Between Politics and Identity
The History and Future of Education in Lebanon

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Children form their sense of identity through a number of sources. Chief among these, having influence on all aspects of a child's life, are their formal education and social exposure, such as their family's identification with a culturally specific historical narrative. The process of learning one's identity takes on particular significance in Lebanon where social tensions between competing identities has, in recent history, erupted into civil war. Lebanon's education system, like those in other countries with ethnic, religious, and/or political tensions, especially those labeled 'post-conflict,' is strategically poised to play an important role in shaping the way that children view each other, and help stave off the impact of persistent divisions and misconceptions.

The Lebanese government recognizes their education system as a powerful tool capable of fostering national cohesion and has long worked to design a standardized curriculum toward this goal. For example, governmental policies since 1925 have called for such measures as civic education and a nationally agreed upon history textbook in Lebanese schools to increase social cohesion. Children, however, often attend schools where there is little diversity amongst students. As a result, they are not often exposed to cultural perspectives competing with their own until later in life when their pre-conceptions have been solidified. Thus, policies such as the creation of a national history textbook in order to promote a universally accepted idea of Lebanon's past are not enough. Rather than focusing solely on projects designed to create a homogenous national identity, policies should focus on celebrating the population's diversity. Such a program would include a national plan to integrate the schools. Through early education, Lebanese youth can be exposed to diverse cultural identities and narratives, hopefully fostering the tolerance needed for a peaceful and prosperous civil society.

History

The roots of the domestic tensions in Lebanon lie in centuries of invasion and conquest that left the small area of modern-day Lebanon rich with ethnicity and culture. Lebanon is composed of a mixture of Armenians, Greeks, Kurds, Turks, Syrians, Circassians, Arabs and more as members of 18 distinct religious groups.[1] The country might be compared to a

Rorschach inkblot test, where what one sees in the blot has much to do with one's underlying history. This idea of seeing what one wants to see in the confusion of Lebanese society, life, and politics is complicated by the fact that there are many ideas of what Lebanese identity is. Education has been shaped by, and in turn helped to form, Lebanon's tumultuous past.

With Arab-Islamic conquests came the Arab period of enlightenment. The Caliph Haroun al-Rashid, who ruled from 786-809 CE,[2] oversaw the translation of scholarly texts from Greek, Latin, and Persian. Having been shaped by such diverse rule, many languages were now spoken in Lebanon including Greek, Syriac, Aramaic and now Arabic. The diverse linguistic backgrounds of the Lebanese made them excellent candidates to help with this translation and many Lebanese were so employed by the Caliphate.[3] This industry brought large swaths of knowledge into Islamic education and discourse, paving the way for a golden age of Islamic thought particularly in Lebanon and Syria. After the crusades of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, religious communities were charged with providing some type of basic schooling for their youth populations. Mosques and churches doubled as classrooms. However, education rarely went beyond the primary level.[4] With such local diversity and a continuing legacy of foreign rule and remote governance, the diffusion of education continued through to the Ottoman period.

Under the Ottomans, education in Lebanon's outer provinces fell on religious groups to provide education for the poor, and private tutors to teach those who could afford them. The lack of a public, state-run school system allowed for the growth of Christian missionary education in the seventeenth century. While these schools provided many more lower class and rural children with the opportunity for an education, and "all Lebanese communities benefited from the free school system," "their impact on national unity and social cohesion are questionable, given that Muslim families did not send their children to these schools."[5]

Sectarian conflict was rife throughout the Ottoman period and manifested within the public school system. At the time the major social fault lines ran along the perceived class divisions, which were reflective of the public school versus private school divide. Free religious education programs implemented within various communities served to further isolate and divide the different religious sects. The missionary school movement also marked a transfer of influence in Lebanese education, not from religious to secular, but from Eastern to Western, surviving also to reinforce the local religious partitions.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the French governed the non-

Christian population through localized, sect-specific groups who would be able to attain the loyalty of their own with more ease than the Western-Christian French Mandate government. For the French, these leaders were the *zuama*, members of powerful Lebanese families who operated in a style resembling organized crime in America.[6] Since these groups each had their own "district" of influence and their own religious and political agendas, education was dealt with in a manner befitting each district's will. This clearly worked against an idea of a unified Lebanese nation and sectarian harmony adding to the sectarian divide and perpetuating sectarianism among Lebanese youth.

The French maintained their position of power by placing the French language in priority. Because French was used in the better primary schools and in a significant portion of higher education institutions, advanced educational options were more accessible to French-speaking Lebanese, who were often Christian. This fueled feelings of inequality and a sense of a lack of upward mobility amongst the more marginalized sects. The French were, however, abreast of the social climate of unrest and made an effort to educate teachers and students to combat such tensions through constitutional change.[7]

The constitution reflects the realization made after 1943 that the education system could be at the forefront in the social battle against sectarianism:

> Chapter 2, Article 10 - Education, Confessional Schools 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.[8]

Privately run schools were thus brought under the wing of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, subjecting them to the same national curriculum being taught in state-run schools. This standardized program benefited students by preparing them for national exams. Steps were again taken by the government to encourage cohesive social and political orientations through an initiative enacted in 1946. This outlined an addition to the 1944 curriculum on the principle that political and social unity would result from teaching all students the same content. The plan for a universal curriculum was hindered by religious schools, working under pressure from constituent donors, as well as the inconsistency of the Lebanese government. Though this measure addressed the need for social and political cohesion, it did not take the next step towards finding a better way to enforce and derive this cohesion.

During the civil war from 1975 to 1989, many schools, with the exception of some private universities, were closed or destroyed. The time following the 1989 Taif Accord was critical in that the policies implemented would have to help rebuild social unity after fifteen years of civil war. Without a clear-cut "winner" in Lebanon, the country's education system was back to square one, with different sects competing for influence.

In 1994 a plan for educational reform was released. It aimed at "strengthening national affiliation and social coalition among students; providing the new generation with basic knowledge, skills and expertise;" but perhaps most importantly it proposed that this "new generation" be exposed to "emphasis on national upbringing and authentic Lebanese values."[9]

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What these authentic Lebanese values might be was unclear, as "being Lebanese" was still undefined. The 1994 reforms were just the latest in a long line of initiatives calling for unity amongst Lebanese youth. But the facts on the ground, namely the population dispersion of Lebanese cities and rural areas, meant that any civic education was still being fed to largely homogenous populations lacking the potential for student to student interaction between different sects. Sandra Mackey, the author of *Lebanon: A House Divided*, writes:

> Lebanese youth entered the foreign mission schools and emerged twelve years later ignorant of everything concerning the history, geography, and social life of their own country. Further, children passed through the schools of their own confession, often barely meeting children of another faith.[10]

The Face of Modern Lebanese Education

It is obvious that a history of repeated reforms and re-adjustments made by not-so-egalitarian foreign entities has left a system of education which continues to fail the children of Lebanon. According to a lecture given by the Minister of Education, Dr. Khaled Kabbani, the central problem is the lack of strategic direction. He cites an absence of reform politics within Lebanon, in turn, affecting the ability of the Ministry of Education to perform the necessary restructuring and improvements. He calls for a

separation of state and education, especially in light of the fact that sectarian politics and sympathies often get in the way of making any real inroads on education reform. Furthermore, he highlights the fact that Lebanon tends to suffer from misdistribution of schools. Sandra Mackey illustrates this with a statistic from 1975, "The overwhelming Christian area north of Beirut claimed 29 percent of the population but possessed 38.2 percent of Lebanon's schools, while the south, with 19 percent of the population, primarily Shiite Muslim,– has only 14.8 percent of the schools."

The current political influences on the education system are evidenced by a misappropriation of funding which has widened the gap between expensive private schools and public schools that receive little assistance and therefore provide an insufficient education. Influence is also evident in the formerly mentioned problem of misdistribution of schools, with higher numbers in more affluent areas, furthering Kabbani's argument that in Lebanon, "children are not equal in quality in terms of resources, environment, cost, or gain from education, which may hinder future success.[11] Therefore, Kabbani says that, in addition to a separation of the state and educational systems, he feels that educational reform will only be truly complete when it is in conjunction with "political reform and general development of the government." He hopes that through reform and separation, the educational system will be devoid of political influences.[12]

As far as equality goes, the Palestinian refugee situation inserts yet another disadvantaged identity into Lebanese society and complicates the issue of public education. As refugees in Lebanon, the Palestinians do not have all the rights that native Lebanese enjoy. They are only allowed limited employment, they are rarely eligible for government financial assistance, and they do not have access to Lebanese state schools. Private schools being far too expensive, the Palestinian refugees have opened schools within the camps to provide their children with an education.[13]

It is clear that the answer to Lebanon's educational failings will not simply be found in a curriculum that properly provides a civic education, nor a nationally agreed upon history textbook. Yet these are treated as the magic bullets which will inject some sort of unity into Lebanese education, if the government thought otherwise, they would not focus their education policy and reform on such issues. The overlooked failing of the education establishment within Lebanon is the lack of school integration. Paul Salem of the Carnegie Endowment in Beirut concurs: "I think the key thing is having kids grow up together. There's nothing you can say in the classroom… if you don't live it, it's going to have limited impact. So I would say the key is growing up together in schools that are mixed."[14]

School Integration

The idea of school integration is increasingly popular in post-conflict societies. Lebanon is not alone in its ethnic, religious and political tensions. Cases abound, from Northern Ireland to Kosovo in which systems of education served to further divide a restless society but then were used to help rebuild and repair the psychological divisions that existed. This "peace-building education" is being pioneered around the globe with help from UNICEF and UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP). The IIEP has put out a guidebook outlining the importance and effects of, as well as appropriate situations for, peace-building education:

> At times it may be necessary for students with different ethnic, political, or religious backgrounds to study separately from one another—especially in a conflict or post-conflict situation where the safety of children and youth may be endangered if they study together. Separate schooling may also be necessary where children of different ethnic, political, or religious backgrounds live in geographically separated areas. In most instances, however, it is desirable to move towards a policy of integrated education, where students from any political, religious, or ethnic affiliation have the opportunity to study together if they so choose. This will normally require pro-active measures on the part of ministry officials, educational experts, planners and implementers.[15]

The prevailing view of education experts is that children carry the baggage of their culture into the classroom. A study done by UNESCO on children living in societies where high sectarian tensions were present, found that "prejudiced children are more likely to be moralistic, to dichotomize their world…" Where civil conflict abounds it is only natural that the education system is not exempt from the fighting and this "must be taken into account if the peace-destroying impact of education is to be minimized."[16]

Kosovo is one such place where civil conflict reared its head strongly in education. Like Lebanon, it is also a place involved in a debate over a shared (in this case, Albanian/Serbian) history:

> [Cultural and historical debates] form the grit that slows or even halts the wheels of movement. Kosovo's history is hardly an easy subject to discuss, because for every Albanian thrust there is a Serbian parry, and vice versa. Albanians and Serbs dispute the significance or validity of central episodes in their shared history. Battles, repressions, slaughters, resistance and heroism all have their place in real and mythic history, and for both groups the interpretation of history is what matters…[17]

Both groups have their own version of history and mythology, both claim Kosovo as their historic homeland and the opposing group as occupiers or usurpers on that land. Irredentism was rampant for as long as the two groups lived alongside one another and it manifested itself permanently in the rhetoric of opposing school curriculums. The Yugoslav constitution implemented in 1974 was a watershed for education in Kosovo. Kosovo and Vojvovdina were given virtual autonomy and thereby had the local power to control education. Serbian residents of Kosovo continued to look to the Ministry of Education in Belgrade while the Albanian Kosovars developed their own "parallel system of education," officially established in 1990; this system became the main form of Albanian resistance to Slobodan Milosevic's rule and to Serbian control over Kosovar education. By taking this step Albanian Kosovars established themselves as "other," no longer linked to the Serbian residents of Kosovo.[18]

At the end of the NATO bombing campaign, there was no government in power. This allowed peacekeeping troops and members of UNMIK, the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, to come in undeterred and overhaul the failed political and educational system previously established. The specifications of an education system, as seen in the case of Kosovo, have the ability to push sectarian strife into sectarian war.

On the other end of sectarian conflict is Northern Ireland. Civil conflict between Unionists (mostly Protestants who wanted to remain with the United Kingdom) and Nationalists (mostly Catholics who held ideals of Irish Nationalism and wanted a unified Ireland) flourished from the late 1960s on. This fracture carried over into the state-run education system where schools were segregated by religion into Protestant "controlled" schools and Catholic "maintained" schools.[19] Today, children still have the choice of choosing a Catholic "maintained" school but they can now also choose a "mixed" school, where children from all faiths attend to their education.

A group called NICIE, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, opened its first "integrated" school in Belfast in 1981 as an educational alternative to government run segregated schools. An integrated school is different from a mixed school in that students in an integrated school are encouraged to dialogue about differences. As of 2007, NICIE maintains 61 institutions including 20 Integrated Second Level Colleges, and 41 Integrated Primary Schools as well as 19 Nursery Schools.[20] These integrated schools achieve a religious middle ground in their Irish curricula by stressing a generically Christian approach; also, all religious classes are elective. NICIE recognizes the worth of an integrated education beginning

at an early age saying:

> Northern Ireland is a deeply divided and segregated society. Children from both sides of the religious divide who attend an integrated school develop lifelong friendships by playing and learning together during their most formative years. Parents and children, by choosing an integrated school, are contributing to the peace and reconciliation process.

NICIE received government funding in 1991 and has since expanded its number of schools. As a testament to their schools' success, the NICIE website reports that 500 students were turned away in 2006 because of a lack of space to accommodate all the demand.[21]

Both Northern Ireland and Kosovo saw their deeply embedded social tensions aggravated by the structure of their education system. In Northern Ireland students of different faiths attended separate schools, in Kosovo a parallel school system was developed alongside the other to meet the perceived needs of the different ethnic groups. In Northern Ireland, however, the ailment, education, was also the cure. Through the indigenous development of integrated schools, employing teachers who were committed to healing their country through school integration, Northern Ireland is bringing up a new generation in a different social climate—Beirut, take note.

Lebanon is neither Kosovo nor is it Northern Ireland. What is strikingly disparate is that Lebanon deals with 18 religious sects while Kosovo and Northern Ireland deal with only two opposing groups. Size and geography are also obstacles to overcome within Lebanon where large mountains serve to isolate, creating distinct "rural areas." To determine how integration can be effectively implemented there are many demographic questions to be answered. However, what is certain is that world trends in post-conflict reconstruction show that heavy emphasis is placed on fixing education immediately. In the case of Lebanon, public schools must be integrated to allow students the social interaction necessary to build relationships with peers of other faiths and political backgrounds. Perhaps most imperative to the process, however, is that, like Northern Ireland, integration must grow indigenously. It should not be imposed from the outside, even by the United Nations or other such organizations. This "for Lebanon, by Lebanon" method makes use of the people who have the most nuanced understandings of the modern currents and who have the greatest passion for the cause of integration. Eventually, a grassroots undertaking of this kind has the potential to become a national institution and therefore a national source of pride. Allowing Lebanon's schools to carry on in their current fashion, often under-funded and lacking in diversity, is to fail Lebanese youth and deny

them a head start on creating the social cohesion that is needed to stave off further conflict.

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