ERICC
EDUCATION RESEARCH IN CONFLICT AND PROTRACTED CRISIS

POLICY BRIEF:

Learning from Displacement: Towards an Inclusive and Resilient Education System in Lebanon

The Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) Research Programme Consortium is a global research and learning partnership that strives to transform education policy and practice in conflict and protracted crisis around the world — ultimately to help improve holistic outcomes for children — through building a global hub for a rigorous, context-relevant and actionable evidence base.

ERICC seeks to identify the most effective approaches for improving access, quality, and continuity of education to support sustainable and coherent education systems and holistic learning and development of children in conflict and crisis. ERICC aims to bridge research, practice, and policy with accessible and actionable knowledge — at local, national, regional and global levels — through co- construction of research and collaborative partnerships.

ERICC is led by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) with Academic Lead IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, and expert partners include Centre for Lebanese Studies, Common Heritage Foundation, ODI, Osman Consulting, OTHERwise Research and Queen Rania Foundation. During ERICC's inception period, NYU-TIES provided research leadership, developed the original ERICC Conceptual Framework and contributed to early research agenda development. ERICC is supported by UK Aid.

Countries in focus include Bangladesh (Cox's Bazar), Jordan, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria.

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A. Background

Inclusive and equitable quality education, the core commitment of Sustainable Development Goal 4, remains out of reach for a large proportion of school-aged children in Lebanon. The country's education system has suffered a series of overlapping crises in the past decade: the Syrian refugee influx, economic collapse, the Covid-19 pandemic, the Beirut port explosion and, most recently, the Israeli aggression in 2024. Each of these crises, along with inherent inequalities, has tested the system's ability to provide quality, equitable, and inclusive education. The latest war displaced over 1.3 million people, turned schools into shelters, delayed the academic year, and left over 650,000 students out of school – including Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian children. As the country begins to emerge from the war under a fragile ceasefire, there is an urgent need for educational recovery and systemic transformation.

This policy brief is based on a document analysis of pre-existing inequalities in the education system in Lebanon and an assessment of the impact of the Israeli aggression between October 2023 and November 2024 on the education system. We also conducted 93 qualitative interviews with Lebanese and Syrian parents of school-aged children from the areas most severely affected by the war, as well as 16 key informant interviews with education providers, community leaders, and teachers in private and public schools. We analysed the interviews deploying an intersectional lens, exploring the interaction between displacement dynamics, changing socioeconomic conditions, place of origin, gender, disability, and nationality/legal status to better understand what a more inclusive approach in education could mean in Lebanon after war and displacement.

Our starting point for this work was to approach inclusion in a holistic manner, encompassing structural conditions that impede access, pedagogical dimensions for quality, and broader processes of belonging and social cohesion. Thus, focusing on equity, critical pedagogy, voice and agency, structural change, and intersectionality (Cruz et al., 2023).

B. Pre-existing Inequalities in the Education System

Lebanon's education system is marked by deep-rooted inequalities tied to socioeconomic status, sectarian affiliation, and nationality or legal status. These disparities have deepened with the country's compounded crises. Access to quality education remains uneven: approximately 70% of students are enrolled in private schools and 30% in public schools. Wealthier students dominate private schools, while poorer students are often registered in the under-resourced public school system, which is widely considered a last resort for families unable to afford private education. Sectarianism continues to influence governance and reform, undermining efforts toward equity and cohesion. Syrian refugee students face the most severe barriers, with boys experiencing particularly high dropout rates due to economic pressures, child labour, cultural expectations, classroom disengagement, and trauma-related stress (Shuayb et al., 2023).

Between 2011 and 2025, Lebanon implemented several educational policies and reforms aimed at enhancing the quality, accessibility, and resilience of its education system, such as: RACE I (2014) and II (2021), the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (2015 to 2024), the Five-Year General Education Plan 2021–2025, the Education Reform Roadmap 2023, and the Education Emergency Costed Response Plan (EECRP). These initiatives were developed in response to various challenges, including political instability, economic crises, and the influx of refugees, and more recently the Israeli aggressions. However, despite donor funding, these reforms have failed to create a fair or inclusive educational landscape. The identified

inequalities became particularly evident in the context of the Israeli aggressions and the displacement that followed.

C. The Impact of War and Displacement on Education in Lebanon

Israeli aggression in Lebanon – ongoing at the time of writing – escalated between September and November 2024, leading to the displacement of 1.3 million people, the deaths of over 4,000 individuals, and severe damage to the country's education sector (World Bank Group, 2025). By early November 2024, 75% of public schools were unable to operate. Approximately 340,000 children and youth were forced out of school due to widespread attacks, and 45,000 teachers were directly affected by the violence (MEHE, 2024). Many schools, especially in the south, were either destroyed, damaged, or converted into shelters, disrupting educational routines for thousands. By the end of 2024, more than 650,000 Lebanese and Syrian students were out of school (MEHE, 2024).

Our study reveals that the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE)[1] demonstrated limited institutional readiness to manage the educational crisis at a national scale in the aftermath of the aggression. While MEHE launched an emergency plan to maintain learning, the absence of a coordinated crisis response left schools and teachers largely on their own. Public schools, in particular, lacked the resources to adapt, while private schools had greater autonomy and infrastructure to transition to online learning. Emotional and psychological distress was widespread, yet there was no national mental health framework in place, and teachers received no training in responding to post-crisis emotional needs.

The reopening of schools in early November 2024, despite ongoing conflict, was an important achievement, but appeared to overlook the complex realities faced by displaced families, including housing instability, trauma, and lack of basic services. Differences in school modalities further highlighted deep systemic disparities: private schools maintained structured online learning, while public schools relied on informal tools like WhatsApp, often with limited success. Second-shift schools, attended primarily by Syrian refugees, did not reopen until January 2025. This unequal response to crisis education deepened long-standing divides and inequalities and introduced new barriers to equitable, inclusive, and resilient learning in Lebanon.

Across both the public and private sectors, parents and teachers consistently noted that the transition to online learning had a detrimental effect on students' focus, motivation, and emotional wellbeing similar to the effects of the Covid-19 lockdown. Younger children, in particular, showed signs of social isolation and disengagement from academic life, underscoring the emotional toll of remote learning during an ongoing crisis.

D. Key Findings

Our analysis set out to understand how children and families in war-affected areas of Lebanon experienced education during and after war, across three interlinked dimensions: accessing, returning to, and attending school.

1. Access to Education

[1] The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) in Lebanon is responsible for overseeing both public and private education sectors. This includes all levels of education, from early childhood to higher education: https://www.mehe.gov.lb/ar/about-the-ministry/mission

The conditions and factors that influenced whether children could access education – and what form of education – during and after war related to the duration and nature of displacement, socioeconomic status, and changes in this status over time. The school type (private versus public) also played a crucial role. The analysis showed how war-induced displacement exacerbates existing socioeconomic inequalities, forcing low-income families to bear the greatest burden as the education system struggles to get children back to school. The financial burden of displacement also affected education in various ways, with social capital – such as community networks and local support – a major factor in how families were able to maintain access to school for their children. Syrian refugees experienced even more profound impacts of war and displacement, shaped by disadvantages relating to their nationality, legal status, financial hardship, and systemic discrimination.

2. Returning to Public and Private Schools

For many children and families, returning to education after war-related interruption or displacement was a deeply personal experience – yet one that also highlighted systemic challenges in the education system. The process was shaped by fear, disruption, and instability, as well as by the school's preparedness to receive returning students and facilitate their reintegration. Factors such as the duration of displacement, the level of post-war support provided by schools, the socioeconomic impact of war, and families' ability to assist their children all influenced the ease of returning to school. While differences between public and private schools were evident, the role of individual teachers and school heads was also crucial in determining the level of support children received. Additionally, the limitations of school support programmes became clear. Families with children – both with and without disabilities – praised private schools for their general catch-up programmes, but many reported that targeted support for children with disabilities was lacking. As a result, these children struggled to re-engage with learning after displacement. Ultimately, parents who were more involved in their children's education were better able to mitigate learning loss and navigate challenges, significantly influencing how effectively their children returned to school.

3. Attending and Learning in School

The analysis explored whether children who had returned to school were meaningfully engaged in learning, adequately supported, and genuinely included in their school environments. It examined their daily schooling experiences in the aftermath of war, including engagement, motivation, mental health, and teaching quality. It also considered the learning environment – such as overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms – alongside the impact of different learning modalities (online, hybrid, in-person) and the balance between academic support and broader psychosocial and peer inclusion. Disparities in school environments and support systems significantly shaped students' learning outcomes and emotional adjustment after displacement. While children resumed learning in the post-enrolment phase, the quality and level of support varied greatly. Factors such as class size and resources, mode of learning, and the extent to which both academic and psychosocial needs were met all played crucial roles in their reintegration.

E. Primary Challenges

Synthesising the data, we identified the following primary challenges:

1. Inequality in Access and Quality

Displacement magnified existing inequalities within Lebanon's education system. Public schools,

already under-resourced, bore the brunt of enrolment pressures and lacked the infrastructure to respond. Private and semi-private schools, with more autonomy and flexibility, were often better able to adapt to crisis conditions. Socioeconomic status, legal status, gender, displacement, temporality and journey, and disability further shaped students' access and experiences.

2. **Disconnection Between Policy and Practice:**
   Despite national commitments to inclusive education (MEHE 2023), field data shows a lack of coordinated crisis response and limited support for schools, educators and students. The MEHE offered broad reopening strategies but failed to account for displacement-related realities like emotional trauma, logistical barriers, and socioeconomic instability.
3. **Limited Inclusion Beyond Access:**
   Most post-war education strategies focused on the children's physical return to school without addressing whether the school infrastructure was ready to receive them. In practice, inclusion was often superficial – limited to physical presence without adequate psychosocial support, adaptation to learning loss, or differentiated instruction.

F. A Critical Inclusion Approach

A critical inclusion lens goes beyond access and enrolment, to consider the intersecting identities of learners and recognises how systems reproduce exclusion. Applying this lens to educational recovery in Lebanon requires:

- Addressing emotional, social, and academic recovery in parallel.
- Identifying how different social groups – such as internally displaced Lebanese students, Syrian refugees, and students with disabilities – differently access, return to, and engage with education during and after the crisis.
- Supporting not only individual learners, but also families, educators, and school systems as a whole.
- Embedding flexibility and responsiveness at all levels of the system.

G. Policy recommendations

For Policy Makers

- **Develop a National Educational Recovery Framework** that includes catch-up programmes, psychosocial support, reintegration planning, and emergency teaching modalities.
- **Integrate a critical inclusion model** into policy design, with indicators that track not just access but participation, wellbeing, and outcomes across social categories.
- **Bridge the public–private divide** through resource redistribution, infrastructure investment, and accountability mechanisms to ensure equitable learning environments.
- **Institutionalise crisis preparedness** in education, including emergency plans, mobile support units, and flexible accreditation.

For School Leaders

- **Create inclusive school cultures** by leveraging school-level data to identify patterns of exclusion and tailor adaptive practices that acknowledge the diverse realities of displaced and marginalised students.
- **Implement school-level transition plans** that include assessments of emotional readiness, mental health support, flexible re-entry, and support structures – rather than relying exclusively on individual and NGO initiatives.

- **Foster partnerships with local NGOs, municipalities, and mental health professionals** to fill systemic gaps in support services.

For Teachers

- **Engage in training in trauma-informed pedagogy** and inclusive classroom practices.
- **Access structured support and supervision**, particularly in high-burden schools or areas receiving large displaced populations.
- **Advocate for classroom resources and learning materials** that are relevant to displaced learners.

For Donors and International Agencies

- **Invest in long-term education system strengthening**, not just short-term emergency funding.
- **Support data systems and research** that track displacement, access, participation, and learning outcomes.
- **Fund flexible education models**, such as blended learning hubs, that can operate during and after displacement.
- **Prioritise capacity-building for MEHE and local education actors** to lead inclusive recovery efforts.

For Civil Society and Community Organisations

- **Act as bridges between schools and families, particularly in displaced and marginalised communities.**
- **Monitor and report on educational access and inclusion, using participatory methods.**
- **Develop community-based learning spaces where formal schooling is not yet restored.**
- **Amplify the voices of displaced students and families** in education planning and decision-making.

For Parents and Caregivers

- **Engage actively with schools to share concerns and feedback, and support children's learning at home.**
- **Participate in school and community-based recovery initiatives.**
- **Access mental health and parenting support offered through NGOs or local services to manage the effects of displacement.**

H. Conclusion: Building Resilience Through Inclusion

Lebanon's multiple crises have increased the vulnerabilities of many groups, including Syrian refugees, internally displaced Lebanese, children with disabilities, and economically marginalised families. Meanwhile, the experiences of displaced children, families, and teachers during and after the 2024 Israeli aggression reveal the urgent need to reframe what inclusion means in education. Hence, a one-size-fits-all access strategy to education or returning to pre-crisis models is inadequate. Instead, learning from this period and adopting a focused inclusion framework that addresses emotional, social, and academic recovery is essential for strengthening resilience and improving the education system's capacity to handle future challenges.

A resilient education system is one that places the most marginalised people at the centre of its design. It requires not only better planning and coordination but also a shift in mindset: from crisis response to inclusion as a permanent foundation. Only then can education in Lebanon become not just a space of survival, but of belonging, learning, and possibility for all children – in crisis and beyond.

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