

## Examination of the 1997 Curriculum in Lebanon

Eslam Aljaafil<sup>1</sup>

*Necmettin Erbakan University*

Ömer Beyhan<sup>2</sup>

*Necmettin Erbakan University*

### Abstract

Through education and only education a fragmented society can be rebuilt and developed. In order to reach this aim, a country's education system should be carefully considered, planned, organized, applied and evaluated. However, in a politically and economically unstable country like Lebanon, the Lebanese society went through several conflicts which laid its adverse effect on the education sector. Therefore, in order to plan for a better future and a better education system, first we need to determine and analyze the factor which led to the fall back of the Lebanese public curriculum. This research has a qualitative research design and it aims to investigate the stakeholders' perspectives with the help of the data obtained by face-to-face interviews and focus groups. The study depicts the stakeholders' frustration regarding the currently used curriculum as they all agreed and stressed the importance of developing a new curriculum which suits the students' needs and abilities. Also, their responses indicated the presence of several problems and gaps within curriculum elements itself.

### Key Words

Curriculum • Education history • Education system • Lebanon • Stakeholders' perspectives

<sup>1</sup> **Correspondance to:** Eslam Aljaafil. E-mail: [eslam.a.jaafil@gmail.com](mailto:eslam.a.jaafil@gmail.com) **ORCID:** 0000-0001-8631-3152

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Ahmet Keleşoğlu Education, Necmettin Erbakan University, Konya, Turkey. E-mail: [obeyhan@erbakan.edu.tr](mailto:obeyhan@erbakan.edu.tr) **ORCID:** 0000-0002-3811-0307

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Previously known as Switzerland of the Middle East, Lebanon is a country which is diverse in nature and rich in ethnicities, religious communities, and cultures. With its good standard universities and schools, 10,452 Km<sup>2</sup>. Lebanon has always been a destination for youth and individuals who desire to attain a good quality education. Arabic is Lebanon's formal and native language, however, English and/or French are other languages Lebanese students learn in schools (Nahas, 2009). The Lebanese population is estimated to be 6 million, out of which includes about 1.5 million Syrian refugees. This diverse country includes about 54% Muslims and 46% Christians. In 2009 Beirut, the capital, was named World Book Capital (Frayha, 2009). In year 2009 the percentage of literate adults reached 89.6% and 98.7% for that of youth (Nahas, 2009). However, through history and due to its multi-political and multi-religious background, Lebanon failed to neither reduce the sectarian divisions, nor decrease the social imbalance which notably affected the Lebanese society and education. As a result, a civil war was ignited in 1975 and ended in 1990 when the conflicting parties signed the Taif agreement in 1989. Consequently, more than 150,000 deaths were recorded and the majority of Lebanon's infrastructure was destroyed (European Commission, 2017).

As mentioned before, diversity in Lebanon is a two-edged sword which is why communities were granted the chance to organize and establish their own schools. However, consecutive Lebanese governments were unable to set a common curriculum for private schools. After the civil war ended in 1990, a post war education reform was established. It covered only 3 aspects (features) of the education system, namely the curriculum, textbooks, and teacher training. In general, the educational context in Lebanon remained untouched ever since the end of the civil where the application of the reforms in 2010 remained also limited (Frayha, 2009). Further, religious sects in Lebanon have considered education to be means to reproduce and reinforce religious, social and sectarian differences while on the other hand, failed to neither compete with these systems nor to create a unified national identity (Frayha, 2009). A new united curriculum was prevented to see light due to the disagreement of the religious factions on several subjects; however, the fundamental principles which govern education in Lebanon are the Lebanese constitution, Taif Accord, the founding law of the ministry of education, the Lebanese legislation, customs, habits and historic heritages and the international agreements and commitments resulting from the United Nations' charters and international conferences. In addition, there are a great number of official and non-official documents, reports, studies which discuss different themes and topics about education, however, none has been approved or finalized by the governmental institutions, therefore we can say that Lebanon does not have a validated official and strategic vision for the education sector (Nahas, 2009).

### **History of Education in Lebanon**

In 1943, and after Lebanon gained its independence from the French Mandate in Article 8 the Lebanese constitution acknowledged freedom of education to religious communities therefore each community was granted the right to organizes their own schools and ever since that time, diverse and parallel systems and curricula were established in Lebanon's schools. Nevertheless, those several measures were taken to increase the role of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), supervise private schools, centralized the education system, encourage and improve public education and create secular education but unfortunately, due to religious cleavages,

this seems hard to apply. In addition, after the civil war, public education became weaker and education witnessed a sort of a chaotic growth (Frayha, 2009).

In 1798 Ein Warak School was established in Kisirwan region and it was considered the first educational institution in Lebanon which provided free education to students. In 1834 Catholics established their first school, Aintura School. Almost 30 years later, in 1861 the first Druze school was founded in the era of Mount Lebanon. In 1866 Protestants found themselves in competition with the Catholic community thus they created the Syrian Evangelical College which was later named the American University of Beirut. Its founding father, Pastor Bliss, spent four years raising the necessary funds between Britain and America then New York State granted him the license to open the college and then the Ottoman State granted him permission necessary to work and exempted the institution from taxes. The Jesuit Fathers founded their university in 1875 which was later known as the University of Saint Joseph. Later in this year Isrealis opened their school which was run by Zaki Cohen and served the Jewish community for 24 years before it was closed later on. Three years later in 1878 Muslims founded their first school named as Al Makassed Islamic School. In 1886 an Irish woman who used to live in Lebanon founded the school of Choueifat and it was later managed by ambitious educators who opened several branches in Lebanon, America, Gulf States, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, England, Pakistan, and Germany. Also, in this year, College Des Freres was founded by 3 monks who came to Lebanon (Nazarian, 2013).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century and while Lebanon was under the Ottoman rule, its minorities were the focus of the attention of the western countries and during that time missionary activities increased. During this period Catholic and Protestant missionary came from France, Italy, America, Britain and even Germany and Austria. If evangelization was the first task, it was coupled with some activities most notably the establishment of educational institutions. These institutions at that time played and still play an important role in shaping the elite community in the Lebanese society. Also, it is important to mention that these schools also included female students and in 1832 Beirut College for Women was established and education started to acquire the western label (Frayha, 2009).

In 1930 Rashid Youssef Beydoun established a school he called The Global College to educate the youth of Jabal Amel which was mainly of a Shiia majority. Later in 1944 the French established the Higher School of Arts. The Center of Studies and research in Mathematics and Physics was established in 1945 by the French under the direct academic supervision of the University of Lyon. One year after Lebanon gained its independence from the French mandate, the National Curriculum and test system were created and Arabic was the formal language. Flowingly, in 1950 and 1951 the Holy Spirit University and the national Lebanese University were established. Later in 1960 Beirut Arab University was founded then 27 years later in 1987 Notre Dame Catholic University was established and the Balamand Orthodox University was established in 1988. However, in 1994 Lebanon performed its first step towards revising and updating the national curriculum when the first Educational Advancement Plan was created and in 1997 the ministry of education created the first post-civil war curriculum, which ever since that time was not updated. Years later in 2005 Lebanon adopted an educational plan named the National Plan for Education for All and in 2010 an educational reform strategy was created (Nazarian, 2013).

During the French Mandate the education system was immediately reconstructed by the French government following its mandate over Lebanon. It reconstructed it in a way that serves the aims and goals of France as a mandating country to support the French position in Lebanon and Syria (Nazarian, 2013). During the independence period the public-school system witnessed a notable expansion. The aim of the Lebanese government at that time was aimed towards reshaping the aim of education in the country to foster a national identity that would preserve the new independent state. The education policy of the new government devised to fight sectarianism, increase state control over public schools, centralize the system and impose a unified curriculum on all schools. Nonetheless, the education system was hugely pressured during the civil war in 1975. The unfortunate event prevented any effort of establishing an education reform. Additionally, the civil war aftermath on education was the absence of a unified history book as history was the only subject which was not revised or updated. Consequently, till now schools are still obliged to use the history curriculum of 1960s and 1970s (Nazarian, 2013).

It should be noted that the private educational sector in Lebanon started to develop long before the public educational institutions started to develop. Most of the schools which opened in Lebanon were schools of Christian missionaries following the western education as well as being expensive. Therefore, the rest of the religious communities desired to establish their own schools and universities which advocates its doctrines. This reality has two aspects; enlightenment and openness to the Western cultures and language on one hand, and on the other hand it was one of the reasons for the rift in the Lebanese national character, closing of each sect on itself, teachings, values and concepts (AlAbtah, 2016). However, it is worth mentioning that private primary and secondary education would not have flourished if the Ottoman Empire would not have allowed Christians and all different religious groups and sects to educate their children and establish their own schools. By doing so, private schools and universities were widely spread meanwhile during the French Mandate Lebanon's education system was organized and the Higher School of Arts, the Education Center for Research in Mathematics and Physics were founded (Daccache, 2014)

The arrival of missionaries had a great impact on the establishment of a number of schools. In 1846, the Ottoman empire created Al Maarif Council which later became the Ministry of Public Knowledge which was responsible for the affairs of public education throughout the Sultanate but private schools in Lebanon remained outside this arrangement. However, during the French Mandate period, the educational policy focused on teaching French language, culture, unifying curricula and official exams, establishing a centralized administrative system while maintaining the participation of the private sector and equality between French and Arabic in the curricula. During the era of the independence the educational process continued and Arabic was adopted as an official language and the first official curriculum and exam system was issued in 1946 (Frayha et al., 2001)

### **Lebanon's Education System**

Education systems are usually considered to be structures created by the government to educate its citizens. Each country has its own education system; however, arrangements, administration, and organization differ in size, style, vision, and aim where it can be formal or informal. On a national scale, education systems must fulfill the needs of the country (Mcgettrick, 2009). An educational system consists of several elements which comprise of educating public school students in a country, community or state. It is better to be described as remarkably complex and

versatile. Similarly, attempting to modify or amend an education system demands state policy reforms, sophisticated and multiple approaches (Rebore, 2011). Public schooling commences from kindergarten classes and ends by the twelfth grade. It encompasses the regulations, policies, and laws that are established by the state (Mcgettrick, 2009). After all, the significance of pedagogy is that it is not only related to the reflection of the education system, but its development is attributed to the autonomy of the education systems (Baraldi & Crosi, 2017).

The significance of education, its general principle, and regulations were stated in the Lebanese Constitution through Article 10 and in the National Reconciliation Accord also known as the Taif Agreement (The Lebanese Parliament, 2004, p. 6). These principles and guidelines were not only stressed in Lebanese official documents, but also in international conventions which Lebanon adheres to such as the Declaration of Human Rights, the International Agreement on the Rights of the Child, and the International Convention on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, which stress the right to education, the equality of education, and to the accessibility of education (Bankmed, 2014). Even though private and public schools are evenly distributed in Lebanon, the greatest majority of Lebanese students are enrolled in private schools and universities, where primary education is compulsory until the age of twelve (Yaacoub & Badre, 2012). Lebanon's education sector forms one of the significant contributors to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), in addition to the overall expenditure on education, taking into consideration that the latter has been constantly increasing due to the heightened recognition of the importance of education (Bankmed, 2014). After the civil war ended in 1990 a new curriculum and education system were designed in 1997 by the Lebanese Ministry of Education. Even though several reforms have been made, yet the Lebanese education system still suffers from various dilemmas such as having one public university, poor infrastructure and geographical distribution for its education facilities, and unrefined curricula and textbooks for the past twenty years. Conversely, education systems and programs in private schools are constantly being developed, amended and modernized. This discrepancy between the public and private sectors, along with the continuously evolving social and technological factors and trends, has created a gap between those two systems and their respective beneficiaries. Consecutively, on a larger scope, societies in general are not only developing entities but accelerating as well. Henceforth, Lebanon cannot fall behind in education and rely on an unrefined education system that was designed twenty years ago since education cannot be static in a robust and constantly changing world (Frayha, 2009).

#### *General Education*

Three sectors comprise the education system in Lebanon; general education, vocational and technical education, and higher education. General education is composed of four cycles: Cycle 1: kindergarten classes from 3 till 5 years old, cycle 2: primary education from 6 till 11 years old, cycle 3: intermediate education from 12 till 14 years old, and cycle 4: secondary education from 15 till 17 years old (Nahas, 2009). The Taif agreement advocated for the protection of the private education sector and strengthening of state control over private schools and the textbook (Krayem, 1997). However, it can be seen that there is a discrepancy in what it is mentioned in the document and in reality, where different private schools have different curriculum and policies. The Education Center for Research Development (CERD) is an official Lebanese institution which is responsible for the production of textbooks and curricula in Lebanon. It is a semi-autonomous institution under the minister of education where public schools are

forced to use any books published by the CERD. However, the Ministry of education was not empowered to inspect most private schools during the French Mandate. Later, the Lebanese government tried to centralize inspection of private schools but failed. Therefore, public schools were inspected but private schools were only supervised (Nazarian, 2013).

According to Frayha (2009) the Lebanese education system faces two major problems. The first is the sects' influence on education and society and the second is the social quality disparities between schools and regions. In Lebanon, private schools are the dominant school model where it is sought by the middle and upper-middle income groups, and where public schools are sought by lower-middle incomes and poor social groups.

The education system in Lebanon is divided between public and private schools. Some private schools are secular, some are religious, and some are affiliated to a certain religious community (Nazarian, 2013). Article 10 in the Lebanese constitution states that "education is free as long as it does not violate or contradict morals or affect the dignity of the religions or sects in Lebanon. Nothing will affect the right of the sects in terms of the establishment of their private schools as long as they go about it in accordance with general regulations that the state issues regarding public education" (The Republic of Lebanon, 1960, p. 5) Where public education is funded by the government through the MEHE but there is no national scheme of financial support for learners in Lebanon (Tabbarah, 1997).

Private higher education in Lebanon is well developed as it also represents more than 60% of the total student enrolment in higher education however the public sector is under the guardianship of the ministry of education and higher education (European Commission, 2017). Further, there is only one public university in Lebanon which has different branches across the Lebanese soil and it was funded by the government through the MEHE and it offers university education on three levels, Bachelor, Master's, and Doctorate degrees. Concerning private higher education institutions, the main source of funding comes from the tuition fees and different types of resources and donations where sometimes foreign governments support some private universities and schools. However, there is no government financial support to families whose children are enrolled in higher education (Nahas, 2009).

Unfortunately, Life Long Learning is not addressed in the Lebanese education policy, neither in the national strategy not in its action plans. However private schools engage in Life Long Learning strategies. The Lebanese University is almost free and it is open to all students, Lebanese and foreigners who are legal residents in the country, but foreign students pay more fees than their Lebanese counterparts. Some private universities follow the American model of education like the American University of Beirut and the Lebanese American University. The Lebanese University is the only institution in Lebanon which offers public higher education in all fields and levels (European Commission, 2017).

During the French Mandate (1920 – 1946) the Lebanese Education System was adjusted in line with the French system and French became one of the official languages and half of the courses in secondary schools were taught in French. During this period, the Brevet and Baccalaureate Exams were introduced and were administered at the end of the elementary and secondary process (Nuffic, 2016). Children can enter the kindergarten cycle at the age of 3 years old. Primary education is compulsory until the age of 15 years old and the total number of schooling years in Lebanon is 12 years distributed as follow, primary education which lasts for 3 years, elementary or lower secondary

education which lasts for 3 years and it is devoted to general academic subjects. This education phase ends with a national (Brevet d'Etudes) exam. Further, upper secondary education also lasts for 3 years and students are accepted after they pass the Brevet Exam. Arabic is the language of instruction but English and/or French are taught starting from primary schools and onwards. Math, Biology, Physics and Chemistry are taught wither in English or French. During high school or upper secondary education, the first year of education is common among all classes. The 2<sup>nd</sup> year consists of an array of arts or sciences. The final year is more specific and students make a choice between four programs; arts and literature, sociology and economics, life sciences, and general sciences. At the end of the third-year students also undertake another national exam (the Baccalaureate Exams) which qualifies them to enter higher education. Higher education is mainly divided into three cycles. The first cycle lasts from 3 to 4 years where students obtain a Bachelor or License degree. The second cycle lasts two years and students obtain the Master's degree and the PhD cycle lasts from 3 to 5 years. Vocational diplomas can also be obtained like obtaining a teaching or translation diploma for instance ([European Commission, 2017](#)).

#### *Vocational and Technical Education (VTE) in Lebanon*

Secondary education also includes technical and vocational programs in additional to the general course of study where students who pass the national exam receive the Baccalaureate Technique Certificate. Also, students can begin studying vocational education after finishing primary education. Generally speaking, in all education cycles the French grading system is used with scores that range from 1 till 20. If students attain the total average of 10, they pass the academic year while in higher education a percentage system over 100 is used where 60 is the grade of passing the semester or the academic year ([Nuffic, 2016](#)). VTE encompasses two courses; Technical Education and Vocational Training whereas each field has a number of levels. VTE focuses on the employment sectors and occupations which require practical rather than extensive theoretical knowledge. It comprises four levels, three of which lead to the award of a qualification: (a) short term training, (b) the Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnel (CAP), (c) the Brevet Professionnel (BP), and (d) Baccalaureate Professional ([Karam, 2006](#)). While on the other hand, technical education relates to jobs and occupations requiring a thorough knowledge of the theory and a solid scientific and technological base. This field includes three levels: (a) Baccalauréat Technique (BT), (b) Technicien Supérieur (TS), and (c) License Technique (LT) and the License d'Enseignement Technique (LET).

### **The Lebanese Curriculum: A General Overview**

#### **General Objectives of the Curriculum**

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education published the curriculum general aims, general aims for each educational cycle, weekly distribution schedule for subjects and their allocated time, education cycles and its specific curriculum, content of the curricula for each subject in each class, content details and guidelines for academic and formal assessment. The general objectives issued by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education are divided to several levels; the national level, the citizen formation level, the intellectual and human level, the social level, and the level of building an individual's personality ([Center of Educational Research and Development, 1997](#)).

### **The 2005 Action Plan and 2010 Education Strategy**

In 2005 Lebanon adopted an education plan named The National Education Plan for All. It was funded by the World Bank and due to the CERD diminished role, the Lebanese Association for Educational Studies was assigned to study the gaps. The World Bank being the donor pushed the MEHE to develop a long-term strategy for education, therefore the 2010 strategy document tried to shed the light on research gaps. However, it should be noted that the CERD as a national institution did not participate in drafting the 2010 reform strategy. The 2005 Action Plan for Education for All was created and it was designed to offer all children in the society a good quality education. The action plan focused in a particular on girls and disadvantaged children (Shuayb, 2016).

The 2010 education strategy was based on providing an equal opportunity education, quality education, an education that will shape the culture of an individual, and an education that contributed to social integration (Council of Development and Reconstruction, 2011). The 2010 education reform addressed many gaps including a plan for education, attention to dropouts, inclusion of vocational education and consideration for students with special needs. In addition, the 2010 education reform document is limited to the Lebanese nationality where no provision for refugee students were made. Also, the document does not discuss the needs of the challenges that non-Lebanese students might encounter, nor it did address the challenges that are being faced by disadvantage Lebanese students face. Further, the reform did not address the issue of learning a foreign language which is considered as one of the main objectives of the Lebanese curriculum. The reform did not discuss in particular how they will address the education gaps between regions. Moreover, the reform didn't focus on nation building and nationalism neither did it tackle the gap between the private and public sector. In addition, in a research published in 2016, it shows that the majority of the objectives in the 2010 strategy have not been achieved (Shuayb, 2016).

### **Difficulties Faced by the Education Public Sector in Lebanon**

Lebanon performs well on the student to teacher ratio when compared to countries in the region and has made significant progress in achieving higher rates of enrollment in primary, intermediate and secondary education (Bankmed, 2014). In 1994, the Educational Recovery Plan was established and it was followed by a new curriculum for general education. Textbooks were produced, and teachers were trained. Further, a draft law that determines the age of compulsory education by 15 instead of 12 years old was completed. Besides, the performance of the educational administration was improved by updating it and by introducing the, Educational Management Information System (EMIS). The education sector in Lebanon also created and implemented a leadership-training program in 420 schools, then institutionalized it through the Faculty of Education at the Lebanese University to become a continuous program. Also, in 2010, a decree that "facilitated grade promotion" in primary education was canceled and a draft law was created to establish the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (Council for Development and Reconstruction, 2015).

Nonetheless, the education sector in Lebanon suffers from several dilemmas; out of which the following: (Council of Development and Reconstruction, 2015)

- Few equal opportunities are not provided for every student.

- Classes are sometimes large in number and little visual aids are provided to teachers.
- The education quality needs improvement in order to contribute to the building of the knowledge society.
- The curricula need continuous development and assessment especially since kindergarten and primary cycle curricula are not compatible.
- The quality of education in public schools are low and need improvement.
- The lack of a number of qualified teachers who teach kindergarten classes.
- Instructional aids, school buildings and administration are inadequate enough.
- Other curricula need to be constantly updated and evaluated.
- Textbooks suffer from the lack of an independent reference for its development and supervision based on predetermined criteria.
- The absence of any teacher performance evaluation system.
- The absence of a training system for school administrators.
- Concerning vocational and technical education, the most recent curriculum development efforts were in 2000.
- In public sectors teacher qualifications is a matter of conflict as some primary education teachers complain of a high percentage high school certificate holder, in addition a great number of contract teachers do not have teaching diplomas.

Further, some of the most notable problems of the education sector in Lebanon are the increased rate of private spending on education which exceeds the public spending by far. Not only public spending is low, but also it depends on external donor funding. When compared to neighboring countries, Lebanon's gross and net enrollment rates are considered low. A gap between those two rates can be observed which increases with the education level. This discrepancy indicates that repetition rates, due to failure or under achievement, increases as students move to higher education levels. Further, a gender gap can be observed in all education levels where the percentage of females surpasses that of male students. Private schools have an expanding role in the education sector since public schools have limited resources available and therefore this issue indicates the presence of a gap in the accessibility to education. Further, there are no criteria or regulations regarding the qualifications needed to fill teaching positions, as it is different from one school to another and lacks coherent structure. Additionally, there is no national standard for selecting academic employees in the higher education sector. The entire process is merely a market-oriented process. Grade repetition rates in primary and intermediate education decreased only one percent between 2007 and 2012, while the drop-out rate in intermediate education has deteriorated which is a serious challenge to the country's education system (Bankmed, 2014). Besides, according to the Council for Development and Reconstruction, public education in Lebanon does not provide equal enrollment opportunities or academic follow-up, in addition to the inequality between students of the private and public sectors in passing the official exams. Moreover, a discrepancy is observed between the kindergarten curriculum and that of primary education midst the lack of well-trained teachers for the kindergarten cycle. School buildings, educational resources, and administration constitute other challenges as well. Curriculum and national textbooks need continuous evaluation, development, and monitoring. The absence of a performance appraisal system and a training system for principals on leadership and educational administration hinder the educational process as well (Council for Development and Reconstruction, 2015).

With respect to what has been stated, even though Lebanon's education system achieved several successes, it still suffers from various interrelated issues at different levels which hamper it from achieving its targets. In 1994 and after the civil war ended in the 1990 and new educational development plan was launched which resulted in the 1997 new curriculum and textbooks. This curriculum remained untouched until an action plan was designed in 2005 and applied in 2010 when an education reform strategy was created. However, the 1997 curriculum was neither revised, assessed nor updated until now. Compared to the years in 1997, the quality of education improved in public schools but the dropout rate remained high especially amongst disadvantaged groups. Therefore, education inequality increased and after 13 years only a reform strategy was launched.

Lebanon witnessed one education reform and one action plan since the post-war curriculum was designed in 1997. However, even though the policy makers collaborated with research institutes when designing the reform, but their relationship was haphazard and it was influenced by a number of factors such as personal relationship, policy brokers and donors (Shuyab, 2016).

### **Rationale and Purpose of the Study**

An education system is not born from nothing, on the contrary, it is an embodiment of a reflection of a political, philosophical, economic and social reality which affects it and is affected by it. Further, if societies are to be developed further in life, then close attention should be paid to the education systems since it should be parallel with the changing variables of our time. In Lebanon neither the education system, nor the curriculum were revised since the 90s and this in turn lays its effects on the overall status of education in Lebanon since it should reflect the society's and country's status quo. Judging from this point, an education system, in all its elements should be flexible, dynamic, and progressive enough to keep up with the society's changes; however this is not the case of the Lebanese curriculum. This article aims to gather feedback from different stakeholders to help educators and officials in designing and developing a constructive curriculum which plays a key role in the development of not only education, but the society as well.

### **Purpose of the Study:**

This research aims to determine the main features of education in Lebanon and its education system. Therefore, the following questions are ought to be answered:

- 1- What are the main historical characteristics of education in Lebanon?
- 2- How is the education in Lebanon organized?
- 3- Through time how was the curriculum in Lebanon updated or revised?
- 4- What are the stakeholders' views regarding the current curriculum?
- 5- What are the stakeholders' views regarding the current curriculum's objectives, contents, methods of teaching and evaluation?

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

This qualitative research uses the ethnographic design of collecting data, mainly interviews and focus groups with teachers from elementary classes, principals, students and their parents in two private and two public schools. This study focuses on the stakeholders' perspective about the latest curriculum in Lebanon, how and to which extent it is applied in classrooms. A qualitative research approach was the most applicable method for this study and the main purpose behind using the focus groups and interviews was to acquire information about the stakeholders' views, beliefs, experiences, opinions and thoughts related to the current curriculum in Lebanon.

### **Participants**

The research consisted of four focus groups with 14 female teachers, 4 principals, 43 students, and 19 parents in four schools, two of which were private schools and two public schools whereas the average number of teachers' experience was 15 years in the city of Saida in southern Lebanon. The teachers teach English, Arabic, Math and Science where Math and Science are taught in English since early elementary classes. The focus groups and interviews were held in the teachers' rooms with groups that range between 4 to 6 teachers at a time. Interviews with principals were held in their offices and in the classrooms with the students. Also, since the researcher could not reach all the students' parents at their homes, the researcher sent the interview questions to the parents at home where they answered it and returned it back to the researcher. The prepared questions were approved by the researcher's supervisor and edited to comply with the research's aims and literature. The initial letter of the name of each participant was used to mark their ideas and the researcher acted as a moderator and guided the discussion.

### **Research Instruments and Processes**

Based on the literature review and previous studies, different set of open-ended questions for both interviews and focus groups were prepared for each group of participants. Students and parents were asked 4 questions, while teachers and principals were asked 8-9 questions. The questions were all answered and it focused on the stakeholders' opinions regarding the currently used curriculum. The researcher explained the aim of these questions and its importance and was granted their approval. The interviews were taped recorded for accuracy with a signed approval obtained from the interviewees. The interviews were transcribed, translated to English, coded and summarized for analysis and investigation. Transcripts were carefully read and data was phrased and grouped into themes.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher opted for thematic analysis and a deductive approach to identify the stakeholders' perspectives regarding the currently used curriculum. Therefore, after transcribing and translating the interviewees' responses, the researcher organized the data in a meaningful way for each question, gathered similar responses, included elaborated ones, generated initial codes, divided the data into themes and combined the responses under each theme. These steps were repeated for each group of the participants under respective titles.

## Results

According to the transcripts and the summarized information from the focus groups and interviews, data was phrased and grouped into categories or themes according to the stakeholders' answers.

### **Teachers' opinions and suggestions regarding the current curriculum**

Participant S, B and L described the 1997 curriculum as "*old, not developed and weak*". She added "*teachers are forced to create new ideas or strategies since the Ministry of Education cannot support public schools financially as it should be*". Participant F stated that "*the curriculum is loaded with information which focuses on memorization and textbooks are loaded with either too little exercises or too much questions. It is not designed according to Bloom's level thinking skills therefore students suffer academically*". Participant S who is a second grade English Language teacher described the reading texts as too long and unrelated to the students' real life. She added "*there is a gap between the curriculum and the students' real life and not all students reach the assigned objectives. Objectives are random and not suitable for the grade level. For instance, not only topics are different from the students' life but also character or street names in reading books are also different than that of the Lebanese community*". Participant D and G added "*questions are typical and repeat from one lesson to another where sometimes every exercise has a different objective. Some lessons have more than 10 or 12 set of exercises and we cannot finish it all*". In addition, Participants K, M, and R stated that within the curriculum itself not all objectives are related to each other, neither related to the textbooks. For example, Independence Day and its related objectives are stated in the national curriculum but absent in students' textbooks. "*Therefore, we can determine the presence of a gap between the curriculum, its specific objectives and textbooks. We need more exercises and activities that are related to the comprehension, application, and synthesis levels of Bloom's cognitive domain*". Further, some teachers explained that the content is not appropriate to our reality at all where titles might look related and beneficial but on the other hand the content does not relate to the students' life.

### *Gaps and problems faced by teachers*

Teachers emphasized the presence of gaps in the curriculum content on several levels; objectives, textbook content, photos, maps, statistics, and concepts. Participants S, F and M stated that the curriculum needs to be developed and reorganized urgently and resources need to be addressed and met. Further, Teachers stated that there is a scope-and-sequence problem since there is a gap between cycle 1 (grades 1, 2, and 3), cycle 2 (grades 4, 5 and 6) and cycle 3 (grades 7, 8, and 9) and the absence of grammar books in some of these grades. Teachers stated that while their teaching methods are old, they lack resources and have to search the internet for new strategies but this factor is related to each teacher and his/her own personal development and personal efforts. "*Students' face difficulties in all subjects and teachers do not rely on the state's textbooks. We create our own worksheets relying on different resources, to adapt it to their own. According to them the content is dry, huge and incoherent, also some topics are repeated over the years and some important topics are not included at all*", participant F stated.

### *Teachers' suggestions to improve the curriculum*

Teachers collectively agreed that students need to learn more about ethics and moralities, and how to uphold responsibilities of their actions. Some teachers stated that it is important for students to take English speaking courses, mental math classes, social awareness classes, read new Arabic and English texts and solve higher level thinking exercises. Also, teachers stressed the importance of developing the curriculum as soon as possible in order to avoid the problems they are facing. Lastly, teachers highlighted the importance usage of diverse passages since classes are not inclusive to Lebanese nationals only.

#### *Teachers' confidence in the current curriculum*

Upon being asked about their faith in the Lebanese curriculum some participants said it depends on the school's education staff, social environment and therefore differs from one school to another. Another group of teachers said if they had to enroll their children in public schools, then they would be forced to compensate for the present gaps. However, some teachers expressed that they would enroll their children in schools which teach the national curriculum after the second cycle (after the sixth grade). Other teachers said it depends on the economic circumstances but still they would compensate for the gaps at home.

#### **Students' opinions and suggestions regarding the current curriculum**

As stated earlier several focus groups with students were made and it was one of the most enjoyable focus groups during this research since the students revealed a great level of awareness and consciousness. *"We feel too much pressure on us and the presence of too much information we need to learn and memorize. We always feel short of time and we do not like what we learn since it is really outdated and our world is changing. If we fall sick and do not attend a class on time, we feel that we missed a lot of information which we cannot compensate. We learn a lot of topics that are not directly related to our society. We like to learn more about topics related to our life right now like robotics, technology, translation, new languages, and music for example. Further, some concepts in civics education for example are merely theoretical and detached from our society. Some lessons are better seen as general information to be learned, not as a major element in the official exams which determine our future. Also, since the Lebanese community is rich in its diversity the curriculum should take into consideration the presence of Palestinian students in social studies and civics lessons"* students said. Others added, *"we would like to take self-defense courses, information about other cultures, first aid, and social skills. We are learning about life in school while we need to live it. Moreover, through education we learn about topics in the curriculum that are not present in university education in addition to the gap between national tests and our books. Improving the curriculum should not be about omitting or adding lessons, but on improving and developing it"* students concluded.

#### **Principals' opinion and suggestions regarding the current curriculum**

Participant B stated that the curriculum's general objectives are suitable but it has some discrepancies especially regarding the transition from one grade to another. According to participant H, curriculum is good to a certain extent but we face problems within the textbook itself. According to him, the curriculum lacks motivation and variety of exercises and texts and prohibits the students from a positive interaction with each other. *"In public schools we suffer from the lack of resources and visual aids therefore teachers are forced to search for new resources whether by*

*using the internet or by using private school textbooks to adapt the material to fit the class and students' level. Regarding the evaluation tools, it only assesses the low-level skills of the cognitive domain and does not take into consideration the psychomotor or affective domain. Our curriculum needs to be revised and updated".* Participant R stated that there is a gap between the objectives and the curriculum content since it focuses primarily on memorization. *"We also suffer from another problem since our textbooks are old and therefore not totally parallel with the national official exams. Some concepts are not convenient for the students' age or grade level"* she added. Further, Participants G and H added *"with the faulty arrangement of lessons and between the classes, the curriculum needs to be developed to be aligned with the students' real life and to keep pace with our current life."*

#### *Gaps and problems faced by teachers from the principals' perspectives*

All principals agreed that dealing with the curriculum and content gaps is a personal effort in addition to the presence of a gap between the official exams and the curriculum. Further, the principals highlighted the presence of another problem which is the number of special case students in classrooms. Also, teachers are forced to compensate for the lack of exercises and texts in textbooks. In addition, the number of students (40 – 45 students) in classes need to be decreased.

#### *Principals' confidence and belief in the current curriculum*

Principal R stated that there are several gaps with the curriculum and its content and therefore would prefer to enroll their children in private schools which use up-to-date curriculum. Another principal stated that they would enroll their children in school that use the state curriculum after they finish their elementary education. Principal B said they are not strongly interested in the state curriculum while principal G said they would enroll their children in state schools but compensate the academic difference at home.

#### *Principals' suggestions*

Principals expressed the need to omit old lessons that have no benefits. *"As a father I want my children to learn something that benefits them in their life, work and future. I do not care about memorization. Education should build the students' characters, and teach them how to uphold responsibilities of their actions in addition to teaching students' discipline, values, morals and ethics. Curriculum should include topics related to everyday life, technology and topics students are interested in. We can delete some lessons from the history or philosophy books and use new maps and statistics for geography lessons for example"* said principal H.

#### **Parents' opinion and suggestions regarding the current curriculum**

Majority of the interviewed parents agreed that the curriculum has become old, overloaded and needs to be revised and updated. Our curriculum is detached from reality and the students' daily life. It focuses on memorization of information and not acquiring skills needed to deal with life's challenges. They added, *"there is a gap between the curriculum and the national exams on one side, and a gap between the curriculum and university education. Teachers rely on worksheets and extra exercises."* Another parent added *"we want curriculum to focus on scientific subjects, omit some unnecessary history lessons, revise civic education in a way that is aligned with reality, use 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, teach music, acting or drama classes, or sports in professional ways. We need to focus on social*

*activities and extracurricular activities, avoid memorization and learn new languages like Turkish, German, or Spanish”, concluded.*

*Parents’ opinion regarding the problems faced by their children*

Several parents stated that some lessons are hard and a tutor is needed almost all of the time. There is too much pressure on students and a great load of memorization on their children. Their children feel stressed and pressured especially that there is quite a difference between the books and test content.

*Parents’ suggestions regarding the current curriculum*

Parents stated that their children should be able to choose the subjects they want to learn. “Curriculum needs to be revised and updated, some lessons should be omitted from several subjects and technological development should be followed” one parent stated. Parents want educators and programmers to communicate with students and ask them about their interests and needs. “*Teachers need to use new methods of instructions, use technology and social media and check the curriculum in developed countries and adapt it to ours and our society*” one mother concluded.

### **Discussion, Conclusion & Recommendations**

#### **Discussion**

Education always plays a significant role in the development of any country. Based on the literature review, we can say that education in Lebanon has had a religious dimension which, along with other factors like the civil war, affected its development and caused it to suffer from several interconnected problems. This matter can be identified by the absence of any tangible curriculum development efforts through the years. Nonetheless, even though education in Lebanon remained steadfast in the face of many dilemmas and challenges, but also the lack of development resulted in a series of negative consequences which was discussed through the paper. On the other hand, based on the results of the focus groups and interviews, a change in the curriculum structure can be seen as a demanding need which needs to be met. Another issue that was also identified through the research is the loss of people's faith in public education, but at the same time, it is their only resort during hard financial times.

#### **Conclusion**

Since the Ottoman period and education in Lebanon took a religious dimension with the entrance of any missionaries and religious schools. Along with the unstable political and economic situations, the aftermath of these factors was seen after the 1975 civil war where education became a tool for social and sectarian segregation. Education which is supposed to be a tool for social reconstruction became a tool for social division. Currently the curriculum in Lebanon is 23 years old, textbooks, information, pictures, statistic are old and problematic. Also, there is a great reliance on memorization. Content design is subject based and it gives authority to the textbook and the teacher. Public schools and their students are the victim of this negligence. Further, we cannot forget the gaps between the grade or the cycles neither we cannot ignore the absence of any clear philosophy of education in Lebanon and even if it is present it is not translated in the curriculum. Also, students like to have the freedom of choice to decide what to study and the lack of resources and the absence of any updated content hinders any

development of education. All stakeholders' opinion emphasized one main idea; the Lebanese curriculum needs to be revised urgently since it became detached from the students' reality, interests and needs. Teachers emphasized the use of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in today's classrooms to improve the students' analysis, performance and problem-solving skills. Further, they added that the guidance and counseling department from the Ministry of Education review, edit the exams and provide their opinion, suggestions and advice. Students and their parents expressed their need to use a curriculum which resembles them and their life right now, not decades ago. Finally, principals and teachers' perspectives revealed an alarming issue which needs to be probed cautiously; how to restore faith and confidence in the public education sector in Lebanon.

### **Recommendations**

- 1- A clear philosophy should be adopted along with it the country's general objectives should be determined.
- 2- Needs analysis should be implemented and it should include the students' individual needs, the society's and the needs of the subject matter itself.
- 3- Objectives of each cycle, subject and lesson should be revised and all of Bloom's level should be taken into consideration.
- 4- Content has to be updated and a suitable content design should be chosen.
- 5- Learning experiences should be updated, new strategies and methods should be implemented.
- 6- Contemporary evaluation techniques like portfolio, performance assessment, and project-based assessment should be used.
- 7- Curriculum should constantly be evaluated in parallel with new education trends.
- 8- Educational policies should be implemented as soon as it is adopted.

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## **Attachments**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Teachers / Principles:**

- 1- What is your personal opinion regarding the curriculum content you teach? objectives? teaching methods? evaluation techniques you use?
- 2- Are there any topics that should be deleted? gaps?
- 3- If you would like to add/delete any content on the curriculum what would it be?
- 4- Are there any gaps in the content that need to be addressed?
- 5- Is the scheduling (organizing of the content) reasonable?
- 6- What are the greatest problems you face when teaching the content?
- 7- What would you like to teach your students if the curriculum were to be developed? Suggestions?
- 8- If had a son/daughter enrolled in the public school, would you be satisfied with the curriculum? Why or why not.
- 9- (For principles only) What is the teachers' opinions and problems they face or express to you as the principle?

#### **Parents:**

- 1- What is your opinion regarding the curriculum your children are learning? curriculum content? teaching methods? evaluation techniques? resources?
- 2- What would you like your children to learn? any new topics?
- 3- How do you describe the curriculum your children are learning?
- 4- What are your suggestions regarding the curriculum your children are learning?

#### **Students:**

- 1- What is your opinion regarding what you are studying? Do you like it? dislike it?
- 2- Describe the curriculum you are studying in some words.
- 3- What are the problems you face in class or while studying at home?
- 4- What do you like to study or what subjects/lessons you would like to omit?