

Education in Lebanon

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I. Introduction

How can tolerance be part of the Lebanese education regarding the elevated level of religious differences and diversification in Lebanon?

II. Diversification in Lebanon

A. Religious differences

B. Cultural differences

III. School divisions in Lebanon

A. Difference between private and public schools

B. Problems in the Lebanese educational system

IV. Citizenship education in schools

A. The course content

B. The need of improvement

V. Comparison of the Lebanese situation with the Northern Ireland one

A. The suggested solutions in Northern Ireland

B. The possibility of applying Northern Ireland's new educational study in Lebanon

VI. Conclusion

Education in Lebanon

Referring to the Lebanese constitution: "Lebanon is a parliamentary democratic republic based on respect for public liberties, especially the freedom of opinion and belief, and respect for social justice and equality of rights and duties among all citizens without discrimination". It recognizes 18 religious sects, and it provides each citizen with the right of freedom of belief. Thus each citizen is free to exercise his/her own religious practices. The Lebanese constitution claims the coexistence of all religious sects in the society, and it guarantees their representation proportionally in the parliament (MinistryOfInformation, n.d.).

Religion also interferes in the Lebanese educational system. In the declaration of article 10 of the Lebanese constitution, education is a free practice as long as it does not abuse morals, ethics, values and dignity of any religious sect. Plus, each religious category is allowed to construct its own school curriculum with the condition of adopting the stated Lebanese general regulations concerning education (MinistryOfInformation, n.d.).

Most of schools are divided and redistributed based on religious sects depending on each area they belong to. Thus, pupils are growing in a homogeneous community which contradicts the reality of the Lebanese society. Pupils are unknowledgeable about other beliefs: they tend to be intolerant in the future, and this disturbs the social order on the long run, especially when it comes to political practices. So, how can tolerance be part of the Lebanese education regarding the elevated level of religious differences and diversification in Lebanon?

Lebanon is a mosaic of various religious factions. As mentioned before the constitution recognizes 18 religious sects. Religion varies between Christians 40.5% (Maronite Catholic 21%, Greek Orthodox 8%, Greek Catholic 5%, and others 6.5%), Muslims 54% (Sunni 27%, Shia 27%), Druze 5.6%, Jews, Buddhists Baha'is, Mormons, and

Hindus. Sunnis are mainly present in West Beirut, Tripoli, Akkar, Sidon, West Bekaa and Iklm al Kharoub. Shiite are present in South Lebanon, South Beirut, Baalbek and Hermel. Christians are mainly present in East Beirut, Zahle, Mount Lebanon and Jezzine. Druze are concentrated in Southern Mount Lebanon and Hasbaya. It is important to mention that because of the Syrian civil war there are large waves of Syrian refugees entering Lebanon; more than 1 million Syrian are registered as refugees in the Lebanese state; the number is growing day by day, and is a major cause in the regress of the educational level in the Lebanese public schools (IndexMundi, 2013; The WorldFactBook, 2014; Naharnet, 2014).

The ethnic groups present in Lebanon are Arabs (95%), Armenians (4%) and others (1%) (ex: Jews); it is important to note that many Christians do not consider themselves Arabs but Canaanites. An understanding of the Lebanese mosaic requires an awareness of ethnicity and confessionalism, because the similarity between the two concepts has become clearer in present-day Lebanon, where each sectarian group has its own agenda, political culture, and leaders. The languages used are Arabic (official national one), French, English and Armenian (IndexMundi, 2013; The WorldFactBook, 2014; Naharnet, 2014).

According to the article 11 in the Lebanese constitution, Arabic is the official national language; however there is a law that determines the cases in which the French language may be used (MinistryOfInformation, n.d.). French is incorporated in the Lebanese society due to the 23 years of the French mandate over Lebanon (1920-1943). Thus it was used as a main language in teaching mathematics, sciences, philosophy, and literature, and in some schools religion, history and history as well. After the civil war the English language became more frequently used. Almost 40% of Lebanese are considered francophone, and another 15% "partial francophone," and 70% of Lebanon's secondary schools use French as a second language of instruction. By comparison, English is used as a secondary language in 30% of Lebanon's secondary schools (DataBank, 2011).

According to the Global Information Technology report Lebanon is ranked 13th out of 148 worldwide in the quality of the educational system, owing to its high standards.

Lebanon is widely known as “the school of the Middle East” for its high private educational system. In Lebanon, education is considered among the top three costs of living, along with health and food. There are two types of schools: public and private ones. The literacy rate (people over 15 who can write and read) of the total population is 89.6%. The rate among males is 93.4% and among females in 86% (2007 est). The public educational sector needs deep structural reform especially after the civil war. Its tuition fees do not cost more than \$90/year. However, there is a big gap between public and private schools/universities in Lebanon. Private education is widely known for its high level and quality; however, it is very expensive. The tuition fees' average is approximately \$6000/year. Despite cost, Lebanese families choose private education over public schools. The public education is less than 7.1% of public expenditures, which is below what developed countries and neighboring countries spend (Khaddaj, 2010).

According to 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 violence". Until today the Lebanese educational system has not succeeded in lessening the sectarian divisions and the social disparities which affect the society; thus leading to political instability, social disorder, tensions and conflicts. In most schools the religious education has been severely altered in the multi-confessional society, because it emphasizes on the sectarian identity as being the only viable marker of political reforms and the only genuine basis for political claims. Therefore the Lebanese society adopts the framework of a divided and sectarian social development (Frayha, 2009).

Since the French mandate, there were many attempts in centralizing the educational system and this task continued after the independence, but political and religious oppositions constituted a barrier in front of such a project. Therefore, legislation related to education tended to strengthen the confessional autonomy as stated in the constitution of 1926 in article 8 under the French mandate, which declares that confessional communities have the freedom to have their own curriculums, and this article was confirmed in 1943 after the constitution's amendment which led to the Lebanese independence. The successive Lebanese governments were unable to impose a common curriculum especially to private schools. Several measures were taken in order to increase the Ministry of Education's role after the independence. There were attempts to centralize the educational system in order to supervise and control the private schools, improve the public ones and work on creating a secular education. But, unfortunately until today there is a general consensus that education policies continue to reflect confessional cleavages. The Lebanese civil war weakened the development of such plan, thus Lebanon witnessed a chaotic boom in various kinds of private institutions.

The Lebanese educational system is presently facing two main problems: firstly, the influence of sects on education and secondly, social and quality disparities between schools and regions. First, sects and religious leaders are given a wide range of power when it comes to handle specific issues, and it is important to mention that they sometimes tend to abuse this power. A good example would be their opposition to the civil marriage, because it contradicts many religious beliefs, as well as their interference in the curricula of education; this is an obstruction to alter. At the same time, the conspiracy between political and religious leaders over the freedoms guaranteed by the constitution designates the level of threat that political sectarianism holds to the citizens and the nation equally. For example the Lebanese parliament ratified a newly established law which concerns the association of one of the factions, 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". Therefore, the sect which is the guardian for the freedom of belief is becoming a potential hindrance to the freedom of belief itself with this law. After the civil war, the struggle that education faced was framing a new generation of Lebanese youth with a common national identity based on a set of shared civic and social standards, the acceptance of the pluralistic and unified nature of the Lebanese community. Schools are still using books published in 1968 and 1970. Notably, the disagreement of religious factions on numerous subjects has prevented the appearance of new united curricula. For example, in history curricula, sects have advocated for teaching it from their own perspective and disagreed on a single unified textbook. Their antagonism was also embedded in economic interests and was not only ideological. Until now, especially in private schools, more than six history textbook series are being used, because one unified history textbook would create market loss result for the traditional publishers (Frayha, 2009). Religious leaders succeeded after the civil war in imposing a religious curriculum in public schools, which was traditionally absent before the war, despite the opposition of many secularists in Lebanon. Different textbooks for each faith were created for each grade without any information about any other religion. The writing of a general common textbook for Christians and Muslims based on common spiritual standards and values was declined by the sects (Frayha, 2009).

The dominant model of school in Lebanon is the private schools (up to 60%), which have a history of using textbooks for religious education. Charbel Antoun conducted a research on 77 textbooks used for religious teaching in private schools:

- The language which was used was discriminatory: "us and them, "our faith and their faith, "Christian and Muslim".

- The mention of other religions in these textbooks was not to inform about the other present belief, but to show superiority.
- The emphasis on teaching religious doctrine led the authors and instructors to discriminate not only between religions but also between sects.
- The propagandas were prevalent in the material of textbooks. (Frayha, 2009).

These outcomes clarify that the promotion of religious teachings as it was practiced in the private sector was not a tool to build social unity among the Lebanese youth; however a tool of partition. Lebanon has turned into a dual system on a social level. Private education has been sought mostly by the middle and the upper income groups, with the exception of free private education which is focused on the very poor, while public education has attracted lower income and poor groups (Frayha, 2009).

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%), which makes the situation even harder, because people would not be knowledgeable about other beliefs and would tend to be intolerant, thus we would have roots of conservatism (Frayha, 2009).

Since it is almost impossible to preach tolerance through religious education, because of the high level of interference of the religious authorities, citizenship education would be the only hope to do so. Citizenship education in Lebanon has been introduced in 1946. It comes under the national civic course, which is used as a tool for social cohesion in the post conflict sectarian society, and is still regarded as being an essential tool for the country's development. However, it is important to mention that that civic education course focuses more on the national issues, with special references to civil laws, civil behaviors and nationalistic feelings. As McKinnon said: "Education remains the most effective defense

against underdevelopment and poverty", but education is not a magic tool for creating an ideal environment. However, it aims to reduce inequalities and wars. In short, through education, we learn to live together. Civic education also provides the means of political, social and economic development following conflict or social and political changes.

Although this course primarily focuses on the Arab and Lebanese identities, civil laws and procedures, its curriculum emphasizes on universal norms and values of justice, peace and the importance of the citizen's participation in the political and civil practices. This following table retrieved from "The Program of General Education and their aims, established by the Ministry of Education in 1997" shows the nine different aims of the national civic course:

1. "...humanistic values in his/her community and country".
2. "...spirit for work and appreciation for workers in different fields".
3. "...to contribute to world development..."
4. "...critique, debate and to accept the other...peace, justice and equality".
5. "...a social spirit...larger community...enriched with a diversity of ideas".
6. "...free participation in his/her civil life".
7. "...Lebanese identity...through a cohesive and unifying democratic framework".
8. "...Arab identity...open to the whole world".
9. "...regardless of gender, color, religion, language, culture and any other differences"

This course is taught for students since grade 3 for 30 hours/year, which is 1 hour/week. Despite the high level of autonomy present in private schools and their freedoms to set their own teaching programs, national civic textbooks are standardized texts published by the Ministry of Education and are obligatory across all Lebanese schools. Teachers consider knowing each citizen's responsibilities and rights as being a fundamental element of citizenship. National civic teachers should value and practice the traditions of rote learning in the civic classrooms, but should also give a major importance for planned and unplanned debates within classrooms, because dialogue is one major road towards an idealistic citizenship (Akar, 2007).

Since the national civic education is the sole hope for raising a tolerant wave of youth, this course needs some improvements. As stated before, this course is offered 1 time/week, and it basically teaches students about national laws, rights, duties, responsibilities, separation of powers, and means of development of the country... As for religion courses, the material is framed by the religious sect the school belongs to, which makes it almost impossible, especially with the high level of power religious authorities have in hand, to introduce or talk about any other religion. So, there is necessity to modify and improve the national civic course's content in schools. First, the school must supply its students with at least 2 hours/week of this course. Second, this class must discuss deeper realistic issues. They must learn deeply about the constitution in order to be able to give worth to articles concerning diversity, such as the one which recognizes 18 religious sects and which emphasizes on the coexistence. Thus we would have a new tolerant and conscious generation, who accepts diversifications and differences, and who is able to deal properly with all kinds of issues by tending to negotiations and consensus instead of referring to the use power (Akar, 2007).

Comparing Northern Ireland's case to the Lebanese one, many similarities might be detected. Like Lebanon, Northern Ireland is a divided society facing religious divisions. But it is important to mention that the division is among Christian sects (Catholics vs. Protestants), unlike Lebanon where the division is mainly between religions (Christians vs. Muslims) and in some cases divisions upon sects exist. Schools there suffer from the same division present in Lebanon. Gallagher and Richardson, in their articles, have mentioned several solutions that might help in abolishing the religious wall between schools. Richardson started his lecture at UCC in November 2014, by referring to the "Berlin Peace wall" and the "Belfast wall"; he mocked the peace walls, wondering how these walls which separate people would provide peace. The two professors carried out studies concerning the division case, with the aim of reaching a solution.

Richardson suggested several key points that would promote tolerance while teaching in schools. The instructor should speak openly and comfortably about cultural and religious diversities without being biased. He/she is also supposed to be open and professional; teachers are role models for pupils, so they must model their skills. Disregarding the teacher's affiliation he/she must have clear information equally about each subject in order to transfer an uncensored or biased message. The teacher should be well trained and should have good networks and communication with other societies locally and globally. He/she must focus on teaching the students about the principles of being engaged in a dialogue, should allow critical thinking and should also give a major importance for unplanned dialogues, because they might clarify different understandings within the classroom. The instructor should avoid using an exclusive language, which promotes superiority and/or discrimination. Gallagher and Richardson introduced the following solutions in order to unite the educational system and abolish divisions. They talked about having common textbooks and curriculums for schools. In this way students would be informed about the other sects. They also came up with the idea of having partnership programs in which students will be brought together, opening the chance for free discussions. Adding to that, they also shed light on the importance of the equal treatment of separate schools by the state (Gallagher, 2010; Richardson, 2012; Richardson, 2013; Richardson, 2014).

The two professors also emphasized on the importance of the citizenship education. Diversity and inclusion should be part of the schooling process. Students are supposed to be aware of their rights and duties. They also have the right to claim justice and equality within classrooms and as well as in the society, as being a part of a democratic state which is based on participation (Gallagher, 2010; Richardson, 2012; Richardson, 2013; Richardson, 2014).

Many similarities can be detected between Lebanon and Northern Ireland when it comes to the socio-political and educational contexts, in which religious education has developed in

both countries. It is important to mention that Lebanon is certainly a much more complex case than Northern Ireland. In Lebanon there is long-standing ethno-religious coexistence; a large number of coexisting religious communities; and an entrenched sectarian political system which reaches all levels of the political life, from division of parliamentary seats to the distribution of public service positions among the communities. Moreover, Lebanon is shaped by the influences of external powers and the instability of the Middle East, which contrasts with the stability, brought to Northern Ireland by the European Union. Despite these differences, significant similarities allow for a fruitful comparison between Northern Ireland and Lebanon. First of all, Lebanon and Northern Ireland share a history of coexistence between ethno-religious communities. The presence of different religious communities and their influence in policy-making remain important in both contexts. Second, in Northern Ireland and Lebanon, religious affiliations are mobilized by elites for politically motivated objectives. The sectarian political system allocates seats in parliament to the parties representing each of the ethno-religious communities. Thirdly, educational systems in both countries present similar features. As in Lebanon and in Northern Ireland the educational system has been religiously segregated since its beginnings. Teaching of Religious education in the curriculum has been a controversial issue in both the Lebanese and Northern Irish educational system. In both countries, the government has often given up because of the influence of the churches in the stabilization of the region. Both governments have initiated a process of reform of the educational system and both have faced strong opposition from religious communities. This opposition has led governments to withdraw initiatives or postpone reforms on several occasions. In the past, religion in the Northern Irish educational system has contributed to the segregation, division and clustering of individuals within their own religious groups (Gallagher, 2010; Richardson, 2012; Richardson, 2013; Richardson, 2014).

When Richardson and Gallagher were asked during the UCC lecture in November 2014, if the situation in Lebanon is more complicated and more challenging than it is in Northern Ireland, their answer was yes, but they also said that as a start, small changes should occur now and might become bigger in the future, such as creating partnerships between Christian and Muslim schools, thus making students' and teachers' exchanges. It is true that this is a very small step, but it can actually create a big improvement in the future with the upcoming generations, thus establishing the coexistence notion. So schools in Lebanon must have shared education and religion courses must contain both the Christian and Muslim subjects.

The national civic education course should also be improved. Policy makers and religious communities need to pay special attention to the status of the Lebanese educational system. They are supposed to work on improving the course's content in a way of moving from a national level to a broader one, and going deeper to developing cross cutting ties, building mutual understanding and bring down stereotypes and mistrust.

A good example would be The Grand Mufti Ahmad Al-Shaftari who is calling for reform. He said: "It is our responsibility to rehabilitate political, national and social life as well as [enact] reforms in institutions and at the level of education in terms of culture and religion. We are in need of reforms in religious education as well as charity organizations, because these organizations are meant for everyone, not a specific group. Our youths need to feel that they are cared for and that their society provides them with needed confidence and resources. We are responsible for these young people and society before the security and military institutions, and we should care for them so they can trust us. We should not leave them or neglect them while we complain of divisions" (Kheir, 2014).

In conclusion, until now education in Lebanon has unfortunately been an instrument to reproduce, and reinforce, social and sectarian divisions, despite efforts from few through time to change the status quo. Sects have indeed considered education as a mean of

preserving and reproducing group identity. The Lebanese state was unable to build a public educational system able to compete with 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 influence, 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, as soon as possible. The slogan "reforms the minds and souls before the texts" is nonsense; the current institutions and educational 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.

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