mid-2021. A fuel crisis since 2021, made worse by the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, continues to cause regular power cuts. After the closure caused by the pandemic, public schools closed again between May 2020 and April 2021 and again for most of the

## Delivering bread at a Syrian refugee camp in Lebanon

academic year 2021/22. The education of Syrian child refugees, living in extreme poverty, has been particularly badly affected, especially since public school teachers have been intermittently on strike from October 2021 in protest at their inadequate employment conditions.

## WHAT DID WE FIND?

Living conditions for both Syrian children and Lebanese children in low-income families are often cramped and overcrowded, with poor sanitary facilities. Syrian children may also be bullied and experience racism. They are often hungry, which makes learning difficult. One head teacher reported children fainting with hunger in the school, while another ascribed this school's popularity with poor 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.

With households lucky to get

more than a few hours power a day, children's access to Wi-Fi or digital devices during the pandemic was hit and the digital divide between children from families with low incomes and their better-off peers also profoundly affected learning for many children whose parents we spoke to. Where schools offered virtual learning during the pandemic and later, refugee and low-income Lebanese families may share a single mobile phone, making this difficult to access. And anyway, since the teachers' strike, this avenue to early learning has been closed off.

Teachers and head teachers in our study regretted the poor and often inappropriate kindergarten facilities and lack of outdoor space characterising public schools, as well as the shortage of resources such as books, stationery and play materials. Only five of ten kindergarten teachers we interviewed had a specialist early years qualification. There was evidence that both teachers and children clearly tried to make the best of the conditions, however.

As one 50-year-old Lebanese father of two, who moved his children from private to public school three years previously, said, 'Concerning the school, it needs repairs, a lot of work. It's a public school, but performance wise, how the teachers explain, it's 80% good.'

A 29-year-old Syrian mother of two children, one in kindergarten, one about to start first year of compulsory education, clearly valued the education her children were able to get:

'I've found that everything related to the teachers and schools is great. There aren't any problems when it comes to the children... I mean I talked to the teacher many times, and she always tells me they are well behaved and always praises them.'

Public school provision for children with SEND is poor and such children may not enter kindergarten at all or be withdrawn by parents. Among the Syrian parents we spoke to, a high proportion had children with SEND.

## REFUGEE ACCESS

Early education for Lebanese children aged three, four and five is delivered over three years in public (state) and private provision. Compulsory schooling starts at age six.

The national crisis is forcing more and more originally well-to-do Lebanese families to take their children out of expensive private schools. This is putting pressure on public schools to free up places for Lebanese children, at the expense of Syrian child refugee access. Only 11% of Syrian child refugees attended early education during the academic year 2020/2021, according to UNHCR figures.

Despite the stated aims of the RACE II strategy, the way kindergarten provision is organised hampers access by Syrian child refugees. Under RACE II, Syrian child refugees are entitled to attend a condensed one-year early years programme delivered in afternoon shifts in public schools and in non-formal education settings run by national and international NGOs, including UNESCO and Save the Children. Attending kindergarten sessions from 2 to 6 in the afternoon, while often hungry, is likely to affect their alertness and ability to learn.

To gain access to kindergarten, parents must show their children's birth certificate and proof of residence. For many, this is impossible. To progress to Grade 1 of compulsory education, kindergarten pupils must gain a certificate based on their educational achievement. Only public and private schools are licensed to grant this certificate, but not non-formal education settings such as those run by NGOs. This is another major hurdle for Syrian children's educational progress.

Qualified Syrian teachers are not permitted to teach in Lebanese public schools, although they can teach in NGO-led settings and in private schools. Therefore, child refugees who have experienced the trauma of leaving their home due to armed conflict, or are living with traumatised parents, cannot get much-needed emotional support from teachers speaking their language and sharing their culture and background.

Interviews with parents showed the layers of difficulties they faced. One Syrian mother of three, whose children have been asked to leave the local school where they attended the morning shift alongside Lebanese children, and instead attend afternoon shifts for Syrian child refugees at a public school in another town, said, 'We

Attending kindergarten sessions from 2 to 6 in the afternoon, while often hungry, is likely to affect their alertness and ability to learn

communicated with someone from the UN and asked him to help us for the sake of our children. We told him that our children are out of school, and we are not able to send our children to the school in J... I have to pay 150,000 Lebanese pound per child for bus fees, and my husband was barely making 750,000 pounds, which means I pay the fees and we have no money left for food or house rent.'

## WHAT NOW?

All the teachers and head teachers our team interviewed offered suggestions for different ways to improve the delivery of early childhood education and for addressing institutional inequalities between Lebanese and Syrian children. While refugees within Lebanese society do experience discrimination, many Lebanese recognise the contribution to society that refugees can make and attempt to improve their situation. Nevertheless, Syrian families are now leaving to return to Syria or attempt to travel to Europe, sometimes with devastating consequences – at least 94 people drowned in a boat off the Syrian coast which had travelled from Lebanon in September.

Teachers, NGOs, policymakers and parents in our study viewed policies and strategies aimed at alleviating poverty as an absolute priority when tackling the unsatisfactory state of early childhood education. Only the Lebanese Government can make this happen. Unless the political situation in Lebanon stabilises, there is little hope of improvement in an economic crisis that the World Bank considers may be ranking in the top three most severe crises globally since the mid-19th century. ■

An explosion in the port of Lebanon's capital city left an estimated 300,000 people homeless

