

Tracing Lebanon's Educational Journey: Historical Dynamics, Contemporary Challenges, and Strategies for Resilience

Megan Edmond Khoury^{1,*}

¹Saint Joseph University, Lebanon

*Corresponding author: Saint Joseph University, Lebanon

Received: November 14, 2023 Accepted: January 3, 2024 Published: March 22, 2024

doi:10.5296/ije.v16i1.21502 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/ije.v16i1.21502>

Abstract

This article offers an examination of Lebanon's historical trajectory, exploring its profound influence on the country's education sector. Beginning with an overview of Lebanon's ancient roots and the impact of foreign occupations, including the Ottoman Empire and the French Mandate post-World War I, the study delves into the enduring effects of domestic conflicts and international influences. Specifically, it scrutinizes the legacy of sectarian divisions stemming from the devastating Civil War, which has left indelible marks on Lebanon's governmental structure. Despite successive efforts, the Lebanese National Curriculum has remained stagnant since 1997, exacerbating proficiency gaps and educational challenges. Recent economic crises and geopolitical turmoil have further strained the education system, as evidenced by alarming proficiency deficits and governmental neglect in educational contingency planning. Recognizing the interconnectedness of primary and higher education, the study advocates for a holistic approach to address Lebanon's education crisis. Urgent action from the Lebanese government, particularly the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, is essential to revitalize the education system. By harmonizing policy decisions, effectively allocating resources, and implementing transparent accountability mechanisms, Lebanon can navigate its current educational challenges and pave the way for a resilient and promising future.

Keywords: education, curriculum, reform, sectarianism

1. Introduction

Lebanon's history is a mix of richness and turmoil, often serving as a stage for regional conflicts and political-religious tensions. From its ancient roots to recent times, Lebanon has seen occupations by foreign powers that have left profound imprints on various aspects of its society. These foreign occupations continue to reverberate in Lebanon today, manifesting in political and social upheavals with detrimental and enduring effects on education. The Ottoman Empire, the French Mandate post-World War 1, and the devastating Civil War constitute key historical phases that have shaped Lebanon's trajectory and education system. However, throughout its modern history, the Lebanese government has struggled to effectively modernize education and adapt it to contemporary needs.

Lebanon's education system grapples with multifaceted challenges. Despite multiple efforts, the Lebanese National Curriculum remains unchanged since 1997 (Ghosn-Chelala, 2020). In mathematics, Lebanon initially matched global averages in 2007 according to the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, yet this performance dipped below average by 2015 (Abdel-Hamid & Yassine, 2020). The country's economic turmoil, ignited by the 2019 uprisings, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2020 Beirut port explosion, has exacerbated the crisis (Bizri, Khachfeh, Fares, and Musharrafieh, 2021; Kharroubi, Naja, Diab-El-Harake, and Jomaa, 2021). The fallout from these crises prompted nearly 100,000 skilled professionals, including teachers, doctors, and nurses, to leave Lebanon for better prospects abroad, deepening the brain drain (Ramadan, 2022). Amidst these complex challenges, collaborative and innovative strategies are imperative to rejuvenate Lebanon's education sector, fostering a brighter future for its students.

2. Method

The methodology adopted for this study involved a comprehensive literature review that drew upon various academic journals and reputable online databases. The objective was to identify and examine scholarly texts specifically addressing the relevant historical periods of interest.

3. Discussion

3.1 Challenges Unveiled: Proficiency Gaps and Governmental Oversight in Lebanon's Education Landscape

Results from international standardized exams, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), have highlighted concerning levels of proficiency among Lebanese students in mathematics, science, and reading (Abdulhamid & Yassine, 2020, p.10). The PISA benchmarks for Lebanon reveal that around sixty percent of Lebanese students fail to attain basic proficiency in these subjects, indicative of a "learning crisis" (Abdulhamid and Yassine, p. 10). These scores also uncover significant achievement gaps both "among schools and between individual students" (Abdulhamid & Yassine, 2020, p.10). Despite this, surprisingly, a 2017 World Bank survey revealed that over seventy-five percent of Lebanese individuals maintain a positive outlook on the educational sector (Abdulhamid & Yassine,

2020). Lebanon has faced successive crises since the 2019 political uprisings, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating August 4th, 2020 explosion (Saad, Harfouche & Hariri, 2021). Despite these challenges, schools and universities were excluded from government contingency plans, highlighting a lack of prioritization for education (El Feghaly, Bou Nader, & Hariri, 2021, p.198). These results, coupled with achievement gaps, underscore a deep-rooted learning crisis. Alarming, the Lebanese government's failure to include education in its contingency plans exacerbates the already struggling educational landscape. This disregard for education aggravates ongoing challenges, raising concerns about the quality of education for future generations in Lebanon. Despite the grim findings, it is essential that the government shifts its focus and recognizes the crucial role education plays in shaping the nation's future.

3.2 Education Crisis in Lebanon: Proficiency Gaps and Government Neglect

The pronounced deficits in student proficiency levels, as underscored by international standardized exams like PISA, emphasize the pivotal role of school management and governance in the intricate process of curriculum development within Lebanon's educational context. The disconcerting outcomes of these exams, indicating subpar performance in key subjects such as mathematics, science, and reading, signify an urgent need for collaborative efforts between educational leadership and governance bodies to reinvigorate the curriculum landscape. Furthermore, the revelation of achievement gaps, both inter-school and intra-student, underscores the multifaceted nature of the challenge, necessitating the development of curriculum frameworks that accommodate diverse learning pathways while mitigating disparities. In this context, effective school governance emerges as a strategic driver, uniting the visions of education authorities, school administrators, teachers, and the larger community to orchestrate a comprehensive curriculum that equitably caters to the learning needs of all students.

The incongruity between the positive perception of Lebanon's sector by the majority of its population and the governmental oversight in terms of contingency planning in times of crisis invites contemplation on the broader role of school management and governance. The cumulative impact of the various crises compounded by political upheavals, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the catastrophic explosion on August 4th, 2020, has placed additional strain on the Lebanese education system (Saad, Harfouche & Hariri, 2021). Yet, the exclusion of educational institutions from governmental contingency plans, as highlighted by El Feghaly et.al., signifies an unfortunate oversight, spotlighting a systemic indifference towards the education sector's pivotal role (2021). This juncture underscores the significance of effective governance structures that advocate for the integration of education into national resilience strategies. The interplay between school management, governance bodies, and policymakers becomes an essential catalyst for curriculum evolution that not only addresses immediate crises but also forges a sustainable path for educational advancement. The omission of educational institutions from contingency planning is indicative of an untapped potential for transformative change through curriculum development, as well as a call to action for more harmonized efforts between educational leadership and governmental bodies to ensure the resilience and progression of Lebanon's education system.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Bridging the Gap: A Holistic Approach to Navigating the Educational Crisis

The preceding sections illuminate the multifaceted challenges that Lebanon's education sector faces in the wake of economic and political crises. These challenges extend from primary to higher education and encompass a range of issues from shifts in enrollment patterns to the devaluation of the local currency and existential threats to universities. The urgency of the situation necessitates immediate and resolute action from the Lebanese government, primarily the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. In this context, it becomes evident that the interplay between primary and higher education spheres is a critical juncture that demands a holistic and comprehensive approach.

The economic and political crises have set in motion significant shifts in student enrollment, leading families to opt for public schools due to financial constraints (Bahous and Nassar, 2021). This movement has placed an additional burden on the public education system and necessitates careful resource allocation. Budget allocation for the educational sector, which has consistently fallen short, amounting to only two percent of the country's gross domestic product (Bahous and Nassar, 2021; UNESCO, 2015; World Bank, 2017) must now be examined with renewed urgency to ensure that the necessary funds are available to support both primary and higher education. Simultaneously, the upheavals have also jeopardized the stability of higher education institutions, with both public and private universities facing threats to their survival (Akar, 2023). The interconnectedness of these challenges underscores the need for a unified strategy that addresses the entire educational continuum.

For the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education, this calls for not just piecemeal interventions but a well-coordinated, holistic approach that aligns policy decisions, funding allocation, and accountability mechanisms across both primary and higher education sectors. The resilience of the education system, built through decades of investment, cannot be sustained by focusing solely on one end of the spectrum. Instead, a synergistic effort that recognizes the inherent links between primary and higher education is vital.

Transcending the complexities posed by competing interests and political agendas requires transparent accountability mechanisms. The challenges of stakeholder engagement and the potential for conflicting priorities are not unique to either the primary or higher education sectors but are challenges that reverberate throughout the education landscape. Frayha's (2012) characterization of the situation as "chaotic" is particularly apt in highlighting the need for a harmonized and comprehensive educational philosophy that encompasses both realms (p.34). In this endeavor, the Ministry must take the lead in instigating systematic curriculum revisions that not only address the immediate crisis but also lay the groundwork for a more adaptable and resilient education system.

To conclude, the intricate challenges posed by Lebanon's education crisis necessitates a holistic and unified approach that bridges the gap between primary and higher education. The urgency of the situation demands the Lebanese government's decisive action, with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education spearheading transformative change. By harmonizing

policy decisions, transparently addressing competing interests, and strategically revising the curriculum, Lebanon's education sector can embark on a trajectory of revitalization and resilience. Time is of the essence, and the interconnectedness of these challenges underscores the need for a concerted effort that navigates the current crisis and paves the way for a more promising educational future.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the contribution of the Saint Joseph University, Beirut, Lebanon, particularly its Faculty of Educational Sciences for the opportunity to conduct this study.

References

- Abdul-Hamid, H., & Yassine, M. (2020). *Political economy of education in Lebanon: Research for results program*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1546-1>
- Akar, B. (2023, April 19). Higher Education in Lebanon: Struggling to Survive in Times of Crises. The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies. Retrieved from <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/articles/details/4784/higher-education-in-lebanon-struggling-to-survive-in-times-of-crises>
- Bahous, R., & Nassar, N. N. (2021, March 9). On the Brink: The Critical State of Lebanon's Education Sector. The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies. Retrieved from <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/articles/details/4664/article-%7C-on-the-brink-the-critical-state-of-lebanon%E2%80%99s-education-system>
- Bizri, A. R., Khachfe, H. H., Fares, M. Y., & Musharrafieh, U. (2021). COVID-19 pandemic: an insult over injury for Lebanon. *Journal of community health*, 46, 487-493. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10900-020-00884-y>
- El Feghaly, Y., Bou Nader, R., & Hariri, N. (2021, July). Online education in Lebanon during the Covid-19 crisis: An ongoing coping phase. In *International Conference on Digital Economy* (pp.197-207). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10/1007-978-3-030-92909-1_13
- Frayha, N. M. (2012). Educational reform in the Arab world: Directives, mechanisms and challenges in Lebanon, Syria and Oman. *The politics of education reform in the Middle East: Self and other in textbooks and curricula*, 15-39.
- Ghosn-Chelala, M. (2020). Global citizenship education in conflict-affected settings: Implications of teachers' views and contextual challenges for the Lebanese case. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 93, 103078. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103078>
- Kharroubi, S., Naja, F., Diab-El-Harake, M., & Jomaa, L. (2021). Food insecurity in pre-and post the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis in Lebanon: Prevalence and

projections. *Nutrients*, 13(9), 2976. Chicago. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu13092976b>

Ramadan, Tala. (2022). Demoralised and broke, Lebanon's teachers flee to the Gulf. *Context*. Retrieved from <https://www.context.news/socioeconomic-inclusion/demoralised-and-broke-lebanons-teachers-flee-to-the-gulf>

Saad Harfouche, J., & Hariri, N. (2021, December). Transition to Tertiary Education and ELearning in Lebanon Against the Backdrop of Economic Collapse and Covid-19 Pandemic. In *Digital Economy. Emerging Technologies and Business Innovation: 6th International Conference on Digital Economy, ICDEc 2021, Tallinn, Estonia, July 15–17, 2021, Proceedings* (pp. 183-196). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92909-1_12

UNESCO (2015). Education 2030: Incheon declaration and framework for action for the implementation of sustainable development goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. UNESCO.

World Bank (2017). *Lebanon education public expenditures review 2017*. The World Bank.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the contribution of the Saint Joseph University, Beirut, Lebanon particularly its Faculty of Educational Sciences for the opportunity to conduct this study.

Authors contributions

Dr. Bassem Kandil, Saint Joseph University, Beirut, Lebanon

Funding

N/A

Competing interests

N/A

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Macrothink Institute.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical

restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.