Transforming Attitudes to and Capabilities for Play-Based Early Years Learning in Lebanon

Published by

This report is published by Seenaryo.

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Acronyms

FGD	Focus Group Discussion
KNH	Kindernothilfe
KII	Key Informant Interview
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning
MEHE	MEHE (Ministry of Education and Higher Education)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development Assistance Committee
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East

Executive Summary

Project Background

Kindernothilfe (KNH) is a children's rights organisation grounded in Christian values. Since its inception in 1959, the organisation has been committed to the recognition of children and young people in situations of poverty and marginalisation as subjects of rights. KNH partners with local NGOs to implement awareness-raising, education, and advocacy projects in line with development policies, contributing to the realisation of children's rights as per the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Seenaryo is a leading specialist in theatre and play-based learning with underserved communities in Lebanon and Jordan. It uses theatre and play to transform education and support people to learn, lead, heal, and thrive in their classrooms and communities.

KNH and Seenaryo have engaged in a technical partnership to deliver the 'Transforming Attitudes to & Capabilities for Play-Based Early Years Learning in Lebanon' project. Proposed for funding by KNH and the German Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation, this 45-month activity focuses on early years education, early childhood development, child rights, participatory education, play-based learning, and teacher training. The project will be implemented in all nine governorates of Lebanon in kindergartens, primary schools, non-formal education centres, government schools, low-income private schools, UNWRA schools for Palestinian refugees, and NGO-led emergency schools for Syrian refugees.

The project targets two sets of beneficiaries, both teachers and children:

Teachers

For teachers, the project aims to enhance their ability to implement and maintain child-centred, play-based teaching practices, engage in positive classroom management, and create more inclusive classrooms.

Children

For children, it seeks to increase engagement in learning and improve core life skills across cognitive, language-based, physical, social, and emotional domains.

The project comprises three main activities supporting its objectives:

1) Playkit resource development,
2) Playkit teacher training & consultation with children,
and **3)** teacher community building.

Study Purpose
& Key Questions

This feasibility study examines the project objectives and planned strategies in light of the operating environment in Lebanon.

Specially, the feasibility study will:

Assess the context of the planned study at the micro, meso, and macro levels and provide essential, project-relevant data on the project's context at baseline.

Develop an analysis evaluating the extent to which the proposed project can contribute to solving the problem for the beneficiaries and other stakeholders, while also incorporating the OECD DAC criteria where relevant.

Recommend adjustments to refine the project concepts, including the impact matrix and project measures.

It is important to note that this study investigates the baseline conditions and current realities in Lebanon that may impact the feasibility of the proposed project. Nevertheless, as Seenaryo has been delivering early iterations of the Playkit application since 2017, this study also integrates feedback from past users of the application. This integration aims to understand past challenges and lessons learned, providing valuable insights on how these experiences can inform the current iteration.

The key research questions for this study are:

How do the planned key components or activities contribute to achieving the stated objectives?

What potential constraints or limitations could impact the feasibility of the project? What potential concerns and feedback from stakeholders should be considered in the project?

Are the project objectives clearly defined, measurable, and attainable? How will the project's success be measured and evaluated?

What are the potential risks and uncertainties associated with the project's objectives and strategies, and how should they be mitigated? What alternative components or strategies should be considered to enhance the project's feasibility and effectiveness?

Conclusions

This project has outlined four key activities and components to achieve its stated objective. These include upgrading the Playkit application to make it a fully functional, scalable, and versatile one-stop shop of diverse teaching materials for all early years teachers in Lebanon; training 15 cohorts of 22 teachers of 3- to 8-year-olds across Lebanon to equip them with teaching strategies for creating child-centred, participatory classrooms and engaging children in participatory evaluation sessions before and after their teachers' training; developing a Teacher Community of Practice; and conducting a multi-pronged advocacy campaign to ensure that stakeholders, including the Lebanese Ministry of Education, are committed to play-based learning and to incorporating Seenaryo's tools.

The findings from this study suggest that macro-level regional and national dynamics play a significant role in Lebanon's educational landscape. The country is mired in political instability, financial crisis, and the aftermath of the Beirut explosion in August 2020, all of which have had devastating effects on young Lebanese learners. Teachers and parents both acknowledge that

these challenges correlate with increased learning difficulties, negatively impacting core aspects of young people's development – especially refugee students – including behavioural issues, communication and social skills, and ability to grasp information.

In addition, the national curriculum, widely utilised in schools across the country, is characterised by a daunting heaviness. Coupled with traditional 'desk-based and rote memorisation' learning methods, it leaves young learners with limited opportunities to develop the social and emotional life skills needed to navigate the country's difficult realities. However, the majority of teachers, both trained and non-trained, believe that the adoption of play-based learning can significantly benefit students. This positive impact includes fostering enthusiasm for coming to school, encouraging participatory learning in classrooms, and increasing self-esteem and confidence. Similarly, parents agree that play-based learning offers a valuable alternative to traditional teaching methods and is more likely to support strong social skills and a love for learning.

The project's **objectives and sub-objectives** are clearly defined in the project's concept note and accurately reflected in the logical framework developed to evaluate and assess the project's progress towards its stated objectives. These are:

1
Sub-objective:

Teachers have increased their capacity to understand and implement participatory, play-based classroom activities and positive classroom management, creating an inclusive learning environment.

2
Sub-objective:

Regardless of their ability, children actively participate in and enjoy their learning experience, demonstrating improved life skills in the five developmental areas (social, emotional, physical, cognitive, language).

3
Sub-objective:

Teachers, supported by head teachers, are inspired to actively engage with other teachers and develop a long-term commitment to delivering, advocating for, and furthering their capabilities in play-based teaching.

4
Sub-objective:

Seenaryo's capacity to advocate for child-centred, play-based teaching practices with Early Childhood Education stakeholders including Ministry of Education and major education NGOs is built.

Clear baseline values and attainable endline targets are attached to each sub-objective, providing clarity to and simplifying the evaluation process. However, to enhance the project's potential for sustainability beyond the funding cycle, we recommend that Seenaryo leverage its long-term presence in the country, along with its local network and expertise, to establish impactful partnerships with other education providers and education clusters on the ground. The goal is to create a network of education providers well-versed in and enthusiastic about play-based learning and the Playkit.

Additionally, we recognise that sub-objective four may be difficult to achieve, although it is clear that engaging external stakeholders, especially the Ministry of Education, is vital. While Seenaryo is expected to have the capacity to implement a larger-scale public relations and social media campaign advocating for play-based learning and the Playkit application, assuming it is granted the necessary resources, it remains uncertain whether such a campaign would convince the Ministry of Education within Lebanon to endorse and support play-based learning in a more mainstream fashion.

Another recommendation, related to sub-objective three, is to establish ongoing methods for informal interactive sessions, potentially through the application itself, but also in other forums where teachers can regularly engage and interact with each other. Additionally, we recommend

that teachers participate in off-site, in-person events to strengthen the community of practice. This approach aims to go beyond tokenistic involvement, allowing for meaningful networks and partnerships to enhance the community. We further recommend allocating resources to ensure that in-person events can be conducted during the academic year.

Regarding participatory child evaluations, this study suggests that these types of evaluations are beneficial and have a long-term positive impact both on the young participants and on the educational programs themselves. However, conducting such evaluations requires specific capacities within the facilitator group. We recommend allocating resources to ensure that facilitators receive regular training in delivering child participatory evaluations for the two different age groups investigated in the study: 3- to 5-year-olds and 6- to 8-year-olds.

The project is significantly limited by nationwide restrictions on internet capacity. Trained teachers overwhelmingly highlighted that their primary critique of the Playkit application was their inability to access it due to insufficient internet in their classrooms. Additionally, there is not enough internet capacity to download educational materials to laptops or other devices in advance of the sessions. This is a core and fundamental concern that needs to be addressed under this project.

The lack of a memorandum of understanding with the Lebanese Ministry of Education is also a significant constraint, as it relegates access to schools and head teachers based on personal networks and connections. A more robust and formalised recognition of the methodology would allow the project to have a far greater impact across the country, in terms of schools, teachers, and students reached.

A number of potential risks and uncertainties could impact the feasibility of the project's objectives. Most significantly, considering the current political reality, the active hostilities on the country's southern border with Israel and the recent related airstrike in Beirut have the potential to escalate into a more widespread war, leading to school closures and other disruptions. An increase in hostilities would inevitably impact the country's financial capacities, leading to a deprioritisation of education in favour of defence spending, further burdening an already overstretched system.

However, it's important to note that Seenaryo has been active in the country since 2015 and has successfully navigated shifts and pivots to accommodate various unexpected political and social changes. This included providing remote support to teachers and parents during the COVID-19 pandemic and working flexibly with individual schools for this study to collect data when possible and to shift geographies when needed. Thus, Seenaryo has demonstrated its ability to make adjustments to continue the progress of the work while remaining attuned and relevant to the current context.

Alternative strategies that could be considered include building on the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic to continue facilitating play-based learning and the Playkit application remotely. This would be a relevant shift should political turmoil render in-person meetings difficult. Additionally, Seenaryo could explore technologies that allow the use of mobile applications offline or revisit the utilisation of USB flash drives to provide an alternative means for teachers who struggle to access the application and download resources due to internet constraints.

Key Recommendations

Provide frequent interactive or remote interaction opportunities for the Teacher Community of Practice, but supplement this with more substantial in-person offline meetings.

Invest in the capacities of the existing facilitators to conduct participatory child evaluations by allocating funds towards ongoing training with qualified experts.

Continue and expand the use of local expertise in the development of the Playkit application to ensure that Lebanese teachers have relevant and context-appropriate learning materials within the application, considering the variance in languages and secular/religious identities of Lebanese schools.

Invest in technologies that would allow access to the application even when the user is offline.

Revisit the possibility of utilising USB flash drives so that teachers who are unable to access the application and download the resources have an alternative means to do so.

Capitalise on the existing appetite for play-based learning in Lebanon to generate evidence and advocate for products through which the Lebanese Ministry of Education could be encouraged to mainstream this methodology in the education system.

Work to develop formal agreements with the Ministry of Education to further enhance the project's impact, through relationships with other education providers and learning institutions that have existing ministry relationships.

Connect with other non-traditional education service providers (such as SPARK Lebanon and Right to Play) to harness collective efforts and create long-term sustainable change in the country's educational landscape.

Methodology and Limitations

This feasibility study employed a multipronged, hybrid (remote and in-person) research approach that included a thorough examination of both internal and external documents through comprehensive literature reviews (done remotely), a quantitative survey (done in-person), focus group discussions (FGDs - done in-person), and key informant interviews (KIIs - done remotely and in-person).

The study commenced with a literature review which incorporated concept notes and other relevant documents outlining the planned implementation of the current project. Project documents from past iterations of the Playkit application were also reviewed, including evaluations documenting lessons learned, successes, and changes in the application over time. Simultaneously, the research team conducted a rapid review of literature pertaining to Lebanon's political, social, and economic history, along with its present status. The results of the literature review were used to refine the scope of the data collection.

Recruitment Method and Sampling Framework

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Respondents for the survey, focus group discussions, and interviews were teachers, head teachers, and parents/caregivers of young learners aged 3 to 8 in three localities across Lebanon. Teachers were further categorised into two groups: those who had received training on the Seenaryo Playkit at any point ('trained teachers') and those who had never received such training ('non-trained teachers'). Respondents were randomly selected without bias towards ethnicity, religion, geographic location, disability, or prior project involvement. Nonetheless, the study aimed to adhere to the planned gender and population target ratios, including at least 20%-30% male teachers and 20%-30% refugee teachers. Furthermore, efforts were made to include respondents from at least one Christian school, one Muslim school, and one school catering to or inclusive of children with specific needs.

While this project will be implemented in all nine governorates across Lebanon, three were chosen as a representative sample. These three encompass diverse community populations (including Syrian and Palestinian refugees); varied religious and ethnic backgrounds (covering Sunni Muslims, Shiaa Muslims, Druze, and Christians); and the presence of government schools, low-income private schools, UNWRA schools, and NGO-led emergency schools.

Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews

FGDs were held between 11 October and 15 November, 2023. The research team conducted 15 FGDs involving a total of 113 respondents across three locations: eight FGDs in Akkar, six in Hasbaya, and one in the North. Additionally, 20 KIIs were conducted, with 11 in Akkar, eight in Hasbaya, and one in the North.

FGDs were segregated by respondent type, creating separate sessions for trained teachers, non-trained teachers, and parents/caregivers. Head teachers were interviewed individually. Each discussion included participants of mixed ages and genders.

The survey was conducted between 8 and 30 November 2023, and was randomly distributed to teachers and head teachers at the same schools targeted for FGDS and KIIs. The sample comprised 47 all-female respondents (N=47), with 96% being teachers and 4% head teachers. Geographically, participants were dispersed across the three cities/governorates targeted for the study: 21% from the North, 28% from Hasbaya, and 51% from Akkar. All sampled schools were private, and in Akkar, they were equally divided between those defined as having a religious and non-religious nature. In Hasbaya, 85% were defined as non-religious, while in the North, 80% were defined as having a religious nature.

The sample was equally divided between teachers of students aged 3 to 5 years and those teaching students aged 6 to 8 years. 28% of respondents worked in schools accommodating children with special needs and 43% worked in schools with refugee students.

Stakeholder Interviews

As part of the research methodology employed for this project, the research team conducted four pivotal stakeholder interviews. Three interviews featured key members of the project's management and administrative team, providing perspectives from those involved in the project's day-to-day operations. The fourth interview involved an external Seenaryo consultant – a social and emotional learning specialist with a PhD in child development.

Internal team interview questions delved into the team's perspectives on the evolution of the Playkit, capturing valuable lessons learned, successful implementations, and noteworthy changes observed throughout its iterations. Inquiries were also made regarding the cultural and gender barriers encountered in the Playkit's utilisation, offering a deeper understanding of the contextual challenges faced by the project.

In parallel, the external consultant interview focused on eliciting insights related to child-friendly participatory evaluations and the effectiveness of play-based learning from a developmental standpoint. Discussions also revolved around access to the Lebanese Ministry of Education, exploring avenues for mainstreaming play-based learning within the broader educational landscape.

Study Limitations

Two significant limitations impacted this study. First, the outbreak of the war between Israel and Gaza, commencing on 7 October, led to substantial instability and fear across the region. This, in turn, had a spillover effect in Lebanon, resulting in school closures, altered schedules, and shifting priorities. These factors affected the availability, willingness, and appropriateness of recruiting participants. The instability persisted until the end of data collection, confining it to locations less influenced by hostilities. Consequently, schools in the South and Beirut had to be entirely excluded from the study, presenting a notable challenge given the vital and unique nature of these locations in the Lebanese context. Additionally, this resulted in an uneven representation of the selected geographies, with Akkar being significantly overrepresented.

Second, the study used a convenience sample drawn from Seenaryo's current and past beneficiary schools. This sampling approach was chosen to expedite recruitment and to

ensure that respondents, while not direct beneficiaries of the study, had a connection to services linked to this work, thereby mitigating the extractive nature of data collection. Although the participants were randomly selected from each school in order to minimise inherent biases associated with this sampling method, it is important to note that they were drawn from schools in contact with Seenaryo for past or future training, potentially indicating a higher exposure to conversations about play-based learning than the average Lebanese population. In addition, the overrepresentation of women in the education space introduced a notable gender imbalance in the study sample, potentially impacting the generalisability of the findings and the study's ability to draw broader conclusions about the Lebanese population.

Finally, while FGDs are a common form of qualitative data collection in the social sciences, they carry inherent risks and limitations. Although they offer the advantage of capturing diverse perspectives from a relatively homogenous group, it can be challenging to gain true insight into topics that participants may be less open to discussing in a group environment. Moreover, dominant voices in the culture often become the dominant voices in discussions, potentially overshadowing differing views and nuances. To mitigate this risk, facilitators proactively encouraged participation from every respondent, emphasising the absence of right or wrong answers and promoting a wide array of perspectives and insights in the discussion. The research team also opted to conduct separate interviews with head teachers, recognising that this respondent group is less likely to speak freely in an open forum.

Introduction

Kindernothilfe (KNH) is a children's rights organisation grounded in Christian values. Since its inception in 1959, the organisation has been committed to the recognition of children and young people in situations of poverty and marginalisation as subjects of rights. KNH partners with local NGOs to implement awareness-raising, education, and advocacy projects in line with development policies, contributing to the realisation of children's rights as per the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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The project, which targets both teachers and children, has two sets of sub-objectives. For teachers, the project aims to enhance their ability to implement and maintain child-centred, play-based teaching practices, engage in positive classroom management, and create more inclusive classrooms. For children, it seeks to increase engagement in learning and improve core life skills across cognitive, language-based, physical, social, and emotional domains. The project comprises three main activities supporting its objectives:

1) Playkit resource development. Before launching a pilot version of its Playkit mobile phone application in 2020, Seenaryo spent four years developing, refining, and evaluating the book form of the Playkit. Under the current project, Seenaryo will upgrade the application to serve as a fully functional, scalable, and versatile one-stop shop of diverse teaching materials for all early years teachers in Lebanon. This includes creating 10 new teacher training videos per year, which will focus on instructional content rather than simply modelling activities as is currently the case, and introducing new features to optimise the user experience and teacher engagement, such as interactive chatbots, points boards to incentivise teachers, and in-app notifications guiding teachers to new and relevant content. Additionally, two new content areas – Peace Education and Wellbeing – will be introduced over the four years. A physical booklet complete with QR codes will be produced and distributed to all teachers, summarising top tips and directing them to key content on the app.

2) Playkit teacher training and consultation with children. Seenaryo will train 15 cohorts of 22 teachers of 3- to 8-year-olds across Lebanon, equipping them with teaching strategies to create child-centred, participatory classrooms. The three initial training days will be delivered consecutively and focus on games, songs, interactive stories, and positive behaviour management techniques. A follow-up coaching and mentoring day, one month after the initial training, will provide an opportunity for troubleshooting, observation, and adaptation of content. In parallel, Seenaryo will provide one-to-one coaching with each school's head teacher to ensure their buy-in and ability to support integration of play-based learning. Children will be consulted in participatory evaluation sessions before and after their teachers' training, providing a platform for their voices to be heard.

3) Teacher community building. Extensive evaluation and focus groups show that teachers benefit from and seek a sense of belonging to a movement committed to the long-term transformation of classrooms towards participatory and child-centred approaches. The Teacher Community of Practice responds to this need. Using newsletters, Facebook groups, in-app chat functions, and live

events, Seenaryo will provide a space for teachers to share experiences, engage in peer learning, troubleshoot, and stay engaged. Seenaryo's Communication & Engagement Officer will engage the Teacher Community on a weekly basis, including through posts that set challenges (e.g. adapting the words to a specific song), signpost relevant content (e.g. spring-themed games during springtime), ask what teachers' favourite activities are, or invite teachers to share their own versions of activities. The Communication & Engagement Officer will respond to comments and questions online and will also organise one major live event a year for teachers to exchange and deepen learning and effect sustained behaviour change.

In addition, Seenaryo will conduct a multi-pronged advocacy campaign to secure stakeholder commitment to establishing play-based learning and incorporating Seenaryo's tools over the four years. This campaign will include: regular meetings with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) and the Centre for Education Research and Development with the aim of training ministry trainers, contributing to the Lebanese Early Childhood Education curriculum, and signing a long-term memorandum of understanding with the ministry; working with partners including Lebanese Alternative Learning, whose e-learning platform is accessible to every public school student and teacher in Lebanon due to their partnership with MEHE to feature the Seenaryo Playkit on their platform; working to have the Seenaryo Playkit accredited by an international university (Seenaryo is currently in early-stage discussions with University College London's Institute of Education); and organising high-level advocacy events and conferences.

Objectives of the Feasibility Study

This feasibility study examines the project objectives and planned strategies in light of the operating environment in Lebanon. Specially, the feasibility study will:

- **Assess** the context of the planned study at the micro, meso, and macro levels and provide essential, project-relevant data on the project's context at baseline.

- **Develop** an analysis evaluating the extent to which the proposed project can contribute to solving the problem for the beneficiaries and other stakeholders, while also incorporating the OECD DAC criteria where relevant.

- **Recommend** adjustments to refine the project concepts, including the impact matrix and project measures.

It is important to note that this study investigates the baseline conditions and current realities in Lebanon that may impact the feasibility of the proposed project. Nevertheless, as Seenaryo has been delivering early iterations of the Playkit application since 2017, this study also integrates feedback from past users of the application. This integration aims to understand past challenges and lessons learned, providing valuable insights on how these experiences can inform the current iteration.

Key Research Questions

This feasibility study aims to answer the following research questions:

- How do the planned key components or activities contribute to achieving the stated objectives?

- Are the project objectives clearly defined, measurable, and attainable? How will the project's success be measured and evaluated?

- What potential constraints or limitations could impact the feasibility of the project? What potential concerns and feedback from stakeholders should be considered in the project?

- What are the potential risks and uncertainties associated with the project's objectives and strategies, and how should they be mitigated? What alternative components or strategies should be considered to enhance the project's feasibility and effectiveness?

Research Design and Methodology

Research Methodology

This feasibility study employed a multipronged, hybrid (in-person and remote) research approach that included a thorough examination of both internal and external documents through comprehensive literature reviews (done remotely), a quantitative survey (done in-person), focus group discussions (FGDs done in-person), and key informant interviews (KIIs - done remotely and in-person).

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While this project will be implemented in all nine governorates across Lebanon, three were chosen as a representative sample. These three encompass diverse community populations (including Syrian and Palestinian refugees); varied religious and ethnic backgrounds (covering Sunni Muslims, Shiaa Muslims, Druze, and Christians); and the presence of government schools, low-income private schools, UNWRA schools, and NGO-led emergency schools.

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in the North. Additionally, 20 KIIs were conducted, with 11 in Akkar, eight in Hasbaya, and one in the North.

FGD were segregated by respondent type, creating separate sessions for trained teachers, non-trained teachers, and parents/caregivers. Head teachers were interviewed individually. Each discussion included participants of mixed ages and genders.

Location	Type of activity	Total participants	Total number of sessions	Trained teachers	Non-trained teachers	Parents & caregivers	Head teachers
Akkar	FGD	72	8	38	12	22	0
	KII	11	11	3	2	3	3
Hasbaya	FGD	35	6	11	12	12	0
	KII	8	8	2	2	2	2
North	FGD	6	1	0	6	0	0
	KII	1	1	0	1	0	0
Total	FGD	113	15	49	30	34	0
	KII	20	20	5	5	5	5

Survey

The survey was conducted between 8 and 30 November 2023, and was randomly distributed to teachers and head teachers at the same schools targeted for FGDS and KIIs. The sample comprised 47 all-female respondents (N=47), with 96% being teachers and 4% head teachers. Geographically, participants were dispersed across the three cities/governorates targeted for the study: 21% from the North, 28% from Hasbaya, and 51% from Akkar (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of schools per region in sample
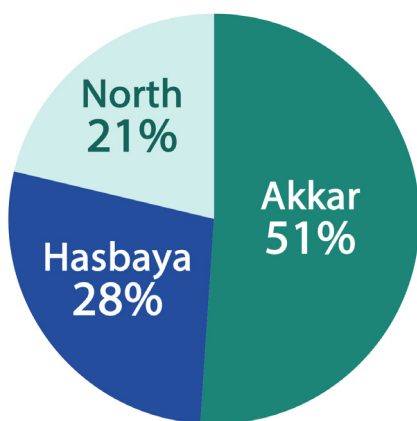
North 21%
Akkar 51%
Hasbaya 28%

All sampled schools were private, and in Akkar, they were equally divided between those defined as having a religious and non-religious nature. In Hasbaya, 85% were defined as non-religious, while in the North, 80% were defined as having a religious nature (Figure 2).

The sample was equally divided between teachers of students aged 3 to 5 years and those teaching students aged 6 to 8 years (Figure 3). 28% of respondents worked in schools accommodating children with special needs (Figure 4) and 43% worked in schools with refugee students (Figure 5).

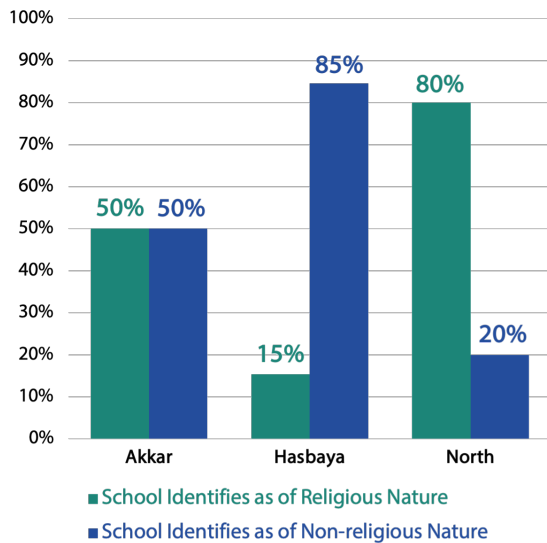**Figure 2: Religious vs. non-religious schools across governorates**

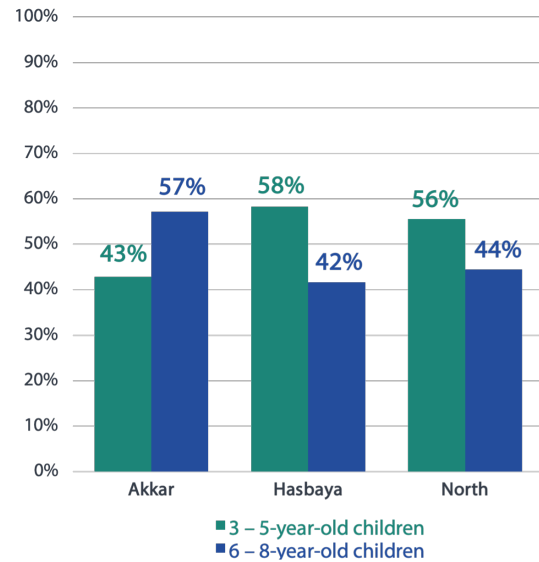**Figure 3: Students' age group and location**

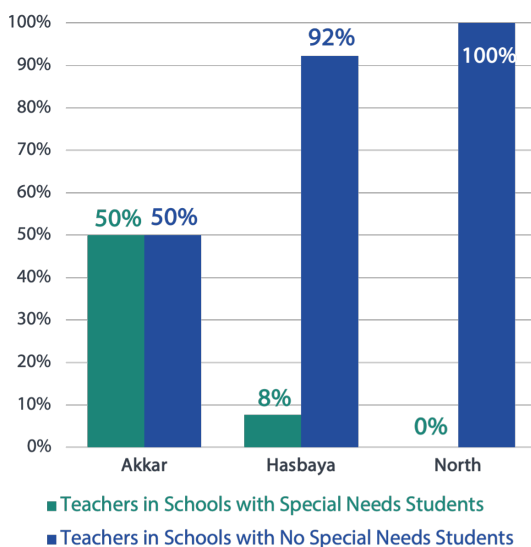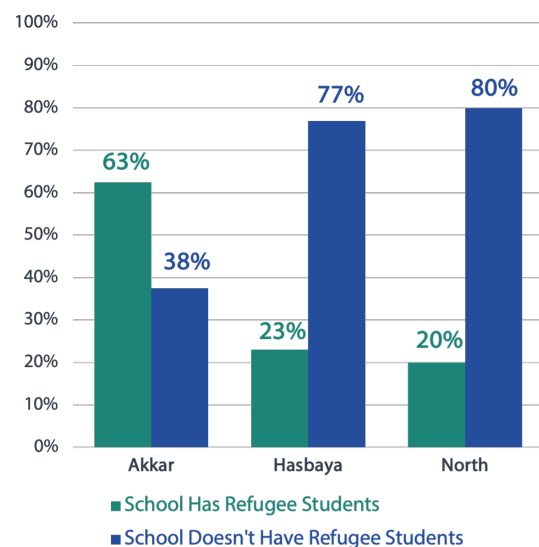**Figure 4: Special needs students across governorates**

Figure 5: Refugee students across governorates

Stakeholder Interviews

As part of the research methodology employed for this project, the research team conducted four pivotal stakeholder interviews. Three interviews featured key members of the project's management and administrative team, providing perspectives from those involved in the project's day-to-day operations. The fourth interview involved an external consultant – a social and emotional learning specialist with a PhD in child development.

Internal team interview questions delved into the team's perspectives on the evolution of the Playkit, capturing valuable lessons learned, successful implementations, and noteworthy changes observed throughout its iterations. Inquiries were also made regarding the cultural and gender barriers encountered in the Playkit's utilisation, offering a deeper understanding of the contextual challenges faced by the project.

In parallel, the external consultant interview focused on eliciting insights related to child-friendly participatory evaluations and the effectiveness of play-based learning from a developmental standpoint. Discussions also revolved around access to the Lebanese Ministry of Education, exploring avenues for mainstreaming play-based learning within the broader educational landscape.

Data Collection Teams

The data collection teams in Lebanon comprised local Seenaryo consultants (Seenaryo's in-country freelance trainers and facilitators). All team members had prior experience with the Playkit application, and many had previously interacted with the teachers and head teachers at the targeted schools. Importantly, all team members were native Arabic speakers, fluent in the Lebanese dialect, and well-versed in the culturally appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication norms.

Pre–data collection training and quality assurance

The data collection teams participated in an online comprehensive pre–data collection orientation session. This session included a detailed walkthrough of all data collection protocols, allowing time for collaborative feedback and editing to ensure that questions were context-sensitive, relevant, and accurately aligned with the desired line of questioning. The orientation also covered facilitation styles, open-ended questioning techniques, and provided guidance on the process for note taking and storing collected data.

Informed Consent and Data Protection

Informed consent was obtained verbally before the commencement of any data collection. Verbal consent was considered sufficient given the low-risk nature of the questions, allowing for more time-efficient data collection. Facilitators uploaded recordings of the sessions and note sheets to a shared online drive owned and managed by DARNA Research. These recordings and notes will be securely destroyed 60 days after the study's completion.

Data Analysis

Interview and FGD notes underwent Arabic to English translation and selective cross-checking against recordings. Subsequently, a thematic analysis was conducted in Excel to identify and analyse emerging themes that addressed the research questions or were otherwise surprising and relevant. Each data set was anonymised by removing any identifying information and then coded with demographic data, including location (Akkar, Hasbaya, North); respondent type (non-trained teacher, trained teacher, head teacher, parent/caregiver); and school name. Additionally, significant responses to each question group were coded.

This disaggregation and coding method allowed for flexible data slicing, resulting in separate analyses for each location. It facilitated a discussion of themes that cut across the entire country, as well as

distinct findings for specific respondent types. For confidentiality, no personally identifying information from FGDs or interviews has been included in this report, and quotes are labelled only by respondent type.

Research Ethics and Limitations

Research Ethics

The research team adheres to the American Psychological Association's Ethical Guidelines for Research with Human Research Participants, guided by the following ten principles:

- In planning research, it is the researcher's responsibility to evaluate and ensure its ethical acceptability, to obtain ethical advice when needed, and to apply careful safeguards to protect participants' rights.
- A primary concern of the investigator is to determine whether the procedures will place the participant at risk.
- It is the investigator's responsibility to ensure ethical practice, including that of all collaborators, assistants, employees, and students.
- Informed consent must be obtained from all participants prior to the research. If potential participants cannot give consent, such as children, informed consent must be obtained from a responsible surrogate, such as a parent.
- If deception is necessary, full disclosure must be made as soon as possible after completion of the research.
- Participants' freedom to decline or to withdraw at any time must be fully respected by the investigator.
- Participants must be protected from physical and mental harm. The investigator must provide participants with ways to contact the investigator at any time after completion of the research, should questions arise.
- After data collection, full disclosure, explanation, and answers to any questions raised by participants must be provided.
- It is the researcher's responsibility to detect and to remove any negative effects of the research, including long-term consequences.
- All information obtained must be held in confidentiality.

Risks and Limitations

Two significant limitations impacted this study. First, the outbreak of the war between Israel and Gaza, commencing on 7 October, led to substantial instability and fear across the region. This, in turn, had a spillover effect in Lebanon, resulting in school closures, altered schedules, and shifting priorities. These factors affected the availability, willingness, and appropriateness of recruiting participants. The instability persisted until the end of data collection, confining it to locations less influenced by hostilities. Consequently, schools in the South and Beirut had to be entirely excluded from the study, presenting a notable challenge given the vital and unique nature of these locations in the Lebanese context. Additionally, this resulted in an uneven representation of the selected geographies, with Akkar being significantly overrepresented.

Second, the study used a convenience sample drawn from Seenaryo's current and past beneficiary schools. This sampling approach was chosen to expedite recruitment and to ensure that respondents,

while not direct beneficiaries of the study, had a connection to services linked to this work, thereby mitigating the extractive nature of data collection. Although the participants were randomly selected from each school in order to minimise inherent biases associated with this sampling method, it is important to note that they were drawn from schools in contact with Seenaryo for past or future training, potentially indicating a higher exposure to conversations about play-based learning than the average Lebanese population. In addition, the overrepresentation of women in the education space introduced a notable gender imbalance in the study sample, potentially impacting the generalisability of the findings and the study's ability to draw broader conclusions about the Lebanese population.

Finally, while FGDs are a common form of qualitative data collection in the social sciences, they carry inherent risks and limitations. Although they offer the advantage of capturing diverse perspectives from a relatively homogenous group, it can be challenging to gain true insight into topics that participants may be less open to discussing in a group environment. Moreover, dominant voices in the culture often become the dominant voices in discussions, potentially overshadowing differing views and nuances. To mitigate this risk, facilitators proactively encouraged participation from every respondent, emphasising the absence of right or wrong answers and promoting a wide array of perspectives and insights in the discussion. The research team also opted to conduct separate interviews with head teachers, recognising that this respondent group is less likely to speak freely in an open forum.

Findings

In this section, we examine the current realities in Lebanon and their intersection with the feasibility of implementing the proposed project. This exploration is conducted at the macro, meso, and micro levels. At the macro level, we consider Lebanon's regional dynamics, economic and political environment, and the status of its refugees. At the meso level, we delve into various learning challenges in three distinct communities across the country: the Akkar district in the Akkar Governorate in the northwest of Lebanon bordering Syria; the North Governorate just south of Akkar; and Hasbaya District in the Nabatieh Governorate in southeast Lebanon bordering Israel and Syria. We also analyse how these challenges vary among different respondent groups and age cohorts, emphasising noteworthy findings related to specific religious subgroups and how these variations impact the implementation of the project. Lastly, at the micro level, we assess Seenaryo as an institution, exploring its capacities to effectively deliver the proposed project within the outlined timeline.

In addition, this study incorporates the relevant evaluation criteria developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee, commonly referred to as the OECD DAC criteria. These widely used evaluation criteria assess the merits of development interventions, encompassing investigation into the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability of the interventions. Typically, these criteria are applied to interventions during or after implementation. However, as part of this study, we have explored the expected relevance, coherence, impact, and sustainability of the proposed project.

https://www.oecd.org/dac/applying-evaluation-criteria-thoughtfully

The Macro Level: Regional and National Dynamics

Regional Dynamics

Lebanon is deeply influenced by complex regional dynamics that mould its political, economic, and security landscape. The country remains entangled in the longstanding rivalry between Western/US proxies, including Saudi Arabia, and anti-Western/US forces backed primarily by Iran. This rivalry reflects the impact of US and Western interests in the Arab world, and secondarily, the broader Sunni-Shia divide in the region.

The repercussions of the rivalry became starkly apparent following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, triggering the 'Cedar Revolution' that saw the appearance of two opposing coalitions – the March 8 and the March 14 alliances. These coalitions were largely defined by either a pro-Syria stance, recognising Syria's support in ending the Lebanese civil war and supporting Lebanese resistance to the Israeli occupation, or an anti-Syria stance, advocating complete sovereignty from Syria and more open to Western alliances.

The March 8 alliance comprised various nationalist political parties and organisations, including Hezbollah, a powerful Shia political and military organisation that holds a prominent role in Lebanese politics. The March 14 alliance was led by the assassinated prime minister's son, uniting a group of sectarian and secular organisations with disparate political agendas but shared opposition to Syria.[1]

The 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah provided regional actors with an opportunity to assert their leadership. Predominantly Sunni Saudi Arabia, blaming Hezbollah for triggering the war, pledged significant reconstruction aid to Lebanon, aiming to balance Iranian influence. In contrast, Shia Tehran sought to capitalise on Hezbollah's popularity and bolster it in order to challenge Saudi leadership, reduce Western support for the March 14 Alliance, and raise its own profile as a Levantine superpower.

In the years that ensued, Saudi Arabia and Iran have maintained an ongoing stalemate in Lebanon characterised by support for specific local factions and broader regional partnerships. Their proxy war reverberates across the region with long-term violent consequences in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen[2]

This rivalry and its global implications have once again come to the forefront in the current Israeli hostilities targeting the Gaza Strip. Hamas and Islamic Jihad, controlling Gaza, have significant ties to Hezbollah in Lebanon, enabling them to counterattack Israel from the north. This raises concerns that Iran may support its allies and escalate the conflict, expanding its scope to a full-scale regional war. To counter this possibility, the US and Western allies have worked through Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the latter of which had been moving towards a normalisation agreement with Israel before this outbreak, to mitigate the violence and constrain its escalation.

Economic and Political Environment of Lebanon

The regional dynamics described are further complicated by fragmentation within Lebanon's political landscape, characterised by a confessional system that allocates key positions based on religious affiliations: the President must be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, the Speaker of the Parliament a Shi'a Muslim, and the Deputy Prime Minister and the Deputy Speaker of Parliament Eastern Orthodox. Although this system is intended to balance power among the country's diverse religious communities, it often leads to polarisation and a political scene marked by division, with numerous parties representing different religious and ideological groups. Consequently, the country is plagued by periods of political instability, recurrent challenges in forming governments, and delays in implementation of essential reforms, all contributing to the country's deep economic crisis.[3]

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[1] Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy, March 2009, pp. 77-92 (16 pages). https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg840srf.10
[2] https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/lebanon-and-the-start-of-iran-and-saudi-arabias-proxy-war
[3] https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/overview

The economic and financial turmoil, which began in October 2019, was further exacerbated by the dual shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and the catastrophic explosion at the Port of Beirut in August 2020, marking one of the most devastating periods in modern Lebanese history. The severity of the situation was underscored by the Spring 2021 Lebanon Economic Monitor, ranking Lebanon's economic and financial crisis among the most dire globally since the mid-nineteenth century.[4]

Per capita gross domestic product witnessed a staggering decline of 36.5% between 2019 and 2021. The decline in average income, coupled with triple-digit inflation and severe currency depreciation, has disproportionately and severely impacted the poor and the middle class. Unemployment has surged from 11.4% in 2018-19 to 29.6% in 2022, and over of half the population is in danger of falling below the poverty line.[5] In July 2022, the World Bank reclassified Lebanon from upper-middle income to lower-middle income status, a profound shift typically associated with conflicts or wars.[6]

The country's depleting foreign exchange reserves have resulted in severe shortages of fuel, leading to more than eight rolling blackouts. The national electric grid now provides only one to two hours of public electricity supply per day. Fuel scarcities have also hindered access to healthcare and clean water, while essential sectors such as food supply, sanitation and sewage management, transportation, and telecom face severe disruptions. Compounded by weak public financial management, large macroeconomic imbalances, and deteriorating social indicators, Lebanon faces a complex and challenging path to recovery.

Refugees

Lebanon's role as the host of the largest number of refugees per capita worldwide[7] presents additional challenges. According to UNHCR, Lebanon hosts approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees and 13,715 refugees of other nationalities, including from Iraq, Sudan, and Ethiopia.[8] Lebanon is also home to 12 recognised Palestinian refugee camps, estimated by UNRWA to house between 200,000 and 250,000 Palestinian refugees. About 210,000 Palestinian refugees reside in Lebanon, with 30,000 of them experiencing displacement for a second time due to the civil war in Syria.[9]

The majority of refugees are grappling with increasingly difficult financial challenges, with 9 out of 10 households living in extreme poverty.[10] The deteriorating economic situation in Lebanon, impacting both Lebanese citizens and refugees, has sparked competition between host and refugee communities for the dwindling economic resources. Consequently, tensions have escalated, accompanied by a rise in anti-refugee public opinion and rhetoric.

The simultaneous crises of economic collapse, political instability, and the COVID-19 pandemic, set against the backdrop of overstretched public services since the onset of the Syrian war, have left Syrian and Palestinian refugees, along with the Lebanese host community, vulnerable. Eighty-two percent of all of Lebanon's inhabitants live in poverty, a number that is exacerbated among refugee populations, where over 90% of Syrian refugee families now live in extreme poverty. Additionally, 80% of Palestinian refugees live below the poverty line, despite the cash assistance provided by UNRWA. Without this assistance, that number would increase to 93%. The impact on child rights is dire, with a doubling of child labour, an increase in early marriage, and a decrease in school enrolment and teaching quality as oversubscribed and underfunded schools struggle to cope.

[4] https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/394741622469174252/pdf/Lebanon-Economic-Monitor-Lebanon-Sinking-to-the-Top-3.pdf
[5] https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/overview
[6] Ibid
[7] https://www.unhcr.org/countries/lebanon
[8] bid
[9] Palestinian Program. (n.d.). UNICEF Lebanon. https://www.unicef.org/lebanon/palestinian-programme-0.
[10] Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR). (n.d.). UNHCR Lebanon. https://www.unhcr.org/lb/14025-nine-out-of-ten-syrian-refugee-families-in-lebanon-are-now-living-in-extreme-poverty-un-study-says.html.

The Meso Level: Learning Challenges in Governorates and Groups within Lebanon
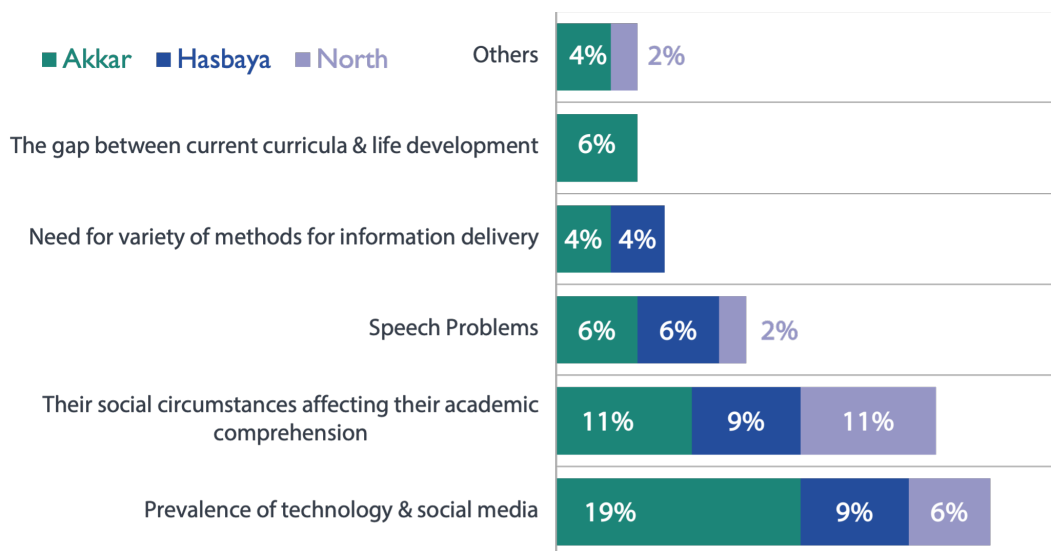
Young Lebanese learners face substantial learning challenges, many of which stem from or are closely linked to the contextual challenges described above. To have a meaningful impact, an educational program implemented in Lebanon must navigate this intricate landscape effectively. It should also be capable of addressing the multifaceted contextual challenges that are deeply rooted and exist at a macro level.

Learning Challenges and their Effect on Young Learners

When discussing the primary challenges that impact the learning ability of Lebanese students between the ages of 3 and 8, 65% of educational staff (teachers and head teachers) described two main difficulties: the 'prevalence of technology and social media' and the 'effect of social circumstances affecting the students' academic comprehension'.

As illustrated in Figure 6, the relative weight for each challenge varied according to the governorate. For instance, 'the effect of social circumstances affecting students' academic comprehension' carried equal weight in Akkar and the North. However, when considering the 'prevalence of technology and social media', it becomes evident that this is a more significant challenge in Akkar compared to the North and Hasbaya.

Figure 6: The most significant learning challenge by governorate

Legend: ■ Akkar ■ Hasbaya ■ North

| Challenge	Akkar	Hasbaya	North
Others	4%		2%
The gap between current curricula & life development	6%		
Need for variety of methods for information delivery	4%	4%	
Speech Problems	6%	6%	2%
Their social circumstances affecting their academic comprehension	11%	9%	11%
Prevalence of technology & social media	19%	9%	6%

In addition to the variances by location, the data also indicated that learning challenges differ amongst different age cohorts as illustrated in Figure 7. While the prevalence of technology and social media had a similar effect regardless of age group, the challenges associated with 'social circumstances' affected 6- to 8-year-old students more than 3- to 5-year-olds, and 'speech problems' posed a significantly bigger challenge in the younger age groups.

Figure 7: The most significant learning challenges by students' age group
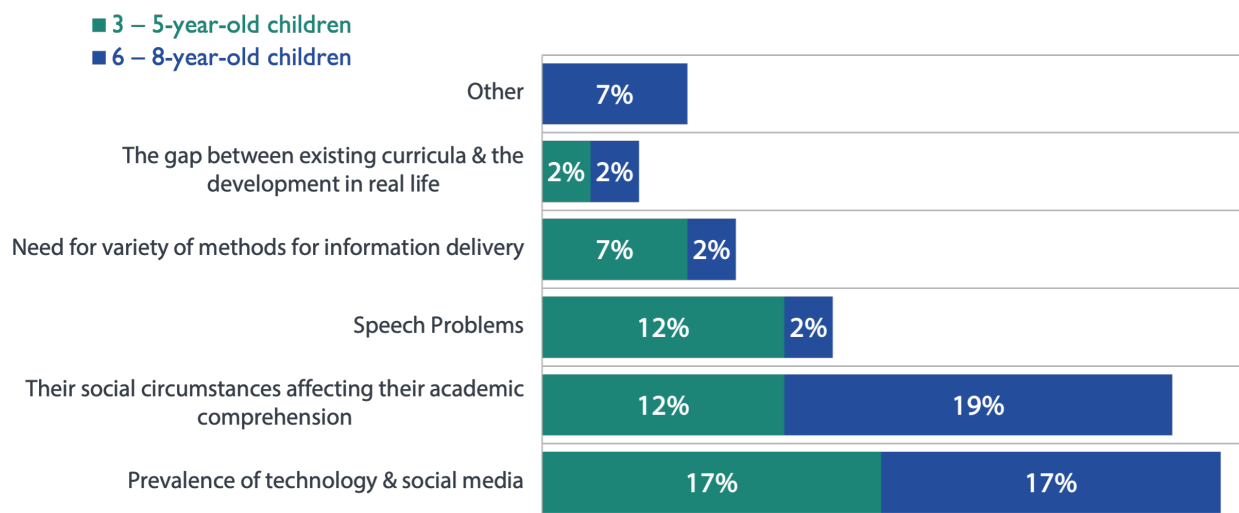

The data also revealed variations in learning challenges based on the religious identity of the school (see Figure 8). However, it is crucial to note that a significant portion of Muslim schools (10 out of 12) in the sample is concentrated in Akkar governorate, while a majority of Christian schools (8 out of 10) are situated in the North governorate. Consequently, there is insufficient evidence to ascertain a causal relationship between learning challenges and the governorate and/or school religion. Nevertheless, the learning challenges identified in Muslim schools, primarily in Akkar, included 'speech problems' and 'the need for a variety of methods for delivering information'. In contrast, the challenge more pronounced in Christian schools, primarily in the North, was that 'their social circumstances affect academic comprehension'.

Figure 8: The most significant learning challenges by religious identity of the school
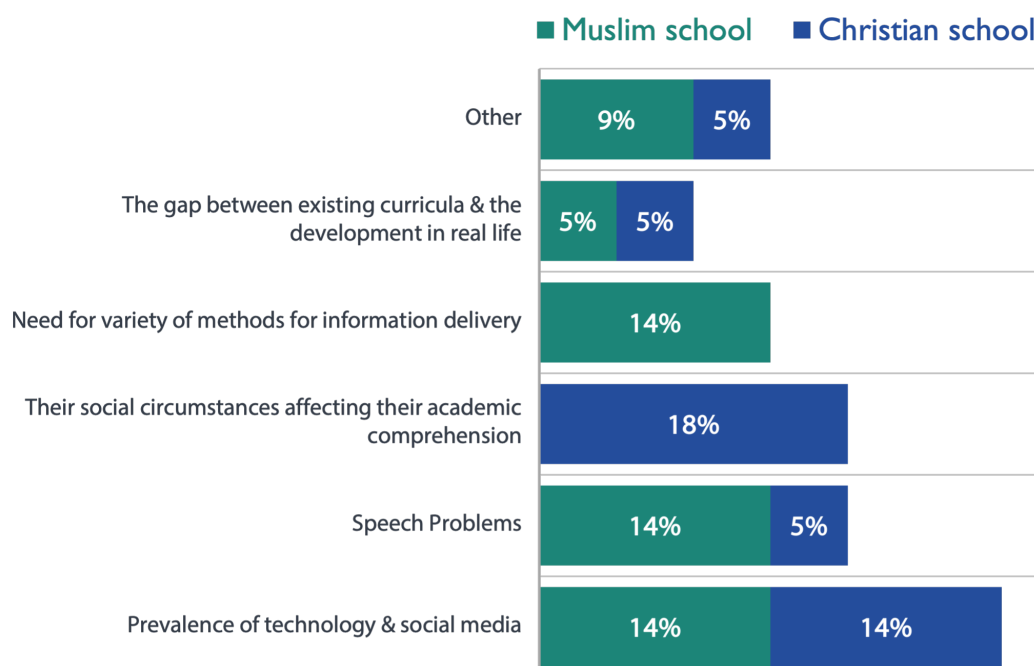
In addition, 91% of the teaching staff believed that the learning challenges young students face had a spillover effect on various aspects of their development, as illustrated in Figure 9. Fifty-eight percent asserted that these challenges negatively impact their students' behaviour (most prominent in 6–8-year-olds), almost 49% perceived a negative influence on their students' communication and social skills (most prominent in 3–5-year-olds), and 44% expressed concerns about the detrimental effect on their students' ability to grasp new information.

Figure 9: How do learning challenges affect the students' learning & development?
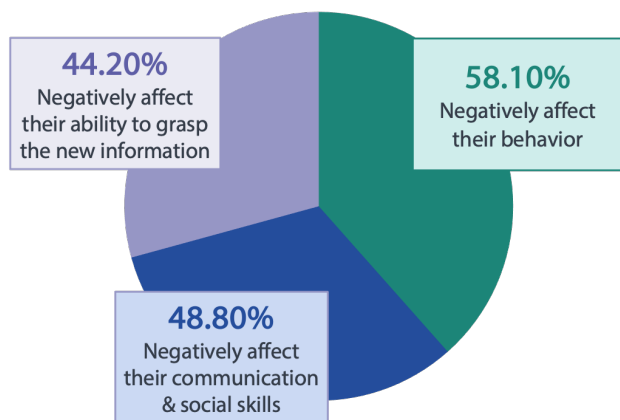
Focus group teachers and head teachers further explained that social media primarily distracts young learners and makes it difficult for them to focus on the tasks at hand. Teachers described that social media, internet, and screen exposure has made it difficult to get children interested in classroom activities without screens. The end result is that children have become overstimulated by the frequent screen noise and find the classroom activities 'silly or boring' in comparison. One teacher noted, 'whenever I use a video in class, children pay attention, but they don't focus when we use a book or a worksheet'. Simultaneously, the lack of strong internet infrastructure in the country and within the school system presents an additional learning challenge in that it prevents swift and easy access to downloadable educational materials and learning aids.

Head teachers detailed the multitude of social challenges with a spillover effect on students' capacity to learn. Many highlighted the 'economic crisis in Lebanon' resulting in the 'closure of schools due to the unstable situation'. Additionally, they noted issues within family homes and interpersonal relationships, including 'psychological instability', 'domestic violence', and 'a lack of interest and follow-up from parents'.

Head teachers also expressed concerns regarding the widespread use of social media by both children and parents and noted that parents do not always play a collaborative role in their children's learning but instead 'fully depend on the school' for their children's educational development. Many also pointed to failures within the school systems, including overly lengthy school days that lead to children getting 'tired and bored', as well as a lack of technology and tools for educational purposes. There was also acknowledgment that teaching multiple foreign languages (English and French) is challenging, and that teachers at times lack consideration for the experiences of the student.

Head teachers also concurred that the learning challenges lead to subsequent behavioural and emotional issues. They observed that these challenges 'affect the academic performance of the students' including 'difficulties in knowledge acquisition' causing delays in completing the curriculum. Additionally, the challenges affect students emotionally and psychologically, with some students becoming 'aggressive or isolated'.

Parents overwhelmingly identified the economic situation in the country as the primary catalyst for learning challenges. They characterised these challenges as influencing the availability of both resources and tools within the education space and as having psychological ramifications. Some

parents specifically noted that, due to the economic circumstances, 'psychological issues affect the concentration of kids in class'. Others pointed out that 'skilled and qualified teachers are leaving the country . . . schools are hiring new inexperienced teachers', and that schools now have to contend with 'poor access to electricity and the internet'.

Many highlighted that the teaching curriculum is 'big' and heavy, posing difficulties for students in understanding and enjoying the learning process. Parents also acknowledged the 'excessive use of mobile phones by kids'. They further noticed that these learning challenges have more insidious repercussions, affecting children's ability to focus in class and negatively impacting their capacity to acquire new information.

When asking teachers to identify the most significant learning challenges affecting their students, their responses mirrored sentiments shared by head teachers and parents. They identified the country's financial crisis as a significant factor, as well as familial issues such as 'domestic problems and family separation'. Within the school environment, they mentioned that 'the learning environment is unsafe' and that there is a lack of teaching aids and materials. They also agreed that students are distracted by the overuse of social media, while the negligent IT infrastructure serves as a hindrance for advancing knowledge and learning in the educational space.

Additionally, this respondent group was critical of their profession, their peers, and themselves. They highlighted that teachers 'lack awareness and information', and that traditional learning methods do a disservice to students, especially given the difficulty level of the national curriculum.

Importantly, this study identified distinct variances in response types between two groups of teachers. The first group comprised teachers who had been trained on the Seenaryo Playkit at some point ('trained teachers'), while the second group had never received such training ('non-trained teachers'). Non-trained teachers were much more likely to see learning challenges as a reflection of the students' and parents' internal capacities and willingness to learn. This group emphasised that learning challenges were due to behavioural issues in students, as well as challenges in the home environment. They identified bullying between students as a primary learning challenge, as well as children being disobedient and having 'differences in academic and cognitive abilities'. Moreover, they highlighted numerous issues at home, such as 'parental conflict and problems' and a 'lack of parents' follow-up'. In contrast, trained teachers described learning challenges in a more holistic way, incorporating many national issues as part of the educational problems. They were significantly less likely to blame the learners and parents for the learning challenges. Instead, they focused on the need for better classroom management tools, better ways to motivate children, improved curriculum design, and encouraging parents to focus less on grades.

Additionally, 50% of the respondents working in schools with refugee students believed that refugee students encounter more learning challenges than host community students. Another 15% believed that refugees face the exact same learning challenges as their host community peers, and 15% reported that they face entirely different challenges (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Learning challenges encountered by refugee students

20%
I don't know / I'm not sure

15%
Refugees face the same learning challenges as non-refugee students

15%
Refugees have totally different learning challenges than non-refugee students

50%
Refugees face additional learning challenges
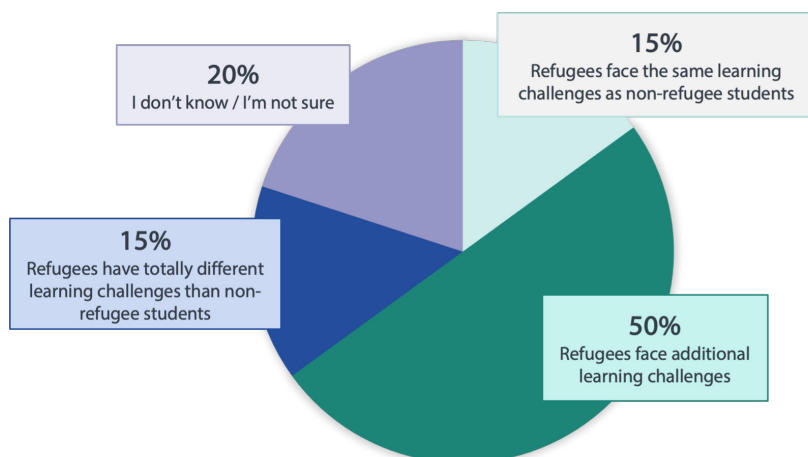
43% of the respondents working in schools inclusive of refugee students stated that the primary learning challenge faced by refugee students is that 'their circumstances negatively affect their ability for academic comprehension', followed by 24% who cited 'the language barrier' as a primary learning challenge unique to refugee students (Figure 11).

Across respondent types, there was unanimous agreement that while male and female learners express learning challenges differently, there is no real difference in the types and degree of learning challenges based on gender.

Figure 11: Learning challenges faced only by refugee students
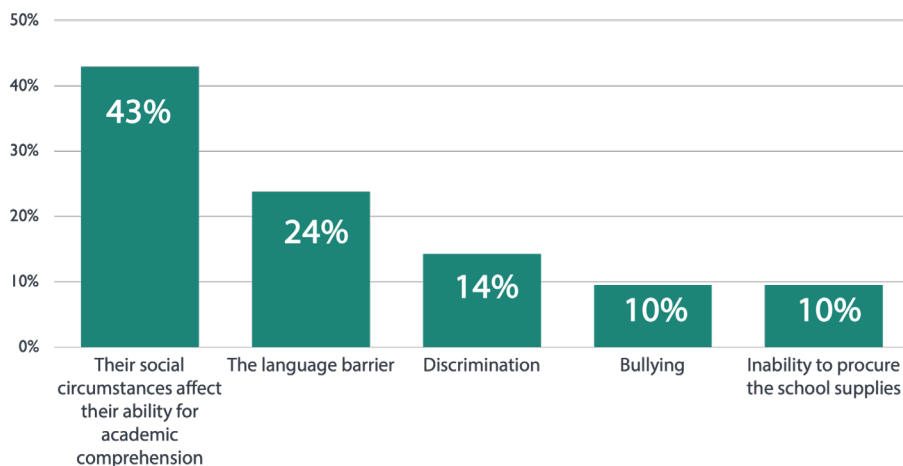
Relevance and Impact of Play-Based Learning

98% of survey respondents had at least heard of play-based learning, and 95% of them believed that play-based learning has a positive effect on the challenges faced by their students and actively integrate these methods in their classes. Additionally, 69% of the respondents familiar with play-based learning said that the parents/caregivers supported play-based learning with their children, while only 2% said that the parents/caregivers rejected it (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Parents/caregivers support of play-based learning methods
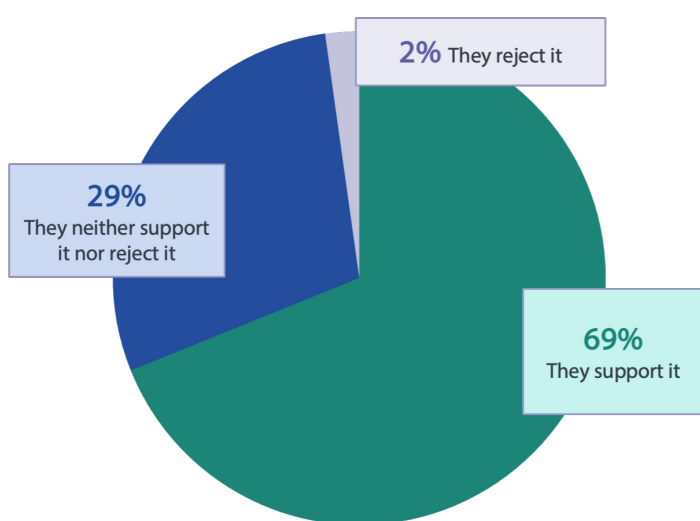
During focus-group sessions, teachers overwhelmingly echoed the survey findings. The majority of non-trained teachers believed that adopting play-based learning has several positive impacts, including encouraging student participation and making students 'enthusiastic about coming

to school'. They also noted positive impacts beyond academic skills, such as building students' personalities, helping children gain self-confidence, encouraging learning, and providing positive reinforcement in class. Some teachers emphasised the importance of using play-based learning to reach lesson objectives and finding purposeful games or activities for children that can complement the curriculum. However, a few teachers mentioned the need for limits, expressing that games cannot be incorporated every day due to the curriculum that needs to be covered.

Trained teachers enthusiastically highlighted numerous successful implementations of play-based learning in their classrooms. They emphasised its efficacy in attracting students' attention, fostering interest in lessons, and encouraging participation, especially among less extroverted learners and those with diverse cognitive and physical abilities. Some teachers noted that 'activities, songs, and games attract students and enhance participation', allowing them to better grasp the lesson they are working on. Many highlighted that lessons become 'more enjoyable and entertaining', reducing the need for persuasion and discipline to focus students. Games help children with various backgrounds grasp the concept, and all students have a turn to participate, with even shy students gaining the courage to join in.

Trained teachers recognised that play-based learning is an effective method for integrating all students into activities and lessons, breaking down barriers between high- and low-performing students. They noted that 'the isolated and shy students also participate in the games', and the play-based learning has 'helped children with physical challenges or special needs' as they found the Playkit activities 'easy to participate in'. Some trained teachers shared the sentiment that play-based learning would be beneficial if used as an integral and mainstreamed part of the educational system. This could be achieved by 'including games in the textbooks and training teachers on it'. In fact, some teachers are already doing this by using 'the Playkit to deliver my lesson and then using the textbook'. Another teacher noted, 'in presenting a French story that needed to be memorised, I applied the Playkit approach and made it easier for me and the students.'

Trained teachers stressed the importance of parental support for the play-based learning . They noted that parents often observe the approach's positive impact on their children through social media pages and WhatsApp groups where teachers document and showcase the process. Some parents call to inquire about the games, learn the methods, and enthusiastically replicate the same activities at home with their children. However, they also recognised that the extent of participation depends on circumstances, as 'some parents may not agree with applying this approach'.

Trained teachers asserted that play-based learning would be 'very successful and essential if all teachers follow the approach' but acknowledged the need for constant training and raising awareness among teachers. They also recognised that implementing play-based learning requires substantial effort, which is sometimes impossible due to existing curriculum constraints and pressure to complete the heavy national curriculum.

Focus group parents also reiterated survey findings. They agreed that 'learning through play is the best way' and expressed encouragement for applying these strategies. Some parents highlighted that play-based learning would make children 'like school more' and teach interpersonal skills like 'learning how to share'. They emphasised the importance of play-based learning for specific groups of learners, including those with special needs and those who learn best through active movement and physical activity. One parent expressed interest in incorporating more play-based learning in their son's classroom because 'my son is addicted to movements and playing. He wants someone to always move with.' Overall, the parents consistently used the word 'happy' to describe their feelings towards integrating play-based learning into the classroom. Statements such as 'I would be very happy because it's better than memorising', 'I would be very happy to see my child coming home happy', and 'I'm happy to see my child happy with his classes' were common. However, some parents did express the idea that while play-based learning is enjoyable, it wasn't clear to them that it led to better learning outcomes. Additionally, they emphasised the importance of ensuring that teachers are capable of conducting these activities and delivering lessons in this way.

Impact of the Seenaryo Playkit Application

All survey respondents who received the Seenaryo Playkit training believed that it has a positive effect on the learning challenges faced by young students: 71% believed it improves learning challenges significantly, and 29% believed it improves challenges slightly. Respondents reported that the Seenaryo Playkit has the highest impact on 'students' cognitive and intellectual skills'.

Figure 13. Effect of the playkit on the learning challenges faced by young students

29%
It slightly improved the challenges

71%
It improved the challenges significantly
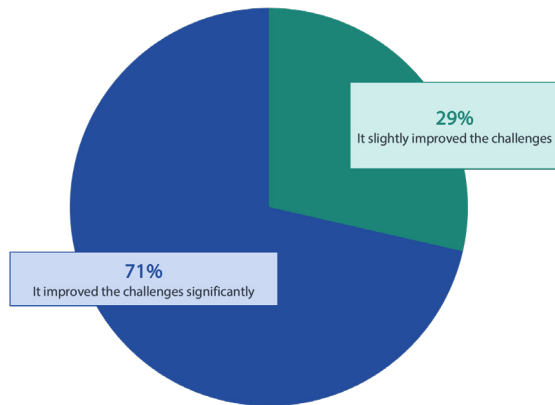
However, 26% of the respondents who received training for the Seenaryo Playkit faced challenges in its usage, with the most notable challenge being 'its need for a fast internet connection'. When asked about the suggested improvements for the Playkit, the majority of the respondents suggested that 'songs be provided on external storage devices'. This is likely in response to the 'internet speed problems' which prevent downloads of the songs in the classroom.

Figure 14. What are the challenges faced in using the playkit?

23%
The games cannot be found unless the search on the Playkit uses the correct spelling for the game's name

77%
Needs a fast internet connection which is NOT always available
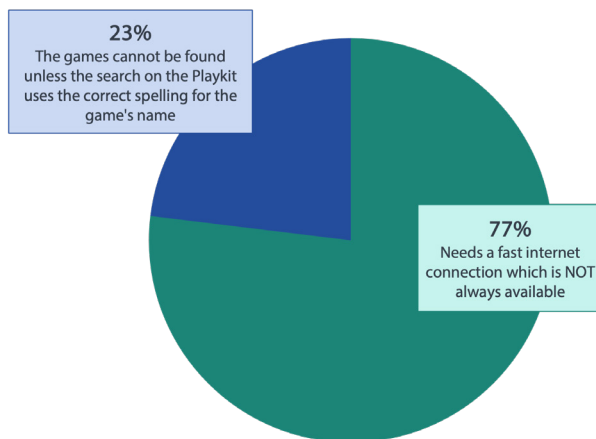
Figure 15. Suggested improvements for the playkit

40.4%	23.4%	8.5%	2.1%
Providing the songs on an external storage device (CD or Flash disk).	Providing instruction cards with the Playkit	Providing more explanatory instructions for the games	Providing songs in formal Arabic
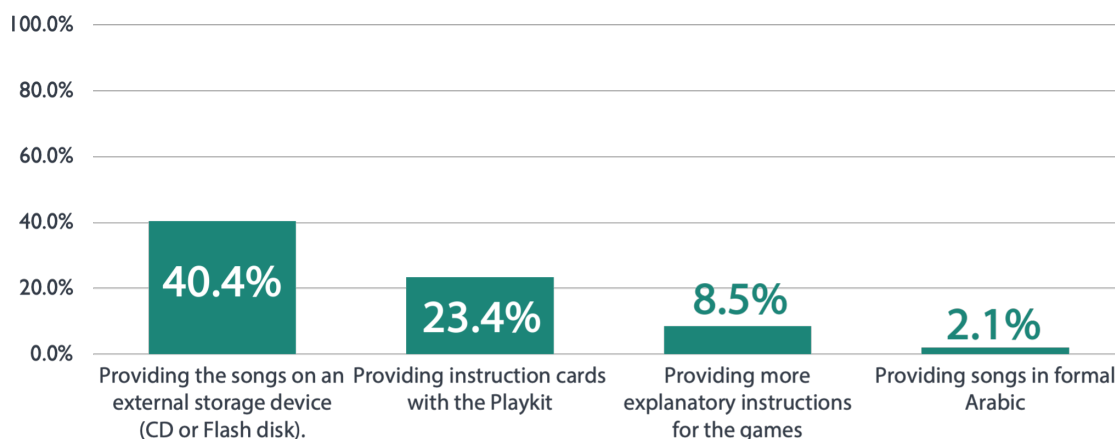
Focus group trained teachers, who overwhelmingly found the Seenaryo Playkit application to be useful, also agreed that internet capacity created a significant limitation to its usability. Some teachers noted difficulties in using the application, including that they were 'not able to play songs due to internet outage'. Other feedback included a limited number of games for large classroom sizes and challenges in the search function within the application. Additionally, teachers noted that the application was limited in its capacity to address the different language challenges in Lebanon. They observed that the 'Playkit has more songs in the Lebanese dialect', rather than formal Arabic, and also explained that due to the importance of foreign language learning in Lebanon, especially French, there was a need to increase activities that would support French learning.

The Micro Level: Seenaryo's Capacities as a Provider of Play-Based Learning in Lebanon

Seenaryo has implemented various iterations of the Playkit in Lebanon since 2017. Over the years, the Playkit has evolved from a hard copy format to a sophisticated online application with search functions and modification capabilities for integration into the national curriculum.

Internal evaluations conducted by Seenaryo indicate that between 2017 and 2022, the Playkit was distributed to over 2,500 teachers, impacting over 65,000 children aged 3 to 8. The evaluations revealed a mindset shift among teachers introduced to the Playkit, with a 26% increase in those disagreeing that children learn best behind a desk. Over 95% of teachers felt that Playkit resources improved teaching and classroom management practices. This is particularly important given the learning challenges and their impact on the social and behavioural issues described earlier in this study. Additionally, the evaluation targeted head teachers, who also provided very positive feedback about the value of play-based teaching activities.

Given Seenaryo's demonstrated success in implementing the Playkit in Lebanon, there is a strong basis to believe that the current project, which will include significant expansions, modifications, and restructuring of the Playkit, will be executed effectively and efficiently. During our study, we observed several noteworthy factors that highlight the organisation's capacity as a provider of play-based learning.

First, Seenaryo adeptly integrates international and local expertise. Local staff members exhibit a sincere commitment to the Playkit application and the broader concept of play-based learning. Their genuine ownership of the Playkit was evident during the orientation workshop, where their thoughtful feedback aimed to ensure that data collection accurately captures the intricacies and challenges of implementing play-based learning in Lebanon.

Concurrently, many staff members recognise the value of collaborating with an organisation with both local, regional, and international offices and reach, capable of introducing non-traditional educational methodologies in a culturally sensitive and collaborative manner within the local and regional context. Interviews with Seenaryo's local project management team underscored their nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in working as part of an international NGO in a local context. They emphasised the importance of being locally attuned when adapting games and songs to align with community needs and values. They also acknowledged the challenges related to access in the educational space, particularly concerning the perception that Western organisations may impose foreign cultural values.

Furthermore, Seenaryo operates with a flexible organisational style that enables swift adaptation to change. This adaptability extends to changes in a volatile political climate and shifts in the educational landscape, as well as simpler scheduling, venue, and logistical challenges. Seenaryo's ability to operate as a 'lightweight' organisation, unburdened by the often cumbersome workflow protocols embedded in larger international NGOs, allows it to make necessary modifications quickly to ensure continuous progress despite the external circumstances.

However, Seenaryo faces challenges in mainstreaming its play-based learning programs within the Lebanese education system. Issues related to access with the Ministry of Education present obstacles to widespread adoption. Overcoming these challenges will require a collaborative effort between Seenaryo and government bodies to create pathways for the integration of innovative education approaches into the broader curriculum. Our interview with Dr. Garene Kaloustian, a social and emotional learning specialist with a PhD in child development (who is currently contracted by Seenaryo under a different grant and who might continue working with Seenaryo under this planned project) highlighted that the Ministry of Education is open to making modifications and trying new techniques to enhance learning. While it may be difficult to reach the right people to implement such a change, there is an interest within government entities to move towards non-traditional methods of learning that can evidence their success, especially in comparison to more traditional methods of learning.

Building a Teacher Community of Practice

In addition to restructuring and enhancing the Playkit application, the current project introduces a new community of practice for teachers to enhance professional development. This community aims to cultivate a sense of belonging among teachers, fostering a commitment to the long-term transformation of classrooms into participatory and child-centred environments. The Teacher Community of Practice establishes a learning and development hub through newsletters, Facebook groups, in-app chat functions, and live events, providing a dedicated space for teachers to share experiences, engage in peer learning, troubleshoot, and stay connected.

The feasibility of creating a Teacher Community of Practice is evident through teachers' demonstrated openness to collaborative learning and their expressed need for mutual support, along with a desire for a platform to share experiences. Focus group teachers overwhelmingly emphasised the need to meet their peers, recognising the value of collective knowledge-sharing. Statements such as 'teachers who underwent the training and applied the program need to meet each other to share their experience' and 'I like to meet other teachers to keep myself updated' underscored the eagerness among educators to understand how different teachers are using the Playkit and to learn from each other's successes and challenges. In interviews with local staff, it also became apparent that teachers would benefit from the social exchanges embedded in this kind of community of practice. Local staff emphasised the necessity of shifting away from isolated trainings and individualistic approaches at the individual school level. They advocated for a broader, more collective process that harnesses the intelligence of a group working together towards a shared goal.

Conducting Child-Centred Participatory Evaluations

Seenaryo's current Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) tools comprise classroom observation forms, teacher surveys, teacher focus group guides, head teacher interview guides, and an adapted IDELA (International Development and Early Learning Assessment) for children's interviews, initially developed by Save The Children and tailored for the Playkit. The classroom observation tool, for example, comprehensively assesses various aspects of the methodology, including children's language skills, teacher storytelling, integration of gross and fine motor activities, the proportion of active participation, duration of sitting vs. active engagement, teacher-student interaction dynamics, and the utilisation of behaviour correction methods.

For this new project, the MEAL tools will be revised, with a particular focus on the development of a participatory child evaluation plan. This plan would establish a methodology that actively engages children in the assessment and evaluation processes associated with play-based learning in general and the Seenaryo Playkit application more specifically. Through this participatory approach, children are recognised as stakeholders possessing valuable perspectives and insights into their own learning experiences and become active contributors to their education in an age-appropriate manner.

Survey respondents already familiar with play-based learning were asked to contemplate ways to develop and implement such a participatory child evaluation protocol. The responses highlighted the significant challenges with this exercise: 73% believed that the best way to evaluate or measure the effectiveness of play-based learning by actively engaging the children themselves is to conduct a form of pre- and post-test. This test would assess the amount of information retained from lessons learned through play-based learning compared to that from traditional lessons. Another 22% believed that the success of the methodology could be measured by assessing how well the children remember the rules of the games they played without prompting from the teacher, and the remaining 5% suggested evaluating efficacy using test scores.

Figure 16. Ways to measure the effect of play-based learning on children's education
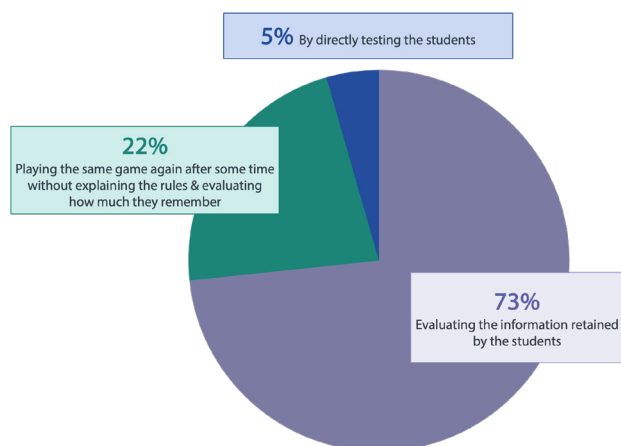
In focus group discussions with both trained and non-trained teachers, the question of developing a participatory child evaluation plan was extensively deliberated. While a very small minority contended that evaluating the learning methodology or the Playkit directly from children might not be feasible, an overwhelming majority agreed that it is indeed possible to assess the effects of play-based learning on children by engaging with them directly. Some teachers noted that the plan should be based on 'talking to students in class interactions' and that 'the child can tell us directly'. However, the vast majority believed that the evaluation should include long-term observation of in-class behaviour as well as its integration into their home life and in their interactions with peers.

Teachers expressed the belief that the effectiveness of the methodology could be evaluated by observing students' levels of participation in the classroom and 'their ability to acquire new skills that increase their self-confidence'. Many suggested that successful implementation could be gauged by the degree of attentiveness in class and the way students actively listen. They also emphasised that the evaluation plan should encompass demonstrated 'enhanced communication skills' and a more open expression of opinions. Teachers considered the most accurate representation of the methodology's success to be its impact on the integration of increased emotional and behavioural skills into everyday interactions outside the classroom. Additionally, they proposed that one way to assess change is to observe if 'the child goes home and repeats the lesson on his own' and if positive changes in dealing with peer interactions are noticeable.

While there is limited literature on methods and processes for participatory child evaluations, a wealth of existing research focuses on participatory child research. Primarily developed for international development projects, this research builds on the work of sociologist Roger Hart, who found that meaningful child and youth participation in educational and training programs has been documented to yield numerous positive outcomes. Children and youth involved in the planning or design of programs are more likely to be engaged and committed. Their active participation often brings forth innovative ideas and introduces a fresh and enthusiastic perspective into the planning process.

Perhaps most importantly, increased child and youth participation yields benefits for the young people themselves. When invited to participate as co-producers of their own educational/training programs, it can enhance their sense of confidence and self-esteem, provide a greater sense of purpose, and foster stronger relationships between them and the adults leading the programs. For refugee youth, participation may serve as a particularly vital tool, representing their only sense of personal agency in a situation where they have little control. Participation may also be an avenue for building trust between refugee youth, who may be suspicious or fearful of authority, and adults. In the case of refugee youth in host communities, greater levels of participation may help counteract negative perceptions that host community members might hold about refugees.

Our interview with Dr. Garene Kaloustian, along with insights from external literature, indicated that engaging children aged 3 to 5 in participatory evaluations is possible and desirable, but requires a developmentally sensitive approach. Evaluators should employ creative and age-appropriate methodologies that respect the limited verbal and cognitive abilities of young learners. Activities such as drawing, storytelling, and play-based interactions become essential tools for eliciting their thoughts and experiences, and evaluations should be capable of capturing non-verbal cues, facial expressions, and gestures as part of the holistic picture. As children progress to ages 6 to 8, their cognitive and verbal skills develop further. Participatory evaluations for this age group can include more structured discussions and activities that encourage expression through words. Interactive games, group discussions, and visual aids can also be used as effective tools to facilitate communication. For this age group, facilitators should focus on creating a supportive and non-judgmental environment to allow young learners to actively and openly share their thoughts and ideas.

Dr. Kaloustian highlighted that while participatory child evaluations are absolutely possible, facilitators need to be capable of developing child-friendly and flexible approaches that respect the attention spans and varying energy levels of young learners. Facilitators will need to focus on creating a comfortable and child-friendly environment for eliciting genuine responses and fostering a positive experience. They should be prepared to adapt activities on the spot, ensuring that the process remains engaging and enjoyable.

It is also important to note the ethical considerations of conducting participatory evaluations with young children. Informed consent and assent must include both the child and their guardians. Evaluators must prioritise the well-being of the child participants and be mindful of potential emotional reactions during and after the evaluation.

Discussion and Recommendations

This section distils key findings of this report and explores the degree to which the project's overall objective – to ensure that Lebanese children of all learning styles and abilities are more engaged in their learning and have developed critical life skills in the five developmental areas (social, emotional, physical, cognitive, language) – is feasible within the Lebanese context. The findings are discussed in light of the four main research questions highlighted below. Finally, this section provides recommendations to maximise the impact, effectiveness, and sustainability of the project's outcomes in accordance with OECD DAC evaluation guidelines, including adjustments to the project evaluation metrics.

How do the planned key components or activities contribute to achieving the stated objectives?

This project has outlined four key activities and components to achieve its stated objective. These include upgrading the Playkit application to make it a fully functional, scalable, and versatile one-stop shop of diverse teaching materials for all early years teachers in Lebanon; training 15 cohorts of 22 teachers of 3- to 8-year-olds across Lebanon to equip them with teaching strategies for creating

child-centred, participatory classrooms and engaging children in participatory evaluation sessions before and after their teachers' training; developing a Teacher Community of Practice; and conducting a multi-pronged advocacy campaign to ensure that stakeholders, including the Lebanese Ministry of Education, are committed to play-based learning and to incorporating Seenaryo's tools.

The findings from this study suggest that macro-level regional and national dynamics play a significant role in Lebanon's educational landscape. The country is mired in political instability, financial crisis, and the aftermath of the Beirut explosion in August 2020, all of which have had devastating effects on young Lebanese learners. Teachers and parents both acknowledge that these challenges correlate with increased learning difficulties, negatively impacting core aspects of young people's development – especially refugee students – including behavioural issues, communication and social skills, and ability to grasp information.

In addition, the national curriculum, widely utilised in schools across the country, is characterised by a daunting heaviness. Coupled with traditional 'desk-based and rote memorisation' learning methods, it leaves young learners with limited opportunities to develop the social and emotional life skills needed to navigate the country's difficult realities. However, the majority of teachers, both trained and non-trained, believe that the adoption of play-based learning can significantly benefit students. This positive impact includes fostering enthusiasm for coming to school, encouraging participatory learning in classrooms, and increasing self-esteem and confidence. Similarly, parents agree that play-based learning offers a valuable alternative to traditional teaching methods and is more likely to support strong social skills and a love for learning.

Are the project objectives clearly defined, measurable, and attainable? How will the project's success be measured and evaluated?

The project's objectives and sub-objectives are clearly defined in the project's concept note and accurately reflected in the logical framework developed to evaluate and assess the project's progress towards its stated objectives. These are:

Sub-objective 1: Teachers have increased their capacity to understand and implement participatory, play-based classroom activities and positive classroom management, creating an inclusive learning environment.

Sub-objective 2: Regardless of their ability, children actively participate in and enjoy their learning experience, demonstrating improved life skills in the five developmental areas (social, emotional, physical, cognitive, language).

Sub-objective 3: Teachers, supported by head teachers, are inspired to actively engage with other teachers and develop a long-term commitment to delivering, advocating for, and furthering their capabilities in play-based teaching.

Sub-objective 4: Seenaryo's capacity to advocate for child-centred, play-based teaching practices with Early Childhood Education stakeholders including Ministry of Education and major education NGOs is built.

Clear baseline values and attainable endline targets are attached to each sub-objective, providing clarity to and simplifying the evaluation process. However, to enhance the project's potential for sustainability beyond the funding cycle, we recommend that Seenaryo leverage its long-term presence in the country, along with its local network and expertise, to establish impactful partnerships with other education providers and education clusters on the ground. The goal is to create a network of education providers well-versed in and enthusiastic about play-based learning and the Playkit.

Additionally, we recognise that sub-objective four may be difficult to achieve, although it is clear that engaging external stakeholders, especially the Ministry of Education, is vital. While Seenaryo is

expected to have the capacity to implement a larger-scale public relations and social media campaign advocating for play-based learning and the Playkit application, assuming it is granted the necessary resources, it remains uncertain whether such a campaign would convince the Ministry of Education within Lebanon to endorse and support play-based learning in a more mainstream fashion.

Another recommendation, related to sub-objective three, is to establish ongoing methods for informal interactive sessions, potentially through the application itself, but also in other forums where teachers can regularly engage and interact with each other. Additionally, we recommend that teachers participate in off-site, in-person events to strengthen the community of practice. This approach aims to go beyond tokenistic involvement, allowing for meaningful networks and partnerships to enhance the community. We further recommend allocating resources to ensure that in-person events can be conducted during the academic year.

Regarding participatory child evaluations, our research supports the idea that these types of evaluations are beneficial and have a long-term positive impact both on the young participants and on the educational programs themselves. However, conducting such evaluations requires specific capacities within the facilitator group. We recommend allocating resources to ensure that facilitators receive regular training in delivering child participatory evaluations for the two different age groups investigated in the study: 3- to 5-year-olds and 6- to 8-year-olds.

What are the potential constraints or limitations that could impact the feasibility of the project? What potential concerns and feedback from stakeholders should be considered in the project?

The project is significantly limited by nationwide restrictions on internet capacity. Trained teachers overwhelmingly highlighted that their primary critique of the Playkit application was their inability to access it due to insufficient internet in their classrooms. Additionally, there is not enough internet capacity to download educational materials to laptops or other devices in advance of the sessions. This is a core and fundamental concern that needs to be addressed under this project.

The lack of a memorandum of understanding with the Lebanese Ministry of Education is also a significant constraint, as it relegates access to schools and head teachers based on personal networks and connections. A more robust and formalised recognition of the methodology would allow the project to have a far greater impact across the country, in terms of schools, teachers, and students reached.

What are the potential risks and uncertainties associated with the project's objectives and strategies and how should they be mitigated? What are the alternative components or strategies that should be considered to enhance the project's feasibility and effectiveness?

A number of potential risks and uncertainties could impact the feasibility of the project's objectives. Most significantly, considering the current political reality, the active hostilities on the country's southern border with Israel and the recent related airstrike in Beirut have the potential to escalate into a more widespread war, leading to school closures and other disruptions. An increase in hostilities would inevitably impact the country's financial capacities, leading to a deprioritisation of education in favour of defence spending, further burdening an already overstretched system.

However, it's important to note that Seenaryo has been active in the country since 2015 and has successfully navigated shifts and pivots to accommodate various unexpected political and social changes. This included providing remote support to teachers and parents during the COVID-19 pandemic and working flexibly with individual schools for this study to collect data when possible and to shift geographies when needed. Thus, Seenaryo has demonstrated its ability to make adjustments to continue the progress of the work while remaining attuned and relevant to the current context.

Alternative strategies that could be considered include building on the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic to continue facilitating play-based learning and the Playkit application remotely. This would be a relevant shift should political turmoil render in-person meetings difficult. Additionally, Seenaryo could explore technologies that allow the use of mobile applications offline or revisit the utilisation of USB flash drives to provide an alternative means for teachers who struggle to access the application and download resources due to internet constraints.

Key recommendations from this study:

- Provide frequent interactive or remote interaction opportunities for the Teacher Community of Practice, but supplement this with more substantial in-person offline meetings.

- Invest in the capacities of the existing facilitators to conduct participatory child evaluations by allocating funds towards ongoing training with qualified experts.

- Continue and expand the use of local expertise in the development of the Playkit application to ensure that Lebanese teachers have relevant and context-appropriate learning materials within the application, considering the variance in languages and secular/religious identities of Lebanese schools.

- Invest in technologies that would allow access to the application even when the user is offline.

- Revisit the possibility of utilising USB flash drives so that teachers who are unable to access the application and download the resources have an alternative means to do so.

- Capitalise on the existing appetite for play-based learning in Lebanon to generate evidence and advocate for products through which the Lebanese Ministry of Education could be encouraged to mainstream this methodology in the education system.

- Work to develop formal agreements with the Ministry of Education to further enhance the project's impact, through relationships with other education providers and learning institutions that have existing ministry relationships.

- Connect with other non-traditional education service providers (such as SPARK Lebanon and Right to Play) to harness collective efforts and create long-term sustainable change in the country's educational landscape.