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the destructive silence of corruption and authoritarianism in education

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Education research and development initiatives have mostly approached poor or weak practices of governance as consequences of armed conflict. Moreover, education reform strategies have often overlooked the political and historical roots to governance issues that impede education reform and development. Drawing on the case of Lebanon, we observe how governance practices of corruption and authoritarianism emerge as destructive expressions of conflict. I focus on two of many areas that have jeopardized the safety of children and their rights to quality education: the failure of rehabilitating school infrastructure that has led to the death of a student in November 2022 and the stalemate of history curriculum reform since 1970. In this paper, I argue that authoritarianism and corruption should be regarded in education research and development work as expressions of conflict rather than consequences.

Keywords: authoritarianism, conflict-affected, corruption, education governance, education in emergencies

1 Introduction

The dimension of governance is only beginning to expand in studies examining the factors that hinder children's rights to safe, inclusive and quality education. The scholarship of conflict studies in education has mostly attributed the violations of children's rights to education (e.g. exclusion from learning, violence in schools, discriminatory policies) to the reverberations of armed conflict (Quaynor, 2012; Tawil & Harley, 2004; UNESCO, 2011). Furthermore, education reform efforts for social reconstruction in contexts affected by armed conflict focus primarily on constructing a single narrative about the past, the avoidance of controversial issues in classrooms, promotion of a unifying national identity and fostering approaches to dialogue to avoid future destructive expressions of conflict (Akar, 2019; Smith, 2011). More subtle destructive expressions of conflict, however, are harder to find in conflict studies examining social injustices in education.

In this paper, I turn a spotlight on corruption and authoritarianism through education governance as overlooked and even institutionalised forms of conflict. Studies on war in developing countries have positioned the state of poor governance as a consequence or victim of armed conflict (e.g. Stewart & FitzGerald, 2000). However, reports on education and conflict sometimes suggest that corruption in the government is a causal factor to the damages made to the education system, but without specific details or evidence (e.g. UNESCO, 2011). The report *Accountability in Education* (UNESCO, 2017) delves deeper into the failure of governance through corruption, though focuses primarily on mismanagement of funds. Destructive expressions of conflict stemming from education governance remains an underexamined and even avoided contributing factor to failing and stagnant education

systems. Drawing on the case of Lebanon below, I argue that, in conflict-affected areas, corruption and authoritarianism are neglected roots to the hindrances of education reform and violations of children's rights to safe and quality education.

Despite the questionable validation of measures used to evaluate corruption and the nature of political governance, Lebanon has earned its position on indices showing high levels of corruption and authoritarian approaches to governance. The annual Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) report measures perceived levels of corruption in the public sector by drawing on data sources and then scores countries and territories out of 100, with 0 as the most corrupt. Lebanon's score has decreased from 28 in 2015-2019, to 27 in 2020 and, most recently, 26 in 2021 (Transparency International, 2021). Compared to other countries, the CPI (Transparency International, 2021) ranks Lebanon 154 out of 180 countries, with 180 being the worst position; Lebanon ranks near Iran (150), Central African Republic (154), Nigeria (154) and Iraq (157). Lebanon has also been reviewed and ranked in the Democracy Index that the Economist Intelligence Unit has been producing since 2006. Countries' political and governance practices are scored according to indicators and then categorized under either full democracy, flawed democracy, hybrid and authoritarian. Prior to the Democracy Index 2021, Lebanon has consistently been classified as "hybrid"; but then Lebanon was classified as "authoritarian" in the 2021 report (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022). Neighboring nation-states in West Asia and North Africa are also positioned as "authoritarian", including Palestine, Kuwait, Lebanon, Algeria, Qatar, Iraq, Jordan, Oman, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iran, Yemen and Syria. Authoritarian practices can indeed take place in countries that proclaim democracy as their system of governance, such as in the Constitutions of Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria and Palestine. Furthermore, we can observe a correlation between authoritarian approaches to governance and perceived corruption in the public sector. The countries classified as "authoritarian" in 2021 – Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Syria – are also in the lowest two tiers of the Corruption Perceptions Index 2021.

2 Failures of an Education System

2.1 Risks to children's safety

On 2 November 2022, part of the ceiling in El Kobeh Secondary Public School in Tripoli, Lebanon, fell and killed 16-year-old Maggie Mahmoud. Education reform programs in Lebanon over the past two decades have prioritized the renovation of public school infrastructure. In September 2010, USAID/Lebanon awarded the Education Development Center (EDC) and its consortium of local partners a five-year grant of 75 million USD for the reform project, "Developing Rehabilitation Assistance to Schools and Teacher Improvement" (D-RASATI) program. An audit by the USAID Office of Inspector General (2013) identified failure in leadership and management and called for the removal of selected activities. The audit found that of the 32.7 million USD allocated to assess and rehabilitate the 1,400 public schools, only 1,280 schools were assessed, taking one year longer than the set date and costing 1.5 million USD from the allocated budget of 1.1 million USD. In addition, it reported that 15 million USD were spent on partial rehabilitation of 154 schools and full rehabilitation of 29 schools. While public information on the outcomes of D-RASATI are limited and mostly unavailable, a recent press release by the Center for Lebanese Studies (2022) following the death of Maggie Mahmoud reported that the school infrastructure assessment from the D-RASATI project found 239 schools needing major repairs and 40 regarded as unsafe or at risk of collapsing.

The rehabilitation of schools returned to the education reform agenda through the "Reaching All Children with Education 2" (RACE 2) strategy. In RACE 2 (MEHE, 2016), the ministry cited a self-study in 2004, "National Education Strategy in Lebanon", that found one-fifth of the school buildings required rehabilitation and renovation. RACE 2 referred to the D-RASATI project but only as a project that assessed the infrastructure of 1,280 schools, with no reference to the incompletion of rehabilitating schools. In the new strategy, the rehabilitation of schools was placed as a reform outcome under the first of three pillars. A sum of 2.1 billion USD was raised for RACE 2, of which 270 million USD were earmarked for rehabilitating public school infrastructure. Among the donor agencies, the World Bank required the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) to be responsible for all implementing and reporting activities. MEHE allocated this responsibility to its Project Management Unit (PMU). The PMU and UNICEF have recently been the target of an investigative journalist, Riad Kobeissi, who found significant discrepancies in school enrolment figures of Syrian refugee children and funds allocated per refugee child (Blog Baladi, 2020). Furthermore, a year after the end of RACE 2, comprehensive financial and outcome reports by donor agencies and MEHE are neither available nor accessible, which should set alarm for accountability among donor agencies and MEHE (Center for Lebanese Studies, 2022).

2.2 Hindering education reform

The failure of curricular reform, particularly for history and citizenship education, is largely the result of approaches to governance defined by exclusive participation, authoritarian politics and greed for money (or the desire to attain financial wealth at the cost of breaching policy). The Lebanese national curriculum has undergone three main reforms since its independence in 1943: 1946 for the new Republic, 1968-71 in response to the rise of Arab nationalism and 1997 for social reconstruction after the 1975-1990 civil war. Subsequent attempts to reform the national curriculum after 1997 should be the subject of ongoing investigations, but with greater emphasis on conflict analysis in governance. An unresolved failure of the 1997 curriculum reform was history education, the only program that was not approved, leaving it untouched since 1970. The history education development committees comprising historians representing religious and political parties struggled to reach consensus on a single historical narrative, especially concerning sensitive issues (Frayha, 2004).

Later in 2000, the committees agreed on a history curriculum that was approved on 22 June 2000 by the government Presidential Decree no. 3175. The Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD; an autonomous public agency linked to MEHE and responsible for curriculum development and teacher training) completed the production of textbooks for grades one to six. However, the minister of education halted all production and distribution after objecting to how the Arabs were portrayed as invaders in the conquest of 636 AD (Frayha, 2004). Subsequent attempts to reform the history education national curriculum in 2010 and 2012 also failed after conflicts among political parties in how certain narratives were presented and omitted. Frayha (2003) reveals a rare analysis into the exclusive political engagement and even personal preferences that determine the approval of a national curricular program. Also, the ministry offices responsible for curriculum reform have not yet been held accountable for nearly three decades of stalemate and stagnation in revising the national curriculum.

The process of constructing a single narrative, according to Seixas (2000), is an expression of authoritarian political ideologies while disciplinary approaches to learning history by critically examining evidence and co-constructing claims represents a democratic philosophy of governance.

Seixas (2000) maintains that the explicit aim for social cohesion through collective memory strengthened by the grand narrative limits or denies opportunities to use second-order concepts like change and causation to construct or interpret past events. Hence, the implications in education through learning single narratives have, also by definition, reinforced practices of rote learning and, thus, described as leaving students "intellectually disabled" (Howson & Shemilt, 2011, p. 80).

Similar expressions of corruption have impeded citizenship education reform initiatives. Citizenship education was defined as one of the ten priorities of national education reform in the Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP; 2010-2015). The EU delegation in Lebanon allocated a grant of 1.2 million Euros to support the MEHE in citizenship education reform activities. I was personally among the members of the consortium that was awarded the fund (CEAR, 2013). Numerous tensions arose between grant-holders and MEHE. After nearly a year and a half into the three-year project, the coordinating representative from CERD terminated the project. Prior, he attempted negotiating ways to allocate funds to pay civil servants to carry out the work. However, using funds to pay civil servants was prohibited according to the EU contract regulations; this further fuelled tensions that led the representative to cease project activities. After termination, the MEHE and EU contracted a local NGO to complete the reform activities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that payments to civil servants were later informally negotiated. Moreover, the EU made no reference to the consortium supporting MEHE in its citizenship education reform during its annual EU-Lebanon Cooperation Days exposition in Beirut, UNESCO Palace (18–19 March 2003).

3 Conclusion

The selected incidents in this case study prompt closer and careful inquiry into various dimensions of governance, including the historical traditions of how government and reform policies are developed, funded, implemented and reported on. While they zoom in on practices of corruption and authoritarianism, they extend the scope of these concepts beyond exclusive decision-making and mismanagement of funds to include accountability, transparency and the qualifications of implementing personnel and partner organizations. Indeed, reports on previously funded education reform initiatives are rarely available. Moreover, the failures and successes of past reforms are even rarely acknowledged in strategies developed by MEHE and funded by international donor agencies such as the World Bank, USAID and the European Union (EU). We as education researchers and program developers should question the extent to which these strategies build on the reports of previously funded reform initiatives such as the ESDP for "Quality Education for Growth", a five-year national education reform project approved by the Council of Ministers on 22 April 2010 and co-financed by multiple international donor agencies, including the World Bank, UNDP and the EU.

Nation-states and societies may make direct and explicit commitments to principles of democracy and human rights. However, their systems of governance sustain approaches that undermine the same principles they proclaim as foundational to reform. These approaches are more subtle than the destruction of buildings and mass murder of people. They are indeed institutionalised into common practice. The systemic and accepted practices of any destructive expression of conflict become a cancer in the education system; a silent killer that prevents the strengthening of resilience and recovery. In this case, we observe this cancer as the governance of education that maintains nepotism, avoids transparency, neglects accountability and governs unilaterally. This silent killer has cost lives and schooling of children. It has eclipsed through reform initiatives that government and donor agencies design for more inclusive and just education policies and practices. The knowledge field of corruption and authoritarianism as destructive expressions of conflict remain undeveloped

and possibly even hidden. This only leaves education researchers as front-line explorers to build its empirical base with narratives and testimonies to not only reveal the tumors but also discover transformative approaches. Their research should demand a conflict analysis that considers authoritarianism and corruption as *expressions* of conflict rather than mere consequences of armed conflict.

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