Examining barriers and enablers to language enriching early childhood education and care at systems, structural and process levels in Lebanon

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Rationale

- Children's early language skills underpin future developmental outcomes. However, most research on language enriching environments and intervention strategies to support children's early language development is based on Western, English-speaking countries.
- Lebanese Arabic is the mother tongue for most children and is commonly used for everyday communication in Lebanon. French and English are widely used in many homes while some children are only exposed to foreign languages alongside Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) at the beginning of preschool. This poses challenges for language support in early years education and the lack of a unified approach due to a fragmented education system based on a mixture of private, semi-subsidised, public and NGO-run schools
- Studies have shown it is possible to increase the quality of language support offered to children in the complex multilingual Lebanese context (Messarra et al., 2021, Kouba et al., 2022); however, these remain small-scale and exploratory. The precise nature of educators' knowledge, understanding and attitudes with regards the provision of language enriching environments in Lebanon remains underspecified

Lebanese Context

- Lebanon faces challenges due to a long history of conflict, occupation, and political and economic instability. The situation has been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, Beirut explosion and recent rapid economic decline.
- Lebanon hosts the largest number of refugees per capita in the world due to waves of mass displacement from neighbouring Syria and Palestine.
- The focus on children's language and early childhood education can take a back seat to essential needs such as food, shelter, and medicine.
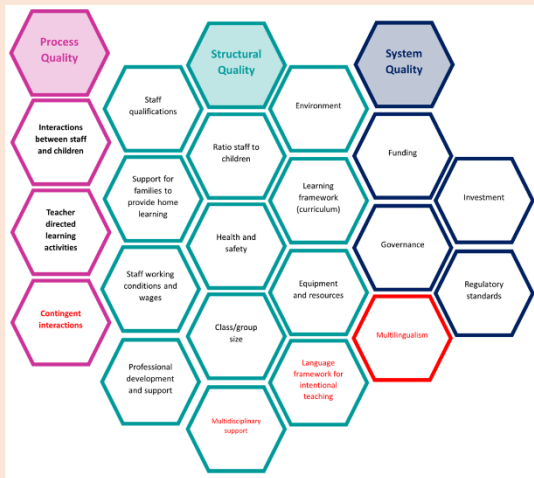
Quality in Early Childhood Education (Torii et al)

System Quality: The systems that support, organise and maintain ECE. This includes funding, governance, investment and regulatory standards.

Structural Quality: The structures that are necessary for high quality ECE to be delivered effectively.

Process Quality: The processes that are in place to support interactions between children and educators.

Additional factors: Multilingualism

References

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For more information about this poster.

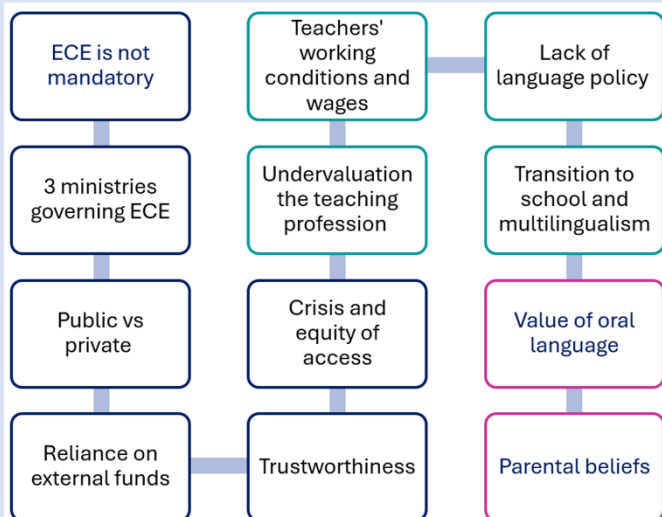For more information about Bulbul.

Research Aims

- Explore the barriers and enablers to ECE in Lebanon including the promotion of oral language development.
- Explore policy and services relevant to ECEC including the promotion of oral language development in children from 0-4 years.
- Investigate the degree to which services are equitable. Are they reaching all sectors of society with equal benefit?
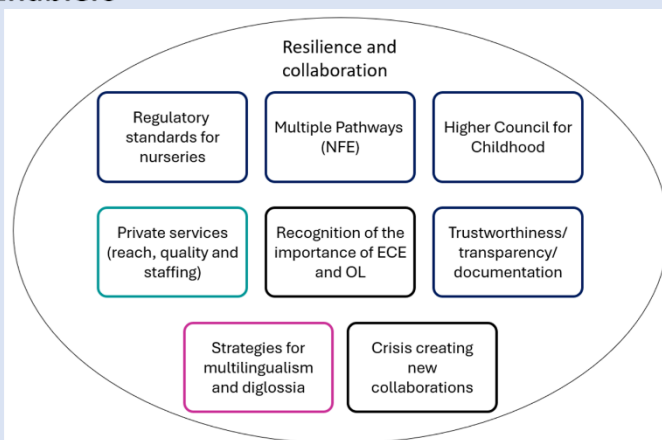
Methods

- In-depth qualitative case study
- Semi-structured interviews or focus groups with fifty-six participants representing key agents in ECEC policy, services and practice across Lebanon.(N = Government Ministries-8; Higher Education -7; Public and Private Schools and Nurseries-25; NGOs -9; Speech and Language Therapists-3; Paediatricians-2; and Parents-2).
- Thematic analysis identified the barriers and enablers to the provision of high quality ECEC to promote child language development with a focus on equity, the prevalence of multilingualism, multi-agency collaboration, funding and sustainability.

Barriers

System Quality Structural Quality Process Quality

Enablers

System Quality Structural Quality Process Quality Overarching Theme

Barriers

- **Early Childhood Education (ECE) is not mandatory:** children are not required to attend nursery and kindergarten; formal education starts at 6 years old. This has an impact on the value people place on ECE resulting in lower levels of funding.
- **ECE is governed by three ministries:**
  - Ministry of Public Health (MOPH): private nurseries (0–3-year-olds)
  - Mistry of Social Affairs (MOSA): public nurseries (0–3-year-olds)
  - Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE): kindergartens (3–5-year-olds)

  This causes fragmentation of services and affects communication between ministries and with other educational organisations.
- **Public and private:** having ECE split between public and private settings results in inequity. Different levels of investment affect staffing, buildings, quality etc. The type of provision children access depends on their families' socio-economic circumstances. Public schools have been affected by lengthy closures due to lack of funds and there is very little public provision for children under the age of 18-20 months. 70% of nurseries are private.
- **Reliance on external funds:** as ECE is not mandatory the government budget does not pay for all ECE. Education relies on donors for 80% of its funding, for ECE the rate is even higher. Funding comes from charitable or 3rd Sector organisations. This affects sustainability of education/initiatives, and results in fragmentation.
- **Trustworthiness:** without a clear road map, overarching policy, and effective communication, funders do not always know how funding is spent, leading to a lack of trust. There is a need for increased accountability and monitoring.
- **Crisis and equity of access:** challenges mentioned above have been exacerbated by the crises (political and economic instability, conflict and displacement, and COVID), resulting in increased inequity between different areas of Lebanon.
- **Undervaluation of the teaching profession/working conditions:** all teachers are undervalued, but especially those in the public sector. Recruitment has fallen and many teachers are leaving the profession or the country.
- **Lack of language policy:** there is no clear guidance about the language of instruction and when to use Modern Standard Arabic / dialects / foreign languages (English or French).
- **Transition to school:** schoolification is a problem. Parents and settings often focus on what children need to do when they are in mandatory education rather than what they need while they are very young.
- **Multilingualism:** approaches to the use of home language / foreign languages vary, not all teachers are proficient in the languages they are expected to teach. Parents value some languages more than others.
- **Value of oral language:** Whilst some aspects of oral language are valued, there is no clearly articulated strategy and a lack of intentionality to support these areas.
- **Parental beliefs:** parental beliefs about the value of oral language and multilingualism place pressure on ECE settings.

Enablers

- **Regulatory standards:** The International Rescue Committee (IRC), Knowledge to Policy Centre (K2P), MOSA, and MOPH have published standards for both public and private nurseries, although these differ.
- **Multiple pathways:** there are formal and non-formal pathways into education. In the past the non-formal pathway was only for non-Lebanese children. As a result of high levels of dropouts and child labour, pathways are now available for all children. While this applies to schools rather than ECE it reflects a focus on inclusivity.
- **Higher Council for Childhood:** the council supports complementary work between NGOs and the public sector, however, not everyone feels it is effective.
- **Private services**: high quality services are accessible for families who can pay, however there are concerns about equity.
- **Recognition of the value of ECE and Oral Language:** people recognise the importance of ECE and oral language, seeing how they can underpin children's development and future lives.
- **Trustworthiness:** new initiatives are emerging that require accountability and financial transparency, this is starting to address the lack of trustworthiness mentioned in the barriers section.
- **Strategies for multilingualism and diglossia:** a small number of actors in the ECE space are actively addressing how to overcome the impact of diglossia and multilingualism on access to education within the Lebanese system.
- **Crisis creating new collaborations:** we know that the crisis had a very devastating impact, but it catalysed collaboration between organisations and funders for initiatives and programs.