

# BETTER TOGETHER: THE IMPACT OF THE SCHOOLING SYSTEM OF LEBANESE AND SYRIAN DISPLACED PUPILS ON SOCIAL STABILITY

## SUMMARY

This paper presents the findings from a case study research comparing the impact on social cohesion of segregated and mixed schooling systems of Lebanese and Syrian refugee students. Based on qualitative research with students, their families and teachers, the paper argues that perceptions and relationships between students in mixed classes improve over time. Though this change bears little impact on relationships beyond the school or the attitudes and relationships of family and community members, it does equip students with the ability to counter prevailing prejudice. The adoption by ministries and partner donors of an integrated approach bridging educational reform with social cohesion programmes within the school will support improved social relationships as well as educational attainment for all school students.

## INTRODUCTION

This case study research aims to assess the impact of the schooling system on social cohesion. It assesses perceptions of and relationships between Lebanese and Syrian refugee students within and outside the school, as well as the relationship of those students and their parents with the educational and broader community. The case study seeks to inform humanitarian actors in the social stability as well as the education sector on the needs and type of support needed to foster social stability within current education programmes for Lebanese and Syrian displaced students.

Data was collected from May to July 2015 from two locations, Akkar and Burj Hammoud. Fourteen focus groups with a total number of 94 participants were conducted with Lebanese and Syrian refugee students aged 10–15, their parents and teachers in both areas (see Table 1). In addition, five interviews were conducted with school principals, teachers and aid workers working locally.

Akkar is a governorate in the north of Lebanon characterised by poverty and underdevelopment. It has around 390,000 inhabitants out of which a third are refugees from Syria.<sup>1</sup> More than 38% of the Lebanese are deprived and the demand on public services such as water, sanitation and power has increased due to the Syrian refugees influx while competition for jobs between locals and refugees also intensified and resulted in tension across the two communities.

Burj Hammoud and its surrounding is a densely populated urban area that is a suburb of the capital, hosting diverse ethnic and sectarian groups. Burj Hammoud boasts a number of Armenian religious organisations and schools that teach the Armenian language and preserve this community's culture and heritage. However, in recent years and even before the crisis, Burj Hammoud started attracting other poor communities. Interviewees from local Armenian organisations highlighted that, due to the high number of Syrian refugee students in the local public schools, many of the poorest Armenian and Christian communities are moving from attending public schools to subsidised private

<sup>1</sup> Inter-Agency Coordination Lebanon, UNHCR, June 2015 Akkar Governorate Profile

schools affiliated with Armenian religious organisations. The municipality of Burj Hammoud as well as the majority of municipalities in Akkar have imposed a curfew on refugees in the evenings to contain any possible friction or problems.

Table 1: Key characteristics of the research context

	Akkar		Mount Lebanon
	Halba	Tal Abbas Al Gharbi	Burj Hammoud
<b>Focus groups with</b>	Lebanese students in morning shift and Syrian refugee students from both shifts, aged 10–15 and parents of children within the same schooling arrangements. Teachers in morning or afternoon shifts	Lebanese students aged 10–15 in the morning shift. (Considered a segregated shift as number of Syrian students was negligible)	Syrian refugee students aged 10–15, segregated by gender, from both shifts and parents of children within the same schooling arrangements. (Access to Lebanese students from the same schools was not possible)
<b>Number of Syrian refugees<sup>2</sup></b>	9,085	1,851	20,177
<b>Context</b>	The capital of Akkar Qaza with approximately 18,000 residents (Christians and Muslims). Has three public schools: a kindergarten, a secondary school and a primary school	Has a total of approximately 3,000 residents, mostly Christians	Diverse ethnic and sectarian groups, including Lebanese Armenian Christians, and migrant workers. Enrolled students live in different regions including Burj Hammoud, Sin el Fil and el Nabaa
<b>Schools covered</b>	Halba Public School for Boys; Primary co-education school for students from different regions in Halba and within Akkar in general. School director is not from Halba and its teaching staff is relatively old	Tal Abbas Al Gharbi Public School (below secondary) – number of Syrian students is negligible	Burj Hammoud el-Thalitha, Uruguay, and Sad el-Baushrieh
<b>Number of students in morning mixed classes</b>	– 148 Lebanese (80 girls and 68 boys) – 40 Syrians (23 girls and 17 boys)	– 532 Lebanese (272 boys and 260 girls) – 30 Syrians that have lived in the villages for over five years. The school does not enrol any refugees	–
<b>Number of students in afternoon refugee-only shift</b>	500 Syrians (290 girls and 210 boys) in the age range 5–16 years	None	–

## OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Lebanon's public institutions that provide basic services are facing a significant burden resulting from the influx of more than 1.2 million Syrian refugees into the country. These institutions have been suffering since before the crisis, due to intricate political conditions and structural and financing difficulties. The substantial scale of the crisis aggravated the weak governance of the fragile state's institutions. Lebanon was not equipped to handle the situation and, despite the local and international organisations' response, the challenges have been compounding. The most affected public services are education, health, water, electricity and waste management. The pressure on services has been a key trigger of tension between the refugees and hosting communities.

In particular, public education that suffered from multiple weaknesses pre-crisis is now further affected by the fact that the number of refugee school-aged children is significant, compared to the Lebanese, with public schools ill-equipped and under-resourced to deal with the situation. Nevertheless, Syrian refugees are being enrolled in public schools in two shifts: the regular morning schedule and an afternoon shift specifically tailored to non-Lebanese and refugees once the morning shift reaches full capacity. The majority of the enrolled student refugees attended the afternoon schooling arrangement.

## THE EDUCATION SECTOR

Education in Lebanon is highly privatised with less than a third of the Lebanese school-aged children enrolled in public schools. The number of Lebanese students in the public schools is almost 239,000 during the 2013/14 academic year, with a little more than 201,000 in the 6–14-year-old age bracket.<sup>3</sup> These are mainly children of the poorest families located in the most vulnerable areas of the country where Syrian refugees are also concentrated. However, the enrolment of Lebanese in public schools has been declining to the advantage of private schools since before the Syrian crisis (from 2004/5 all the way to 2009/10),<sup>4</sup> because of quality differences between the two systems and the availability of quasi-free private schools mostly affiliated to religious institutions.

According to the Lebanese Ministry of Education, the public education system is suffering from 1) low qualifications of the teaching and administrative school staff, especially as a result of a mismatch between teachers' specialisations and the needed requirements; 2) inadequate learning and teaching environment in terms of physical infrastructure and equipment); and 3) limited reform regulations to support improvement.<sup>5</sup>

The number of private schools is only slightly higher than that of public schools (1,448 private schools compared to 1,273 public in 2013/14).<sup>6</sup> The public and private systems operate as parallel systems with little connections. The affluent Lebanese attend the paying private schools. The private school system also has free or subsidised schools affiliated with not-for-profit generally religious organisations (351 free private schools out of the 1,448 private schools). In addition, Palestinian refugee children attend United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)-managed schools. The Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) regulates the public education sector and basic education is compulsory. Private schools have their own organisation, but operate under the authority of the MEHE.

---

*Less than 25% of school-aged Syrian children have been able to access formal public schooling.*

---

Within this context, the influx of refugees over the past four years increased the demand on public schools in particular. Out of the 1.16 million refugees registered or pending registration with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), around 33% are school aged.<sup>7</sup> Fewer than 107,000 Syrian children (25% of the school aged) have been able to access formal public schooling with regional differences in enrolment rates. Beirut, for example, captures a higher percentage than in the Bekaa.<sup>8</sup> In 2014/15 there have been 62,000 students attending second-shift schools across 156 schools in Lebanon, compared to fewer than 43,000 in the regular first shift. For the following year (2015/16), the MEHE announced the possibility of opening schools for up to 200,000 children of non-Lebanese origin affected by the Syrian crisis pending funding availability.

## POLICY RESPONSE

The policy response to the refugees' influx has progressed since the crisis started in 2011. The immediate response consisted of a rush of humanitarian relief interventions by local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) amidst little government involvement. By 2014, the picture changed all the way to a strong government control, through the MEHE, implementing a centralised strategy in coordination with UN agencies and international donors.

3 Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Center for Educational Research and Development 2013/14 Statistics Bulletin

4 Ministry of Education and Higher Education, March 2010, Quality Education for Growth National Education Strategy Framework Education Sector Development Plan (General Education): 2010–2015

5 Ibid.

6 Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Center for Educational Research and Development 2013/14 Statistics Bulletin

7 UNHCR Lebanon monthly updates, December 2014

8 Quarterly Dashboard Jan–Mar 2015, Inter-Agency Coordination Lebanon

The MEHE developed a strategy under the title “Reaching All Children with Education” (RACE) around mid-2014 and staffed a full-fledged unit to coordinate and implement it.<sup>9</sup> RACE aims to strengthen the public education system with the priority to increase enrolment of school-aged children affected by the Syrian crisis in the formal system. NGOs were no longer allowed to operate at the level of formal schools, a change from previous years. The NGOs’ role became restricted to providing outreach support and ensuring that children have complementary non-formal education. The RACE strategy supports both host communities and Syrian refugees, and also expects to reinforce relations between communities through education. By the end of 2014, the MEHE had moved to reinstate robustly its role and reinforce monitoring of education operations. It is also working on setting a regulatory and operational framework for other alternative education programmes. For example, a new accelerated learning programme, including psycho-social support, has been piloted for both Lebanese dropping-out students and out-of-school Syrian refugees to be taught either in public schools or at centres anywhere in Lebanon, and to allow some students the possibility of catching up to the formal education system.

Within this context, 156 public schools operating two shifts have been enrolling Syrian students (see Table 2). In both shifts, to enrol, Syrian students need to undergo an assessment test to be placed in classes according to their level of ability rather than their age.

The schools allowed to have a second shift are those that filled their capacity in the morning shift or have enrolled a number of Syrian students equal to the enrolled Lebanese students. Thus, in some schools, there was still capacity in the first shift where refugee children could be enrolled, but they were refused because of the low number of Lebanese students.

**Table 2: Key characteristics of morning and afternoon schooling systems for Syrian refugee students**

<b>First shift (mixed classes of Lebanese and Syrian refugee students)</b>	<b>Second shift (only Syrian refugee students)</b>
Academic year started September 2014 (regular date for the beginning of the academic year).	In 2014/15, academic year started in February 2015, because of funding issues, so programme is quite condensed.
Regular Lebanese public school curriculum with minimum of six hours of teaching per day.	Curriculum covers the main basic courses of the Lebanese curriculum with slight modification. No arts, sports or music classes, or extracurricular activities.
Open to Lebanese students and only to Syrian students who were enrolled in the previous year, thus taking in primarily the first waves of refugees that enrolled in education.	Four hours of teaching per day with a 25-minute break midway.
Places available based on a set maximum and only if number of Syrians does not exceed the number of the Lebanese enrolled.	All Syrian students are generally accepted.

The aid community has also progressively increased its focus on matters of social stability and social cohesion in Lebanon. The Syrian crisis and the influx of the refugees have further destabilised a fragile political context. Increasingly, aid organisations have become more sensitive to the impact of both the crisis and their operation on the conflict context and on relationships between the Syrian refugees and their host communities. Many programmes have since been redesigned to be inclusive of both Syrian and Lebanese beneficiaries and aid is redirected to meet the needs of the refugees and the local communities burdened by the massive increase in refugee population. More recent political and security developments and the clash between the Lebanese army and Syrian militant groups on the Lebanese border caused a backlash against refugees in some communities and highlighted the need for further attention to social cohesion and stability.

<sup>9</sup> The timing of data collection of this research and its scope did not allow for an assessment of the implementation and impact of the RACE strategy, particularly as research was implemented only shortly after the strategy was adopted and in most cases during the summer school vacation.

## THE INTERSECTION OF EDUCATION AND SOCIAL COHESION

The Inter-agency Multi-sector Needs Assessment (MSNA) specifically recommended having “programs in schools to address social cohesion” as a priority need.<sup>10</sup> In addition, after the completion of the first academic year 2013/14’s second shift, UNHCR consulted with school directors, regional MEHE offices and implementing partners to compile general lessons learned. While this consultation focused on academic issues and elicited the opinions only of school directors, regional MEHE offices, implementing partners and UNHCR, some indicative observations were made with regards to factors that could support healthy and positive relations and perceptions between the Lebanese and the Syrians.<sup>11</sup> Most important of which are the following:

- Discriminatory and racist acts are not prevalent everywhere. While some parents and children complained of such acts, others did not.
- Harassment on the way to school has been reported.
- Corporal punishment and issues related to child abuse and violence were reported and not systematically dealt with.
- Extracurricular activities within the school do not exist and are needed.
- In some schools no recess time is available during the second shift.
- Teachers and school management have limited capabilities and experience in dealing with the refugees and similar emergency situations.
- Support functions such as psychologists<sup>12</sup> are lacking in many schools and are needed.

## FINDINGS

The following sections present the key findings of the case study organised as per the research framework into three main sections. The first looks at perceptions of both Lebanese and Syrian students towards the other, as well as the perceptions of their parents. The second examines relationships of Syrian and Lebanese students within the school as well as their relationship with the schoolteachers and administrators, and their parents’ relationship with the school. The third examines student relationships beyond the school. Within every section, the findings from mixed (Syrian and Lebanese students) morning-shift schools are presented first, starting with the perspective of Lebanese students then the Syrian students, followed by the findings from the segregated afternoon shift, and, where relevant, findings from one school with only Lebanese students, and any difference between the responses of male and female students, if it exists, is noted.

It is important to note that Syrian refugee students in the mixed morning shift also represent a demography of the refugees that is different to those attending the afternoon shift, and attending joint Syrian–Lebanese classes is one of several factors that affect integration. Students in the morning are generally those who have been in Lebanon longer, and whose parents more promptly registered them in Lebanese schools upon arrival, indicating an interest in ensuring their children’s continued education. Some of the morning-shift students also have better connections with the Lebanese community, with either a Lebanese mother or relatives who have lived in Lebanon previously.

---

*Attending joint Syrian–Lebanese classes is one of several factors that affect the integration of Syrian students.*

---

The conditions for the students in the morning shift are also more conducive to learning and allow for more support for the teacher and the student alike. The morning shift takes place during normal school operating hours, where individual teachers are supported by a long-established administrative system that allows for smooth operation of the school. The afternoon shift, which often starts much later in the academic year than for regular schools, is forced into a more condensed academic programme without any activities or space for leisure, despite the students needing more academic support than their counterparts in the morning shift. The teachers also often come to the afternoon shift tired after an already long day of teaching so have less energy for and tolerance of students’ needs, which are often more demanding.

10 UNHCR May 2014, Inter-agency Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA) Phase One Report: Secondary Data Review and Analysis

11 Second shift in public schools in Lebanon for Syrian children: Lessons learnt from academic year 2013–2014, based on consultations with school directors, regional MEHE offices, implementing partners and UNHCR, May 2014

12 The lack of support functions in schools has supposedly been addressed for the academic year 2015/16.

Table 3: Summary of key findings by type of schooling

	Mixed classes	Segregated classes
<b>Perceptions of the other</b>		
<b>Lebanese students</b>	Generally positive: Improved with time, students able to contest prevailing stereotypes, a nuanced assessment of how the Syrian students perceived them	Generally negative: Syrian students described as 'criminals' and 'dirty'
<b>Syrian students</b>	Generally positive: Improved with time, a few still described the Lebanese as discriminatory	Generally negative: Expressed fear of the Lebanese and grudge for being 'humiliated' by them
<b>Lebanese parents</b>	Unanimously negative: Described Syrians as competing with them for jobs while enjoying support from international aid community	–
<b>Syrian parents</b>	Varied by region: Generally negative in Akkar claiming that the Lebanese disdain them. More nuanced in Burj Hammoud with some friendships	Generally negative: Have normalised the harassment that their children face
<b>Relationships within/with the school</b>		
<b>Lebanese students</b>	Generally friendly relationships, improved with time	Not applicable
<b>Syrian students</b>	Generally friendly relationships, improved with time, with some Syrian students complaining of bullying	Complaints of bullying by fellow Lebanese students encountered during transition from one shift to another
<b>Lebanese parents</b>	Cautious of children's friendships. Generally instruct their children to avoid Syrian schoolmates	Not applicable
<b>Syrian parents</b>	Cautious; prioritises continued education enrolment. Some parents do demonstrate positive engagement with the school and the teachers	Cautious. Avoidance of conflict and contact. Tense relationship with the academic staff and dissatisfaction with quality of education
<b>Relationships within the community</b>		
<b>Lebanese students</b>	Limited if any contact. Friendships beyond the school discouraged by parents	No contact with Syrian children. Children cautioned that Syrian refugees might be a source of danger
<b>Syrian students</b>	Limited contact. In Akkar, no friendships beyond the school. In Burj Hammoud, some friendships exist within the neighbourhood	Limited relations. Some relationships with neighbours, though some also complained of harassment in the community

## 1. SYRIAN–LEBANESE PERCEPTIONS

### 1.1 Students

#### Mixed classes

**Lebanese students in mixed classes** have a better perception of Syrian refugees than their counterparts in segregated schools do. Perceptions improved over time after prolonged contact within the school context. The Lebanese students asserted that their daily contact with Syrian classmates allowed them to form their own perceptions of the Syrian students and contest negative stereotypes.

Lebanese students expressed how, three years earlier, they had a negative perception of the refugees and either had disputes with them or avoided them. Their perception was shaped by what they heard about them at home and from their families, such as “the Syrians kidnap and rape the Lebanese”, according to one focus group participant in Akkar. As time passed and the Lebanese students interacted more and more with the Syrian students, the negative perceptions changed. The Lebanese said that “they don't believe anymore” what circulates about the Syrians. The teachers confirmed this, saying that, during the first years when the Syrians started enrolling, the Lebanese students referred to the Syrian students in their complaints as “Syrians”, such as saying “the Syrian hit me...” and identified them by their nationality exclusively.

In addition, the same students voiced a more nuanced assessment of how the Syrian students perceived them. They estimated that Syrian students might have a negative perception that is fuelled by fear and bitterness from the way they were treated by some of the Lebanese, and generalised that perception on all Lebanese. They were not sure if Syrian students might have changed these perceptions after having more contact with the Lebanese.

**Syrian students in mixed classes also conveyed a better and more diverse perception of the Lebanese than Syrians in the segregated afternoon shift did.** In both Akkar and Burj Hammoud, Syrian students conveyed a positive impression of their neighbours, describing them as “very supportive and helpful”. Students in Akkar conveyed a positive impression of some classmates at school and acquaintances in their neighbourhood, because they treat them fairly and humanely, including some teachers and the school director. Syrian students in Burj Hammoud also noted that some close Lebanese friends or neighbours would stand up for Syrian families against any hostile or unpleasant encounters. Nevertheless, others still described the Lebanese as discriminatory and expressed bitterness at being harassed or humiliated as Syrian refugees.

### Segregated classes

In contrast, Lebanese students in segregated classes had a negative perception of Syrians, describing them as criminals “attacking the Lebanese army” and “stealing”. They were also described as “dirty”, and a cause of damage to the areas they take refuge in as they “have a large number of children” and are generating a lot of garbage on the streets. A few of the students nuanced such a negative portrayal by stating that Syrian refugees are “human beings like the Lebanese”.

---

*The Lebanese students who do not have refugee classmates do not know how the Syrians could perceive them.*

---

The Lebanese students that do not have refugee classmates do not know how the Syrians could perceive them because they did not encounter them at all, neither in school nor outside, and cannot shape an idea on how they would perceive them.

**The perception of the Syrian students attending the afternoon shift** of the Lebanese is likewise generally gloomy. They resent the Lebanese and have a grudge against them because they insult them, as they stated. This was confirmed by the teachers’ observations. The Syrian students said they have heard from the Lebanese insults, unheard of previously in their lives. They would have liked to have relationships with the Lebanese students but cannot because of Lebanese students’ attitude towards them and prefer to stick to their compatriots. Some also expressed fear of the Lebanese at large, because the latter can resort to the police, who come to their homes for a search and frighten their families. In fact, the same perception prevails among the parents as they feel weaker and consider the Lebanese more powerful.

Among the Syrian students in Burj Hammoud’s afternoon shift, the same generally negative perception prevails yet many admitted that not all Lebanese are the same and only some are bad. This is more so among the girls. Still, even though they would like to have Lebanese friends, they fear them. They also said that, when they first arrived in Lebanon, they thought the Lebanese were “good-hearted”, which turned out to be untrue, in their opinion.

Both girls and boys said that they would want to be in class with them “only if they are nice to us” and thus considered that, if they were in mixed classes, discrimination and problems between Syrians and Lebanese would increase. Based on a game of associating a colour with a nationality, the Syrian students gave the Lebanese symbolically the white colour, hoping that such a colour would “clear” their hearts.

The Syrian students attending the second shift considered that the Lebanese students look at them with disdain, and that the Lebanese hate them and do not want them. They said: “the Lebanese consider us their servants”. The Syrian girls said that the Lebanese girls look at them frowning and disgusted. They also highlighted that the Lebanese think that the Syrians dress differently in the street and have a different accent.

Some of the Syrians stated that they didn’t know why the Lebanese do not like them. Others explained this behaviour saying that the Lebanese feel: “we took their country”. They explained the Lebanese’s attitude by the fact that the Lebanese think the Syrians are seizing their rights and receiving aid that the Lebanese should be getting. They have come to such an explanation as the Lebanese directly tell them: “you damaged our country”.

## 1.2 Parents

### Mixed classes

Parents of Lebanese students in mixed classes in Akkar expressed a unanimous negative perception of Syrians, which was more disapproving than that of their children. They claimed that, at the onset of the crisis, they “welcomed them into their homes and helped them”. Now, they see them as a source of competition by taking their jobs or any socio-economic aid they could receive. They claimed that the Syrians are able to rent houses with the rent covered by international agencies, while the Lebanese poor cannot consider renting. They also complained that Syrian children at school receive stationery and books, while their kids did not have similar privileges. The Lebanese parents said: “we are getting poorer, while the Syrians are advantaged”.

The perceptions of the parents of Syrian students in mixed classes were varied by region. In Akkar, Syrian parents said they do not like the Lebanese, because they attack them for no reason. They do not feel comfortable with the Lebanese that disdain them. Such a perception was reinforced during parents’ school meetings for students attending the morning shift. The Syrian parents claimed that their children were more polite and disciplined than the Lebanese, yet the latter’s parents considered them inferior. A parent noted: “even if the Lebanese would like or love us, they will not be able to give us back our dignity”. The attitude in Burj Hammoud was different, with less of an overreaching negative attitude and an attitude that is less judgemental of the Lebanese, which might be the result of the greater diversity within the urban context.

### Segregated classes

Syrian parents of afternoon-shift students at first were surprised by the discriminatory treatment, but then they realised it is a reality and got used to it. A mother noted: “the kids now take the Lebanese attitude more lightly and less at heart”. Another mother actually stated: “now we are used to the harassment”. Still, they acknowledged

---

*Parents of Syrian students in the segregated classes would like their children to befriend Lebanese if they treat them nicely and without racism.*

---

that not all Lebanese are the same. They would like their children to befriend Lebanese if they treat them nicely without racism. According to the Syrian parents, the Lebanese consider Syrians inferior. A mother noted: “the Lebanese think we are different”. Another felt insulted when she heard the director saying to students: “what kind of humans you are?!”.

In addition, the Syrian parents think that the Lebanese complain about the efforts they are making to teach them in the afternoon shift, whereas they should be appreciative of this opportunity (according to the Syrian parents), as they are being paid for it.

The Syrian parents perceive teachers as discriminatory, even though they admit not all of them are in reality. Consequently, they do not expect to receive much support, if they complain of the treatment they are receiving.

## 1.3 Teachers

The teachers of the morning shifts expressed diverse perceptions about the Syrian students. Many consider the Syrians are taking away the rights of the Lebanese in Lebanon. Other teachers perceive the Syrian students, especially the girls, as hardworking and polite, and appreciate these characteristics. Some refused to be interviewed on the subject, asking whether there are no other issues to research more pertinent to the country than the Syrian refugees nowadays. The Lebanese teachers also felt that Syrian students were not at ease early on when they started enrolling in the school and feared that Lebanese teachers might disadvantage them based on their nationality. The teachers, however, feel that they were able to change this perception with time and merit-based performance with no nationality biases.

## 2. RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE SCHOOL

### 2.1 Friendships and student relationships

#### Mixed classes

The Lebanese students claimed to play and converse with Lebanese and Syrian students alike without differentiation based on nationality. They recognised that disputes between Lebanese and Syrian students do happen, but not because of the difference in nationality, but rather related to other school and play subjects of dispute.



However, Lebanese students reported that, a few years back, nationality differences were a trigger for violent incidents between them and the Syrian students, provoked by the former. As time passed, such disputes became unheard of. One student reported that such disputes actually led to building relationships with the Syrians. Parents of the Lebanese students confirmed this, saying they used to hear of nationality-based disputes in the school early on as the refugees started to enrol, but not anymore. Teachers confirmed the impact of time in improving relations, as they explained that, early on when Syrian refugees started attending the school, they played separately in areas of the playground different to the Lebanese. In addition, disputes were more frequent. With time, teachers reported much fewer dispute incidents, and students from both nationalities started playing during recess.

The fact that the Syrian students in the morning shifts have reported high academic achievements, in comparison to Lebanese students – as well as contrary to the expectations of the Lebanese counterparts – and their parents have shown interest in following up on their educational progress further gave signals that they are at least on a par with their Lebanese peers, and they have thus gained their respect and the teachers' respect.

**Syrian students in the mixed morning shift** in both Akkar and Burj Hammoud spoke of generally friendly relationships with Lebanese classmates. They study together and play together during recess or during the sports sessions. The teachers also observed that the relations between the Lebanese and Syrian students in the morning shift are currently good and have developed with time, allowing the Syrians to integrate well. The teachers claimed: “we cannot differentiate Syrians from Lebanese if it was not for the accent”.

---

*Teachers have observed that the relations between the Lebanese and Syrian students in the morning shift are currently good and have developed with time, allowing the Syrians to integrate well.*

---

However, many Syrian students nuanced this positive description of the relationship. Some complained of bullying in the school, an issue that teachers also confirmed. They mentioned that some Lebanese students label them by their nationality using “the Syrian” as a derogatory term, and that Lebanese students sometimes blame them for Lebanon’s problems, voicing accusations such as: “you destroyed our country in the past and have come to finish it”; “you are taking away our country – Lebanon – and rights”; “you are outnumbering us in our own country”; “you have taken aid away from us”, among others. No physical violence incidents were reported between Lebanese and Syrian classmates, although one of the boys attending complained about being constantly beaten by two older Syrian boys. In Burj Hammoud, girls complained of harassment more than boys, although it is important to note that the morning shift in these schools had more girls than boys.

The divisions characterising Lebanese society, particularly sectarian ones, were considered a tension trigger among Syrian students attending the morning shift. The confessional discourse affected the relations of the Syrian students in the morning shift with their Lebanese mates. The participants mentioned that Lebanese schoolmates ask about the confession before asking about names, a matter that is very new to them. Sometimes the Syrian students are blamed or harassed for confessional issues that they have no clue about. This harassment did not prevent Syrian students from voicing the desire to build and maintain relationships with the Lebanese and preference for mixed schooling, although, overall, Syrian students still feel more comfortable and at ease with Syrian friends than with Lebanese.

In cases of disputes, the Syrian students complained to the school staff and management, even though they do not like to do so, and feel sometimes that the school staff takes the Lebanese side. Nonetheless, the Syrian students claimed that, when resorting to the director, he usually listens to two sides of the story and tries to separate people from the problem subject, an approach that the school director himself explicitly narrated with examples. Reaching out to parents at times of conflict was also cited by the students as a positive approach in dealing with disputes.

Some students, though, complained of a few trouble-making students in their class, and in some cases, in Burj Hammoud, teachers and parents mentioned that there was tension between Syrian students on political belonging and opinion of the Syrian crisis.

### **Segregated classes**

**Syrian students in the afternoon segregated shift in both Akkar and Burj Hammoud** only encounter Lebanese students during the transition from the morning shift to the afternoon shift. In Burj Hammoud, only on their first day of school, the Syrian students of the second shift met the Lebanese of the morning shift. The latter told them to stay away and not play with them.

During the transition between shifts, the Syrian students would be waiting for the Lebanese dismissal in the playground before they start classes. According to Syrian students in both areas, the Lebanese students would harass them, throw chalk on them, insult them verbally, and even kick them once they got closer. Some Lebanese

---

***According to Syrian students in both areas, the Lebanese students would harass them, throw chalk on them, insult them verbally, and even kick them once they got closer.***

---

throw stones on them from outside the school gates or from higher floors. In Burj Hammoud, this harassment sometimes leads to fights with physical violence if they get closer to each other. The Syrian students noted that the Lebanese recognise them as Syrian from the way they are dressed and make fun of them.

to the Syrians an attitude of avoidance and for them to ignore the harassment. The director usually asks the second-shift students to move away.

According to the Syrian students in both areas, the school management response is usually to recommend

Nonetheless, the Syrian students in the afternoon shift expressed interest in befriending the Lebanese, if the latter treat them well and do not insult them. One of the respondents expressed these feelings saying: “If a Lebanese comes and tells me let’s resolve our issues and fix our relation and become friends I will accept”, and another noted: “If they do not insult us we will befriend them”.

Within the second shift, relationships appear to be good between classmates and compatriots. Students at first befriended only their relatives in school, but then developed relationships with Syrian classmates and others using the same mode of transport to get to school. They claimed to have met fellows from different regions in Syria and were happy to learn about these regions.

In Burj Hammoud, they also have Iraqi friends in class and they liked them and bonded well with them. They also benefited from their relationship with Iraqis and were exposed to the latter’s country.

## 2.2 Student relationships with teachers and school administrations

### Mixed classes

Lebanese students, parents and teachers of Lebanese schools discussed the ways in which relations within the schools are affected by the weaknesses characterising the public education system in Lebanon. Teachers believed that they are demotivated and are affected by the pressure from the country’s deteriorating economic conditions. They explained that this reduces their productivity and thus affects their performance in class, not to mention dealing with the particular needs of the Syrian students.

---

***Parents of the Lebanese students feel that the enrolment of Syrians further aggravated the challenges already faced by the education system before the crisis.***

---

Parents of the Lebanese students are well aware that the public education system has many weaknesses predating the crisis and explained, for example, how their schoolteachers’ old age and consequently little energy and motivation affects teaching quality, in addition to the school’s limited human resources and human capacities in general. They stated that they are poor and do not

have a better option than public schooling for their children, notwithstanding the low quality of education. The enrolment of Syrians, in their opinion, further aggravated these challenges, even though some noted that Syrian students are capable and performing.

Nevertheless, within that context, in two of the schools from which students were interviewed – one in Akkar another in Burj Hammoud – teachers and, of more significance, the administration have played a significant positive role in improved relationships. In one school in Akkar, for example, conflicts were being resolved with no bias between the two nationalities, according to the Lebanese students and as confirmed by the school director and teachers. The school director stated that he aims to be impartial and non-discriminatory. The approach he applies in resolving non-academic problems is to refocus attention on the subject of the problem, away from personalisation, and listen to both sides of the contended issue. In addition, he claimed to promote these principles across the teaching staff and ensure their application in class. However, despite his efforts, the problem-solving skills were not widespread across all the teaching team and were rather the personal capacities of the director, amidst the absence of any structured programme on addressing conflicts.

Syrian students in mixed classes in both Akkar and Burj Hammoud expressed interest in schooling and valued it as a place not only to study but also to play and enjoy their time. Most of them were doing well in class and achieving academically, reporting generally the same challenges that the Lebanese suffer from, due to the weaknesses of the public education system. Only a few said they face academic challenges particularly in language because of differences in curriculum, and experience difficulty following the lecture.

Students in Akkar, for example, did not complain of favouritism of teachers based on nationality, but only based on performance. The teachers of the morning shift described their relations with the Syrian students as positive, and even appreciated Syrians more because of their hard work and discipline. Yet Syrian students attending both the morning and afternoon shifts complained about teachers' use of corporal punishment. Teachers hit them, and pull their hair or ears. Teachers did not mention such punishments. At the same time, both groups of students acknowledged that some teachers are loving and friendlier.

In Burj Hammoud, by contrast, students said that the teachers did not subject them to physical violence. In very few incidents, basically in one school, a teacher and supervisors verbally insulted them. Yet, some mentioned that teachers favoured Lebanese students and punished more Syrians occasionally. One Syrian student claimed that their grades are many times lowered, or correct answers in exams are changed, in order for the Syrians not to overachieve against the Lebanese. Some Syrian students also felt punishments are not fair and favour the Lebanese against the Syrians.

The attitude and dispute-resolution approach of two school directors – also praised by Lebanese students – had a positive impact on relationships between students. One school director put measures in place against harassment of Syrian students. Another constantly lectured students on the importance of respecting classmates and used punishment for harassers. However, according to the students, in many cases, Lebanese students do not abide by the rules. Recreational activities in the school implemented jointly between Lebanese and Syrian students also contributed to improved relationships according to Syrian students.

---

*The attitude and dispute-resolution approach of two school directors – also praised by Lebanese students – had a positive impact on relationships between students.*

---

### Segregated classes

The relationship of Syrian students to the school in the afternoon shift is less positive. According to teachers and school directors, the teachers' relationship with students attending the afternoon shift was affected by the general academic challenges that this education arrangement faces, as explained by the school director. The teachers' productivity during the afternoon classes is lower; the academic levels of students in the one same class are very different and, thus, require more effort to manage the class; some students start attending months later after the school starts and need more attention to catch up; students rarely complete their homework, which puts more weight on achieving results relying exclusively on classwork. Such factors, along with the fact that most students in the afternoon shifts come from very low socio-economic family backgrounds and live in very poor conditions, put pressure and demands on the teachers of the afternoon classes in performing their tasks. Accordingly, teachers get easily stressed out. Teachers of the afternoon shift also considered the students to be less disciplined, even though some are hardworking and want to achieve academically.

The students in the afternoon shift voiced many complaints compared to their counterparts in the morning shift. The majority of students complained of heavy academic workload, difficulty in understanding subjects, and quality of teaching and of teachers, mainly, and then other children secondly. Their parents complained primarily of learning challenges and how the children are not getting the basics and foundation for courses. Mothers also expressed that they suffered from the lack of organisation and delays in starting the academic year and provision of school supplies. The result was that the academic programme was squeezed and kids were not able to catch up while teachers were under pressure.

Several students complained about teachers' harsh treatment and unfair punishments. One of the teachers throws students' notebooks on the floor, as she gets angry because of their low performance. The students also said that teachers and other school administration members insult them, saying: "you are animals"; "the Lebanese are better than you"; "you were not raised well", etc. A director lectures them every recess on behavioural issues, comparing them to the Lebanese who are considered much better behaved. Some mentioned they are beaten with a rope and a stick. Physical violence in particular was more common against the boys than the girls. The students

feel that they are insulted and want to inflict violence back. In addition, in one school, students are not allowed to use the toilets unless they have a medical excuse. In another school, the second-shift students are obliged by the school to clean the classrooms and toilets regularly, even if they did not dirty them themselves. Some students explained that they changed school because of harassment or beating by teachers and students alike.

That said, and although the satisfaction with the school cannot be quantified in a study of this nature, several students highlighted particular teachers with whom they had a particularly positive relationship. They expressed that these teachers treat them well, and described them as nice, affectionate and caring and “make jokes with us”, especially the girls. In addition, and despite the difficulty, students of the afternoon shift generally liked going to school.

## 2.3 Parents

### Mixed classes

Parents of Lebanese students in mixed classes remain cautious about their children’s relationship with the Syrian students. They do not know their children’s Syrian friends from school. They also generally instruct their children to avoid Syrian schoolmates because, in their opinion, the latter could be a source of problems.

---

*Parents of Syrian students in mixed classes considered the teachers and school administration good, but complained of the quality of education.*

---

Parents of Syrian students in mixed classes prioritised above all issues related to educational attainments in discussing their and their children’s relationship with the school. They considered the teachers and school administration good, but complained of the quality of education. They think the school’s achievements are disappointing and not up to the standards they desire

but cannot do much about it nor can the school administration change it much. The parents feel that the school remains the only recreational activity their children have, since in Lebanon they are deprived of any other forms of recreation.

In terms of relationships between parents and teachers, both parents and teachers considered it “normal”. The teachers observed that, when there are problems with students, Syrian parents are more receptive to listening and accepting than the Lebanese parents are. In one of the schools in Burj Hammoud, a Syrian mother explained that she was part of a parents committee along with Lebanese mothers and they were consulted about their kids and acted as representatives of the parents. While that mother actively took part in the committee, she did not want relationships with the school or other parents – Syrian or Lebanese – beyond that. Like many other mothers, she had a safe distant relationship in dealing with the context where she lives and prioritised the completion of her children’s schooling with minimal trouble.

In terms of relationships between students or the way their children, as Syrian refugees, related to the school, parents of Syrian students were very cautious. They just complained generally of the Lebanese racism against the Syrians, even though they acknowledged they are not all alike. They are obliged to accept whatever they are subject to in Lebanon, because of their refugee situation. Their children’s educational achievements are not up to their expectations, but they said: “we do not have a better option”. They noted that, when they first enrolled their children, the Lebanese did not accept them. With time, they observed that disputes declined, yet, whenever conflicts occur between two students, supporters on each side team up in accordance with their nationality. Some parents also complained of particular troublemakers among the Lebanese students, who are well known in the school, harassing both Lebanese and Syrians, and who represent a main challenge to the school administration.

That said, cases existed in Burj Hammoud where parents appeared to be well integrated in their surroundings. They made friendships with Lebanese neighbours and engaged with the community, which reflected positively on their children’s relationship in the school.

### Segregated classes

Parents of Syrian students in segregated classes appear to have less of a positive relationship with the school and with Lebanese parents. Syrian parents do not have a strong relationship with the school community and remain on the sidelines. In cases of conflict with the Lebanese, they always instruct their kids to avoid and ignore the issues. They often tell their children to be patient and hope for better times when they return home to Syria and that their situation is temporary so there is no need to get in trouble. One mother explained that, even when she

complained about academic issues unattended to by the teacher of her child, she did not get any response and had to change the school, which resolved the matter. The mothers of students often complained of teachers not being “serious” in class and instead “playing with their mobiles” during class, while assigning “written punishments to their students”. They would like their kids to be part of the morning shift with the Lebanese, if the latter treat them fairly and don’t discriminate against them. One of the mothers is convinced it is not going to work because of discrimination, more so among the older children.

Teachers also clearly stated that the relationships with the parents of Syrian students are not good. The teachers complained that parents are not following up on their kids properly. The teachers explained that parents are mostly “illiterate”, they use the school as an “escape” for their kids and do not follow up on their children’s “hygiene”.

In terms of relationships between parents and the Lebanese community, this too, according to Syrian parents, appears very limited. They do not visit and barely meet as parents and children. One mother said: “we, along with our children, are now in a prison, locked in the houses we are renting. In Syria it was different. Houses were bigger, we had social interactions, kids were freer to play outside. Here, we feel unsafe and won’t let kids go buy from grocery. The school is the only exit. Despite all the challenges they face at schools and the attitude, our children are eager to go to school.”

### 3. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SYRIAN AND LEBANESE STUDENTS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

#### Mixed classes

In general, limited relationships beyond the school reflect the generally tense relationship between the Lebanese communities and Syrian refugees, which is affected by several factors including historical and current political factors, real or perceived competition over employment and aid, as well as strain caused by the number of refugees on the infrastructure and services. Findings suggest that daily encounters in the school and resulting improved perceptions are not enough to counter these factors within the community.

Lebanese students in mixed morning shifts reported little contact with the Syrian children outside school, limited to occasional encounters in commercial shops or neighbourhoods. Friendship between classmates from the two nationalities does not exist outside school and parents warn their children against interaction with Syrian refugees in public places.

The **Syrian students** in general also have limited social opportunities to meet their classmates outside the school given their refugee and socio-economic conditions. Even if they bump into each other in a public place or a commercial centre, the students are usually accompanied by their parents that do not know their classmates’ parents, and “do not even want to try to know them”.

**Parents** of the Syrian students of the morning shift considered that there is no room to build relationships with the Lebanese outside school, due to their financial conditions as refugees and due to the behaviour of the Lebanese dealing with them with an attitude of superiority that was evident during the parents’ meetings in school. They think that the school is making some effort within its premises to build relations between the Lebanese and the Syrian students, but there are no such attempts made outside the school.

In Akkar, Syrian students’ relationships were limited to encounters with their immediate Syrian relatives or Syrian and Lebanese neighbours, yet even these were occasional. The children barely socialise with peers, because their parents do not allow it. In Burj Hammoud, where the living conditions of the Syrian students are less segregated, Syrian students of the morning shift, who have been in Lebanon for a few years now, developed some relations with the Lebanese outside school, mainly through the neighbourhood, but these were still limited. Some of the Syrian boys of the morning shift reported that they were enrolled in Lebanese scout troops in their neighbourhood and seemed happy about it, doing activities with the Lebanese, whereas girls had fewer opportunities to build such relations.

### Segregated classes

Lebanese students in all-Lebanese schools reported no contact with Syrian children. In the segregated schooling where no refugees are enrolled, students avoid mixing with Syrian refugees in the community at large as their parents warn them. Parents would caution their children that “the refugees might carry weapons”. The attacks that took place on the Lebanese army in north Lebanon by Syrians and the subsequent arrests of Syrians further reinforced the concerns of Lebanese parents, whose children attended both segregated and mixed classes. These incidents were given as an example of the potential danger that the refugee community could cause.

Another reason behind avoiding the Syrian refugees outside school, as mentioned by the Lebanese students that attend a school where no refugees are enrolled, is to avoid “diseases’ spread”, as the Syrian refugees live in non-hygienic “dirty” conditions in the villages.

Syrian students in the segregated afternoon shift said that they did not go out of their houses when they first arrived in Lebanon. With time, the interaction with their surroundings increased a little. However, they still have limited relations with their Lebanese peers outside school and usually it is with their neighbours that are not necessarily their age. Some parents complained that neighbours harass their children. The parents of the afternoon-shift students confirmed that they had almost no contact whatsoever with Lebanese potential friends.

Exceptions did exist for one girl and one boy attending the afternoon shift. She said that she was able to have befriended a Lebanese girl of her age outside school. The boy befriended a Lebanese peer in his neighbourhood four years earlier when he first arrived in Lebanon and they played together every day. The Syrian boy does not have any other Lebanese friends in school.

Other opportunities to build relationships outside school for students of the afternoon shift happen on the bus on the way to school, even though they are in different schools. However, these few relationships outside school boundaries do not develop much. The students do not visit each other much and do not know about each other’s families.

The afternoon students all expressed a preference for the friendships with fellow Syrians built within the school because there they spend more time together and notwithstanding the insults they are subjected to before classes start. When asked if outside school they face harassment from the community such as neighbours or in public places such as grocery shops, they denied it and said harassment is more common in school or on the way there. One boy stated that he works in a supermarket and no one harasses him at work, unlike at school.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In brief, joint Syrian–Lebanese educational systems appear to have a positive, albeit limited, impact on social cohesion. Such an impact can be further strengthened by an integrated approach seeking to simultaneously improve the educational services for both Lebanese and Syrian schoolchildren, as well as strengthen social stability in the broader community. Findings clearly indicate that social cohesion – in terms of both relationships and perceptions – between students is improved by their sharing the same classroom (see Table 3). The Syrian students of the morning shift seem more integrated and comfortable, benefiting much more from the academic and social life in the school than those attending the afternoon shift. Many of those attending the morning shift have increasingly adapted to the context and even adjusted to the Lebanese accent when speaking, and this adaptation might be the reason behind the decreased discrimination against them.

Lebanese school students, parents and teachers testify to improved relationships between Lebanese and Syrian students within the mixed morning shift compared to three years ago. This is reinforced by the non-discriminatory policy of school administration and good academic performance of Syrian students. Improved relationships within mixed classes appear to have little impact on increased contact between the students themselves, or between them and members of the other community in general beyond the school.

The MEHE and the partner donor community should:

- Prioritise improvement in the quality of educational standards, particularly teachers’ recruitment, training and monitoring for the benefit of all public school students. The public education system in Lebanon suffers from a number of weaknesses since before the influx of Syrian refugees to Lebanon, which were accentuated by the pressure of dealing with quick increases in student numbers, while also meeting special requirements

of students escaping a crisis and seeking refuge. Addressing these challenges would improve the effectiveness of the learning experience for all students and, consequently, reduce directly the academic-triggered tension.

- Acknowledge the positive impact of first-shift schooling and consider favourably requests from schools that are willing to accept additional Syrian students in the first shift. NGOs can provide support by parallel outreach activities within the catchment communities of these schools to really ensure the decision is supported among Lebanese and Syrian parents.
- Provide teachers in the afternoon shift with administrative, logistical and academic support in addition to close performance monitoring, in terms of both educational processes and results. This will improve the quality of education for both Lebanese and Syrian refugee students and create conditions for higher academic achievement.
- Improve responsiveness to arising needs and issues, as voiced by school administrations and teachers, and avoid delays in implementing response interventions. This primarily means ministry-approved measures to ensure timely commencement of the academic year for second-shift students to reduce stress on teachers and students in reaching their academic objectives and allow time for extracurricular activities.
- Support school staff, particularly school administrators with skills and training on dealing with conflict. This would provide them with tools to manage arising problems between students and at the same time help them reduce prejudice and stereotyping-driven behaviour.

Local and international organisations should:

- Support extracurricular activities that bring together Lebanese students with Syrian students in the afternoon shift. Such extracurricular activities could take place on school premises, for instance, during weekends or even outside school within the community. The aim is to create a recreational outlet for children and allow them to connect with other people from their neighbourhood and school and befriend them.
- Target girls of both first and second shifts in extracurricular activities that are culturally appropriate, particularly as boys appear to have opportunities beyond the school while girls don't. For girls, it might be easier to have these activities within the school premises as it could be more acceptable to the parents rather than elsewhere.

This paper was written for International Alert by Zeina Abla and Muzna Al-Masri. The research team were Ali Chahine, Alia Chaaban and Sawsan Masri.

---

#### About International Alert

International Alert helps people find peaceful solutions to conflict. We are one of the world's leading peacebuilding organisations, with nearly 30 years of experience laying the foundations for peace. We work with local people around the world to help them build peace, and we advise governments, organisations and companies on how to support peace. Find out more at [www.international-alert.org](http://www.international-alert.org)

#### Acknowledgements

International Alert and the authors would like to thank Aurelia Ardito and Gemma Bennink from UNICEF Lebanon for their support to this research. The authors wish to thank Mirella Chekrallah, Project Manager/Head of Education Unit at the Caritas Lebanon Migrant Center, and her colleagues Manuela Casalone, Jeanne Elias and Kawthar Sadek. Thanks are also due to Raquelle Chidiac from the Howard Karagheusian Association, Michel Maragel from Himaya, Heba Hage-Felder from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, and Hanan Nehme Merhi and Bahia Sleiman. Special thanks to youth, parents, teachers and school administrators who participated in the study.

International Alert is grateful for the support from our strategic donors: the UK Department for International Development UKAID; the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency; the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The opinions expressed in this paper are solely those of International Alert and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of our donors.

© International Alert 2015

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without full attribution.

International Alert.  
346 Clapham Road, London SW9 9AP, United Kingdom  
Tel +44 (0)20 7627 6800, Fax +44 (0)20 7627 6900  
Email [info@international-alert.org](mailto:info@international-alert.org)  
[www.international-alert.org](http://www.international-alert.org)

Registered charity no. 327553

 /InternationalAlert

 @intalert

ISBN: 978-1-911080-07-7