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Who shapes education reform policies in Lebanon?

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ABSTRACT

Many Arab countries are currently undergoing significant education reform. However, there is a paucity of research on how reforms are crafted and educational policies constructed. Lebanon has witnessed two education reforms since the Taif Agreement in 1989. This paper examines the role of research centres in influencing the last two education reforms. It selects a case study of an independent, non-governmental educational association and studies the role it played in these two reforms. The study found that contrary to the conventional wisdom, policy makers did call on research institutes when designing their reform. Yet there is a haphazard relationship between policy makers and researcher centres influenced by a number of factors, such as personal relationships, policy brokers, donors, and the availability of reputable research centres. The study also showed reluctance amongst some academics to play a direct role in influencing policymakers decisions.

KEYWORDS

Education policy; policy making; education reform; Lebanon; knowledge production; research centres; education

Introduction

Education Policy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has undergone immense change in the last half century. While many MENA countries have achieved significant success through increased student enrolment and widened access to education, the persistent issue of poor quality education continues to raise major concerns. This has led to fresh calls for reforms in education across the region in recent years. Several MENA countries, such as Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, and Lebanon, recently responded with large-scale education reforms. Despite mixed success in these important initiatives with respect to widening access to education, the quality of education remains in question (Arab Knowledge Report 2009; Arab World's Education Report Card 2012; World Bank 2008). Therefore, two salient questions related to the impact of these reforms emerge: Who conducts education reforms? How are these education reforms carried out?

The paucity of research does not only reflect the lack of transparent processes in planning and designing education reforms, but also calls into question the role played by academic and research institutions in shaping education sector reforms (El Amine 2005; Akkary 2014). Most existing literature on education reform focuses on the objectives and effectiveness

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of the reforms (LAES 2003). Nonetheless, the few critical studies on education reform in MENA countries attribute the limited success of reform policies to a top-down approach (Bashur 1997, 2005) or by political agenda-driven reforms without participation of experts and professionals (Akkary 2014). Others call for stronger links between knowledge producers and policy makers, as well as a greater acknowledgment of locally-produced knowledge when developing education reforms (El Amine 2005; Akkary 2014).

This study focuses on the development of reforms in one of the states in question, Lebanon. Education was considered one of the means for promoting social cohesion in post-civil war Lebanon after 15 years of civil war concluded in 1989. The Lebanese government has initiated several attempts for education reform since 1990. Two of these efforts resulted in Cabinet-approved strategies, known as the education reforms of 1994 and 2010.¹ The Centre for Education Research and Development (CERD), a public institution under the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), initiated the Plan for Educational Reform in 1994. This reform led to an increase in the number of public school students. The rates rose from over 285,000 in 1996/1997 to a peak of 350,000 Lebanese children in 2000 and 2001 (CERD 2002).² However, public sector performance soon dwindled as the number of public school dropouts soared. Currently, the number of students in public schools exceeds 280,000, around 28% of all students enrolled in education in Lebanon (CERD 2015³). The worsening conditions of public education in Lebanon prompted the development of a new education reform initiative in 2006. This culminated in the publication of a new education strategy for Lebanon in 2010. The reform strategy aspired to achieve a 50% increase in adult literacy rates, particularly for women, by 2015. The MEHE solicited the Lebanese Association for Education Studies (LAES) to develop an education strategy based on a desk review of existing reforms and challenges. The LAES report highlighted 17 priority areas for the new reforms. In 2010 the Minister of the MEHE took a summary of the report to the Ministerial Cabinet, which approved the reform. The MEHE then developed the Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP), which comprised 10 priorities each falling under these 5 main areas. The details of the reform priorities will be explored later in the paper.

Seven years have passed since the launch of the 2010 reform strategy. The ongoing challenges and recurrent attempts at education reform prompt a number of questions: Who is involved in designing and implementing reform? What role do academics, researchers, teachers, and the local community play in shaping these reforms? This study examines the role of research centres in the 1994 and 2010 education reforms in Lebanon.

Policy makers and research: a haphazard relationship

In Lebanon, there is little empirical research on how these reforms were developed, who shaped them, or the relationship between policy-making and empirical research on existing issues. Most existing literature in this field is conference reports on the specific education reforms (Akkary 2014; BouJaoude and Ghaith 2006; El Amine 2004, 2005). These conference reports conclude with broad recommendations (Akkary 2014). Akkary (2014) argues that most education reform in the Arab world is driven by political agendas, dominated by top-down approaches to change, and lacks a culturally-grounded knowledge base on effective reform in the development of the reforms. Akkari also claims there is little planning for implementation and a lack of professional capacity in those participating in the reforms.

Beyond the education sector Hanafi and Arvanitis (2015) argue that there is a fragmentation in the relationships between policy-making, knowledge production, and *knowledge translation* in the Arab world. They claim that a condescending attitude toward public- and policy-oriented social science research persists among some professional and critical social scientists. While academics feel that policy makers are not interested in their research, the former discourage scholars from involvement in politics; as such policy-oriented interventions cannot be accompanied by any critical discourse. Hanafi and Arvanitis argue this attitude is more frequent with academics from elite universities. This attitude has resulted in a bifurcation between social science scholarship and policy-making.

Hanafi and Arvanitis (2015) highlight the dominance of a positivist approach to research by many professional researchers. The rupture Hanafi and Arvanitis claim is mutual between professional academics and policy makers, the latter of which rarely calls on the former when developing policies. They argue the main issue plaguing the Arab world is not rigorous scholarship or research, but rather the use of knowledge produced by scholars and researchers. Produced knowledge is constrained within a small elite group and rarely translates to policy or public awareness. They critique the existing disconnection between research and society. Hanafi and Arvanitis invoke Burawoy's research typology – which distinguishes four types of sociology: two (*professional* and *critical* sociology) relevant to academic audiences, and the others (*public* and *policy* sociology) pertaining to a wider audience (Burawoy 2005, 8) – to argue that there is no connection between these four types of research in the Arab East, while there is a 'healthier' situation in the Francophone Arab countries. They also claim that there is a weakness of public research in all of the Arab world, but particularly in the Arab East (2016). Hanafi (forthcoming) goes on to argue and give examples of how authoritarian Arab regimes leverage technical research rather than critical policy and social science research. He claims that this general lack of demand discourages researchers' engagement with the public and policy makers. This, in turn, reduces their knowledge production to the narrow confines of a professional variety only.

A number of reasons are cited for why policy makers do not use research centres and research. These reasons include: a difficulty to translate think tank ideas into policies, timing, and the lack of a common language (Worpole 1998). Undoubtedly the link between research and policy-making is not always clear or even existing, yet the fissure between the two is present and perceptible on many levels. Whitehurst (2003), who reviewed hundreds of sessions presented at the American Education Research Association, found many titles to be arcane and idiosyncratic. He identified a gap between the 'supply' side and the 'demand' side for an academic-oriented research culture, which does not provide accessible knowledge due to academic journal paywalls and a lack of relevance to the immediate needs of policy makers. On the other hand, policy makers do not always actively seek the knowledge provided by researchers. Hammersley (2008) argues that the evidence and claims made by researchers are also insufficient to make policy recommendations. He argues that there is a danger in expecting that social scientists should have a leading position in policy-making, as it not only 'overlooks the contingent relationship between facts and value conclusions, but also involves two very serious dangers. First, it increases the risk of bias in producing research findings; second, it amounts to scientism' (511).

On the other hand, using evidence-based research by policy makers is not always a straightforward task. Hasci (2002) notes when it (research) seems relatively straightforward, it often lacks the specifics needed to describe exactly how programmes should be

implemented. Most research does not provide complete answers, nor does it often answer specific questions and, hence, the research offered is incomplete. Hasci also questions the extent to which policy makers are even serious about using research evidence as policy debates are often influenced more by politics and ideology than by presentation of evidence.

Schwartz and Kardos (2009) describe a number of reasons why policy makers are influenced so little by the findings of education research. Time features prominently among these. Policy makers often need a quick turnaround time for research and are unlikely to wait for the long process of academic publishing. Yet academics are discouraged from publishing their original findings in anything other than peer-reviewed scholarly journals, which count the most for their academic career. Audience is another factor. Scholars often write for other researchers and sometimes for practitioners, but rarely for policy makers. Journals, on the other hand, favour articles that are of complex design and presentation of findings and academic language, such as theoretical frameworks, methodology, methods of analysis, and findings. Researchers rarely discuss the implications of their research on policy makers or suggest concrete recommendations, which is what policy makers would like to read. The length of articles is another obstacle for policy makers.

Yet bridging the gap between the two worlds is possible. In their study of research that influenced policy makers, Firestone, Susan Fuhrman, and Kirst (1990) highlight a number of conditions that helped achieve this, such as researched topics important for policy makers, confirmed conventional wisdom, had pre-existing constituencies, were led by persuasive policy brokers, were longitudinal, were successfully replicated, and produced usable research synthesis. Fuhrman also emphasised the importance of what she refers to as 'policy brokers', or researchers capable of simplifying complex ideas as another important aspect of translating research to policy-making. Here the source, communication channel, format of knowledge, and the message itself are all essential for shifting the thinking of policy makers. As a result, Schwartz and Kardos (2009) highlight the important role of universities in producing policy brokers.

Nevertheless, even when policy makers rely on evidence, the use can be inconsistent. Some policy makers envision evidence as an instrumental step in policy-making. They imagine their civil servants will directly use evidence for guidance or decisions to policy and practice. However, Schwartz and Kardos (2009) point out that evidence is rarely used in such scenarios. Evidence from evaluative data tends to be employed in a diluted and delayed way. It is worth noting that even when evidence plays an instrumental role in decision-making, the interpretive process often affects the use. In some cases, evidence is used in a conceptual manner in that it influences individuals or shared working knowledge, even when it does not influence specific decisions. On the other hand, Cobb et al. (2003) show that evidence is often used to justify decisions to either suspend or introduce new policy or, alternatively, to defend existing policy decisions. Decision makers also make decisions without evidence, despite its availability, or even discard the findings when they commission it. Schwartz and Kardos (2009) list a number of ways to encourage the use of evidence at the district level. The authors note collaboration with external organisations facilitates access to the 'right' evidence and its interpretation (81). In turn, policy makers can develop structures or processes to fund and support the search for evidence, foster conditions for collective interpretation, develop political support for evidence use, and develop new strategies for building central office capacity for evidence use.

In this study, we focus on the role of education research centres in the last two education reforms. Our aim is to understand how policy makers utilised research, as well as how research centres and researchers perceive their role in influencing policies.

Methodology

We employed a qualitative research methodology comprised of a desk review, document analysis, and a case study of one research institute, the Lebanese Association for Education Studies. The case study examined the relationship between research organisations and policy-making. We also conducted 6 individual interviews with policy makers involved in the 1994 and 2010 reforms; these interviews examined how these reforms were designed and the role of various knowledge producers in shaping them. Additionally, we conducted 14 interviews with founding and current members of LAES. These interviews focused on the aims and missions of the association and the activities it conducted over the last 20 years. We also investigated the role of the organisation in the 1994 and 2010 education reform. Finally, the interviews examined whether policy reform was an objective for LAES and if it was, how did it seek to achieve this objective. Table 1 provides a summary of the individual interviews.

Our document analysis included white papers or publications from the MEHE or CERD on the process of developing the 1994 and 2010 reforms. The study found two white papers referring to the two reform attempts. The publications, produced by the CERD since its creation, were also analysed and coded in order to examine the type of publications, the topics, and the funders. In total, CERD produced 172 publications, which include a mix of policy papers, research studies, and guidelines for using textbooks. Later in this paper we will present the results of this analysis. Our document analysis also included the examination of LAES aims and objectives, strategies, and publications to learn more about the association's approach to policy-making.

Table 1. List of interviewees.

| Interviewees | Number of interviews |
|---|----------------------|
| Ministry of education and higher education ministers | 2 |
| Centre for Education Research and Development presidents | 3 |
| Other key policy makers involved in 1994 and 2010 | 2 |
| Members of the Lebanese Association for Education Studies | 9 |
| Total | 16 |

Case study of a research institute: an overview

The LAES was selected as the case study to examine the role of research centres in shaping policy reform. The LAES, established in 1995, is a professional, non-political, and non-profit organisation that aims to develop and disseminate educational knowledge that would contribute to the development of educational research in Lebanon. It is the only independent research organisation dedicated specifically to education research in Lebanon. The organisation was established following the end of the civil war and the start of the education reform plan. Over the past 20 years it has been a leading research institute for education in Lebanon. The organisation conducted several education-oriented research projects, organised several regional and local seminars and conferences, and produced

an extensive list of documentation and publications on education in Lebanon. Consent to mention the name of the association was granted by the director of the association at the time of the study in 2015.

Membership of LAES is restricted to PhD holders in education or currently working in the field of education. Membership to the association is granted following an application process, which consists of the applicant CV. Only PhD holders are eligible to apply, and virtually all members should have a publication record. The administrative committee then reviews the application and a decision is made. There have been proposals by the administrator and general assembly to introduce a new type of membership for PhD and Master's students. Yet this proposition was not adopted. Nonetheless, a year ago the association started a platform where PhD students from all universities present their research and receive feedback from LAES members, who serve a mentor for current students. The members of the organisation fluctuated between 40 to 30 members.

While LAES activities range from research, conferences, seminars, and consultancies, the organisation served two primary purposes: conducting research and providing a platform for educationalists to meet. The organisation succeeded in these objectives. Concerning research, over a period of 20 years, LAES produced 27 books and 10 study reports. The research tackled educational issues, which in some cases, as we shall explain later, put the organisation in confrontation with some officials who threatened to take legal action against it. Yet the most significant challenge facing LAES research was funding. As a result, most research was determined by donor prerogatives. Moreover, the lack of funding hindered the capacity of LAES to conduct research in a number of the priority areas of organisation members; LAES relies mainly on consultancies to fund its activities as well as research grants from international organisations, which often sponsor the association's conferences and publications.

One of the main LAES objectives is to contribute to the development of education in Lebanon and the wider Arab region. However, LAES lacks a strategy that describes how it would achieve all of the aims. When examining the projects of the organisation and its publications, we noticed that almost all activities could be categorised as research or as conference planning and facilitation.

Findings

Process of developing the 1994 and 2010 education reforms

The Lebanese cabinet established a committee of 10 ministers representing the various political and sectarian groups to oversee education reform in Lebanon following the 1989 Taif Accord, which put an end of over 15 years of civil war. The CERD, a parallel entity to the committee, was tasked with education research and planning in Lebanon. This entity created a committee representing the various sectarian groups from its own staff. The CERD committee drafted an education sector development plan, which was then shared with the ministerial committee. The Ministers had their own advisors as well. The plan was approved by the ministerial committee and later by the cabinet on the 17 August 1994. The plan outlined very ambitious goals:

To build an advanced and cohesive Lebanese society that would allow its children to live their lives in a climate of freedom, justice and democracy, a society capable of assuming a cultural role in the Arab world and globally. (CERD 1997, 4)

The very detailed Educational Plan dedicated a section to deal specifically with research. It highlighted the studies used in developing the plan; these include data, research, and statistics gathered by CERD and other public institutions as well as local and international institutes. However, the plan did not include references to these studies. The plan listed five new studies to be carried out by CERD. These were: the framework of teachers, comprehensive educational statistics, social survey in Lebanon, the labour market and its needs, and the problems of the child as a result of the war. All of these studies were funded by CERD. Only one of the studies, commissioned by a team of external as well as internal experts, was actually published (CERD 1995).

A new director of CERD was appointed in 1994. The new director took charge of developing the new curriculum. During our interview, he noted that one of the main priorities was create a more inclusive approach to developing the Educational Reform Plan 1994, which resulted in several complaints. To address this, an executive committee was established which represented private and public educational institutions, including schools as well as universities. The selection of these representatives took into account the sectarian representations, as well as the educational experience. Academics were heavily represented in the committee; 128 out of the 322 members of the committee were academics and the other members were representatives from private and public schools in Lebanon, the general directorate of the ministry, and civil servants from various departments of MEHE. Most of these academics (85) were from the Lebanese University and 17 were from the American University of Beirut. The decisions of this committee were then taken to the ministerial cabinet to establish the new curriculum. The approval by the cabinet was virtually guaranteed, given the committee included representatives of the main political parties and sectarian groups.

In our interview, the then-CERD director explained that he worked on issuing a decree to hire professors from the Lebanese University⁴ at CERD, however, the demanding nature of the work at CERD coupled with an objection from the Council of Civil Servants eventually blocked this attempt in spite of support from the then-Prime Minister, Rafic Al-Hariri. The former director underscored the limited role research served during this stage, yet a number of studies were carried out to support the reform. The CERD justified the limited role of research due to the reliance on academics as heads and members of the various reform and subject committees.

In 2000 CERD appointed a new director. In a recent interview, this director explained that developing the curriculum and the textbooks served as the main priority during this period. As a result, the director indicated research was overlooked and become a secondary priority. The CERD had the funds and organisational structure to conduct research on efficacy of education policies, yet such research was not considered a pressing issue at the time. Rather, the organisation narrowly focused on textbook development at the expense of all other activities.

While the two directors of CERD from 1994 to 2003 considered research to be important, they acknowledged that studies and research did not play as significant of a role as it should have when designing the education reform. Both former directors noted the emphasis placed on the role of experts, rather than research and research centres at that time, in part due to the lack of research centres specialised in education.

Process of developing the 2010 Education Strategy

In 2005, a National Action Plan for Education for All was adopted in Lebanon. The plan aimed to offer all children in society a quality education with a particular emphasis on girls and disadvantaged children. Contrary to the 1994 reform, a MEHE commissioned a white paper to develop a strategy for the education reform. The World Bank, which funded the education reform, highlighted the lack of an overall education strategy to guide the work of MEHE. A policy-maker interviewee involved in the process explained:

MEHE thought of the strategy as a means to ‘make projects and get funds.’ The World Bank suggested developing a strategy for MEHE. They suggested advertising this, but I refused and suggested that we consult LAES being an organisation that includes the most prominent local researchers and represents everybody. The Minister of Education at that time, Professor Kabbani, agreed and that is how it happened. (interview with a policy maker)

Consequently, LAES was commissioned to conduct a review of the educational situation in Lebanon. The result was a white paper (LAES 2007) on the state of education in Lebanon. It is worth noting that the policy-maker who suggested LAES draft the white paper used to be a member of the organisation. According to the policy makers, including the minister at that time, the reason for selecting this particular research institute was its reputation as one of the pioneering research organisations and the knowledge and personal contacts some of the policy makers had with members of the research institute.

Almost a year later, LAES produced a report that analysed the main gaps in the current education system through a desk review of available research and statistics. The LAES did not conduct new empirical research, but reviewed published studies. The drafted report was then discussed at a closed meeting where feedback was solicited from academics and educationalists, for which the report was amended accordingly. The report only became an official strategy for reform almost three years later, when a new Minister of education and cabinet were appointed. The new minister, Professor Hasan Menimeneh, presented an executive summary of the report to the cabinet for approval. Approval was granted in 2010, and the work on the strategy began thereafter. This process eventually produced what became known as the National Educational Strategy in Lebanon. It adopted 10 main priorities (MEHE 2007), presented below in Table 2:

Table 2. Education strategy for 2010.

| NES (2007) | | Education Sector Development Plan (2010–2015) | |
|------------|--|---|---|
| 1. | Education available on the basis of equal opportunity | 1. | Early childhood education |
| | | 2. | Improving retention and achievement |
| | | 3. | Development of infrastructure |
| 2. | Quality education that contributes to building a knowledge society | 4. | Professionalisation of the teaching workforce |
| | | 5. | Modernisation of school management |
| 3. | Education that contributes to social integration | 6. | Achievement assessment and curriculum development |
| | | 7. | Citizenship education |
| 4. | Education that contributes to economic development | 8. | Information and communication technology in education |
| | | 9. | National qualification framework |
| 5. | Governance of education | 10. | Institutional development |

NES - National Educational Strategy in Lebanon.

Contrary to 1994 Education Reform Plan, the 2010 strategy later known as The National Education Strategy (2010-2015) only provided general recommendations and priority areas for the new reform to focus on. The strategy did not include the level of detail in the 1994 plan, nor did it specify what needed to be done in each of the priority areas. The 2010 strategy comprised a review of the main statistics and indicators of education attainment in Lebanon as well as a desk review of previous research carried out in various related fields. However, the desk review was not comprehensive for all the 10 main priorities it chose to focus on. A review of the citations and list of references indicates the strategy was built mainly on the statistics from CERD, as well as those from a few other research studies. The document did not explain the rationale for the choice to focus on particular fields without a view to all of the areas. While the strategy document highlighted research gaps, there were no research recommendations to fill the gaps.

If we compare the processes of developing the two reforms in 1994 and 2010, we notice that CERD did not participate in drafting the last reform strategy, although this falls under its work remit. On the contrary, the World Bank funded the establishment of a cabinet within MEHE known as the Education Sector Development Plan. This cabinet took charge of the development of the new reform. The common trend between the two plans was the reliance on academics and specialists. However, for the first time in 2010 strategy, MEHE resorted to a private research centre in developing the education reform strategy. While the 1994 reform plan identified a number of research priorities to be carried out as part of the education reform plan, the 2010 plan failed to highlight significant research gaps in the priority areas. For example, there is limited research on vocational education and school dropout, both of which are two priority areas in 2010 strategy. In the 1994 reform plan, CERD, a public research institution attached to MEHE, commissioned independent researchers to conduct the studies under its supervision. One senior civil servant at CERD criticised the limited involvement of their organisation in the 2010 education strategy as well as the brief and vague nature of the strategy document.

The overreliance on independent research institutes in the 2010 reform plan, instead of CERD – created specifically to perform this role – reflects the diminished role of this key entity within the MEHE. To further understand the role of research centres and education policy-making in Lebanon, it is essential to examine and analyse the role CERD played in this respect. This institute may be the only public research institute that serves a ministry in Lebanon, and therefore may offer a model for other public research institutes and their role in shaping policies.

CERD: an independent public research institute

While this study did not intend to examine the public research centres and their role in shaping education reform, we found it almost impossible to understand the relationship between the knowledge producers and policy makers without exploring the role of CERD. The latter was founded as a public, yet independent institute in 1971. Its main role is to conduct research and develop education policies independent from the influence of politics and political rivalries. As its mandate clearly states, CERD was tasked with conducting research for the following purposes: to maintain statistics, to plan education reform, to develop curricula and textbooks, and, finally, to provide continuous teacher professional development. The CERD has a committee of specialists who are expected to have a PhD degree with the goal to leverage their expertise. This committee, with input from the CERD

director, oversees the work of the research office, which is comprised of several units: curriculum, planning, assessment, and projects. The explicit purposes of research office include: to conduct various educational research and disseminate results in appropriate ways, to develop the necessary studies of curricula, and to conduct educational statistics and issue bulletins with their own analysis of the results.

The CERD played an active role in publishing numerous studies on education during the 70s and partially throughout the 80s, in spite of the civil war. However, research output began to decline as can be seen in the Figure 1, which tracks the number and type of CERD publications over the past 40 years:

In the first twenty years, CERD was the main funder of in-house research and publications.

However, international donors primarily funded the majority of CERD publications in the last ten and fifteen years, as noted in the Figure 2.

The donor role in funding CERD research did not exist prior to the civil war. However, we see how this role started to increase gradually from 1990 to reach a peak in the last 10 years. This obviously affected the topics of the publications and the overall output. For instance, while in the 70s and 80s, we see publications focused on issues, such as the structure of the educational system in Lebanon, the socioeconomic background of students, the income of the educational sector, and so on, we find shifts in topics reflecting the agenda and priorities of the donors in the subsequent eras.

There are numerous reasons for the declined emphasis on research at CERD. According to one former CERD director, the period of developing the new curriculum placed all emphasis on textbook design rather than research. Moreover, the specialist committee and several members of the CERD staff, formerly responsible for research, retired in the intervening years. These roles were not replaced due to ‘the hiring freeze on all civil servants throughout the public sector’ (Previous director of CERD). Moreover, CERD senior staff salaries remained stagnant for years, an issue not found at national and private universities in Lebanon. The CERD simply became an unattractive employer for academics, partly due to these low salaries. As the role of CERD has diminished in the last 15 years, the role of research in policy reform has become even more marginal. Yet one of the most important

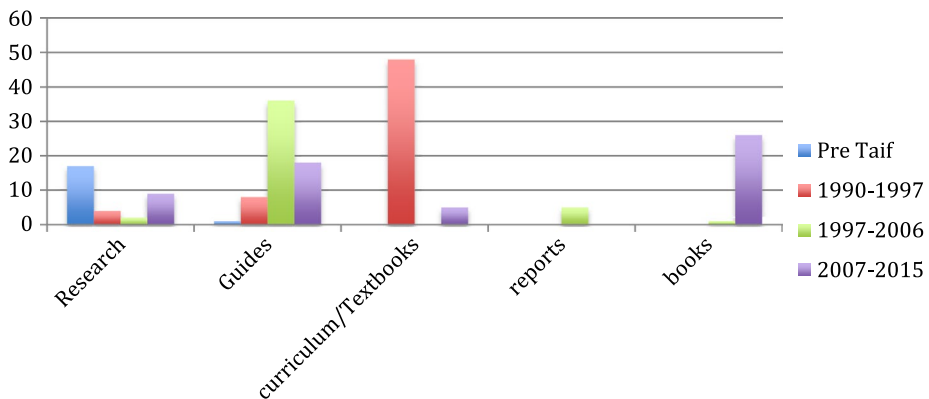


Figure 1. Research conducted by the Centre for Education Research and Development over the past 40 years.

External Funders

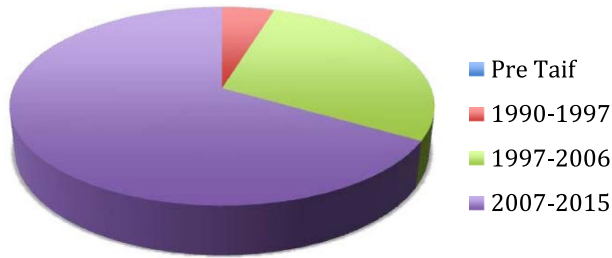


Figure 2. The role of external donors in funding Centre for Education Research and Development publications.

factors in strengthening the relationships between research and policy-making lies in the role of policy makers themselves, and the importance attributed to research.

Policy makers' views and the role of research in 1994 and 2010 reform plans

To further understand the role of research and research centres in the 1994 and 2010 reforms, it is important to examine the views of policy makers involved in these two reforms. While all of the interviewed policy makers highlighted the importance of research centres and research for policy makers, all of the interviewed policy makers noted the absence of a specific policy for engaging in research or research centres, when designing policies or reform. As one minister put it during the interview, 'there are no policies. Only the priorities are addressed based on pressure of the public or the wish and mood of the minister.'

Several reasons were cited for the minor role of research in the last two education reforms. One of the most-cited factors was the diminished role of the *Centre for Education Research and Development*, tasked the role of policy reform and research. While explicitly established to conduct independent research for MEHE, the hollowed-out budgets and understaffed organisation weakened the capacity to perform this role and created a void that was never filled. As a result, CERD's work became primarily focused on curriculum development, teacher professional development, or donor-determined priorities.

The *over reliance of Ministers of Education on external advisors* was seen as another factor that weakened the investment in research and collaborations with research centres. Ministers often hire a group of advisors, some of whom are academics, rather than relying on the ministry's civil servant expertise. When hiring academics as advisors, policy makers saw this as indirectly using and deploying research in their decision-making. As one minister commented:

Ministries don't rely on research centres. The phenomena of advisors undermined research centres as advisors have their personal positions and agendas so these advisors promote the role of the minister and his beliefs which is often not based on evidence. (Minister of MEHE)

While the research was institutionalised within CERD structure and budget, *the lack of a research culture* rendered it ineffective. According to one of the interviewed ministers, the lack of awareness of the need of a research culture was more important than legislations enforcing it. According to two policy makers, the lack of awareness of the importance of

research compels research centres to play a more proactive role by communicating their research recommendations and building bridges with MEHE. In other words, researchers should not wait for policy makers to seek their advice, but should be more proactive in promoting their research findings.

Having examined policy makers' views of research, we shall now investigate the other point of view and focus on the attitudes of research centres towards influencing policies.

Research centres view of their role: The hermit versus the activist

Interviews with members of the association (both founding and non-founding) revealed divergent views and expectations of the organisation from its founding to the present. There were two opinions at the organisation. One group supported restricting the organisation activities to research and knowledge production only, while the other group believed that LAES should play an active role in influencing and shaping the views of the public and policy makers on educational matters. Yet members within the latter group differed in their views on how to influence policy-making. The majority seemed to favour a less direct approach, mainly by choosing topical research activities, conducting conferences, and publishing books and policy briefs on various educational issues. Others argued for a more direct approach, including advocacy and producing position papers, petitions, and statements. This debate began with the founding of the organisation, and continues to date.

In 2012, the aims of LAES were revised to reflect an emphasis on contributing to the development of education, both locally and regionally. This is achieved through its research, conferences, and publications. Although many interviewed members of LAES noted that although it did not directly seek to influence policy-making, there were numerous cases where it actually played this role, and in some cases, clashed with policy makers.

The LAES was established in 1995, and thus did not play a role in the 1994 reforms that rendered a new national curriculum in 1997. Nonetheless, many LAES members participated in the reform as affiliates with various universities; they were in charge of different subject areas. In other words, they participated indirectly in their personal capacity. In 2000, the newly appointed director of CERD was a member of LAES.

As LAES built its reputation through the production of high quality research on education, the demand increased for research output. While CERD was developing the 1997 curriculum, UNESCO sought to conduct an independent evaluation of the new curriculum and textbooks. Following an agreement with the newly appointed CERD director in 2000, LAES was commissioned to conduct this evaluation.

A large team from LAES was assembled to conduct a survey of teachers, principals, students, and parents' views on the new curriculum. Progress reports and initial findings were regularly sent to CERD until a new director was appointed. In 2003, a new director at CERD refused to accept the final report and criticised the commissioning of an independent institute to conduct an evaluation of CERD's work. After being pressured by the director of the UNESCO office in Lebanon, CERD officially received the report. A workshop was also organised to discuss the findings; however, LAES was not invited to participate. UNESCO and CERD maintained copyrights, and as such, the report findings were their property. As a result, the study was never published, but a copy remains accessible in the LAES Beirut office.

The LAES played a significant role in the 2010 reform, as it was commissioned to write a white paper, which defined the main educational priorities for the new education strategy by

then-Minister of Education, Khaled Kabbani. The decision to develop a white paper came as a result of a World Bank recommendation, as well as at the advice of one MEHE specialist. This specialist at MEHE was also a member of LAES; LAES produced a vision document, which concluded with a synthesis of several educational priorities. As mentioned, the white paper included a review of statistics and some studies upon which it recommended the 10 reform priorities. The drafted plan was then discussed in a meeting of various stakeholders. The plan was consequently modified and later approved by the cabinet under Minister Hassan Mniemneh in 2010.

The involvement of LAES in this strategy is an example of the collaboration of MEHE with research centres to produce new policies. However, one of the criticisms of LAES involvement was the lack of research underpinning the strategy document, best summarised in an interview with a founding member of LAES: 'If LAES is a research institute then it should have conducted empirical research and not a review of research, and based on this new research it should have made the recommendations.'

The encounter of LAES with policy makers and policy-making did not stop at the 1994 and 2010 education reforms. The LAES choice of research topics and conferences were always topically relevant and hence attracted attention from those in the education sector and policy makers. In 1999, LAES conducted a study of the conditions of Lebanese University (LU). The published book caused a major uproar in the academic community, and resulted in the director of LU sending a letter threatening legal action against the association. In 2006, when Minister Khaled Kabbani became the head of MEHE, he planned to revise the regulations for the Lebanese University. Since the LAES study of LU, the authors of the book as well as other renowned professors at the Lebanese University were appointed with the task of developing new regulations for LU that would form the basis of a new law. The law was issued by the MEHE, approved by the Cabinet, and is now awaiting implementation. The case of Lebanese University is one example of the significant role LAES played in influencing the quality of education in the public university.

Despite the above examples of LAES influencing and playing a prominent role in shaping education sector policy-making, such a course was never fully intended by LAES founders and members. Rather, the LAES role in policy-making was a product of its demonstrated research capacity and born of necessity due to the deteriorating role of CERD. Some LAES members preferred a more proactive role in influencing policy through producing policy papers, signing petitions or declarations, or even writing in newspapers on topical issues in the name of the association. Yet several members preferred distance due to a lack of consensus on educational issues amongst the members, the desire to avoid potential political disputes and polarisation, and finally due to the lack commitment and availability of the members. On the other hand, a few members adopted a positivist view of research and preferred a more passive role by publishing and leaving it to others to use the publications as they wish.

Discussion

The study on the relationship between policy makers and research institutes in the two reforms of 1994 and 2010 revealed a haphazard cooperation, where both parties seemed reluctant about the possibilities for cooperation. On the one hand, policy makers, who have either known or were members of LAES, acted as policy brokers by seeking its educational

expertise. In contrast, policy makers distant from the LAES network were more reluctant to collaborate with it and sometimes were even quite defensive about its research. They also seemed to favour calling on the expertise of individual members of LAES, rather than collaborating with the institution as a whole.

On the other hand, LAES remained cautious about actively seeking to influence policy makers. It preferred to leave it to ‘users’ to use the research it produced and avoided direct advocacy activities, such as producing statements, signing petitions, writing opinion pieces in the newspapers, or even supporting its members against the authority of policy makers. While one objective in establishing the association was to ‘rationalise the debate on education’, this rationalisation remained restricted to a debate within the academic sphere, and did not expand to the wider public or even to teachers or principals. In other words, policy makers needed to actively seek the expertise of LAES in informing educational reform.

The case study of the two reforms also revealed different moments of diversion and conversion between policy makers and research centres. The main factors that facilitated the conversion are as follows:

The role of policy brokers: Our study confirmed Schwartz and Kardos (2009) findings on the important role of what they describe as ‘policy brokers’, intermediaries who advocate the role of research in policy-making. Policy brokers serve as a push factor to establish this relationship. The necessity and ubiquity of policy brokers may indeed be necessary in part due to the passive role research centres play in direct advocacy to policy makers or due to a need to reduce the complexity through the production of summaries or publications to reach a wider, non-academic audience. This is exactly the case of 2010 reform, where a policy-maker who was part of LAES pushed for the latter to play a role in developing a research-informed education strategy.

The donor: The World Bank funded the Education Development Sector Plan, and has thus played a key role in pushing MEHE to develop a long-term strategy for education reform, instead of managing individual projects. While the World Bank planned to advertise a commission for a consultant to develop the strategy, personal relationships played a key role leading to the appointment of a research centre, instead of relying on individual experts as previously done. The willingness of the World Bank to negotiate during the implementation phase reflects a degree of flexibility from their side. At the same time, other donors working with CERD pushed a different research agenda, which did not always reflect the educational priorities of Lebanon. This was manifested in the investment in publications that failed to address the pressing needs cited in the priority areas, such as education attainment of children in deprived areas and soaring dropout rates, to improve the public educational system.

The availability of reputable independent research institutes: The LAES was commissioned for the evaluation of the 1997 curriculum and the development of the 2010 Strategy Plan due to its reputation as a strong research institute with expertise in education. The organisation boasts an impressive record of publications, and is considered a hub for many prominent educational researchers in Lebanon. Furthermore, Lebanon does not have many independent educational research institutes that could be charged with such a task.

While the above factors helped bring together research institutes and policy makers, the following three main issues have resulted in divergence:

The weak culture of research at the ministry: One of the main challenges that undermine the deployment of research by policy makers is the lack of a collaborative research culture at the ministry level. Even though the role of research in education reform and planning

was institutionalised when CERD was created, the absence of a research culture at the ministry (amongst other political reasons) resulted in diminishing CERD's role for over 15 years. According to the current director of CERD, there are attempts to rekindle the research culture. However, one of the challenges is the lack of the institutional structure of research within CERD, which undermines the capacity of the organisation to hire many academics and, thus, according to the director, necessitates collaborations between CERD and other independent research centres that might have professionals with such expertise. This partnership has the potential to bridge the gap between research institutes and policy-making in Lebanon.

Reluctance of LAES members to influence policy: Independent research institutes, whether private or non-governmental, can play a significant role in influencing the public debate on education. While this was one of the reasons cited as a driving force for the founders of LAES, members were reluctant to write op-eds or engage in wider debates on issues of public policy. In turn, journalists and policy makers set the public agenda for education reforms. One fundamental challenge lies in reaching a consensus on particularly divisive issues. Moreover, lobbying and advocating for a particular issue may result in the alienation of the association from some policy makers and political actors.

A weak professional identity: The weak professional identity primarily emerges in how the association saw its role within the public and policy spheres. For instance, many of the interviewed LAES members preferred to play an indirect role in influencing educational policies. Some saw their role as academics who produce knowledge for others to use if they wish. Others had a more complex view of their role as contributing, but sought to avoid a drift into a 'populist' type of activism. However, there was a near consensus that the association would not take official positions on educational matters and produce statements for several reasons, such as lack of potential consent and in avoiding the labelling of LAES, which might imperil future work. Another manifestation of this weak identity is the reluctance to engage with young researchers, and by prohibiting them from becoming members of the association. Instead, the membership of the association was restricted to selected academics who already have a publication record and established credentials in the education field. There have been discussions of the possibility of amending these regulations and potentially opening a student membership, however, this suggestion was ultimately not approved. After several attempts by one member of the association, LAES temporarily ran an activity where students working toward a PhD could present their work to members for feedback. This programme was extremely successful, as it attracted many young researchers who were keen to present their work and receive feedback from established scholars. The significant interest in this series of workshops shows the need for a professional organisation that can host and foster forums for educational researchers to debate education issues. The presence of professional groups with a strong identity concerned with promoting their subject is essential for a reflexive and contextualised research agenda that also engages with public issues and current problems.

Conclusion

The study of the last two education reforms in Lebanon challenges the conventional wisdom of the estrangement between the policies and research. The results of this study demonstrate a longstanding relationship between research, education policies, and reform in Lebanon.

This relationship entailed convergences and divergences at various stages, depending on policy makers as well as the availability and capacity of research associations. Despite the convergence of research and policy-making, either through public or non-governmental avenues, the relationship between the two remains inconsistent. Developing policies based on empirical research was not always on the mind of policy makers in Lebanon. This highlights the proactive role that researchers and research centres need to play in educating not only the masses, but also policy makers. However, academics affiliated with the association were reluctant to play a direct role in influencing policy, and most LAES activities were restricted to the academic sphere with an orientation toward academics.

While the case study of LAES as well as the 1994 and 2010 education reforms confirms Hanafi and Arvanitis's (2015) argument on the dichotomy between research and policy-making, the case also highlights existing avenues for bridging this gap. Our study showed that policy makers are not always resistant to research, and if approached systematically relevant empirical research could play a significant role in shaping policy. Research associations, particularly professional outfits such as LAES, could play a more significant role in the policy-making process. Academics played an important role in influencing policy through their 'expert' position in both the 1994 and 2010 education reforms. This implies that policy makers acknowledge local expertise. Hence, there is a precedent for academics to play a more influential role in shaping education policy through professional associations. However, several barriers remain. Most importantly, the weak professional and activist identity amongst academics at LAES in addition to the disconnect between university research and current social affairs. For most academics, their research priority within their institutions is focused on career promotion, which universities measure by universities in the number of publications in Western journals rather than its relevance to local issues.

Notes

1. Decree 15/94, date 17/8/94 and Decree number (1) date April 22, 2010.
2. <http://www.crdp.org/sites/default/files/04.pdf>
3. <http://www.crdp.org/sites/default/files/Nachra%20i7saieh.pdf>
4. The Lebanese University is the only public university in Lebanon.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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