
Rethinking Education for Social Cohesion: International Case Studies is a significant and sustained edited book that trifurcates into theory, policy-making and practices, and case studies. Fifteen authors from five disciplinary backgrounds (education, psychology, chemistry, history and public administration) equipped with varied experiences have sought to tackle the longstanding intractable question facing societies in both developed and developing countries, i.e. ‘how can we contribute to the creation of a more equitable, respectful, and just society for everyone?’ (Zajda 2006, 13). As such, the book has probed into a litany of pressing issues in societies divided along lines of race, ethnicity, culture and religion fomented by fissiparous politics, economic divisions and resultant social pathologies. The main premise of the book is that education as an agent of change can still play a vital role in reducing the lack of social cohesion in society. In essence, the book identifies problems and issues associated with intra/intergroup relationships in post-conflict societies, and promotes awareness of which of those issues are capable of being addressed by the school, education policy-makers and those interested in fostering social cohesion. Further, by utilizing lessons gleaned from international case studies, the book transcends parochial concerns and spells out a series of practical recommendations that can be turned into significant opportunities for promoting social cohesion in different parts of the world having broader applicability.

As a prefatory note, Rethinking Education for Social Cohesion coincides with the recent seismic events that wreaked havoc in the Arab Middle East, Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), let alone the smouldering tension in Pakistan and Afghanistan together with the terrorist threat looming menacingly over many parts of the world. Under such inauspicious circumstances, discussing issues of social cohesion in the society is a timely endeavour.

The 254-page book is edited by Maha Shuayb, Director at the Centre for Lebanese Studies in London. It is divided into two parts. Part 1, ‘The Theory and Politics of Social Cohesion’, furnishes a conceptual framework of social cohesion providing terra firma theoretical foundations for the subsequent analysis of this fundamental topic of concern in post-conflict societies. It also comprises five case studies, of which two emanate from the UK and three from Lebanon. Part 2, ‘Means for Promoting Social Cohesion: Evidence from the Field’, synthesizes lessons extrapolated from different case studies as tools for fostering social cohesion. The parts constitute a connected chain of analytical discussion in that one given chapter leaves behind unanswered questions which are tackled afterwards in another chapter from a different
dimension, accenting the multidimensional, yet complementary, nature of the book. The Introduction and Conclusion, both written by the editor, bring together syntheses provided by each author into a coherent piece of scholarship.

In Chapter 1, Shuayb engages in the gruelling, yet vivacious, task of synthesizing the pertinent theoretical framework of social cohesion by cross-examining a trove of 93 different sources. The author recasts the entrenched dominance of the welfare state citizenship approach of social cohesion and debates the ascendancy of the neo-liberal economic model of what is termed as ‘global competitiveness’ (O’Brien 2008). This latter continues to wield influence on theory and policies of social cohesion. Interestingly, the author has rightly avoided the use of ‘community cohesion’ – which is ubiquitous in the UK context – lest understood in Lebanon as confessional communities, shielding against possible agoraphobia of the country’s fractious confessional landscape.

An intriguing part of this chapter is the critique of the discourse of citizenship education and the predominant culture of authoritarianism and undemocratic structures that govern schools (p. 31). The author calls for a redefinition of the role of the schools, teacher and students to one of political and social activism and agency (p. 31). In brief, Shuayb has shown a penchant to favour social justice and care as an alternative conceptual framework to the economic and nationalistic ones which have failed so far to acknowledge the root causes of lack of social cohesion in society. Despite their palatable semantic connotations, concepts of social justice, recognitive justice and care cited by the author (p. 24) still lack precise meaning and consensually agreed upon definitions, adding, thereof, to the stock of immeasurable concepts dominating much of the literature on social cohesion. That said, social cohesion continues to represent an evolving set of ideas (Rod 2002), including social justice and care that this chapter has examined.

Hugh Starkey discusses the role of education in promoting social cohesion as guided by human rights standards and concepts as universally accepted nostrums that potentially agitate for naming injustices and formulating political demands (p. 37). However, one might be wary of dependence on human rights determinism in light of the bald catalogue of critiques lodged against human rights per se. For instance, the author makes successive omissions of the feminist critique of human rights, post-colonial critique that lays blame on human rights for nourishing the appetite of colonial powers to spread Western cultural hegemony, and the Marxist discourse that denounces ‘human rights’ for discarding class struggle (Ife 2012). The author’s characterization of citizenship (pp. 46, 47, 48), which sought to bring readers back to the heart of discussion concerning social cohesion, is interesting to learn from.

Citizenship is further examined by Dina Kiwan. Drawing on the case study of England, the author offers a compendious analytical account of citizenship education policy excerpted from her earlier research focused on analyses of interviews and documents of key citizenship education policy and relevant curriculum documents. An important finding yielded from the author’s comparative analysis is the differential approaches underlying citizenship education in the UK, with England purporting a predominantly ‘post-national’ yet multicultural approach compared with the national orientation of Scotland and Wales, and the human rights-guided approach in Northern Ireland (p. 57). The recommendations chronicled by the author (pp. 59–60) transcend the UK experience to other contexts, particularly strengthening state institutions for listening to and acting on behalf of all citizens (p. 69). This recommendation is useful to pursue in Lebanon as the government undertakes the task of reforming its educational...
system which has been stymied by disputatious sectarian politics tinged with socioecono-
mic polarization.

In this context, Mark Farha examines the reform educational plan aimed at rebuild-
ing trust among the Lebanese following the protracted war of 1975–90, and syn-
thesizes, from a historical perspective, the panoply of barriers that continue to bulwark the promotion of national integration in conflict-ridden Lebanon. The author’s discussion of the historical development of schools and higher educational institutions in Lebanon provides a sharper awareness of the various complex historical antecedents that have shaped Lebanon’s educational system of today. An important remark penned by the author is his questioning of the ability of the new civics curricu-
lum to promote a civic culture in Lebanon since it glosses over the civil war and avoids a conformational reading of Lebanon’s past war. A detailed case study of educational reform plan in Lebanon is discussed by Mounir Abu Assali. Drawing on his experience as former President of the Center for Educational Research and Development in Lebanon (CERD), the author stresses participatory governance as a solid trajectory towards reform involving stakeholders in Lebanon to participate in a bottom-up approach to overhaul the obsolete 1968–71 curricula. The author discusses the attempts to promote social cohesion through two main plans: rebuilding the infrastructure and addressing the needs of the traumatized population with education as its main tool. According to Abu Assali, the curriculum was criticized by the new Lebanese government that came to power in 1999, although it was described by an expert from the World Bank as an ‘extraordinary accomplishment’ (p. 99) with little discussion as to why the government then had criticized the new national curriculum. Despite the enormous and resolute efforts mustered to develop a new national curriculum for Lebanon led by the wise leadership of Mounir Abu Assali, one cannot overlook the glut of research that has identified inherent weaknesses in that curriculum. For instance, a compre-
prehensive assessment of the 1997 curriculum conducted by The Lebanese Association of Educational Studies (LAES) (2007) has provided incontrovertible evidence of several weaknesses that blight the life chances for fostering social cohesion through the new curriculum. Specifically, the role of the school in building of national belong-
ingness exhibits weaknesses in at least four forms: the dispersion of the concept of national identity throughout the curricula, textbooks and educational practices; the weak connection between national identity and other related terminology such as cultural openness, diversity, confessional identities and common living (living together). A critique of the civics education curriculum of the General Education Curricula and Objectives of 1997 is further provided by Nemer Frayha who has described it as more idealistic than realistic. Drawing on his personal experience also as former presi-
dent of CERD, the author has lamented the political intervention that has led to aborting the publication of a new standardized history textbook. One might be jaded by the sus-
pension of religious instruction in schools that was designed to instil multifaith under-
standing among schoolchildren hailing from a barrage of sectarian backgrounds.

Richard Pring discusses the role of education in promoting or preventing social cohesion in society made up of different cultural and religious groups. Reflecting on the idea of Catholics and Protestants joining together in a ‘common school’ (p. 114) is very interesting. He rightly argues that the multiplicity of so many schools from different cultural and religious backgrounds pronounces a segmented system, hard to administer, and most importantly would be difficult to guarantee good education for all (p. 115). The author’s description of Lebanon as a multicultural society (p. 119) deserves further scrutiny as the only two groups that are highly distinguishable on
cultural grounds are the Druzes (secretive religion) and Armenians (language) (Abouchedid 1997).

Chapter 8 by Tony Breslin is interesting primarily because it tackles a previously unexplored particular issue underlying social cohesion in the school setting. According to the author, achievement in school produces its own exclusion and undermines social cohesion. Both academic attainment and inclusion need to be balanced (p. 125) as a solid foundation for fostering social cohesion in the school.

Shuayb discussed her survey results conducted with 24 school principals, 62 schoolteachers and 990 grade-11 students drawn from 24 schools. It is disappointing to find out those educational opportunities and practices conducive to social cohesion are reduced to a junior position in the majority of the schools surveyed. The results are worth comparing with those presented and discussed by Bassel Akar in Chapter 10. The objectives of the Lebanese civics curriculum guided by the preamble to the Lebanese Constitution regarding national identity (pride in the country, belonging to it and commitment to its causes) cannot be realized through passive styles of pedagogy and large emphasis on content knowledge. Akar’s significant findings resonating from what respondents say indicate the paucity of opportunities rendered to the development of students’ citizenship skills; hence citizenship education becomes more of a tool for instilling obedience rather than responsibility among schoolchildren. The teacher as ‘change agent’ (p. 171) plays a significant role in promoting participative activities (p. 166) in the classroom. Building on this, Lee Jerome and Andrew McCallum looked into teacher education at London Metropolitan University as a case study that would benefit teaching civics in Lebanese schools. The link of classroom interactions to democratic discourse is a goal worth striving for en route to promoting social cohesion.

Shuayb’s thesis in Chapter 1 which states that ‘Challenging oppression begins with the school structure and the relationships within this small community’ (p. 31) is substantiated by Rocío García Carrion who provides a very interesting case study of a school situated in a poor neighbourhood in southern Spain. The author furnishes a trajectory of how the school moved from a place of apathy into an active agent of change that transpired into surrounding communities. Involvement and participation of community members, policy-makers, administrators and researchers (p. 193) in the process through a dialogical approach facilitated the enormous transformation of the school to one of social activism. Souraya Ali presents models that could promote and strengthen social cohesion in turbulent neighbourhoods and communities taking the UK as a case study. The seven-point recommendation list (pp. 217–218) makes it clear that school-linking opportunity programmes – which emphasize introducing students to others from different backgrounds – are applicable in a wide range of contexts, including post-conflict countries whose implementation would need to be adapted according to each context’s particular characteristics and realities.

A nuanced chapter on the power of language by Alexandra Assiely presents one of the most different chapters of all by examining the role of language as a powerful vehicle for facilitating social cohesion. The author stresses the importance of language of positive authority (p. 226) in the classroom. Positive language, less authoritarian tone in the classroom, voices heard and taken into consideration would guarantee the establishment of an environment conducive to the eradication of lack of social cohesion in the society.

In Chapter 15, Tatiana Minkina-Milko recounts the role of history as a tool that can promote peace. Teaching history from multiple perspectives can allow students to
analyse issues using their own critical and analytical lenses, a lesson useful for Lebanon and for other post-conflict societies sharing similar situational characteristic features.

As in any scholarly endeavour, Rethinking Education for Social Cohesion is not without minor flaws. More importantly, the substantive chapters are written in a technical language that could be hard for even well-versed readers to understand. However, these shortcomings do not detract from the book’s overall value and significance in fostering a sharper understanding of social cohesion through a redefinition of the role of the schools, teacher and students in post-conflict societies. This book is highly recommended.

References

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Writing the history of Lebanon is probably one of the most difficult tasks facing historians and political scientists. It is quite astonishing that there is no consensus in Lebanon on a unified historical narrative about the constitution, emergence and evolution of the Lebanese political entity. Most historians in Lebanon approach their historical legacy from the perspective of their own ideology or political affiliation, whether consciously or otherwise. It is true that no one expects to write history like a scientific report because the events that fashion and mould people’s behaviour are viewed and perceived from the lens of their political inclinations. Hence there are several historical narratives about Lebanon and each narrative either contradicts other narratives or adds particular insight, in as much as archives and documents permit an objective analysis. Those interested in understanding the present Lebanese polity must make an extra effort and read more than one narrative.

In this respect the book by William Harris tries offering a new perspective. The author is not a bona fide historian but a political scientist. His effort to reread Lebanon’s history through the prism of a political scientist is commendable. His relatively short book for a period encompassing 16 centuries does not really do justice to a very