



The Obstacle Course: Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon

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[Executive summary and key recommendations](#)

Elias Abu Aea/NRC

In 2019, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) commissioned a research using quantitative and qualitative methods to understand the lived realities of Syrian children in school, in Non-Formal Education and those who are out of school in Lebanon. The objective was to inform NRC's education programmes and outreach, and ongoing conversations on opportunities and challenges in the wider education sector. The report findings focus on retention factors and existing barriers to education, which are now exacerbated by the impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic and the ongoing economic crisis in Lebanon.



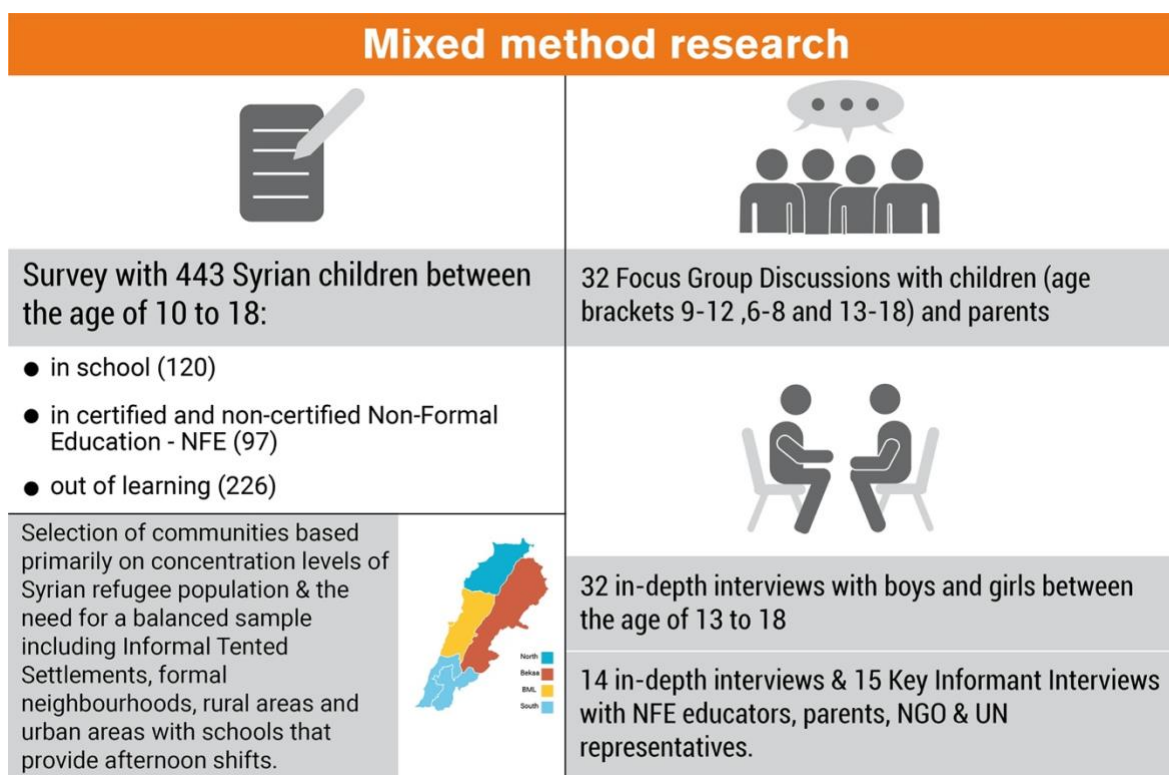
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Research objective and methodology

In 2014 the Government of Lebanon, with the support of the international community, set out an ambition to ensure that all refugee children aged 3-18 would have access to quality education. Six years later, however, **the challenges to fulfil the right to education for refugee children in Lebanon remain massive**, with 58% of children out of school. In 2019, building on NRC's extensive programme experience as an education provider for Syrian refugee children, the organisation conducted **in-depth and extensive qualitative and quantitative research to better understand these challenges**.



All designs by Zaynab Mayladan/NRC

“My mom and dad tell me to study well so no one will bother us when we grow up. When someone gives us a document to sign, we need to understand what it says.”

Focus group discussion with 9-12-year-old male and female children out of learning, Douris, Baalbek governorate, 20/01/2019.

“I tried to register in the public school, but I was not accepted. I was told there was only a spot for one student.”

Focus group discussions with 13-18-year-old girls out of learning, Bourj Hammoud, Matn district, Mount Lebanon governorate, 16/01/2019.

Main research findings

The research carried out by NRC¹ shows that the vast majority of Syrians in Lebanon, **both parents and children, see the value in education**. 52% of all surveyed children who are currently out of learning, have never learned in a formal or non-formal programme, both certified and non-certified. This means that over half of out-of-learning children have never learned in a structured environment since they arrived in Lebanon.



76% of all children surveyed said their parents support them to continue learning

NRC's research identified a number of **structural barriers** to school enrolment, which children and parents cannot address themselves. These include financial constraints, class capacity and **real and perceived administrative obstacles**. The chilling effect of real and perceived prior denial of school enrolment, can also be a significant barrier.¹



- A child who has been denied enrolment previously is almost three times more likely to be out of learning than a child who has never been denied schooling. There is also a negative relationship with siblings having been denied access previously.
- Out of the 443 children surveyed, 29% had at least once been denied access to school. Only about a quarter of those students sought help.
- Out of the children surveyed who are currently out of learning, 38% have been denied access to school at least once.

Boys and girls faced their own specific obstacles, with girls more likely to report transport, care requirements and timing of second shifts, and boys referring to the need to work to support the family.



¹ Follow-up on enrolment denials is done through UNICEF's 'Education Registration Complaints Mechanism' or bilaterally with MEHE Race II PMU. The objective of the quantitative and qualitative data collection conducted for the research at hand, was to capture both real and perceived barriers without investigating individual cases of enrolment denial. Moreover, these cases might have occurred over the course of several years.

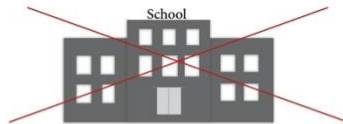
Refugees' experience in schools also affected whether they stayed in school or dropped out. Children and parents often cited bullying and **violence in schools** as contributing to dropping out, as well as **problems with learning the Lebanese curriculum**. Parents facing these difficulties found themselves torn between choosing a non-formal and non-recognised Syrian education programme, which some believe is a safer environment for their children, or opting for a learning environment that provides a school certificate.

The **majority of children were not aware that there are organisations who can support them in pursuing their education**. The fact that 60% of children currently out of learning stated they would register again 'if they could' (66% of out-learning-children think they cannot), shows the potential and the need for education actors to (re)engage with out-of-learning children and their families.



Aid organisations need to improve outreach to parents and children: 75% of the children surveyed think there are no organisations who can support them with schooling.

The main barriers to both school enrolment and retention are capacity issues and the **high costs associated with attendance, including for transportation**. With one fifth of the surveyed students stated that they had dropped out of school *during* the school year, NRC's research confirms the need for continued financial support to cover education costs.



Out of the 226 surveyed children who are currently out of learning:

- 78% cannot go to school because of financial challenges
- 60% worked at some point since they arrived in Lebanon
- 62% of those who have been in a form of learning since they arrived in Lebanon, state they dropped out for financial reasons

Conversely, there are a **number of actions which are likely to influence school retention positively**, based on the conversations with children, parents and education actors. These relate mostly to the quality of education services, including child protection, learning support, constructive engagement with parents, certification, and the extent to which families engaged with Lebanese host communities.



Social cohesion promotes learning: Frequently meeting Lebanese people is statistically significant to a child being in a form of structured learning. Qualitative insights also support this finding.

Statistically significant positive and negative factors regarding children accessing education



Emerging educational challenges in crisis-hit Lebanon

At the time of writing, **Lebanon is dealing with pre-existing economic woes** while trying to mitigate the impact of the **unfolding global coronavirus recession**. Although the data collection for the research at hand was conducted prior to the economic and health crisis, the findings and recommendations are even more relevant now.

As a result of growing economic hardship in Lebanon, families are increasingly forced to rely on their children to earn money, with child labour becoming an even greater barrier to school enrolment and attendance as a result. This is also clearly affecting vulnerable Lebanese families, who were not the focus of the research at hand. According to UNICEF, Lebanese families are already **relying on negative coping mechanisms today**, which might increase in the future. These include **children not going to school, marrying off younger, or being sent out to work**.

There are unconfirmed reports that there might be **a rise in numbers of Lebanese students who were previously in private schools, integrating into public schools** due to the increased economic pressure. Already during the current school year, economic pressure has led to around 16,000 students to shift from private schools into public schools which started to create pressure on the education system.² Considering the limited absorption capacity of formal education opportunities for Syrians, more pressure is expected on the sector. This trend could potentially negatively impact refugees' future ability to enrol or maintain their current place in schools.

Despite the growing demand, UNICEF is currently unable to increase the share allocated to transportation support through the UNICEF "Reaching School Program" due to several equally pressing sector priorities.

While it is difficult to measure the full impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic, combined with the ongoing economic crisis in Lebanon, it is clear that the stakes are even higher now. In addition to the exacerbation of pre-existing barriers, new educational challenges result in **uncertainty about access to education for Syrian out-of-learning children and the ability for Syrian students to return to school in fall 2020**.

"Financial problems is what makes all children leave the school. I fear being unable to pay the rent and having to leave school."

Focus group discussion with 13-18-year-old female students and non-students, Tal Abbass, Akkar Governorate, 18/1/2019.

"I have four school-aged children, but I only send two of them because I can't afford the bus fees."

Focus group discussion with parents in Minieh Dennieh, North governorate, 19/01/2019.

² According to CERD the preliminary data for 2019-2020 says there are 289,698 Lebanese children in public schools [link](#). In 2018-2019, according to the Statistics Bulletin for that year, it was 273,634, [link](#).

Recommendations

In order to meet the ambition to have all Syrian children in education, the complex interplay of factors influencing Syrian refugee decision-making on education must be recognised and acted upon. Action should be taken to address the **structural challenges in the education sector**, as well as the specific enabling and blocking factors that need to be considered at the level of the household.

Recommendations for the Government of Lebanon:

➤ **The Ministry of Education and Higher Education:**

1. Support teachers' professional development so they can address the psychosocial needs of non-Lebanese students.
2. Ensure School Directors have a common understanding and are compliant with MEHE's Standard Operating Procedures for enrolment of non-Lebanese children in public schools.
3. Ensure School Directors are compliant with MEHE's child protection policy in terms of appropriate response measures to deal with violence in schools.
4. Review and adapt MEHE registration policies for non-Lebanese to attend the first shift, and prioritise girls who have real and perceived safety threats on their way home from school.
5. Increase the involvement of non-Lebanese parents in the school community.
6. Refer students lacking complete birth registration to area legal actors for fast tracking.

➤ **Municipalities:**

7. Where there are shortages in absorption capacity, adapt appropriate unused buildings to construct temporary public school buildings on public domain lands.

Recommendations for donors to the education sector:

8. Retain and expand predictable and multi-year funding for:
 - transportation costs and school/class capacity;
 - additional classroom space in areas that have reached capacity or in acute need, including funding solutions such as mobile classrooms and temporary/emergency classrooms;
 - innovative pilots to address the education needs of out of school children and scale funding for successful pilots; and
 - teachers' professional development.
9. Encourage and support the MEHE, municipalities and other parts of the government of Lebanon to make the necessary policy changes required to increase enrolment and ensure retention of Syrian refugee children in school.
10. Encourage UNICEF to ensure timely enrolment barrier tracking and follow-up mechanisms are functioning, active and responsive, and follow up with MEHE as necessary.

Recommendations for education NGOs, including NRC:

11. Prioritise targeting of children who have never learned in a structured environment since they arrived in Lebanon.
12. Continue reporting on a rolling basis on UNICEF's 'Education Registration Complaints Mechanism', including regarding schools that are not complying with the MEHE Standard Operating Procedures.
13. Communicate proactively and directly with refugee communities on documentary requirements for school enrolment.

14. Support MEHE in the institutionalisation of the Better Learning Programme (BLP) in public schools and document evidence as to its effectiveness in meeting psychosocial support needs of students.
15. Identify a supportive, low-cost programme that can support students transition from non-formal education programmes into public schools.
16. Support children who work through ensuring programme timings are flexible.

Recommendations for the education sector:

17. Ensure enrolment barrier tracking and follow-up mechanisms are functioning, active and responsive.
18. Intervene with MEHE to ensure that students identified via barrier tracking are admitted on a bi-weekly basis during the first two months of the enrolment period.
19. Expand funding opportunities to include transportation in order to respond to the increasing need, particularly for retention support programmes.
20. Launch a broad outreach campaign to ensure all children are aware of learning opportunities and supporting interventions (e.g. transportation).
21. Mitigate challenges with the curriculum by improving outreach by education actors providing retention support and being a resource for MEHE on teacher professional development on psychosocial support interventions.

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