

Diversity and Citizenship

A Selective Teaching of Notions



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Photo cover: Sharon Mccutcheon

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Disclaimer

While the team made all efforts possible to cross check information and reproduce only accurate facts and events, this does not overrule the possibility of inaccuracies or oversights, for which ALEF expresses hereby its regrets

Introduction

Around the world, interest in learning and understanding different religions is growing. Over the years, several intellectuals started questioning whether our differences were the cause of tensions or in fact people's reaction to them.¹ However, many societies still refuse to familiarize their students with this growing diversity by educating them about different faiths. **Indeed, given the increase in religious diversity across the different layers of society from the workplace to the military, but also in schools, the institutions' significant neglect of such a subject is worth mentioning.**



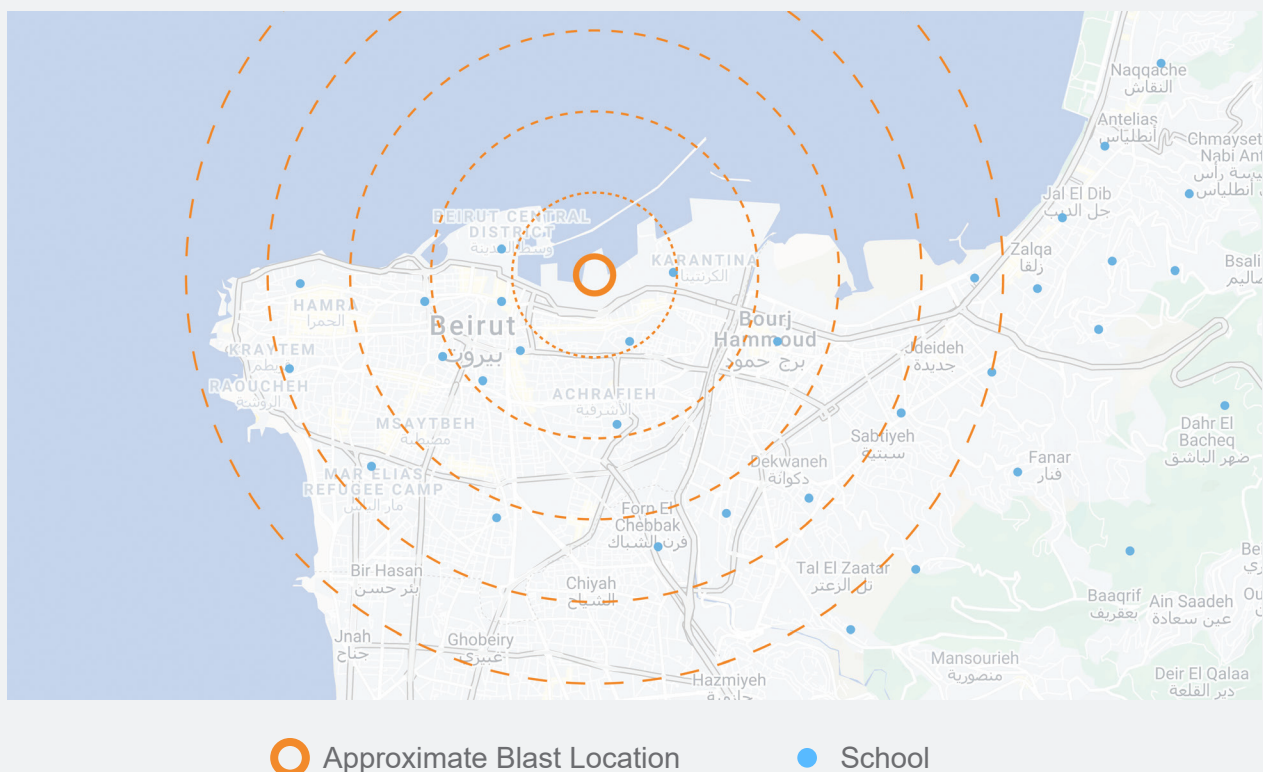
Following the Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1990, education was used as a tool for rebuilding the nation. In 1990, the great social fragility that Lebanon was experiencing, also had an impact on formal education.² In Lebanon, where schools are reputed for their religious diversity, young pupils will most probably encounter one of these two different behaviors: either a total neglect of their religious beliefs, or an education with the sole aim of blindly developing their birth-acquired confessional identity (the majority having to deal with the second situation). This reinforced and anchored within the Lebanese legal system with Article 10 of the Lebanese Constitution which grants religious denominations the right to open their own private schools, as well as freedom in the content of their programs, in particular with regard to religious education. **Multicultural education remains debatable in the country's curriculum, many have called for its reform in order to instill in students the tolerance of diversity.**

1 Ref. Collège de France : "How does socialization contribute to explain differences between individuals' behaviors?", https://www.college-de-france.fr/media/campus-innovation-lycees/UPL7695956174861787556_Classe_de_premiere__Chapitre_6.pdf.

2 Faten Ghosn and Amal Khoury: "Lebanon after the Civil War: Peace or Illusion of Peace?", <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23012171?seq=1>.

Further, in addition to structural challenges, the current situation in the country has had a significant impact on students. First, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the education sector, forcing thousands of students and teachers to stay at home. At the start of the pandemic, the Lebanese Ministry of Education had been tasked with finding solutions such as additional school establishments to address with the current situation before the end of the 2020-2021 school year. However, soon after, the ministry issued a statement on March 25, 2020, requiring schools to adopt remote learning. This decision was widely debated and criticized on the grounds of both its form and substance. Indeed, with regard to form, taking precautions in schools to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic is understandable but the adoption of purely online and distance learning, in a country extremely affected by recurring power cuts (up to 20 hours per day in summer 2020)³ and the permanent lack of internet connection, constituted a major obstacle for students as well as teachers. From a content basis, the outdated curriculum is more than 30 years old and poses a significant barrier to transforming and delivering online content.⁴

In addition to being forced to stay at home, many families will no longer be able to enroll their children in schools in the future due to the financial and socio-economic crises. The Beirut port explosion added its own layers of new challenges to the education sector as hundreds of schools were severely damaged. Indeed, a total of 85 000 students are enrolled in the 163 schools damaged by the explosion, and preliminary reports predicted that about 25% of students in Beirut were no longer able to register this year.⁵



3 The Washington Post: "Lebanon's rising power cuts add to gloom economic crisis", https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/lebanons-rising-power-cuts-add-to-gloom-of-economic-crisis/2020/07/07/95498db4-c05f-11ea-8908-68a2b9eae9e0_story.html.

4 American University of Beirut: "COVID-19: Is Lebanon Ready for Online Higher Education?", <https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/news/Pages/20200330-covid19-is-lebanon-ready-for-online-higher-education.aspx>.

5 UNESCO: "Fact Sheet on Schools Rehabilitation in Beirut, September 5, 2020", <https://en.unesco.org/news/fact-sheet-schools-rehabilitation-beirut-september-5-2020>.

Photo: John Owens



As for Syrian and Palestinian refugees as well as the poorest communities in marginalized cities such as Tripoli, and the neglected regions of Akkar or Bekaa, they find themselves once again victimized by the system. Numbers show that less than half of the refugees in Lebanon attend Lebanese public schools and informal schools at the initiative of NGOs in camps whereas the other half is still deprived of schooling or training, which increases the number of children and adolescents who are excluded from education.⁶

ALEF, in the framework of its “Musawat” project, in collaboration with PAX for Peace, drafted the following paper on the Lebanese education system in the context of the crises the country is enduring. The report has a special interest in freedom of religion and belief namely the teaching of religion at school, the current curriculum and the methods used and their impact on the coexistence and learning of citizenship and diversity.

Numbers show that **less than half** of the refugees in Lebanon attend Lebanese public schools and informal schools

⁶ UNHRC: “Vulnerability assessment of Syrian refugees in Lebanon”, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/VASyR%202020.pdf>.

Methodology

This research is based on a survey conducted by ALEF, targeting 140 people aged between 18 and 35 and consisting of an online questionnaire shared by ALEF's volunteers with their colleagues, classmates and communities, between February 10 and February 20, 2021, across multiple Lebanese regions.

In the questionnaire, people were asked to name their school, and mention whether religion was part of their school curriculum and if so until what age. Other questions addressed the confession of students in the school, as well as the existence/nonexistence and applicability of the concept of diversity. People were asked to assess their interest in many subjects, including history, geography and citizenship, but also with regard to the contribution of their school life to certain values such as citizenship, diversity, and freedom to practice religion. Finally, they were asked to identify their knowledge of other religions after their school career.

Moreover, ALEF organized a series of round tables, bringing together experts but also local and international organizations leading projects in the education sector. The round tables took place on February 17, February 24 and March 3, 2021. These discussions gave the opportunity for the exchange of expertise, information and recommendations sharing regarding the current context and its impact on education in Lebanon, and the question of teaching religion and essential values in schools, such as citizenship, diversity and acceptance of "the other" and finally, the main proposals made so far in terms of the modification of the current curriculum.

Finally, ALEF conducted interviews with several local and international organizations operating in the field of education, in addition to several experts and professionals in the sector.



Some background



The article 10 of the Lebanese Constitution and the National Reconciliation Agreement (Taef Accord) and the reforms brought to the education sector, recognized the importance of education and defined its principles and guidelines. They emphasized on freedom and the right to education as well as accessibility, equality of opportunities and the requirement of education for all. The same principles have also been underlined in the international conventions to which Lebanon adheres, namely: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The foundation of the contemporary education system was laid during the French mandate (1923–1946) inspired from the French model. Even though Lebanon became independent in 1943, French influence remains widespread, especially as Lebanese schools still have the same academic qualifications models such as the Brevet and Baccalaureate. Basic education namely Grades 1 to 9 practically follow the same curriculum across all schools in the country, but there are several exceptions where schools add different subjects to update their own system (technology, programming, etc.).

In terms of history, private schools, overwhelmingly dependent on the religious authorities, have a long and strong tradition in Lebanon which resulted in a variety of educational institutions in the country. This can be seen as a reflection of the government's

openness to the international community. Besides, long before public schools, private schools incepted by foreign religious missions (French, Anglo-Saxon, German and Italian) were the first to set anchor, followed by a few local and foreign secular schools.⁷

The majority of these schools are funded by private religious groups - mainly Jesuits (Catholics who came in 1625 and, along with the Maronites, founded the first religious schools in Lebanon). Therefore, these schools have, until today, brought together students from all regions or religious denominations. Much later in 1866, Presbyterian missionaries came to the Lebanese capital, Beirut, and rivaled Catholic schools by establishing the American University of Beirut and several high schools. The Makassids or Muslim schools have sprung up in many mosques in major cities and were supported by wealthy Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.⁸ This is mainly how, for a vast majority of families, religious preference influenced the choice of schools.

⁷ Education State University: "Lebanon Educational System – Overview", <https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/827/Lebanon-EDUCATIONAL-SYSTEM-OVERVIEW.html#:~:text=The%20majority%20of%20these%20schools,rivalry%20with%20Catholics%20by%20establishing.>

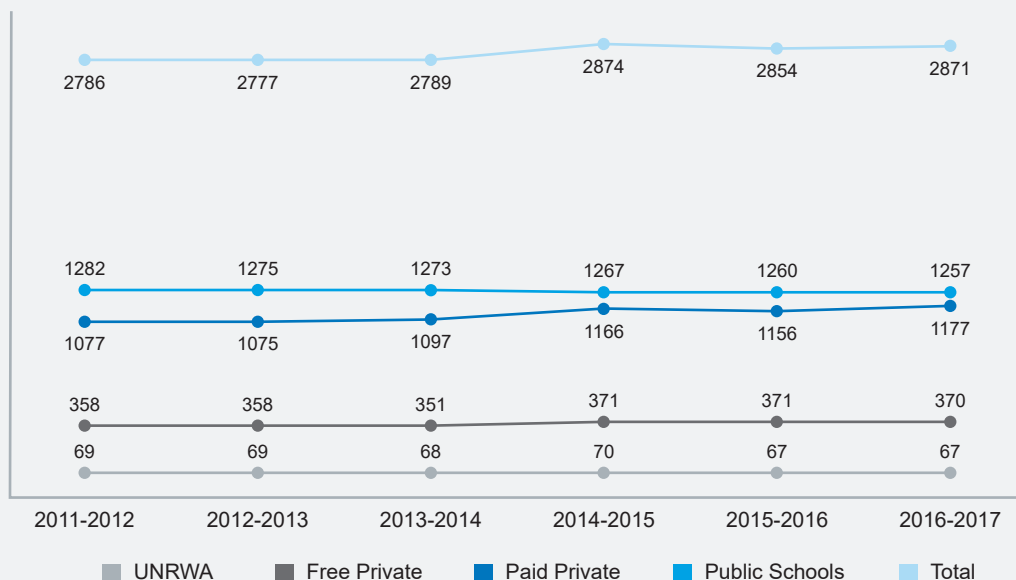
⁸ Ibid.

An old education system

Since the days of the Ottoman rule, public schools have been categorized as schools “for the poor”.⁹ This portrayal has not only tarnished the reputation of the public school system but also accentuated the growing differences between social classes. As a result, parents who could afford rather high tuition fees, enrolled their children in private schools, while less fortunate parents who, as a result of the high tuition fees in private schools, were forced to choose public schools.

Since 2011, the private sector grew incrementally, only to absorb about 54% of the total number of schools in Lebanon.¹⁰ On the backdrop, the number of public schools was in decline. In fact, the number of public schools, accounting for 1,257 in 2016-2017, has seen a steady decline every year since 2011-2012, with an average of 5 schools closing each year.¹¹ To illustrate this, divided among the 1 256 schools, the number of students in Lebanese public schools totals 328 040, or 30.7% the total number of students.¹² Lack of funding, neglect and mismanagement are the main reasons why the public system has fallen behind.

Table 1: Breakdown in the Number of Schools in Lebanon



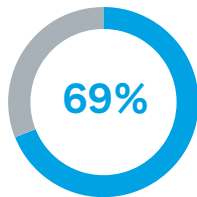
Source: Center for Educational Research and Development Lebanon

⁹ SAGE Publications, Bahous and Nabhani : “Improving schools for social justice in Lebanon”, Volume 11 Number 2 July 2008 127–141.

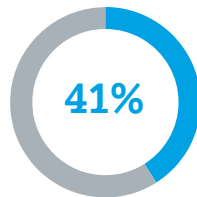
¹⁰ Morten Greaves, Rima Bahous : “Adapting to change; exploring early childhood educator’s perceptions of a child-centered curriculum”, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10643-020-01077-x>.

¹¹ Blominvest Bank: “The education Landscape in Lebanon 2016-2017”, <https://blog.blominvestbank.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/The-Education-Landscape-in-Lebanon-2016-2017.pdf>.

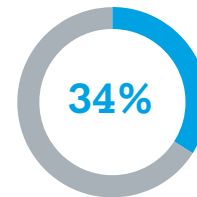
¹² The Monthly: “Public education in Lebanon: Facts and figures”, https://monthlymagazine.com/article-desc_4831_.



Students enrolled in private schools



Religious entities as main investors in private schools



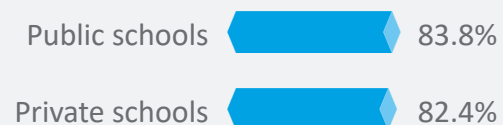
Religious entities as main investors in schools

For example, another study conducted by BankMed, early 2018, shows that 69% of students in Lebanon are enrolled in private schools.¹³ Indeed, many families prefer private schools because of the various advantages they offer, namely international baccalaureates and updated and modern equipment. But these are not the only factors, many parents prefer private schools because they offer a specific religious education.¹⁴ As a result, the influence of religious authorities over the education system is first expressed by the grip these entities have over the education system. Religious entities are the main investors in private schools and religious- affiliation schools thus represent 41.1% of private schools and 34% of schools in Lebanon.¹⁵

Private schools also belong and are funded by local and international religious groups, there are **Greek-Orthodox**, **Greek-Catholic** schools, **Sunni** “Maqasid” schools, **Protestant** schools (run by German deaconess sisters known as Deaconesses of Kaiserswerth founded in 1862), the **Jesuits**, the **Nazareths**, the **Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Apparition**: The congregation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Apparition was established in Beirut in 1847 at Zokak el -Blat¹⁶, the **brothers of the Christian** schools and even a **Jewish** establishment (founded by the Chief Rabbi Zaki Cohen in 1869 in the district of Wadi Abou-Jmil)¹⁷. **Makassids** or Muslim schools have sprung up in many mosques in major cities and are supported by wealthy Islamic nations such as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.¹⁸ The Shiite schools started with the **Amiliyya Society of Beirut** and the **Ja’fariyyah in Tire**, but following oppression, Hezbollah and the Amal Movement have largely invested in these schools.¹⁹

As a consequence of neglect and lack of funding, most public schools are deficient in terms of infrastructure, material, equipment, and human resources necessary to win local recognition²⁰. Yet, figures show that the success rates are practically the same in both the public and private schools. For example, in 2016, the success rate of students graduating from the Economics Sociology section was 83.8% in public schools compared to 82.4% in private schools.

Table 2: Success Rate of students
from the Economics Sociology section



13 BankMed : “Analysis of Lebanon’s Education Sector”, <https://www.bankmed.com.lb/BOMedia/subservices/categories/News/20150515170635891.pdf>.

14 Helen Tannous: “Religious Diversity and the Future of Education in Lebanon”, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/83022415.pdf>.

15 Local Liban : “Private Schools in Lebanon: Religiously affiliated schools in Lebanon”, <https://www.localiban.org/private-schools-in-lebanon-religiously-affiliated-schools-in-lebanon#:~:text=Religiously%20affiliated%20schools%20account%20for,number%20of%20students%20is%20911%2C314>.

16 L’Orient Junior : “The oldest schools of Beirut”, <http://www.lorientjunior.com/article/944/les-plus-anciennes-ecoles-de-beyrouth.html>.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Sabah Dakroub: “Expansion of Shi’a Schools (1960-2009): Factors and Dynamics”, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275948695_EXPANSION_OF_SHI'A_SCHOOLS_1960-2009_FACTORS_AND_DYNAMICS.

20 Relief web: “Lebanon Education in Crisis: Raising the Alarm”, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Lebanon%20Education%20crisis%20spotlight.pdf>.

Finally, the chaotic distribution of staff and the mismanagement of human resources constitute additional complications. The Ministry of Education has a total of 43 532 staff, 41 647 of which are teachers (half of them operating full time). The education system appears to be over-staffed; in 2019 approximately 328 000 students enrolled in public schools, meaning there was almost one teacher per 8 students.²¹ However, despite the high number of teachers, the distribution of the educational body is inefficient. Hundreds of teachers are overwhelmed with long working hours several days of the week, in largely overcrowded classrooms.

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²¹ BankMed : "Analysis of Lebanon's Education Sector", <https://www.bankmed.com.lb/BOMedia/subservices/categories/News/20150515170635891.pdf>.

2020, one year too long

Over the past year, the education system, similarly to the rest of the Lebanese sectors, had to face four cumulative obstacles: the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic crisis, the protests and road closures and finally the Beirut port explosion which left devastating marks on a system that had been struggling for years. As a result, the economic crisis has pushed 40 000 students to public schools.²² Obviously, these public schools are not ready to absorb such high numbers. Indeed, several teachers claim that they have to manage classes of nearly 50 children. In addition to these difficulties is the obsolete infrastructure which was also damaged such as heating and humidity problems, damaged windows or doors, and poorly equipped classrooms. The principal of an Evangelical High School in Beirut told that the administration had barely the means to address basic necessities “the funds we received were barely enough to buy stationery such as markers and erasers and pay the generator bills for the year.”

²² Le Commerce du Levant: “The Economic Crisis has pushed 40,000 students to join public schools”, <https://www.lecommercedulevant.com/article/29627-the-economic-crisis-has-pushed-40000-students-to-join-public-schools>.

COVID-19 pandemic

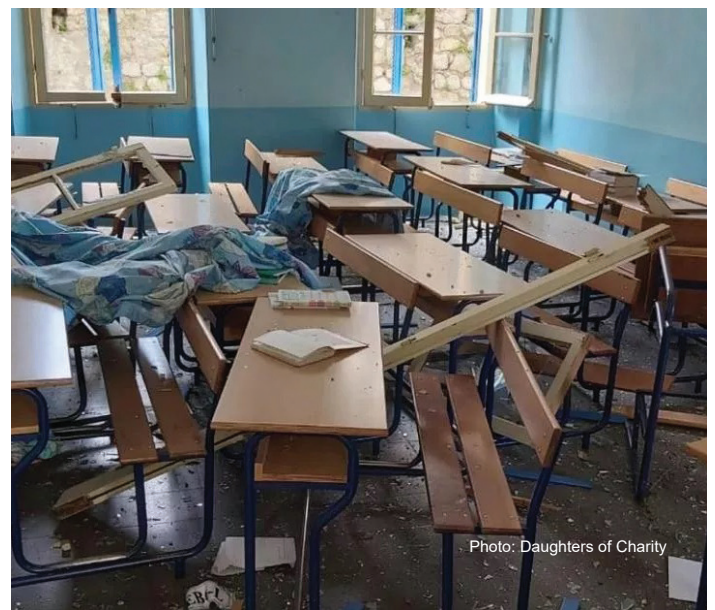
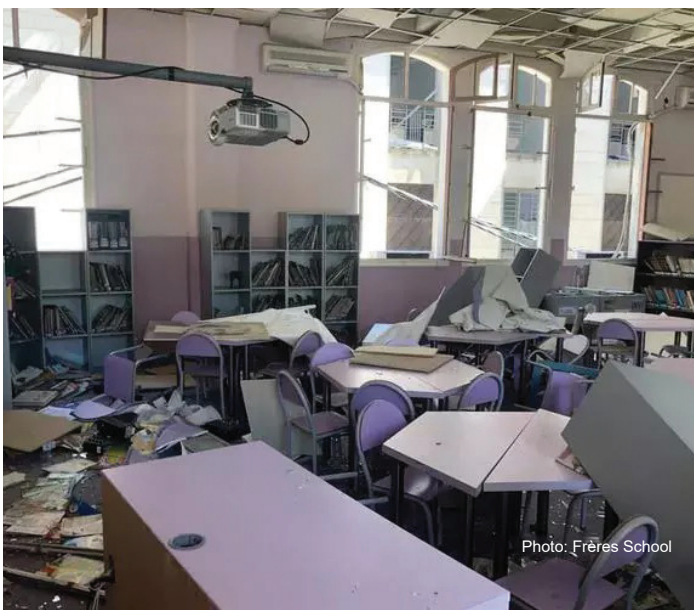
Economic crisis

Protests and road closures

Beirut port explosion

40 000

Students pushed to public schools



Due to the financial and socio-economic crises hitting the country since 2019, thousands of families were faced with extremely difficult choices in terms of education. Even though some private schools have kept their tuition fees unchanged, families on a tight budget can only afford basic necessities. Despite this, no action has been taken by the authorities to protect children's access to education. "Even though we exonerated the parents from paying the school fees for this year, 100 students dropped out," said the director of a private school in Gemmayzeh. Families cannot afford the skyrocketing prices of school uniforms, textbooks and stationery. For example, after asking a teacher regarding the average stationary needed for a school year before the crisis, 10 notebooks, 10 pens and pencils and a ruler were priced at 65 000 Lebanese pounds. A year later, the cost of some of these materials has increased by 400%, which means parents now have to pay nearly 350 000 Lebanese pounds. But these prices are still not set in stone and families will struggle even more to provide enough material to their children especially that the Lebanese Pound is still devaluating and reached 15 000 LBP for 1 USD in March 2021.²³

In addition, since May 2020, and as part of the COVID-19 response plan, the Ministry of Education has asked all schools in Lebanon to switch to online education in an attempt to flatten the curve of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, this decision was a huge failure due to shortage in power supply, lack of stable internet connection or the necessary electronic devices. As a result, thousands of children have been left without education while awaiting the authorities' intervention plan.

In addition, the majority of schools were caught off guard and were not ready to move on to online education, which postponed the end of the school year to July instead of June 2020. Indeed, switching to online education was difficult for school staff; "the teachers also had difficulties; their programs had to be revised to adapt to the online format" explained the Lebanese Teachers' Union. Moreover, many of them do not know how to use specific tools such as communication applications, Microsoft Office or other software to facilitate teaching or working online. The Lebanese education system, which has long neglected the use of technology, today cannot afford it and has hesitated to develop. Bottom line, it was almost impossible for the education sector to adapt to the new reality.

Finally, the Beirut explosion also had an extremely important impact on the sector. At least 163 public and private schools were damaged by the blast, which affected the education of at least 85 000 students.²⁴ The negative impact on education goes beyond this physical damage. The increased risk of dropping out of school, the vulnerability of marginalized children and children with special needs as well as the post-traumatic effects on students jeopardize the continuity of education.

163

Schools damaged
by the blast

85 000

Students affected

23 National New: "Lebanese pound crashes to 15,000 against dollar as protest continue", <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/lebanon/lebanese-pound-crashes-to-15-000-against-dollar-as-protests-continue-1.1185215>.

24 UNESCO: "Fact Sheet on Schools Rehabilitation in Beirut, September 5, 2020", <https://en.unesco.org/news/fact-sheet-schools-rehabilitation-beirut-september-5-2020>.

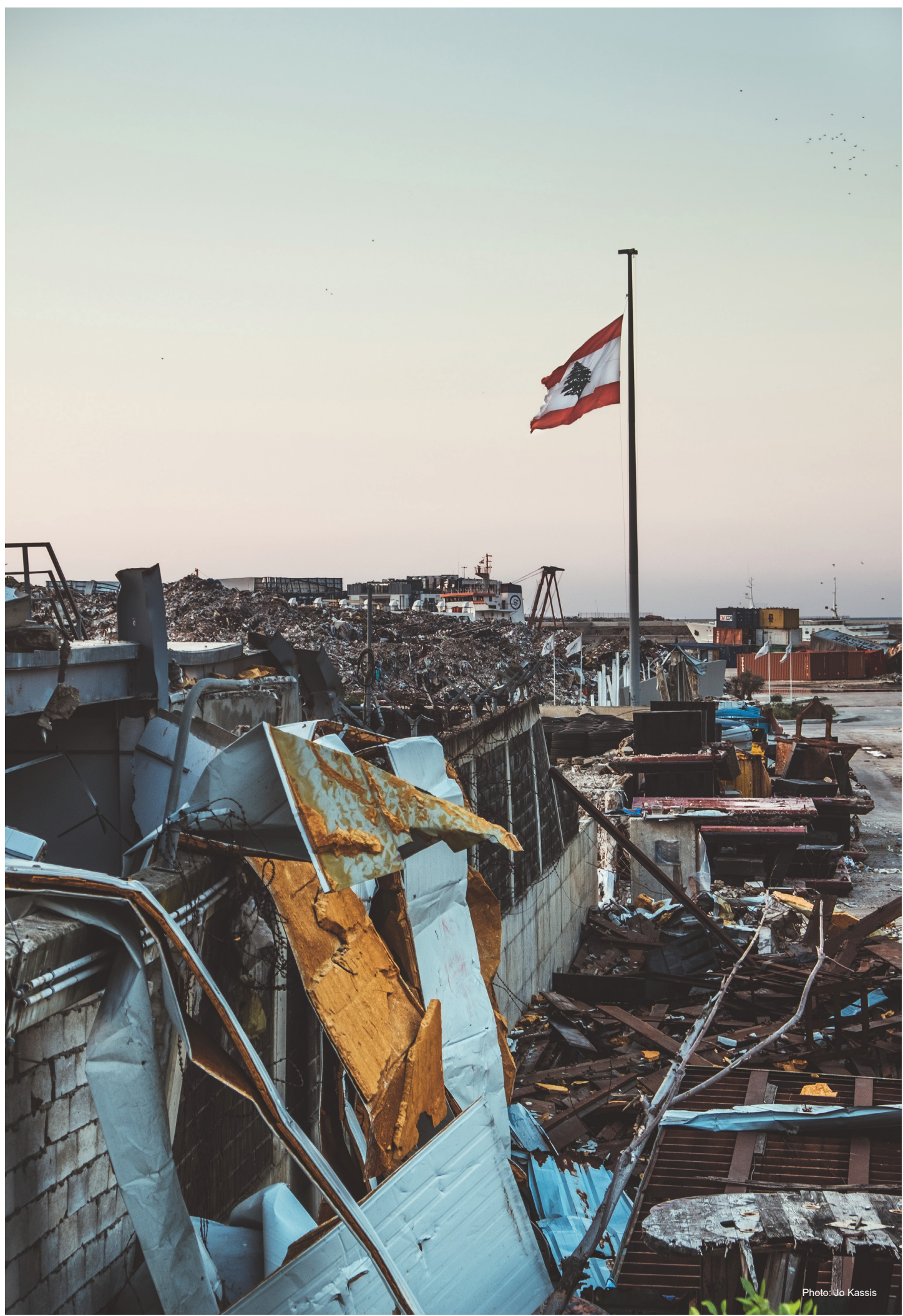


Photo: Jo Kassis

To each sect, its school

The history of confessional schools in Lebanon dates back to the Ottoman-French era during the Concordat of 1516. Under Ottoman rule, Suleiman the Great enabled France to introduce Western philosophies of education to the Middle East. Later, during the reign of Ibrahim Bacha (1831-1840), the first missionary schools were founded by both Jesuits and Protestants. These confessional schools gained momentum under the French mandate in Lebanon (1920-1943) when religious communities were entrusted with education²⁵.

Today, the Lebanese State officially recognizes eighteen religious communities, each having its specific private rights. Reflecting this social and religious diversity, around half a dozen religious groups dominate private schools on the Lebanese educational scene such as the Catholics, the Orthodox, the Protestants, the Sunnis, the Shias, the Druze, and the Armenian. In addition, some secular private schools, such as French or English private schools have been able to establish themselves over the years.

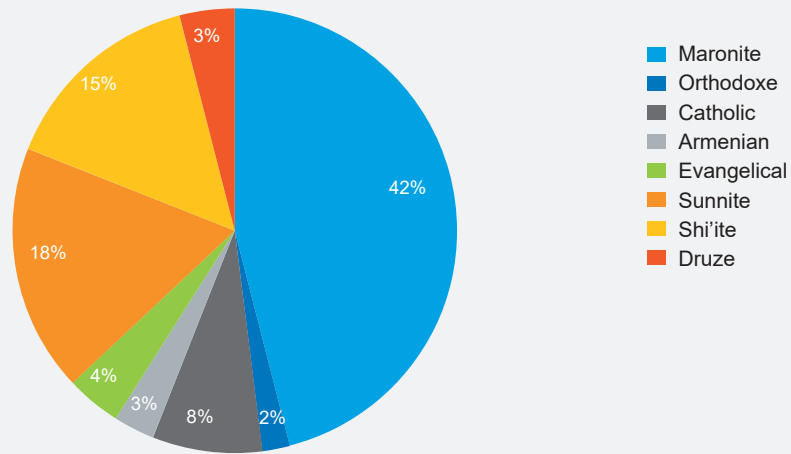
Table 3: Private and Public Schools Distribution based on Sects in Lebanon in 2005-2006

(Source: Center for Education Research and Development)

Confession	Number of non-tuition paying private schools	Number of students in non-tuition paying private schools	Number of private schools	Number of students in private schools	Total number of confessional schools	Total number of students
Maronite	84	28821	172	129787	256	158608
Orthodoxe	3	365	12	10447	15	10821
Catholic	16	4761	33	16350	49	21111
Armenian	6	1253	16	4225	22	5478
Evangelical	1	151	22	13637	23	13788
Sunnite	42	11651	60	28221	102	39872
Shi'ite	33	16466	53	36161	86	52627
Druze	9	2889	10	4322	19	7211
Total	194	66357	378	243150	572	309507

²⁵ Daniel Cervan : "Religion in Education and Conflict: Lebanon and Northern Ireland Compared", https://ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/20006/1/Cervan_Daniel_2011_thesis.pdf.

Table 4: School distribution among confessions in Lebanon



Catholic

The Lebanese Synod of the Maronite Church in 1736 had already decided that education should be quasi free and compulsory. Since then, and during the 1800s and 1900s, the number of schools has increased, thanks to missionaries coming from abroad to establish new Catholic schools.²⁶ At this point in time, Catholic schools enroll around 90000 pupils out of a total of 1 100 000 pupils, and this network is comprised of approximately 332 schools. Finally, Catholic schools welcome students of all Lebanese religions, 27% of whom belong to non-Christian communities.²⁷

Religious education in Catholic schools follows two methods, one weekly session, or mass for students. As a result, religious education is a subject just like any other, which is graded and is part of the student's curriculum and learning. Usually, it is taught by a priest or a nun, depending on the school, but it can also be taught by a teacher with a degree in liturgy. Throughout the years, a student attending religion course in a Catholic school will be acquainted with several thematics and concepts under a specific program laid out down below. Further, religious education is also graded such as history, mathematics, or language courses. The grades are added to the grade sheet that students receive at the end of each semester.

²⁶ Marist mission: "Catholic Schools in Lebanon", <http://www.presence-mariste.fr/Les-ecoles-catholiques-au-Liban.html>.

²⁷ General Secretariat of Catholic Schools: "Lebanon: Catholic schools in danger", <https://enseignement-catholique.fr/liban-lecole-catholique-dans-la-tourmente/>.

Table 5: Religion courses in Catholic courses throughout the school years

Grade	Objectives
KG 1, 2, and 3	God the creator who loves us and sent Jesus his son to earth
Grade 1	Discover that God is Love
Grade 2	Discover that God gives us happiness
Grade 3	Listen to the words of God and participate in the Eucharist
Grade 4	Know Jesus as a teacher who lived on Earth with man, died, rose from the dead, and established the church
Grade 5	Sacraments of the Church
Grade 6	The story of Abraham's salvation to Jesus and then to the Church.
Grade 7	Get to know Jesus and the Church better
Grade 8	Know the sacraments of the Church
Grade 9	Students discover their vocation
Grade 10	Old and New Testament
Grade 11	The Christian Church, its history and ideology and how to be an active member
Grade 12	The principles and values you must adapt to be successful in life ²⁹

Orthodox

One of the oldest schools in the capital belongs to the Greek Orthodox community and was founded in 1835. The name of the school, “Thalathat Aqmar” or “Three Doctors” is in reference to the three patron saints of educators: John Chrysostom, Basil the Great and Gregory the Theologian²⁹. There are 15 Lebanese schools affiliated with the Orthodox Church, 3 free private schools and 12 paid private schools. Orthodox schools represent 0.54% of the total number of schools in Lebanon, they accommodate 10 812 students. In other words, 1.18% of Lebanese students attend Orthodox schools³⁰.

One of the main goals of Orthodox schools is to educate students about belief in God. This is reflected both in their goals as well as in their practices. Educating students religiously is clearly stated in their mission and policies. Religious education classes are offered during all school years. The school’s documented mission statement found on the webpage is to “build the personality of a human being who believes in God”. This mission was also mentioned in the interview with a consultant teacher and the principal.³¹

28 American University of Beirut: “An explorative study on the approach of private schools in Lebanon preparing students for a society with religious diversity”, Christelle Naddaf, 2014.

29 L’Orient Junior: “The oldest schools of Beirut”, <http://www.lorientjunior.com/article/944/les-plus-anciennes-ecoles-de-beyrouth.html>.

30 Localiban: “Orthodox Schools in Lebanon : 1.1% of Lebanese students attend Orthodox Schools”, <https://www.localiban.org/orthodox-schools-in-lebanon-1-1-of-lebanese-students-attend-orthodox-schools>.

31 Les trois docteurs : “Mission”, <http://www.troisdocteurs.edu.lb/aboutus/aboutus.php?wsid=etd>.

Sunni

The first Sunni school was founded by Sunni dignitaries from Beirut in 1880, and was reserved for the education of girls. The “Makaseds” are very successful as an educational institute.³² Currently, there are 102 Sunni schools in Lebanon divided between free and non-free private schools, while 7.4% of Lebanese students attend Sunni schools.³³

The aim of these schools is to “develop a balanced, civilized and Islamic character with scientific knowledge and leadership skills that would help invest in life management and the advancement of society”.³⁴ The written goals of the school refer to the religious education of students on the faith and principles of Islam, character building and fluency in the Arabic language and the Quran language. The objectives stated on the web page are to get the students to know Allah in accordance with Islamic teaching.³⁵

Shia

During the 1920s and 1930s, Shia leaders supported educational reforms to develop and increase their involvement in the Lebanese community.³⁶ While several Shia educational institutions were established before and at the start of the French mandate, they often lacked support and funding, which caused their abolition. Today there is a total of 86 Shia schools.³⁷

Their mission is “to raise a human being who believes in God” and to educate “a good and balanced citizen who contributes to building the society on the grounds of religion”.³⁸ In these schools, all girls must wear the Hijab, considered part of the school uniform.³⁹ In addition, boys and girls go to different classes. Religious holidays are those dictated by the government, in addition to Islamic holidays during which students have extended holidays.⁴⁰ Religious education is integrated into almost all subjects except mathematics.⁴¹ For example, in English literature the teacher will discuss with the students a quote from the Quran to tackle the matter under discussion.⁴²

32 L'Orient Junior: “Les plus anciennes écoles de Beyrouth”, <http://www.lorientjunior.com/article/944/les-plus-anciennes-ecoles-de-beyrouth.html>.

33 Localiban: “Sunni Schools in Lebanon: 7.4% of Lebanese students attend Sunni Schools”, <https://www.localiban.org/sunni-schools-in-lebanon-7-4-of-lebanese-students-attend-sunni-schools>.

34 American University of Beirut: “An explorative study on the approach of private schools in Lebanon preparing students for a society with religious diversity”, Christelle Naddaf, 2014.

35 Al Makased: “About us”, <https://schools.makassed.org/ar/>.

36 Sabah Dakroub: “Expansion of Shi'a Schools (1960-2009): Factors and Dynamics”, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275948695_EXPANSION_OF_SHI'A_SCHOOLS_1960-2009_FACTORS_AND_DYNAMICS

37 Localiban: “Private schools in Lebanon: Religiously affiliated schools in Lebanon”, <https://www.localiban.org/private-schools-in-lebanon-religiously-affiliated-schools-in-lebanon>.

38 Imam Sader Foundation: “About us, Mission”, <https://imamsadrfoundation.org/v1/about/history/>.

39 L'Orient-le Jour: « Le voile, une question de société non tranchée », <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1099141/le-voile-une-question-de-societe-non-tranchee.html>.

40 American University of Beirut: “An explorative study on the approach of private schools in Lebanon preparing students for a society with religious diversity”, Christelle Naddaf, 2014.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

Students and religious schools

Table 6: Sample table on the distribution of students and staff among schools affiliated with major denominations and religions⁴³

Name of the school	Region	Religious affiliation of the staff	Religious affiliation of the school	Religious affiliation of the students
La Sagesse	Ashrafieh, Beirut	Maronite	Maronite Catholic	Mixed with a Christian Majority
Cedar School	Northeast Beirut	Maronite	Maronite Catholic	83.5% Maronites; 15.9% Greek Orthodox; 0.5% Sunnites
Ash School	Beirut	Sunnite	Sunnite	98.3% Sunni; 0.5% Druze; 1.2% Shiite
Pine School	Beirut	-	Protestant	39.5% Maronite; 34.5% Greek Orthodox; 23.4% Evangelical; 2.3% Sunni

Studies show that Catholic schools, which constitute the vast majority and most representative schools in Lebanon enroll students from all communities, be they close, remote, Christian or Muslim. In all regions, Catholic schools represent the last forum where Christian and Muslim youth meet and grow.⁴⁴

Thus, Camille Zeidan, former secretary general of the Episcopal Commission of the Catholic School Council, underlined that in some of schools, non-Christians represent 90% of the pupils. This situation is especially true in private Christian schools in the region of Beirut and Tripoli, where large religious groups are represented. Indeed, in Tripoli, for example, about half of the private Christian students are Maronites and the other half are Sunni Muslims.⁴⁵

⁴³ Daniel Cervan : "Religion in Education and Conflict: Lebanon and Northern Ireland Compared", https://ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/20006/1/Cervan_Daniel_2011_thesis.pdf.

⁴⁴ Daniel Cervan : "Religion in Education and Conflict: Lebanon and Northern Ireland Compared", https://ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/20006/1/Cervan_Daniel_2011_thesis.pdf.

⁴⁵ Antoine Messarra : "Religion in an intercultural pedagogy", <https://journals.openedition.org/ries/1503?lang=en>

Secular Schools

The first secular school in Lebanon as well as in the Middle East is located in Zokak el-Blatt and was founded in 1863 by Boutros al-Boustani.⁴⁶ Today, there are several secular schools in Lebanon, and 41.9% of students enrolled in private schools are registered in secular institutions. Indeed, the largest network of schools is called “Mission Laïque Française” and includes more than 10 high schools in Lebanon.⁴⁷

Secular education is non-religious at all levels, these institutions provide students with education in accordance with their aptitudes with equal respect for all beliefs.⁴⁸ In fact, in all public schools, colleges and high schools, religious education is not included in the school curriculum, and the wearing of signs or outfits by which students ostensibly manifest a religious affiliation is prohibited.⁴⁹

46 L'Orient-le Jour: "At Zokak el-Blatt, the first secular school in the middle east is now registered", <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1184159/la-premiere-ecole-nationale-du-liban-inscrite-sur-la-liste-du-patrimoine.html>.

47 Mission Laïque Française : "About us", <https://www.mfmonde.org/qui-sommes-nous/>.

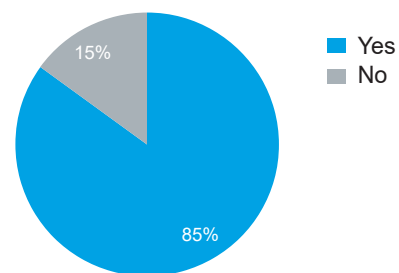
48 Ibid.

49 Grand Lycée Franco-Libanais : « Internal Regulations », <https://www.gflf.edu.lb/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/RIF-Grand-Lyc%C3%A9e-Lyc%C3%A9e-20-21-2020-05-06.pdf>.

Teaching religion at school

As mentioned earlier, private schools are mostly affiliated with specific sects or religious institutions, **which directly influences how believers are viewed as well as how religion is taught in the education system.** But this is not only the case with private schools, even public schools, which are supposed to be neutral and unaffiliated, generally follow the religion of the region wherever they may be located.⁵⁰

Table 7: Were religious studies part of your school education?



As a result, by dwelling on the notions of diversity and citizenship, one can very quickly notice that they are quasi non-existent in education systems. Not only are they not taught and do not lie in the heart of the curriculum, the fact that a school teaches only its religion, does not help nurture the concept of diversity in the mind of students.

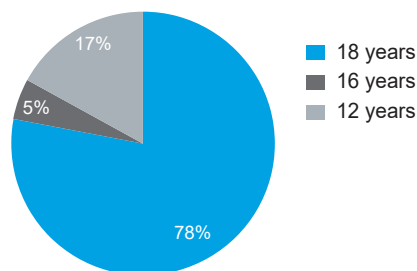
When it comes to the freedom of religion and belief, teaching the religion to which the school is affiliated is not necessarily discriminatory. However, this changes when the notion of knowing the other party is brought up. Indeed, when students belong to a different religious affiliation, they end up learning the religion promoted by the school, without necessarily sharing their religion with their schoolmates. This is very common in Catholic schools which accommodate students of all religions. In fact, the survey carried out by ALEF's volunteers shows that 85% of the individuals who completed the questionnaire participated in religious education courses as part of their compulsory academic training.

when students belong to a different religious affiliation, they end up learning the religion promoted by the school, without necessarily sharing their religion with their schoolmates.

⁵⁰ Relief Web: "Schools Plant Seeds of Sectarianism", <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/schools-plant-seeds-sectarianism>.

In most schools, pupils are separated during catechesis classes. “This is the first time that children realize that they are different than their classmates”,ⁱ concluded the participants in the round table organized by ALEF on February 24, 2021. Thus, the survey shows that among those who took these religious studies courses, around 80% continued to receive catechesis lessons until the age of 18, which shows that, in some cases, private schools, especially those affiliated with religious institutions, prioritize religious education.

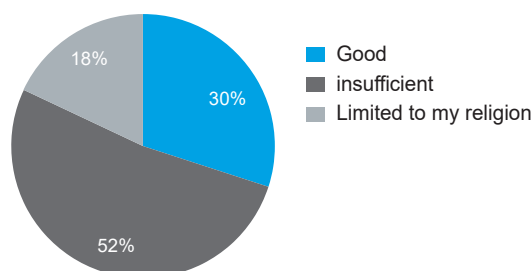
Table 8: At what age did you stop taking religious education?



In most cases, schools choose to teach only the religion with which the school is affiliated, namely one of the 18 officially recognized sects regardless of the general idea of religion or the individual value per se, and this without really taking into account any religion. Students would have the choice to either attend the catechesis class or to engage meanwhile in another activity.⁵¹ Education experts who attended the roundtable stressed that this had completely jeopardized the freedom of religion and belief.ⁱⁱ This is highlighted in the survey carried out by ALEF volunteers with the majority of participants answering that **the pupils who did not share the school’s religion, spent the catechesis period in the schoolyard doing nothing, went to the library, or were forced to attend class** - this is an infringement of the freedom of belief as a student is forced to attend a class contrary to their belief.

Further, the majority of schools do not provide any religious education that is different from its own, even though this falls within the battle for diversity in general and is related to accepting others and nurturing openness. All these concepts are very useful, but they do not really touch on the concept of freedom of religion and belief. Consequently, the survey shows that 18% of the participants did not learn anything about other religions at school, while 52% confirmed that they are not “sufficiently” introduced to other religions.ⁱⁱⁱ The absence of diversity within schools is mainly the result of marginalization and of a restrictive approach within schools.

Table 9: How do you assess your knowledge of other religions?



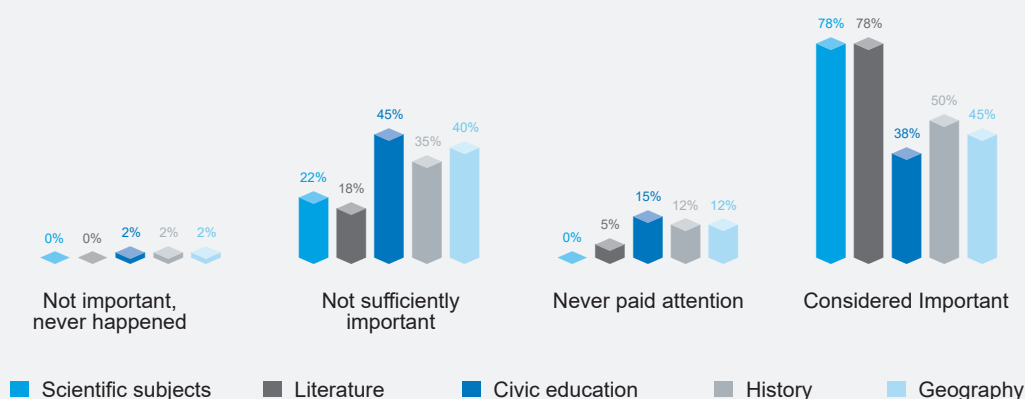
⁵¹ Helen Tannous: “Religious Diversity and the Future of Education in Lebanon”, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/83022415.pdf>.

Citizenship and diversity: almost non-existent

The “new school curriculum” was launched in September 1998 by the Educational Center for Research and Development which trained 16 000 teachers in public schools and 6 000 teachers in private schools on the methods and principles imbedded in the new curriculum.⁵² The new curriculum had to take into account economic, social and national perspectives.⁵³ **However, despite the decree clearly citing the need for reform every four years, no reforms have been made.** Civil society organizations and experts in the educational field have carried out proposals and projects to push towards this change but, until now, to no avail.⁵⁴

Moreover, the Lebanese society continues to exert pressure on children and schools by giving priority to scientific subjects, with the sole aim of specializing afterwards in “highly rewarding” professions and becoming engineers or doctors.⁵⁵ This had led to a saturation at the professional level with **10 engineers for every 1000** inhabitants in 2014,⁵⁶ **four doctors per 1000 inhabitants** in 2018.⁵⁷ In general, students show interest in scientific subjects with around 80% considering that science is essential, compared with an average of 45% for other subjects such as geography, history and civic education. These results prove on the one hand, the fact that parents’ plans affect the choice and interests that children have for subjects they study, and on the other hand the gaps in the efforts that schools put to win the interest of pupils - 45% of pupils who completed the survey carried out by ALEF volunteers considered civic education as “not sufficiently important”.^{iv}

Table 10: On a scale from 1 to 5 how do you assess your acquisition of these notions?



52 Education International: “Situation Analysis of Education in Lebanon”, http://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/EI-FES_Report_Lebanon.pdf.

53 Ibid.

54 Education State University: « Lebanon-Educational system Overview », <https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/827/Lebanon-EDUCATIONAL-SYSTEM-OVERVIEW.html>.

55 LibanNews: « Parents Pressés et enfants décentrés », <https://libannews.com/parents-presses-et-enfants-decentres/>.

56 The Daily Star: “Too many engineers in Lebanon, order says”, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Nov-01/276140-too-many-engineers-in-lebanon-order-says.ashx>.

57 Bank Bemo: “Hospitals in Lebanon”, <http://www.databank.com.lb/docs/Hospital%20Industry%20Report.%20June%202013.pdf>.

Civic education in Lebanon is taught for only 30 hours per year compared to, for example, mathematics, taught for an average of 210 hours per year.⁵⁸ Despite the autonomy of private schools and the freedom they enjoy to provide their own teaching and learning resources, the Civic Education Handbook is a standardized book published by the Ministry of Education and is compulsory in all schools.⁵⁹ At first glance, Table 6 below, which presents the civic education objectives set up in 1997, seems to cover many concepts such as values, accepting others, justice, anti-discrimination, or diversity. This list shows that the problem does not lie in the content or the essence of the civic education program but the time allocated to it.

Table 11: 9 Main objectives of the civic education program

1	"... humanist values in one's community and country".
2	"... spirit of work and appreciation of workers in different fields".
3	"... contributing to global development..."
4	"... criticizing, debating and accepting the other... peace, justice and equality".
5	"... a social spirit ... a larger community ... enriched by a diversity of ideas".
6	"... free participation in one's civilian life".
7	"... Lebanese identity... through a coherent and unifying democratic framework".
8	"... Arab identity... open to the whole world".
9	"... regardless of gender, color, religion, language, culture and any other difference" ⁶¹

Education experts who took part in the roundtable organized to discuss the matter say that topics addressing broad concepts and principles such as those mentioned in the core objectives of the civic education curriculum, especially those pertaining to diversity and citizenship are "indirectly addressed in classrooms as teachers respond to questions".^v Therefore, the subjects are not tackled directly but are essential especially in the classroom discussions since children are exposed in the media, society and at home to all the forms of information, hence their questions.

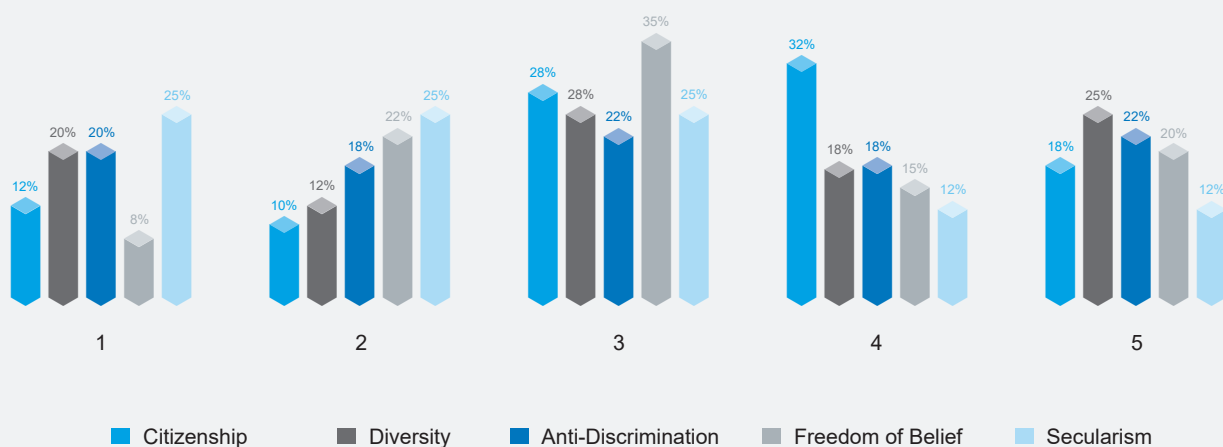
⁵⁸ CRDP: « Evaluation Diagnostique des acquis scolaires au Liban », <https://www.crdp.org/magazine-details1/649/454/453>.

⁵⁹ Bassel Akar: "Citizenship education in Lebanon: An introduction into student's concepts and learning experiences", Institute of Education, University of London, 2007.

⁶⁰ Ministry of Education: "The programs of General education and their aims", 1997.

Teachers must tackle this problem in a direct but also discreet manner. In higher classes, they are instructed to limit themselves to the program and only discuss diversity when it arises or if aligned with the objective and content of the curriculum without getting into details.⁶¹ This is showcased in society, since the survey shows that cumulatively, when assessing the participants' knowledge of secularism, 50% report it was below average.^{vi} In addition, around 36% of participants say they have not acquired the concept of non-discrimination at school, compared to 60% who deny having acquired the concept of freedom of belief.^{vii} Thus, by returning to the definition of freedom of belief, namely respect for others and their beliefs as well as non-discrimination based on religion, the results remain contradictory.

Table 12: On a scale from 1 to 5 how do you assess your acquisition of these notions?



61 Nordidactica: "Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education", Rima Bahous, Mona Nabhani and Annika Rabo, 2013.

Gender based discrimination

A close-up to gender access to education reveals that even though the number of girls who drop out of schools is lower than the number of boys, the number of boys graduating is higher than the number of girls. Because the particular reason for this circumstance is that many families still believe that the education of boys is considered to be more important. For example, in 2013-2014, according to the Center for Research and Development,⁶² parents prefer to enroll their sons, rather than their daughters, in private schools. It is important to mention that the further one gets from the Lebanese capital, the more this idea becomes common and takes root within certain communities, thus paving the way for an increase in the cases of underage marriage.⁶³ Child marriages are widespread in refugee camps namely in the towns of Siddiqine, Faour, Akkar and Hermel.⁶⁴

As a result, the lack of social support for poor families, especially in times of economic crisis, supplanting the absence of a law criminalizing underage marriage, exacerbates the problem.⁶⁵ The economic crisis in vulnerable communities and the loss of family income further forces families to push their young daughters into forced marriage, seeing them as financial burdens.⁶⁶ For example, some organizations working in Tripoli, explain that a man who recently forced his daughter into marriage said that it was the only way to provide for her,^{viii} since he was unable to offer her the basic necessities.

Lebanon is slowly addressing the question of equality between women and men; women are granted new rights, such as criminalization of sexual harassment, new mechanisms of complaint and protection from domestic violence according to new laws 205 and 206;⁶⁷ unfortunately, women still fall victim of the Lebanese patriarchal system and see their rights and protection violated. Until today, the sole consent of a father is enough to marry his daughter. In addition, stereotypes and discriminatory contents remain widespread in school textbooks, for example, each time the problem necessitates the input of an engineer, the latter is a male whereas women are confined to the role of mothers preparing meals at home, hence the mind embedded stereotypes amongst children.

62 CRDP : "Rapport PASEC – Liban 2012", https://www.crdp.org/files/Rapport%20PASEC%20Liban%202012_0.pdf.

63 Al Nahar: "Remarkable increase in child marriage rates for young girls", <https://www.annahar.com/arabic/section/77-%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B9/23112020020118900>.

64 L'Orient-le jour: "Lebanon : These girls that we marry to preserve honor", <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/880332/ces-fillettes-quon-marie-pour-preserver-lhonneur-.html>.

65 World Bank Blog: "Child marriage: the unspoken consequence of COVID-19", <https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/child-marriage-unspoken-consequence-covid-19>.

66 UNICEF: "Child marriage in Covid-19", https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/child_marriage_in_covid-19_contexts_final.pdf.

67 Human Rights Watch: "Lebanon: Sexual Harassment Law Missing Key Protections", <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/05/lebanon-sexual-harassment-law-missing-key-protections>.

Children with physical or mental disability

Children with physical disabilities have also been affected by the COVID-19 epidemic. Indeed, not only have they always been confronted with difficult obstacles in terms of resources and access to quality education, but also, legally speaking, Lebanon has still not ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Even though Law 220/2000 prohibits discrimination based on disability, the very definition of disability remains extremely narrow, excluding children with mental disabilities.

Another barrier faced by children with disabilities is the lack of a systematic policy to provide reasonable accommodation, including access to schools, inclusive programs and qualified teachers. Many families turn to humanitarian organizations for support, as most schools still lack the necessary equipment to provide adequate education for children with disabilities. In addition, the Lebanese state has failed to improve the access of these children to education or to ease the logistical, financial and moral burden on their families. In addition, children with disabilities suffered from marginalization during the pandemic which manifested mainly in the difficulty of accessing health care, education and food.⁶⁸

Additionally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online education, many children with disabilities have been completely neglected and left behind. Many of those who had been able to benefit from access to schools and education through humanitarian organizations, specialized establishments and religious actors, have now found themselves abandoned and waiting for a solution to the pandemic. Many of them are in need of constant care and the presence of a professional to assist them, which is impossible to ensure given the closure of schools and the country in general due to the pandemic. A professional working in an autism center assures us that: “Some children need someone to hold their hand all the time to feel assured. They need constant psychological support, which I cannot provide online and without which they cannot sit still or concentrate.”^{ix} It is therefore very problematic for families to face this obstacle and find an adequate solution to ensure their children have access to education.

Online schooling has been the best option to limit the spread of the virus among the younger generations, but the Lebanese authorities have taken no measures to anticipate or resolve the difficulties faced by the most vulnerable. Families were left to fend for themselves without any logistical, financial or moral support. This is a clear failure of the authorities who had the responsibility and the duty to meet and overcome the challenges facing the country by taking certain categorical decisions, while drawing up contingency plans. The COVID-19 emergency working group that has been set up to develop a plan to deal with the pandemic should come up with concrete solutions to support these families and children.

⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch: “Lebanon: People with Disabilities Overlooked in Covid-19”, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/11/lebanon-people-disabilities-overlooked-covid-19>.

Conclusion

The Lebanese education sector has over the years, mainly been designed by several religious authorities belonging to different groups. From local to international interferences and influence, the Lebanese education sector has become greatly diverse while the schooling establishments themselves remained extremely homogenous in terms of registered individuals. At the same time, these establishments, for the most part private, have taken over the majority of the system with a higher quality of education thanks to abundant resources and funds provided by international and local donors. This situation has led the public system to slowly deteriorate with almost no support from the state to renovate its infrastructure, improve its curriculum, and provide assistance to the most vulnerable.

With the various crises affecting the country, more and more families are falling under the poverty line, while the ones lucky enough to still pay for basic necessities are struggling more and more to send their children to private establishments. This situation, which is putting even more pressure on the Lebanese public schools, will affect future generations with many children either not able to attend schools, or not able to receive a proper educational baggage. With the postponing of a tangible reform plan to improve the Lebanese public educational sector, and the almost total absence of funding from the part of the Lebanese state, what remains of public schools can only become worse over the next few years if nothing is done to address the current challenges faced by the schools themselves, but also the families of children not able to afford private education.

Finally, private schools will not be able to take on the weight of education by themselves. These establishments are also paying the price of the financial and socio-economic crises and will slowly increase their fees to match the latest market prices, throwing thousands of families into disarray. The latter will be forced to shift to public education which is, as mentioned several times throughout this paper, completely overwhelmed. An education crisis is slowly becoming a possibility, which will not only mean pressure on the public sector, but pressure on the Lebanese society itself. Thousands of children are already paying the price of it and sent on the Lebanese streets and agricultural fields to work in order to support their parents paying certain bills. In addition, the risks on young girls and refugees, who are already extremely vulnerable will increase especially if public schools become overwhelmed. It is now crucial, more than ever, to support the Lebanese state in coming up with tangible and concrete reforms to address these challenges, to avoid seeing one of Lebanon's only developed service fall in complete ruins.

Recommendations

To the Lebanese authorities

- **The GoL must adopt a collaborative participatory approach** to consult with the various education stakeholders including UN agencies, civil society organizations, the private sector, representatives from the regional districts, municipalities, academia, and parents in developing the national education strategy to increase access to education and coordinate efforts related to education service deliveries (such as equipment, materials, transportation, etc.) to make sure all children are scholarized.
- **The GoL must increase cooperation** between the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Transport, and Ministry of Education to identify solutions to reduce barriers to accessing education, including access to digital infrastructure but also the cost of school transport and materials such as books and equipment.
- **The GoL and Municipalities must increase access to information** on child labour laws and the enforcement of child labour laws. This should involve a modification of Article 22 on child labour to raise the minimum age for work to 15 years old to meet international standards. Further, it is necessary to introduce a monitoring mechanism or oversight body to ensure the application of the law, the identification of child labour cases and sanctioning businesses engaged in child labour.
- **To clearly monitor private schools' non-fee restrictions**, such as discriminatory enrolment practices, on access to education for Syrian refugees.
- **To amend the education curriculum** by increasing and strengthening courses related to civic education and history, to promote the notions of diversity and citizenship in a more concrete way while providing training for teachers to address sensitive questions and to be able to answer students' questions or concerns.
- **To finally issue the necessary decrees** to provide for the implementation and enforcement of Law 150/2011 on compulsory and free education at the basic stage.
- **To closely coordinate with private schools' higher management** to increase control over curriculums in order to unify schooling programs to prevent political and religious interferences while promoting religious diversity.
- **To provide the most vulnerable families with financial support** to be able to pay registration fees.

- **To organize a national campaign promoting and protecting the access to education** of all children, especially young girls, to sensitize families all across the country, especially in peripheral areas, to ensure young girls are scholarized instead of staying at home or forcibly married.
- **To develop an action plan focusing on adapting schools** to increase access for children with disabilities, but also train specialized personnel to support and protect these children while revising the curriculum to facilitate inclusive learning, and finally, amend Law 220/2000 to include a wider range of disabilities not limited to physical ones.

To the Civil Society

- **To develop concrete support programs related to education** such as the distribution of schooling material, food for children, but also, coupons for fuel to support the most vulnerable addressing the transportation costs.
- **To continue raising awareness regarding the importance of access to education to all** (whether boys, girls, refugees, or children with disabilities), especially in rural areas.
- **To create spaces for activities** where students can enroll and participate in community service to enhance their inclusion in the society and their activeness in their role as citizens all across the country, especially with private schools' students.
- **To create reporting mechanisms** to report violations related to access to education and support lines.

To Donors

- **To meet their funding obligations**, ensure that RACE II is fully funded, and honor past pledges and the Global Compact on Refugees.
- **To continue to and increase funding** to provide and cover transportation and school materials' costs for vulnerable communities.
- **To increase their funding in terms of capacity building and trainings** to support vulnerable parents contracting a job to ensure children are not victim of child labour.

ⁱ In a series of roundtables conducted by ALEF-Act for Human Rights around Freedom of Religion and Belief, the second of three tables, held with experts on Education of Citizenship, Diversity and Religion, on the 21st of February, discussed the teaching of religion in Lebanese schools and its contribution to understanding diversity and human rights. The roundtable revolved around two presentations, the first on the teaching of religions, was delivered by Dr. Elie El Hindi, Director of Adyan Foundation and was followed by a moderated discussion by ALEF.

ⁱⁱ In a series of roundtables conducted by ALEF-Act for Human Rights around Freedom of Religion and Belief, the third table revolved around the presentation of Father. Fadi Daou, Senior Advisor at Adyan Foundation, followed by a Q&A and a brainstorming discussion. The presentation and questions tackled the reform of education on citizenship in Lebanon from the experience of Adyan and reflected on expertise in the field of education, specifically civic education.

ⁱⁱⁱ Table 9

^{iv} Table 10

^v Table 10

^{vi} Table 12

^{vii} Table 12

^{viii} On the 27th of January 2021, ALEF met with Fawaz Bassoumi, Project Manager at DROPS an organization operating in Tripoli working with refugees. During the interview, ALEF asked about grassroots information on violence against children, education and the general condition of refugees during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a special emphasis on education.

^{ix} On January 20, 2021, ALEF met with Ms. Cynthia Abou Chebel, a social worker, specialized in Autism working at the Autism Lebanese Center in Gemmayze. During the meeting, she explained the challenges she faces in assisting children with special needs, especially during the pandemic.

Diversity and Citizenship
A Selective Teaching of Notions
March 2021