Education for the Future
Improving learning environments in Jordanian public schools
Lessons from school visits and community dialogue in Northern Jordan

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Introduction

This report from the project "Education for the Future" provides an overview of challenges and prospects of improving learning environments in Jordanian public schools in general. Available literature and public narratives on education in Jordan since 2011 highlight the many challenges to the creation of a positive learning environment posed by the increased number of children attending Jordanian public schools, and Syrian children in particular. The report observes how such challenges have affected the learning environment of Jordanian and Syrian children in the governorate of Mafraq (northern Jordan), where the number of Syrians refugees in the main town exceeds that of the indigenous population (about 100,000 versus 80,000) (Al-Ghad, 2015). It also focuses on an often neglected dimension of the learning environment, namely parental involvement and the role of parent-school relations.

The report is based on a literature review and fieldwork comprising,

- Visits to 40 schools in Mafraq Governorate in May-June 2015, which included observation of the physical and social school environments as well as informal interviews with school staff and school children;

- Seven focus groups and 15 individual/small group interviews with parents, school children and teachers in Mafraq town in December 2015 and May 2016; and

- A small questionnaire survey among Jordanian and Syrian households with children enrolled in public schools in Mafraq town.

The questionnaire survey was carried out in October 2016 with the main objective of empirically testing many of the new insights obtained from the school visits and the semi-structured qualitative interviews held with groups and individuals. The survey comprised a total sample of 107 households with one or more children enrolled in a public basic school, 65 households with Jordanian nationals and 42 households comprising Syrian refugees. The questionnaire contained a few questions about the dwelling, the household as a unit (economic standing) and its members (basic demographics). The majority of questions, however, covered some aspects of children's education, parents' perception of their children's education and the relationship between the families, on the one hand, and the schools and their staff, on the other[1].

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1   Further details on survey methodology and results are available in a separate survey documentation paper. INSERT LINK TO WEBSITE OR REFERENCE.

Learning environments in national policy

Chapter 6 in the Jordanian National Education Strategy 2006-2016 (NES) is fully devoted to the learning environment, which is considered key to providing quality education for all. The NES states that "[l]earning environments that are safe, healthy, and conducive to learning, with appropriate ICT connectivity and equipment provide the optimal conditions for holistic growth and development of learners." Furthermore, it says that, "[t]he provision of effective environments for learning is a primary investment in the future of the country and students, who will be more able to contribute to society in the future." (MoPIC, 2006: 26).

To that end, the NES outlines a set of operational principles for the creation of a good learning environment (MoPIC, 2006: 26-27):

- *General Infrastructure: safety and cleanliness of school facilities;*

- *Classroom context: adequate class size, space per student and timing of classes;*

- *Participation of students and school staff: valuable source of direct information, insights and support for the design and maintenance of new, better, learning environments; and*

- *Central role of the principal: in her/his capacity as the on-site educational leader, she/he has a leading role in ensuring the creation and maintenance of positive learning environments.*

Finally, of relevance to the project's focus on the relations between schools and parents/local communities in education:

- *Participation of families and community: involvement of families and local communities in decisions concerning the design and improvements in the learning environment contribute to the establishment of positive places for learning and strengthen local commitment.*

In order to implement these principles, certain strategic steps are envisioned, including: boost the cooperation between students, teachers, principals, and the community around the development implementation, and maintenance of effective, safe, caring, and healthy learning environments; allocate financial resources to priority learning environment issues; improve transportation of students to schools; implement quality assurance standards and audit procedures; eliminate double shift and rental schools as well as reduce the number of underutilized small schools (less than 400 students); and monitor improvements and progress for each schools' learning environment (MoPIC, 2006: 27-28). These strategic ori-

entations were developed further in operational documents, such as the Education Reform for Knowledge Economy Second Phase (ERfKE II), which provided for the construction of new modern schools, and the refurbishment and extension of existing schools in urban areas (MoE, 2013: 33-34). Furthermore, in several governorates including Mafraq, community leaders were involved in setting up effective, school-based development processes as the main vehicle to deliver to all young people of the Kingdom education of high quality. These strategies and implementation plans have been derailed by the inflow of the Syrian refugees.

Learning environments in practice: conditions and challenges

The data gathering activities of "Education for the Future" have focused on three main aspects of the educational process: 1) general challenges related to learning environments in public schools; 2) specific challenges for Syrian children; and 3) local school initiatives to improve learning environments. The main findings are presented in the following sections.

General challenges

The general challenges outlined below are faced by both Jordanian and Syrian school children alike, and most of the challenges point towards structural causes within the Jordanian school system, which has become more exposed by the extra pressure caused by the Syrian refugee crisis. Although faced by both Jordanian and Syrian children and in most schools, the challenges are most severely experienced by children attending afternoon shifts in schools with double shifts, i.e. predominantly Syrian children.

Overcrowding and uneven distribution of children

As a result of the inflow of some 225,000 Syrian children to Jordan since 2011, classroom overcrowding increased from 36 to 46 per cent in the period 2011-2015, while the number of double-shift schools (accommodating a majority of Jordanian students in the morning and a majority of Syrian students in the afternoon) doubled during the same period of time, from 50 to 98 schools (UNICEF, 2015). In the small questionnaire survey conducted in Mafraq, overcrowding in the classroom came out as a key concern and was mentioned as a priority area of improvement by 29 per cent of Jordanian respondents (mostly parents) and 12 per cent of Syrian respondents.

However, the "student bulge" is not the only factor explaining overcrowding. At the national level, the establishment and location of schools is uneven. According to

a 2013 USAID report, 11 per cent of the student population of Jordan reside in 43 per cent of the schools, while 89 per cent of the student population occupy only 57 per cent of the schools (USAID, 2013). Because of lack of space in most schools this has traditionally resulted in crowding in highly populated urban localities endowed with an insufficient number of schools. Conversely, in some semi-desert areas villages are not endowed with any educational facilities.

Nevertheless, it is the deteriorating impact of overcrowding on the quality of education, which came up as the main concern in most group discussions held in Mafraq. Here, the number of students per classroom frequently exceeds 40 children whereas the standard set by the Ministry of Education specifies 25 children per classroom.

Overcrowding is also said to lead to the overuse and ensuing degradation of the schools' furniture and equipment and affect the overall quality of education. During focus groups, students frequently aired sentiments of discomfort and the ensuing lack of concentration, weak (if not non-existent) teacher-student relationships, limited technological and other resources in the classrooms, inadequate cleanliness inside and outside the classrooms, and poor academic performance. The situation is particularly bad in crowded single-shift schools, leading to examples where classrooms may comprise more than 60 students. In October 2014, the inhabitants of Sama Sarhan in Mafraq governorate decided to boycott the district's schools as a measure of protest against overcrowding that they said had become "fatal" (The Jordan Times, 26 October, 2014).

Poor physical infrastructure and maintenance

The school visits in Mafraq showed that many school buildings and precincts are in need of physical upgrading. According to national reports, 28 per cent of all schools in Jordan are affected. The situation in rented schools is admittedly the worst: our field visits suggest that most of them have limited recreational areas and are not protected by fences or gates. According to the Minister of Planning and International Cooperation, they do not attract the same attention of donor states and local authorities as standard schools (The Jordan Times, 27 November 2016).

In addition, most students we met with emphasized the poor quality of the infrastructure inside the school buildings: broken, soiled, windows and faded walls; dirty and unusable toilets, etc. The school visits showed that this situation can vary largely from school to school. The connected issue of cleanliness in the classrooms was repeatedly brought up during the focus groups, highlighting the insufficient number of cleaners operating in schools. As an alternative, school principals often require from students to carry out cleaning duties in the classroom. Interestingly,

the Jordanian students of the morning shift regularly accused the Syrian students of the afternoon shift of not fulfilling their cleaning duties, and vice-versa.

Furthermore, students and teachers alike complained about the lack or insufficient number, and the outdated nature, of specific facilities such as health clinics, IT and scientific labs, libraries, sports fields, and the availability of equipment such as computers, heating devices and stationary. The lack of or poor maintenance of such facilities and equipment is also an issue identified by the school visits.

Better school equipment, i.e. physical facilities and classroom resources, was ranked as the highest priority to improve the learning environment by Jordanian parents (86 per cent) and came second amongst Syrian parents (46 per cent) in the questionnaire survey. Improvements of the outside areas of schools, including playgrounds, were ranked as the third highest priority by both groups.

Finally, as shown by our interviews and noted in numerous reports, the specific needs of Jordanian and Syrian disabled children require changes to the physical infrastructure of many school buildings in order to turn them "disable-friendly".[1]

Table 1 The state of the physical environment in 40 schools, Mafraq Governorate, 2015.

Characteristic/facility	Findings and observations
Physical infrastructure in general	27% of schools had
Playground	50% of schools had a playground suitable for playing
School ownership and design	28% of schools were rented and not physically designed as schools
Crowdedness	43% of schools
Number of shifts	12% of schools ran two shifts

Safety concerns

The deteriorated physical infrastructure of many schools in Mafraq was said to jeopardize the safety of the students, e.g. due to a lack of fences around rented schools. Many students, parents, and teachers were concerned about the various dangers they faced in the schools' neighbourhoods, stemming from uncontrolled car traffic, drug traffickers and casual violence. Syrian boys often accused groups

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1   In Mafraq, heavily disabled children are tended by local NGOs, which, with the assistance of the Ministry of Social Development and the Higher Council for Affairs of Persons with Disabilities, provide them educational services adapted to their situation.

of Jordanian youngsters of verbal and physical harassment on their way to and from school, while girls mentioned cases of sexual harassment. Again, these accusations are reciprocated by Jordanian children. In the questionnaire survey, improvements of the safety in and around schools were mentioned as a crucial area to ensure better learning environments by 24 per cent of Syrian respondents and 13 per cent of Jordanian respondents.

Limited capacity of teachers

There was unanimity amongst Jordanian and Syrian students and their parents that most teachers were not fulfilling their educational responsibilities properly, and the group sessions comprised several statements like, "they show little commitment" to their job, "they are not properly trained", and "they lack the necessary skills" to manage a classroom. Teachers operating in the afternoon shift for Syrian students were more criticized than those operating in the morning shift because of their inexperience. As acknowledged by these teachers themselves and the Ministry of Education, most of them are newly graduates (and not necessarily in educational sciences) and have short-term contracts aimed to cover the (temporary) need of extra teachers for Syrian children. Students and parents also mentioned that teachers' work in the afternoon shift in particular is never (or too seldom) inspected.

Such descriptions were also reflected in the results from the questionnaire survey, where better teachers was ranked the second most important area of improvement by Jordanians and was ranked the most important area of improvement by Syrian refugees—mentioned by respectively 64 and 77 per cent of respondents as the 1st, 2nd, or 3rd most crucial issue to tackle.

Interestingly, teachers tend to agree with the scathing statements aired by students and their parents. However, they present the unfavourable situation as a rather recent phenomenon, the consequence of unrewarding and stagnant wages, difficult working conditions due to overcrowding, a growing lack of respect from their students, ill-adapted "old-school" teacher training, and a heavy administrative work load.

Bullying was mentioned as a major problem in 24 per cent of the schools visited in Mafraq governorate, and the resort by teachers and administrative staff to verbal bullying and corporal punishment is mentioned by many girls and boys as a major deterrent to school and education at large, leading also to violence amongst students and to drop out. This situation clearly contradicts Jordan's legislation that prohibits corporal punishment in schools since 1981 (UNICEF, 2013). However, male and female teachers tend to downplay or justify the violence exerted against students, highlighting the "difficult" or violent nature of many of them. Several

teachers complained that the anti-violence legislation, which bans them from dismissing or suspending students disrupting classroom and school activities, combined with the lack of proper training and ineffective school leadership, had further disowned the teaching staff from its authority and respect in the classroom (the children's violent attitudes against teachers instilling fear amongst several of them[2]) and from its prestige in society at large.

Teachers, students and parents alike seem to be worried about the classroom situation, often characterized by crowdedness, noisiness, unruliness, or verbal and physical violence and abuse, features not conducive to efficient learning. Such concern manifested itself as a wish for better discipline in school, expressed by one in three parents as the 1st, 2nd, or 3rd most crucial issue to tackle to improve the learning environment at their child's school. Their "demand" for more qualified teachers just mentioned, should also be seen in the light of their inadequacy in managing the classroom situation and doing so without resorting to illegal and abusive means.

In Jordan, the counselor is tasked to play a major role in educating students and teachers about the former's rights as well as dealing with incidents related to student-to-student violence or teacher-to-student issues. Among the 40 schools visited in Mafraq Governorate, 15 schools were without a counselor; and in those with a counselor, both teachers and parents were unanimous in outlining their inefficiency. The rehabilitation of the counselors' role has become a national concern (The Jordan Times, 24 April 2014). As a result of schools and teachers not treating their children "right", as understood by parents, we were told that more and more Jordanian parents take the initiative to protect their children by holding faulty teachers accountable to their misdeeds, e.g. by prosecution under state law and we heard stories of desperate parents retaliating physically against those who have abused their children.

Maladapted curricula

There was consensus amongst Jordanian and Syrian students as well as teachers interviewed in Mafraq, that sports and other recreational components of the formal curriculum should be expanded. They also expressed a need for setting up a genuine extra-curricular or co-curricular program including travels, social and cultural awareness sessions, additional sports classes, IT and internet proficiency. Such activities would serve to build relations between teachers and students and between students; it would improve the social and psychological well-being of students and improve the overall learning environment.

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2   Children's violence against teachers is a phenomenon, which has recently been documented at
      country level (Alzyoud et al., 2016). See also Alayan, 2015.

Teachers complained about the fact that Mafraq schools were lagging well behind other schools in Jordan, starting with those in Amman, which are believed to have the most developed and strongest curricula/extra-curricular educational services.

It was admitted that the formal and extra-curricular educational services received by Syrian students in Mafraq were poorer than those received by Jordanian students. In addition, Syrians frequently asked for support to enrich the curriculum for Syrian refugee children to safeguard their cultural and national identity. Furthermore, most Syrian children expressed that they found it difficult to adjust to the Jordanian curriculum, especially in the core disciplines of mathematics and English, a situation which contributes to school failure and dropout—mentioned as a significant problem in 27 per cent of the visited schools.

Lack of coordination within the school management system

All teachers interviewed in Mafraq agreed that there are gaps in the overall management of the school system that seriously contribute to the deterioration of the learning environment. One major gap relates to the lack of coordination and dialogue between the Ministry of Education (and its directorates in the governorates) and the schools. An example is the way changes in the curriculum are conceived and implemented. Whereas the teachers agreed that the national curriculum is improving, decisions to implement changes are usually taken unilaterally by the Ministry of Education and imposed upon them without any prior consultation or training.

Lack of communication between schools and parents

Another management gap pertains to the lack of communication between the schools' staff, including school principals and teachers, and the parents. Many parents attending the focus group discussions complained that they were not being informed about such important matters as changes to the curriculum and the evolution of school-related legislation. Yet many parents stated that they followed the situation of their children closely, including meeting with teachers and principals, but mainly at their own initiative. Opportunities to establish a structured and in-depth dialogue with the teachers and the educational authorities were rather scarce.

Confirming this, the school visits in Mafraq showed that one third of the schools did not have any functioning system for parent-teacher meetings, despite the law requiring it. This picture is verified by the questionnaire survey, which shows that only 23 per cent of the parents (32 per cent of Jordanian and ten per cent of Syrian parents) are aware of the existence of Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) at their children's schools. Out of these, only one third have ever attended a PTA meeting.

According to the survey, just above half the Jordanian parents but fewer than half the Syrian refugee parents have ever been invited to a general school meeting, have ever been invited to an individual meeting with the teacher of their child, and have ever received written feedback about their child's school performance and/or behavior. Roughly the same share of parents has contacted the school about their child's performance or social wellbeing. Interestingly, around two thirds of parents who have received written information about their child from school or have received invitations to individual meetings with the child's teacher have ever initiated contact with the school about their child's social welfare and performance, whilst only one third of parents who have never received written information or an invitation have done so. This suggests that "active" schools generate more engaged parents.

The mapping exercise shows that the schools usually organize one or two general meetings every school year and that PTAs exist, but that they are as good as their members are committed. According to Jordanian and Syrian parent focus group participants, attendance at the PTA meetings is low, mainly because parents are not properly informed of such meetings, or because they feel that the entire educational staff, from the Ministry to the teachers, is unaccountable. In addition, transportation costs are deemed unaffordable by many. However, the questionnaire survey found that 85% of all parents would like to participate in future PTA meetings, testimony of the potential for higher parent engagement.

Contrasting this, teachers interviewed describe most parents in Mafraq as uninterested or not having the educational background it takes to aptly monitor and provide support to the education of their children. Again, the role of the counselors was highlighted as needed to bridge the gap between educators, students and parents.

Socio-cultural aspects influencing learning environments and the quality of education

Many of the issues highlighted in the previous sections are compounded by structural characteristics of the Mafraq society, some of which are common to the Syrian refugee communities. Although these characteristics are hardly quantifiable, their prevalence in the respondents' narratives makes them important to consider.

First, "traditional" adaptations to economic hardship keep children out of school. For example, steering children towards early marriage is a "solution" for girls in many poor families, Jordanian and Syrian alike. Child marriage is directly associated with girls' school dropout (as principals and families are unwilling to accept married girls in schools), while it renders them more vulnerable to diminished social and economic opportunities as well as domestic abuse.

Second, a culture of "manliness" conjuring up the image of brave and strong men prevails amongst children, encouraging violence amongst them, in and outside schools. Outside schools, the bad reputation acquired by Syrian refugees elicits violence against them. In this respect, teachers sometimes blamed Jordanian parents for fuelling anti-Syrian sentiments among their children.

Third, "tribalism", namely the segmentation of society along competing solidarity networks defined by the identification of their members to tribes allegedly originating from a common ancestor, was said to result in teachers favoring Jordanian children whose families belong to the most powerful local tribes. Moreover, as has been observed in many rural parts of the country, removing ineffective teachers in areas where familial or tribal connections run strong often proves difficult, limiting the advent of a genuine performance-based management system (USAID, 2017).

Specific challenges for Syrian children

As indicated by Syrian parents in discussions, Syrian refugee children face particular, additional, challenges in obtaining quality education and a satisfactory learning environment compared to Jordanian children. These specific challenges are related to the school enrolment process and to the learning environment.

Most Syrian parents complained about the existence of administrative and social barriers that lead to unclear and arbitrary practices in admission procedures:

- Decisions regarding registration of refugee children occur at the discretion of school principals in a non-transparent manner;

- Not having an ID card from the Ministry of Interior or having an ID card that was not issued in the governorate of residence is a main barrier to school enrolment;

- According to the Ministry of Education regulations, any child who has been out of school for three years or more cannot re-enrol in the formal public education system. This is said to be the case of many Syrian refugee children, who depend on a rather limited non-formal education system; and

- Lack of documentation of previous education in Syria.

Furthermore, Syrian refugee children and their parents claimed they faced particular challenges within the schools precincts:

- Less qualified and skilled teachers, as already alluded to above;

- Reduced school hours;

- Difficulties in adapting to the Jordanian curriculum (especially in English and mathematics);

- Higher prevalence of permanent and "intermittent" dropouts;

- Infrastructural deficiencies are compounded by the fact that the toilets are closed during the afternoon shift;

- Violence exerted against Syrian children outside school hours by Jordanian children; and

- Unmet psychosocial needs due to war experience and/or hardship endured during and after the flight to Jordan.

Current "best practices" to improve learning environments

One of purposes of the 40 school visits carried out in Mafraq Governorate was to identify local initiatives aimed at improving the school learning environment. In most schools there were few signs of such initiatives, since the teachers and other staff was completely preoccupied with ensuring the regular educational workflow. However, in about one fourth of the schools, initiatives were taken to improve the learning environment at different levels:

School staff level

- Actively promoting cooperation and communication between the principal and other key administrative staff, counsellors and teachers e.g. through regular staff meetings; and

- Encouraging and facilitating capacity building of teachers.

Student level

- Encouraging students to take leadership and responsibility, e.g. by carrying out and sharing responsibilities for maintenance duties in school;

- Establishing children's parliaments to support teachers, including in classroom teaching;

- Actively using the morning radio (school loudspeaker system) to communicate with children and encourage children to discuss prepared subjects amongst themselves;

- Rewarding students who contributed actively to a positive learning environment by access to extra-curricular activities, e.g. playing computer games; and

- Rewarding exceptional and hard-working students.

Extra/co-curricular activities

- Establishing "side-activities" such as handicrafts classes/sessions; and

- Encouraging students to participate in external activities, such as science festivals (in one school the teachers transported the children to such an event in their own cars).

Parent/community reach-out

- Making home visits to families whose children show signs of leaving school;

- Organizing bazaars to raise funds for infrastructure improvements and for school material to children from disadvantaged families (one school had a charity box where staff donated money to support poor school children and their families); and

- Establishing a developmental education council at the school, which includes parents. The council selects or asks parents to select one or a few parent representatives and influential civil society personalities to attend meetings with the governor to inform about school needs.

Regional level

- Establishing relationships with neighbouring schools to share resources, e.g. share teachers with particular skills such as in English language; and

- Establishing links with state authorities and powerful NGOs to attract support, e.g. to improve school infrastructure such as toilet facilities and playgrounds. The role of the principal and his/ her staff in establishing financial support networks (notably by virtue of political ties) is considered crucial.

Conclusions and recommendations

General conclusion

A general observation based on our findings is that the school management system is characterized by arbitrary decisions leading to large variation in the state of the learning environment and quality of education, both geographically as well as between different groups of children.

This situation is reflected in several features of the educational system: the uneven distribution of school children among schools; the disparity in physical facilities between schools, of which rented schools are in the worst condition; huge

variation in teacher qualifications and capacity, both across schools and between morning and evening shifts; quality differences in the curricula; and the fact that some schools have counselors and functioning systems for school-parent communication, while other have not. Furthermore, the arbitrary management system is apparent in the fact that initiatives to improve learning environments and the quality of education to a large degree depend on the resourcefulness and initiatives of teachers and school management.

Potential areas of intervention

We have identified three key areas for intervention and further investigation, which may contribute to improving learning environments and the quality of education in Jordanian public schools. These are:

1. Improving the flow of information between schools and parents/homes by developing communication channels between the latter and the school's educational and administrative staff;

2. Raising awareness of parents and children about rights concerning the learning environment, including school-parent communication rules and channels; and

3. Building capacity of parents in supporting their children in homework and school issues, and school involvement in general. It may also be helpful to have parents volunteer as assistant teachers.

As mentioned above, some schools are rather "developed" and seem to have a good track record in one or more of these three areas. It would be useful to identify success stories and "best practices" and set up systems and mechanisms for the transfer of knowledge and competence between schools, students and parents across communities. While the context is often not exactly the same across schools and communities, the sharing of experiences and "recipes" for what works and what does not work may prove inspirational and helpful.

A thorough mapping exercise to identify and document the approaches, which have worked in accordance with intentions and with which schools, students and parents are satisfied, may be a useful next step. However, there is no reason to wait. To the contrary, research is well equipped to follow processes, and such action research can assist in identifying "model approaches" to improving the learning environment along the lines suggested here.

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