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Lebanon: A Case of History Education in a Sectarian Society

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Abstract: This paper synthesizes the extant literature on history education in Lebanon. The sectarian nature of the country and the recent civil war make the case of Lebanon a unique and compelling one. Three emerging understandings underscore the complexity of history education in Lebanon and demonstrate the ways in which history is used to undercut national social cohesion. First, history education in Lebanon is influenced by the tradition of parochial or confessional schools dating to the hands-off approach of the Ottoman colonial powers. Second, the delay of a state-sanctioned national curriculum has paralyzed educators who have been left to piece together their own curriculum. Third, the political gridlock in Lebanon continues to make history education a contentious topic.

Keywords: Lebanon, Middle East, history education, social studies, social cohesion, confessional, sectarian

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Among the predominantly Muslim countries of the Arab world, Lebanon stands out as notably heterogeneous country. For this reason, Lewis (1995) argued that Lebanon has played a role as "the only surviving centre of cultural and religious pluralism and of economic and political freedom within the Arab world" (p. 347) dating to the Ottoman Empire. Today Lebanon has some 17 Christian and Muslim denominations, plus a small Jewish minority, in its population of approximately four million (El-Ghali, 2013; Frayha, 2003). This diversity has contributed to frequent unrest in the country, as evidenced by the 15-year civil war starting in 1975, as well as continued sporadic violence. In an illustrative example of the contentious nature of information in this divided Lebanon, various authors have alternately described the civil war as ending in 1989 (Frayha, 2003), 1990 (Abouchedid, Nasser, & Blommestein, 2002; Terc, 2006), and 1991 (Volk, 2008). Since 2011, the civil war in neighboring Syria has dramatically increased Lebanon's longstanding diversity, adding an estimated 1.2 million refugees – or about one third of Lebanon's total population (Jalbout, 2015; UNHCR, 2015).

Within this setting, education has served as a vital means of controlling and disseminating information. For this reason, schools have traditionally been divided in Lebanon with some 60% of students attending private schools (Frayha, 2003; Jalbout, 2015). Most of these private schools are run as religious schools by various confessional communities (Abouchedid & Nasser, 2000; Bahous, Nabhani, & Rabo, 2013).

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Abouchedid and colleagues (2002) demonstrated this diversity in a study of religious and history education in Lebanon through identifying and sampling seven schools from the following seven faith traditions: Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Protestant, Druze, Sunni, and Shi'i. Volk (2008) reported that the result of this factious setting has been an emphasis on "the future (*al-mustaqbal)* over the present or the past" (p. 293).

Theoretical Framework

Given the sectarian nature of Lebanese society, this paper utilizes a conceptual framework of social cohesion, which Frayha (2003) and others (e.g., Shuayb, 2012) have previously introduced in their analysis of education in Lebanon. Social cohesion is analogous to civic education, but reaches beyond the concept of citizenship (i.e., the relationship between the individual and the state) and focuses on the social and cultural dimensions of society (Starkey, 2012). Given the significant social and political friction within Lebanon, social cohesion provides a lens through which to analyze the implications of the realities of education, and particularly history education, in this unique context.

Social cohesion is a particularly salient framework when examining the stated goals of education in Lebanon. For example, the Taef (or Ta'if) agreement that ended the civil war tasked the governmental Educational Center for Research and Development with developing a history curriculum and textbook (Fraya, 2003) in an effort to provide "united, post civil war national identity" (Volk, 2008, p. 309). However, these instructional materials have been slow in coming and appear to provide an example of McCully's (2009) assertion that "historians and history educators are often more conspicuous by their absence than by their engagement" (p. 215). Shuayb's (2015) recent analysis of the national Lebanese civics curriculum further serves to emphasize the lack of a national history curriculum for which no parallel examination is possible. This reality leads to the research question guiding the present review of the literature: How do Lebanon's heterogeneity and contentious past inform history education in a sectarian society?

Findings

In this section of the paper, I present findings from the extant literature on the teaching and learning of history in Lebanon. Three themes emerged during analysis. First, history education in Lebanon is influenced by the tradition of parochial or confessional schools dating to the hands-off approach of the Ottoman colonial powers. Second, the delay of a state-sanctioned national curriculum has paralyzed educators who have been left to piece together their own curriculum. Third, the political gridlock in Lebanon continues to make history education a contentious topic.

Sectarian Schools Lead to Splintered National Narratives

The first finding from the literature suggests that the large number of sectarian communities and confessional schools in Lebanon contributes to a diverse set of narratives in history classrooms. Central to this analysis is the understanding of Lebanon as a diverse country with a significant number of *confessional* (Abouchedid & Nasser, 2000; Abouchedid et al., 2002) or *parochial* (Bahous et al., 2013)

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schools. The current reality stems from the extensive missionary engagement in education when present-day Lebanon was under the control of the Ottoman Empire, a fact that reflected the limited availability of public schools under the Ottomans (Frayha, 2003). Today the political sectarianism and "perceptions that public schools offer lower quality education" (El-Ghali, 2013, p. 8) lead many families to seek private education (see also Jalbout, 2015).

As Abouchedid and Nasser (2000) and Bashshur (2005) found, within this confessional system schools and teachers feel the tension of representing their own communities, while also promoting a shared Lebanese identity. Abouchedid and Nasser (2000) situated their analysis of history teaching in Lebanon within the context of confessional or religious private schools. In their introduction, Abouchedid and Nasser highlighted the importance of history and history education in the formation of a national identity and dialogue. Their study focused on analysis of history textbooks used in seven confessional schools and the amount of emphasis each has "on subjects conducive to inter-group understanding" (p. 58). The schools they selected are the same seven included in their later related work (Abouchedid et al., 2002): Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Protestant, Druze, Sunni, and Shiite. Abouchedid and Nasser's analysis of the 10 textbooks used across these schools found a consistent "neglect of pluralism in Lebanon" (p. 70). Specifically, the origins and beliefs of the various confessional communities were omitted, as were the 1958 civil war and the Israeli/Arab conflict. Interviews with history teachers at some of the schools revealed the complexity of teaching when so many diverse viewpoints are present. For example, a history teacher at the Shiite school explained that while the textbook did not directly address disparate perspectives, "it is common knowledge in history that some Muslims preferred the Ottoman rule to the French one. . . . Some groups in Lebanon view the martyrs who faced the Ottomans as traitors others saw them as heroes" (p. 72). Other teachers demonstrated a dedication to presenting perspectives other than that of their own tradition, but reported feeling pressure to stick to the basics, arguing, "We have to meet the requirements of the national examinations" (p. 73).

Abouchedid and Nasser (2000) concluded that "history teaching in Lebanon is not conducive to national integration" (p. 74). They cited the weak influence of the national government and schools' loyalty to particular constituencies as major factors. Abouchedid and Nasser added that there is a lack of political will to change the status quo. Their findings suggest that teachers will continue to play an important role in curricular decisions, as discussed in the following section.

Bashshur (2005) presented similar conclusions based on an overview of history education and history textbooks in Lebanon in the 20th century. Upon reviewing a collection of text analysis and survey studies, Bashshur highlighted the fluidity of the historical narrative, with history textbooks shifting focus based on the audience and primary political power of the era. For example, before the civil war in 1975, history texts had a French or European tilt. Additionally, books used in Muslim schools emphasized Lebanon as an Arab country, while textbooks in Christian and public schools identified "heroes" among Phoenician figures. Bashshur's analysis includes the recent past, following the civil war, noting that a history curriculum was conspicuously missing from the school national curriculum adopted in 1997. When two elementary textbooks were released in 2001, controversy over inclusion of Arab conquest in

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a chapter titled "They All Went and Lebanon Stayed: Independence of the Nation" led to the books being quickly withdrawn (p. 8). Bashshur explained that the texts were criticized for insinuating that Lebanon was not an Arab nation by listing Arabs as conquerors alongside Ottomans and French.

Bashshur's (2005) analysis focused on the nature and role of history. Bashshur argued for an "emphasis on inquiry and interpretation" (p. 11) much as recent scholarship and policy documents in the United States have (e.g., Barton & Levstik, 2010; National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). Bashshur also addressed the role of memory in the history classroom, concluding that as schools are situated in a social context "a culture of memory is very likely the breeding grounds for submission and dependence which includes submission to 'authority' as well as to 'facts'" (p. 11). Volk (2008) similarly highlighted the importance of collective memory in recounting the steps taken to get the archaeological site of Nahr al-Kalb on UNESCO's world memory list. In each case, the role of the master narrative is recognized, but whereas Volk interpreted the recognition of the Nahr al-Kalb historic site as a means of bringing Lebanese together through identifying ancient roots, Bashshur called for schools to focus on pedagogy and inquiry as a "starting point of resistance and change" (p. 11) that may in fact upset the status quo.

Together this research suggests that the sectarian nature of schools fuels contradictory historical narratives in Lebanese schools. Yet in analysis of the Makassed Assocation, a Sunni Islamic organization that runs over 40 schools, Terc (2006) argued that a Lebanese national identity exists despite the civil war and sectarian divisions, citing Makassed as an example of a parochial organization that "took a leading role in articulating a national identity that could accommodate both national allegiance and Islamic learning" (pp. 444–445). This counter example demonstrates a way forward for teachers such as those in Abouchedid and Nasser's (2000) study who reported being unable to balance multiple narratives. In the process, the need for further examination of the role of history teachers becomes clear and is addressed in the following section.

Teachers Guide the History Curriculum

The second finding is that the lack of a national history curriculum both emphasizes Lebanese history teachers' role as curricular-instructional gatekeepers (Thornton, 1991) and highlights the limitations teachers face in exercising their professional duties. In the previous section, Abouchedid and Nasser (2000) and Bashshur's (2005) methodological decision to analyze textbooks and national curriculum documents highlights the expectation that these official sources of knowledge will guide instruction, making the absence of the long-awaited national history textbooks all the more paralyzing (see also Ayyash-Abdo, Bahous, & Nabhani, 2009). Mourad's (2010) interview study provides additional insights into the factors that influence teachers' decision making.

Mourad (2010) presented findings from a study based on interviews with five classroom teachers. Mourad explained that the study focused on teacher perspectives precisely because there was no singular history textbook to standardize instruction. A strength of the paper is the clear conceptual framework. Mourad articulated an understanding that "history is intertwined with politics. . . . it connects to the broader constructions of society and identity" (p. 3). This understanding is operationalized through discussion of the Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO) curriculum, which

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focuses on using history instruction for character education, as well as the theoretical framework of Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) with a focus on socio-emotional competencies.

Mourad's (2010) participants shared a view of history instruction as contributing to healthy personal and societal development. Dr. Saleh, one of the participants, described dissatisfaction with an indoctrination (*talkeen*) or memorization approach perpetuated by the official exams required of history students, arguing instead for a focus on critical analysis. Other teachers identified similar concerns, as well as opportunities. Ms. Zouk and Ms. Sat saw their history classes as a place for student language development. Mourad concluded that the teachers did not provide a "unified voice" among history teachers, but did identify "difficulties history teachers are facing" (p. 16). At the forefront are the limitations of discussing politicized content and a lack of guidance in the absence of an official curriculum.

In a recent ethnographic study in five elementary schools in Lebanon, van Ommering (2015) found similar results as history teachers frequently sought to avoid or silence discussions of the civil war. Van Ommering argued that teachers operate in a "complex web of power relations," (p. 204) which he described as consisting of "students' interest in understanding the society in which they live; the limited contents of the national history curriculum; the didactic outlook that radiates from history textbooks and teacher training; the pressure exerted by political parties to endorse their interpretations of the past; and, finally, the personal conflict histories that teachers brings [*sic*] along to the classroom, shaping their capacities and perceptions" (p. 204).

Much as Mourad's (2010) participants reported, van Ommering (2015) found that his participants used evasion as a primary tactic in responding to students' questions about the civil war and present day violence. An emphasis on people and dates served a common means of glossing over the broader subjects that emerged in the curriculum. Such an approach reflects fear of personal repercussions for engaging in political discourse. For example, one teacher described how a colleague was dismissed from their teaching position when she was "too outspoken" about a particular political party (p. 205). Van Ommering (2015) concluded that teachers' own experiences with the stress of war also serve as a silencing force, as "a key strategy for coping with protracted instability and recurring conflict is expelling it from conversations or portraying it as irrelevant" (p. 205). In short, van Ommering (2015) and Mourad (2010) demonstrated that the lack of a national history curriculum places considerable pressure on teachers who must navigate personal and political realities in exercising their roles as curricular-instructional gatekeepers (Thornton, 1991). In the following section, I further examine the link between history education and politics in Lebanon.

History Education and Identity Politics in Lebanon

The third finding is that examples from civics education in Lebanon provide insights into how identity politics continues to make history education a contentious issue. Bahous and colleagues (2013) made the link between civic and history education explicit through their joint analysis of the two curricular, arguing that the substance of a history curriculum will directly guide the formation of young Lebanese

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citizens. They reported that while a national history curriculum has yet to be developed, a common civics curriculum is used by those schools who have adopted the national curricula. The stated goals of the civics education include promoting a unified Lebanese identity, developing social skills, and reinforcing the importance of democracy in a diverse country. Bahous and colleagues quoted educational leaders, including Adnan El Amine of the Lebanese Association for Educational Studies, as suggesting that history standards be developed instead of an official textbook, so that publishers can "compete on the Lebanese market . . . with a creative handling of the content" (p. 69). Another unnamed "expert" argued that each social group in Lebanon could "write its own history" using primary sources as a way of exposing students to diverse perspectives (p. 70). A secondary school principal reported having difficulty recruiting teachers for history, civics, and geography classes because these are seen as "low prestige" content areas (p. 70).

While Bahous and colleagues' (2013) article raises some methodological questions with their mix of cited and anonymous sources, the clear link the authors drew between civics and history education pushes the conversation forward. The questions their sources raised about the nature of a history curriculum map onto broader conversations about the role of teachers in interpreting the curriculum (e.g., Frayha, 2003; Mourad, 2010; Thornton, 1991) and the nature of education in society (e.g., Fox, 2007; Masemann, 2007; Shuayb, 2012). Additionally, the principal's comments about the perception of teachers and social studies curricula raise important questions about the ability to recruit and retain teachers in a unique situation.

In related analysis, Shuayb's (2015) recent study of civic textbooks used in Lebanon revealed similar findings, particularly regarding the integration of human rights and peace education in the civics curriculum. Through a content analysis of civics textbooks and examinations from grades 1–12, Shuayb identified numerous objectives and goals. For example, Shuayb listed the stated aims of "National and Civics Education" as established in the 1997 Lebanese curriculum, including "to promote his devotion/loyalty to his Lebanese identity" and "to raise awareness of his Arab identity" (p. 7).

By identifying two primary critiques, Shuayb (2015) demonstrated how Lebanese identity politics has prevented the potential of history education from being realized. Shuayb's first critique is that the civics curriculum contains numerous examples of gender inequality (e.g., presenting women in certain roles; consistently using masculine nouns, verbs and adjectives). Shuayb's second critique is the lack of inclusion of peace education principles or references. She noted that the Lebanese government's "post-civil war curriculum emphasized rebuilding, social cohesion, and reconciliation and adopted citizenship education as one of its main aims" (Shuayb, 2015, p. 11). In other words, the specifics of history education proved too contentious (as noted in previous sections) and the government instead articulated broad concepts, leaving each confessional group to "write its own history" (Bahous et al., 2013, p. 70).

Conclusion

In their book, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn (2000) recounted the role of political ideology in shaping history education in the United States during

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the culture wars at the end of the 20th century. They noted that in the U.S. context, the "traditional story, focusing on national politics, elite society, and traditional heroes, has been elegant, linear, and unconfusing precisely *because* it left out so much" (p. 100). In the complex case of Lebanon, such a master narrative has proven illusive as the selection of politics and heroes continues to be controversial and divisive.

In order for history education to contribute to increased national social cohesion, the types of "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991) on which national identity is built must be presented in the classroom. Such a goal is clearly articulated in the Lebanese government's 1994 Plan for Educational Reform, which states explicitly that schools should contribute to "the formation of a citizen who . . . recognizes the long national Lebanese history that, emancipated from extremist beliefs, will attain a unified, open and humanistic society" (as cited in Frayha, 2003, p. 85). The research reviewed above suggests, however, that the teaching and learning of history in Lebanese schools reflects and reinforces the sectarian nature of society in Lebanon, strengthening identification with confessional communities more so than the national community. In the absence of a national curriculum, decisions about what to teach continue to fall to teachers—many of whom have little training or whose lived experience during the recent civil war mediates their instruction—or be made at the sectarian level with politics and religion clearly influencing competing narratives (Bahous et al., 2013; van Ommering, 2015). In short, Lebanon provides a case in which "the interweaving of various historical narratives . . . has transformed *common* history into *controversial* history" (Carretero, Rodríguez-Moneo, & Asensio, 2012, p. 3). While the tension inherent in this process is not unique to Lebanon (e.g., Evans, 2004; Nash et al., 2000; Taylor & Guyver, 2012), this diverse and complex country provides a compelling case study for the discussion of the role of history education in a pluralistic society.

Future Research

The relevance of the Lebanese history education dilemma is clear. Societies around the world face the conflict inherent in considering what it means to welcome a plurality of voices into discussions of educational philosophy and practice (Masemann, 2007). Study of Lebanon can be particularly informative because of Lebanon's recent civil war and a history of colonial occupation. Lessons learned in Lebanon may speak to the role of history in contributing to peace building (see McCully, 2009) in other countries with similar postwar and postcolonial settings. To this end, future research should investigate particular approaches to history education beyond the textbook analysis and initial interviews reported in this paper. Another line of inquiry should include comparative analysis between Lebanon and other countries with similar social, historical, and political realities. For example, comparing history education in Lebanon to that of Vietnam and other French directorates may uncover important findings that could help guide policy and instruction across settings. Similarly, Lebanon and Rwanda or other countries in a post-civil war phase would be instructive. Furthermore, the case of Lebanon serves to broaden the conversation about history education beyond the investigation of primarily Western and English-speaking countries that dominates the field (e.g., Taylor & Guyver, 2012). Lastly, the recent influx of refugees from Syria into Lebanon (Jalbout, 2015; UNHCR, 2015), as well as the localized nature of the broader Sunni-Shiite schism found across the Middle East (Telhami, 2013), makes

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the current paper particularly timely. Future empirical research and comparative analysis on Lebanon and similar contexts is warranted given these findings.

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