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Addressing issues of (in)justice in public schools within postwar Lebanon: Teachers' perspectives and practices

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a critical analysis of the interplay of complex factors and conditions influencing teachers' practices in public schools within a postwar conflict-affected society like Lebanon. I draw on Nancy Fraser's tri-partite justice framework as an analytical lens through which to examine the key issues that emerged from teachers' perspectives and practices in relation to engaging their students in learning and the broader systemic influences. The findings suggest that postwar educational reforms were limited because the Ministry's attempt to promote the ideals of social cohesion failed to address the underlying structural violence, concealing the socio-economic inequities stemming from sectarianism, and overlooking the daily injustices taking place in classrooms and schools. I outline strategies to transform the economic, sociocultural and political injustices limiting teaching practices in order to support teachers in making engagement central to the learning and empowerment of all students.

1. Introduction

> We don't need [student] engagement, we need discipline, we need students to study, to respect the teacher...This is a Danish system with all its emphasis on human rights and democracy in an Afghanistan situation where such values are not the reality in Lebanese families. We are not ready for this. They [the Ministry] took away our authority and left us with what? (Nasr, public school teacher/supervisor)

The intensification of conflict in many parts of the world has increasingly drawn attention to the role of education in wider peace-building strategies, in potentially strengthening development benefits for communities and equipping young people, particularly those at the margins, with essential skills and knowledge to improve their life circumstances (UNESCO, 2011). However, literature on education in conflict-affected societies has tended to focus mainly on short-term emergency efforts, basic literacy skills, child protection, psychosocial well-being and school access, as argued by Novelli and Lopes Cardozo (2008), Smith (2005), and Zakharia (2013). Although essential, such responses have failed to acknowledge the realities of schooling processes and to address issues of social inequity. There remains a large theory-practice gap in the literature between the aspirational theorizing of academics, de-contextualized goal-setting of international organizations and the realities teachers face in classrooms (Paulson and Rappleye 2007). Responses have lacked a longer sustainable developmental and transformative view of education (Davies, 2004; Novelli and Lopes Cardozo, 2008; Smith, 2005), thus focusing on the symptoms of the conflict, not its roots. Lebanese scholar Zakharia (2011) argues that schooling, particularly in such contexts, must serve as a vehicle to meaningfully address the structural violence that perpetuates social and economic inequity so that educational systems can contribute towards building peaceful, just and inclusive societies. To this end, Novelli and Lopes Cardozo (2008) and Shah and Lopes Cardozo (2014) have highlighted the need to be attentive to the historical, political, economic and cultural contexts in which schooling in conflict-affected societies is embedded. If education is to fulfill the needs and aspirations of young people, then more focus is needed on developing a critical understanding of the interactions between policies, school-level and classroom-level processes as experienced by different stakeholders in particular, students, teachers and principals. In order to begin understanding such interactions, this paper examines factors influencing learning and teaching processes in Lebanese public schools from

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teachers' perspectives and practices relating to engaging students with learning.

Scholars in Western countries, where student engagement has primarily been studied, assert that it is linked to enhancing school retention (Finn and Zimmer, 2012), academic achievement (Marks, 2000) and students' overall educational experiences (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). However, few scholars, like Zyngier (2008) and Smyth (2006), argue that engagement embraces broader schooling outcomes, such as active citizenship and personal and community empowerment. In contexts affected by conflict the need for academic, emotional, cognitive and broader civic learning outcomes becomes further amplified.

Although definitions of student engagement are diverse and contested, there is wide consensus that it is multi-dimensional, encompassing students' behaviors, feelings and cognitive involvement in learning, and can be shaped by teachers' actions and the school environment (Appleton et al., 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004). Some scholars have focused on certain school features in relation to facilitating engagement, such as the benefits of communal schools in which greater personalization, safety, fairness and student participation are essential factors (National Research Council, 2004; Ripski and Gregory, 2009). Other researchers studying low-income US urban schools have emphasized teachers' significant role, particularly teacher-student relations that are characterized by supportive instrumental relationships, high academic expectations and caring as a basis for transforming the school culture to one of mutual respect and active engagement (Antrop-González and De Jesús, 2006; Hantzopoulos, 2013). Rejecting deficit discourses that often portray socially disadvantaged students as poor learners, a number of critical scholars have asserted a strong connection between engagement and pedagogical approaches (Antrop-González and De Jesús, 2006; McMahon and Zyngier, 2009; Zyngier, 2008). Consistently, these scholars have found that teaching practices that are responsive to students' lives, learning needs, interests, and that are participatory and empower students to make changes to their own marginalization can result in both social justice and academic achievement.

While there is little disagreement that good teaching makes a difference to students' engagement and achievement (UNESCO, 2013), attributing this solely to what teachers do in classrooms overlooks the powerful influence of the context of schooling. McMahon and Portelli (2004) caution educators against technical or procedural remedies for disengagement in which teachers are given a list of specific procedures, strategies and skills to adopt in order to ensure student engagement. Schools are situated in, and interact with, larger structures and conditions marked by inequity (Mills and Gale, 2011; Tikly and Barrett, 2011) and can be sites of direct and structural violence (Smith and Vaux, 2003; Zakharia, 2013). However, the engagement literature does not adequately address the sociocultural, political and economic factors impacting educational processes outside Western contexts, especially those in politically unstable settings. In this paper, I explore such influences on teachers' practices to engage their students in Lebanese public schools. I argue that issues of justice and equity in and through public schooling need to be made central to Lebanon's social cohesion agenda and any future educational reform. It is hoped that developing a critical understanding of schooling and classroom-level processes by examining teachers' perspectives and practices, as this paper aims to do, can prompt educators and policy-makers in Lebanon and similar conflict societies to interrogate and revise the educational processes, conditions, values and practices that are undermining contemporary public schooling and thus reinforcing systemic inequity.

2. Lebanese context

Lebanon is a high-middle-income country; nevertheless, the overall poverty rate stands at around 28 percent, while the extreme poverty rate is estimated at around 8 percent with significant regional disparities, especially in North Lebanon where conditions are worst (World Bank, 2012). Lebanon's 18 officially recognized religious or sectarian communities have often been described as a plural democracy and social mosaic.[1] With roots in the 400-year Ottoman rule and consolidated under the French colonial mandate (1920–1943), during independence Lebanon's sectarian-based power-sharing formula became institutionalized, ensuring political and economic privilege along socio-religious lines. A culture of sectarianism permeated Lebanese institutions, resource allocation and daily life, supporting a sectarian system of kinship and widespread nepotism (Khalaf, 2002). Thus the more favored sectarian communities, particularly Maronite Christian, Sunni and Druze elites, received a disproportionate share of power and resources, which resulted in economic deprivation for the marginalized Shi'a population and underdevelopment of those communities living in the North, South and Bekaa valley outside Beirut and the Metn (Salibi, 2003). Further reinforcing sectarian cleavages, communities had the freedom to develop and operate their own private schools, where the vast majority of students were enrolled, promoting their own curricula, textbooks and sectarian vision of Lebanon (Inati, 1999). Children from poor, mostly Muslim, families attended public schools, which lagged behind private schools in providing their students with precious foreign language skills, scientific knowledge and activities (Kobeissy, 1999).

Aggravated by the regional Arab-Israeli conflict and strong influence of external actors aligned with different sectarian communities, internal, long-standing, unresolved grievances and stark inequalities between the sectarian groups exploded into a protracted 15-year civil war (1975–1990). During the Civil War public institutions all but crumbled in the absence of a functioning government. Amidst a state of lawlessness and disorder, teachers and administrators were threatened and often physically attacked by armed students and their family members for higher grades and undeserved grade promotion (Zakharia, 2011). Official examinations for elementary, middle and high-school students were often cancelled during the war or the pass grade was lowered to 25 percent from 50 percent, which allowed students to be academically promoted without the necessary competencies (Boujaoude and Ghaith, 2006). Many teachers who entered teaching in public schools during the war did so without the necessary qualifications.

The Taif Accords ended the war in 1990. It is estimated that between 150,000 and 200,000 people were killed, more than 150,000 were severely wounded, 13,000 were kidnapped and 17,000 disappeared and still remain unaccounted for (Zakharia, 2011). An estimated one million people were displaced and hundreds of thousands emigrated, while infrastructure damage amounted to $25 billion (UNDP, 1997). The Accords established the country's Arab and Lebanese identity, preserved the sectarian-based political system under a modified formula and favored privatization while also emphasizing the necessity for balanced economic development (Krayem, 1997). Significantly, the Accords

[1] The largest of the 18 sectarian communities include: among the Muslims – Shi'ites, Sunnis and Druze – and among the Christians - Maronites, Catholics and Greek Orthodox. Makdisi (2000:7) defines sectarianism as the deployment of religious heritage as a primary marker of political identity. In this paper, I use 'sect', 'sectarian' and 'confessionalism' interchangeably.