

Designing the Lebanese public education budget: A policy document analysis

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Education has become a high-stakes, big-budget item worldwide and is often a major contributor to the country's GDP. Each country's public expenditure on education differs but there is a general recognition that education is a catalyst for country growth and development. In Lebanon, public sector education is viewed by the government as unproductive and the gap between private and public schooling is vast. The strong centralization and governance of Lebanese public schools' finance, management, and curriculum hinders the development of the public education sector and influences the performance of students and teachers. Although the total expenditure on education is high (about US\$1.2 billion annually: approximately 2.45% of GDP and 6.4% of total public expenditure), Lebanon's public expenditure on education is lower than expenditure by its neighbors. This study used an interpretive document analysis method to analyze the design of the public budget policy used to determine the allocation of funds to the Lebanese education sector's development plan for the educational section. The study determined the uniform guidelines for the education's budget design by comparing the design used by Finland with that of 33 other developing countries. Analysis of results found that the Lebanese public education development plan uses six of eight best-practice guidelines. This study is potentially useful for educational policymakers and researchers interested in educational budget policies design in low performing systems. Comparative document analysis will assist policymakers in Lebanon to follow benchmarked guidelines in resource allocation to improve the quality of education.

Keywords: Education budget policy; policy design; Lebanon public and private schools; centralized and decentralized education systems

INTRODUCTION

The global trend towards increasing school autonomy over control of budget and resources has been a catalyst for more effective education systems (Chin & Chuang, 2015). Findings are that school autonomy is associated with student performance and reducing the constraints caused by centralization and governance over school personnel, curriculum, instructional methods, disciplinary policies, budgeting, facilities, and student admission will lead to the better performance of schools (Nechyba, 2003). Schools in most Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries have complete responsibility and authority for resource allocation: they hire and fire teachers, establish teachers' salaries and increases,

formulate school budgets, and decide on budget allocations within the school (Saarivirta & Kumpulainen, 2016).

In Lebanon, school autonomy is minimal and school principals work under a highly centralized bureaucratic structure. The role of the school principal is limited to assessing the school's human and physical needs, and reporting such needs to the provincial education bureau. The provincial education bureau assigns teachers and evaluates their work, leaving no room for principals to hold teachers accountable for their performance (Mattar, 2012). The bureau also allocates the educational equipment and mandates teaching and learning regulations without considering the individual needs of the schools.

The country's economic and political instability and the Syrian civil war has caused a dramatic deterioration in, particularly, the public sector. The Lebanese civil war, which spanned 1975 to 1990, weakened the development of public education and damaged most schools buildings (Frayha, 2009). Public schools lack proper infrastructure and technological materials and science laboratories, they do not have inclusion-based policies, and the curriculum and textbooks are outdated and do not reflect 21st century skills (Ghamrawi, 2010; Shuayb, 2016). Besides that, public schools attract mostly non-qualified human resources because of low salary offerings compared to salaries offered in private sector schools (Ghamrawi, 2010; Shuayb, 2016). Teachers working in public schools operate in a context in which most of their needs are unmet (Mattar, 2012). Teachers regularly protest on the streets to demand pay raises, a proper allocation of resources, and the improvement of schools' buildings (Mattar, 2012). In response to protests, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education developed a five-year development policy and allocated US\$2.424 million by 2011 to develop the education sector. This reform plan aimed to improve and update the national curriculum and teaching strategies through providing them with training and professional development programs (Bou Jaoude, & Daith, 2006).

Research purpose and questions

This study analyses the design of the budget policy related to the development of the public education sector in Lebanon. Public sector reform in poorer income countries can always benefit from the experience of higher income countries despite the different conditions under which they have to operate (Bale & Dale, 1998). Therefore, it makes sense to examine the education policy of a more developed country. Finland was chosen for such examination for several reasons:

1. Finland has decentralized its education structure by giving greater authority to local municipalities (Mølsted & Karseth, 2016).
2. Finland has a high success rate in tests of students' school achievements (Vitikka, Krokfors, & Hurmerinta, 2012).
3. The community and state put great faith in Finnish teachers (Vitikka et al., 2012)
4. New approaches to education, such as New Public Management, are found within this successful education system (Varjo, Simola, & Rinne, 2013).

Specifically, the research questions for this study are:

1. Did the allocated funds fulfil the goal of improving the quality of public education in Lebanon? To answer this question, two sub-questions needed to be addressed:
 - a. How is the budget policy designed?
 - b. Does this design follow benchmarked guidelines?

The study reviewed related literature and policy documents to examine the Lebanese education budget policy for developing its public education system. Results from this study are potentially useful for education policy makers and researchers interested in studying education budget policies design in low performing systems. The comparative analysis will alert policy makers in Lebanon to benchmarked guidelines in resource allocation for improving the quality of education.

Theoretical model

Designing budget policy and school funding is the responsibility of local school districts or the state. While having it centralized within the state could create greater equity, it could also lead to other unintended consequences (Zimmer & Jones, 2005). Limited school autonomy is among the consequences of a strongly centralized system. If the state is the sole body to have governance over schools' finances, management, and curriculum, it will decrease the autonomy of schools and negatively affect its overall performance (Nechyba, 2003). Hence, understanding the consequences of both centralized and decentralized systems is linked to understanding how the budget was designed and allocated. Hence, this section is divided into two parts. The first part presents an overview of centralized education by focusing on the financial centralization of school budgets. The second part examines the design of the budget policy by benchmarking it against a more experienced, developed, and richer country, Finland, and with other similar developing countries contexts. This comparison will provide the study with rich data from two contexts.

Centralisation and decentralisation of educational systems

Taylor (1997) notes that the centralization of education involves embedding authority in the governance bodies, which could be the central government; provincial, state or regional governing bodies; municipal, county or district governments; and schools themselves. Taylor also highlights that there are three main dimensions of centralization in Education: fiscal, administrative and political. Fiscal is when the governing body regulates and controls the level of schools' revenues and expenditures. Administrative is when the allocation of human resources is within the authority of the governing body, and the political dimension refers to authority over decision-making.

While many countries still follow and favour the centralized education system to ensure equality across all schools in the country, over the past 15 years, a decentralization model has been gaining favour (Chin & Chuang, 2015). Having a decentralized education system have met the strong demands for education of families in wealthier districts that are no longer matched under a system of equalized funding (Fischel, 1989, 1992). These demands are mostly about the quality of teaching materials and technological resources that could not be measured with in a centralised system (Theobald & Picus, 1991).

To date, few countries give complete autonomy to schools or local authorities because of a distrust in such customer-oriented ways of thinking (Saarivirta & Kumpulainen, 2016). For instance, some people argue that financial authority should be given to local units or schools because they have a better understanding of the needs of their community and how to allocate money to meet those needs; other people argue that the units and schools might lack the knowledgeable and qualified individuals who will ensure good funds management (Honig, 2006). Even in advanced educational systems, such as the US system, public schools are provided with some autonomy over their finances but they cannot control the level of funds they receive. These funds are mostly provided from federal, state, and local governments and planned in alignment with the school's vision, mission, and with its instructional plan related

directly to student achievement (Taylor, 1997). In cases where the state has complete power over school finances, schools struggle because such control affects teacher and staff income, working conditions, and opportunities for advancement (Taylor, 1997), as well as access to resources. This is the case in Lebanon, where high centralization and bureaucracy is correlated with teacher unhappiness concerning their incentives, employment security, the quality of teachers being hired, and the physical conditions of school buildings (Mattar, 2012). Unfortunately, the highly centralized Lebanese system suffers from a fragile central governance structure, weak rule of law, and lack transparency (Van Ommering, 2017). Weak governance is a consequence of 15 years of civil war that impacted government institutions and enabled corruption to spread into all public institutions.

By comparison, Finland's secure and stable context, prepared the ground for the state to transform its centralized structures to a more decentralized one. The increased decentralization in 1994 gave local municipalities the authority and freedom to finance and manage schools and provided teachers with increased responsibilities for developing and deciding on curriculum content (Mølsted & Karseth, 2016; Saarivirta & Kumpulainen, 2016). Local municipalities also became responsible for inspecting schools, allocating resources to students—including those with disabilities—and organizing schooling and subjects offered (Saarivirta & Kumpulainen, 2016). By doing so, the Finnish education system created a strong link between schools and communities to promote a shared responsibility towards student performance (Saarivirta & Kumpulainen, 2016).

From centralized towards greater decentralization

Lebanon's education system is a highly centralized system in which even the smallest decision is made by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. This ministry regulates and governs all policies, budgets, curriculum, teachers, and staff recruitment through the provincial education bureau (Ghamrawi, 2010). Private schools have control over their own organization (Ghamrawi, 2010) but all Lebanese schools must implement the national curriculum. Should a school want to implement a foreign curriculum, it must apply to do so as an add-on to the Lebanese curriculum.

The Lebanese education system is similar to what the Finnish system was back in the 1970s and 1980s, when it was highly centralized, with the Finnish National Board of Education being the only decision-making authority and little power was granted to local municipals or schools (Saarivirta & Kumpulainen, 2016). When the decision to decentralize was made in 1994, principals were trained to participate in school development and reform (Saarivirta & Kumpulainen, 2016) and to manage the school staff and finances as well as internal and external networking. However, the hiring and firing of teachers remains in the hands of the municipality authority, though by taking the principal's opinion into account.

Although Finland has decentralized to some extent, it has not gone as far as developed countries such as the Netherlands and UK (Saarivirta & Kumpulainen, 2016). Finland is continuously developing the human resources at both federal and local authorities to ensure that they are qualified to make the right decisions towards educational improvement. This is not the case in Lebanon, where administrators are not well trained or qualified to manage and improve the educational sector with even the small amount of flexibility they have over school affairs (Ghamrawi, 2010; Shuayb, 2016). The possibility of transferring to a less centralized system in Lebanon is debatable. Many more challenges exist in the Lebanese education sector and, in response, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education issued a new budget policy to serve the public education development plan (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

Research design

Even though educational policy makers count on outcomes in quantitative terms to make reliable judgments with policy reform, interpretations of qualitative data resources remain the best method to provide a good understanding of the impact and consequences of educational policy (Halpin & Tyrona, 1994). To address the financial challenges of the Lebanese educational sector, this research used a phenomenal instrumental case method to seek in-depth understanding and insights (Bowen, 2009). Interpretation of documents gives voice and meaning to the similarities and differences of the themes found when analysing the design of the policies between different contexts (Bowen, 2009). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that analysing, reviewing, and interpreting printed and electronic documents is the best method for producing rich descriptions of the investigated topic (the Lebanese education system) as a single phenomenon. Following this method will also serve the purpose of this research to gather a broad array of data on the design of the educational budget (Halpin & Tyrona, 1994).

Data collection

Source identification. Four document sources were found through a preliminary search using three terms associated with educational budget policy: centralized education system, policy design, funds, and resources allocation. Then, the researcher identified four sources for documentary data on centralized educational budget: (a) ProQuest Research Library (library database), (b) Google Scholar, (c) BUID library, and (d) The Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education Official site.

Sample selection, inclusion and exclusion criteria. The four data sources used an extended list that included eight terms: (a) Advantages of centralized educational system, (b) disadvantages of centralized educational system (c) school autonomy (d) developing countries (e) educational policies design (f) funding of public schools (g) teacher's incentives and performance (h) educational outcomes improvement. The researcher searched library databases for peer-reviewed literature then sources for grey literature. Reports, statistics, manuscripts, and other written materials were selectively chosen for content analysis and comparability. Documents had to be similar in topic and type. For instance, budget allocation forms were selected from both public and private schools in Lebanon. As part of centralized and decentralized educational budget policy issues, areas were further divided into sub-issues: expenditures per student and allocation of budget. In terms of the public education development policy. The researcher chose the most recent documents related to the design and implementation. Genuine and credible documents from Lebanon and Finland were selected to make the comparative analysis and identify gaps or present alternatives to the Lebanese education policy design and implementation. Document analysis of public education budget policy in Lebanon was selected from a review of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education documents dated between 2010 and 2015. Other documents from public and private schools were included to address the centralization of the Lebanese public school education system. Finland's budget education policy was also included to compare and examine the gaps that lie in the design and implementation within the Lebanese context. Due to time limitations, only four main documents were selected to support the analysis of the educational public budget policy in Lebanon, three will be analysed for comparison.

Data analysis

Data were analysed following a content analysis technique to organize information into categories related to the central questions of the research and to evaluate documents in such a way that the understanding of the design of budget policy is developed (Bowen, 2009). After identifying categories, the researcher used a comparative method to identify patterns and concepts that seemed to cluster together. Concepts were compared by asking: What kinds of ideas are mentioned in both documents? How is this concept like, or different in the documents? Hence, similarities, differences, and general patterns were identified to develop an understanding on budget policy design and implementation in both centralized and freer systems. Documents were analysed and the component of policy design is represented by structures: (a) Rehabilitation and equipping of science and informatics laboratories, (b) Capacity development of teachers, (c) Stimulating the participation of parents in schools, (d) Developing the administrative capacity of principals, (e) Development of standards and specifications for textbooks and educational resources, and (f) Development of a mechanism for measuring performance.

Overview of education budget policy

Document 1: Quality education for growth: National education strategy framework (2010)

Document 2: The Lebanese Ministry of Education and higher education achievements (2011)

In the period during and after the civil war of 1975–1990, the Lebanese Government's investment in public education dropped, opening up opportunities for the private sector to provide educational opportunities (Shuayb, 2016). Only 29.2% of students are enrolled in public sector schools even though the number of public and private schools are almost the same (HEART, 2015). This is because of the inefficiency and unproductivity of public education, which is linked to the poorer quality of teaching, shortage of qualified teacher, low teaching standards, and lack of resources and infrastructure (Mattar, 2012; Shuayb, 2016).

The Ministry of education and Higher Education acted in 2010 by putting in place a reform of the educational system based on a five-year development plan (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2010). The new system emphasizes many issues essential for the achievement of equality of access to and quality of education. It highlights the gap in success rates in official exams between the public and private sectors and emphasizes the importance of counselling and guidance (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2011). A budget was then designed and allocated based on Lebanese educational sector priorities (see Table 1). The plan raised US\$2.424 million by 2011 by signing agreements with several agencies to obtain internal and external funds for education sector development.

The design of the policy is aligned with the top priorities of the educational development plan over five years (2011–2016), but what was not expected has happened and shifted the allocations entirely. Funds were no longer spent as planned. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education had to cater for an increase in Syrian students in classrooms as a result of increase Syrian refugees, who now outnumber Lebanese students. Arab donors, the UNESCO, and UNICEF provide funding but it is well below that necessary to close the financial gap and provide support to the Lebanese government to educate all children residing in its territories. Hence, the design of the budget policy and the real implementation of the development plan is controversial.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education claims that 14 billion Lebanese pounds (US\$9,256,198) were allocated to hire teachers on contract bases to teach arts, sports, second foreign language, and IT. Schools were also rehabilitated and provided with the necessary supplies and equipment for science and IT laboratories. The Ministry has sponsored several capacity-building programs using teachers from foreign languages who teach mathematics, sciences, French and English in various cycles. Finally, several partnerships between the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, and The Hariri Foundation and the Arab Thought Foundation developed the integration of information communication technology in Education. In spite of all these efforts, the education sector in Lebanon still struggles and student performance is still below average when measured on international standardized tests (Martin, Mullis, Foy, & Stanco, 2016).

The purpose of this study is not to investigate how the money was spent but to analyse the design of the policy when compared to a similar one in one of the most successful OECD countries, Finland.

Table 1: Lebanese budget policy for educational sector development projects.

Fund Type	Budget	Agency	Project	Project purpose
Grant	US\$75 Million	US Agency for International Development	Developing rehabilitation assistance to schools and teacher improvement (D-RASATI).	Rehabilitation and equipping of science and informatics laboratories. Capacity development of teachers. Development of extra-curricular activities. Stimulating the participation of parents in schools.
Loan	US\$40 Million	The World Bank	Education development project II	Equipping of KGs Developing the administrative capacity of the cadres of MEHE Developing the administrative capacity of principals
Loan	Euro 13.7 Million	The European Union	Education development project	Strengthening the management of public finances. Improving the planning, implementation and Monitoring of the education sector reforms. Improve management, increase transparency, enact accountability Promoting awareness of students' citizenship concepts.
Grant	US\$3 Million	UNESCO	Follow up and evaluation of public schools' performance	Developing monitoring tools. Developing the mechanism for measuring performance. Identifying teacher's training needs.
Grant	US\$0.66 Million	UNICEF	Annual work plan for development of requirements of early childhood	Parental awareness program. Developing standards and specifications for textbooks and educational resources. Producing support lessons for underachieving students. Contributing to the "back to school"

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				media campaign for the school year 2010–2011.
Grant	US\$2.4 Million	The United Nations Development Program	Providing technical support to MEHE to implement the Education sector development plan	<p>Developing the development of institutional competencies.</p> <p>Activating the education management information system to render it accessible to all units in the Ministry.</p> <p>Developing a system for monitoring and evaluation of the programs.</p> <p>Providing tools and capacity building of staff.</p>
Contribution	US\$100 Million	Lebanese State	Education sector development plan	Developing of the overall education sector.

Document 3: European Commission – Education and Training Monitor 2015 – Finland

Finland's education system requires no tuition fees and divides funding responsibilities between the federal (57%) and municipal authorities (43%) (European Commission, 2015). The total spending on Education in Finland represents 6.5% of total GDP in 2013 compared to 5.9% of the GDP in 2008, which is well above the EU average of 5% (European Commission, 2015). The Ministry of Education and Culture oversees all publicly funded education; however, local municipal authorities appoint principals then leave the management of the schools to the principals, teachers, and staff (Saarivirta & Kumpulainen, 2016). The Ministry of Education and Culture constitutes 13% of the state budget. Additional funds come from local authorities, the private sector and citizens.

The Finnish budget is distributed according to the variety of the educational needs. It provides meals to fulltime students and free transportation to dispersed schools. The key to its success and effectiveness is the continuous professional development of teachers and the development of programs that involve parents in their children's education. Finnish teachers starting salaries are 10% higher than the EU average and they are educated to high standards at master's level (European Commission, 2015). The Finnish education system is considered among the most effective systems in the world but has its own flaws.

Reducing the achievement gap among pupils and integrating immigrants into the Finish school system has caused the education ministry to allocate a new budget policy to fund further system development (European Commission, 2015). The new budget also funds training to increase teacher competency and experience in using ICT resources within their teaching and additional training to develop assessments skills. In addition, the budget allocates a significant amount to the LUMA program (Finland's science education) for the period 2014–2019 to motivate children to move beyond the arts fields and take a greater interest in subjects such as mathematics, natural science, and technology education (Saarivirta & Kumpulainen, 2016).

In short, the Finnish education system is more advanced than the Lebanese education system because it not only identifies and attempts to solve problems but also makes a substantial public investment in education. However, this observation would not be useful for helping to advance the Lebanese education system if the context in which the systems operate remained unexamined.

Document 4: Improving educational outcomes in developing countries: Lessons from rigorous evaluations (2014)

Income per capita is a key predictor of performance on learning in developing countries but other factors are also important. A systematic review of 33 middle and low income countries identified four necessary factors for improving educational outcomes:

- 1- reducing the costs of going to school
- 2- building parents' capacity
- 3- employing resources to change the daily experience of children at school
- 4- providing well-designed incentives for teachers and training low-skilled teachers.

Applying these four factors in the Lebanese context would make a difference in the public education sector; Ganimian and Murnane (2016) recommended policy makers include them in the design of the budget policy for education. Reducing costs of going to school, such as providing free transport to schools, especially schools in rural areas, and free meals and free eyeglasses at public schools, are effective ways to change children's daily experiences and increase their attainment rate (Ganimian & Murnane, 2016).

This section discussed the conditions that favour a decentralized educational system and to which extent it is needed to increase overall school performance. While schools in Finland and most developed countries have almost full autonomy, in Lebanon it is minimal or absent. Hence, when the public policy budget was designed, it did not include schools funding in the decision-making process. If schools had been included, then the design would be more beneficial to the improvement of students and teachers because they are best placed to determine their needs

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This study examined the design of the public budget policy allocated to the development plan of the educational sector in Lebanon and determined benchmark guidelines from the Finnish education context and the context of developing countries similar to Lebanon.

To answer the general question on whether the funds allocated are expected to reach the anticipated goal of improving the quality of public education in Lebanon, the study identified six factors from the Finnish education system. Listed below are the actions taken by each country in relation to those factors. It should be noted that, despite the efforts of the Lebanese government, the majority of the objectives of the 2010 strategy have not been achieved (Shuayb, 2016). Equal education is still not available for the majority of Lebanese and non-Lebanese students. Particularly, the education system fails to support the needs of Lebanese students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds or are non-Lebanese; such students are at high risk of underperforming and dropping out of school (Shuayb, 2016).

- 1 Rehabilitation and equipping of science and informatics laboratories: In the design of both the Finnish and Lebanese budget policy designs, this guideline was associated with the development of educational quality. As noted, in Finland, funds were allocated to the launch a new educational program called LUMA. In Lebanon, the shortage of laboratories, ICT resources and lack of teacher interest in the use the ICT resources and in integrating such resources within the curriculum (Nasser, 2008; TIMSS, 2011) is evidence that the money allocated was not enough or was not deployed properly.

2. Capacity development of teachers: Teacher quality and qualifications is directly associated with student performance (Woessman, 2016). The Finnish budget allowed for the further development of teachers, raising their level of education to the level of masters and then to provide continuous professional development (Saarivirta & Kumplulainen, 2016). In Lebanon, teachers are provided with little encouragement to further their professional development or even collaborate with their peers (Van Ommering, 2017). It is true that, in public schools, teachers receive training three times a year that aims to develop their teaching methodologies and assessment skills. However, such training is not customized to fit the needs of individual teachers, nor does it consider their background and years of experience (Van Ommering, 2017). More experienced teachers are benefiting little from professional development programs and, therefore, hold on to their traditional teaching techniques, thus failing to develop the critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity skills of students (Abd-El-Khalick et al., 2004; Osta, 2007).
3. Developing the administrative capacity of principals: In Finland, principals are continuously trained to participate in school development and reform (Saarivirta & Kumplulainen, 2016). Each school can manage its own staff and finances as well as internal and external networking. The limited authority that principals have in Lebanese public schools does not encourage the implementation of serious professional development programs for either themselves or their staff. Neither is pre-service and in-service administrative training available for the majority of principals (Mattar, 2012). Studies have found that principals tend to adopt an authoritarian style and give limited attention to the instructional dimension of their principalship (Akkary, 2014). In low performing schools, such as in Lebanon's public school system (Akkary, 2014; Mattar, 2012; Martin et al., 2016), school principals do not motivate teachers to perform at higher levels and cannot promote the potential of and contribution by teacher. In high performing schools, such as those in Finland, principals can adopt a stronger instructional leadership style (Mattar, 2012).
4. Development of a mechanism for measuring performance: This guideline is aimed at ensuring that education budgets allow for workshops to develop teacher assessments skills (European Commission, 2015). Assessments are tools for learning about curriculum, teacher instructions, and assessments aimed at learning whether students actually learnt what has been taught. Teachers are expected to be professionally developed and experienced in how to use assessments inside the classroom and how to benefit from the data generated from them (Gipps, 1994). For instance, assessment data can give teachers detailed information about the quality of their teaching methodology and how they can improve it. However, in Lebanon, the shortage of qualified teachers and technological resources for schools are challenging the capacity of schools to improve by making use of the assessments data (Osta, 2007).
5. Stimulating the participation of parents in schools: This guideline is in the Lebanese budget design but there is no evidence that any action has been taken by public schools to stimulate parental engagement (Shuayb, 2016). Parents rarely visit the schools to follow up on their children's academic achievements (Van Ommering, 2017). They are not even encouraged by the school to become engaged in the education of students (Van Ommering, 2017). In Finland, schools have programs for parents and support low-income parents by providing free meals and reducing the costs associated with their children going to school (Saarivirta & Kumpulainen, 2016). Parental engagement is considered an essential component for student academic success. In Lebanon, the

potential advantage of having parental involvement include: the power to promote teachers' working in a situation of conflict and for peacebuilding inside the classroom. In other words, teachers will have a better ability to manage classrooms containing Lebanese and Syrian students if relationships between parents and teachers are strong, as well as strengthening the sense of teachers in the security and stability of their employment (Van Ommering, 2017).

6. Development of standards and specifications for textbooks and educational resources: The availability of school resources is a significant factor in determining student performance (Woessman, 2016). In Lebanon, textbooks and classroom conditions are relatively poor and the national curriculum has not been updated since 2000 (Sarouphim, 2009). Despite the newly developed textbooks with the ministry's intention of developing students' problem solving skills and scientific inquiry among other educational outcomes, the build-up of textbooks and assessment practices are still outdated and not aligned with the 21st century skills that students should have (Abd-El-Khalick et al., 2004). This is mainly because of the lack of authority teachers and school administrators have in the decision making process of bodies such as Ministries of Education and curriculum development agencies in the design of textbooks, tools, and interventions (Van Ommering, 2017)

Although the Lebanese education budget policy is designed as per benchmarked guidelines, it lacks two core guidelines necessary for overall educational quality improvement: the provision of free meals and transportation to public school students. When these needs to help student attendance are satisfied, absenteeism rates will decrease and student perform at school will increase (Ganimian & Murnane, 2016).

CONCLUSION

This study reviewed the design of the public education budget policy in Lebanon and explored whether the current centralized system is providing quality education for Lebanese students. To do so, this research followed an interpretive document analysis approach and compared the Lebanese education policy budget against literature on international budget policy design. The examination found that the budget policy of the Lebanese system follows uniform guidelines in money allocation and distributions of resources but is missing two major guidelines that other, more advanced educational system use: allocations of funds for providing free meals and transportation for students. Both of these are necessary for meeting the basic physiological needs of students (Ganimian & Murnane, 2016). Students who are hungry cannot perform well and children in rural areas clustered in the economically disadvantaged regions of Bekaa, and South and North Lebanon cannot afford transport to schools (Shuayb, 2016).

In addition, examination of documents found that in more experienced, richer, and socio-politically stable country contexts, schools are given greater autonomy than found in Lebanese public schools. However, the necessary components for moving Lebanese schools to greater autonomy are almost non-existent. For example, there is a lack, at the school level, of qualified and competent human resources to develop a school budget and adjust it as necessary. However, if school staff were initially appropriately trained, they could help with the reduction of education sector debts and avoid unnecessary expenditures without detrimentally influencing student achievement (Shuayb, 2016). Hence, in the design of the education budget, the Ministry could, for example reduce the current budget allocated for training school administrators by providing in-house training and allocate the savings to providing free meals and transportation—at least in the most disadvantaged areas. The Ministry could also use its

own people, rather than consultants. to train school administrators and teachers on education sector objectives and priorities, teachers rights, pedagogy, and good governance in schools (Van Ommering, 2017).

This study provides policy makers in Lebanon with a deeper understanding of current budget allocations and provides insights for policy makers of benchmark guidelines for improving the public sector education.

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