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RESILIENCE IN RETURN TO LEARNING DURING COVID-19

LEBANON CASE STUDY

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This report is dedicated to the tireless teachers, learners, and parents around the world who continue to endure this global emergency.

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ACRONYMS

B2S	Back to school plan
CERD	Center for Educational Research and Development
DGE	General Directorate of Education
DOPS	Direction d’Orientation Pédagogique et Scolaire
GoL	Government of Lebanon
IAC	Inter-Agency Coordination
ICT	Information communications technology
NGO	Non-government organization
KII	Key informant interview
LBP	Lebanese pound
LCRP	Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (2017–2020)
LeaRA	Learning Readiness Rapid Assessment
LMS	Learner management system
MEHE	Ministry of Education and Higher Education
NFE	Non-formal education
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
PMU	Project Management Unit (of the MEHE)
RACE II	Reaching All Children with Education (2017–2020)
RLP	Lebanon’s National Action Plan for Remote Learning System (Remote Learning Plan)
RtL	Return to learning
SIMS	School Information Management System
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH

This case study examines the return to learning (RtL) processes and strategies of the education system in Lebanon from March 2020–April 2021. The report sits within a [compendium of five case studies](#) and an overarching synthesis report (Heaner et al. 2021) that examine the RtL process during the COVID-19 pandemic in Colombia, Georgia, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Zambia.

The overarching purpose of this research was to (a) document descriptions of the processes of keeping learners engaged during school closures and reopening across a range of diverse national contexts and alongside multiple ongoing shocks and stressors; (b) capture the perspectives and learning of education stakeholders and institutions in order to understand how systems absorbed and adapted to the dynamic context of COVID-19; and (c) examine the ways in which education was positioned as a key sector in support of national resilience and recovery efforts. The research was informed by USAID’s Return to Learning framework (Boisvert and Weisenhorn 2020), which largely structured the thematic lines of inquiry for the case studies, and USAID’s Resilience White Paper, which framed the overall methods and analysis (Shah 2019).

METHODS

The research team was comprised of four international “core” team members and five local research consultants, one in each case study location. This case study included four waves of qualitative, primary data collection in Lebanon, conducted by the team’s local research consultant over a six-month period. The researchers conducted 70 key informant interviews targeting education stakeholders that included Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) and other government officials, donors, international and local NGO stakeholders, civil society organization staff members, principals, and teachers. Over the course of the research, the team conducted ongoing review of documents and literature that described the RtL processes, decision-making, policies, and strategies.

Across the five case study locations, all consultants, the core team, and USAID came together to review findings and process after each wave. The purpose of these workshops was to unpack findings, compare across contexts, iterate lines of inquiry and priorities for the subsequent wave, and share methodological challenges and learning. After each wave, context-specific research teams developed priorities, plans, and targeted interviews for the next wave. After four waves, the team transcribed and analyzed data for each location. The findings from each case study are offered as descriptive, stand-alone pieces and are analyzed alongside each other in a synthesis report.

CONTEXT AND COVID-19

In Lebanon, the COVID-19 pandemic intersected with a country that was already suffering a complex number, variety, and depth of shocks and stressors and deep national instability, with health, education, and other social systems already under significant strain. 2020 saw overall inflation hit 84 percent, food inflation hit 670 percent, and over half of the population forced to live in poverty (United Nations 2021).

This case study focuses on the impacts of COVID-19 on general education (primary and secondary) at the national and school levels in Lebanon, as well as on the roles centralized government systems, non-

formal education (NFE), and education donors and technical partners played in the national education response to the pandemic.

The first case of COVID-19 in Lebanon was confirmed on February 21, 2020 and the Government of Lebanon (GoL) took immediate and significant action to prevent its spread. On March 2, the Inter-Ministerial Committee for COVID-19 mandated closure of all education institutions. The MEHE oversaw distance learning measures for primary and secondary education that were based mainly in the use of an online platform. For eight weeks in November and December 2020 (six weeks for students in second-shift schools), schools reopened under a blended learning modality but then closed again due to a new COVID-19 outbreak. By May 2021, most schools had returned to in-person learning.

FINDINGS

This case study describes the alignment of response with the USAID RtL Framework's five priorities, as well as challenges and opportunities for resilience during the responses. In particular, the Lebanon case demonstrates that much of the RtL framework was inadvertently adopted in the initial stages of crisis response to absorb the shock of COVID-19 and ensure continued learning (and plan the return to school). Although all RtL priority areas were relevant to some degree to the MEHE response planning for RtL during COVID-19,¹ decision-making processes under these priorities was most often conducted in an opaque and non-inclusive manner at a national level, sidelining school-level decision-making and innovation.

Specific “pockets of promise” were identified during this research that highlighted capacities that were leveraged to respond to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. These include: (a) development of an array of national COVID-19 response and remote learning plans, policies, and platforms; (b) increasingly strategic collaboration between government agencies; (c) readiness of existing networks of education partners to mobilize response support; (d) principals and teachers embracing a strong sense of moral purpose, accountability to their students, and adaptive responses in their practice; and (e) the NFE subsector leveraging existing coordination mechanisms and crisis experience to mobilize rapidly and responsively.

However, overall, the compound effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Lebanon have contributed to the possibility of long-term costs to education. The system has been able to deploy localized adaptive responses to COVID-19 and its secondary effects, but ongoing political gridlock, discord between policy and practice, and lack of recognition of existing latent potential within the system to address the pandemic are currently hindering more sustained, transformative change. At the same time, the COVID-19 response has also highlighted some existing capacities across the system that could be built on to increase systemic resilience. Rebuilding the resilience of the broader system has the potential to reignite public trust in education and mitigate some of the factors that currently render the system susceptible to recurrent shocks and stressors.

¹ Priority areas include: (1) learner re-engagement; (2) education reopening plans; (3) instructional time, curricula, and learning supports; (4) exams and promotion; and (5) educators and the learning space.

I. INTRODUCTION

This case study sits within a compendium of five case studies plus an overarching synthesis report that examine the return to learning (RtL) process during COVID-19 in Colombia, Lebanon, Georgia, Nigeria, and Zambia. Learning regarding RtL processes and resilience in education systems more broadly is explored further in the synthesis report (Heaner et al., 2021). The purpose of the overall research was to (a) document descriptions of the processes of keeping learners engaged during school closures and reopening across a range of diverse national contexts and alongside multiple ongoing shocks and stressors; (b) capture the perspectives and learning of education stakeholders and institutions in order to understand how systems absorbed and adapted to the dynamic context of COVID-19; and (c) examine the ways in which education was positioned as a key sector in support of national resilience and recovery efforts. The research was informed by USAID’s Return to Learning framework (Boisvert and Weisenhorn 2020), which largely structured the thematic lines of inquiry for the case studies, and USAID’s Resilience White Paper (Shah 2019), which framed the overall methods and analysis; it was ultimately guided by seven research questions ([Appendix B](#)).

Each of the case studies examines, describes, and analyzes specific localized processes, decision-making, and intricacies of continuing education and reopening schools, tracking responses to COVID-19 against USAID’s RtL framework. With equity and inclusion at its core, this framework recognizes that crises affect learners in different ways, and offers guidance on critical plans and processes needed during crisis response to ensure that education authorities: (1) support all learners to return to or maintain a connection with learning; (2) mitigate learner dropout because of the crisis; and (3) facilitate return to learning both for learners who have dropped out during the crisis and learners who were outside the system prior to the crisis. When facilitating the return to learning—in-person, at a distance, or both—the RtL framework encourages education planners, partners, and leaders to “leverage this opportunity to address historic educational disparities faced by the most marginalized” (USAID 2020) to ensure that not only is learning loss mitigated during crisis response, but that systemic resilience is, in fact, built through crisis response.

USAID defines resilience in education as the “ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth” (USAID 2012). USAID’s Resilience Framework may be understood in relation to resilience capacities (defined in the box below), and to pathways of resilience and vulnerability during COVID-19 (Shah 2019). This research set out to understand this framework in context to better understand how it may be more effectively applied.

Absorptive resilience capacities – The ability of learners, schools, communities, or institutions to minimize exposure and sensitivity to shocks and stressors through preventative measures and appropriate coping strategies to avoid long-term negative impacts.

Adaptive resilience capacities – The ability of learners, schools, communities, or institutions to make informed choices and changes in response to longer term social, economic, and environmental change.

Transformative resilience capacities – The ability of communities and institutions to establish an enabling environment for systemic change through their governance mechanisms, policies and regulations, cultural and gender norms, community networks, and formal and informal social protection mechanisms.

METHODS OF INQUIRY

The research team was made up of four international consultants (three researchers and one technical advisor) who served as the core team, and one local consultant per case study country.² One core team researcher served as the main point of contact for the local consultant for each case study. In general, the local consultant was responsible for conducting interviews (in person or online/by phone, as appropriate) and supplying notes or recordings to the core team member, who would review and provide feedback as necessary. In some cases, the core team member participated in interviews or conducted interviews on her own. The local consultant also collaborated with the core team member on refining lines of inquiry, selecting participants, supporting data analysis, and writing the report. The study comprised three phases: (1) inception, (2) document collection and review, and (3) four “waves” of primary data collection through key informant interviews. After each wave, lines of inquiry were refined as needed.

As part of the inception phase, five countries were selected in a manner that considered Mission-level capacity to support and benefit from the study and consideration of various features and characteristics of the contexts. USAID (either the Missions themselves, or colleagues working in the region) suggested an initial set of 14 countries. From those 14, the team aimed to select five that would allow for comparison across contexts in order to identify common themes, but also with enough breadth to show diversity in contextual approaches to RtL. A scoring rubric was prepared to assist in this selection of five. The rubric was designed to allow for each case study context to be coded on two administrative criteria (USAID Mission concurrence and existing vetted GK Consulting contacts), and five situational criteria to generate a “contextual profile” for each, thereby balancing the uniqueness of a case study with its complementarity within the set. These situational criteria were:

1. Resilience: experience with a health crisis, or a crisis in which schools closed at scale for a protracted period of time
2. Return to learning status: schools have reopened/are currently open/funding allocated or provided
3. Context vulnerability: nature of existing shocks and stressors on society, and specifically on learners
4. Diversity of income levels
5. Geographical diversity (aim to include one each from Latin America and the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East and North Africa)³

² In the Nigeria case study, an additional local consultant was brought on to support outreach to the state-level government agencies.

³ A separate set of case studies had already been planned through the USAID Asia Bureau, so Asian countries were not considered in the set.

The five countries selected using the criteria were: Colombia, Georgia, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Zambia. Colombia was selected because of its upper-middle income status, as well as experience dealing with natural hazards and an ongoing refugee situation. Georgia served as a good contrast to Colombia given that it, too, had an upper middle-income status but had fewer ongoing shocks. Nigeria was selected because of its lower-middle income status and previous experience battling a public health crisis (Ebola in 2015) along with recurring instances of violence in the north. Lebanon and Nigeria complemented each other in terms of their similarly multi-risk contexts and lower-middle income status, but were distinct from one another in terms of geography and geopolitics.

Also during the inception phase, the research questions initially articulated by USAID were elaborated upon and situated within a conceptual framework of resilience, and local consultants were hired to lead the case studies in each of the selected contexts.

For the second phase, the research team conducted a comprehensive desk review and gathered (a) frameworks published by international agencies on education sector responses to COVID-19; (b) reports on education during the pandemic school closures; (c) situation analyses of access to education during school closure in each of the countries; and (d) government plans drafted and decreed in response to COVID-19 (specifically in the education sector) for each of the countries. At this point, additional thematic areas of focus were considered for certain contexts. For example, the Lebanon case study was identified to focus on general education (primary and secondary) at the national and school levels, and on the roles centralized government systems, non-formal education (NFE), and education donors and technical partners played in the national education response.

The third phase focused on interviews with key informants in the education sector—from government agencies, donor agencies, universities, NGOs, civil society organizations, and the private sector—over a series of four waves of research. After each wave, the local and international research teams convened to discuss emerging findings and recalibrate the research questions and sample set for subsequent waves. In total, 70 interviews were conducted for the Lebanon case study.

Exhibit I. Respondents in Lebanon interviewed during Phase 3

INFORMANTS INTERVIEWED IN LEBANON	NUMBER
Government officials	14
Donors	9
International technical partners	6
Local NGOs and civil society organizations	3
Principals and teachers	38
TOTAL	70

Common limitations across five case studies

Several limitations must be considered in contextualizing the findings of this study:

Challenge accessing information from key informants

While the multi-wave methodology allowed for a substantial amount of time to reach out to key informants and to build relationships with individuals and organizations/agencies over the course of the research, the team's ability to access some individuals was limited, in particular at the government level. This was true both in terms of securing an interview and in hearing candid responses from individuals. As a result, in some cases, the perspective of government is provided by just a few individuals who offer a particular perspective on successes or challenges; sometimes, these perspectives were in contrast to more critical descriptions offered by other respondents.

Subjectivity and potential for bias from the research team

As with respondents, researchers are subject to their own biases, which can emerge in the data, particularly with the open-ended qualitative approach employed for this study. The local researchers had significant influence and autonomy over shaping the questions that were asked in each interview, and in analyzing and interpreting responses. This helped ensure that the questions were relevant and appropriate to the context at the time in terms of COVID-19 and other developments in the education sector in each setting. Constant reflexivity within the research team, as well as a process of triangulating information (where possible), served to mitigate some of the inherent bias that individual researchers bring to their work. Specifically, local consultants regularly engaged with the core team and each other to share findings and analysis. Local consultants were also asked to reflect on their own biases emerging from the research.

Focus on first fourteen months of ongoing crisis

This study was conducted during the six months from November 2020 to April 2021 and was designed to reflect both on the initial eight months of crisis response and on the ongoing response, decision-making processes, and actions that took place during the course of the six months of data collection. It was beyond the scope of this study to capture longer term outcomes of the RtL process. As such, some of the research questions can only be partially addressed, and in some cases, have introduced more questions to ask in subsequent research. For example, our research found that the majority of coping strategies deployed across the contexts were absorptive in nature, more so than adaptive or transformative, given that the COVID-19 emergency was ongoing. Thus, the research focus is balanced toward absorptive capacities deployed and the characteristics that have allowed some contexts to more readily build on these to then deploy adaptive strategies, and in less depth on transformative capacities. The potential for both adaptive and transformative capacities to be further leveraged in the future has been explored in the pockets of promise and serves as an important focal point for future research.

Context-specific limitations in Lebanon

Given the high-pressure context in Lebanon—economically, socially, psycho-socially, and physically—at the time of data collection, the well-being of researchers and respondents was under significant strain. While some interviews ran for only a short period of time because the respondent expressed too much fatigue to either continue or reflect on their experiences, many other respondents, especially teachers, extended far beyond the scheduled interview time to share their personal grievances, which also served as key findings. The research team members in Lebanon, particularly those managing young children at home, had to stretch the timelines, given that schools were closed for more than 14 months since the

pandemic had started and work time was, therefore, limited to late evenings and times when working partners were able to care for children.

2. CONTEXT

NATIONAL-LEVEL CONTEXT

In Lebanon, the COVID-19 outbreak met a country that was in the “midst of a crippling socio-economic crisis, with total collapse looming on the horizon” (UN OCHA 2020). The pandemic came at a point when the country was already suffering a complex number, variety, and depth of shocks and stressors, rendering its resilience to further disruption reportedly at its lowest since the 1975–1990 civil war (Meyer 2021). The onset of the pandemic intersected with pre-existing social inequalities and complex political and economic failings, and measures to respond to COVID-19 were implemented within a context of deep national instability, putting additional pressure on already exhausted health and social systems.

Lebanon currently has the highest ratio of refugees per capita in the world (UNHCR 2018). It has hosted more than 400,000 Palestinians since 1948; nearly 50,000 Iraqis since the 2003 U.S. military operations in Iraq; and an estimated 1.5 million people from the ongoing war in Syria that erupted in 2011 (Government of Lebanon 2020).

On October 17, 2019—just before the onset of COVID-19—street protests ignited, resulting in two months of roadblocks and demonstrations across Lebanon in reaction to ongoing endemic corruption and a deteriorating economy. Then Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned less than two months later. The country has been operating under a shadow government ever since. At that time, confidence in the banking sector began to plummet, resulting in an economic crash.⁴ By February 2020, Lebanon’s unemployment rate had jumped to 25 percent, and nearly a third of the population was living below the poverty line (BBC 2020), up from 27 percent in 2018 (World Bank 2019). By June 2020, with the depreciation of the Lebanese Pound, overall inflation had reached 84 percent, with food inflation reaching 670 percent. Lebanon’s gross domestic product contracted by 25 percent. Now, more than one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, over half the population lives in poverty (United Nations 2021).

Corruption in Lebanon plagues its institutional and social systems, with the 2020 Corruption Perception Index ranking Lebanon at 149 out of 180 countries (Transparency International 2020). On August 4, 2020, the Beirut Port explosion, seen by many as the result of years of corruption and mismanagement (BBC 2020), left over 200 people dead, 300,000 homeless, 6,500 injured, and 90 public and 73 private schools with varying degrees of damage (UNESCO 2020). Today, Lebanon continues to struggle to maintain public services, with supply of electricity, Internet, and fuel available sporadically, at best (France24 2021).

Today, Lebanon remains on the verge of collapse. International partners continue to seek solutions to the increasing levels of poverty in the country and to rebuild public services without feeding endemic corruption and inequality (Saadoun and Majzoub 2020). However, with a transitional government and

⁴ As the demand for U.S. dollars to import goods increased, the Lebanese Pound depreciated in a black market from 1,507.50 LBP per USD to 12,000 LBP per USD.

the formation of a new government in stalemate, Lebanon reportedly gives international partners very little confidence to support it out of the current complex web of crises (Al Jazeera 2021).

Overview of the education system

With a national median age of 30, about 25 percent of the population is currently enrolled in some kind of learning and more than 1 in 10 members of the national workforce is employed in the education sector in some capacity (Yarak and Collins 2020).

At the government level, the MEHE regulates all education provisions from kindergarten to higher education and across public and private schools.⁵ The MEHE houses three directorates: Higher Education; General Education; and Vocational Training. The Centre for Educational Research and Development (CERD)⁶ is an autonomous arm mandated to develop national curriculum and learning resources, provide teacher training, and gather and publish data on schools.

Schooling in Lebanon for children K–12 comes in three sub-sectors: public, private, and non-formal (CERD 2020).⁷ 2019 and 2020 have seen a population of children in private schools migrating over to public schools in response to the economic collapse and school closures resulting from ongoing nationwide protests (Abdul-Hamid and Yassine 2020). With the compounding effects of COVID-19 in 2020, the MEHE expected an estimated increase of 10 to 20 percent enrollment in the 2020/21 academic year compared to previous school years, with up to 1,600 private schools reportedly at risk of closing due to economic strife (Houssari 2020). Less than half of all public school teachers are tenured, and the majority are on some form of temporary contract that pays per hour.

The public education system also serves approximately 150,000 of the estimated 660,000 Syrian refugee children in Lebanon through a second shift in 360 public schools (CERD 2020). NFE services are also a critical provision in Lebanon, particularly for children who are marginalized because of their refugee status, low income level, or poverty, and are out of school.⁸ The MEHE regulates NFE programs, which support approximately 30,000 learners, mostly Syrian refugees (IAC Lebanon 2020b).

With reliance on these services for refugee children in Lebanon, as a well as a focus on broader structural reform, a range of international stakeholders—bilateral and multilateral donors, United Nations agencies and international NGOs—as well as civil society and community groups play a central support role in Lebanon’s education system.

In lieu of a comprehensive national education strategy or contingency plan in the education sector,⁹ the core document that has underpinned crisis response in recent years is the education chapter of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP, 2017–2020). The LCRP was initially drafted by the Government of

⁵ Nurseries fall under the Ministry of Public Health. Article 10 of the Lebanese Constitution gives private schools a great degree of autonomy in what programs they offer and how they govern their school, so long as policies and approaches adhere to national law.

⁶ CRDP in French; see <https://crdp.org>.

⁷ Among the 1,069,826 school children in the 2,861 public and private schools, 32 percent are distributed across the 1,235 public schools while the 1,626 private schools cater to nearly 70 percent of the children through either fee-paying schools (52.2 percent; 1,209 schools), subsidized schools (12.5 percent; 352 schools), and UNRWA (3.3 percent; 65 schools).

⁸ NFE services provide an MEHE-regularized curriculum delivered by civil society actors, NGOs, and international NGOs.

⁹ At time of writing, a MEHE-drafted 2021–2026 national education plan is under construction.

Lebanon (GoL), United Nations agencies, and other sectoral stakeholders in 2014 (and updated every year since) to guide the national response to the Syrian refugee crisis. This national strategic plan will end in June 2021. In the education section, the LCRP aligns with the “Reaching All Children with Education (RACE)” plan developed into two strategies: RACE I (2014–2017) and RACE II (2017–2021). The RACE strategies provide an overall map of pathways to improve three pillars of formal and regulated NFE programs: access, quality, and management of the national education system. The RACE framework is administered by the Project Management Unit (PMU) of the MEHE and is largely operationalized by the education sector Inter-Agency Coordination (IAC) group, chaired by UNESCO and UNICEF with international and local NGO co-chairs.

There is currently a level of stagnation across the sector, with the most recent curriculum reform taking place in 1997, and with less than a quarter of the teacher workforce having qualifications that the MEHE recognizes as sufficient to teach (CERD 2020). Results of the 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) test indicated that roughly two-thirds of students did not meet the basic proficiency level in reading, mathematics, or science; well below the Middle East and North Africa average (World Bank 2018). Additionally, children with special educational needs and disabilities were and continue to be structurally marginalized from accessing schools and engaging in classroom learning (Human Rights Watch 2018).

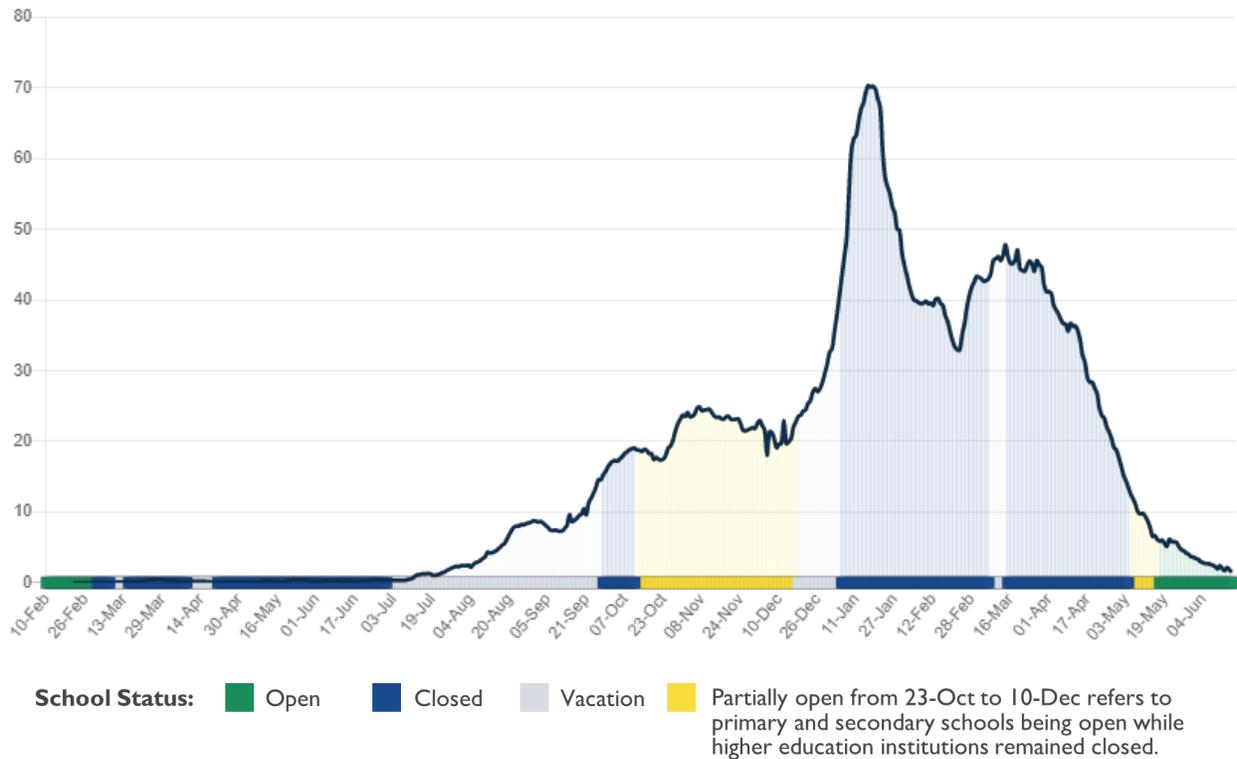
The sector’s challenges with corruption are well-documented. In September 2020, the current Minister of Education admitted on television that corruption in his ministry is rife (Naharnet Newsdesk 2020). Even prior to COVID-19, public trust in education was at a low, made worse recently by mass teacher protests as a result of contractual teachers having not been paid during the COVID-19 period. The past decade has seen over half a billion dollars in donor grants and loans for education development and reform in management, accountability mechanisms, and other systems strengthening initiatives, but with little information available on sustainable outcomes.¹⁰

Within this context, this case study explores some of the decision-making processes and actions taken during the Lebanon response to COVID-19 in general education at the national and school levels, and considers the roles centralized government systems, NFE, and education donors and technical partners played in the national education response.

¹⁰ Information drawn from <https://elgherbal.org/loans-grants>.

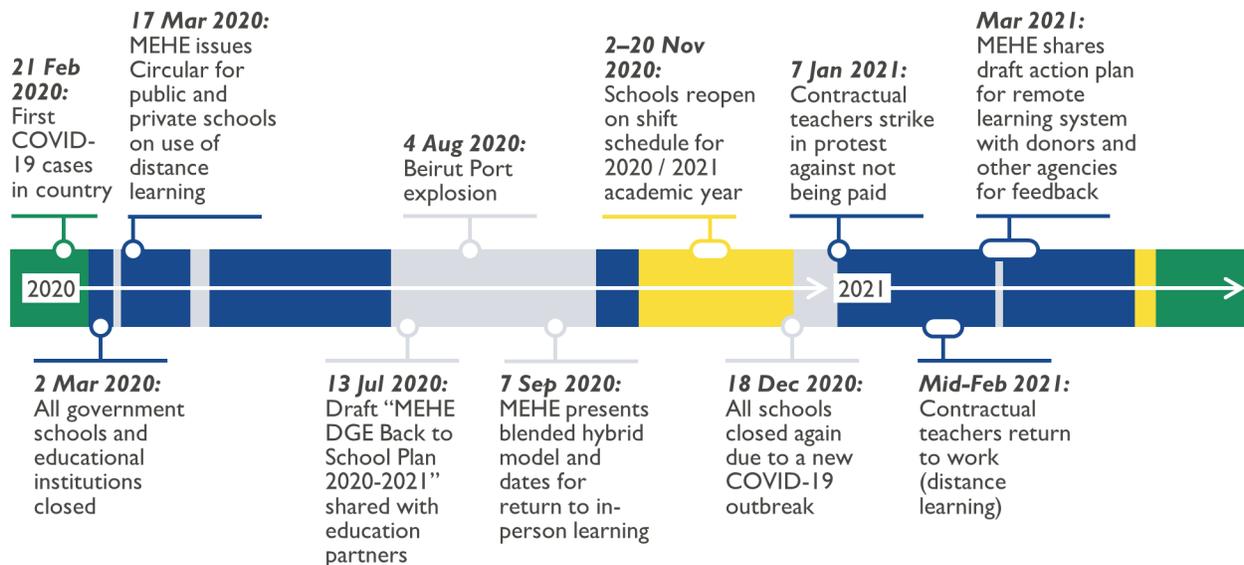
TIMELINE OF KEY COVID-19 EVENTS AND RESPONSES IN LEBANON

Exhibit 2. School closure in relation to new COVID-19 cases in Lebanon, per 100,000 of population (Insights for Education)



Note: For the first 3 weeks of November 2020, single and morning shift schools were open while second shifts were still closed. All shifts then closed again from mid-December 2020.

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS



As illustrated in Exhibit 2, across the 70 weeks of COVID-19 response in Lebanon examined in this study (March 2020 to June 2021), most public and private schools were opened for only 8–10 weeks;¹¹ approximately 305 days (61 weeks) of school closure.¹² Second-shift schools had been closed for approximately two weeks longer. The graph above shows month-by-month when schools have been opened and closed (against new COVID-19 cases per 100,000 of population) in Lebanon. Although this timeline tracks only the COVID-19 period, many schools across the country had already been closed in November and December 2019 when protests against the economic crisis were widespread.

Following is a timeline of key events undertaken in the Lebanese education system in response to the COVID-19 pandemic up to the time of writing (April 2021).

Exhibit 3. Timeline of initial pandemic responses (February–April 2020)

DATE	EVENT
February 21	The first COVID-19 cases are reported in Lebanon.
March 2	The GoL issues a decree to close all schools and educational institutions in the country. The education sector’s IAC group recommends that NFE service providers close their centers as well (IAC 2020b).
March 15	Through its national COVID-19 General Mobilization Plan, the Inter-Ministerial Committee for COVID-19 applies wide-reaching lockdown measures to attempt to curb the spread of the virus.
March 17	The MEHE issues Circular 15, 17/03/2020 for public and private schools outlining guidance on the key methods schools should use for distance learning during school closure.
March–April	The education sector IAC group conducts a <i>Rapid Learning Readiness Assessment (LeaRA)</i> (IAC 2020a).
April 15	The education sector IAC group shares its <i>Education Sector Short-Term Response to COVID-19, Lebanon – Guiding Framework</i> (IAC 2020b).

For distance learning during school closure, the MEHE Circular 15, 17/03/2020 outlined that all schools should use:

- **Media:** Tele-Liban (the national television station) and the MEHE and CERD produced class lectures for learners who have official exams—grades 9 and 12—with the intention to expand to other grades later. The lessons are accessible on YouTube at the “[Tele-Liban E-learning](#)” channel. The MEHE with other agencies—Ministry of Public Health, Ministry of Information, UNICEF, WHO, International Red Cross—produced a series of videos raising public awareness on health and safety measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. The videos are uploaded on the [MEHE YouTube channel](#).

¹¹ Higher education institutions have had their campuses closed since March 2020 and are likely to continue into the Fall 2021 semester. TVET schools also closed in March 2020 but opened again briefly in October 2020.

¹² Data cross-referenced between interviews and Insights for Education.

- **Online platforms:** Microsoft Teams was launched in partnership between the MEHE and Microsoft as the official application to be used in remote learning for public schools across all grade levels. The MEHE also produced a mobile application for the public to access information on updates, announcements, circulars, and decisions.
- **Non-ICT methods:** Paper-based materials for learners across all grade levels in their homes.

Teachers were offered some limited training by the MEHE on using the online platform. School-level personnel quickly started reporting that they wished the platform were simpler and that they had been provided more training in how to use it. They also reported that the platform required more bandwidth than they or their students could access, and that it was not engaging for students.¹³ Most teachers, especially in cycles 1 and 2, reported moving to other applications, especially WhatsApp, Telegram, and, in fewer cases, Zoom or Google Meet, as that was what both they and the students felt most comfortable with and to which they had reliable access. No school personnel interviewed referenced the MEHE and CERD resources available on YouTube at all. The MEHE reportedly provided forms for school personnel to provide their feedback on the three remote learning pathways (media, online, and non-ICT methods); but who received the feedback and whether the feedback was read was not clear from interview responses.¹⁴

Despite MEHE accountability for second shifts in public schools and for regulating NFE programs—both of which largely serve Syrian refugee populations—the MEHE’s Circular 15 did not provide guidance for either service on how they should be engaging in distance learning. Schools initially navigated their own responses to second shifts—some forgoing them altogether, others attempting to engage second-shift students in some classes—until further instruction was provided from the PMU at the central level.¹⁵ However, once teaching was finally deployed for these students,¹⁶ bureaucratic processes tied to macroeconomic conditions prevented contractual teachers—who largely serve the second shifts—from being paid their salaries. This situation continues; their last payment was in March 2020 (Human Rights Watch 2021). Education partners, for example, [UNICEF](#) and [Save the Children](#), have put out calls to remedy this situation but, at time of writing this report, a resolution had still not been found.

For the NFE sector, despite the absence of a clear directive from the MEHE, the sector’s IAC coordination group mobilized to support learners within NFE services. In April, the IAC group deployed a “Learning Readiness Rapid Assessment” (LeaRA) which, of Syrian refugee students in NFE, “reached approximately 10,000 households representing over 45,000 children, predominantly refugees, to identify the needs and sources of support to continue to support children’s right to education via distance learning modalities” (IAC 2020a). The assessment report highlights the existing enabling components of home environments for these students during distance learning—namely, the willingness and ability of parents to support their children’s learning at home, and access to WhatsApp—but also highlights the many challenges, including the unreliability of electricity and Internet in Lebanon, and the lack of sufficient devices to meet the needs of all students within a household.

¹³ Interview 5, 63, 42

¹⁴ Interview 4, 2,

¹⁵ Interview 14

¹⁶ This happened at different times in different schools depending on school leadership decisions.

From the LeaRA, and in consultation with the communities its serve, the IAC group drafted a “Short-Term Response Plan to COVID-19” (IAC 2020b) and constructed a comprehensive database of themed resources—including dedicated psychosocial support and social and emotional learning resources—for NFE providers and parents during distance learning. The LeaRA and the Response Plan were shared with and read by¹⁷ the MEHE at the time. The IAC group had hoped for MEHE endorsement of the documents, but, according to one respondent, this was probably not possible at the time due to the urgent competing priorities of the MEHE during the pandemic.¹⁸

Second semester of the 2019/20 academic year (April–June 2020)

Preparing and moving content to the online platform continued. Secondary school content and online classes, especially for critical grades 9, 11, and 12, received targeted support from the MEHE to support students to complete (and graduate) the year. Secondary school teachers reported persisting and having some success with the online platform. However, other grade level teachers, especially in the lower primary grades, reported little success with the platform. School personnel reported that lessons seemed to simply have been shifted online with limited consideration of school personnel preferences or capacities in designing appropriate methodologies for delivering and accessing digital technology (Internet, electricity, devices).¹⁹

Many teacher respondents reported feeling that the mandated remote learning methods provided them limited opportunity to ensure quality in their teaching, and a lack of student engagement or progress. Teachers also noticed and worried that, with the ongoing national economic and public infrastructure concerns, especially around electricity and Internet, some groups of students were not accessing education, especially those living in households affected by poverty or the economic collapse.

Exhibit 4. Timeline of end of 2019/2020 academic year (July–August 2020)

DATE	EVENT
July 1	Vacation starts (until 28 September).
July 13	The MEHE Director General shares the draft “MEHE DGE Back to School Plan 2020-2021” with education partners.
July 17	The United Nations in Lebanon, in coordination between the GoL’s Inter-Ministerial Committee for COVID-19 and international partners, releases the national <i>COVID-19 Emergency Appeal</i> (UN OCHA 2020).
July 22	The MEHE issues Ministerial Decision 85 for a “blanket graduation” of all students to the following grade in the new academic year, regardless of their exam results.
August 4	The Beirut Port explosion occurs.

Despite instructing schools to issue final exams to all students, in consultation with the National Inter-Ministerial Committee for COVID-19, the MEHE issued Ministerial Decision 85 on July 22, 2020 stating

¹⁷ Interview 2

¹⁸ Interview 2

¹⁹ Interview 46, 57, 68

that, in light of the challenges schools had faced in response to the pandemic, all students across the country would be considered to have completed the 2019/20 academic year and would graduate to the following grade in the new academic year, regardless of their exam results. Education partners and the majority of teachers and principals interviewed expressed concern and frustration with this decision, since (1) students had already lost a significant amount of learning time during 2019/20 and had missed fundamental content needed for the next grade level; and (2) there was potential for students to become complacent with their studies in future if they expected that blanket graduation would occur again in the next academic year.

By July 13, 2020, the MEHE Director General presented the “MEHE DGE Back to School Plan 2020-2021” (MEHE 2020) (hereafter referred to as the B2S plan) in the form of a PowerPoint presentation to donors. A number of actions within the plan called for financial support to contract additional teachers and procure hardware (laptops, tablets, etc.) for the MEHE, schools, and students. Some donors expressed concern that the focus of the MEHE’s COVID-19 response was ICT procurement and declined to fund this initial MEHE request for lacking a clear national strategy for COVID-19 response.²⁰ As one respondent noted, “We can provide devices for all the children in the country, but then what?”²¹ The MEHE announced that it was drafting a remote learning plan, with technical support from donor-funded technical advisors and the United Nations.²²

The United Nations released the national emergency COVID-19 appeal, drafted by the GoL’s Inter-Ministerial Committee for COVID-19 and international partners. The call for appeal notes that “for refugee children in particular, due to the pandemic, enrollment trends have decreased and drop-out rates from school are high (especially in cycle 3 between grade 7 and 9)” (UN OCHA 2020).

The MEHE and the CERD stepped up efforts to develop and improve data management systems, including to better track refugee data, which was not being well tracked at the national level. The MEHE further built on its School Information Management System (SIMS) that principals use to register profile data of each student, and expedited its work in developing a Learning Management System (LMS) using the [Classera digital platform](#). Classera, a private sector enterprise, has offered the MEHE two years of service to the platform (MEHE 2021). What happens to the platform, or payment for it, after two years was not made clear to researchers. The LMS aims to support teachers, parents, and administrators in monitoring students’ assignments and progress by tracking errors and work time given to complete online assignments. The CERD has also started preparing a digital learning platform using [mCourser](#) to develop curricular and pedagogical content.

The MEHE and the CERD became aware of the considerable overlap in the utility of these various platforms, and by March 2021, agreement had been reached to integrate both the LMS and the digital learning platform into Classera.²³ The mandates of each agency in the online platforms have since been

²⁰ Interview 6, 17, 21

²¹ Interview 16

²² The draft of this plan was shared in March 2021.

²³ Interview 10. Other overlaps have also been reported, including between the MEHE’s Visit Information Management System and the CERD’s Training Management System which can now not be integrated because they were written with different computer programming languages.

defined in the draft national remote learning plan (MEHE 2021). It is understood that, currently, none of these platforms is yet being deployed to its potential. Many are still under construction.

The Beirut Port explosion occurred on August 4, destroying more than 100 schools, injuring and displacing thousands, and further disrupting the country’s already laboring responses to COVID-19.

Exhibit 5. Timeline of start of 2020/21 academic year (September–December 2020)

DATE	EVENT
September 7	Ministerial Decision No. 132 is issued, presenting a blended hybrid model for schooling and dates for return to in-person learning.
First week of November	Full-day and morning-shift schools open to start the 2020/21 academic year.
Third week of November	Second-shift schools open to start the 2020/21 academic year.
December 18	All schools close again after 6–8 weeks being open due to a new COVID-19 outbreak.

On September 7, 2020, the MEHE circulated Ministerial Decision No. 132, which presented a blended hybrid model for schooling,²⁴ and dates for return.²⁵ Curricula were uploaded to the online platform by the CERD.²⁶ Measures were put in place by United Nations agencies and other international partners to ensure that refugees were reached—largely via the IAC coordination group—and understood the process to return to school (United Nations 2021). Registration and enrollment, including for second-shift students, were administered and, with the ongoing support of sector partners, preparations were undertaken to ensure the safety of school infrastructure and to provide school administrators with training on health and sanitation.

There was a sense of hope for the return to in-person learning.²⁷ Full school days and morning shifts started the first week of November 2020 (the second shift started in the fourth week) using the hybrid model, but within six weeks another COVID-19 outbreak occurred and the GoL mandated that schools be closed again. Schools and students reverted to their previous remote learning methods. The return for second-shift students (who are largely Syrian refugees) had been planned to start three weeks after the morning shifts, which meant that second-shift students returned for only three weeks before re-closing. There have also been reports that principals in 80 schools refused to open their second shifts because they had still not been paid for their work since the start of the pandemic (Human Rights Watch 2021).

²⁴ The details of the blended hybrid model are outlined in [RtL Priority 2](#).

²⁵ The decision assigned dates for different cycles and shifts to start in-school classes (e.g., cycle 4: AM shift 28 September, PM shift 5 October); however, classes actually started during the first week of November for the morning shift and last week of November for the afternoon shift.

²⁶ Details of curricula adaptation are outlined in [RtL Priority 3](#).

²⁷ Interview 16

Exhibit 6. Timeline from January–April 2021

DATE	EVENT
January 7, 2021	Contractual teachers call for a strike in protest against not being paid.
Mid-February	Contractual teachers return to work (still distance learning).
March 2021	The MEHE shared a draft of “Lebanon’s National Action Plan for Remote Learning System” with donors and other key agencies for technical feedback.

Schools did not open again after the Christmas break, so, as 2021 arrived, teachers and students continued to use remote learning methods. On January 7, contractual teachers called for a strike in protest against not being paid, returning to remote teaching by mid-February. Persisting with remote methods, most teachers estimated that at least half their students were not benefiting or learning through the methods available. Reasons for this included remote learning methods not being engaging for students and students being unable access remote learning due to: (1) not having access to a mobile device or Internet connection; (2) having to share a device with an older sibling who has priority, or a parent (typically father) who takes the phone to work; (3) needing to visit neighbors to access Internet; and/or (4) parents completing the assigned work for the children. Most teachers also reported that only 50–60 percent of their students regularly attended. One school-level respondent noted:

“The bigger picture was still missing for the COVID-19 response: A prioritization plan was missing because not all children had the same needs. It’s not realistic to think that all children have the same needs.”²⁸

Teachers continued to struggle with access to Internet services and digital devices. Most reported persisting with remote teaching through WhatsApp or similar applications. With the economic collapse, some teachers expressed distress when not able to afford maintenance when their charger or screen broke. Most teachers expressed a degree of burnout from juggling their work with domestic responsibilities, including supporting their own children’s home learning. Some reported responding to questions and assignments via WhatsApp until as late as midnight. Because some learners were not able to access online materials or e-books consistently, the CERD found it necessary to provide school textbooks in hardcopy form, which it reported starting to distribute to all schools in 2021.

During this time, NFE services also continued to be delivered remotely, in many cases with limited resources, and reports that service providers were also becoming increasingly exhausted.

In March 2021, the draft of “Lebanon’s National Action Plan for Remote Learning System” (hereafter referred to as the Remote Learning Plan [RLP]) was shared with donors for technical feedback (MEHE 2021). A date for final publication of the plan has not been confirmed.

Looking forward in the education sector (April 2021 onwards)

RACE II was planned to close in June 2021. A mid-term review of RACE II was undertaken prior to this, and an evaluation of the NFE sector under RACE II was aimed to be finished soon after the time of

²⁸ Interview 15

writing (June 2021). Significant sector-wide projects continue; for example, the World Bank’s Support to RACE II (also dubbed S2R2) project, which is funded by a \$100 million loan from the U.K. government to end in 2021 and a \$100 million grant from the World Bank to end in 2023 (Abdul-Hamid & Yassine 2020). Other large-scale projects for systems strengthening and refugee support continue across the education sector, funded, for example, by USAID, the U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the European Union, and Germany. New projects will soon be undertaken at a national level in conjunction with the MEHE; for example, a new Education Can’t Wait initiative for systemic resilience building, reportedly in draft at time of writing.

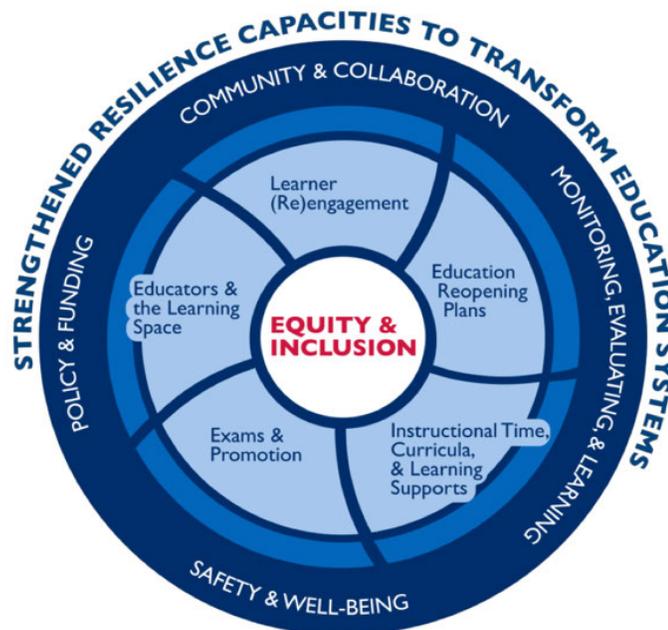
The MEHE’s five-year education plan outlining its priorities for the coming years is also expected to be circulated soon. At time of writing, a draft of the plan had been shared with some donors and partners, with some reflecting that it outlines clear priorities for the MEHE over the next five years, but doesn’t make clear how these will be realized.²⁹ Additionally, the plan does not seem to draw on lessons learned during COVID-19 or acknowledge the significant amount of learning loss for students across the country, which will need to be addressed in coming years to avoid long-term negative impacts.

3. LEBANON’S PLANS AND PROCESSES TO RETURN TO LEARNING

LEBANON COVID-19 RESPONSES TRACKED AGAINST USAID’S RETURN TO LEARNING (RTL) FRAMEWORK PRIORITIES

This section tracks the Lebanese education system’s responses to COVID-19 against USAID’s Return to Learning (RtL) framework (Exhibit 7). USAID’s RtL policy brief proposes that a sufficiently resilient system would be able to address each of the priority areas within the RtL framework (outlined below) while keeping at the core these cross-cutting considerations: promoting equity and inclusion; ensuring the safety and well-being of learners, educators, and school personnel; actively communicating, consulting, and collaborating with educators, communities, and other stakeholders; planning to monitor, evaluate, and learn; revisiting policy and funding to benefit all learners; and planning for resilience. This section outlines where and how the Lebanese education system is or is not aligned, to date, with the five priorities (section headings) and sub-priorities (in bold below section headings) identified in the

Exhibit 7. USAID’s Return to Learning Framework



²⁹ Interview 24

RtL framework (see [Appendix C](#) for detailed explanation of priorities and sub-priorities in the framework).

RtL Priority I

Priority I: (Re)engage all learners, especially the most marginalized. This priority emphasizes that not all learners are affected by crises in the same way or to the same degree, and that education planners “need to understand how learners, especially the most marginalized, have been affected, and strategize to re-engage them in education.”

Conduct rapid assessments to identify marginalized groups: The national education response to COVID-19 has not yet comprehensively identified which learners have been marginalized by the pandemic, by what, or to what effect. To date, no comprehensive education system needs assessment has been conducted to better understand the differentiated needs of schools, teachers, or students affected by the pandemic.³⁰ At the MEHE, the CERD has the mandate as a research center to carry out studies. However, its research scope has been limited to routine statistics for the annual bulletin. An initial assessment of the ICT needs of government officials, school personnel, and students was conducted, seeking to mobilize funds, but the assessment generalized needs for all learners to ICT and did not do a good job of considering other barriers to engagement in learning that specific groups of children might be facing as a result of the pandemic.

The MEHE’s national draft RLP acknowledges that learners who do not have devices or consistent access to electricity or Internet suffer some level of marginalization because of the pandemic but does not differentiate further (MEHE 2021). It does not consider what is needed to re-engage marginalized learners on the verge of or having already dropped out. Page 14 of the plan notes that learners in places with little access to Internet can resort to paper-based materials, but the broader plan gives only limited consideration to what the low-tech/no-tech paper-based method would entail.

Through the IAC group, drawing on existing expertise and tools for conducting assessments, the NFE sector rapidly mobilized a collective needs assessment within the first month of the pandemic to identify the needs and potential sources of support for children to continue learning remotely (IAC 2020a). Informed by the assessment results, NFE providers attempted to address differentiated needs where they could in the immediate term; for example, re-budgeting pre-COVID-19 planned travel costs to household Internet connectivity for learners. One international NGO noted investing in audio-visual equipment to produce more engaging videos for the learners in its programs,³¹ while a local NGO explained that it engaged additional specialized staff to provide training to support parents in supporting their children with relevant teaching methods.³²

³⁰ Comprehensive cross-sectoral needs assessments have been conducted in Lebanon; for example, Plan International’s [Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment](#) (April 2020), or World Vision’s [Rapid Assessment: March 2020](#), but which do not provide an in-depth look at the differentiated needs across the education system.

³¹ Interview 12

³² Interview 13

Collaborate with communities to (re)engage all learners: Only limited national-level guidance has been provided for school-level personnel on when or how to engage community members in (re)engaging learners. Despite this, stories have emerged at the school level of teachers, principals, and civil society groups reaching out directly to households to engage marginalized learners, for example, starting “teacher-parent WhatsApp groups.”³³ One teacher spoke of waiting, at the request of caregivers, until 10 or 11pm at night to deliver classes because this was when Internet was available.³⁴

In the NFE response, caregivers were engaged immediately through existing NFE networks in responding to the rapid assessment to inform the drafting of the NFE COVID-19 plan of action. They were asked specific questions regarding the needs of their children and the household to ensure that the learners in the household would be able to remain engaged in their learning, and regarding the capacity available in the household to support it. The results of the assessment informed the types of responses prepared. It also informed how best to address the needs of the caregivers through NFE programming, including their psycho-social needs, for which open-source materials were prepared and shared for the IAC network.

Ensure education information and monitoring systems are functioning and capable of tracking (re)enrollment of all learners, especially marginalized populations, in real time: Since the onset of the pandemic, many steps were taken towards ensuring that national education management and data systems were being improved, but at the time of writing had not yet been deployed or reached the capacity to be able to capture disaggregated dropout or (re)enrollment data.

Promote alternative pathways back to education: Although investments have been made into alternate methods for engaging learners still enrolled, so far, the B2S plan does not specifically promote alternative pathways back to education such as accelerated or catch-up programming. The national draft RLP serves as a remote learning strategy, not as a re-engagement plan. No other alternative pathways back to education have since been deployed nationally. Although an NFE framework of alternative pathways back into formal education exists under the RACE II, it has not (yet) been engaged beyond the NFE subsector to promote alternative learning pathways for learners across the country.

Address policy barriers that exclude some learners from returning to education: Prior to COVID-19, there was already a considerable amount of policy surrounding the right of refugees in Lebanon to access education, including their right to access the second shifts of public schools. Despite this, policy or directives for this group of learners—marginalized by their refugee status—during COVID-19 have been inconsistent and, at times, unclear. For example, the initial Circular 15 in March 2020 did not include MEHE directives for this group, and the return to hybrid in-person learning in September 2020 was delayed by three weeks for this group. The reason for their delayed start was not made clear to researchers at the time, although some donor respondents suggested that cultural prejudice against refugees at the government level may have played a role.³⁵

Although it is assumed that the national remote learning plan is designed to benefit students in both the first and second school shifts,³⁶ the March 2021 draft opens the possibility of inequitable benefits by

³³ Interview 61

³⁴ Interview 44

³⁵ Interview 3

³⁶ It mentions children in both first and second shifts in a note about safeguarding on page 8.

specifying that the beneficiaries of some actions are Lebanese rather than other nationalities. Although this may simply be a typo in this draft, it notes that “By the end of this phase...all Lebanese students and teachers in public schools will be equipped with requirements for effective online learning (devices, Internet connectivity, and digitized classrooms), and thus will be ready for any online learning scenario should the need arise” (MEHE 2021).

The B2S plan recognizes that other national policies will also need to be revised regarding student registration and teacher transfers, but if, how, or when these will be realized or linked to reducing barriers to returning to education was not made clear to researchers.

RtL Priority 2

Priority 2: Education reopening plans. This priority encourages decision makers to develop comprehensive plans for reopening institutions, ensuring the physical safety for students, teachers, and school administrators whether meeting in-person or remotely. The actions encourage regular monitoring to be able to adapt to the context, and to “transition between remote and in-person learning depending on the local risk factors.” To ensure equity and inclusion are built into actions taken, this priority encourages participation of a range of stakeholders in decision-making processes around reopening and contingency planning, and clear, consistent communication with all stakeholders across all processes.

Involve learners, educators, parents, and communities in decision-making: In all stages of the response, national-level decisions and plans for school reopening have been made centrally, sometimes in conjunction with the national Multi-Sectoral COVID-19 Committee, such as on blanket promotion, and other times within the MEHE, such as for rescheduling the academic schedule. Government decrees are then circulated to schools and communities informing them of decisions made. This was not a new way of working for the highly centralized education system of Lebanon; it was the same before and during COVID-19. School-level agency in decision-making has not been well recognized at a central level during this response.

Develop an education reopening plan, including safe operations guidance: As of mid-July 2021, the B2S plan is a PowerPoint presentation. It sets out a list of ambitious key concepts to follow when developing a more comprehensive plan, but overall lacks development and detail.³⁷ Key sections of the plan include: (1) management, planning, and financing; (2) teaching and learning; (3) human resource allocation; (4) capacity, premises, and infrastructure (availability, rehab, maintenance); (5) marginalized children, well-being, protection; and (6) communication. The plan identifies the importance of deploying measures for holistic consideration of returning to learning, for example: (re)engaging children who have dropped out of learning during the pandemic, regaining lost learning, and strengthening low-tech or no-tech options in the context of unstable electricity and Internet and poverty. However, the plan does not elaborate on how any of these concepts will be realized at the school level.

³⁷ Interview 1. Some refer to it as the “shopping list.”

A notable achievement from the list so far under section 2 is the recently shared national draft RLP. This plan is more comprehensive than the B2S, partly because it considers various contextually responsive scenarios for reopening depending on COVID-19 prevalence at the time. The “medium risk scenario” presents a blended hybrid learning model that was deployed in the first weeks of 2020/21 academic year, while the “high risk scenario” reverts to the fully remote learning measures (pp. 10-13). The plan is designed to accommodate smooth transition between the different scenarios as the context demands. The RLP plan mentions lack of connectivity at home and at school as a risk (pp. 11),³⁸ and then notes that areas with limited access to Internet will need to resort to paper-based materials and learning (pp. 14). Neither options for low-tech or no-tech methods are well-detailed in this plan, nor are the content and methodology of the paper-based model.

Few principals or teachers interviewed for this study showed awareness of either the B2S or the RLP. Instead, most mentioned feeling that they had to create their own methods to adapt to the distance mode of instruction, including having to adapt curriculum and classes to meet their students’ needs.

The B2S presentation notes safe operations but does not elaborate on them well. Section 5 for protection includes mentions of best practices for health and safety during the pandemic and drafting a national Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for safety measures at the school level. Although these are not detailed in the plan, the MEHE published a special protocol guide on roles and responsibilities for schools to implement regarding health and safety measures during the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁹ Prior to the B2S becoming available, UNICEF’s education and health sections coordinated with the MEHE’s Direction d’Orientation Pédagogique et Scolaire (DOPS) to develop health protocols at school for the return to in-person learning.

Develop an outbreak response plan at the school level: The Lebanese Red Cross supported the MEHE to develop a school-level outbreak plan. Development of a more detailed SOP for safety measures at the school level is mentioned in the B2S plan.

Communicate clearly and consistently: Both prior to and during pandemic response, when national decisions were made, communication from the MEHE to schools and communities was consistently conducted through the issuance of government circulars, then shared through the government’s app that was purpose built for this service. The circulars did not offer a mechanism to collect input or feedback nor did they include justification for the decisions or directives. So, although the communication was consistent, it was highly centralized and unilateral, and did not always reach the community. For example, one respondent noted during an interview:

“You (the researcher) asked me if schools had opened and, if so, when had they opened. We should not have to ask each other these questions. If the MEHE was more effective in informing the public about what they are doing, we would know.”⁴⁰

Monitor the situation regularly: The B2S plan notes that, once schools reopen, government officials will make regular assessments of schools to monitor implementation of the return to in-person learning

³⁸ Even if these don’t then appear in the risk matrix on page 46.

³⁹ The report is available at the Ministry of Information website: <http://www.ministryinfo.gov.lb/inc/uploads/2020/09/covid-catalog-education.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Interview 16

process. These plans have not yet seen fruition as, at the start of the 2020/21 academic year, there was a national return to lockdown and school re-closure. Recent investments in education management and data platforms may eventually support this, if deployed with this aim in mind.

Limited national-level monitoring of distance learning measures has been conducted. At a school level, principals reported regularly monitoring, or “checking in with,” their teachers on an informal basis. NFE actors noted adapting their usual monitoring methods while using distance learning measures to engage parents in monitoring child progress; providing the parents with tools and simple instructions for monitoring child progress, then sharing the results with the NFE providers.⁴¹

RtL Priority 3

Priority 3: Instructional time, curricula, learning support. This priority is recommended to sequentially follow the previous priority and focuses on ensuring that modifications to educational programs are made with attention to, and prioritization of, core learning objectives. Consideration of various catch-up options—and the financial and human resources needed for these—is recommended, as is the importance of ensuring that learning objectives also take the psychosocial, social-emotional learning, and protection needs of learners into consideration.

Understand the range of options for helping learners catch up: Decisions were made nationally for curriculum adaptation to suit the adapted academic schedule but, as of the time of reporting, no national-level plans had been shared for how nationwide support would be provided to students to help them recover lost learning or to catch up. Teachers consistently reported being worried about this and seeking to condense and adapt the curriculum themselves to meet the needs of their students. Many expressed a wish for more national guidance on how to meet student needs during distance learning, during the return to learning, and in the future.

One NFE partner staff member reported feeling some level of autonomy over adapting or accelerating parts of the curriculum to suit student needs for catching up on lost learning.⁴² The respondent also noted that, during the distance learning period, NFE providers were still required to submit student names and achievements against the regulated programs to the MEHE to ensure certification, so adaptation to the program content was limited during distance learning, with more flexibility for accelerating content for catch up expected during the return to in-person learning.

Revise the academic calendar and schedule: Revision of the academic calendar has been an iterative task in response to changes in COVID-19 incidence. Revision of the academic schedule for the return to learning has now been agreed on and captured in the draft national RLP. The blended hybrid model presented minimizes the number of students and teachers physically in school at a time by splitting students into two groups. The first group attends face-to-face during week 1, then learns remotely during week 2; vice versa for the second group.

⁴¹ Interview 12

⁴² Interview 12

Adapt (or condense) the curriculum and teaching and learning materials: Initial measures to communicate content used YouTube, although this was short-lived. For preparing the content for the online learning platforms, curriculum adaptations have so far been made in response to adaptations in academic schedules and to include key content missed in the previous academic year because of pandemic. Under the direction of CERD, the curriculum was reportedly reduced by approximately 50 percent, with the remaining 50 percent focused on key topics only.⁴³ Approximately 80 percent of the content was expected to be delivered at school, with the other 20 percent delivered at home.

Textbook content was made available online, as not all subjects were offered online. In some cases, delivery of these was adapted to paper-based delivery, but in a blended format (mathematics, French).⁴⁴ During the first two months of the 2020/21 academic year, it was planned that content missed during 2019/20 academic year would be covered first, before moving on to 2020/21 content.

The B2S plan notes that more training is planned for teachers in online lesson delivery. Teachers and principals report that, so far, teaching approaches and materials have largely remained unchanged since before COVID-19, with the content simply transferred to the online arena. Textbooks have been scanned or photographed to share with students.

Identify learners' social-emotional, protection, and academic needs: Identification of learner needs has been considered although not well translated to policy or guidance. So far, the physical protection needs of learners have been well considered during the return to in-person learning, through focus on health, safety, and water, sanitation, and hygiene principles. Other protection concerns—including the impact of extended lockdowns on the psycho-social well-being of children—have not yet been prioritized at a national level. The extent to which the academic needs of learners have been balanced against scheduling and timetabling needs is not clear; neither is whether attempts have yet been made to catch up or recover lost learning. The importance of PSS in distance learning has been noted in the RLP for children, teachers, and parents, but is not well-detailed.

Consider where distance learning should continue: As noted in [RtL Priority 2](#), this has been considered in the risk scenarios in the RLP.

Mobilize financial and human resources for planning for catch-up programming: Throughout COVID-19 response, the MEHE and other education system stakeholders, including international NGOs and civil society groups, have put out calls for funding. While the NFE sector has called specifically for funding for catch-up programming (and been successful in many cases) (Fakih 2021), the MEHE has called for funds for other initiatives but not yet specifically for catch-up programming.

RtL Priority 4

Priority 4: Exams and promotion. This priority encourages education planners and decision-makers to be strategic and methodical when considering if, how, and when to promote which

⁴³ Interview 16

⁴⁴ Interview 4, 16

learners, and to consider carefully how to communicate changes to examination processes and procedures, and justifications for these.

Identify how exams have been affected by the crisis; identify which exams are a priority; develop a learner promotion strategy; communicate with learners, families, and educators:

Exams for cycles 3 and 4 (grades 9 and 12) were very quickly identified in the response as critical grades on which to maintain focus. These were also prioritized in immediate responses, in the process for building the online content, and in the RLP as critical transitional years.

For the 2019/20 academic year, a “blanket promotion” decision was made by the Inter-Ministerial Committee for COVID-19 and communicated downward to school-level administrators. The process for making this decision was kept centralized and not consultative with other levels of the system. Promotion decisions for the 2020/21 year had not yet (at time of writing) been communicated.

Ensure that monitoring systems to track access to exams and pass rates are in place: The Learner Management System (LMS), which will profile students and maintain their academic history, is under construction for national rollout. At the time of writing, it was not confirmed when this platform would be in full use and providing the type of function required of this priority.

Mobilize resources needed to implement adapted exams: To date, the official exams are scheduled for summer 2021. However, a news report has noted that the economic collapse has threatened the purchase of paper materials needed to administer the exams, especially for Syrian refugee children (TRT World 2021).

RtL Priority 5

Priority 5: Educators and the learning space. This priority reminds education planners and decision makers of the essential role of educators and other personnel and their needs, preparation, and mobilization in planning to “welcome learners back safely.” Workforce (including recruitment, deployment, certification) and capacity development (including both the professional and psycho-social needs of personnel) requirements are highlighted, as is the need to ensure that learning environments are safe. This priority also reminds education planners to ensure that adequate policy and finance are available to support the above.

Revisit workforce needs: During the pandemic, DOPS and the Pre-Service and In-Service Training Bureau (PITB) have mostly invested in organizing online training to use Microsoft Teams and making resources accessible online. Based on conversations with teachers and principals, their needs resemble necessities like (1) access to digital technology, namely Internet and devices (including maintenance); (2) support for mental health to prevent or address burnout, (3) approaches to guiding parents on how to support their children, because parents seem to complete the assignments for their children, (4) official payment security, whether contract or assurance of payment, and (5) the provision of health care.

Address educator capacity development needs: UNICEF reported that training on using Microsoft Teams was facilitated in November and December 2020 and that out of the 40,000 teachers in the workforce, only 1,250 completed the online module trainings; UNICEF has since readjusted its target group to 5,000. Reportedly, contract teachers who make up more than half the teacher workforce have found that attending the online modules is a great cost because they have to either give up teaching hours or time to manage students' homework, home, and family. Moreover, the teachers interviewed reported receiving training in January 2021, but relied more on in-school workshops on how to use Microsoft Teams. Although schools and teachers have received some training in hygiene-related issues, many expressed anxieties over the spread of the virus from children when schools briefly reopened for the hybrid model.

Despite training sessions being offered, most teachers and principals noted that their psychosocial needs during COVID-19, as a result of having to maintain distance learning strategies while also dealing with their own domestic challenges, were not well acknowledged at a national level. Most noted feeling that teachers and learners—as well as teaching and learning—were not central to the national response. Teachers consistently reported feeling exhausted and stressed for their students (and, often, also for their own children).

Develop or revise policy to meet education workforce needs: Teachers are priority 3 of 4 in the RLP, with the identified actions focusing on a series of training activities to support teachers in using distance learning platforms and measures. National-level efforts to address other essential needs of teachers, for example, psycho-social support, contractual status, and payment schedules that have prompted nationwide protests, are limited in the B2S, the RLP, or otherwise. Moreover, approaches to gather knowledge of teacher needs also appear to be overlooked.

Assess the need for repairs and creation of new learning spaces, additional furniture and materials, disinfection of learning spaces, and signage and floor markings: Response strategies during the COVID-19 closures focused on (1) health and safety measures and (2) apparent ICT needs. The Lebanese Red Cross supported the MEHE to set up disinfection stations at schools and hand sanitizers in classrooms which, many principals noted, will likely continue to be maintained even post COVID-19. The B2S plan outlined the need at various levels of the system for digital technology to access online learning, devices, and the Internet. Calls for funds to procure ICT were not well received by donors, who expressed concern over accountability of the MEHE in acknowledging procurements and repairs in the past and long-term visions of sustainable procurement and maintenance. Additionally, during the school closures, whistle-blowing reports revealed over 8,000 laptops purchased several years ago were still in warehouses without software licenses.

Mobilize financial resources to fill gaps: There is an apparent financial stalemate of governing funds needed to pay contract teachers. The World Bank issued a letter to the Minister of Finance in the transitional government calling for the need to resolve this issue in the fairest manner (Alsharif 2021). Schools have also suffered from apparent poor governance of operational funds distribution. Principals reported last receiving money for running costs in the 2018-19 academic year. These funds are normally used to pay another form of teacher contracts (*Musta'an bihem*), electricity, cleaning, and stationery.

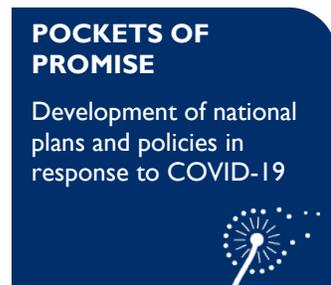
4. OUTCOMES OF THE RETURN TO LEARNING PROCESS, AND IDENTIFICATION OF “POCKETS OF PROMISE”

For Lebanon, the return to learning process has been undertaken within a context of extreme uncertainty, not only about the nature and expected trajectory of COVID-19, but also uncertainty about the broader economic, political, and social stability of Lebanon, with a gamut of interwoven and competing stressors on the system. Despite this, there have been many similarities between the initial COVID-19 responses in Lebanon and those in the four other case study contexts of this broader study, with all five contexts seeking first to absorb the shock of COVID-19 by closing schools and resorting to distance learning strategies to protect the physical health and safety of teachers and learners, and subsequently seeking to institute long-term adaptive response strategies.⁴⁵

This section examines in more detail the outcomes of these responses in Lebanon at various levels of the education system, primarily national government, school, and the NFE subsector. This section identifies opportunities that presented themselves through the pandemic response in Lebanon that may be leveraged to build system-wide adaptive capacities and contribute to systemic resilience moving forward. This study calls these opportunities “pockets of promise.”

NATIONAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL

As detailed in earlier sections, government-led responses that have sought to absorb the initial shock of the COVID-19 pandemic on the system have included: school closure; moving to remote learning; revising academic calendars, timetables, and exam schedules multiple times; and ensuring implementation of health and safety measures, including instituting protocols in schools and providing teacher training on health and safety. Within these, responses have also emerged that have attempted not only to absorb but to adapt to the impacts of COVID-19. For example, a central focus of the government-led response so far has been on developing plans, policy, and platforms for COVID-19 response, including for a national distance learning program. Significantly, development of these documents and initiatives (most still under production) has been government-led (with technical support from partners). National-level plans and policies developed in response to COVID-19 include the B2S plan, the RLP, various online education management and data platforms (including the LMS and the TMS), and the MEHE’s pending 5-year education plan.



Although presented as a PowerPoint presentation, the B2S plan is recognized as a first step toward building a longer term response plan. It outlines some key components that will need to be addressed during and after the crisis to ensure recovery. Development of the RLP was noted as a priority in the B2S and has since been drafted. This is Lebanon’s first distance learning strategy, which, if further developed and detailed for more ready application at a school level (some of the challenges of which are discussed in the subsequent section of this report), offers potential for the teachers’ capacity to be built in remote teaching and learning strategies. It also offers a plan that may be deployed in future crises in which remote learning strategies are mandated. For example, despite localized school closures during

⁴⁵ The findings of the five case studies are synthesized in the associated RtL Synthesis Report, forthcoming.

the widespread social protests in the second half of 2019, national-level distance learning measures were not deployed at that time. Moving forward, the RLP may be further developed for deployment in similar circumstances.

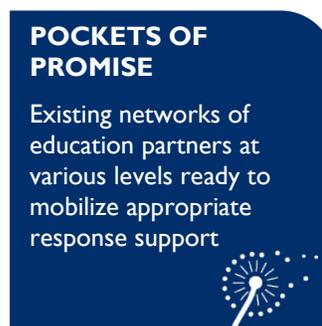
Development (or continued and expedited development) of various online portals such as the Microsoft Teams teaching and learning platform, the LMS, and the TMS during the COVID-19 pandemic has also been a central focus of government response. Again, this provides insight into the ways in which the government is seeking to adapt to the impacts of COVID-19 by building the technological capacity of the education sector. The MEHE has leveraged its response to this crisis to: raise development funds to further roll out national ICT-based initiatives; develop virtual and concrete infrastructure; and build national and subnational capacity to use it. In various ways—for example, redirecting existing technical support to these efforts during pandemic response and decreasing bureaucratic processes surrounding the approval of these ICT initiatives—the MEHE has been able to deploy these response strategies fairly rapidly. Respondents providing technical support to the MEHE in development of these platforms noted their potential to support more evidence-based decision-making at both national and subnational-levels once they are finalized, linked to each other, and all users have developed sufficient capacity to use them.⁴⁶ The functionality of these platforms is also discussed in the subsequent section.



Additionally, many respondents noted the increasingly strategic collaboration between the MEHE and the CERD, two agencies that have found collaboration challenging in the past, in the development of these various plans and platforms.⁴⁷ The draft national RLP clearly outlines the mandate of each agency and their purposeful collaboration in distance learning measures. Agreements have been made between the two agencies with the intention of ensuring that the specializations of each are strategically engaged and efforts not duplicated. If sustained, the decrease in political tension and competition between the two agencies

has the potential for continued, purposeful, strategic collaboration that brings the agencies together around common goals to collectively address stressors within the system. This increasingly collegial approach may continue to be leveraged to support national efforts.

Development of these plans, policies, and platforms within 18 months has also been achievable in part due to a strong existing network of national-level education partners, including donors and United Nations agencies, that were ready to coordinate themselves to provide appropriate technical support to the government to “steer the ship” through the COVID-19 response.⁴⁸



⁴⁶ Interview 18

⁴⁷ Interview 1, 24, 16

⁴⁸ Interview 16, 6

Outcomes and challenges of the national government response

Most respondents recognized the inherent potential in the responses to embed them as foundations for significant and sustainable change across the system. However, most respondents, both government and non-government, also noted that, **in their current forms, the adaptive capacity of most of these initiatives is currently hindered by: (1) lack of development, with many plans and policies still presented as top-level lists of priority items;⁴⁹ (2) lack of awareness of school-level agency or guidance for school-level application; and (3) lack of an evidence base.**

Many respondents noted that processes for developing these plans and policies were largely non-transparent and non-consultative and sidelined the roles of non-government stakeholders across all levels of the system. Most donor and technical partners noted that the non-consultative way of development left the partners feeling underutilized and unable to provide meaningful input to the national response. They noted that plans and policies were presented to them like “shopping lists” from which to pick what they would fund or support, rather than being consulted and participating in drafting them. Principals interviewed noted having suggestions for and feedback on the national response, but not being consulted. Additionally, as one respondent noted,⁵⁰ that the policies and plans were drafted in English only, not translated to Arabic, indicates that they are likely not intended to be shared with subnational or school-level actors, but rather with international funding audiences. The absence of discussion of these documents during interviews with school-level stakeholders also suggested this. **Respondents across the system noted feeling that their agency had been sidelined in the national response and that they felt “lost from the response.”**

Respondents at all levels also noted that **most plans and policies currently lack reference to lessons learned from response to previous crises, and/or lack evidence gathered by other stakeholders on the current crisis;** for example, the needs assessment conducted by the IAC education group. Many referred to the solutions presented as “band-aid” solutions not likely to build resilience for future crises. Most also noted that there seemed to be no clear or consolidated strategy guiding development of the multiple initiatives; the plans and policies respond to short-term needs but do not have a comprehensive vision for sustainability.

Lastly, respondents at all levels also noted the apparent **discord between national policies and plans and their practicality at the school level.** For example, in both the B2S and the RLP, there is a focus on high-tech solutions, which, in a country struggling with consistent supply of electricity and Internet, has drawn criticism from various stakeholders for not focusing on more readily accessible low-/no-tech solutions. Some respondents also noted the potential for these solutions to further entrench inequities across the system, especially for marginalized learners in households affected by poverty who have limited or no access to Internet, devices, or electricity, including both refugee and low- or no-income Lebanese households.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Respondents variously referred to the B2S plan as a “shopping list,” a “skeleton,” “bits and pieces of a plan,” “something to work with while waiting for a real plan,” and “fatooush [a traditional mixed salad in the Arab region] – it has all the right ingredients but it’s mixed up.”

⁵⁰ Interview 2

⁵¹ Interview 17, 20

Therefore, despite the inherent adaptive potential in many government responses, their current limitations have resulted in a national response that is stalled, inciting frustration and a breakdown in relationships across the system, and undermining trust in the leadership of the MEHE during crisis response.

“The MEHE is attracting a negative public image because they do not collaborate or share. They need expertise to help them, but short-term experts often do not understand the bigger picture. The MEHE needs to collaborate with partners to develop their own capacities for planning and response as part of sustainable development efforts.”⁵²

SCHOOL LEVEL

Within the context of the broader government response, which offered limited levels of school-level guidance or acknowledgement of school-level agency, principals and teachers attempted to adhere to the responses mandated by the government for remote learning, but this often led to teachers resorting to absorptive strategies to maintain the response. For example, the majority of teachers abandoned the government-mandated online teaching and learning portal for other more convenient methods (e.g., WhatsApp); declined to participate in training offered on the government portal; resorted to photographing textbooks and resources to share with students via messaging applications when needed; and stayed up late to times when both teacher and students had access to both electricity and Internet. When contract teachers were not paid for their remote work, they protested for many weeks. In at least one reported case, the principal of a school paid his contract teachers to continue working instead.⁵³

Despite these challenges and resulting absorptive responses at the school level, teachers and principals also reported a vast array of adaptive strategies they have deployed during the pandemic in seeking to ensure continuity of learning for their students. Most teachers interviewed noted engaging modes and methods of instruction new to them; for example, using video conferencing where available or making videos for students. Many teachers noted benefiting from the forced exposure to online resources, finding videos and readings to supplement their curricular material, some independently seeking opportunities—for example, via online webinars—for professional development in using online resources. Many also noted forging new working relationships with parents, where teachers and parents became “partners” in teaching, as well as forging, via WhatsApp groups, new professional development circles with their colleagues.



⁵² Interview 16

⁵³ Interview 37

POCKETS OF PROMISE

Principals and teachers have strong sense of moral purpose and accountability to their students



Many principals noted that their persistence throughout the pandemic has been motivated by a sense of responsibility as leaders for their teachers and students, and many teachers noted that their motivation during the pandemic has stemmed from a sense of moral purpose and love for their students. However, **most principals and teachers also noted that the demand for adaptive response at a school level to supplement the apparent lack of guidance, support, or acknowledgement from the national level is exhausting and not sustainable. Respondents noted feeling that neither the teacher nor the learner is the focus of the national response.** Teachers and

principals consistently reported feeling forgotten and exhausted. Within a context of irregular salary payment schedules and working hours often extending to midnight, while also managing their own domestic responsibilities and children, various teachers noted that they are nearing burnout. Other sector partners also noted feeling frustrated at the seeming ambiguity of the government focusing on procuring high-cost ICT infrastructure while, at the same time, contractual teachers are protesting in the street for months about not being paid for their work.⁵⁴

School-level strategies and persistence throughout the pandemic have not been well acknowledged at a central level, which has resulted, at a school level, in a sense of erosion of both agency and resilience capacities. Teachers and principals have expressed feeling disenfranchised by government initiatives that overlook structural issues (e.g., contract terms and conditions) and professional challenges when teaching vulnerable and marginalized learners.

NFE SUBSECTOR

Despite some self-reported internal struggles with the stress of working remotely during the pandemic,⁵⁵ the NFE subsector has sought to ensure continuation of learning for marginalized groups through their services. Even when sidelined in national response guidelines, NFE providers readily mobilized under the IAC coordination mechanism to collaborate in conducting a rapid needs assessment deploying existing tools, networks and expertise; strategizing around a common response plan; and curating a database of resources, all to ensure continuation of NFE services for marginalized children and their families.

POCKETS OF PROMISE

NFE subsector leverages existing coordination mechanisms and crisis experience to mobilize rapidly and responsively



POCKETS OF PROMISE

NFE subsector creating a virtuous cycle of resilience



NFE providers faced similar challenges to school-level stakeholders in ensuring an online response, so they were quick to deploy low-tech responses (e.g., WhatsApp and similar apps) and other adaptive teaching and learning methods through remote means. NFE providers have also reported drawing on their existing relationships with parents to build and engage parental skills in supporting learning at home. They also reported working in awareness of parental needs and pressures during the crisis, ensuring psycho-social resources were available for learners and their parents, strengthening the existing

⁵⁴ Interview 1, 6, 17

⁵⁵ Interview 12, 15

relationship between the service and the parent. This direct engagement with parents, as well as building an evidence base through the needs assessment and creating a comprehensive centralized database of resources, has resulted in the NFE subsector strengthening its current and future collective practice, simultaneously creating a virtuous cycle of resilience.

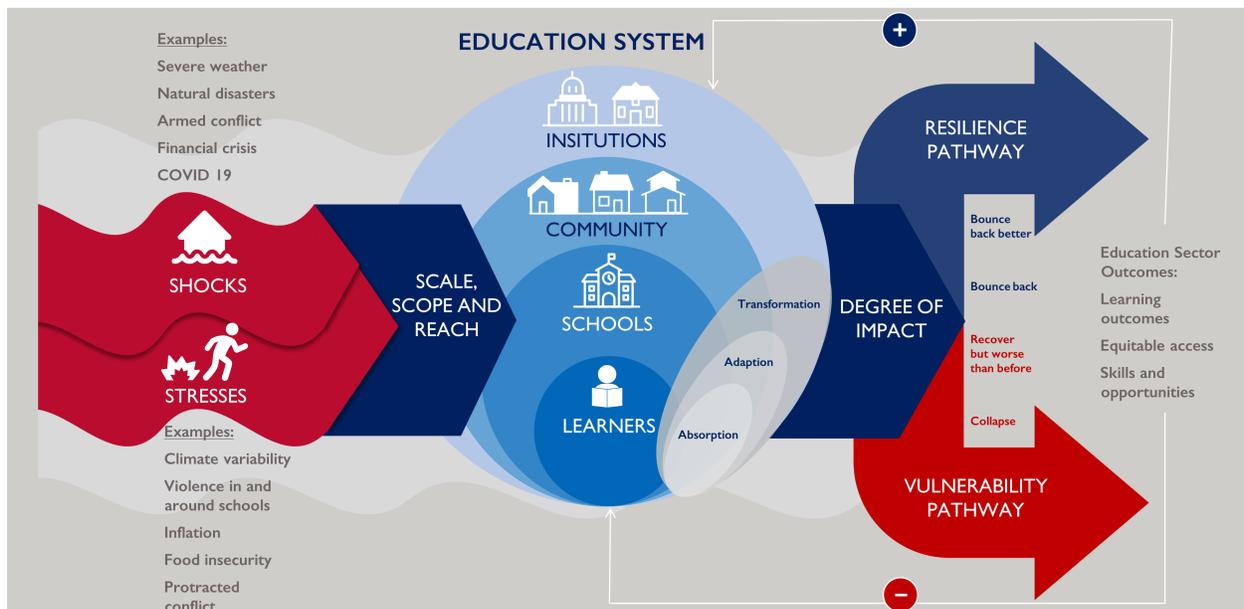
However, as with school-level personnel, NFE providers noted their exhaustion with the current methods of delivery and with the lack of acknowledgement of NFE services and learners in the national response. **Despite the strong NFE response for marginalized learners during the pandemic, current national education policy, which does not effectively incorporate NFE services or providers into the broader system, is inhibiting its transformative capacity.**

5. DISCUSSION: USAID’S RESILIENCE IN EDUCATION FRAMEWORK AND THE RETURN TO LEARNING PROCESS IN LEBANON

USAID’S RESILIENCE IN EDUCATION FRAMEWORK

In investigating the outcomes of the return to learning process in Lebanon thus far, consideration is given to USAID’s Resilience in Education Framework. USAID defines resilience in education as the “ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth” (USAID 2012). USAID’s Resilience in Education Framework may be understood in relation to pathways of resilience and vulnerability during COVID-19, as indicated in Exhibit 8, below (Shah 2019). This research set out to understand this framework in context in order to better understand how it may be more effectively applied.

Exhibit 8. Pathways of resilience and vulnerability during COVID-19



Reconceptualizing COVID-19 from a *shock* to a *stressor* over the course of the pandemic (early 2020 to the time of this writing in mid-2021) affected countries' responses and this research. According to the Resilience White Paper:

Shocks are typically short-term, acute deviations from long-term trends that have substantial negative effects on people's current state of wellbeing, level of assets, livelihoods, and safety or their ability to withstand future shocks. Stressors, on the other hand, tend to be chronic, long-term trends, pressures, or protracted crisis that undermine the stability of a system and increase vulnerability within it. (Shah 2019, 23)

The terminology itself is less important than the underlying change in perception and, thus, response to the COVID-19 crisis. Our research trajectory, in fact, serves as a microcosm of sorts in terms of adapting questions, methods, ideas, and assumptions as the duration and, thus, nature of the pandemic evolved. In each country context, COVID-19 interacted with other shocks and stressors in unique ways, with both similar and contrasting impacts on the education system. While scale, scope, and reach of the pandemic differed, so too did the ways in which each country's education system responded in attempts to mitigate impact. Ultimately, the relationships and interactions between COVID-19 impact and the underlying political, economic, and social norms, structures, and processes of response are illuminated in unique ways, with each case study demonstrating specific characteristics and qualities of resilience. The accompanying synthesis report offers in-depth analysis of resilience across these contexts.

RESILIENCE IN LEBANON

Pre-COVID-19 capacities that were leveraged

What becomes clear in [Section 4](#) of this report is that, **where stakeholders at any level have identified and leveraged existing (pre-COVID-19) capacities, their responses have been more responsive and adaptive to the context.** For example, the NFE subsector leveraged its collaborative nature—structured around an existing coordination mechanism (the IAC group) and existing policy (the RACE II)—to deploy a rapid, well-informed, and collaborative response. The mechanism and policy underpinning this multi-level, multi-stakeholder group of actors were initially born of crisis response specifically to address some of the challenges of the broader system to ensuring equity and inclusion. This has allowed this group to respond adaptively, nimbly, and collaboratively in planning and decision-making at the outset of COVID-19, and have supported it to maintain focus on the learner and on learning in its collective response. NFE responses have focused not only on access to academic content, but also on psycho-social response for learners and their families as a stepping stone to longer term recovery. As one international technical partner in the group noted,

“In Lebanon, we've been through lots of crises before and have continued to serve the most vulnerable children and youth. But COVID-19 was different. It affected everyone in the country at the same time, even the privileged families. We [NFE providers] at least knew how to cope – Others didn't... We always knew that, no matter how [COVID-19] looked at the start, we needed a long-term plan or else we would fail to ensure actual teaching and learning.”⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Interview 12

At a school level, many principals noted being able to leverage years of experience to assume strong leadership for their school communities during pandemic response. Teachers, despite, in many cases, bearing the burden to not only absorb the shock of COVID-19 but also to adapt to the challenges of the front line, consistently foregrounded their moral obligation as teachers, their pride in their work, and their relationships with and love for their students as the resilience capacities they have leveraged in persisting with their responses.

For both school personnel and NFE providers, leveraging these existing capacities has allowed for a pandemic response that centers the learners and learning. However, the environment in which these capacities have emerged and been leveraged is currently hindering their potential to underpin a more transformative response. For example, the policy environment surrounding the NFE subsector is hindering its transformative potential for the broader education system to benefit from existing NFE expertise and experience in centering learning. For teachers and principals, the lack of more direct and dedicated support from the national to the school level has rendered school personnel feeling disenfranchised and exhausted.

Additionally, at a national level, although the government is aware of the existing capacity, good will, and expertise in the strong networks of education partners at all levels of the system, it has thus far largely only sought to leverage these mechanisms to gain funding and discrete technical support, rather than to gain a comprehensive response, well-informed and supported by the collective networks across the system. **This approach at a national level has created somewhat of a political gridlock in the sector and has significantly hindered potential for further systemic transformation. Many education partners have expressed frustration at this, particularly when the capacity to realize transformative potential is already latent within the system.**

Key emerging resilience pockets of promise

Despite the challenges with underutilized capacities, adaptive responses have been deployed and opportunities have presented during the pandemic response that may be strengthened to contribute to systemic resilience moving forward. **The transformative potential of the identified pockets of promise lies in how the government and sector partners (are enabled to) engage with them.**⁵⁷

Whichever way the identified initiatives are further developed, it will be important to ensure that system-wide lessons learned through the COVID-19 response are captured to feed into future contingency planning and crisis response. **The apparent lack of system-wide learning from one crisis response to the next—or from one education strategy to the next—has rendered the current system perpetually susceptible to some of its greatest stressors, including corruption and lack of transparency, and susceptible to future shocks.** Multiple respondents spoke of needing a “circuit breaker” in the education system to stop the cycle of susceptibility and reliance on absorptive (“band-aid”) responses.⁵⁸ System-wide learning might hold the answer, especially

⁵⁷ Interview 3, 8, 20

⁵⁸ Interview 1, 6, 20

if it incorporates the transparent data the system will hopefully soon have capacity to capture and share through its multiple platforms.

For both school personnel and NFE providers, despite being sidelined by national policy and practice at key times during the pandemic, these stakeholders have proved themselves to be adaptive, responsive, and self-motivated. With greater recognition of school-level agency and support for the professional needs, including PSS needs, of school personnel, as well as of the critical role NFE services play for marginalized groups in Lebanon, the critical and differentiated needs of learners may be better highlighted, advocated for, and addressed. As the impacts of COVID-19 start to abate in Lebanon and in-person instruction resumes, the need for teachers in formal education to know how to re-engage their students in their studies (and to re-engage students who have dropped out), how to remediate and accelerate classroom content to recover lost learning, and how to address the psycho-social needs of children who have been living in lockdown for more than a year will become critical. NFE actors have existing expertise in many of these areas and services; for example, in catch-up and accelerated education programming, and in re-engaging learners who have dropped out of their studies, which could potentially be engaged in supporting nationwide post-crisis and recovery responses, if invited to do so.

6. CONCLUSION

The Lebanon education system was already suffering a complex collection of stressors at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The compound effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated existing crises, have not only exposed but also deepened existing inequalities, and have contributed to the possibility of long-term costs to education. The system has been able to deploy localized adaptive responses to COVID-19 and its secondary effects, but ongoing political gridlock, discord between policy and practice, and lack of recognition of existing latent potential within the system to address the pandemic are currently hindering these responses from achieving more sustained, transformative change.

At the same time, COVID-19 response has also highlighted some existing capacities across the system that may now be built upon in attempting to contribute to systemic resilience. Rebuilding the resilience of the broader system has the potential to reignite public trust in education and to mitigate some of the factors that currently render the system susceptible to recurrent shocks and stressors.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: REFERENCES

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APPENDIX B: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	SUB-QUESTIONS
<p>1. Planned Process for RtL: What was the process by which countries planned for/are planning for the return to learning during COVID-19?</p>	<p>a. What policies and plans exist or were developed to support the return to learning?</p> <p>b. What were key triggers/decision points when planning the return to learning, and what factors contributed to the decisions made?</p> <p>c. Who was involved in decision-making, and how were decisions made about the return to learning across the education continuum (pre-primary, primary, secondary, tertiary, non-formal, technical training)? What were the explicit (and implicit) priorities?</p> <p>d. Were the decision-making processes harmonious across different stakeholders?</p>
<p>2. Actual Process for RtL: What was/is the actual process by which countries returned/are returning to learning (from an implementation perspective) during COVID-19?</p>	<p>a. How did countries reach and retain marginalized populations; adapt the academic calendar; adapt instructional time, curricula, and learning supports (including integrating distance learning); modify exams and learner promotion practices; and re-engage educators and prepare infrastructure?</p> <p>b. What were the key challenges and opportunities that emerged to ensuring a safe, equitable, and inclusive return to learning, especially regarding (but not limited to) safety and wellbeing; communication, consultation, and collaboration; monitoring, evaluating, and learning; and policy and funding?</p> <p>c. Which learners became (further) marginalized by the actual return to learning process?</p> <p>d. What strategies were common across contexts; which strategies had particular relevance to specific countries? What contextual, political, or other factors seem to explain the differences between planned and actual RtL processes?</p> <p>e. How were strategies changed or adapted in response to contextual factors (e.g., insecurity, rising COVID-19 tests, political transitions, natural hazards)?</p>
<p>3. Appreciating Shock/Stress Context for RtL: What are the ways in which COVID-19 intersects with ongoing shocks and stressors in context and do these additional shocks/stressors affect some populations more than others (i.e., are certain populations/demographics/locations more vulnerable due to additional shocks/stressors?)</p>	<p>a. How has this been identified and tracked through the return to learning period?</p> <p>b. How are response efforts recognizing and responding to the differential impacts of the pandemic on communities, educators/school personnel and learners, and targeting action accordingly?</p>
<p>4. Identifying Pockets of Promise in RtL: How are educational decision makers seeking to identify not only problems/issues with the COVID-19 response, but also where things went well and</p>	<p>a. This may include investigation of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Local level autonomy vs. the need for centralized decision-making support</i> – <i>Communication between teachers and parents</i> – <i>Capacity of educators and policymakers to adapt quickly and nimbly; the functionality/local leadership of coordination mechanisms</i>

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	SUB-QUESTIONS
<p>seeking to build off of these “pockets of promise”?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Focus and attention on student well-being, pre-existing contingency plans and structure, etc.</i> - <i>Role of non-state actors and, potentially, the private sector or civil society in supporting educational continuity</i> - <i>Coherence between education actors and health, humanitarian, protection, social protection, or other actors</i> - <i>The extent to which these pockets of promise are absorptive/adaptive vs. potentially transformative</i> <p>b. How can these pockets of promise be built upon/strengthened so as to embed as common practice in the education system as a whole? Particularly from an inclusion/equity standpoint?</p>
<p>5. Outcomes of RtL Process: Retrospectively, according to key stakeholders, what positive and negative intended and unintended consequences were observed as a result of decisions made when planning the return to learning?</p>	<p>a. What were the intended or unintended outcomes of the return to learning process on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>equitable and inclusive access to education?</i> - <i>learners’ well-being or ability to cope with adversity?</i> - <i>promoting or inhibiting learners’ resumption of learning?</i> - <i>building resilience of learners, schools, families, communities, and the education system?</i> <p>b. What do key stakeholders identify as the most important lessons learned from the return-to-learning process?</p>
<p>6. Utility of USAID Frameworks: To what extent are USAID’s RtL and resilience and education frameworks useful for conceptualizing, planning, and carrying out the return to learning during and after an education disruption such as COVID-19?</p>	<p>a. How could the frameworks be amended, adapted, or contextualized in light of what has been learned in the application of them to examining educational responses in a range of country contexts (for example, by specifying in greater detail adaptive, absorptive, transformative capacities, or thinking about exposure and sensitivity to risk)?</p> <p>b. How are the two frameworks related/how do they inform one another? What can we say to the hypothesis that enhanced resilience capacities within entities engaged in the RtL process will enhance the potential that the RtL is equitable, minimizes learning loss, etc.?</p>
<p>7. Perception of Education as a National Priority: How is / has education being / been positioned as a key driver for national COVID response and recovery efforts?</p>	<p>a. How are/have cross-sectoral approaches and perspectives affecting/affected this positioning, especially in regard to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>education as a site for strengthening lines of communication between health officials and communities about the pandemic</i> - <i>use of education as a vehicle for workforce upskilling/redeployment</i> - <i>balancing public trust in schools’ health/safety measures, with student demand/need for protection and return to learning and the need for equitable provision of learning (social capital)</i> - <i>continuity of education as a part of a social protection strategy, portfolio, or package</i>

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	SUB-QUESTIONS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - coherence of the national COVID-19 public health strategy and the education return to learning strategy (i.e., the prioritization of the education workforce for vaccinations as they become available)⁵⁹

⁵⁹ See: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/immunization/sage/covid/sage-prioritization-roadmap-covid19-vaccines.pdf?Status=Temp&sfvrsn=bf227443_2

APPENDIX C: CHECKLIST: RETURN TO LEARNING DURING COVID-19 PRIORITIES⁶⁰

✓	(RE)ENGAGE ALL LEARNERS, ESPECIALLY THE MOST MARGINALIZED
	Conduct rapid assessments (either through existing data or primary data collection) to identify marginalized groups.
	Collaborate with communities to (re)engage all learners.
	Ensure education information and monitoring systems are functioning and capable of tracking (re)enrollment of all learners, especially marginalized populations, in real time.
	Promote alternative pathways back to education.
	Address policy barriers that exclude some learners from returning to education.
✓	DEVELOP EDUCATION REOPENING PLANS
	Involve learners, educators, parents, and communities in decision-making.
	Develop an education reopening plan, including safe operations guidance.
	Develop an outbreak response plan at the school-level.
	Communicate clearly and consistently.
	Monitor the situation regularly.
✓	ADAPT INSTRUCTIONAL TIME, CURRICULA, AND LEARNING SUPPORTS
	Understand the range of options for helping learners catch up.
	Revise the academic calendar and schedule.
	Adapt (or condense) the curriculum and teaching and learning materials.
	Identify learners' social-emotional, protection, and academic needs.
	Consider where distance learning should continue.
	Mobilize financial and human resources for planning for catch-up programming.
✓	MODIFY EXAMS AND LEARNER PROMOTION PRACTICES
	Identify how exams have been affected by the crisis.
	Identify which exams are a priority.
	Develop a learner promotion strategy.
	Communicate with learners, families, and educators.
	Ensure that monitoring systems to track access to exams and pass rates are in place.
	Mobilize resources needed to implement adapted exams.
✓	RE-ENGAGE EDUCATORS AND PREPARE THE LEARNING SPACE
	Revisit workforce needs.
	Address educator capacity development needs.
	Develop or revise policy to meet education workforce needs.
	Assess the need for repairs and creation of new learning spaces, additional furniture and materials, disinfection of learning spaces, and signage and floor markings.
	Mobilize financial resources to fill gaps.

⁶⁰ Boisvert K. and N. Weisenhorn, 2020