

VALIDITY, ACCOUNTANILITY AND FAIRNESS OF OFFICIAL EXAMS  
IN LEBANON: REFLECTIONS OF GRADES 9 AND 12 PUBLIC SCHOOL  
STUDENTS

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Master of Arts

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by  
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**List of Acronyms:**

ARG: Assessment Reform Group

DOPS: Departement d'Orientation Pedagogique et Scolaire-Orientation and  
Counselling Department

GSC: General Secondary Certificate

MEHE: The Ministry of Education and Higher Education

MOET: Ministry of Education and Training

MSC: Middle School Certificate

OECD: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment



### **Abstract**

My research examines the learners' attitudes towards the validity, accountability, and fairness of the official examinations and the extent to which they influence the quality of learning in public schools in Lebanon. I chose learners of Grades 9 and 12 Humanities and Life Sciences Sections who were sitting the official examinations during 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 in a public high school in West Bekaa. They were 122 participants and data were collected from the learners through essay writing, open-ended-question survey, Diamond Ranking from Akar (2009), and open discussions. I also compared the attitudes of 14 students who took the Brevet exam in 2015-2016 and are preparing for the Terminale exam in 2018-2019. Findings demonstrated that students have changed attitudes towards the official exams between grades 9 and 12. Students also reflected that teachers use prescriptive pedagogy that instructs students to practice rote learning and memorization to accumulate grades and succeed at the official examinations with a distinction. Learning does not matter; succeeding at the Brevet or Terminale does. Classroom practices and learning approaches reflected threats to validity, accountability and fairness of the official exams. It is suggested that a change in the curriculum should be held alongside a change in the behavior where learning is taken by different players as lifelong instead of mere competition, memorization and accumulation of points.



## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Education can lie at the root of development and/or conflict in any society (Akar, 2012). Educational programs and curricular materials can be used to enhance national identity, promote social cohesion and sustain democracy (Steiner-Khamsi, Torney-Purta, and Schwille, 2002; Steutel and Spiecker, 2000 cited in Akar, 2014). It can build active citizenship when education is “a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (Dewey, 1982, p. 541). Education also has a definite role in building social cohesion in a diverse society (Kymlicka, 2011). The Lebanese education system is in line with this vision. The Taef Agreement in 1989 ended the war and urged a reform in the educational policy: a new curriculum “that strengthens national belonging, fusion, spiritual and cultural openness” alongside a unified history and civics textbooks for both the private and public sectors (Government of Lebanon, 1989).

In education, assessment is a key component because it determines whether or not the goals and standards of the process have been met. The results of assessment can improve students’ learning and teachers’ teaching. Formative and summative assessment can also affect decisions about grades, placement, advancement, instruction and curricula. Chapman and Snyder (2000) argue that standardized tests, an example of summative assessment and my topic in this study, allow the “fairest” comparison of large groups (p.

457). Policymakers can assess the effectiveness of a program instruction based on the scoring of test takers.

However, the practices of high-stakes standardized testing reveal some challenges that hinder its purposes to serve the best of the young citizens: They test-teach for better success rates. Also, Vlaardingerbroek, Shehab and Alameh (2011) found that open-cheating in the Lebanese Brevet and Baccalaureat external examinations is a “syndrome” actively encouraged by the institutional culture and supported by invigilators, supervisors, and parents (p. 298).

In this thesis, I will examine the extent to which high-stakes exams influence the quality of learning in public schools in Lebanon. I will review evidence-informed literature on the forms and purposes of assessment and, more specifically, standardized testing. I will focus on three dimensions of standardized assessment: validity-“whether it actually measures what it claims to measure or we assume it measures” (Ridden and Heldsinger, 2014, p. 43), accountability- “teachers and schools should answer to the public for the academic achievement of students” (Bernauer & Cress, 1997, p. 71) and fairness -or equity- linked to access to equal opportunities and equal results or outcomes (Gipps, 1995; Stobart, 2005). I will also review evidence on how standardized tests have shaped learning and teaching practices in developed and conflict-affected areas. I then examine

the data gathered from grades 9 and 12 students in a public school in West Bekaa, Lebanon to explore their experiences and reflections of how the Lebanese official exams have shaped their schooling and education.

### ***Background to the study***

Each year in Lebanon, students in grades 9 and 12 must sit for the official exams administered by the government. Their success transitions them to a new phase: grade 9 to secondary school, grade 12 to higher education. Their failure might mean repeating the academic year or dropping out of school. The preparations for the official exams and the ceremonies held after the results are announced involve rituals across the country. The Minister of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) publicly announces the days of the official exams and refutes any rumors that they are cancelled. General security officers are stationed at examination centers. Teachers are recruited to supervise, monitor and mark exams and parents accompanying their children and waiting impatiently outside the school gates while their children take the exam.

I have been teaching grades 9 and 12 English in a public school in the Bekaa governorate since 2010. At the beginning, I was struck by several practices. Students were asking me if the given information is going to be assessed in the official exams so they might focus on it more. Parents of grade 9 students would be concerned about their kids' results in the

official exams. Students of grades 12 would show no interest in the school tests the entire year waiting for the break in May when they would revise the important information. I wanted to discuss matters that relate directly to my learners' life and probably future. I chose to investigate these within the context of the official exams for two main reasons. The first one is related to my own belief that young learners are "already citizens with rights" (Starkey, Akar, Jerome & Osler, 2014). Their opinions matter in the teaching-learning processes inside the classroom; however, there is virtually no room for students to exercise this right in grades 9 and 12. Building on my own experience, teachers of grades 9 and 12 are only concerned about finishing the curriculum before the official exams. The second reason is that during the eight years that I have been preparing grades 9 and 12 for the official examinations, whether at school or private tutoring, I have observed how the preparations influence their life as well as that of their teachers. For example, students complain of the stress parents and teachers put them through so they pass the official exams. Some parents even brag that they ban any phones or social visits from their children during the preparations for the official exams. In education research, such "personal motives, perceptions, and subjective experience[s]" are indeed a reality that can contribute to the knowledge field (Jones & Kottler, 2006, p. 36). Thus this research is to examine students' reflections towards the official exams.

In Chapter 2, I will review the literature on the benefits and limitations of high-stakes standardized testing. I also present three dimensions that determine the quality of

assessment -validity, accountability and fairness -and practices that might hinder them. Moreover, I discuss some cases of developed countries and conflict-affected areas that show different approaches to official exams. I then present the case of Lebanon. In Chapter 3, I present the methodology of the data gathering in this research study. In Chapter 4, I present the results collected from the students' responses to each of the data tools. In Chapter 5, I discuss the findings reflecting on the literature review. In Chapter 6, I conclude the research and provide some recommendations in regard to standardized tests which would have an impact on classroom practices to enhance life-long learning.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### **Assessment: High-stakes standardized testing**

Assessment is normally dichotomized into summative and formative assessment according to the purpose it might serve. For example, formative assessment guides teachers to tailor appropriate planning and instruction that can support students' learning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Ridden & Heldsinger, 2014). The formative function of assessment, commonly referred to as assessment **for** learning, is used to assist learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Assessment can also be used to build final decisions. In these cases, summative assessment can enable policymakers to rank schools according to a set of standards (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2012). It measures the mastery of standards and judges the education system. This summative function is described as assessment **of** learning, whereby results are used for review, transfer and certification (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Black, Harrison, Hodgen, Marshall, & Serret, 2013). Assessment practices can link formative and summative approaches to aid learning while grading and reporting (Harlen, 2005). In this study on official exams, I focus on high-stakes standardized testing, a form of summative assessment.



### *Defining high-stake standardized testing*

High-stakes exams have several purposes. For tests to be labelled high-stakes, their results “are directly linked to important rewards or sanctions for students, teachers or institutions” (Madaus, 1988, p. 29). For example, a high-stakes testing program yields results that determine major “actions and decisions such as passing or failing a grade, graduating or not, determining teacher or principal merit, or assuming responsibility for a failing district by a state agency” (Smith, 1991, p. 9). The results also qualify students for promotion and reflect and analyze instructional quality implemented by teachers (Propham, 1987, p. 680) which means the passing rates of students determines the efficiency of the instructional methods adopted in the classrooms. In other words, the results of high-stakes testing can impact and determine the future of the test-takers.

Another characteristic of high-stake exams is that they measure performance. They do this by either norm or criterion-based referencing. Through norm referencing, the results of high-stake tests are used to compare and rank the achievement of students and schools based on the performance results of another group of test takers typically of the same age and level (Chapman & Snyder, 2000). Some standardized tests are criterion-referenced when the score of each individual student determines the student’s achievement to a preset standard or criteria (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2012). Hughes (2011) also refers to the ipsative grading which compares the learner’s previous performance to long-term progress. However, ipsative approaches are uncommon in high-stakes testing of learners.

### ***Benefits of high-stake standardized testing***

Students take high-stakes standardized tests for several reasons. A better quality in the education system is closely linked to better results in the national tests (Propham, 1993; and Murphy, Greaney, Lockhead & Rojas, 1996). When administering these tests, a large number of students sit for the same-or similar- items and under nearly the same conditions (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2012), which allows for the “fairest” comparison of large groups (Chapman & Snyder, 2000, p. 457). Chapman and Snyder argue that standardized tests, in general, are less biased culturally, ethnically and gender-wise than other forms of testing. Moreover, Fetsco and McClure (2005) found that standardization increases the reliability of the results because it minimizes the errors of administration and scoring. All test takers’ answers are corrected based on a unified answer key or rubric, for example. Based on the scoring of test takers, policymakers can decide about the effectiveness of a program of instruction. Linn (2000) lists four reasons that drive policymakers to advocate testing in the reform role: inexpensive changes, external mandate, rapid implementation and visible results.

Successful results from high-stakes testing can help bring in resources to schools for improvement. Governments and policymakers might sometimes increase the funding of the schools based on their results in the high-stakes standardized testing. Schools that “improve achievement” in the high-stake testing are rewarded (Boardman & Woodruff, 2004, p. 545); hence, testing might be seen as stimulants to students, teachers, and

schools to have better performances and get more opportunities (Assessment Reform Group, 2002).

### *Limitations to high-stake standardized testing*

Education researchers, however, have reported on limitations and even dangers of high-stake standardized exams. Davey and Neill (1991) argue that the measurement per se does not by default prompt positive effects in the educational process. Unless testing is furthered by actions, the educational reform is not effective in refuting propositions of how high-stake testing improves education (Chapman & Snyder, 2000). Also, the pressing will to succeed in standardized testing pushes teachers to teach only to what is tested statewide without any real concern about the actual learning process (Boardman & Woodruff, 2004). “Mini-summative” assessments are used in the classrooms to compensate the deficiency and sometimes lack of assessment of learning practices (ARG, 2006, p. 10). Hence, the incentives that might press teachers and learners to get better test results are likely to hinder deep learning instead of promote it. Although teachers realize the importance of the formative assessment, they might not be practicing it in their classrooms. Knowledge of the theories of teaching and learning is not necessarily demonstrated in practice with the students; teachers, instead, direct teaching for the examinations (Sebatane, Chabane & Lefoka, 1992). Moreover, assessment practices that might be culturally biased reveal test standards and content that do not reflect the “essential life learnings” (Stobart 2005, p. 282). Indeed, test scores are used more to

support certain educational policies that serve political purposes than enhance the quality of education (Smith (1991); Goldstein (1993); Gipps (1999); Chapman & Snyder (2000); Shepard (2000) and ARG (2006)).

This first part of the literature review presents two types of assessment that are mostly used: (1) formative assessment as an approach to assist learning and instruction and (2) summative assessment to give value or measure to students' performance. High-stakes exams are one example of summative assessment. Their significance lies in their validity, accountability and unbiased results that can be used to measure the performance of teachers, schools, and the reliability of an educational system. However, some argue that these high-stakes exams do not reflect the essential practices of lifelong learning. Teachers tend to teach to the test to escape criticism and boost students' results; thus memorization becomes the norm.

### **Validity, Accountability and Fairness**

High-stake standardized testing has several features that are essential. In this study, I look closely at validity, accountability and fairness.

### *Validity*

Ridden and Heldsinger (2014) define validity in assessment as “whether it actually measures what it claims to measure or we assume it measures” (p. 43). Madaus (1988) focuses more on the pragmatics of the test results; and, so, “test validity refers to the degree to which a particular inference, and any resultant description or decision about an individual or institution, made on the basis of test performance is appropriate or meaningful” (p. 33). Drawing on Madaus, Messick (1998) maintains that validity is determined by the accuracy of score inferences as well as the “evaluation of the appropriateness, meaningfulness, and usefulness” of these inferences in defining validity (p. 41). Messick (1989, 1998), Hubley and Zumbo (2011), and Kane (2013) agree that valid interpretations are based on the test scores and not the test per se. Salkind (2010) illustrates that Messick’s definition of test validity is a question of degree, “not all or none” (p. 1589). For tests to be valid, the results need to be evaluated, interpreted and help fulfill the purpose of the assessment.

Madaus (1988) refers to three common types of validity: content validity in which the set(s) of questions or tasks in a test represent the content of the domain; construct validity where the test measures a trait(s) such as intelligence, motivation, reading comprehension ability, etc.; and criterion-related validity where the test is used to predict the future performance of a student on similar or different domains. Crooks, Kane and Cohen (1996) and Stobart (2001) base validation on eight stages of Administration, Scoring,

Aggregation, Generalization, Extrapolation, Evaluation, Decision and Impact where any threat to one link jeopardizes the entire chain associating the difficulty to conduct and report validity to its heavy dependence on human judgement.

There are, however, many factors that threaten the validation process and the content of tests. Messick (1998), for example, refers to the effects of construct underrepresentation and construct irrelevant difficulty that would invalidate a test. In addition, Crooks et al (1996) argue that students with physical disabilities do not have their skills, knowledge, and capabilities accurately measured because the assessment tool may not accurately measure their performance with their disability. Such an inconvenience in the high-stakes limits the validity feature.

In short, the tests do not end only when the students finish taking their tests and the teachers grade them. Using the results of the tests is very important in assessing the validity of tests. The results of test-taking should be aligned with the theory because “both the test and the theory are under scrutiny” (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955, p.296); otherwise new tests, new theory, or both are required to maximize validation (Zumbo, 2009). There are several actors who are responsible for the validation of high-stakes. Messick (1989, 1998) states that the accurate and appropriate use or misuse of interpreted scores cannot be blamed on test makers. Hubley and Zumbo (2011) conclude that test

developers and test users are responsible to scrutinize “all” the meaning of test scores to be able to proceed in the validation process (p. 228). Validation is a process that does not end with the announcement of the results of the high-stakes; it actually begins there.

### *Accountability*

Accountability is the belief that “teachers and schools should answer to the public for the academic achievement of students” (Bernauer & Cress, 1997, p. 71). Public accountability is considered among three basic principles to be considered by educators in the selection test techniques along with availability of resources and logistical issues (Heyneman, 2004). Accountability in testing is boosted by providing equal access to curriculum- one of the conditions to fairness- and preparing students to any assessment program (Gipps, 1995).

There are some limitations that might affect accountability in assessment. Developing a program in education should take into consideration the needs of students and the educators and not doing so might jeopardize the accountability of the program. Power and Wood (1984) state that when political considerations in developing a curriculum are superior to collecting and explaining students’ and teachers’ needs to fulfill an objective, the program becomes “bland monitoring exercises of little direct information value to policymakers and educators” ( cited in Gipps & Goldstein, 1984, p. 14). The

inappropriate or lack use of the test scores might cause “fallible” teaching practices in the classroom and hence limit the test’s accountability purposes (Gipps, Steadman, Blackstone & Stierer (1984) cited in Madaus, (1985), p. 614). High-stake exams can exert pressure on teachers that negatively affects the instructional performance of teachers in the classroom (Propham, 1987; Shepard, 1989; Smith, 1991; Bernauer & Cress, 1997& Sebatane, 1998). Students direct their efforts at school in accordance to the rewards and punishment received from external testing (Shepard, 2000). In other words, teachers will shape behaviors of learners to ensure they perform well on tests. This demonstrates to the public that teachers are doing their job well. Similarly, ARG (2006) argues that high-stake examinations are perceived superior to school testing because results make teachers and schools accountable to the public. Environmental challenges that affect external examinations compromise quality assurance and equity (Vlaardingerbroek & Taylor, 2009). Corruption, for example, threatens accountability when those accountable undermine the integrity of testing.

### ***Fairness***

Fairness is a top priority on the part of learners and policymakers when dealing with high-stake standardized tests where students from different ethnicities, cultures, and maybe languages have to take the same assessment. Stobart (2005) uses the terms fairness and equity interchangeably and differentiates them from quantitative equality. Fairness or equity is linked to access to equal opportunities and equal results or outcomes



(Gipps, 1995; Stobart, 2005); hence, accountability and fairness are interrelated. For an assessment to be fair, it requires that the groups have the same access to resources and yields same results. Baker and O'Neil (1994) state that the term equity in the United States is "to move toward the attainment of reasonably equal group outcomes" (p. 11).

However, there are some practices that jeopardize fairness in testing. Gipps (1995) cites Yates (1985) who states that the test questions demonstrate the needs of the dominant group "where the criteria of success and the norms of teaching and curriculum are still defined in terms of the already dominant group, that group is always likely to remain one step ahead" (p. 272).

The idea of tests mirroring the majority is also echoed in Shohamy (2000) who highlights the use of tests by "educational bureaucrats" to "suppress and eliminate multicultural differences in covert ways" (p. 3). Test-takers are forced to adapt accordingly to succeed, and tests become a means to impose power (Ibid). Yet, multicultural differences yield different experiences and hence, making one group of test-takers would threaten the fairness trait giving more privilege to the dominant group over the others. Even when different multicultural groups might be granted equal access to opportunities, equal outcomes may not be attained because "there is no cultural neutrality" in the selection of test questions (Stobart, 2005, p. 282). Stobart lists three elements that impact the fairness

of high-stakes tests: (1) the use of the language of the culture, (2) offering same questions of tests in two or more languages, and (3) the use of international language as medium of assessment. The knowledge of the dominant group is always privileged and maintained. With the political will, tests can be made fairer (Gipps, 1999). Dardick and Choi (2016) write about the importance of the process of preparing for the assessment, taking the test and receiving the results. Educational access-or learning the content and types of test-tasks- and test familiarity with testing conditions and equipment prior to the test are two important elements to ensure fairness (Ibid).

In this section, I define high-stake standardized exams and tackled the benefits and limitations of three features that make them important: the validity, accountability and fairness. The three features are interrelated and apparently jeopardizing one can threaten the others. Kunnan (2000) describes the correlation among the three: fairness in testing is a prerequisite to having “valid and reliable or even authentic and interactive” tests (p. 10).

### **High-stakes assessment in developed countries and conflict-affected areas**

In the next section, I discuss the features of validity, accountability, and fairness in the Lebanese context of high-stake official exams and see how the practices are promoting or inhibiting the role of education in general to build a lifelong learner and citizen.

### *National examinations as formal examinations*

Formal examinations, whether they are school tests or national ones, are adopted as main tools for assessment in many countries (Osta, 2007). Every nation practices a different testing system, from well-designed testing items to corrupted ones; their system enables stakeholders to select students who are qualified to university entry (Heyneman, 2000). The examples below highlight certain practices that areas affected by armed conflict, like Lebanon, share and differ from developed countries.

### *External examinations in developed countries*

Some developed countries conduct national examinations. Countries as France, England, New South Wales in Australia and Alberta in Canada are examples. It seems that though these countries have some good command over standardized testing, they face some obstacles: cheating, corruption, bias, rote learning and test teaching are but a few examples that raise opposition to the national exams.

#### *France*

The school system in France has three main cycles: 3-year primary (starting at the age of 6), 4-year middle or lower secondary (*Collège*) terminating in non-compulsory external *Brevet des Collège* examinations, and 3-year upper secondary (*lycée*) for those intending

*to pursue Higher Education terminated in Baccalaureate or BAC as is commonly used among the French.*

Cros (2009) distinguishes between the Brevet and BAC in terms of reliability and public accountability. Students do not need to sit the Brevet examinations and some parents even oppose the Brevet examinations because they are “pointless and stressful examination” (p. 25). In contrast, the BAC has acquired a high profile status among the public and politics of education mainly because it is a requirement to enter university and a tool to determine the student’s career. Yet this does not necessarily make the system spotless. Cros points some demerits: (1) assessment is based on a single grade; (2) the ministry pressures to an 80% pass rate; (3) the costs are immense, “millions of euros” (p. 26); and (4) scandals of cheating were found.

### *England*

England introduced free secondary schooling since 1972 and has primary (ages 5-11) and secondary (ages 11-16) schooling which is culminated by the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). The education system also splits into four key stages according to the age of the student: key stage 1: 5-7 years old; key stage 2: 7-11 years old; key stage 3: 11-14 years old; and key stage 4: 14-16 years old. The results of the national curriculum tests enable parents to select their children’s schools, school

inspectors to assess teacher's performance, and governments to control school funding (Baird, 2009). With such use of the results of the national examinations, Baird (2009) argues that teachers and schools are more likely to be driven by the success of their students and consequently would teach to the test which would yield disinterested "rote learners" instead of independent knowledge seekers (p. 46).

#### *New South Wales, Australia*

In New South Wales, Australia, the schooling system consists of primary (Kindergarten 0 to Year 6) and secondary (Years 7 to 12). Year 10 and Year 12 are culminated in external examinations: School Certificate (SC) and Higher School Certificate (HSC) enable teachers to assess their students' strengths and weaknesses and to adjust their plans and programs accordingly. However, Bennett (2009) cites some incidents that reveal cheating, plagiarism, and corruption activities for many HSC courses.

#### *Alberta, Canada*

In Alberta, Canada, the schooling system consists of the elementary (Grades 1 to 6) and secondary (Grades 7 to 12) resulting in Achievement Testing Program (Grades 3, 6, and 9) and Diploma Examination Program at Grade 12. Aitken (2009) notes that the public and stakeholders strongly support the external examinations and they believe that they are

necessary for “quality control” demanding that the school ranking be publicized to hold teachers and schools accountable (p. 92) and to provide feedback on students’ achievements of provincial standards so that suitable procedures can be taken. Teachers, in contrast, feel that the Education Department is acting as a “watchdog” which might in itself lead to a general mistrust of the public in “teacher’s professionalism” (ibid, p. 92) creating stress among schools and teachers. Consequently, teachers would resort to rote memorization and focus on “this narrowed testable curriculum” (ibid, p. 93) to ensure students’ success and avoid blame from the public, students, and schools.

Such issues about high-stakes standardized testing in the developed countries do not seem so alien from the situation in the post-conflict countries whose situation is vulnerable to renewed conflicts and are struggling on all levels to be at peace.

### ***Education in conflict-affected areas***

Areas affected by conflict are fragile and vulnerable to elements that sustain violence and injustice. Fragile states are states “that have either been through or are highly vulnerable to serious forms of internal violence, including civil wars” (Panić, 2009, p. 1). Nations after civil wars resort to reconstruction in the educational systems to reform education and rebuild post-conflict societies. “Policymakers assert that education can heal the psychological wounds of war, solve youth unemployment, deliver decentralization and

democracy, build peace and promote economic and social development” (Buckland, 2005, p. 7). Social cohesion is one common aim of public schooling in conflict-affected areas. Through education, young people can learn to be informed and responsible citizens (Tawil, 2001) in order to foster socially cohesive practices with other communities. However, “political rivalries, hidden curriculum, school organization and formal versus informal messages conveyed by school may interfere with the cohesive role of formal education” (Heyneman & Todoric-Bebic, 2000, p. 149). Below are some features of high-stake examinations in three conflict-affected countries: South Africa, Vietnam, and Greece.

### *South Africa*

The Department of Education (2000) reshaped its vision in post-apartheid South Africa: “...all its people have equal access to lifelong education and training opportunities, which will contribute towards improving their quality of life and building a peaceful, prosperous and democratic society” (p.1). The formal school in South Africa consists of primary schooling (from Reception to Grade 9) and secondary schooling (Grade 10 to Grade 12). The Senior Certificate (SC) and the National Senior Certificate (NSC), which are strictly managed and conducted by Umalusi (the national body responsible for the issue of certificates and quality assurance of assessment in general and further education), culminate Grade 9 and Grade 12. The NSC examinations are considered the most important because they provide access to higher education and to workplace. Moreover,

the Senior Certificate results do not measure the effectiveness of the school system and show practices of inequalities of races among the students mostly because of teachers' and principals' low levels of knowledge in quality education and the interference of politics in education (Jansen, 2011). Schools in South Africa are judged on their pass rate; a good school would attain a pass rate of 80% of its students.

### *Vietnam*

According to the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in Vietnam, schooling system consists of five years of compulsory primary schooling, four years of secondary schooling and three years of high school. External examinations used to be conducted at the end of each phase of the primary, secondary and high school until 2006. Currently, the National Graduation Examination is conducted after Grade 12. Candidates sit for six subjects and each is out of 10 points: Vietnamese Language and Literature, Mathematics, a foreign language (English, French, Japanese, Chinese, Russian or German) and three other subjects from Biology, Physics, Chemistry, History and Geography. The candidate needs to obtain at least 30 points overall and not a zero on any subject. The MOET conducts the process. Students would have to sit for another high-stakes examination administered by the universities to enter higher education.



An Thi My Tran (2014) reported that the MOET merged the two examinations and announced that one national examination would determine high school graduation whose results would be used as the basis for university entrance. It is conducted once annually and if a student fails, s/he will have to wait another 12 months and cannot apply for college or any job that requires the high school graduation diploma. The report criticizes the decision of the MOET because (1) the examination score does not measure the competencies needed at the university level: it might be too high for high school but too low for university skills; (2) it adds more pressure on the students who might cheat and on educators who might teach to the test resulting in less instruction time to the curriculum; (3) Different assessments should be used to measure high order thinking skills and one test cannot possibly measure all. An Thi My Tran concludes that one high-stake national examination might jeopardize fairness and accuracy in assessment interpretation. The education system is exam-oriented.

However, this exam-oriented education system is giving its fruits. A survey of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015 by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Vietnamese students rank high compared with the wealthiest countries. Their results outperformed students of Germany and Switzerland in science, and those of the U.S. in science and math, “only in Canada, Estonia, Finland, Hong Kong (China), Japan, Macao (China), Singapore and Viet Nam do at least nine out of ten 15-year-old students master the basics that every student should

know before leaving school” (OECD, 2016). Phieu Linh - Thanh Tam (2016) cites Phung Xuan Nha, Vietnam’s education minister who claims that the impact of parents is influential because they might sell their houses, lands and everything just to provide education for their children.

### *Greece*

The school system in Greece is divided into a 2-year pre-primary education (Kindergarten), 6-year primary education, 3-year lower secondary school (Gymnasium) and 3-year general upper secondary school (General Lyceum) terminating in national examinations that enable students to enter university or workplace. In 2004, the penultimate national examinations were cancelled and subjects were reduced from nine to six. In 2006, 10 out of 20 became the minimum pass mark for admission to university. Candidates receive an examination certificate which is based on internal assessment and enables them to sit the national examinations. University admissions are based on both the examination certificate and the national examinations.

The national examinations received criticism. The Coalition of the Radical Left Party, SYRIZA, states that these exams are unfair and costly both financially and psychologically to students and families. “The academic community and wider society know very well that these exams are unfair and they amplify social discrimination, class

division, competition and elimination among other flaws” (Matsaidoni, 2014). Dabilis (2014) asserts that the pressure parents and teachers exert on students before the national examinations and the university entrance exams on students is traumatic where some students are left without sleep and some even commit suicide. Dabilis (ibid) also reveals that the pressure is on invigilators and cheating scandals are revealed. Edith Ismene Nicolaou-Griffin (2012) quotes 17-year-old Maria Kyrozi who says that the pressure exerted on them leads them to tutoring programs that teach students the tricks to excel the exams and these add more financial strain, “Going to school during senior year is pointless when all you do is review the things you learned during your tutoring session. Most people would prefer to study on their own.” Furthermore, the results of the national examinations reveal inequality of educational level of the parents and legitimize the process of selection of the students to the university entry (Gouvias, 1998).

In this section of the literature review I defined the importance of education and the role of formal examinations as the main tool to assess or measure a student’s learning. I also briefly outlined benefits and harms of high-stake exams in developed countries of France, England, New South Wales (Australia), and Alberta (Canada). I then discussed the merits and disadvantages of the exams on students in conflict-affected countries of South Africa, Vietnam, and Greece. The common vision of creating a responsible and free citizen to merge in the globalized world is not quite promoted by the high-stake national examinations which are, to a great extent, politically driven. This will lead to the next

part where I will discuss in details the education system in Lebanon as a post-conflict country and the benefits and harms of the high-stake external examinations.

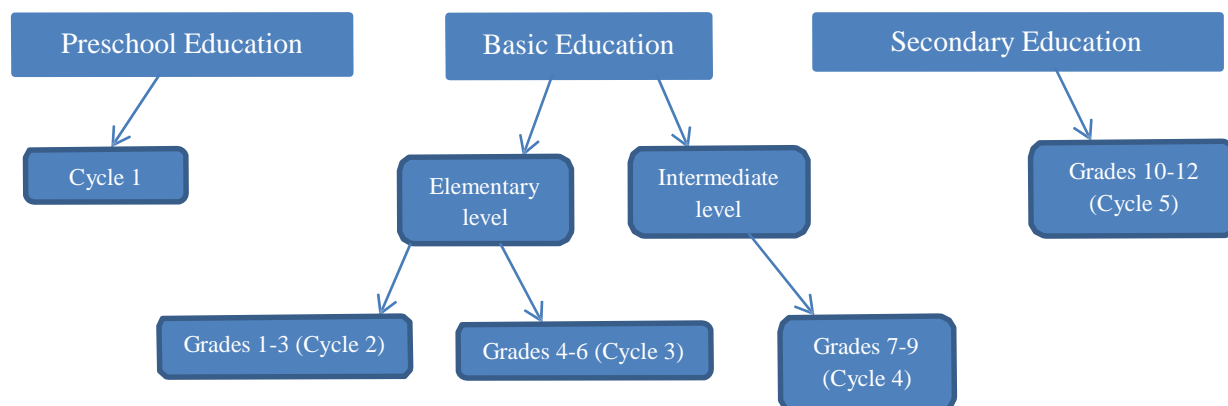
## **The case of Lebanon**

### ***An Overview of the Schooling System in Lebanon***

The schooling system in Lebanon consists of six years of elementary schooling, three years of lower secondary referred to as intermediate and three years of upper secondary.

Figure 2.1 summarizes the distribution of the education according to the cycles. Grade 9 is culminated in the Brevet examinations leading to Middle School Certificate (MSC).

Students passing the Brevet pursue their studies in the secondary; those who fail have one of the three options: repeat grade 9, go into vocational level or drop out. Grade 12 is divided into four tracks or streams: General Sciences, Life Sciences, Humanities and Economics and Sociology. Students who finish the secondary education sit for the Baccalaureate to earn the General Secondary Certificate (GSC). Table 2.1 presents the subjects taken by grade 9 and the four tracks of grade 12 and the weighting of each subject.



**Figure 2.1. Distribution of Education in Lebanon**

**Table 2.1. Distribution of subjects and weights for grades 9 and 12 certificates**

Subject	Certificates				
	General Sciences	Life Sciences	Sociology & Economics	Humanities	Brevet
Mathematics	160	80	70	40	60
Physics	110	80	20	20	20
Chemistry	80	80	20	20	20
Biology	-----	100	20	20	20
Arabic	50	50	60	90	60
English/French	40	40	40	70	40
Philosophy	40	40	50	Arab/General 120	
History	30	30	30	30	20
Geography	30	30	30	40	20
Civics	30	30	30	30	20
Sociology	-----	-----	80	-----	-----
Economics	-----	-----	80	-----	-----
Total	570	560	530	480	280
Average	285	280	265	240	140
Minimum Pass Mark	<b>-15</b>	<b>-15</b>	<b>-15</b>	<b>-15</b>	<b>-10</b>
	<b>270</b>	<b>265</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>130</b>

Table 2.2 presents the subjects taken by grade 9 and the Humanities and Life Sciences tracks of grade 12- my case of study- and the allotted number of periods per week.

**Table 2.2. Distribution of subjects and periods per week for grades 9 and 12**

**Humanities and Life Sciences**

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Life Sciences</b>	<b>Humanities</b>	<b>Brevet</b>
Mathematics	6	2	5
Physics	5	1	3
Chemistry	6	1	3
Biology	7	1	4
Arabic	2	6	6
English/ French	2	6	6
Philosophy	2	9	0
History	1	1	1
Geography	1	2	2
Civics	1	1	1

Students passing are qualified to pursue their studies in the university or college; those who fail have either to repeat grade 12, do freshman or drop out. The first session of the official examinations is in early June; candidates who fail or those who intend to improve their score are given a second chance- a second session held usually in August. Those who sit the second session have to redo all the subjects irrespective of their mark in the first session. Subjects and their weightings vary according to the stream/track students have chosen. Normally all students of the public schools and the majority of the private schools sit the national examination-referred to as the official exams- which are designed by a panel of teachers, conducted, corrected and results published by the MEHE.

*Link between official exams and the process of the nation building*

The history of education in Lebanon could indicate how conducting official exams would help foster a national citizen. Fontana (2016) traces the history of education in Lebanon into four phases: (1) The French Mandate of 1920-1943; (2) Independent Lebanon between 1943-1958; (3) Compromises between 1958-1974 and (4) The Civil War between 1975-1989.

*The French Mandate 1920-1943*

During this period, French regime was in control and the Lebanese official exams emulated the French ones. Private sector was given the freedom over the schools' material, the first step of jeopardizing the fairness among students. The French Mandate established a Division of Education in 1920-which became the Ministry of Public Education in 1926- had control over the education system and was responsible to "revive" the government-run schools (Fontana, 2016, p. 63). Abouchedid, Nasser and Blommestein (2002) argue that "ironically" in Greater Lebanon, the French authorities provided the "socialization process of schoolchildren to the private sector" (p. 63) instead of to the state or public ones. It appears that the French authorities may have undermined Article 10 of the Constitution of Lebanon that states

Education is free insofar as it is not contrary to public order and morals and does not interfere with the dignity of any of the religions or creeds. There shall be no

violation of the right of religious communities to have their own schools provided they follow the general rules issued by the state regulating public instruction.

French became compulsory in all schools. The official examinations initiated officially in 1929 with the Lebanese Baccalaureate and consisted of 'Bac 1' and 'Bac 2' of Grade 11 and Grade 12, respectively, following the same pattern of France (Jurdak & BouJaoude, 2009, p. 155).

#### *Independent Lebanon 1943-1958*

The political agreement between the Maronites and the Sunni led to a compromise in the educational system. A National Pact between the Maronite and Sunni resulted from the independence from France. However, the opposite ideological differences between "the Lebanese and Arab nationalism" were not settled (Fontana, 2016, p. 67). After 1943, the government's main aim was to "obliterate" (Abouchedid, Nasser, & Blommestein, 2002, p. 63) what the French mandate had enforced on the educational system: a new curriculum was introduced (Fontana, 2016), private schools were supervised by the MEHE but no definite procedures were taken (Abouchedid, Nasser & Blommestein, 2002). As an "Arab face", Arabic became the official language in all schools and English and French became foreign languages-a step that could not unite the Lebanese ideologies towards nationalism (Hudson, 1969, p. 249). Regulations were made to school-leaving



examination culminating Grade 5, the Brevet (Grade 9), and the Baccalaureat (Grade 11 and 12) (Jurdak & BouJaoude, 2009).

#### *Compromises 1958-1974*

The Civil War initiated in 1958 continued to impact the process of building a citizen. Citizenship exams were cancelled from the official exams and competition rose between private and public schools. Teaching to the test was the means to score more. Public schools increased “from 184 in 1941 to 1487 in 1980”, 60% of which were Muslim students (Fontana, 2016, p. 70). The national curriculum was reformed between 1968-1971 (Frayha, 2003), without any reference to ‘Lebanese nation’ or ‘Lebanese identity’ (cited in Fontana, 2016, p.70). The “fragile pluralistic and heterogeneous nature” among the Lebanese was not reconciled (Frayha, 2003, p. 77). The primary school certificate at Grade 5 was eliminated and the Brevet and the Bac 1 and 2 certificates were kept (Jurdak & BouJaoude, 2009) while citizenship exams were still eliminated (Fontana, 2016).

#### *Post-Civil War*

The 15-year-civil war initiated in 1975 paused the official exams and attestation-of-completion certificates were issued instead (Jurdak & BouJaoude, 2009). This act affected the educational system and even the consensus of a definition of the term citizen. Later, the Arabic language was highlighted but there was no real assessment to the efficiency of any new curricula. Opposite ideologies of the conflicting parties were taught

in the history subject at schools (Fontana, 2016). The Taef Agreement in 1989 ended the war and urged a reform in the educational policy: a new curriculum “that strengthens national belonging, fusion, spiritual and cultural openness” (Government of Lebanon, 1989) alongside a unified history and civics textbooks for both the private and public sectors (Frayha, 2003). As a result of the Taef Agreement, “Lebanon is Arab in belonging and identity” and hence Arabic-as an official national language according to Article 11- was stressed as a tool for national unity urging students to master at least one foreign language (Lebanon, Ministry of Education, 1994).

A new curriculum was developed in 1997 and implemented in 1998 (Lebanon, Ministry of Education, 1997) but failed to develop a history curriculum and textbook that deals with Lebanon as a nation (Shuayb, 2016). Arabic was used as a language of instruction till Grade 6 and then a shift to French or English was adopted and correlated with in the highest dropout rate: 92.7% in primary level and 68.5% in the intermediate level (Shuayb, *ibid*, p. 237). Frayha (2003) emphasizes the role of teachers in highlighting social cohesion and national unity among students but concludes that the government does not follow its educational reform plan and schools are concerned only about academic achievements.

### *Contemporary debates and issues over the official exams*

#### *Importance of the official exams*

Since the first phase of building, or at least attempt at building, a nation-state, the private sector has always been free and independent of the Ministry of Education in what textbooks to use and how to teach its content armed by Article 10 of the Constitution.

The Ministry can supervise but not fully control them (Frayha, 2003) although statistics by the Centre for Educational Research and Development CERD show that in 2015-2016, 30.3% of students were in the public sector; 66.3% in the private sector; and 3.4% in the Palestinian private sector. One option of the aim of the official exams could be that they are a means to assess and, to some extent, control the private schools when almost all students sit exams according to the national curricula. Moreover, when learning the national curriculum is being evaluated, students at the public schools would have more advantage over the other students at the private sector. Also, the fact that the Brevet and Terminale certificates are a pre-requisite for admissions at any government job gives more added importance to the official exams.

#### *Proposal to Cancel the Brevet*

The National News Agency NNA (2016) announced that Members of Parliament, Serge Torsarkissian and Nadim Gemayel, submitted on March 17, 2016 a law draft that proposed the cancellation of the Brevet official exams because “this certificate no longer

matched the development pace of the curriculum adopted in Lebanon.” Osseiran (2016) quotes that the two lawmakers defended their proposal, “Our proposal is based on the rampant corruption [among teachers] when preparing exams and correcting them...It would be best to annul the middle school exams and endeavor to enhance the development of the official high school exams.” The proposal frenzied the League of Public Education who answered that “This proposal...is unethical and non-academic and brings education standards down into the gutter”; then Head of the Union of Private School Teachers Nehme Mahfoud accused MPs of “meddling” with the teachers’ jobs instead of doing their own (Osseiran, *ibid*). Only days before the launch of the official exams in 2016, the Minister of Education, Elias Bou Saab tweeted that the official exams would be on time criticizing journalists for creating “confusion among students” (The Daily Star, May 24, 2016).

### *A Cheating Culture*

Vlaardingerbroek, Shehab and Alameh (2011) describe a collectivist culture or consensus among students, invigilators and even parents that encourages open cheating in the official exams. This was enforced when Amine (2016) quotes Bou Saab who revealed that, “We have detected a large...cheating and forgery network in the educational sector... that consists of ringleaders, middle men and schools as well as university students who illicitly carry out other people’s official exams.” Bou Saab also found that the cheating includes “smuggling of mobile phones into testing centers and teachers that

would leak exam content to students via mobile phones” (Amine, 2016). According to the Daily Star (2016), Bou Saab revealed that 55% of sample students who sat the official exams cheated in 2015 listing the circumstances of inappropriate buildings, interference of influential people and teachers that might encourage cheating. Bou Saab promised of reforms to minimize the cheating and corruption at the official examinations: designing exams, proctoring and exam grading. But there were no indicators of any serious policy.

#### *Alignment of Objectives to the Curricula*

Osta (2007) investigates the alignment of Lebanese national Math exam tests with the curriculum of Grade 9 and comes out with the following: (1) there is lack of alignment between national exams [ Math in her research] and curriculum objectives and content; (2) an “assessment culture” (p.193) of limited stereotyped tests is reinforced by school administrators, teachers, students, parents, textbook authors and publishers; (3) teachers teach to the test and rote learning; (4) based on the assumption “what is tested is valued”, a “mini-curriculum” is taught (p. 194).

The lack of alignment between objectives and curricula is not limited to Math only.

Hokayem, Jin and Zhu (2014) conclude the same with regard to biology national exams in the Baccalaureate level, some objectives were not tackled and failed to satisfy “the dimensions of science as a way of knowing and the dimension of relationship between

science, technology, and society” (p. 84). This does not comply with goal 3 of the Education for All EFA goals that encourages learning skills used for life.

The reality of the educational policy in the nation of Lebanon that goes back to the French Mandate and extends till now clearly reflects the vulnerability and non-consensus towards the curricula, national examinations among different stakeholders including the private and public sector which directly impact the teaching-learning process.

In this section, I discussed the historical background of Lebanon that impacted its schooling system. I also explained the role of the national examinations throughout Lebanon’s attempt to build its identity. Moreover, I reflected on the weaknesses of our national exams as they are practiced in our country. I aimed to see how the national examinations in Lebanon impact the teaching-learning inside the classrooms in Grade 9 and Grades 12 and how students of these grades view the process of the high-stake national examinations which directly influence their life and future.

The research will help in constructing knowledge about the benefit of the official exams in reflecting learning. It will also help develop guidelines for improving the teaching-learning process in the classrooms and assessment of the official exams for the best of the young learners.

## **Research questions**

In the literature, qualitative research studies examining students' voices about their experiences and understandings of the official exams were not found. Using my position as a public school teacher in the Bekaa, I decided to investigate the experiences and attitudes of public school students in the West Bekaa towards the official exams. The purpose is to answer one main question: How do students of grades 9 and 12 reflect on the validity, accountability and fairness of the official exams? The questions below will help answer the main inquiry question:

- 1- According to students of grades 9 and 12, what approaches to learning have they adopted or faced in preparing for the official exams?
- 2- What is the main aim or concern regarding learning and schooling of grades 9 and 12 students throughout the year?

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

My aim in this research is to understand and describe the validity, accountability and fairness of the official exams from the perspectives of Lebanese program grade 9 and 12 learners, who are primarily involved in these exams. This aim coincides with the definition of phenomenological research: to be “concerned with the lived experiences of the people involved, or who were involved, with the issue that is being researched” (Greene, 1997; Holloway, 1997; Kruger, 1988; Kvale, 1996; Maypole & Davies, 2001; Robinson & Reed, 1998) cited in Groenewald (2004, p. 44). I collected data from different participants over a period of three years. In addition, I traced thirteen of grade 12 students back to grade 9 to describe differences in attitudes towards official exams. This is longitudinal design where participants are entirely different on each sampling occasion or/ and some or all individuals are considered over time (Caruana, Roman, Hernández-Sánchez & Solli, 2015). Thus, this research is a phenomenological longitudinal qualitative research. In this chapter, I present the participants and the procedures for the data collection.

#### *Participants*

A total of 122 learners from grades 9 and 12 took part in the study. They were all students at a public secondary school in West Bekaa and participated in the study during



the academic years 2015-16, 2016-17, and 2018-19. Table 3.1 presents the distribution of student participants throughout the targeted years and classes.

**Table 3.1. Distribution of student participants**

<b>Learners distributed throughout years and classes</b>			
<b>Year</b>	<b>2015-2016</b>	<b>2016-2017</b>	<b>2018-2019</b>
<b>Class</b>			
<b>Grade 9</b>	29	21	
<b>Grade 12 Humanities</b>	12	12	10
<b>Grade 12 Life Sciences</b>	14	7	17
<b>Total number</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>27</b>

*Background of the secondary school and its village*

The school is located in a village in the West Bekaa district, around 1,100 meters above sea level. It has a population of nearly 9000 inhabitants, among which 3,100 residents, in an area of 12 hectares. Nearly two-thirds of the population immigrated mainly to Canada and Brazil. The village has a private elementary school that holds around 300 students and a public secondary school. It used to have a public intermediate school but was closed in 2011 by the MEHE.

The secondary school was first established in 2000. It consists of two floors. In August 2004, it had its official opening as an intermediate school. In the school year 2006-2007, it took the permission from MEHE to open secondary classes with a separate

administration from that of the intermediate. In 2011, the intermediate section failed to go on and was closed and the secondary classes continued. Now, the school has an intermediate level or cycle 4 (Grades 7 to 9) and secondary education or cycle 5 (Grades 10 to 12). Grade 12 in the school is of two strands: Humanities section and Life Sciences section. The majority of the students were/are from the village and very few were from the neighboring villages. All students were from the same religious denomination: Muslim communities. Students could speak and write Arabic and English. Some students could also speak Portuguese and/or Spanish because they were living in Brazil or Venezuela. These had difficulty in understanding formal Arabic. The work was conducted with grade 9 children about 14-and 16-year-olds and with grades 12 aged about 17-and 19-year-olds. The Syrian students in the classes were a minority, 7 students in total. Their responses could not skew the results and hence were treated as part of the sample. They were in grades 9. Three of them completed grades 7 and 8 in another public school. The total number of teachers is 32, 16 permanent full time and 16 contractual.

### ***Procedures***

Before data gathering, the headmaster of the school and the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their consent was taken. They were assured that their responses to the instruments would be treated with confidentiality and that their responses would be used solely for the purpose of academic research.

The procedure entailed 3 stages throughout the three academic years. The first stage was in April 2015-2016 when students of grade 9 and 12 were asked to write an essay on the following question: *Some believe that the official exams are essential to the learning process; others, however, believe that official exams are bringing only harm to students, teachers and education in Lebanon. Where do YOU stand? Support your opinion using examples and evidence.* Indicators to validity, accountability, and fairness were looked at in the essay writings. Writing their essay was prepared to be answered in 45 minutes.

An open-ended survey that consisted of sixteen items was piloted with three students in grade 9 and 12 in other schools. Questions were then filtered and modified based on the respondents' answers. A final ten-question survey was given to the participants. These questions were divided to reflect the students' attitude towards the official exams: Questions 1 and 2 reflected *accountability*, questions 3, 5, 6 and 10 reflected *fairness*, and questions 4, 7, 8 and 9 reflected *validity*. I composed the questions based on my experience, students' essays and discussions. Based on students' responses and the literature, I categorized the questions as reflecting validity, accountability and fairness.

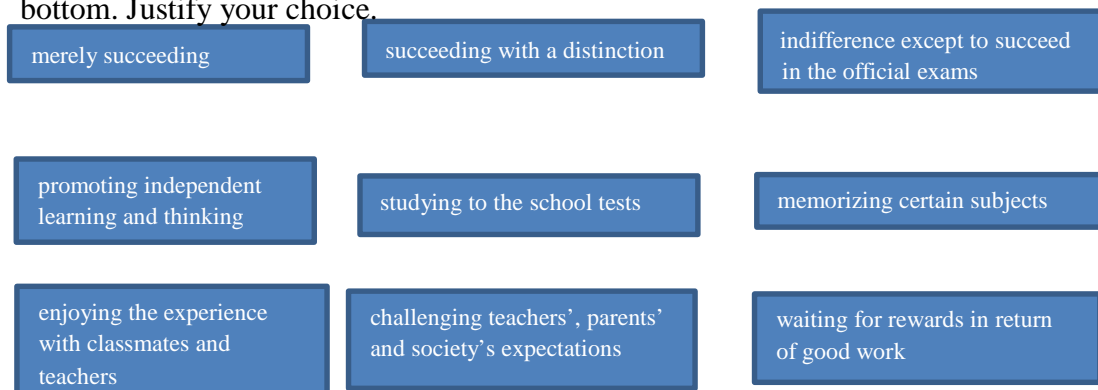
The questions are:

- 1- How did the teachers often teach you how to take the official exams?
- 2- According to you, what was your teachers' main aim throughout the year?  
Explain.
- 3- Do your preparations differ at the beginning of the year from the post mid-term exams, from May? How?
- 4- Do you sense the official exams will reflect your learning done during this whole school year? Why? Why not?
- 5- Do you trust the results of the official exams will be fair and unbiased? Why? Why not?
- 6- Do you depend on memorization? Why? Why not?
- 7- Do you focus on certain subjects and ignore others? Why? Why not?
- 8- Which subject(s) do you focus most on? Why?
- 9- Which subject(s) do you study the least? Why?
- 10- Do you think the break in May to prepare for the official exams will be beneficial? Why/Why not?

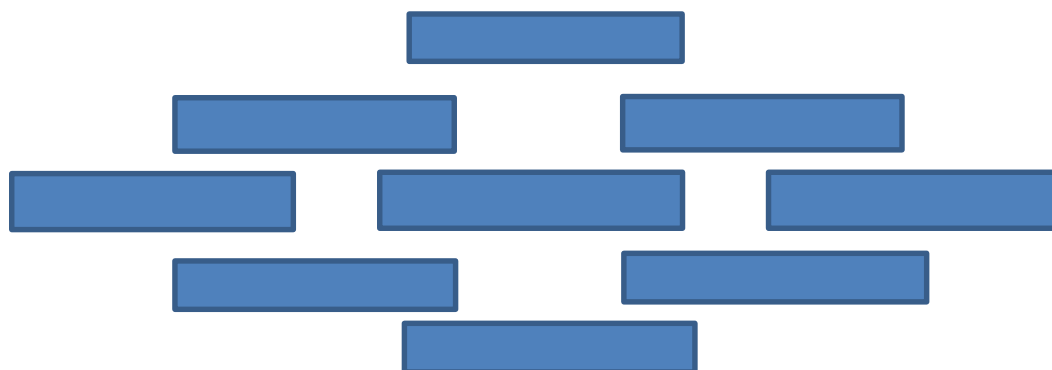
The survey was designed to be answered in 30 minutes. Students in Life Sciences Section in 2015-16 did not take the survey. All data collection was conducted in English. I also provided explanations when needed.

Participants were given a diamond ranking exercise that consisted of nine themes related to purposes of education or schooling (see Figure 3.1). These themes emerged from their responses to the essay mentioned above and their discussions. I selected them based on the literature and my experience as a teacher to grades 9 and 12. Diamond rankings have been used by education researchers (e.g. Akar, 2014) to gather responses and generate discussion from students. Each student was given these nine themes and asked to choose the most important and the least important and write them in the top and bottom boxes of the diamond-shaped diagram (see Figure 3.2). They were also asked to write down why they selected their themes as the most and least important. Students' choices and justifications would suggest their understandings of and attitudes towards accountability, validity or/and fairness.

The boxes are some objectives we might have had throughout the year. Place each of them in this diamond map with the most important on top and least important at the bottom. Justify your choice.



**Figure 3.1. Themes related to purposes of education**



**Figure 3.2. Prioritizing themes in the diamond map**

The activity was prepared to be answered in 15 minutes.

The second stage was in April 2016-2017 when the same procedure was replicated with grades 9 and 12. Grade 12 students were preparing for the official exams for the first time because in 2013-2014 they were given attestation of completion of Grade 9 or *ifadeh* by the MEHE due to a conflict between teachers and the Minister of Education then Mr. Elias Bou Saab. Grade 12 Life Sciences did not desire to take the essay writing and instead chose to discuss the prompt as a whole class. Their responses were noted. They all completed the diamond ranking.

The third stage was in November 2018-2019 when only students of grade 12 were selected to participate in the research. From a total of 27 grade 12 student participants, 14 were also traced back to Grade 9 of 2015-2016 for comparison of attitudes. I read the essays and elicited themes. I also compared their responses of the open-ended-question survey and the diamond rankings. In April 15, 2019-one week before they got their one-

month break- I gave them back their responses for any modification. I did not select grade 9 because the survey was carried out early in the school year and, thus, grade 9 students had limited experience in preparing for the official exams.

### *Explicitation of the data*

Students' essays were read for recurring themes based on the literature. These themes became codes that I used to identify all other responses. Each of the responses to the open-ended surveys and explanations for the diamond rankings was coded. In the diamond ranking, I calculated the single most recurring top and bottom priority. Students' justifications helped also in understanding the rankings themselves. Students' responses and explanations helped me see quantitatively their perspective towards the official exams and qualitatively the processes and causes of these understandings. The responses generated unexpected results when students suggested features of better educational practices which might lead to more efficient practices of official exams.

This chapter deals with the methodology used to collect data that would demonstrate students' reflections towards the validity, accountability and fairness of the official exams. Essay writing, open-ended surveys, diamond ranking exercise, classroom discussions and informal discussions at the teachers' lounge contributed to answer the research questions.

## Chapter 4

### Results

Data collected from the participants intended to give each of my students in grades 9 and 12 the opportunity to write about their attitudes towards and experiences in preparing for the official exams. The survey activities intend to elicit responses that tell us more about the validity, fairness and accountability of the official exams. I separated findings of grade 9 learners from those of grade 12. Under each grade, the findings are presented and interpreted based on the instruments designed to elicit data that answer the questions raised in the research study.

The variation of the scores is not tested in this study because the academically weak students whose cumulative score on the official exam was  $9.285 \leq x < 12$  represented the majority group of the targeted classes in my research. Moreover, students' responses revealed no direct link between their cumulative scores on the official exams and their attitude.

#### **Findings from grade 9 students**

##### *In-class essays*

As an in-class assignment, 50 students (n = 29 in 2015-16; n = 21 in 2016-17) wrote their reflections of whether they consider that official exams promote learning or complicate life. Table 4.1 summarizes the distribution of the attitudes according to their essays.



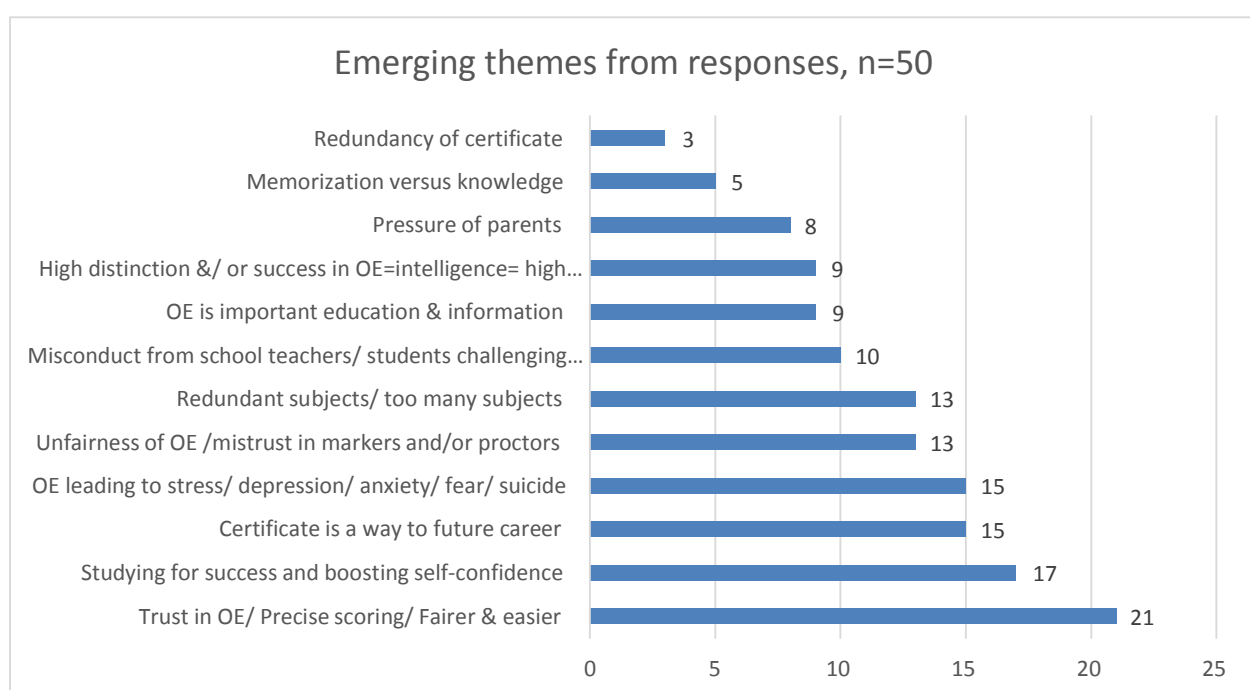
**Table 4.1. Grade 9 students' reflections**

<b>Opinion</b>	<b>Promote learning</b>	<b>Complicate life</b>
<b>School Year</b>		
<b>2015-2016</b>	n= 17	n=12
<b>2016-2017</b>	n=16	n=5
<b>Overall number</b>	<b>n=33 (66%)</b>	<b>n=17 (34%)</b>

*Common themes in the essays*

Their reflections in both academic years revealed interesting findings. Figure 4.1 presents common themes among grade 9 students. While all students agreed that official exams were some kind of rite to shift to a new stage of their life, they differed in expressing other themes. Rola writes, "Tomorrow when we reach the age we are searching for a job to cover our poor situation, we would wish to be young again to make official exams." For example, 21 students believe that the official exams are fairer than the school tests because (1) official exams are easier than school tests; (2) students have more time to prepare for them; (3) there is no discrimination because names are covered; and/or (4) students have another chance in the second session. Bob, for example, writes, "If you fail in the school, it is okay because there is the first session of the official exams and the second session comes to give you a bigger chance to succeed." Moreover, 17 students reflected that studying necessarily leads to success and, thus, boosts their self-confidence. Bob reflects, "It depends on how you study. So if one didn't study, s/he will fail and may have problems, but if s/he studied, s/he wouldn't fail so s/he will not have problems. It is all in our hands." 15 students believed that the certificate is a way to a future career. Rama, for example writes, "Now we are talking about education and information. If we pass the exams, we pass an important challenge in our life." Some of the essays reflected

beneficial themes to the official exams. They can determine the “high achievers” from the “low achievers.” Dina states, “They [Official exams] determine smart from underachievers.” Rola also writes, “Official exams allow us to compare our abilities with others...Imagine a school where no exams are done and all students good and bad, smart and dumb.”



**Figure 4.1. Common themes among grade 9 students**

The themes reflected in the students’ writings showed concerns about the validity, fairness and accountability of the official exams. Students wrote of redundant subjects and the large amount of information they were forced to memorize to get more points in the official exams. Here, the validity feature is threatened. Marwan, one of the students, reflects, “We are learning subjects that we will not use in our future. History, for

example, is not important because we don't care about the people in the past and what they did..." Arwa also writes, "There are also lots of subjects they can delete. History is for what? History is not useful for students in their future. History is to know about past life and what they did centuries ago. All of this information is not important." Moreover, writings showed concerns about accountability of teachers by explaining how teachers misuse their roles and responsibilities inside the classroom to negatively impact the learners. Suzan, for example, writes, "Sometimes the teachers start to show us that we are going to fail... We put in our mind that we are going to succeed just to show the teachers that they are wrong... This makes us feel more self-confident." Faqih also writes, "While in class, teachers are strict and tell the students stuff to scare them like, 'You will fail!' This will make students scared and lose their concentration." Students also expressed concerns over fairness when writing about how their success depends on the markers or/and the proctors. Sara writes, "The government isn't paying enough salary to the correctors, so they carelessly correct the exams and students who deserve to succeed are failing and the other way around." She adds, "Connections and buying a certificate are always a major problem in the Lebanese exams. Kids that are spoiled and dumb will convince their parents to buy them a certificate and they will easily pass without going through any exam. Many proctors are failing to do their jobs correctly. They discriminate against students, help special ones while ignoring the others." Joe writes, "In our society, we have two types of students: Those who memorize to succeed, and those who think fail, so it is not fair to all students. This means that the correction is fake, teachers correct in a way that should be the same as the answer key and they do not test our knowledge."

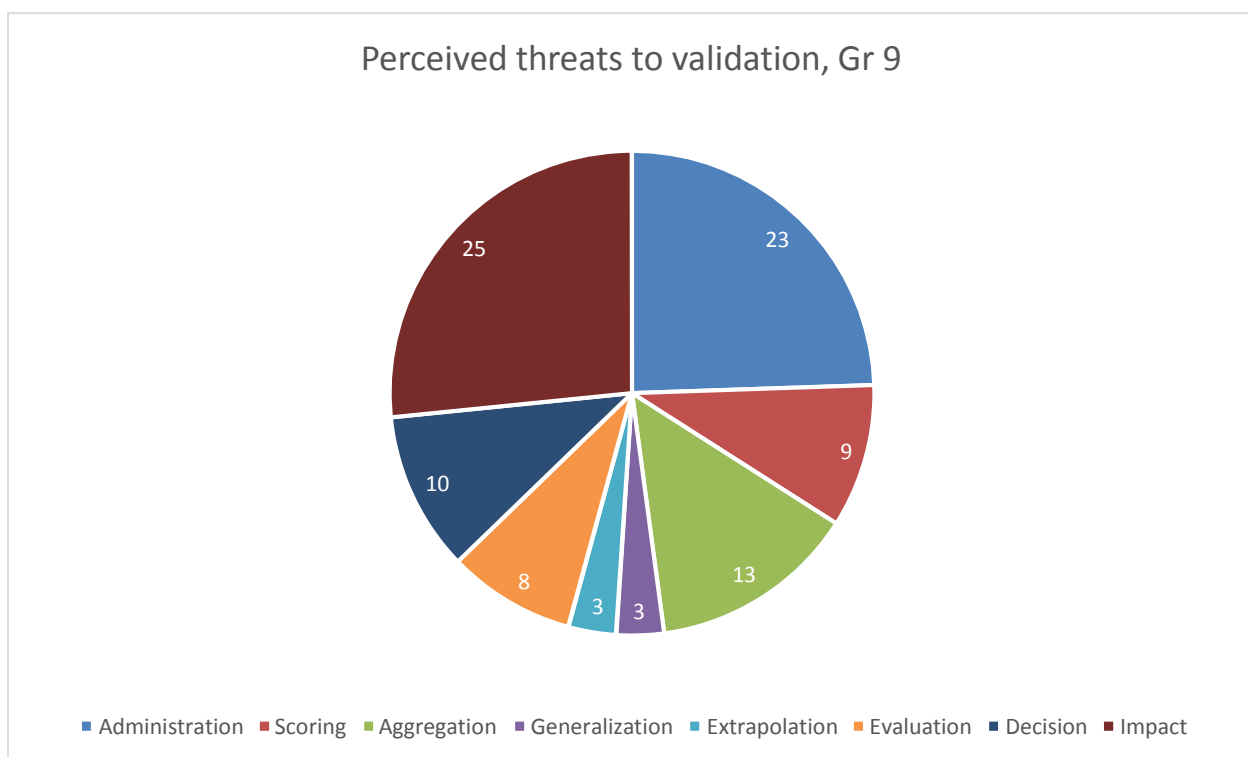
Unfairness is also shown in the perspective of society towards students. Students claim that those who get distinction at the official exams are treated more respectfully in their society compared to those who fail, for example. Bob writes, “By succeeding with high distinctions, your society will look at you as a smart one and will be proud of having a student who is smart and who will bring fame to the village.” Marwan writes, “In many villages, when a person succeeds in these exams, they keep talking about him that he or she is smart and good at school. If we fail, we will have psychological problems like being sad and lonely. We wouldn’t eat or talk to anyone for a long time.” They suggest that society encourages competition and inequality among citizens. Hana writes, “Official exams cause social problems. For example, if a student fails in the exam, people in the village will talk about them and they will consider them as an intruder in the society. Also, teachers will be absolutely mad and they will feel frustrated. The school will get a bad reputation academically.” She adds, “When the failed student goes out in public, everyone will look at him/her pitifully.”

Moreover, students’ reflections demonstrated different views towards the aim of education and the purpose of the official exams. To Dina, “Official exams reflect our rate of knowledge. They are made to test and to have a theory of our capacity of studying and memorizing subjects.” Rama reflects, “If we pass the exams, we pass an important challenge in our life” associating passing the exams to succeeding in the future. Sara’s attitude reveals a different perspective. “Education should be more than academic basics.

Information test does not provide us exactly what will make the difference between failure and success.” To Amanda, official exams should be cancelled... they damage our dreams. Official exams are a very bad dream that we live in.” Faqih reflects, “The answers to all the questions are all memorized by the students when studying. Official exams are not good. They are a waste of our time.”

### *Students’ essays and threats to validation*

Students’ writings towards official exams revealed some threats to validation links by Crooks et al (1996) and Stobart (2001): Administration, Scoring, Aggregation, Generalization, Extrapolation, Evaluation, Decision and Impact. Figure 4.2 presents the threats as revealed by students.



### **Figure 4.2. Perceived threats to validation, Grade 9**

Students' writings reflected threats to the links of validation. Revealing Administration, Faqih for example writes, "Easy-going proctors let children do whatever they want. These proctors take papers from smart students and give them to dumb student or students they know." What Muhammad writes, for example, reflects a threat to scoring, "Teachers [markers] correct exams and delete marks on any small mistake and that causes failure and stress to students." To Sara, her attitude reflects a threat to Aggregation. She writes, "Education should be more than academic basics. Information test does not provide us exactly what will make the difference between failure and success." Joe's opinion reveals a threat to Generalization, "We have two types of students: those who memorize to succeed and those who think fail." Threatening the trait of Extrapolation, Faqih writes, "Students study all the biology book but only five chapters are included in the exam. Students work hard for nothing" and on evaluation he writes, "Official exams do not test knowledge. They test memorization." Official exams are a threat to Decision as Majd writes, "Official exams should be cancelled to make students feel comfortable without having stress while memorizing. We could make our life more fun and less complicated without official exams." Reflecting Impact, Sara writes, "If the student fails, s/he will get devastated which may lead to depression that allows the possibility to commit suicide."

### ***Results of the open-ended-question survey among Grade 9 students***

Students answered an open-ended question survey that consists of ten questions examining the validity, accountability and fairness of the official exams. In class, 28

students participated in 2015-16 and 21 students participated in 2016-17. The overall number was 49 students.

**Question (1): How did the teachers often teach you how to take the official exams?**

From the responses, 33 students wrote that teachers taught them how to answer correctly to succeed by providing sample exams and sessions; 14 students wrote that some teachers misused official exams as a motif to make students study; and 2 students wrote that some teachers made school exams more difficult. Responses revealed a threat to accountability. Teachers' practice in the class limits students' search of knowledge and programs them to think/answer in one correct technique. Questions always reveal the same format and teachers were driven to test-teach.

**Question (2): According to you, what was your teachers' main aim throughout the year? Explain.**

34 students wrote that their teachers' main aim was that students understood and answered correctly so they would succeed in the official exams. Students explained that the teachers and their school were afraid of their reputation so they worked hard to make students succeed. A group of 10 students wrote that their teachers had no aim at all but to explain and leave. Only two wrote that teachers wanted them to focus on their subject and another two thought of their teachers as bullies who gave no importance to their students.

Responses illustrated a threat to the accountability of the official exams. Teachers wanted their students to test-study to succeed so teachers would not be blamed and the school

would attract more students. This might be due to the practice of those in charge of writing the official exams who use the same format and focus on the same topics.

**Question (3): Do your preparations differ at the beginning of the year from the post mid-term exams from May? How**

33 students believed that they would focus most in May; 8 students wrote they focus most from mid-term exams till the official exams; and 3 students wrote they focused at the beginning of the year but they lost enthusiasm later. Students' responses revealed that most students would wait till May to be able to focus and study what they had been given throughout the year. This impacts the validity: the information assessed in the official exam can be covered within a short time.

**Question (4): Do you sense the official exams will reflect your learning done during this whole school year? Why/ Why not?**

33 students answered "No" to this question. Official exams did not reflect their learning because (1) they would be asked important questions only and (2) success did not mean learning and failure did not mean non-learning. These responses demonstrated that most students had a clear view that official exams tested limited information which they categorized as important information thus associating the importance to the frequency of being asked. However, 14 students believed official exams accurately measured their learning because (1) studying would lead to success and/ or distinction and to learning, (2) exams meant new ways of thinking and getting information, and (3) students would be tested in all the information taken throughout the year. This threatens the validity of the official exams.



**Question (5): Do you trust the results of the official exams will be fair and unbiased?****Why/ Why not?**

Apparently, markers were the key in the students' answers. 21 students believed that the results of the official exams would be fair because (1) there would be more than one marker correcting their papers; (2) the markers did not know them so they would not deduct grades unfairly; and (3) studying and/or memorizing meant success. However, 18 students answered they thought official exams would neither be fair nor unbiased because of the markers. According to this group, (1) markers did not know them so they might deduct grades randomly; (2) markers might feel tired because of hot weather and might become moody so their corrections would be reckless and unfair; and (3) some students might have connections and proctoring might be bad. A group of 8 students were not sure about the results and related it to the way markers might correct. Answers revealed confusion towards the administration of the official exams: proctoring and marking. Having students base the results of the exams on the mood of the markers threatens the fairness of the official exams.

**Question (6): Do you depend on memorization? Why/ Why not?**

From the sample, 27 students answered "Yes"; they depended on memorization because it would add more grades to their cumulative score and they would succeed. The other 22 students answered "No"; they couldn't depend on memorization because (1) they forgot memorized information easily, (2) memorization subjects did not have high scores.

Responses show a threat to the fairness of the official exams. Students who did not have the skill of memorization would be at a disadvantage compared to the other students who

would memorize. Strengthening memorization skills is not an aim of education in the Lebanese national curriculum.

**Question (7): Do you focus on certain subjects and ignore others? Why/ Why not?**

More than half, or 26 students, answered they did not focus on certain subjects because (1) all were important to succeed and (2) they might need to amend other scores in other subjects. The other 23 students wrote they focused on certain subjects because (1) they might get more grades; (2) they preferred certain subjects to others; and/ or (3) certain subjects had more overall scores than others. Subjects do not have the same overall scores (See table 2.1). Some subjects have more scores leading students to focus more on them to succeed. Hence, subjects might determine the success and failure of the students at the official exams and scores might determine the preference of the students. The aim of the students is to accumulate grades and not to learn. This fact raises a question about the fairness of the official exams.

**Question (8): Which subject do you focus most on? Why?**

Interestingly 32 students named Math because (1) Math has the highest overall score among other subjects; (2) Math needed more time to focus on and study; and/ or (3) some students preferred Math to other subjects. Once again, answers reflected unfairness. The weighting of the subjects does not match with the allotted periods per week (See table 2.1 and table 2.2). Mathematics, for example, is given 5 periods per week yet is weighted out of 60 points, the highest next to Arabic. English, for example, is allotted 6 periods per week yet is calculated out of 40. Students choose to focus on a subject rather than the other based on the overall score and not how much knowledge it gives them.

**Question (9): Which subject do you study the least? Why?**

Students responded by selecting more than one subject. I calculated the three most recurring subjects. 24 students named civics because (1) civics is unimportant and boring; (2) students did not know how to study it or memorize it; (3) students hated the subject and/ or the teacher; or (4) its topics were taken from daily life. Eleven students chose history because (1) they are not good at memorization; and (2) they do not see the point of memorizing about people who lived and died centuries ago. Nine students wrote chemistry because they do not like the subject or the teacher and seven selected both English and Geography because they can succeed them without having to study. Again responses revealed threats to the fairness. Civics, history and geography do not have a high overall score or equal periods per week (See table 2.1 and table 2.2) and are believed to be unimportant by the students.

**Question (10): Do you think the break in May to prepare for the official exams will be beneficial? Why/ Why not?**

34 students answered “Yes” the break in May would be very beneficial because they would have lots of time to study and revise all the information they needed. Ten students thought May would not be enough and they would be pressured and stressed out to finish all studies before the official exams. Some students spoke that they would resort to private tutoring during the month of May to be able to cover the entire program required for the official exams. Answers dealt with the fairness of the official exams. Giving students a month to study would add pressure to their ability to condense the information within a short time.

### *Diamond ranking findings*

The diamond ranking consists of nine themes that were related to the students' experience throughout the year. Students were asked to prioritize their top and bottom theme justifying their selection. 49 students took the activity: 28 students in 2015-16 and 21 students in 2016-17. Fifteen students of both academic years chose "succeeding with a distinction" to be their top priority because (1) they wanted the whole society to talk about them; (2) they wanted to make their parents proud and happy. In 2016-17, four students wrote memorizing certain subjects as their bottom priority because they could not memorize and there was too much information to grasp; and four students wrote promoting independent learning and critical thinking as their bottom priority because they would forget everything right after the exam. Table 4.2 summarizes the results of the diamond ranking in both academic years.

**Table 4.2. Frequencies of top and bottom, Grade 9**

	Top (%)	Bottom (%)
Merely succeeding	16.66	16.66
Succeeding with a distinction	31.25	16.66
Memorizing certain subjects	2.08	12.5
Promoting your independent learning and critical thinking	8.33	8.33
Studying to the school tests	0	6.25
Enjoying the experience with classmates and teachers	6.25	12.5
Indifference except to succeed in the official exams	20.83	12.5
Challenging teachers', parents', and society's expectations	12.5	6.25
Waiting for rewards in return to good work	2.08	8.33

31.25% students of grade 9 chose 'Succeeding with a distinction' to be the top priority: study hard to compete other students; distinction allows social privilege; make parents happy and proud. Students are not driven intrinsically to succeed with distinctions.

20.83% chose 'Indifference except to succeed in the official exams' theme. Their justification is that official exams are more important than school tests. However, in the bottom theme(s), both 'Merely succeeding' and 'Succeeding with a distinction' were chosen by 16.66% of students. Those who chose 'Merely succeeding' justified by the importance of getting a distinction to be special. Those who chose 'Succeeding with a distinction' as the bottom theme argued that getting distinctions is unimportant and pointless. Success will ensure everyone's transfer to grade 10.

### **Findings from grade 12 students**

Students of grades 12 in the Humanities and Life Sciences Sections participated in essay writing, discussion, open-ended-question survey and diamond ranking. Data collection was in 2015-2016, 2016-17 and 2018-19.

#### ***In-class essays***

A total sample of 72 students of grades 12 Humanities and Life Sciences Sections took part in the essay writing. In 2018-19, the first phase of the data collection occurred in November, 2018. I returned the data to students in April 15, 2019 to give them the opportunity to change or add any further information based on their experience. Only one

student changed her opinion from “Official exams promote learning” in November to “official exams complicate life” in April.

Table 4.3 summarizes the attitude of the students towards the official exams as reflected in their essays and discussions.

**Table 4.3. Reflections of grade 12 students**

<b>School Year</b>	<b>Section</b>	<b>Promote</b>	<b>Complicate</b>
2015-16	Humanities	n= 4	n=8
	Life Sciences	n=7	n=7
2016-17	Humanities	n=6	n=6
	Life Sciences	0	n=7
2018-19	Humanities	n=5	n=5
	Life Sciences	n=5	n=12
<b>Total</b>		<b>27 students (37.5%)</b>	<b>45 students (62.5%)</b>

Interestingly, the percentage of students who believe official exams promote learning in grade 12 is almost the opposite from that in grade 9. Table 4.4 summarizes the most common themes of the students that emerged from their essays.

**Table 4.4. Common themes reflected from grade 12 writings**

<b>Common themes emerging from students' reflections</b>	<b># of students</b>
Outdated curriculum/Redundant subjects(history)/ many subjects/ tested in little	48
Pressure of teachers on students/ pressure on teachers by school & parents	36
Success = confidence and better rank in the society; failure = disrespect in society	33
Certificate preparing students to university/life/career	26
Unfairness ( curriculum/ exams determining future/ connections/ proctoring/ markers/ care for money/ different total score for subjects)	25
Memorization $\neq$ learning	20
Stir up fear/ phobia/ isolation/ worry/ scare/ stress/ misery/ suicidal thoughts	18
Learning by technology & life experiences not OE/ Pointless OE	14
Fear leading to work harder/ motif for a scholarship	14
Fairness: (separate smart students & underachievers/ same test (equality)/names kept anonymous/ different markers/ 2 sessions/ a month to study/ no cheating	12
Success at OE $\neq$ learning $\neq$ real-life learning/; Failure at OE $\neq$ stupidity	11
Wasting summer vacation	11
Postponing studying till May	7
Mistrust in the entire system	7
School exams being enough	5
Preparation for OE starts in Grades 8 & 11	2
Teachers using OE to get their rights	2

Students who reflected that official exams promote learning explained their benefits. One of the benefits some students wrote is that official exams increase students' self-confidence. Anwar states, "With the stress of the official exams, students remain focused and set goals to achieve success. Students become more dependent on themselves rather than the others." Rana also writes, "Official exams are important because they give the student self-confidence, independence of their own school and their own teachers." To Anwar, official exams reveal social fairness. He writes, "Official exams reveal the honest hard-working from the cheaters and those who take the shortcuts in life." Shadia also writes, "Students who suffer and study the whole years to get great marks have the right

to be special and feel like they are succeeding.” Moreover, students revealed that success in the official exams is an indicator to learning and an advance in life. Sareeta writes, “Learning process is about teaching the students the whole year and ending with official exams that determine who is able to continue without problems.” Shadia writes in this regard, “Official exams have many benefits on the students’ lives because they can make them responsible and stronger to face life.” Malik writes, “There are many who are getting good marks in official exams and because of these marks they get a scholarship in the university.”

Grade 12 students’ writings and discussions showed concerns and threats to validity, accountability and fairness of the official exams. While these students realized the importance to succeed in the official exams, they were well-informed and critical of the entire process of preparing them to succeed. For example, in 2015-16, and in the 12 Humanities section, there were two special needs students: Rabia and Amjad. Rabia was having a physical condition; I also learnt that Amjad was in a private school when he was in grade 9. The administration there suggested that he be listed as a special needs student so he wouldn’t have to sit for the official exams then, fail and affect the reputation of the school. Both Rabia and Amjad were opposing to the official exams. Rabia writes, “They may cause depression. You always start to have a feeling of tiredness... You should always take good marks.” She adds, “Official exams might also play an active role in harming teachers and obliging them to correct our exams. This would reduce their personal freedom and affect us negatively.” Amjad writes, “Official exams do not only



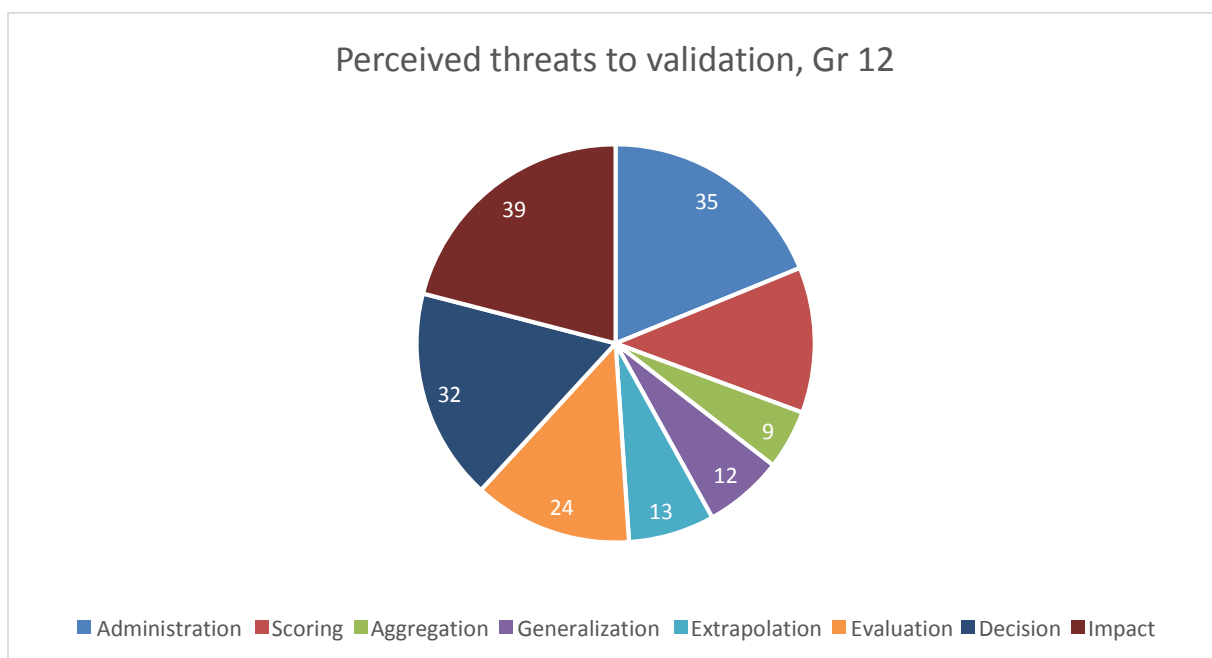
bring harm for students and teachers but also for the education in Lebanon. This point is a very serious and dangerous point. For example, that student that is studying for official exams is not studying to learn but to get high points and succeed and promote to the next level.” Rabia and Amjad succeeded the official exams. Rumors say that Rabia was assigned a teacher to each subject to help her write the answers. The assigned teachers would complete the answers without much consideration to her answers. To the surprise of her teachers, she scored relatively high grades in the official exams.

The impact of the society- particularly parents- on students and teachers was stressed by the students. Kassem writes, “Official exams complicate students’ life not because students are facing a very difficult problem but because parents and teachers make it look like it is your life or death decision.” To Ahmad, for example, “Students are the most individuals affected by official exams: their parents press them and always talk to them about these exams, so do the teachers, their school admin and the whole society sometimes.” He adds, “Under pressure, teachers may also tend to put pressure on their students which comes out with only negative results.” Lamia also writes, “Teachers are facing many problems due to the parents about their kids’ marks at the end of the official exams especially if their kids did not pass.” Hana writes, “Students spend the whole year in these grades preparing for the official exams...teachers and parents always try to put them in the general atmosphere to make them study and study the whole year for an exam whose duration is less than a week.” Habib highlights the fact that official exams limit the student to a number: the mark. He writes, “Official exams are a way to look at a student

by his mark. Marks become a priority to universities. However, do marks determine the IQ of this student?" Nermin questions the entire educational program, "The educational programs aim to create machines out of children, poor critical skills, stressed and anxious generations, unsocial creatures and even (considering how old the program is) citizens that are disconnected and very far from being up-to-date." She concludes, "As long as the variety of individuals and the diversity of personalities are rejected and punished in schools, I disown the results of any exam done on such terms."

### *Concerns to threats of validation*

Students' writings were analyzed for threats of validation links. I did not consider the discussions of students of Grade 12 Life Sciences Section in 2016-17. Figure 4.3 presents the threats.



**Figure 4.3. Perceived threats to validation, Gr 12**

Here are quotations that illustrate threats to each validation link. On Scoring, one student writes, “The grading is unfair because if a student notices that biology has the highest grades, s/he will only (or mainly) study biology while neglecting other subjects that s/he understands better.” Another student reflected on Aggregation, “The children are pushed all year for a two-hour exam that will never contain all what they have learned.” On Generalization, one student states, “The official exams are a flaw that has come along with an entirely messed up and weak educational programs...bringing us to the fact that has become a truth: successful students are unsuccessful in real life and vice versa.” Threatening Extrapolation, one student writes, “The official exams consider a very narrow and strict aspect of an individual’s abilities and tests them based on illogical and strict answer key.” Another student, on Evaluation, writes, “The chosen standards and the foundation of the Lebanese educational system are not legit. They are in need of major changes.” Demonstrating lack of Decision, one student writes, “I think that my curriculum should involve biology, chemistry, math, physics and English because the rest of the subjects will not do me any good in my academic future.” A threat to Impact, one writes, “They are not being fair with us...if we fail the official exams, we must repeat the whole school year...students pressure themselves to study to get a certain score and that leads to pressure and fear.”

### *Open-ended-question survey results*

57 students participated in answering the ten questions. Table 4.5 summarizes the number of participants throughout the three academic years.

**Table 4.5. Distribution in the open-ended-question survey**

Year	Class	# of students
2015-16	Humanities	10
	Life Sciences	0
2016-17	Humanities	13
	Life Sciences	7
2018-19	Humanities	10
	Life Sciences	17
<b>Total</b>		<b>57</b>

Interestingly, students of both tracks had the same attitude towards certain questions.

However, in some questions, students of life Sciences track differed from their peers in the Humanities. I grouped their answers when they coincided and pointed out the differences when these were detected.

### **Question (1): How did the teachers often teach you how to take the official exams?**

The majority, 43 students, answered that teachers solved sample and session questions so students would learn how to answer correctly. Also, 11 students answered that teachers would use the “official exams” to encourage them or threaten them so they would work harder; 3 students wrote that teachers would write school exams that were more difficult than official exams, and 2 students wrote that teachers simply did not care. Responses suggested that teachers’ practices threaten the accountability of the official exams. Using

sample questions, teachers are training students to limit their thinking and preparation to the information that is asked about more frequently in the official exams. Once again, students are guided by teachers to memorize and rote learn in order to succeed.

**Question (2): According to you, what was your teachers' main aim throughout the year?**

51 students thought that teachers' main aim was that students answer the questions correctly so they succeeded justifying that students' failure would lead the school and parents to blame the teachers; 7 students wrote that some teachers wanted to prepare students for life/ next level, and only one student wrote that some teachers want their students to love the subject. The justification suggests that teachers do not desire to be held accountable for the failure of the students in the official exams. They test-teach to avoid the pressure from the headmaster and/ or the parents. Responses reveal that official exams might threaten their accountability and teachers are driven to work and reduce the threat of failure at the official exams.

**Question (3): Do your preparations differ at the beginning of the year from the post mid-term exams from May? How?**

25 students answered that in May they would be more serious because official exams would be nearer and they would have enough time to study; 13 students wrote that since mid-term exams they have started to be more serious; 9 students answered that their preparations were the same throughout the year to maintain the same level; and 5 students wrote that they were more enthusiastic at the beginning of the year but lost interest when teachers went on several long strikes to demand their rights. Students expressed their

wish that the Minister of Education would cancel the exams altogether. Some responses revealed that students waited till May to revise and study all the information given throughout the year which raises a question about the validity of these exams.

**Question (4): Do you sense the official exams will reflect your learning done during this whole school year? Why/ Why not?**

30 students thought that official exams did not reflect any learning: (1) questions were limited, (2) their curriculum was not designed to reflect learning; and/or (3) success at the official exams did not mean learning. Also, 24 students believed that official exams reflected learning because success at the official exams meant learning. Responses revealed different understanding to the concept of learning. Responses also revealed a threat to the validity of the official exams: an old curriculum and redundant subjects.

**Question (5): Do you trust the results of the official exams will be fair and unbiased? Why/ Why not?**

35 students wrote that the results would not be fair: distrust in the markers/ mistrust in the system/ corrupted society/ cheating students; 18 students believed that the results of the official exams would be fair because (1) there would be more than one marker, (2) school exams were long and more difficult, (3) students learned how to answer correctly; and/ or (4) there were strict standards at the official exams; and two students were not sure because it all depended on the markers. Responses demonstrated the unfairness of the administration and scoring. Students were well-informed of the flaws that occur throughout the process of taking the exams. They based their evaluation of the fairness feature on the markers.

**Question (6): Do you depend on memorization? Why/ Why not?**

36 students-12 of whom are in the Life Sciences- answered they did because it helps them (1) to get more grades to succeed especially when they were better in analysis than memorization; (2) to fix ideas; and/ or (3) to compensate their failure at the scientific subjects. 17 students wrote they could not depend on memorization because (1) they were not good at it, (2) they forgot easily, and/or (3) memorization subjects had less total score. The responses showed unfairness in the official exams. Students desired to succeed irrespective of their strands. Memorization added to their cumulative score so they resorted to it. This is also a threat to the validity because the official exams do not test what the student is supposed to know during the year. Moreover, it threatens fairness. Those students who are capable of memorization have a more advantage to those who do not have the ability to memorize information.

**Question (7): Do you focus on certain subjects and ignore others? Why/ Why not?**

28 students wrote they focused on certain subjects: (1) some subjects had more overall score and hence were more important; (2) some subjects (History, civics and geography) were bonuses; (3) some students preferred certain subjects to others; and 27 students wrote that they did not focus on certain subjects because (1) they thought all subjects were important to get more grades/ distinction and/ or (2) sometimes they would need to recompense their failure in some subjects. Responses showed a threat to both fairness and validity of the official exams. Subjects were being dealt with depending on their scores. Students associated their importance to the points they would add to the cumulative scores at the official exams.

**Question (8): Which subject do you focus most on? Why?**

In the Humanities section, 25 students out of a total of 33 wrote they focus on Philosophy because it had the highest overall score and/ or it was the most important among subjects.

In the Life Sciences section, 20 students out of 24 wrote they focused on Math and/ or biology because they had the highest total scores. Once again, students linked the importance of a subject to its overall points at the official exams instead of the amount of information/ learning it might provide.

**Question (9): Which subject do you focus least on? Why?**

Students wrote more than one subject. In the Humanities Section, 12 students named biology because it has the least overall score. In the Life Sciences Section, a group of 11 students named civics, another group of 10 students named history, and another group of 10 students named geography. 14 students in the Humanities and Life Sciences sections chose civics and 9 students chose history. Their reasons are (1) Students are not interested at all; (2) they do not know the point of studying such subject especially when some information was wrong; (3) some subjects had the least average so it would be a waste of time and/or (4) they could pass them easily without studying. Subject weightings are not equal (See Table 2.1), results are unfair and students were adding up points. Questions at the official exams do not reflect all the information needed and thus invalidate the exams.



**Question (10): Do you think the break in May to prepare for the beneficial exams will be beneficial? Why/ Why not?**

48 students answered the break in May would be beneficial because they would prepare for the official exams away from the stress of the school. Nine students answered May wouldn't be enough for them to study everything they had taken throughout the year and needed more time. Students consider May to be a fair break but being able to accumulate the information throughout the year within a month while being asked about a part of the information raises a question towards the validity of these exams.

***Diamond ranking results***

73 students participated in the diamond ranking activity. Table 4.6 presents the results according to students' ranking.

**Table 4.6. Frequencies of first and last, Grade 12**

	Top (%)	Bottom (%)
Merely succeeding	8.21	19.17
Succeeding with a distinction	42.46	5.47
Memorizing certain subjects	1.36	26.02
Promoting your independent learning & critical thinking	16.43	2.73
Studying to the school tests	4.10	9.58
Enjoying the experience with classmates & teachers	2.73	4.10
Indifference except to succeed in the official exams	8.21	2.73
Challenging teachers', parents', & society's expectations	13.69	23.28
Waiting for rewards in return to good work	2.73	6.84

Table 4.6 shows that 42.46 % of the grade 12 students believe that ‘Succeeding with a distinction’ is a top priority: distinction allows them to get a good scholarship and enter a well-reputed university of their choice and choose the major they love; it determines their future; intrinsic challenge that “I can do everything I want”; and make parents happy and proud. 16.43% selected ‘Promoting independent learning and critical thinking’ as a top priority because: grades are not important; learning paves for a unique personality; learning and critical thinking enable the change (success and development) in the world. Sara writes, “If I understand reality and get my thinking straight, critical, and independent, no matter where I go or learn, I will succeed and live a develop life.”

13.69% wrote ‘Challenging teachers’, parents’ and society’s expectations’ in the top box: they want to be over with criticism and “shut everyone up”; teachers and parents believe they would fail the official exams. However, 26.02% placed ‘Memorizing certain subjects’ the least priority: schools to make us smarter not robotics; useless and a waste of time; memorize just for the distinction; inability to memorize. Comparing this to the answers in question (8) of the survey, we can infer that students were fully aware of the threats of memorization; however, they would choose to memorize to succeed. This impacts the validity and fairness of the exams: they do not test all the information that shapes the subject.

Moreover, 23.28% believe that ‘Challenging teachers’, parents’ and society’s expectations’ is the least important: success is for the person and not for anyone else; no interest in what others say or want. 19.17% students wrote ‘Merely succeeding’ as the

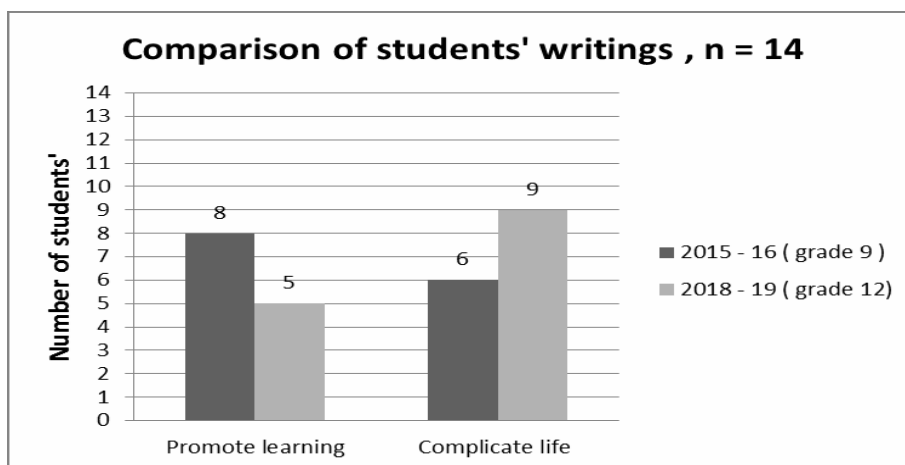
least important because: this is not a goal for special people who want successful life; wouldn't help at the university; wouldn't make anyone happy.

### **A Longitudinal study of grade 12 students' attitudes from Grade 9**

Grade 12 students in 2018-19 are 27 students, 14 of whom were in Grade 9 in 2015-16. I replicated the essay writing, the open-ended-question survey and the diamond ranking exercise in an attempt to trace back any changes in the attitudes with time and age.

#### ***Essay findings***

Figure 4.4 summarizes students' attitudes in the targeted academic years. Grade 12 students have nearly the same result: official exams complicate life.



**Figure 4.4.** A comparison of students' writings

In Grade 12, five students who used to be in Grade 9 three years back changed their attitude towards the official exams: they believed these exams complicate life. This shift

validates the trend above where grade 9 students tend to think that official exams promote learning; but when they get to grade 12, they find that that the exams are far more complicated. Two students who used to believe in Grade 9 that official exams complicate life changed their attitude: these exams promote learning and 7 students did not change their attitudes whether official exams promote or complicate life.

Majd and Marwan used to think that official exams complicate life. In grade 9, Majd wrote, “Official exams make students feel depressed and tired because of studying a big amount of subjects in a short time...Some students will pass from the work and answers of other students.” In grade 12, he focuses on the fact that official exams prepare students to pass through the next level, to the university yet he suggests that “the government should develop these tests by adding subjects that would affect our society in a good way and remove other subjects like history which is useless and worthless.” He also adds, “By getting a high mark, there would be a higher chance of acceptance by the important universities.” Marwan in grade 9 criticized the obligation to study redundant subjects that would be useless to his future. He also criticized the markers who would abide by a strict answer key and deduct grades unfairly. In grade 12, Marwan still focuses on the redundancy of many subjects that are useless and pointless but he also stresses the fact that official exams are his way to university.

Rima, for example, who used to think in grade 9 that “official exams classify the smart student from the not smart” and “if there were no official exams then there would be many students in grade 10 whose right is not to be in this grade” changed her attitude. She writes, “For example students in grade 9 do not know why they do those exams...they will be very nervous about them... official exams are not fair because some students who are smart might fail and similarly to the ones who failed at school might succeed the official exams.” Dora, in grade 9, thought that official exams “assess self-powers, help students to test their abilities and provide them with more and more knowledge to transfer them to higher levels.” In grade 12, she reflects, “So many lessons to understand and memorize from the first day of school... students start to take lessons to the end of school...they have no idea what to do in the official exams because of the whole quantity...” She adds, “There are enough exams in the school and it is enough for students (many exams, pressure, stress from different sources: parents, school, and society).” She also advises the MEHE to “give students a normal curriculum instead of giving them subjects we didn’t even want in our life as History and mathematics” and concludes “Official exams are increasing the level of stupidity among students and teachers.” Rola wrote in grade 9, “Official exams allow us to compare our abilities with others. It is beautiful when you know your level in your society even if it were not so high.” She added, “Official exams make one want to learn more because success and graduation encourage the student for wanting more and teach him/her to work hard.” In grade 12, Rola writes, “Official exams to me were a real sort of bad experience [even though she passed with a very good distinction] that is causing me to stress over this year

too!” She also adds, “From the beginning of the year, people, teachers and parents start giving one bad vibes and some words of warning with that language of sarcasm...the society wait for the official exams just to see who made it and who did not, like they are categorizing us according to the official exams.” Suzan in grade 9 writes, “These exams are done to test our knowledge and to give us more information...When we know that we studied a lot for these exams, we promote more confidence in ourselves.” She adds, “Sometimes the teachers start to show us that we are going to fail...we put in our mind that we are going to succeed just to show the teachers that they are wrong.” In grade 12, Suzan reflects, “It has been a real pressure for me because this way of studying is very harsh. We are not robots and we can’t control everything...So imagine how we are being damaged inside? Everyone keeps screaming on us saying that we don’t have time for playing. We just have to study so we could pass.” She also writes, “The bad thing about these exams is that they determine our future and they are the only way to pass through college. The official exams are exams of all subjects that we don’t even care for. At college we are only going to study for the career that we want to choose...the things that we learned for official exams will not be important.” Dina, in grade 9 wrote, “Official exams reflect our rate of knowledge...we must do these exams to review what we have forgotten, to renew our information, and to stick with them, not only to solve the exams but to leave them in our mind for the next year...They determine smart from achievers.” In grade 12, Dina writes, “Eleven years in academic education but the problem is that in these years we didn’t seek for education...we just went to school because we felt that we had to, a routine that everyone should do...Why do we take all this? Are we going to use

it in our life? We are memorizing our curriculum, learning how to memorize rules (regarding if it's history or math) and copy-paste them on paper." She also writes, "All of us are smart at something and it is not fair on the side of the ministry to do official exams letting all these different types of smart people go through the same exam...Official exams are determining our fate in a very unfair way."

I also examined the reflections of the students who did not change their opinions towards official exams to see if their reasons differed. Three students still think that official exams promote learning. In both classes, Gina for example focuses on the positive stress that preparations for the official exams provide leading to more responsibility and self-confidence after they succeed. In grade 9, Rama believed that official exams "test our knowledge" and "let us know how good we are or we are not." She adds, "There are a number of commercial schools that let students pass by money...official exams show how many students actually deserve to pass." In grade 12, Rama and Bob insist on the importance of the official exams as a shift to another level. Rama writes, "Also official exams for grade 12 are more important because they show if this student can go to college now or he is not ready yet...they also show if the student deserves a scholarship" and concludes, "If you want the best you need to fight for it." Bob in grades 9 and 12 focuses on the importance of these exams as a shift to something "new." In grade 9, he focuses on the importance to get high distinctions. He wrote in grade 9, "Your society will look to you as a smart one and will be proud of having a student who is smart." In

grade 12, he writes, “Official exams have their joy so succeeding in them is not the as succeeding in school exams. Also getting a high distinction promotes the student psychologically so he feels he is ready for the next day.” When I asked him if he feels official exams are fair, he said, “They are. I am not like the others. I could get high distinctions so official exams give me my right.”

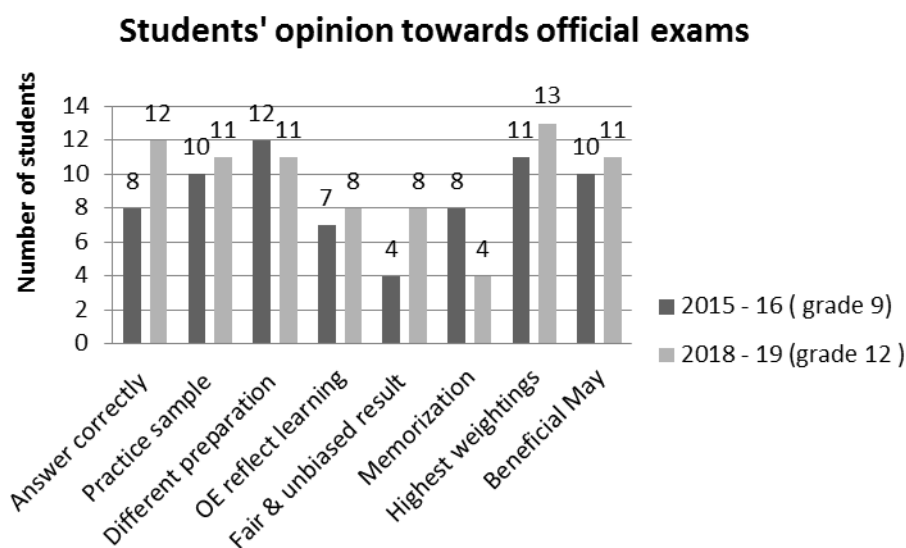
Five students still believe that official exams complicate life. In grade 12 they all concluded that official exams should be cancelled. In grade 9, Faqih, for example, wrote that official exams “test memorization” only and not thinking. He concludes that “these exams are not good; they are ways to waste time.” In grade 12, Faqih criticizes the entire system calling it “as wrecked as a junky old car.” He continues, “The curriculum and the subjects for each class are not well organized” listing the subjects that he should study in the life sciences section: biology, chemistry, math, physics, and English only: “The rest of the subjects won’t do me any good in my academic future.” He also objected to the “unfair grading” because when “biology has the highest grades, he/she [student] will only (or mainly) study biology while neglecting others.” He concludes, “The biggest idiot here is me because I take time out of my life knowing that in the eyes of the government I am just a puppet that has no opinion.” Another student, Aya, still asks the same question, “Why should we do the official exams?” insisting in both grades that information is redundant and pressure from teachers and parents damages their self-confidence. Sara in grades 9 and 12 tackled the educational aim. In grade 9 she writes, “If schools created



some kind of educational system which not only valued and taught academic basics but also taught kids the important lessons of life...” In grade 12 she writes, “Official exams are being done in an outdated way. High schoolers in Lebanon are forced to study in an obsolete curriculum that the ministry provided and goes back to 1997... We have technology that wasn’t available 23 years ago... How is it that we are still learning the same old information that won’t benefit us?” Hana insists that official exams caused/cause stress and anxiety especially during the month of May. In grade 12, she writes that students should only study subjects that are beneficial for their major in the university “instead of wasting time on subjects that are not beneficial.”

### ***Open-ended-question survey***

13 of the 14 students participated in both targeted years. Figure 4.5 summarizes the answers according to the most recurrent answer.



**Figure4.5:** A comparison of answers to open-ended survey

Interestingly, the thirteen students who participated in answering the questions in grade 9 did not have much of a change in attitude towards official exams as they grew into grade 12 students. Checking students' answers to whether the results of the exam would be fair and unbiased, grade 12 students considered that the exam would cover topics that they are being trained to answer and hence they will answer correctly and succeed -associating success to fairness. With regard to memorization, students do not depend on memorization because they focus on the subject that has the maximum average- giving importance to the grade not the information per se. This threatens the fairness of the exams. Grade 12 students wrote that they focus on subjects that might get them more and higher grades- a threat to the fairness and the validity of the exams.

*Diamond ranking*

Tracing the 13 students of grade 12 back to grade 9, results revealed that their top priority did not change. Their desire is to succeed with distinction. Reasons are different though. In 2018-19, distinction gets them a scholarship to the university and major. In 2015-16, distinction was a way to please their families and to get them a high rank in the society. As they grew to grade 12, the impact of society diminished.

**Table 4.7. Frequencies of top and bottom, grade 9**

	Top (%)	Bottom (%)
Merely succeeding	0	23.07
Succeeding with a distinction	46.15	0
Memorizing certain subjects	0	15.38
Promoting independent learning & critical thinking	15.38	0
Studying to the school tests	0	0
Enjoying the experience with classmates & teachers	7.69	7.69
Indifference except to succeed in the official exams	15.38	38.46
Challenging teachers', parents' & society's expectations	15.38	7.69
Waiting for rewards in return to good work	0	7.69

**Table 4.8. Frequencies of top and bottom, grade 12**

	Top (%)	Bottom (%)
Merely succeeding	7.69	15.38
Succeeding with a distinction	53.84	7.69
Memorizing certain subjects	0	15.38
Promoting independent learning & critical thinking	15.38	0
Studying to the school tests	0	15.38
Enjoying the experience with classmates & teachers	7.69	7.69
Indifference except to succeed in the official exams	0	0
Challenging teachers', parents' & society's expectations	7.69	30.76
Waiting for rewards in return to good work	7.69	7.69

'Succeeding with a distinction' continued to be their top theme. As students of grade 9 proceeded academically, their choice was confirmed: 53.84% in grade 12 selected the same theme. Their main reason was to get a scholarship that enables them to choose a well-reputed university and a major they love. However, the first bottom priority used to be 'Indifference but to succeed in the official exams' where it was chosen by 38.46%. It became 'Challenging teachers', parents' & society's expectations' in grade 12: Success belongs to them and no one else.

#### *Consistency in attitude towards teaching practices and official exams goal*

The answers of grade 9 and 12 students to the open-ended survey and the diamond ranking showed consistency regarding their descriptions of teachers' practices, the fairness of the results, certain subjects, and the need of the break in May. Students

revealed that teachers practice didactic pedagogy where students depend on their teachers to answer correctly. It also revealed that the fairness of the results of the official exams depends on the markers and the mood. In the diamond ranking activity, the majority of students of both grades 9 and 12 wrote 'Succeeding with a distinction' theme a top priority. They need to accumulate points for social acceptance from parents and society or for a better opportunity at the university.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

The results of the students' responses revealed some basic elements. Students' attitudes towards the official exams changed between grades 9 and 12. Moreover, teachers' in-class practices revealed prescriptive teaching approach that enhances rote learning and memorizing to accumulate points instead of assessing learning. Classroom practices and learning approaches demonstrated threats to validity, accountability and fairness of the official exams. Based on the findings and the literature review, I present the main themes.

#### *Changes in attitudes from grade 9 to 12*

The essay writings showed that the vast majority of grade 9 students perceive official exams as beneficial and a tool to promote learning. They argued that these exams are easier than school tests and that the results are more precise than the school tests and, hence, fairer. They also described the stress related to preparing for the grade 9 official exams as beneficial because it helps one become more of a responsible and self-confident citizen. The students' writings did not include any specific examples of how official exams could promote learning. However, the minority of students(34%) who did describe official exams as a matter that complicates life referred to memorization as a pedagogy that prepares them for the Brevet exam but does not promote learning. They also started feeling a level of stress that does major harm to everyone involved and found the subjects

redundant and outdated curriculum as pointless. On the other hand, the vast majority of grade 12 students did not perceive the benefits of the official exams. They argued that what they perceived as the outdated curriculum, redundant subjects, limited questions that lead to memorization and pressure from teachers are not factors that promote learning even if students succeed at the official exams.

The open-ended responses through the essay writings showed a distinct difference in discourse about the official exam between the grades 9 and 12 students. Just over 57% of students in grade 9 described official exams as beneficial to learning. However, nearly 65% of the grade 9 students who found the Brevet positive **and** participated in the writing assignment three years later in grade 12 appeared to have changed their attitude by explaining how the official exams have negatively complicated lives.

Reem wrote, “Official exams to me were a real sort of bad experience that is causing me to stress over this year, too!” and she narrated how she forgot her examination card at home three years ago when she was sitting for the Brevet and the panic that she had to go through. Jane also reflects on how she did not study for the Brevet although nearly everyone was pressing her to do so and she got ‘good’ distinction. This reveals that grade 12 students’ capacity to critically reflect on their schooling is because most of these students had experienced preparing for the Brevet, took the Brevet and prepared for the

Terminale. Their personal experience would really inform these students and enable them to be critically reflective to their learning and schooling practices.

### *Threats to fairness and validity*

Some of grade 9 students and most of the grade 12 students referred to cheating as a main reason that threatens fairness and validity of the official exams. Vlaardingerbroek, Shehab and Alameh (2011) found that the personal relationships that arise between students and invigilators inside the small examination halls raise the likelihood of cheating. Their experiences also raise questions of equal opportunities. Not all students have the same opportunity to enter the university of their choice and get to select the major of their interest. Accumulating grades could become their primary concern and they could resort to memorization, cheating, and buying certificates.

Heyneman (2004) lists “equality of access to educational opportunities” as one of the indicators to a corruption-free educational system (p. 638). In countries affected by conflict, corruption is institutionalized in many of their systems. For example, the Lebanese culture justifies cheating as “working together to navigate a difficult task” (McCabe, Feghali & Abdallah, 2008, p. 464). Questions are developed based on the needs of the dominant group and not on the students’ and teachers’ interests (Gipps, 1995; Shohamy, 2000). In the 2017-18 official exams, for example, one question in the first session in chemistry was an exercise in one of the textbooks used by private schools.



So, students who had access to the book prior the exam were more privileged than the other students.

### *Old framework of education*

Students' writings and responses reflected on a number of learning and teaching practices that may hinder the educational aims of the 1997 national curriculum. Grade 9 and 12 students criticized the outdated curriculum and old and boring textbooks they are forced to study in that might make them "disconnected and very far from being up-to-date." This might lead to threats to fairness and accountability.

The official exams are designed to assess students based on the curriculum being implemented. Hence, in Lebanon these exams will be designed on the 'New Framework of Education in Lebanon' which goes back to 1997 (Shuayb, 2016, p. 4). It is then only legitimate to say that the curriculum is relatively old and the textbooks might contain outdated and wrong information. Moreover, the curriculum did not take the needs of the students and the teachers. It was developed by team members who were appointed "based on their religious affiliations and connection because the positions as heads of committees and committee members in charge of constructing the new books were all very well paid" (Khoury, 2015, p. 80 ). None of the members who developed the curriculum had a degree in curriculum development (Ibid). "Electoral logic" (Ibid, p. 86)

leads to incomplete policies. In 2010, educational reforms were being attempted but they were politically driven and had no consideration to professional opinions (Karami, 2014; Shuayb, 2018). Political needs surpass the students' needs and the educational program reflects the needs of the dominant group (Gipps, 1995).

Moreover, some students of grade 12 expressed their helplessness and resentment towards the governmental policies in general. Sarah, for example, criticizes the curriculum and the official exams and concludes her writing, "But who am I supposed to blame? We don't even have a government." [At the time of the writing, the cabinet of ministers in Lebanon was not assigned.] Another student wrote, "But the biggest idiot here is I, because I take time out of my life knowing that in the eyes of the government I am just a puppet that has no opinion." Esraa wrote, "To be clear, nothing can be done, no opinion can be given in our country" and "the slogan of change needs to be forgotten." Such a passive attitude might threaten the notion of citizenship and national identity of the young citizens which are the main aims of the Lebanese curriculum. McLaughlin (1992) refers to this as minimal notion of citizenship which is characterized by "a legal status, a citizen-of-the-state fulfilling law-abiding duties and a concern for a particular community" (cited in Akar (2012)).

### ***Accountability, instruction orientated towards rote learning and memorization***

Nearly all students responded that teachers' main aim and concern is to teach them to answer questions of the official exams correctly through practicing sample tests and

sessions. One student even expressed her disappointment, “We are memorizing our curriculum, learning how to memorize rules-regardless if it is history, math, etc.-and copy paste them in exams, on paper.” In addition, 36 of the 57 students of grade 12 who participated in the study confirmed that they resort to memorization as a bonus to accumulate more grades and 27 of the 49 students in grade 9 answered they depend on memorization stating the same reason. Moreover, my informal observations in the teachers’ lounge reflected a confirmation to students’ answers: teachers of grades 9 and 12 orient students to the exam.

One explanation to test-teaching might be that the high-stakes official exams assess students, teachers and schools (Madaus, 1988; Osta, 2007). Therefore, official exams measure teachers’ accountability of student achievement. Teachers take the performance of students at the official exams as a measure of their success or failure: success of students in subjects reflects success of teachers. If the percentage of success is less than 50% in a certain subject, the teacher of that subject is typically blamed. In addition, after the results of the official exams are announced by MEHE, the principal of the school would send an email to all teachers with the percentages of students who failed and passed in each of the subjects in Grade 9 and Grade 12. When the official exams are announced, graduation parties become competition ceremonies among schools of the region. Success at the official exams projects the school’s success.

Moreover, what makes teachers practice test-teaching is the fact that official exams follow fixed specifications and format. “Similar stereotyped tests” are being adopted over years and an “assessment culture” is being practiced (Osta, 2007, p.193). Teachers start to anticipate what might be assessed and they teach accordingly (O’Day & Smith, 1993 cited in Osta, Ibid). According to informal discussions with members in the Departement d’Orientation Pedagogique et Scolaire (DOPS), new specifications aimed at increasing the scores of the students without any consideration to higher-level thinking skills. They dealt with the external format of the exams only and did not provide any essential change in the content to promote learning. Appointed teachers at DOPS visit schools twice a year to train the teachers on the new specifications without any constructive evaluation and follow-up to the teacher’s practices inside the classroom. This practice threatens content validity: questions should represent the content of the domain and not limited to a part of it (Madaus, 1988).

Moreover, a minority of students memorize to pass the exams because of their weakness in Arabic. Some students in my school for example used to live abroad, in South and Latin America, and hence do not have full command of the Arabic language. Geography, history, philosophy and civics are provided in Arabic only for students in the public schools. Once again, this puts some students at a disadvantage because of the language. The language of the tests hinders their understanding of the questions and thus provides unfair assessment to their understanding and learning.

*An assessment cultural of accumulating points*

Students' writings reflected how teachers press them to work harder to succeed in the Brevet and Terminale. 28 students out of 57 in grade 12 and 23 students out of 49 in grade 9 stated that they focus on subjects that have the highest weightings. Informal observations in the teachers' lounge reveal how teachers of certain subjects such as Math, biology, physics, philosophy boast about the difficulty of their subjects based on the weightings. Teachers' shouting or destroying the morals as students revealed and the pressure to get accepted into a good university drive students to focus on accumulating points. Students are led to believe that the subject(s) that have high cumulative scores are the most important. The weightings of the subjects are not equal (See tables 2.1 and 2.2). Subjects that are given higher ratio scores in tests are seen as more important or high-stakes (Madaus, 1998) and, consequently, teachers voice the importance of their subject(s) and exert more stress on their students. Emphasis on learning high-stakes subjects is an example of how the measure of accountability through standardized tests can hinder learning. Not taking into consideration any differentiated learning and individualistic interests, the education system lacks fairness. The unfairness in the distribution of subjects and weights was clearly criticized by some students. One student wrote, "Biology has the highest grades, so a student only, or mainly, studies biology while neglecting other subjects that s/he understands better." In addition, memorization was adopted by students for more grades only irrespective of the information the subjects

provide. History, civics, and geography are being treated as bonus subjects although students expressed that they do not like them. In Geography, for example, 8 grade points out of 20 depend on analyzing documents which include multiple choice, matching, true/false statements while 12 grade points depend on memorization. Based on the experience of a geography teacher, the questions on the documents presented in the official exams are easy and more of a copy-paste from documents rather than analyzing. This reveals a threat to the unfairness and validity of the subjects at the official exams. According to Shepard (2000), “Under intense political pressure, test scores are likely to go up without a corresponding improvement in student learning. In fact, distortions in what and how students are taught may actually decrease students’ conceptual understanding” (p. 9). In the case of this public school and most likely other public and private schools in Lebanon, learning per se does not matter, but the accumulation of points does.

### ***Inclusion being a monopoly in the official exams***

35 students of 57 who participated in the sample in grade 12 and 18 out of 49 in grade 9 believe that the official exams are not fair. The MEHE always announces that the official exams are fair where all students sit for the same exam at the same time and is treated equally irrespective of religion, political affiliations or social status. Field, Kuczera and Pont (2007) tackle the two dimensions of equity: fairness and inclusion. Equity coined as “equality of opportunities” or “equivalent treatment” provides social protection to disadvantaged groups. Education systems, in-class practices and resourcing are three

basic features to equity which impacts fairness. Practices, however, prior and post the official exams demonstrate threat to fairness. In my experience, two students diagnosed with special needs were in grade 12. They were treated equally with their peers: same instruction, same assignment and same exam. One of them was having a critical health condition yet our public school did not have convenient accommodation to her. She was suffering and her classmates were not accepting her. Inclusion was not successful. She was clearly experiencing difficulty in accommodating to the environmental and academic conditions. It was unfair to her and her classmates. In the official exams, and because she was classified as special needs student, the ministry assigned teachers who were supposed to listen to her answers and write them down. Instead, the teachers were writing the answers for her. She succeeded. Again, this is unfair to her and to her peers. The results are in threats to accountability and fairness.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion and Implications

This study has investigated the experiences and attitudes of public school students in the West Bekaa towards the official exams. It examined how students of grades 9 and 12 reflect on the validity, accountability and fairness of the official exams. Through essay writing, open-ended-question survey, diamond ranking and discussions, students' responses revealed consistent approaches to schooling and learning in preparing for the exams.

Some of the students' reflections revealed a critical attitude towards the Lebanese curriculum, pedagogy, official exams and society. Students' responses to the questions of the open-ended survey emphasized the classroom practices that teach students to a stereotyped test. Building their pedagogy on what is tested is important, teachers practice sample tests and sessions to teach their students. Even though the primary aim/ concern of the teachers is to have their students succeed, their classroom practices suggest a superior attitude of teachers: they teach their students to answer correctly the official exams. Such a traditional attitude of teachers as the sole knowledge holders (Akar, 2012) who are responsible to transfer their knowledge to students hinders students' critical thinking and makes them mere receptors of information. The traditional roles of teachers and students are being emphasized by the official exams.



Moreover, as students reflected, the conception of teachers that their success is being measured by how many of their students succeed and not how much learning attained shows disruptions in the pedagogy. If the ultimate goal is to succeed at the official exams, then it is only legitimate that teachers shape their students' behavior to achieve success through rote learning, memorization and/or cheating depriving them from practicing active learning and promoting their critical thinking skills that might enable them to enhance life-long learning. Their mentions of suggestions to improve the official exams practices suggest awareness to what they are passing through. Several students, for example, recommended updating the curriculum, implementing differentiated learning, having equal weightings of subjects, training teachers to teach to life and not only to teach to what is prescribed in the textbooks. In addition, the feelings of resent and helplessness towards the governmental practices reveal a hierarchical policy on the part of the government which might negatively influence the goals of social cohesion and national identity stated by the 1997 curriculum. Teachers' practices and students' approaches are a threat to accountability, fairness and validity of high-stakes official exams.

The theoretical implications of the findings allow us to focus on three main areas of reform. The first is related to the need to change or uproot our curriculum based on studies that assess the threats of our content-based curriculum on the teaching-learning process of our students. This might ensure accountability. Exam questions should be

aligned with the objectives stated in an integrated well-written curriculum to ensure validity. Subjects must have equal weightings. The entire examination process should be assessed to ensure fairness to candidates. The second area is associated to the first: It is only fair that our young learners need to be treated as independent and responsible citizens. Their voices should be heard in matters that concern them primarily.

Consequently, their attitudes towards the curriculum, official exams and pedagogies need to be valued and considered. The third is related to teacher recruitment in the public sector. There is a necessity to progressively train and assess teachers based on research studies that promote practical active learning in the classrooms and develop a life-learning citizen instead of traditional pedagogies that do more harm than good. Teachers in the public sector should be in constant development and should be assessed every five years. Teachers might be held accountable only when there is integration of the curriculum, textbooks, pedagogy, and assessment.

Analysis of the students' responses to inquiries about their reflections towards the official exams brings to the table further discussions that require more research. The study was conducted in a public school in West Bekaa of the same religious denomination and hence it cannot be generalized. I suggest further research be done in public schools in other areas of Lebanon to compare students' attitudes. I also suggest studies be conducted in private schools to investigate their students' perceptions towards the learning and

schooling approaches in preparing for the official exams. Our young learners are citizens and they have complete rights.

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