

The Negative Face of the Lebanese Education System

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Lebanon is usually, very justifiably moreover, well known for its famous and good standard universities and schools in the Middle East, so much that numerous families over the region send their children to study in the Cedar country. The first universities date back to the 19th century, such as the American University of Beirut in 1866 or the University of Saint Joseph in 1877, and the quality of their education is praised and recognized all around the world. Besides, Beirut has been named World Book Capital 2009, notably for its dynamic program for promoting books and emphasizing cultural diversity and dialogue. The right to education is enshrined in the Lebanese constitution. Lebanon has also committed itself to the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to provide an education of quality. Moreover, the Cedar country is close to fulfilling the second Millennium Development Goal related to education¹, such as UNESCO's data shows us:

- 82% of girls and 83% of boys are in primary school.
- 77% of girls and 69% of boys are in secondary school.
- 52% of the populations of tertiary age are in tertiary education, and with a majority of woman, for example in 2006, 54.5% of university graduates were female and 45.5% were male².
- 89.6% of adults and 98.7% of youth are literate³.

Nevertheless, the Lebanese education system through its history has not been able to lessen the sectarian divisions and the social inequalities that affect the Lebanese society, but quite the opposite has reproduced and reinforced these elements which lead to the quasi collapse of the Lebanese state during the civil war and political instability until nowadays. The Lebanese civil war was of course embedded in regional and international conflicts, but sectarian identities, conflicting conceptualizations of national citizenships and loyalties and the structure of the distribution of political power were central issues both in the outbreak of the conflict in 1975 and in the process of political reconstruction following the 1989 Taef peace agreement until today⁴. The UNESCO Innocenti Research Center has moreover argued that destructive educational practices, when combined with such causal factors as economic tensions, poor governance, and perceived threats to cultural identity, may fuel suspicion, hostility, ethnic intolerance and violence⁵. In 2000, during the World Economic Forum in Dakar, a study recognized that "weakness in educational structure and content may have contributed to civil conflict" and that "an education system that reinforces social fissures can represent a dangerous source of conflict."⁶ Lebanon's education, as we will notice, definitely falls under this category.

The education system and organization is linked to Lebanon's history and its heritage, particularly following the massacres of 1860 and the establishment of the semi autonomous mutasarriffiyya of Mount Lebanon in 1861, which modeled the current political discourse. Ultimate authority of this latter was still maintained in the hands of the Ottoman rulers who appointed the head of the entity, while a council was formed to assist him based on the different sects of the province, each one of them supported by a foreign power. These events marked a new course in the public space by a "discourse of sectarianism" which "permeated all facets of administration law, education, and finally, with the establishment of the Lebanese Republic, the state"⁷. The meaning of religion was severely altered in the multiconfessional society of Mount Lebanon because it

emphasized sectarian identity as the only viable marker of political reform and the only authentic basis for political claims⁸. The partition of Mount Lebanon laid the framework for a divided and sectarian social development. The insertion of modern forms of schooling, which existed before any form of central state control, also permitted for the beginning of an increasingly sectarian institutionalization of knowledge⁹, whereas before the society was structured by elite hierarchies who regarded the control over religious and secular knowledge as a way to maintain their superiority. The spread of European and American mission schools weakened vastly the traditional control from the elites over the landscape of knowledge and therefore the societal order. In the mid 1920s most of the schools in the country were private and religious¹⁰, whereas only 5 to 10% of students were in public schools.

At the end of the Ottoman Empire and the World War I, the State of Greater Lebanon, within its current international borders was established by France in 1920. The French will reinforced the confessional political system inherited from the Ottoman Era by distributing the power between the various communities based on their respective demographic weight, which will besides lead to the National Pact of 1943.

The French government, such as future Lebanese governments, was not able to centralize the educational system because of political and religious opposition. Legislation relative to education tended on the opposite to strengthen confessional autonomy as we can notice with the Article 8 of the 1926 Lebanese constitution, which acknowledged freedom of education to confessional communities, and this has been confirmed in the 1943 constitution. Each community was therefore granted the possibility to organize their own schools, and since that time, the existence of parallel systems and diversified curricula has characterized school education in Lebanon. The successive Lebanese governments were actually unable to impose a common curriculum to private schools and to compete with their hegemony on society. Numerous measures were taken to increase the role of the Ministry of Education following the independence in 1943, such as to centralize the educational system, to control or supervise the private schools and encourage public schools and try to create a more secular education, but unfortunately until today there is a general consensus that education policies continue to reflect confessional cleavages¹¹.

The civil war stunted the weak development of public education and witnessed a chaotic boom in various kinds of private institutions.

The Lebanese educational system is currently facing two major problems: the influence of sects on education and, generally speaking, in society; and secondly, social and quality disparities between schools and regions. Firstly, the disproportionate role and importance given to the sects and their leaders on a wide range of issues in societies, going from their opposition to the civil marriage to their obstruction in the curricula education, is clearly an obstacle to change. At the same time, the collusion between political and religious leaders over the freedoms guaranteed by the constitution indicates the level of risk that political sectarianism represents to nation and citizen equally. The Lebanese parliament for example ratified a newly revised law concerning the organization of one of the sects stating that: it is the prerogative of the head of the religious community to "give prior permission to all books, visual and audio publications that address religious ideology of the sect and to prosecute offenders before the relevant authorities."¹² The sect which is normally a guarantee for freedom of belief therefore becomes a potential hindrance to freedom of belief itself with this law. Following the civil war, the educational challenge was to mould a new generation of Lebanese youth with a common national identity based on a set of shared social and civic values and an acceptance of the pluralistic and unified nature of the Lebanese society. In the postwar educational reform, only three out of the nine

reforms covered were implemented, namely the curricula, textbooks and teacher training¹³. The educational context has therefore remained largely unchanged since the end of the civil war with such a limited application of the reforms. Schools are actually still teaching books published in 1968 for secondary classes and 1970 for primary and intermediate classes¹⁴. Notably, the opposition of religious groups on several subjects has prevented the emergence of new united curricula. For example, in relation to history curricula, sects have advocated for teaching it from their own perspective and were the main opponents of a new single textbook. Their opposition was also rooted in economic interests and was not only ideological because until now, especially for private schools, more than six history textbooks series are used¹⁵. One unified history text would have clear market loss consequences for traditional publishers.

Sects' leaders were also successful after the civil war to impose religious education in public schools, which was traditionally absent before the war, despite the opposition of many secularists in Lebanon. Two separate textbooks for each faith were created for each grade with no information about the other religion; actually the writing of a common book for Christian and Muslim students based on common spiritual values was refused by the sects¹⁶.

As mentioned before, the dominant model of school in Lebanon are the private schools, up to 60%, which have a long history of using textbooks for religious teachings. Charbel Antoun carried out a research on seventy seven textbooks employed for religious teachings in private Lebanese schools. Few results are significant:

- The language used in these textbooks was discriminatory based between "us and them", "our faith and their faith", "Christian and Muslim".
- When mention was made of the other religion, it was not done in the service of studying more about it but to show superiority over it.
- Emphasis on teaching religious dogma led the textbook authors and teachers to discriminate between different sects of the same religions.
- Indoctrination was prevalent in the textbooks materials¹⁷.

These results show that promotion of religious teachings as it was made in the private sector was not a tool to build social unity among the Lebanese youth.

Lebanon has turned into a dual system on a social level, in which private education has been sought mostly by the middle and upper middle income groups, with the exception of free private education which is focused on the very poor, while public education has attracted lower middle income and poor social groups¹⁸. The quality between private and public education exhibit significant differences when it comes to quality, which besides prompted many families to resort to private schooling even if it implied an important increase in expenditures. A study shows that nine out of 1000 students from public schools obtain the baccalaureate without having to repeat one or more years; while as many as 255 out of 1000 from private schools reach this level¹⁹. The lack of confidence in the public education system can be observed through the civil servants, who up to 90% send their children to private schools, whose education are moreover financed by the government²⁰. This latter actually become not only a provider of public educational services, but a source of financing for the private schools. Up to 19% of public spending on education was channeled through scholarships to these children²¹. In addition, the quality of teachers, concerning their educational attainment, average age, competence in their subject, etc., has been lower in public schools, especially presecondary schools²².

Lebanon is also characterized by regional disparities in education attainment level according to the socio-economic development of the region, for example illiteracy rates are higher in the most deprived areas such as the Bekaa (14.45%) or South Lebanon (12.25%). Central urban areas have generally better results in relation

to educational attainment. Due to deficiencies in the public educational system, many low income individuals are denied a quality education, for example 15% of the poor are illiterate, 43.62% have only reached elementary level schools and 3.24% have reached a university level²³. Concerning Lebanese female, who have high levels of educational achievement as we have seen above up to 55% of university graduates; this is not being translated into higher female participation in the labor force where they only represent 19.6²⁴%.

In conclusion, education in Lebanese history and until now has unfortunately been an instrument to reproduce, and very often reinforce, social and sectarian divisions, despite efforts from few through time to change the status quo such as President Fouad Chehab. The sects have indeed considered education as a means of preserving and reproducing group identity. The Lebanese state was never able to build a public education system able to compete with the private schools supported by the sects, indeed short term political interests have shown to prevail over the concern of the future state. While many of the results suggest that political socialization is essentially the result of family and community affiliation and realm on which schooling appears to have very little influence²⁵, but the education system certainly consolidates this division, giving it theoretical cover. Schools and universities could advocate for more tolerant attitudes toward different religious groups, the strengthening of common values and a shared sense of national identity that oppose those the Lebanese citizens receive from their sectarian and local cultures. Finally, Lebanon's future is linked to reforms in education and in the institutions of the state, not in five or 10 years but now! The slogan "reforms the minds and souls before the texts" is nonsense; the current institutions and education system are reproducing the social and sectarian division on a daily and systematic basis. The emergency is demonstrated every day, each delay prevents Lebanese to live peacefully among each other and build a new state through a renovated education. Then Lebanon would really become more than a country "a message" as cited by the Pope Jean Paul II.

Notes

1. PNUD report, Lebanon toward a citizen state, 2009, p 130
2. PNUD report, Lebanon toward a citizen state, 2009, p 58
3. http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=121&IF_Language=eng&BR_Country=4220&BR_Region=40525
4. Frayah N.; Developing Curriculum as a Means to Bridging national divisions in Lebanon; in Education, Conflict and social cohesion edited by Tawil S. and Harley A.;2004, 163
5. Education, Conflict and social cohesion edited by Tawil S. and Harley A.;2004, p 5
6. Education, Conflict and social cohesion edited by Tawil S. and Harley A.;2004, p 5
7. Frayah N.; Developing Curriculum as a Means to Bridging national divisions in Lebanon; in Education, Conflict and social cohesion edited by Tawil S. and Harley A.;2004, 165
8. Frayah N.; Developing Curriculum as a Means to Bridging national divisions in Lebanon; in Education, Conflict and social cohesion edited by Tawil S. and Harley A.;2004, 166
9. Frayah N.; Developing Curriculum as a Means to Bridging national divisions in Lebanon; in Education, Conflict and social cohesion edited by Tawil S. and Harley A.;2004, 170
10. PNUD report, Lebanon toward a citizen state, 2009, p 130
11. Frayah N.; Developing Curriculum as a Means to Bridging national divisions in Lebanon; in Education, Conflict and social cohesion edited by Tawil S. and Harley A.;2004, 172
12. PNUD report, Lebanon toward a citizen state, 2009, p 23
13. Frayah N.; Developing Curriculum as a Means to Bridging national divisions in Lebanon; in Education, Conflict and social cohesion edited

by Tawil S. and Harley A.;2004, 181

14. PNUD report, Lebanon toward a citizen state, 2009, p 28

15. Frayah N.; Developing Curriculum as a Means to Bridging national divisions in Lebanon; in Education, Conflict and social cohesion edited by Tawil S. and Harley A.;2004, 181

16. Frayah N.; Developing Curriculum as a Means to Bridging national divisions in Lebanon; in Education, Conflict and social cohesion edited by Tawil S. and Harley A.;2004, 189

17. Frayah N.; Developing Curriculum as a Means to Bridging national divisions in Lebanon; in Education, Conflict and social cohesion edited by Tawil S. and Harley A.;2004, 190

18. PNUD report, Lebanon toward a citizen state, 2009, p 130

19. PNUD report, Lebanon toward a citizen state, 2009, p 132

20. PNUD report, Lebanon toward a citizen state, 2009, p 132

21. PNUD report, Lebanon toward a citizen state, 2009, p 132

22. PNUD report, Lebanon toward a citizen state, 2009, p 133

23. PNUD report, Lebanon toward a citizen state, 2009, p 151

24. PNUD report, Lebanon toward a citizen state, 2009, p 136

25. Frayah N.; Developing Curriculum as a Means to Bridging national divisions in Lebanon; in Education, Conflict and social cohesion edited by Tawil S. and Harley A.;2004, 193