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Barhoum, Rafah; Avery, Helen

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Helen Avery and Rafah Barhoum, Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, Lund University

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Educational leadership in a state of protracted crisis: refugee education in Lebanon

The presentation is based on a series of interviews with school leaders working with refugee children in Lebanon, both within the Lebanese schools and in various NGOs. Questions focused the social, pedagogical and economic dimensions of their work, as well as their strategies for organising training and functioning structures.

In Lebanon, there are different groups of refugee and migrant pupils in need of education, at primary and secondary levels. These include Palestinians born in Lebanon, or recently arrived as refugees; Syrian refugees; refugees from other countries, and children of migrant workers. The residence and work status of their parents varies. The Syrian refugees constitute a very large group, but the exact numbers are uncertain. People escaping from the war in Syria are not recognised as refugees, and the cost of obtaining work permits is high, so very many lack documents altogether. While some live in camps close to the Syrian border, very many are dispersed across the country, or are seeking opportunities in Beirut. In principal, the younger Syrian children have access to compulsory school levels, and study in a second shift. For various reasons however, not all children actually go to school. Almost all the older children are outside the education system, due to the high cost, and we speak of a 'lost generation'.

There are numerous NGOs working to support education for the Syrian refugee children. Since English and French are languages of instruction in the Lebanese curriculum, the work of NGOs involves language teaching. Support work may also involve getting used to school routines, for children with trauma and interrupted schooling. Providing materials, spaces for doing homework, volunteer tutoring, and food or warm clothes are also important tasks. Parents' stress affects the children, and sometimes there are conflicts between different groups.

The uncertain and precarious situation of the refugees, lack of resources and poor living conditions are major dimensions of the work of school leaders in these contexts, both for those working within the Lebanese schools, and for those who have leadership functions within the NGOs. They need to manage the tensions and conflicts of the situation and adapt to abruptly changing legislation and funding conditions. They also organise training and ad-hoc structures for volunteers, and motivate teachers who have to do work beyond the curriculum, and in situations that their teacher training did not prepare them for.

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