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The Deteriorated Educational Reality in Lebanon: Towards “Another” Critical Approach

→ Suzanne Abdul-Reda Abourjeili & Seham Harb.



Anti-government demonstrators with parents' committees from private and public schools during a sit-in protest in front of the Ministry of Education in Beirut, Lebanon, 11 May 2020 © EPA/Nabil Mounzer



Lebanon has for some time now been witnessing a series of intense political, economic, financial, monetary and health crises, which have only been aggravated by the disastrous explosion of the Beirut port on 4 August 2020 that resulted in huge human and financial losses. Among the sectors affected by this situation was the educational sector, with its various components: Higher education, public education, and vocational education. This article will address in particular the dire educational reality of pre-university public education, from primary to secondary, to shed further light on the struggles and needs of educational groups and to devise alternatives that approach and align with the reality people are living.

The article raises the following question: Is the crisis in public education the result of the Coronavirus pandemic, or was it latent and has only been compounded by the successive crises mentioned above? This article assumes that the general education crisis is a structural one that surfaced when the educational paradigm shifted towards distance education or integrated education. It details the results of this change and put forward treatment frameworks to address the root of the problem.

A qualitative approach to the reality of educational parties has been adopted for this study. We conducted a series of interviews with a sample of parents (14) from multiple educational levels and varied family conditions (from Syrian refugees working as domestic help or agricultural workers, to well-off family living in the capital or other regions, to the middle class or low-class families in urban or rural areas). The same is true for learners; 13 students were selected from different educational stages and various schools in terms of their geographical location, standard, and distribution between public, private, and free-private. Some of the students were the children of the sample parents. Interviews were recorded and their contents analyzed.

The article will therefore address teachers' reality in pre-university public education and tries to explain the general framework of the adopted educational policy and the conditions of students and parents, as well as those of schools. It will then analyze the reasons behind these conditions and present both immediate alternatives to address the current problem and strategic choices for the future.



Teachers: Alone and under scrutiny

The 2020-2021 school year began with conflicts between parent committees and private school administrations as a growing number of parents were unable to pay school fees due to deteriorating living conditions and people's deposits being withheld by banks. Several private schools reduced the teachers' salaries, halted their pay, and, in some cases, dismissed them. Many continue to do so to date. As a lawyer for the Private School Teachers Union, Ziad Baroud, in [an article](#) in Al-Nahar newspaper on 24 September 2020, pointed out that at least 3,000 teachers have been dismissed from their jobs, about 10,000 have been receiving half or no pay, and some schools have conducted negotiations with teachers resulting in lower salaries. In the midst of this crisis, school administrations made unilateral decisions and adopted arbitrary practices while unions kept silent, reflecting the alignment between the logic of many educational authorities and that of political powers distanced from people's suffering and concerned only with their narrow interests.

Salaries of teachers in government schools, however, have not been reduced, although their value has deteriorated due to the economic and financial crisis.

With schools closing on 29 February 2020, many private schools had to develop alternative emergency education plans, using technology and resources in online education. On the other hand, there have been isolated initiatives within government schools, launched by some innovative managers and teachers to find solutions that suit their schools. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education then realized the need to offer alternatives to government schools and designed several scenarios in cooperation with the Educational Center for Research and Development. Most notable among these are educational television for all and distance education through specific platforms to which teachers of government schools shall be committed.

To implement the distance education plan, many teachers from public and private schools have volunteered to prepare lessons and record TV sessions for officially certified classes. This initiative reflects teachers' sense of solidarity and eagerness to help students. The TV sessions have highlighted the diversity in educational and language abilities, including some large discrepancies. While some teachers



showed exceptional skill in presenting the content of the lessons according to the age and time requirements (teenage students and 30 minutes respectively), others merely recited the content of their lessons without trying to explain, showing a clear deficiency in language, be Arabic or a foreign language.

This great discrepancy in the performance of the volunteer teachers shows that the absence of clear criteria are adopted in the recruitment of teachers in general, and the inadequacy of the authority responsible for supervising, supporting, and training teachers with difficulties, whether in public or private sectors. Indeed, this is considered one of the greatest problems of public education in Lebanon today.

The crisis aggravated the difficulties faced by certain teachers in adapting and developing teaching and learning strategies in response to such dire conditions, as well as difficulties in securing follow-up and supporting students in distance education. What added to their isolation was the pressure of being forced to acquire new skills without adequate support, with some administrations blaming them for their failures or underperformance.

On the other hand, some schools, whether public or private, have comparatively higher percentages of well-trained teachers and provide an environment that encourages professional development. Students in these schools therefore receive a better education than their peers in other schools, whether they learn in the classroom or through distance learning. The lack of networking and experience exchange between teachers (except for some professional unions that used to be present before such as the Lebanese Association of Physics Teachers) results in wasted opportunities to invest in effective practices as a basis for professional and educational development.

Diverse attitudes of learners towards distance education

Interviews conducted with several learners revealed various attitudes towards distance learning:

- Some relatively independent learners reaped the benefits of their academic



and technological skills, or gradually developed them, and pursued distance education regardless of its quality. Consequently, the outcome of learning equalled or even surpassed the required curriculum.

- Others were perseverant, though their modest means and limited technical skills sometimes impeded their efforts. With the support of their parents, they, therefore, relied on the minimum available resources to finish their school year. A journey through anxiety and hopelessness which became even more confused in families that could not secure the minimum basic means of support.
- Others were carefree and seized the opportunity to breeze through the academic year, believing that if they were in the government education system, they would receive a legal affidavit that would entitle them to obtain the official certificate. They barely made any effort and, instead, indulged in their hobbies indoors or outdoors, or even their jobs. The latter was especially prevalent in the poor families of farmers, craftsmen, and other manual professions. Learners in the other systems stayed at home, in farms, or alleys, with their parents' illiteracy or poverty exacerbating the phenomenon.
- Many of those who were already struggling faltered further; some parents spent entire days trying to grasp course syllabuses and listen to barely available lessons to attempt to explain concepts to their children as best they could. Of particular note among those who are struggling are children with special needs, as distance education was often extremely trying for them, their families, and their teachers.
- Almost complete alienation of learners in kindergarten, first grade, and some second-grade learners, who were considered by certain parents as “dependent learners,” and “unable to be controlled in front of an electronic board listening to explanation or reading instructions on WhatsApp” or while “looking at PowerPoint or YouTube materials sent by their teachers.” They are kinaesthetic learners who enjoy learning by touching what is presented to them and moving their bodies and hands, their abilities developing through contact with their peers. Are families pedagogically and educationally qualified to create the educational and social environment necessary to learn and develop competencies in this kind of fundamental education? Families who are qualified and aware of the



seriousness of the problem resorted to various options, including private tutoring during the summer vacation.

A study conducted by Save the Children with 137 young men and women aged between 12 and 24 sheds more light on the participants' generally conservative attitudes towards distance education and the challenges they face with their families. These were considered by 40% of the participants between 15-18 years old to be a threat to their mental health. Another study conducted by the Lebanese Center for Studies with teachers, learners, and parents about distance education in Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine revealed that students with special needs were the most affected in terms of exclusion and dropouts during distance learning, according to their teachers. Furthermore, refugee children registered in the afternoon period did not have access to any distance education.

Confused and economically stricken families

Parents are caught in the middle of three concerns: concern for their children's academic future, for securing school fees and electronic equipment (tablets, computers, mobile phones), as well as health concerns following the outbreak of COVID-19. However, this gloomy prospect is multi-coloured, and each family has its own story to tell. There are well-off families, who were not concerned with school instalments despite the economic and financial hardship, but rather worried about the fate of the school year and official certificates and how to move up to the higher grades. Some of them did not have enough time to follow up their children's education because of their practical or professional commitments and, therefore, entrusted their children to grandmothers or private tutoring.

As for the parents of different private schools' students, the economic crisis has forced them to bear the brunt of securing both school fees and materials required for distance learning. Movements within the Union of Parents' Committees in private schools in Lebanon consequently became more active with parents escalating their demands, which led to the issue of private school budgets in relation with the Ministry of Education being raised. These groups were at odds



with school administrations, some of which had raised school fees, and so both parties resorted to legal consultations and media campaign exchanges.

In this context, it is necessary to point out that many families cannot support their children in normal situations and for all school subjects, so how can they be expected to follow up and support their children at times of distance education? The country has therefore witnessed the emergence of centres where the workers take care of the learners (institutionalized private tuition), which added to the financial burden on parents, who paid extra instalments equal to the school tuition. Some overwhelmed parents ended up seeking the help of older siblings and neighbours or placing this responsibility on the learners.

Parents who are also teachers struggled to meet the requirements of public or private schools, resorting to distance education but did not have time to follow the education of their children. This especially occurred in families with multiple children. As a result, pressure increased and they were left in a state of confusion; some tried as hard as they could, while others offered partial help or left the matter entirely "to chance."

The following points could thus be concluded after meeting with parents of diverse social and cultural backgrounds:

- “Lost”, “anger”, and “anxiety” are common words uttered by parents regardless of context: loss due to the absence of educational strategies that should be proposed by the official institution (the Ministry of Education and the Educational Center for Research and Development) or private institutions (the administrations of private schools), and which is still a feature looming over the start of the 2020-2021 academic year; anger exacerbated by the aggravated political, economic, financial, health, and public security crises, which culminated in a terrible Beirut Port explosion that destroyed people and buildings (see the [statement](#) of the Independent Trade Union Movement on 17 September 2020); and anxiety that comes from three sources. The first of these is the past (unpaid educational fees and educational skills that have not been acquired), the second is the present (the efficiency of distance education), and the third is the future (the widespread and dangerous epidemic, school fees, the type of



proposed integrated education that combines attendance and distance education, the quality and utility of education, the public crisis, and the absence of the necessary capabilities and technology for everyone).

- An implicit feeling that distance education is nothing more than a "waste of time" and a useless way to contain and control children. As for the educational outcomes, their effectiveness is questionable, and so you hear many of them repeat such phrases as "whatever they did, it is useless" and "they did not understand anything." Distance education is a new and disturbing unknown in the context of traditional practices.
- A sense of being unjustly treated among learners, parents, and teachers, with each party having its own ordeals. The learners are relatively deprived of the freedom to leave home and meet their peers, as well as their right to have access to quality education. Teachers were forced - without preparation - to shift to distance education in contexts of varying resources and energies.
- Parents' attitudes varied between active attendance (follow-up, support, explanation, and revision, etc.) and a mock attendance which sufficed with observation, warning, reprimand, and gossip.

Some of them were absent due to the reality of illiteracy on two levels: the primary level, or an inability to read and write, and second level "electronic illiteracy". But does this mean that other groups of parents were in a position to make up for the "non-school" system on the psychological, relational, and teaching and educational levels? We are inclined to answer no, given the seriousness of all challenges, the most prominent of which are financial and economic difficulties and the lack of parents' preparedness to tackle them. This is also compounded by the substantial lacks in the electricity and Internet infrastructure and the absence of official plans to support the psychological, material and technical needs of families.

A confused ministry and schools left to organize "as they see fit"

During the Summer of 2020, the Lebanese greatly anticipated the setting of a



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national education strategy to deal with the problems the educational sector is expected to face during the academic year of 2020-2021. This anticipation intensified even further following the Beirut explosion, which affected 241 educational institutions in Beirut and Mount Lebanon and left Beirut suffering property damages and financial losses estimated to exceed 100 million USD ([World Bank, 2020](#)). The aftermath of the explosion also forced 60,000 students to move from privately owned educational institutions to public ones ([Information International](#)). However, Lebanon received nothing but a few official initiatives introduced by the Center of Educational Research and Development (CDRP) and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. These initiatives, which fail to amount to a comprehensive strategic vision, include training of officials concerned with education in the aforementioned organizations and principals and teachers in the public sector in the use of technological resources and platforms and instructing them about precautions against pandemics. [Another initiative](#) was also to launch the Digital Learning Initiative (DLI), which “includes digital interactive lessons and resources and provides an advanced environment to digital asynchronous learning”. They also issued the Health [Guidelines](#) for Precautions against the Spread of SARS-CoV-2 in Educational Institutions.

On the other hand, the Ministry of Education has not issued any detailed report about the damages suffered by the educational sector after the Beirut Port explosion, nor has it published any work plan to rebuild and restore schools and support principals, teachers, learners, and families who must now face this difficult academic year. It is clear that the Lebanese government relies fully on the initiatives of the World Bank, UN, and UNICEF, along with the efforts of local NGOs, to fix these issues. What is also striking is the absence of a national training strategy to help principals and teachers in times of crisis and the lack of an accessible-to-all platform that provides high-quality education. Many schools have already designed and provided courses on these subjects as per their needs and capabilities. In addition, many experts in the education sector, driven by social solidarity, have also provided free courses and shared them on social media in the absence of such initiatives from the centralized authority. As such, the structural gap between the private and government sectors participated in widening the gap between schools and learners during times of remote learning.



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Despite all of the promises made by the Ministry, it has not provided the minimum facilities or financial support needed by less fortunate learners, such as free internet connection and computers. This leads to a widening of the socio-economic gap by failing to provide equal chances for remote learning as a basic right of Lebanese learners, especially under the difficult living conditions that the Lebanese people have had to endure for more than a year.

The nature, coverage and effectiveness of school procedures varied. This can be attributed to different factors:

- The leadership skills of principals and their ability to manage crises actively. Successful management systems were shown to be those able to set realistic objectives for the learning process, gain experience during this crisis, and provide the required training, support, and coordination between teachers and learners to achieve these objectives. Are there any principals that fall under the category of “successful management”? And if so, what is their percentage? More research is needed to answer these questions.
- The level of professional training among teachers. This is evident in their ability to design different teaching and learning scenarios and use the proper educational tools to achieve their goals while taking into consideration both their students’ characteristics and situations and the circumstances of the learning process. These teachers are also the ones who leave a good moral impact on their students and encourage them to learn and improve as individuals. In reality, the governance of the educational system suffers from fundamental shortcomings that reduce the number of such teachers, among these:
 - The lack of a national standardized framework to consistently govern the selection, qualification, employment, monitoring, and training of student teachers. It is important to note here that the Ministry of Higher Education previously launched such a framework in 2018, although it was not made mandatory (what is worse is that the 2018 work frame is no longer available on the internet. This is yet another piece of evidence showing the extent to which developmental projects suffer from weak impact and a lack of



- sustainability due to corruption and poor governance.
- Inconsistency in the teachers' evaluation process within the private sector and an absence of the same in the public sector.
- Poor mechanisms for motivation and professional progress, and the lack of a legal frame linking them to job performance.
- Widespread nepotism as the basis for employment and the lack of regard for qualifications.

Essentially, the lack of a national strategy guaranteeing education oversight and career support in the public and private sectors has contributed to the deterioration of the educational situation and the fragmentation of initiatives and efforts, no matter how remarkable these may be. Additionally, in the context of crisis, the absence of a sharp educational vision, which would guarantee the integration within school pluralism and direct it towards building the society and individual Lebanon aspires to achieve, has exposed deeply rooted disparities and inequalities in the educational system. This lack of justice is embodied in the quality of education and its outputs, where the education system has turned into correlative and heterogeneous groups, between the public and private sectors on the one hand, and within each sector on the other, where schools, teachers, and curricula have ranks that comply with the socio-economic background of the parents. Accordingly, learners' paths are defined by their parents' backgrounds, which allow them to enrol in specialized schools ([Abdul-Reda Abourjeili, 2003](#)) where most teachers share high professional characteristics and educational qualifications. In so doing, schools become places that deepen rather than reduce socioeconomic divisions. Moreover, the financial waste within the “looted Ministry of Education”, according to the Minister of Education and Higher Education Tarek Majzoub in a television [interview](#) on 26 September 2020, along with poor governance, has significantly impacted the education sector and its members, as the grants and loans allocated to support the sector were transferred to the pockets of officials and their associates.

Practical and scientific people-oriented alternatives



It has now become inevitable to adopt another approach in education, one which is built upon the school and the learner, which addresses the current crisis at its roots, and which takes shape within the social dialogue mechanisms between the political authority and the educational parties, thereby contributing to sustainably reshaping the new educational social contract. For this to happen, it is necessary to exclude and hold accountable corrupt officials and employees in the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and the Center for Educational Research and Development, while appointing officials known for their integrity, knowledge, and experience in managing public affairs. This would be done simultaneously with activating and developing the tasks of educational inspectors and relying on a homogeneous and independent team of educational specialists to serve as an educational scientific reference that supports the new decision-makers in:

- Building a national education strategy for 2020-2022 in times of crisis based on broad participatory foundations.
- Developing a fair and supportive plan to manage the educational crisis and provide free learning platforms during the 2020-2021 academic year.
- Establishing an educational mechanism that guarantees the quality of educational television in terms of teachers' competence and approved teaching methods.
- Supervising the design and implementation of development plans and overseeing the building of Professional Learning Communities both within different schools and between educational parties.
- Empowering administrative teams in public and private schools and highlighting effective practices and success stories to reinforce the principle of “leading from the middle” ([Hargreaves, 2020](#)), which ensures ameliorated responses with local priorities and local capabilities and includes a collective educational responsibility.
- Coordinating cooperation with the local community, parents, and organizations in light of the aforementioned strategy. For example, the Lebanese Association for Educational Studies is planning to launch an initiative to support affected schools in terms of administration, teachers, and learners.
- Evaluating plans and correcting their paths in line with the reality and needs of learners and schools, on one hand, and with contemporary



research trends, on the other hand. This would take into consideration the varying and sometimes restricted capabilities of families, especially considering the current economic and health conditions.



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arab-reform.net

contact@arab-reform.net



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