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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN THE LEBANESE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Abstract

As a founding member of the United Nations, Lebanon aims to include its educational policy in the UN's Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs), in particular the fourth, which aims to ensure "inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". To achieve this objective at the national level, many structures and systems have been created in schools, particularly in the private sector. The nature of the interventions and the support offered are not similar, while the room for manoeuvre is not the same for all schools (Akiki & Frangieh, 2018). The structures and systems in Lebanon for the education of students with special educational needs (SEN) then vary from the most segregated schooling to the least restrictive. A systematic review methodology (Young & Eldermire, 2017) was applied. The work and projects related to inclusive education in Lebanon were analysed. It shows that inclusive education remains work in progress without a global action plan. This work dynamic encourages both local initiatives and generates difficulties in carrying them out. Our results show that the development of inclusive education in Lebanon is marked by uncertainties, tensions and contradictions.

Keywords: equality, equity, inclusive education, policy statements, practices, structures and systems

1. Introduction

1. 1. Context

As a founding member of the United Nations, Lebanon is a supporter of to many international declarations and conventions carried out by the United Nations and UNESCO. It highlights the right to education for all and the need to consider the educational needs of each child. As international legislation has developed, this commitment has been embodied in the signatory countries in the principle of Education for All and more particularly Inclusive Education (Ramel & Vienneau, 2016). Thus, Lebanon has committed itself to aligning its educational policies, systems and practices with its international commitments.

Through these, Lebanon aims to include its educational policy in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG4 and SDG17. While the first aims to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all", the second seeks to "revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development".

The framework of our study is based on the guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in education realized by UNESCO (2017), which relies both on ODD 4 and ODD 17. This choice intends to position our work in an international movement for inclusive education,

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especially in the absence of a national consensus on the fundamental principles of inclusive education.

This study is organized according to the four dimensions of the guide: the concepts, the policy statements, the structures and the systems and the systems and practices. They are closely linked in a hierarchical relationship (cf. figure 1).

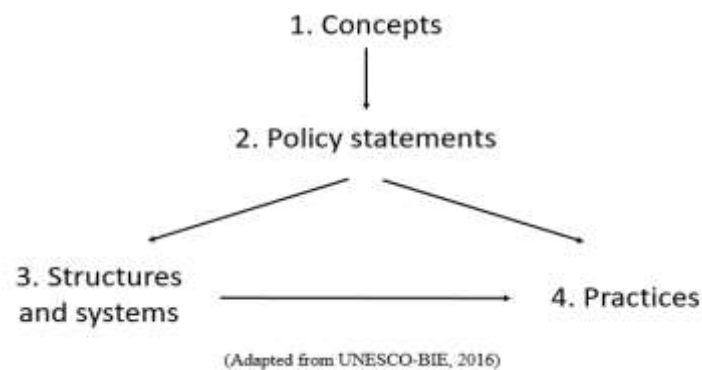


Figure 1:

The four Dimensions of an Inclusive Education Policy

To fulfill these international commitments, a multiplicity of projects related to inclusive education has been carried out in Lebanon and many reports have issued. These show that, similar to other countries around the world, Lebanon faces difficulties in implementing these international guidelines. The question then arises: what are the structural challenges in implementing inclusive education in Lebanon?

We can also note that each of these projects had its own conceptual representations and references, which demonstrates the usefulness of developing a close understanding of the implementation of inclusive education and synthesizing all this work. In this context, it is particularly interesting to look at the data produced by the Lebanese education system by adopting a systematic review methodology (Young & Eldermire, 2017). For this purpose, we contacted representatives of the ministries involved in the project of inclusive education and the concerned entities in the field of the education of students with SEN, like the: Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), Ministry of Justice (MoJ), Ministry of Public Health (MoH), Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD), Department of Guidance and Counseling (DOPS), Higher Council for Childhood.

1.2. Procedures

To provide an answer to our research question and to achieve the goal of this study, we carried out five steps which we deemed crucial.

To implement this study, several interviews were conducted with those responsible for services to children with special needs in ministries, local or international NGOs and other entities. Due to the lack of a databases specific to Lebanon, we had to collect the data directly from with the last-mentioned. The objective of our interviews was so to retrieve any documents as laws, circulars, projects, publications, that could help us to understand the Lebanese context related to the inclusive education.

Our work has been focused on the education of students with special needs, so we have extracted the initiatives and ideas that go with them. The selected documents were classified and analyzed in the light of the four dimensions of the UNESCO guide (figure 1).

2. From Separate Schooling to Inclusive Education

2.1. Concepts and Key Principles of Inclusive Education

The fact that inclusive schooling seems to be the subject of apparent societal consensus and no longer gives rise to a lively political debate (Baudot, Borelle, & Revillard, 2013) could suggest that there is agreement on the definitions underlying the issue under consideration. Reading recent scientific literature suggests that this is not the case, and the lack of shared definitions has been identified as a problem, promoting ideologies and hindering the development of scientific work (Bélanger, Mérini, Thomazet, Frangieh, & Graziani, 2018). This lack of a consensus leads to misunderstandings about the very idea of an inclusive education and more specifically an inclusive school, both in terms of practices and the analysis of phenomena (Bélanger & al., 2018).

It is important to highlight that “a holistic view of the education system, encompassing both the private and public system, must be taken when considering adopting an inclusive approach” (UNESCO, 2005, p. 15). On the other hand, this approach must not be limited to the school context or to a category of student such as pupils with special educational needs but must encompass them. Mérini and Thomazet (2016) affirm that [inclusive school is not simply the opening of the school to students with disabilities. Building an inclusive school means rebuilding the school to serve all students] (p. 31). Inclusive schooling and even more so inclusive education are part of an evolution in schooling practices with each new stage being anchored in the previous one (Figure 2):

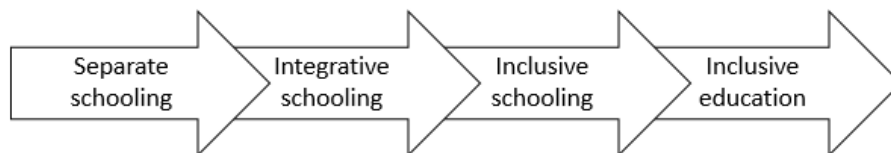


Figure 2:

From Separate Schooling to Inclusive Education

In practice, structures corresponding to each of these stages often remain in the same country as witnesses to the evolution of its educational system. So far, Lebanon has been known for its separative schooling in which pupils with special needs are educated in specialized centers related to their disabilities. At the same time, integrative schooling was further developed, each school creating its own modalities. However, it seems important to highlight the absence of real inclusive schools, even if there are some that claim to be inclusive.

This doesn't seem to work, namely decision-makers, researchers and practitioners, who are expected to work together to achieve a real inclusive educative policy.

2.2. Policy Statements

Lebanon makes Education for All a priority, with its Constitution guaranteeing equality before the law without any discrimination (preamble). Thus, Law No. 220/2000 on the *rights of persons with disabilities* replaced the previous laws on “disabled” persons (Law 11/1973 and Law 243/1993) by providing a codification of the rights of “disabled” persons and the means for them to access their rights. It also promotes the integration of “disabled” children into the regular system as soon as possible (MEN, 2004). It was therefore considered to be an important improvement in this field.

This law has 10 sections, each related to a specific field, and defines the status of “disabled” persons according to the four categories set out in the former International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps (WHO, 1980). It should be noted that this classification has since been replaced by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (WHO, 2001), which was implemented in a version for children and youth in 2012. This observation illustrates the gap that may exist between national laws and international conventions, the former evolving much more slowly than the latter, as do representations.

The concept of disability embodied in this law is therefore no longer in line with current international approaches. The existing legislative framework lets teachers believe that diagnosing all students with SEN will contribute to solving their needs. Medical expertise can give teachers the impression that the student's difficulties are due to a pathology to be treated outside the pedagogy (Frangieh, 2017). Nevertheless, this legal requirement has been an important step in favor of “disabled people” and efforts have been made to facilitate their schooling in a sustainable way.

Despite the fact that Lebanon has made commitments in its Constitution, international and national laws and has ratified many international conventions relating to equality between all persons without any discrimination, in general, and more particularly with regard to “disabled” persons, it has yet to provide a safe and inclusive environment for students. People with disabilities still face many obstacles and are still fighting against a world of exclusion.

The lack of a real inclusion policy is particularly noteworthy despite the publication of Law 220/2000, and the subsequent initiatives to issue decrees. For example, decrees number 16417 and 16614 concerning the exemption from official examinations for students with learning difficulties and gifted students. And the publication of other texts such as the National Plan for Education for All (2004), the National Strategic Plan for Education and Teaching (2012), etc. Despite these important prescriptive attempts, more work needs to be done to make the Lebanese education system inclusive. This dimension is essential because it can influence and support inclusive thinking and practices by establishing the equal right of every individual to education, and by describing the forms of teaching, support and leadership that are the basis for quality education for all (UNESCO, 2015).

Considering the need for clarification of policy statements related to inclusive education, the aim will be to improve the legal context of inclusive education and develop a legal framework that promotes inclusive education. The two dimensions (concepts and policy statement) presented above are struggling to find their place in the Lebanese context, which has repercussions on the ground, where professional structures and practices are still far from allowing all children to attend school in an ordinary environment.

2.3. Structures and Systems

Even if Lebanon is a signatory to the international Declarations and Conventions guaranteeing the right to education for all, many children with SEN in Lebanon are excluded. Indeed, many public or private schools do not accept them, both because of the absence of a regulatory framework and because of the low resources of the schools (Frangieh, 2017). Many children are also unable to access schooling due to lack of available places, inadequate premises, learning curricula and teaching methods that do not meet their needs (Frangieh, 2017). This phenomenon is reinforced by even higher school fees for this category of pupils and the lack of facilities to access schools. But some of them, especially in the private sector, are still trying to do everything possible to accommodate this population in their school (Frangieh, 2017).

The education of SEN students in Lebanon is carried out in several structures, with specific services each with its own name. The structures and systems vary from the most segregated schooling (in specialized centers) to the least restrictive possible (in a regular classroom). As a result, the nature of the interventions and supports offered may differ considerably from one school to another. This gap is reinforced by the lack of a clear and coherent national policy that leads each school to feel free to make and implement its own choices.

Consequently, the nature of the interventions and the assistance offered are not the same in schools. Each school thus tries to invent practices adapted to its context, since the margin of maneuver is not the same for all schools. Each of them carries out its own project according to its financial means and convictions.

As an example, let us underline some existing integration modalities in Lebanon. The student can be integrated into a regular class, in this case the teacher is solely responsible for the schooling of the student with special educational needs. He can be also supported by a multidisciplinary team. In this case, a third option is applicable, two teachers who can be present and work with the whole group. Finally, the student also can participate in a resource group, where he or she attends sessions adapted to his or her own pace.

In the other hand, the student can be integrated into a specialized class in the school. He participates then in the general activities of the school (sports activities, recreation, outings, etc.) and sometimes in some secondary disciplines (geography, history, etc.). However, he may not participate in any school activities outside the specialized classroom.

2.4. Practices

Developing truly inclusive practices is a real challenge for any education system. Indeed, the system can vary considerably from one school to another or from one teacher to another, even though the same legal framework is supposed to guide them. Schools and their principals should therefore take over so that teaching practices are truly inclusive and promote the social and academic participation of all students (Porter & AuCoin, 2012).

UNESCO (2017) sets out four key elements to ensure inclusion and equity in education:

- Schools and other learning centres have strategies to encourage the presence, participation and success of all learners from their local community.
- Schools and other learning centres support learners who are at risk of academic failure, marginalization and exclusion.
- Teachers and support staff are prepared to consider the diversity of learners during their initial training.
- Opportunities for continuing professional development in inclusive and equitable practices are provided for teachers and support staff.

The first step would therefore be to remove barriers to accessibility from an equity perspective, which is “to treat everyone fairly, taking into account their particular circumstances and eliminating structural barriers” (City of Ottawa, 2015, p. 10). To these structural obstacles, practices can also be added when they act as obstacles to student progress, like in the figure 3:

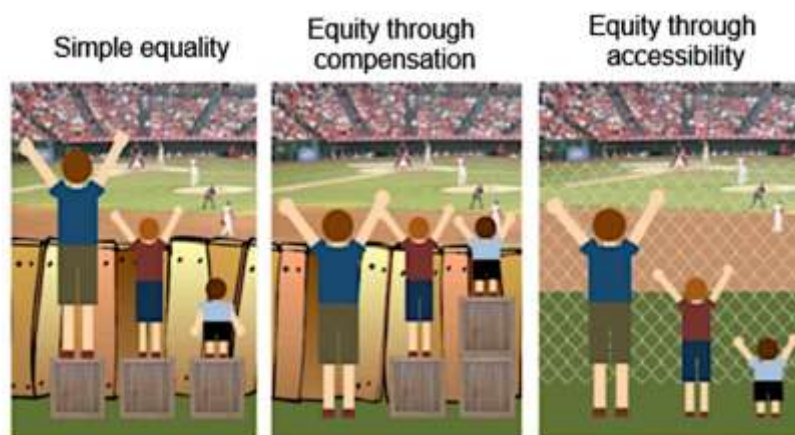


Figure 3:

Between simple equality and equity through accessibility (from Ville d'Ottawa, 2015; Ramel, 2018)

While the first two images are well known, the third is much less so, although it best illustrates the notion of accessibility. If, in the first instance, the three children receive the same equal support without success for the smallest, in the second instance, adjustments are made to the situation of disability for everyone to participate. We could call this second equity mechanism by compensation, since it aims to compensate for a disadvantage related to the size of two of the children.

The Lebanese education system is most often part of a simple equality, where the curriculum is not adapted for students who need it. This principle is also often applied in SEN student assessments, under the pretext that the teacher must not give them favors at the expense of their peers. The consequence is that only students with the required skills can succeed their schooling, while drop-out is a major problem for others.

3. Obstacles and Challenges to Develop Inclusive Practices in Lebanon

Through our study, we have identified four main categories of related obstacles and challenges.

First, current practices regarding students with special educational needs are still highly segregating or integrative. In addition, those are not unified in Lebanon, as each school or specialized center applies its own policy.

Secondly, as already noted, the legal and regulatory framework in Lebanon is insufficiently developed in terms of the reception of pupils with special educational needs in public schools. For this reason, the funds are not released by the government because the law does not require it to do so. So, the people in charge of this mission suffer from a lack of financial resources, knowing that they are already limited to best meet all the needs of the students.

Thirdly, a predominant vision of disability based on functional limitations does not sufficiently consider the learning processes of students with special educational needs. The students' academic difficulties are medicalized and teachers have a labeled conception of students with special educational needs reducing them down to their shortcomings. Such a focus on the deficit hinders educational desire by contributing to the stigmatization and desocialization of the student and leads teachers to abdicate their pedagogical responsibility. The lack of training and awareness in the school community reinforces this observation, the

diversity of the students and the difficulties of some of them putting the teachers themselves in a disabling situation.

Fourth and lastly, existing buildings make physical accommodations such as ramps or elevators difficult or impossible. As a result, pupils with a motor or sensory impairment encounter difficulties in accessing school, difficulties that are reinforced by the lack of infrastructure in terms of adapted transport or accessible roads.

4. Conclusion

As in many countries, the establishment of an inclusive school in Lebanon is marked by uncertainties, tensions and contradictions. This school project is a major challenge for the education system: to provide an effective and high-quality education for all learners. However, this study allowed us to highlight many of the difficulties and obstacles identified by most interviewees. Addressing the subject of inclusive education in Lebanon has been a difficult task because much work remains to be done to ensure a clear conceptual framework, a well-defined legal framework, a structured and organized system and consistent practices.

Providing quality education for all students is a challenge and requires fundamental work for all committed actors. The response to this diversity requires the active participation of management and supervisory staff as well as the intervention of medical and social professionals in the form of partnerships is an essential element. Despite the efforts and initiatives deployed on Lebanese territory, the progress made in terms of inclusive intervention in schools remains as in many countries, still modest. There is still a long way to go in establishing really inclusive schools in Lebanon.

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