



**Khaddit Beirut**

## **BREAKING THE CYCLE: KHADDIT BEIRUT EDUCATION INITIATIVE**

Issue 8

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The lethal blast that occurred in the port of Beirut on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 2020 served as the last wakeup call as it further exposed the magnitude of governmental dysfunction and corruption in Lebanon. The blast and its physical and emotional damage added another layer of devastation to the students and families served by the public schooling system. Students in Lebanese public schools have been spiraling into further neglect and marginalization despite the successive humanitarian attempts at relief and development initiated by the international community. Since the beginning of the 90s, the public schooling system has been plagued by high dropout rates, poor quality of learning, poorly prepared teaching workforce and a steady migration of middle-class families to the private sector, leaving public schools to disproportionately serve the most vulnerable among school-aged children.

### **Launching the Education Initiative**

The Education group (KHBEd) came together under the umbrella of *Khaddit Beirut* (Beirut Shake-up) aligning with its mission of developing a road map for recovery that is evidence-based, community-led, and locally-driven. The team consists of a collective of educators, researchers and concerned citizens who want to be change agents with diverse expertise joining efforts to break the cycles of dysfunction, corruption, mediocrity and ineffectiveness in order to transform our educational system into one that enables every child to develop as fulfilled individuals, masterful and creative learners, engaged community members and future leaders.



The group is guided by a sense of moral outrage at the status quo and a drive to expose and break the cycles that brought about the demise of the educational sector. We believe that breaking those cycles and keeping the focus on providing the basic human right for education and equitable opportunity for success is the only path for schools to become one of the major spaces where societal change can be initiated.

Our work started off with a series of forums where interested educators who share our principles engaged in dialogue developing a shared vision that builds on existing assets, is informed by globally acknowledged best practices and honors the peculiar socio-cultural context of the communities that the schools are serving. In parallel, we started by identifying partner schools through calling on public school principals in different areas in Beirut to join us. 6 schools emerged as ready to partner with the KHB Education group, all willing to collaborate with us to push through the crises, refusing to give in to despair and believing that a vision for a quality, just and fair educational system can be achieved.

Based on an extensive review of the literature and of international success stories, especially those of schools facing harsh conditions, the community school model emerged as a promising model and was chosen to guide the co-construction, with the school practitioners, of a shared vision for schools. This model revolves around 5 pillars: partnerships with families, authentic community engagement, powerful learning for students and teachers, broad-based leadership capacity for improvement, and integrated health and psycho-social services for the wellbeing of teachers and students. The school principals were ready to adopt this model and to start co-building with us a shared vision of a community school that is grounded in its sociocultural context and connected to its community. Welcoming us into their schools was a first step towards enacting this model as they considered us members of the community who are putting their expertise at the service of their schools to build the capacity of the staff to develop and implement this alternative model.

### **Breaking the Cycles**

While our goal was to support the schools through one of the toughest crises they have ever faced, we were adamant not to reproduce the status quo. Our actions, decisions and services were designed to break the



numerous cycles that held back the development of an effective public schooling system. These cycles include:

**Piecemeal Support.** Most support to date aimed to improve and reform the public schooling system has been characterized by one stop disconnected support where multiple players are involved without the presence of proper coordination mechanisms and a design that would ensure coherence during the implementation of these interventions and secure systemic sustainable impact. We developed a flexible and responsive governance structure that comprises a **steering team** that strategizes, plans, and coordinates all initiatives transforming them into concerted efforts towards implementing our shared vision. It also encompasses an **advisory team** and a network of educators and community members concerned about education who committed to volunteer their time and expertise to develop action plans, deliver support based on needs and projects at hand, assist in research and documentation, expand the network, and support the operations. **Network coordination mechanisms** were set to ensure coherence and alignment while capitalizing on the group's shared values including transparency, collegiality, and professionalism. Processes for sharing resources and maintaining shared **documentation** were established along with holding periodic meetings for dialogue and reflection culminating in reaching a shared mission as the teams collectively constructed their roadmap. Finally, the steering team mapped the expertise of the volunteers and the services they are ready to offer and matched their skills and their proposed initiatives to the different facets of the community school model. Sustainability of the impact was at the center of all the decisions made towards building our governance structure.

**Deficit-based Approach.** A deficit-based approach has dominated most of the initiatives targeting public schools. We believe that this approach enhanced the despair and distrust among public school teachers and leaders towards external parties who typically approach them to help without taking the time to acknowledge and build on their assets. Thus, it was important for us to take an asset-based approach. Instead of focusing on the inadequacies and deficits that the schools are facing, we constantly shed light on their strengths and celebrate and build on the successes they have managed to achieve despite the dire circumstances they are working under. This approach alters defeatist perspectives and brings back a sense of educational mission to educators. The assets-based approach was put into



action through the unconventional assets and needs assessment that we conducted with each school. It consisted of a series of extended focused reflective conversations with each school principal and a team from the school to identify existing assets. Through this process, we started reversing the chronic neglect of the needs and know-how of educators by putting their perspectives, voices and experiences at the forefront of future collaborations. The culmination of this process was a report that was shared with the school principals and teams which affirmed the successes as much as shed light on what they deem as priorities to be addressed. This was the start of a process enabling the principals and teachers to enact their agency by developing their own agendas and priorities rather than accept externally imposed plans. Our approach led principals as well as school teams to feel appreciated for the effort they have been putting and increased their morale and motivation to drive their schools into a better place.

**Reproducing Dependency.** As alluded to, public schools in Lebanon have depended on aid from various agencies and NGOs that often come with their own agendas and programs that are detached from the needs of the schools. While any initiative might bring some positive impact, it paradoxically has the potential to pose barriers that disable schools from achieving sustainable growth and improvement. The chronic dependency on others to bring aid has dilapidated the agency of the schools and their school leaders. Thus, we tried to break that cycle of dependency by enabling the schools and their leaders to be the sole decision makers of what they want and who they want to partner with. We consciously work on ensuring that all our initiatives and decision-making processes are community-led and participatory, generating ownership among practitioners in our partner schools. This entails strategizing and re-strategizing based on the rapid and constant changes in the situations of Lebanon as a whole and of the schools and their changing day-to-day realities in particular. Our ultimate goal is to build the capacity of these schools to make informed decisions while exercising their agency, breaking free from their chronic dependency on outside agencies. Strengthening practitioners' agency also contributes to changing the narrative from 'we cannot because we do not have the necessary resources to what can we do with what we have'. It is replacing the school principals' opportunistic acceptance of all what is offered with a critical selection of interventions that align with schools' priorities and vision.



**Exclusive Focus on Relief.** Efforts aimed at helping the public school system were also mostly directed towards relief rather than development, leading to only setting mediocre goals to be achieved in public schools, consequently depriving its teachers and principals from aspiring for the same high standards set in schools serving more privileged communities. We strongly believe that investing in capacity building is the best strategy to reverse this pattern and for ensuring excellence and social justice. In order to build this capacity, each school principal chose a group of teachers/administrators that would closely work with an assigned team of coaches from KHBEd. Coaches help the team locate resources, problem solve, and come up with initiatives. So far, school teams attended workshops, organized extended learning activities for students, and developed plans to reach out to the community. In addition to building capacity efforts being based on needs, they are also tightly connected to assisting the teams in implementing the initiatives they launch or adopt. As a result, building capacity encompasses delivering trainings and coaching as well as providing the necessary infrastructure, complementarity that ensures higher impact. This attention and assistance provided to the principals' contrasts with the neglect and marginalization they have been subjected to.

To give you a glimpse of our work, in one of our partner schools, a partnership was secured with two NGOs to transform one of the rooms into a state-of-the-art computer lab, colorfully painted and furnished with comfortable chairs and desks and new laptops. In parallel, volunteer IT experts ensured the functionality of the lab, through checking the connectivity and the functioning of the computers. Concurrently workshops were conducted to impart IT skills to students as well as to guide teachers on how to make best use of the lab. Stemming from our belief in concerted efforts that build the whole child, KHBEd teachers and the principal were offered sessions to promote their and their students' wellbeing and were referred to additional resources related to mental health that they can tap into. Funds were also made available to the principal to take measures to meet the minimum sanitary requirements. This example of community-based support to schools attended to all aspects - infrastructure, training, wellbeing, and learning environment. It enhanced the trust that started to be built since we engaged the schools in identifying their assets and assessing their needs. We are hoping that this approach will lead to a shift in educators' mindset and raise their expectation beyond just



receiving relief for the schools, to getting the extensive, comprehensive and sustainable support they deserve.

**Absence of Documentation.** We identified an absence of a culture of documentation which would be essential for building a collective repository of knowledge, for knowledge sharing and for ensuring quality, process control, sustainability and tracking of decisions throughout the years. We are using documentation as a mean towards shifting from a reactionary mode to a proactive planning mode for all those involved, especially for teachers and principals, further empowering them to exercise their agency. We therefore started off from the beginning of our work with implementing an internal documentation process that documents pretty much all functions of our units from schedules of events, to lists of volunteers, to reflections of discussions, to transcripts of meetings and decisions made. This has helped us standardize processes and ensure coherence, efficiency and a sustained focus on the shared vision and mission. This has been essential since many of our volunteers come from different disciplines and are dispersed around the globe. It kept us on track and ensured the consistency and efficiency needed as we move forward.

**Detachment from the Community.** Unlike mainstream conventions in which schools operate in isolation from the community they serve, we invited and supported the school principals and teachers to explore the resources and assets in their communities. Utilizing a community-based participatory approach, we involved the principals and other members of the schools in planning and soliciting support from community members who are willing to fund and offer expert services that align with the different pillars of the community school model. In other words, the school community gradually started becoming an integral part of the improvement initiatives undertaken by each school.

### **Towards Building Community Schools**

Our work so far with the 6 partner schools has moved us forward toward our aspiration to build community schools where expectations are kept high for all children to have excellent educational experiences. While our focus remained on developing the school teams' capacity to lead their own journey of reconstruction, the continuous collapse of the country forced us to redirect a lot of our efforts to provide immediate urgent support to



sustain the basic operation of the schools. Our partner principals' requests included on one hand, urgent needs for transportation cost for students and staff, morning meals for children, cleaning and sanitary supplies to ensure minimum hygiene in the midst of the pandemic and on the other, capacity building in the form of digital resources, coaching on advanced differentiated instruction and on sustaining the well-being of their students. As such, our support consisted of interventions where relief and development intertwined, and where emergency response was offered along coaching on best pedagogical and leadership practices. We are convinced that within the context of the current crisis, not providing this kind of support, at the nexus of relief and development, will make fulfilling the vision of a community school of excellence impossible.

To conclude, our work with the schools and our attempts to break the numerous cycles that are disabling school reform in Lebanon have been successful in many ways but have also been rife with challenges. The compounded and non-ending crises the country is facing took its toll on teachers who are fighting to stay afloat, making it harder to rally their energy towards improvement work. Many at this point do not consider efforts to realize a long-term vision as a priority. Added to that, interventions by the ministry of education, intended to support the schools during the crisis, as well as the lack of agility of the adopted supervisory approaches proved to be crippling to the school personnel. This obstructed many promising collaborations and greatly restricted the time that the school personnel can allot in improvement work. Having said that, our close engagement with these schools allowed the co-construction and enactment of a model that enabled them to navigate the crises and take on the challenges of transforming their practices and of using obstacles as learning opportunities. As we continue the work with our 6 partner schools, we are confident that to be effective, any external support must focus on building partnerships that empower school practitioners, develop their agency, invest in their know-how and assets, and enhance their capacity to locate and benefit from community resources. It is indeed a long journey filled with obstacles, yet *Paulo Freire's words* continue to guide us throughout the journey:

*At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know.*