

## Original Paper

# The Synergy between John Dewey's Educational Democracy and Levant's Lebanon Educational Reforms

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Received: April 15, 2022

Accepted: May 25, 2022

Online Published: June 2, 2022

doi:10.22158/wjer.v9n3p55

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjer.v9n3p55>

### **Abstract**

*This study examines the impact of John Dewey's democratic educational principles on the reforms of the Lebanese educational system using data collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, with open-ended questions, as part of case studies designed for this purpose. The participants in this study are all academics, facilitators, intellectuals and scholars of a Lebanese decent (n=30), undertaking full-time and part-time academic posts, involving learning and teaching activities at universities and other higher educational institutions/providers in Lebanon and in the diaspora (United States of America and Australia). As part of the case studies, the individual, personal, and professional teaching and learning journeys of the educators are sketched in details in relation to John Dewey's four (4) key democratic educational reformative principles. Moreover, the current research study finally concludes by providing a realistic response to the following question that currently lingers in every academic Lebanese mind and on every Lebanese, scholar's lips, namely, given Lebanon's current liberal and relatively democratic educational system, are the Lebanese intellectual reformers truly given the opportunity to create a positive and constructive future vision for Lebanon through its educational system. The current chapter further provides a realistic and clear-cut description of the hurdles facing the current Lebanese educational system, including the scholars, intellectuals, and academics, residing in both Lebanon and in the diaspora. The current study further provides an elaboration on how such hurdles to actual and realistic reforms in Lebanon are impacting on the country's brain drain phenomenon, as witnessed during the unfortunate latest Lebanese crisis (1975-1991), and post-crisis (1992-present) periods, which, in itself, act as a vicious circle, heavily contributing to the continuously deteriorating state of the current public Lebanese educational system.*

### **Keywords**

*John Dewey, education, teaching and learning, Lebanon, Lebanese educational system, interdisciplinary progressive education, STEM education, educational democracy, educational freedom, progressive learning, interdisciplinary learning, experiential learning, learning by doing, interactive education, interactive class sessions, active researchers, elaboration, knowledge elaboration, knowledge expansion, life-long learners, and critical thinking*

### **1. Introduction**

**“Without some goals and some efforts to reach it, no man can live.”**

#### **John Dewey**

John Dewey described education as not merely building a successful life, but as life itself. How is this applicable nowadays in Levant's Lebanon? The Levant, on the one hand, referring to the area extending from Greece to Egypt, is an approximate historical geographical term covering a large number of countries in the Mediterranean region where Lebanon, a historically, mythologically, and geographically fascinating country, uneasily matchable by other parts of the world, and that was once known as “Little Paris”, and “Switzerland of the East”, continues to exist against all the odds placed in its face. The late John Dewey, on the other hand, an American academic, philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, was a well-known scholar, in the first half of the twentieth century, for his belief in democracy, as it relates to politics, education, communication, and journalism. John Dewey equated “democracy”, including “educational democracy”, to “humanity” as synonymous concepts. In broad terms, the question here is what is the relationship between Lebanon, with its buoyant and resilient people, not to mention its charming geographical landscape, and John Dewey's democratic educational reform principles? In more particular terms, the primary research question under investigation in this research study, is how the four main notions of John Dewey's democracy, especially in a classroom setting, added to his views on overall progressive education, impact the pro-Western educational system practiced in Lebanon, in both schools and universities, alike. Furthermore, how did Dewey's views assist in reforming the educational system in Lebanon? In other words, being a main voice advocating progressive education and liberalism, how did Dewey's democratically reformative views impact Lebanon's pro-Western educational system? Moreover, of all of Dewey's publications in various domains including epistemology, metaphysics, aesthetics, art, logic, social theory, and ethics, how did John Dewey's publications in the field of education impact the educational philosophies of Lebanese educators, in Lebanon, and in the diaspora (mainly, in the United States of America and in Australia)? Within the context of the current study, the term “*educators*” refers to intellectuals, academics, facilitators, and scholars, whose knowledge is broad, in the sense that it is not limited to set programmatic content.

To this end, the current research study initially reviews the representative literature related to Dewey's educational principles, and their adoption, as an educational reform force. Furthermore, in the same

vein, the educational views, and notions of achieved academics, intellectuals, and scholars involved in teaching and learning activities, and who are of a Lebanese ethnic origin, living in Lebanon, the United States of America, and Australia, are further considered in relation to the application of Dewey's four principles of education, with the aim of developing a better understanding of the application and adoption of Dewey's educational principles within the Lebanese pro-Western educational system.

## 2. Literature Review

**“Education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living.”**

**John Dewey**

### *2.1 Meaning and Significance of John Dewey's Theory*

Dewey felt that education was a social task, that is, it is needed to educate student to develop a better society (Sullivan, 1966). As during Dewey's times, one needs to be mindful that the uneasy relationship between democracy and capitalism continues to constitute a major experimental hurdle for educational philosophy up to the present (Reich, Garrison, & Neubert, 2016). Dewey believed that democracy is dependent upon education by the school and family to confirm its growth, and that due to cultural issues within the American society, education had trailed behind the social movement taking place in the United States then (Sullivan, 1966). In other words, Dewey felt that America was a democracy, but education remained undemocratic, in the sense that forcing a child to study a standard previously developed course of material is undemocratic. As such, to him, education should provide conditions for growth, not just in school, but more importantly in adult life (Sullivan, 1966).

In many countries around the world, including Lebanon, the educational system is the way it is because of the educational theories, views, and notions of John Dewey. His revolutionary approaches to education proved to be quite salient for today's educational systems, especially in the area of interdisciplinary progressive approach to teaching and learning, as per today's emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education. Furthermore, it also reformed education for women given the shifts in the balance of history and philosophy in Dewey's work and the work of his followers and students. For example, for Dewey, history was a tool in philosophy, but, for Goodsell (1870-1962), his doctoral student, the opposite was true, that is philosophy was a tool in history (Goodman, 2019).

The heart of John Dewey's vision of education lies with his views on learning by doing. The basis of his educational theory is progressive education, that is people learn the most via a hands-on-approach, and by building on previously learnt concepts and theories (<https://www.toolshero.com/change-management/john-dewey-theory/>). It is this part of his theory that composed the basic foundations of educational reforms, being a powerful tool of his educational change management theory. Even though Dewey had received intense and vigorous criticism due to his democratic principles and humane approach to education and learning, his educational methods enriched the curriculum and facilitated students' abilities to continue with a problem through to

completion (Sullivan, 1966).

Furthermore, John Dewey's democratic educational philosophy has further been used to assess various educational systems and issues, including the modern process of internationalization of higher education. For example, to ensure that the purpose of democratic education is not taken for granted within the overall process of higher education internationalization, and based on John Dewey's philosophy of education, a study of the Canadian higher education, based on the employment of qualitative research, where interviews with ten professors, taken from different faculties within a mid-sized Canadian university, aimed at reflecting upon their graduate international students, was recently undertaken by Rebeca Heringer (2020). Her research findings clearly indicated that John Dewey's principles of education remain quite pertinent, relevant, and significant, up to the current day. In addition, her research further indicated that there is a continued appeal for Dewey's democratic educational philosophy within the modern process of higher education internationalization. Finally, it is worthwhile to note that whatever issues are currently being raised up by education reformers nowadays, one might find relief that they had already been thought of, considered, and voiced by John Dewey over a century ago.

### *2.2 Levant's Lebanon: Overview and Country Background Information*

The current section presents a brief synopsis of the relevant background country information relating to Lebanon, due to the fact that the Lebanese educational system is a byproduct of what Lebanon represented in the past, and what it continues to represent at present. Furthermore, as Salem (1973) had clearly indicated, nearly half a century ago, the educational system in Lebanon continues to represent a reflection of the country's diverse confessional structure. As such, this background country information is salient to the readers' understanding of the foundation slabs of Lebanon's educational system. It further provides a brief synopsis as to why the private educational institutions in Lebanon continue to partially serve as a centre for pro-Western education, research, and consulting services in the face of the precipitously steep challenges that the country in focus continues to encounter up to the present day. To the contrary, this further explains the reasons behind the continued deteriorating state of the public educational institutions in the country.

**Education, Research and Consulting Services:** In contrary to the tourism and hospitality sector, and to the banking and other financial services sector, the private educational, research, and consulting services sector in Lebanon has grown and further developed. Lebanon continues to have a considerable number of nationally and internationally credible educational institutions. This includes pre-kindergartens, kindergartens, primary schools, high schools, vocational institutions, colleges and other higher educational institutions, and well-established universities, the majority of which are privately financed educational institutions. The Ras Beirut area continues to be quite famous for the American University of Beirut (AUB). Students continue to come from various countries to attend AUB. It is not just an educational entity, but it is further considered a cultural and social institution of great national and international value. Equally important is the Lebanese American University (LAU),

previously known as Beirut University College (BUC), with two campuses in Byblos and Beirut; The University of St. Joseph, founded by the Jesuits, and Notre Dame University (NDU). In addition, the Kaslik University and the Lebanese University are equally salient educational institutions, serving a considerable section of the Lebanese communities. Furthermore, recently, a number of other universities, colleges, and higher education institutions/providers have been founded in Lebanon, including North Lebanon College, among several others.

**Pro-Western Educational System:** Within the context of the current study, the Lebanese educational system is described as pro-Western for various reasons, including the following. First and foremost, Lebanon had always been known to associate itself with the United States, France, and other Western European countries, as such, it had absorbed a lot of the Western culture and mentality, over time. This includes fundamental understandings to the educational approaches and procedures practiced in the West. Secondly, the educational system in Lebanon was initially mainly established by European missionaries. This has highly contributed to the adoption of Western educational approaches, procedures, practices, and methods. Aside from private schools established by Western clerics (French, Anglo-Saxons, Germans, and Italians), there were many other local and foreign religious and secular schools being established. The majority of these schools are funded by private religious groups. For example, the Jesuits (Catholics who came in 1625, and with the Maronites, established the first religious schools in Lebanon). Shortly after, in 1866, the Presbyterian missionaries who came to Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, started an enmity with the Catholics by establishing the American University of Beirut and other high schools. Furthermore, the Maqasid or Muslim schools, which were supported by rich Islamic countries, such as Saudi Arabia, started in many mosques in the big cities of Lebanon. Needless to say, these religious schools nurtured and promoted disagreements and impediments among the Lebanese people, which have been hard, and, at times, impossible to overcome. These hurdles, in turn, have heavily contributed to driving and energizing the 1975-1991 civil war, dressed up as a religious war, for over seventeen long years, in Lebanon. Thirdly, the Lebanese are known for their immigrant communities in the diaspora. This further acted as a trigger encouraging Lebanese families to send their children to Western countries (mainly to the United States and France) to join Western educational institutions and attain higher educational degrees. After graduation, and upon their return back to Lebanon, they practiced what they themselves professionally observed, experienced, and learned overseas, which, in turn, further contributed to the Westernization of the Lebanese educational system.

Within this context, the following questions come to mind: What is Western and/or pro-Western education? In which context/s has pro-Western education been developed? And how does pro-Western education differ from other kinds of education? Even though there are considerable differences in the Eastern and Western cultural educational approaches, whereby each of the distinct characteristics are vital in shaping the learning personalities and outlooks of students (Li, 2012). It is worthwhile to note that both learning systems, Western and Eastern, produce different kinds of results, in terms of both strengths and flaws (Suansing, 2017). For example, a main point of contrast between the two is how students see

their role with their own learning. While Eastern students, for example, view sheer effort as the primary way to do well in school, where discipline can outweigh any academic difficulty, while discrediting any other factors that may affect student performance, Western and/or pro-Western system of education focuses on the individual as the sole entity of success. Students undergoing a Western educational approach are more inclined to challenge ideas presented to them in the classroom setting, regardless of whether class sessions are held face-to-face or online. Following the Eastern educational approach, academic performance failure falls on the students' shoulders; while in educational institutions employing a Western approach, the focus is more on the student, their engagement, their involvement, their class participation, their inductive learning experiences, their participation in discussions, and their particular research interests, which, in turn, promotes innate human curiosity and encourage students to employ critical thinking and challenge ideas. In return, students perceive themselves as critical thinkers, lifelong learners, active researchers, and serious contributors to the learning process, as opposed to merely being recipients of whatever is thrown out by the educator/facilitator during the classroom session. In contrast to educational institutions that have adopted the Eastern educational approach, students' academic failure often fall on the shoulders of the academic institution for failing to support student learning (Suansing, 2017). According to Li (2012), believers in the Western and Eastern educational approaches hold fundamentally different beliefs about learning success, which, in turn, impact their perspectives on the learning process and overall education. Furthermore, another major difference between the Western and Eastern cultural foundations of learning is the understanding of how learning itself is perceived. While Eastern approaches instill moral value in education, such as bringing honor to oneself, family, and society; believers in the Western learning approaches view the individual learner as the sole entity for inquiry, discovery, and success (Li, 2012).

**Bureau-Politically Influenced Educational System:** Lebanon was in the 1960s and early 1970s the main educational centre of the Middle East region, where world renowned professors and scholars, especially from the United States and United Kingdom, dwelled in it, and made it their second home. Disappointingly, in 1975, civil war broke in Lebanon, and Syrian intervention was invited. Unfortunately, Lebanon was used by foreign regional and international forces as an arena to realise personal and hidden political agendas (Kisirwani, 1992). In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon on a full-scale basis, and chaos continued in the country. This was followed by the Taif Accord, prepared by Lebanese politicians, with the approval of the United States and Syria, and under the patronage of Saudi Arabia. According to Kisirwani (1992), the Taif Accord could be considered to be both a blessing and a catastrophe to Lebanon. The Lebanese bureau-political system remains fragmented, and so is its impact on the public sector of the Lebanese educational system, up to our present day.

Mostly inspired by progressivism, various Lebanese intellectuals have relentlessly been trying to generate, encourage, and support the much-needed reformative breath of fresh air to freely circulate within the Lebanese educational System. This includes explicit research and writings about the politics of curriculum reform in Lebanon. Among other Lebanese intellectuals, including Shuayb (2012),

Akkary (2014), and Afiuni (2020), who are relentlessly working on bringing in progressivism insights into the Lebanese educational system, Frayha (2012) specifically wrote about the politics of curriculum reform in the country, and how the dynamics amongst the different Lebanese denominations negatively impact the much-needed educational reform process, especially within the public educational sector.

For example, during an interview conducted by Lebanese American University (LAU) students (Barakat et al., 2009), in relation to seeking clarifications about who should be held accountable for the low educational standard in Lebanon, especially in public schools, Frayha provided a straightforward and honest response, clarifying the role that politicians and political parties continue to play in the creation and accentuation of the hurdles and difficulties faced by especially the public sector of the Lebanese educational system, explain that Lebanese politicians unfortunately use public schools as a medium of exchange for services and favours amongst them, especially when it comes to hiring their partisans, who have minimal qualifications and experience in the undertaking of learning and teaching activities, to perform party-related duties, that have nothing to do with the teaching role that they have been appointed and recruited for. This inevitably leads to weak teaching practices and teaching performance, as such, the overall educational output falls way too short of excellence in teaching practices. Furthermore, when asked about the historical events that led to the drastic deterioration of the Lebanese educational system, Frayha (2009) referred back to the 1975-1991 civil war, dressed up as a religious war, its exploitative beneficiaries, and its consequential negative consequences and implications. He further explained that the war destroyed the outstanding high level pre-war academic standards, and, instead, replaced them with the currently witnessed poor standards.

In the same vein, Shuayb (2012), in her study titled, "From social cohesion to social justice and care in education: Revisiting the theory and practice", also voiced the impact of the ties between social cohesion on educational policies and citizenship education. Likewise, Akkary (2014), in her article titled, 'Facing the challenges of educational reform in the Arab world', outlined that irrespective of the multitude of reform initiatives of the Lebanese educational system, by Lebanese academics and scholars, little is achieved to date. She further explained that this disappointing result is mainly due to the political influence on the educational sector, to the point that a new paradigm of the educational reforms, especially in public schools, is needed. In other words, the initiatives for educational reforms in Lebanon are driven by political agendas and by the politicians themselves, leaving little room, if any, for the academic experts, intellectuals, and scholars to maneuver and assert their reformative opinions and views, and translate mere initiatives into an actual reality. In summary, as Akkary (2014) further explains, educational reforms in Lebanon, as is the case in the Arab world, is undertaken by a top-down change approach, is viewed to be government's responsibility, and is dominated by political agendas, as opposed to on-the-job education reformative plans, programs and schemas. Furthermore, in an exposition related to the future of education and work series, Afiuni (2020), once again emphasized the need for students to build the ideal skill set for the twenty-first century, as a means of preparing themselves for the requirements of a modern workplace.

Unfortunately, at present, there is little international knowledge about educational currents, sources, extent, and disappointing outcome of the political and bureaucratic influences on the educational system of what once was the world accredited educational centre of the Middle East and beyond.

**Progressivism, Deweyan, Cultural and Language influences on the Educational System, and Its Reforms:** As per the 2019 statistics, the population of Lebanon is approximately 6.86 million, where there are more Lebanese people being expatriates. Beirut, though, remains to be the main city, with the largest population. The Lebanese, in general, are mostly open minded. They mainly speak three languages. Although Arabic (with a Lebanese dialect) is the primary language used, French and English are widely used as well. It is not uncommon to find people speaking the three languages interchangeably (Humphrey, 1989), as considerable percentage of private schools offer these languages as part of their regular curriculum. Furthermore, some private Lebanese schools specifically advertise themselves as Deweyan. For example, Eastwood International School promotes itself as having the following attributes: The employment of constructive and progressive teaching and learning approaches, giving students the opportunity to construct their own learning journeys through the use of inquiry and discovery learning strategies, where teachers act as facilitators, and classes being student-centered with heavy reliance on students' experiences to assist them in making sense of the world around them, and where classroom sizes are kept small to facilitate the undertaking of student hands on activities. Furthermore, on the school's website, Mr. Michel Khoury, school director, specifically states that, "Eastwood passionately contributes to reform the educational system in Lebanon, whether in its French sections or English ones, to achieve the greater purpose of education".

Moreover, as early as 1950, Higher Degree Research students of a Lebanese decent have specifically focused on John Dewey's educational philosophies within the context of the Lebanese educational system. For example, in his thesis, Najarian (1950) employed John Dewey's philosophy of education to explore the educational frontier in Lebanon. Additionally, in the same vein, various university students and academics of a Lebanese decent have well researched and published their academic and research articles, while employing Dewey's educational philosophies, in high impact journals. For example, in her study titled, 'Educating for democracy? The case of the Lebanese elementary ESL classrooms', Sinno (2019), explains that Dewey (1938) was a pioneer in educational reform who considered democracy as a social process that is dependent on three democratic dispositions, namely: 1) Citizens are moral "equals"; 2) Citizens are "capable of intelligent judgment and action"; and 3) All citizens are able to "work together to settle conflicts and solve problems"; all of which being a main theme that run throughout her study.

### 3. Research Questions

**"We only think when we are confronted with problems."**

**John Dewey**

To interpret the details presented by the participating academics and intellectuals during the series of



intensive interviews relating to their experiences with the application of John Dewey's democratic educational reform principles in their classes, as well as the core of their respective educational approaches, a qualitative method had to inevitably be selected. The sample (n=30) consisted of thirty (30) academics, intellectuals, and scholars of a Lebanese decent, consisting of fourteen (14) Lebanese educators residing in Lebanon, eight (8) American educators of a Lebanese decent residing in the United States, eight (8) Australian educators of a Lebanese decent residing in Australia.

Keeping in mind that progressivism is indeed a broad family, to which, along with John Dewey, various other scholars including John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Edmund Morris Miller, Larry Cuban, and Arthur Zilversmit subscribed to, the main issue under exploration in the current study is what is the relationship between Lebanon, with its buoyant and resilient people, not to mention its charming geographical landscape, and John Dewey's democratic progressive educational reform principles? The research problem at hand is two-fold. First, how the four main notions of John Dewey's democracy, especially in a classroom setting, added to his views on overall progressive education, impact the pro-Western educational system practiced in Lebanon, in both schools and universities, alike. Secondly, how did Dewey's views assisted in partially reforming the educational system in Lebanon, mostly in the educational approaches practiced in private schools? In other words, being the voice of progressive education and liberalism, how did Dewey's democratically reformative views impact Lebanon's pro-Western educational system? To this end, the current study posed the following four open-ended and exploratory research questions:

**Question 1:**

Do Lebanese educators practice 'learning by doing'? That is, is experiential learning practiced within the Lebanese educational system?

**Question 2:**

Does the Lebanese educational system encourage interdisciplinary teaching, learning, research, and scholarship, where students are encouraged to grow, expand, and elaborate on previously attained knowledge? In other words, are students supported in linking new knowledge with the old, as a means of building and expanding on what had been previously learnt within the same subject, in related subjects, as well as in different and varied other subjects?

**Question 3:**

Do Lebanese educators facilitate discussions, debates, open dialogue, and reasonable arguments in their classrooms?

**Question 4:**

Are classes held at Lebanese schools and universities interactive in nature, in the sense that free and reasonable dialogue is encouraged, and students are inspired to engage, voice their views, ideas, and opinions, practice critical thinking, and become active researchers, and life-long learners?

## 4. Method

### “Skepticism: The mark and even the pose of the educated mind.”

John Dewey

#### *4.1 Background, Sample, and Choice of Interview Questions*

The participants involved in this study were randomly selected from well-known schools, universities, colleges, and other higher education providers located in Beirut, Lebanon; Arizona and Texas in the United States; and in Sydney, Australia; to achieve the sample of thirty (30) academics and intellectuals, whereby fourteen (14) participants are Lebanese residing in Beirut, Lebanon; eight (8) participants are Americans of a Lebanese decent, residing in Arizona and Texas, United States of America; and, the remaining eight (8) participants are Australian of a Lebanese decent, residing in Sydney, Australia. All these participants, are currently involved in the undertaking of teaching and learning activities, including curriculum design, development, and innovative co-creation, and are currently affiliated with various well-known schools, universities, colleges, and other higher education providers, located in the above mentioned three countries, namely Lebanon, the United States of America, and Australia. The rationale behind the choice of the interview questions centers around the four main principles of Dewey’s democratic educational philosophy, namely: 1) The practice of experiential learning, or learning-by-doing; 2) Interdisciplinary education, progressivism, elaboration, and expansion learning strategies; 3) Facilitation of discussion, debate, and open dialogue; and 4) Interactive learning practices.

#### *4.2 Data Collection and Analysis*

The qualitative methodology employed in the current study, namely the case study approach (Helou, 2018), with semi-structured, in-depth, and informal interviews, provided the authors with the privilege of constructing a detailed investigation of the impact of John Dewey’s democratic educational principles on the current Lebanese educational system, and on Lebanese educators, in both Lebanon and in the diaspora. The relevant data was gathered using the educator’s own accounts, interpretations, and descriptions of their personal and professional experiences that they have encountered, in class and out of class. Participating intellectuals and scholars were interviewed once over a period of two (2) months in late 2021. The first author carried on the interviews with the Lebanese academics residing in Lebanon and the United States of America, while the second author, led the interviews in Sydney, Australia. In Sydney, the interviews were held online due to the current lockdown restrictions being in force given the COVID-19 pandemic. They were held in an informal and relaxed atmosphere, with open ended and semi-structured questions, thus, encouraging participants to freely talk, provide authentic and accurate recounts about their in-class and out of class experiences (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The salience of proper presentation and appropriate speech cannot be overemphasized during the interviewing process, being major determinants of the veracity of the collected data (Alshenqeeti, 2014).

### 4.3 Researchers and Participants

This section details the processes through which the researchers engaged as part of the current study to work out their relationship with the participants over the two (2) months interviewing period, as a means of gaining the participants' trust, and enhancing the trustworthiness, reliability, and dependability of the collected data. As part of this process, the two authors scrutinized their own biases, including their personal assumptions, and tightened their control over the possible impact that may occur given their preconceptions (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Information sheets, covering the purpose of the interview, were provided to all participants, who were asked to contact the researchers in the event of any general queries or specific questions in need of clarification. Even though there is limited risk to participate in the current research project, it was explained to the participants not to respond to any question that makes them feel uncomfortable. In addition, it was further explained to them that they may stop and discontinue with the interview at any time if they wish to do so, in which case all information that was provided by them to that point will be totally deleted from the research input. Furthermore, all participants were fully assured of the confidentiality of the research process, including their identity, personal details, and all information provided by them throughout the research process (pre-interview, during the interview, and post-interview). In addition, participants were advised that if any discomfort is felt during the interview process, or if during or post the interview period they experience any thoughts and/or feelings aroused by any of the questions, to contact a support organisation, a list of which was provided to the participants as part of the information sheet. Based on the above, participants were further requested to sign consent forms prior to their participation in the interview.

## 5. Results and Discussion

**“Anyone who has begun to think, places some portion of the world in jeopardy.”**

**John Dewey**

The current study maps the current experiences of educators, academics, and intellectuals of a Lebanese decent, with the application and employment of John Dewey's democratic educational reform principles, in both Lebanon and in the diaspora. This section presents the results of the case study interview, along with a discussion of their respective outcome.

### **Question 1:**

Do Lebanese educators practice 'learning by doing'? That is, is experiential learning practiced within the Lebanese educational system?

#### *5.1 Educational Principle 1: Experiential Learning-Learning-by-Doing and Work-Integrated Learning*

The comments made by the great majority of the interviewed participants clearly indicate that experiential learning, including learning-by-doing, and work-integrated learning, are well incorporated within the Lebanese educational system, especially in the areas of science, scientific laboratories, photography, music, home economics, food technology, hair dressing, beauty and skin care, interior

design, and in the industrial arts, to mention a few. This agrees with Dewey's (1966) continuous emphasis and full support of purposeful learning, experience, use of experiments, notions of freedom in education, and other concepts of progressivism consistently emphasized in his educational writings. In specific, Dewey (1966) argued that the quality of an educational experience is essential as it emphasizes the salience of the social and interactive processes of learning.

The majority of the participants indicated that the core concept of first-hand experiences in Lebanon is evident in the laboratory sciences, library research, language laboratories, excursion programs, school field trips, and in internships, apprenticeships, and other work-integrated learning approaches; being issues outlined by Dewey (1915) in his book titled, *The School and Society*, in which he discusses the psychology of elementary education, students' development of attention, and the aim of history in elementary education.

As declared by the interviewed educators, a main issue shared by nearly all participants in the current study is dealing with the traditional physical set up in most schools, universities, and other education providers. As mentioned by a considerable number of the participants, John Dewey himself encountered considerable resistance in his Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, when administering the Deweyan system of education. To this end, Dewey (1916) discusses how to reconstruct both the classroom and the curriculum in a manner that accommodates the broad range of students' talents and interests.

Another main issue that recurred during our interviews with the Lebanese intellectuals relates to the resistance to change by the administrators of existing traditional schools, that were raised and fully practiced the traditional approach and conventional educational tactics. As noted by the majority of the participants, at times, it takes a great deal of negotiations and exchanges before old-style school administrators allow changes to take place. The issue of being more critical of an innovative educational activity, in comparison to traditional education, was further voiced. Furthermore, few educators mentioned that if and when a student shows an educational shortcoming, it gets blamed on the new and innovative educational approach. Such hindrances to the adoption of the experiential learning approach as per above were previously well voiced by Dewey (1915), where he complains that the conventional public school "is arranged to make things easy for the teacher who wishes quick and tangible results". Furthermore, in his book titled, *Democracy and Education*, published in 1916, Dewey challenged his readers to examine not their "conclusions", but their "principles", and rethink the meaning of educational activity and value of standards. In this respect, the majority of the participants agreed that Dewey had indeed contributed many thought-provoking questions for both traditional educators to consider, and for conventional administrators to address.

### **Question 2:**

Does the Lebanese educational system encourage interdisciplinary teaching, learning, research, and scholarship, where students are encouraged to grow, expand, and elaborate on previously attained knowledge? In other words, are students supported in linking new knowledge with the old, as a means

of building and expanding on what had been previously learnt within the same subject, in related subjects, as well as in different and varied other subjects?

### *5.2 Educational Principle 2: Application of Interdisciplinary and Progressive Education*

The participants explained that interdisciplinary and progressive education, such as STEM education, is currently being the new approach in practice in a considerable number of Lebanese educational institutions, especially in privately funded schools and universities, with the focus being on evidence-based, problem-solving, and project-based learning, both in and out of the classroom. They emphasized the incorporation of technology in teaching and learning as a means of stressing the role and application of science, and better set up students for further future learning. Additionally, they explained that this is undertaken on the grounds that students need a strong foundation in interdisciplinary education, including STEM, so as to become achievers in today's information-driven age.

Participants further explained that interdisciplinary and progressive education, such as STEM education, coupled with the employment of technology, enables students to activate and employ their creativity, and develop critical thinking competencies. Moreover, in relation to when it comes to innovatively co-creating the curriculum, interdisciplinary progressive education allows students to foster a culture of unity and growth. This fully confirms Dewey's notions on the salience of interdisciplinary education and progressivism. In his book titled, *Experience and education*, published in 1938, Dewey provided a concise and powerful analysis of education, where he particularly emphasized interdisciplinary and progressive education. He further argued that the quality of an educational experience is critical.

In addition to schools, the great majority of universities, colleges, and higher education institutions/providers in Lebanon are incorporating an interdisciplinary approach to learning, where academic concepts in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, along other subjects, are coupled with real world situations, thus, facilitating the students' cognitive process of making connections between the classroom and the world around them. As the participating academics, involved in teaching and learning, have advised, the interdisciplinary approach to learning is a main component of today's learning futures, and is gaining popularity nowadays. The underlying premise is that interdisciplinary progressive learning develops essential core competencies, crucial skills, and essential abilities, including, but are not limited to, improved comprehension, critical thinking, problem-solving, innovation and creativity, communication, collaboration, data literacy, digital literacy, and technology-related skills including computer science and computer engineering, among various other equally salient competencies. This further confirms Dewey's earlier notions of the relationship between the child and the curriculum. In his paper titled, *the child and the curriculum*, Dewey (1974a) directs his reader to view the curriculum, and what the child should learn, from their present state of mind. Furthermore, he considers the teachers' views as the medium that facilitates the delivery of the curriculum.

Other participating intellectuals further advised that the adoption and proper employment of

interdisciplinary progressive education, including STEM education, provides educational institutions with the ability to implement state-of-the-art educational practices, which ensures that the faculties are at the leading edge of modern educational practices, providing students with successful futures in their respective careers. Once again, this fully confirms Dewey's relationship between education and social consciousness. In his pedagogic creed, Dewey (1974b) states that he believes that "all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race ... Through this unconscious education the individual gradually comes to share in the intellectual and moral resources which humanity has succeeded in getting together".

Still other participating scholars additionally explained that interdisciplinary progressive education, including STEM, is the focus with current educational reforms in private schools. They further explained that this further includes Science Standards, in a way that facilitate students' comprehension and application of scientific principles.

Furthermore, Lebanese scholars further advised that the notion of progressive education has extended to cover the area of research and scholarship, where both interdisciplinary research, i.e., bringing research together to talk about an issue from each perspective, based on which get integrated together to build a model, typology, or a framework; and multidisciplinary research, where research is brought together to discuss an issue from each perspective, are currently highly encouraged and supported at Lebanese Universities.

### **Question 3:**

Do Lebanese educators facilitate discussions, debates, free dialogue, and reasonable arguments in their classrooms?

#### *5.3 Educational Principle 3: Democratic Learning-Facilitation of Discussions, Debates, open Dialogue, and Reasonable Arguments in Classrooms*

Most of the participants indicated that Dewey's concept of learning in small, segmented, and interrelated parts and progressive series of activities, undertaken during free discussions, interesting debates, open dialogues, and while voicing reasonable classroom arguments has indeed been accepted in a considerable number of Lebanese private schools classrooms as an important approach to teaching and learning. Likewise, a considerable number of the participating educators have once again expressed finding it difficult to well engage students, who were previously discouraged from voicing their views in class, as such, were more used to being spoon fed under the conventionally traditional educational approach. Most participants indicated that they found it difficult to engage some of the less confident students at times in carrying on with lively class discussions, enjoying expressing their views in debates, voicing reasonable arguments, and undertaking class presentations, as they found this to be highly dependent on the individual student's language skills and personality type. The above issue, pinpointed by the participants confirm Dewey's (1902) emphasis on child-centered education, in which he considered the child's effort and experiential knowledge as salient for his well-rounded development. The issue of student participation, pointed out in this study, further confirms the outcome of various

previous studies (Helou & Newsome, 2017; Newsome & Helou, 2017; Helou & Newsome, 2018; Newsome & Helou, 2018; Newsome, Helou, & Crismon, 2019).

#### **Question 4:**

Are classes held at Lebanese schools and universities interactive in nature, in the sense that free and reasonable dialogue is encouraged, and students are inspired to engage, voice their views, ideas, and opinions, practice critical thinking, and become active researchers, and life-long learners?

#### *5.4 Educational Principle 4: Interactive Learning*

A considerable number of the participants stated that interactive learning is definitely used in a considerable number of modern-day Lebanese private schools classrooms, in both the arts and the sciences. Most participants reiterated Cross's (2006) views, in terms of self-confident students with good second and third languages (English and French) find it easier to settle in and undertake interactive learning activities in and out of class. This study further indicated that language problems, in addition to personality types, has proved to be a major obstacle with student's undertaking of interactive learning activities. Language difficulties, coupled with introvert personality types, tend to further limit students from making friends. This finding confirms previous research findings (Cross, 2006). In the same vein, problems in using the English language (in English speaking schools and universities) or using the French language (in French speaking schools and universities), often came up as being a major barrier to inhibit students from joining in and enjoying interactive learning activities. Once again, the views expressed by the participants in relation to the practice of interactive learning are in full agreement with Dewey's earlier notions on the importance of classroom interactions. In his education writings, Dewey (1974c) suggests that it isn't just the student who learn, but rather the experience and interactions of the students and teachers together provides extra value to both of them.

## **6. Conclusion**

**“To me faith means not worrying.”**

**John Dewey**

The purpose of the current study is to develop an understanding of the impact of John Dewey's democratic education principles on Lebanon's educational system reforms. To this end, the current study mapped the application of Dewey's four (4) educational principles by thirty (30) Lebanese educators, intellectuals, and scholars, who are involved in teaching and learning activities, including curriculum design and development. The research outcome of the current study was more encouraging for the Lebanese private educational sector when compared to the public educational sector. Participants have not just acknowledged the salience of Dewey's democratic educational reform principles, but the majority of them have confirmed that they are dynamically applying them in class, and vigorously employing them while innovatively co-creating the curricula for their respective units and programs of study.

One methodological criticism that could be made of this study is that the limited number of participants

involved in the current research were randomly selected from major private schools, universities and other higher educational institutions located in Beirut, Lebanon; Arizona and Texas in the United States; and Sydney, in Australia. Future research could overcome this problem by involving a considerable number of academics and intellectuals from various schools, universities, colleges, and other higher education providers scattered in various areas of Lebanon, and in other states and cities in the United States and Australia, including areas having different multicultural blends and socio-economic conditions.

As indicated in the representative literature review of the present Lebanese educational system, along with the research outcome attained from the academic and intellectual participants in the current study, it becomes evident that Lebanon's pro-Western educational system, along with the great majority of the Lebanese scholars, both in Lebanon and overseas, are completely mindful of the benefits to be reaped out of the application of an interdisciplinary and progressive approach to teaching and learning, including the employment of STEM education, whom most of them engage with when time comes to re-drafting and innovatively co-creating the individual units, subjects, courses, and programs of study that they are respectively in charge of.

In this vein, two questions come to mind. First, are Lebanon's brains still being drained out of Lebanon and funneled overseas, into the havens of safe countries? Secondly, until when will Lebanon continue to struggle with its internal brain drain bleeding phenomenon? In other words, what is the nature of the Lebanese continuous multi-national brain drain, being a heavy burden Lebanon, and on the Lebanese economy, while constituting windows of opportunity for the economies of neighboring countries? Do the stems of the Lebanese brain drain problem lie within the Lebanese educational system or the country's bureau-political arena?

As Kamal Salibi (1988) had explained in his book titled, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, over three decades ago, Lebanon has unfortunately been a good example of socio-political disorganization. Sadly, the post 1975-1991 crisis period continues to witness the disintegration of Lebanon, which can partly be explained by the national and multi-national brain drain phenomenon that continues to sweep the country from north to south and east to west (Helou, 1995). As is well known, in terms of external migration out of Lebanon, there are large Lebanese communities spread throughout the world, including the United States of America, Canada, France, United Kingdom, Australia, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Denmark, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, United Arab Emirates, and nearly every other country in the globe.

Of course, an analysis of the magnitude of Lebanon's continued intellectual emigration crisis, including an evaluation of its impact on the formulation of policy issues, and implementation of recovery strategies to Lebanon's reconstruction and future development, in the education arena, and otherwise, goes beyond the scope of the current study. Nevertheless, it is the view here that the story of the intellectual Lebanese emigrants, being victims of the wars of others on their own territories, and the resulting continued deterioration of the Lebanese bureau-political system, deserves to be considered as



a crucial part of the history of the latest Lebanese crisis period, in particular, as well as part of the historical movement of people in search of safety, security, and, above all, “freedom” and “democracy”, in more general terms, being clear cut concepts that were dear to John Dewey’s heart, as such, were the focus of his overall philosophy. Precisely, this, in itself, related to his philosophy of “Democracy”, which he equated to the concept of “Humanity”, in his overall equation of “Life”. Thus, as education is life itself to John Dewey, so are the concepts of “freedom” and “democracy”, currently being the much-needed breath of fresh air to the Lebanese people, as well as the rest of the world, given current global events.

It should be noted though that regardless of the excellence of educational practices of the Lebanese academics, neither the government, nor the Lebanese political structure, leave room for the Lebanese intellectuals, to maneuver amongst their midst. Although the various universities, colleges, higher educational institutions, research associations, and other intellectual societies in Lebanon provide an excellent forum for the exchange of state-of-the-art innovative and highly creative reform schemes (Helou, 2018), encompassing the practice of education in Lebanon, they are not given a realistic opportunity for formal education reforms, or even political rehabilitative schemas, to carry through and implement.

Going about a quarter of a century back, to follow in Haddad’s (1994) steps in relation to the notions of reconstruction for Lebanon, the major challenge that continues to face the country is not the generation of reconstructive programs, nor is it the layout of the reformative plans, be it in education, politics, or otherwise. Instead, the difficulty lies in its actual implementation. That is, the difficulty relates to the inability to turn these constructive plans and the rehabilitative and reformative programs into tangible realities. Disappointingly, the main question on every Lebanese lips, in Lebanon and in the diaspora, remains as to whether post-crisis Lebanon will ever be able to conquer its own post-crisis demons, and overcome the continuously manufactured challenges and hurdles standing in its way of realizing an all-inclusive, effective, and holistic reformative schema, at the educational level, and beyond.

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