The Ta'theer Program:

NGOs Supporting School Leadership Development in Lebanon

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Introduction

This article examines key issues and trends related to the Lebanese national school leadership development context as a means for expanding knowledge related to school leadership development in non-OECD member countries, which have received little scholarly attention. Indeed, within the sparse literature related to school leadership in Lebanon, issues of leadership development have not been closely examined. This lack of research may be attributed to the fact that the Lebanese educational system does not have standardized processes for selecting, developing, and licensing school leaders, meaning that any research into this topic would likely reflect individual schools rather than the system.

In addition to reviewing the Lebanese context more broadly, this article highlights one non-governmental organization's (NGO) leadership development program within Lebanon. This program, called the Ta'theer program, is enacted by a non-governmental organization that is seeking to contribute to the country's school leadership development landscape. Reviewing this program provides insight for how similar leadership development programs could be implemented within other non-OECD contexts. We examine program development; program funding and staffing; program learning design features; program challenges and strategies to address challenges; and, finally, program impacts. This review is especially relevant for organizations, such as NGOs and philanthropic foundations, seeking to support school leadership

in non-OECD contexts that, like Lebanon, lack school leadership development and licensure infrastructure.

In the sections below we first review the Lebanese context. Then we provide an overview of how data were collected to inform the following section, which explains the Ta'theer program. We conclude with a discussion of how lessons learned from the Ta'theer program could inform leadership development both within Lebanon and in other similar contexts across the globe.

The Lebanese Context

The Lebanese Educational System

Similar to other non-OECD countries, Lebanon faces an assortment of challenges and factors that shape its educational context. The Lebanese educational system serves approximately one million students who engage in nine years of low-cost, compulsory education (and up to 12 years for some students) (Lebanon Educational System—Overview). However, Lebanon's weak economy creates a challenge to school funding, meaning that Lebanese public schools have poor access to educational resources (Frayha, 2009; Khoury-Mikhael et al., 2014). This lack of resources, coupled with the fact that public schools produce poor educational outcomes (e.g., few students obtaining a baccalaureate), has caused many families to opt for private schooling rather than utilizing the public system (Frayha, 2009; Khoury-Mikhael et al., 2014). Approximately two-thirds of families choose private schools over the publicly-available schools (Khoury-Mikhael et al., 2014) and, in fact, Lebanon has one of the highest populations of private school students across the globe (Akkary, 2014).

The high concentration of Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is another notable, challenging aspect of the current Lebanese educational context. According to recent data, Lebanon has the highest per capita concentration of refugees worldwide (Shuayb, 2016). While

Lebanese laws restrict primary education to students of Lebanese nationality, approximately 7% of the Lebanese public school population consists of refugee students (the remainder of refugee students tend to be educated by NGOs). These refugee students are more likely to face challenges within Lebanese schools and tend to have higher drop-out and lower completion rates (Shuayb, 2016). The influx of refugee students has also strained already stretched public school resources, further compounding the number of families choosing to attend private schools over public as referred to above (Loo & Magaziner, 2017).

The influence of religion in Lebanese schools can also create a challenge for educational leaders and school staff. Lebanese schools—public or private—tend to be affiliated with one of Lebanon's constitutionally-recognized 18 religious sects, which hold significant power in setting school curriculum and structures, meaning that curricula are not standardized across Lebanese schools (Frayha, 2009; Khoury-Mikhael et al., 2014). This results in a national educational landscape in which students are not all expected to learn the same content. For educational leaders, this tight coupling with religious sects also means that they have less authority to make localized decisions for the school (this lack of authority is discussed more below).

Finally, as one might see in other contexts—even OECD countries—there are multiple school quality disparities within the educational system. First, there are disparities across regions, with rural regions and regions of lower socioeconomic levels (e.g., the Bekka and North Lebanon regions) tending to have schools with the lowest performance and student enrollment figures (Shuayb, 2018). There are also disparities in student outcomes within schools based on a number of factors, such as gender, ability, refugee status as described above, and age (Shuayb, 2016). These disparities across regions and within schools results in an educational system that

unevenly prepares students to serve as citizens contributing to society, which, as is detailed more below, is one of the Ta'theer program's areas of focus.

School Leadership in Lebanon

The enactment of school leadership in Lebanon is more traditional in that it primarily consists of management tasks and hierarchical relationships with staff. Lebanese school leaders hold little autonomy and decision-making authority in that schools are tightly coupled to the federal government and to religious influence (Akkary, 2014). In fact, leaders can engage in more administrative tasks, such as ordering textbooks, reporting on finances, setting schedules, and defining class sections, but they are not able to hire teachers and they rarely engage in instructional leadership activities (Baroudi & Hojeij, 2018; Mattar, 2012). Additionally, leadership within Lebanese schools tends to be hierarchical and concentrated within the school principal or head, and is rarely distributed to other school leaders (e.g., department heads) or teachers within the building (Berjaoui & Karami-Akkary, 2019).

In terms of leader preparation and identification, there are not standardized requirements for individuals who want to become a school leader in Lebanon. The Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education identifies and hires school leaders and teachers (Baroudi & Hojeij, 2018). Although recent research suggests that roughly 60% of Lebanese school leaders possess some leadership training in the form of a university degree in educational management, such education is not a requirement for aspiring Lebanese school leaders (Rocha & Hamed, n.d.). In addition to whether a potential leader possesses a degree, leader selection is typically driven by considerations such as the leader's compatibility of religion with the school, the leader's relationships, and endorsement or support of local political or community figures (Akkary, 2014). When it is not possible to select leaders holding a degree, skilled teachers who have

worked at the school for five or more years tend to be selected with the assumption that teachers' skills will translate to leadership tasks (Mattar, 2012). Given that there is not a formal process or requirement at the national level for leadership preparation or identification, there is no standardized method for promoting effective leadership (Akkary, 2014; Mattar, 2012).

Once leaders are selected, there are no nationally-driven, formal policies or requirements related to school leaders' ongoing development. Instead, training tends to ad-hoc and on-the-job, though leaders may have opportunities to attend professional development seminars on occasion (Akkary, 2014). Ongoing leadership development tends not to occur, and leaders are rarely subjected to formal evaluation (Akkary, 2014).

Given the lack of national approaches or support for principal preparation and development, the last decade has seen the emergence of several small-scale leader development programs enacted by universities or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). One such example is TAMAM, a program run by the American University of Beirut in conjunction with the Arab Thought Foundation and it works with a limited number of schools in Lebanon. This program seeks to support school improvement by building capacity amongst leadership teams within schools (Tamam, n.d.). Another program—an NGO—Leading for the Future, is provided by the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) for leaders of UNRWA schools. Leading for the Future features online, self-guided activities and three face-to-face group workshops, all of which is meant to develop leaders' ability to lead teaching and learning within the school (Leading for the Future, n.d.). Within the remainder of this article we review in-depth a second leadership development NGO, the Lebanese Association for Educational Leadership, or "Ta'theer" Program. We focus on this program provide an example of an NGO-developed

program that has been enacted without substantial funding or support from a university or other type of international philanthropic or aid organization.

Methods

The data informing this article come from a field-based case study (Creswell, 2013) conducted by WISE, an initiative of Qatar Foundation, and its Agile Leaders of Learning Innovation Network (ALL-IN), which is a global community of practice of school leadership experts and practitioners with an agenda to support research, programming and advocacy in the educational leadership space. In 2019 WISE, through ALL-IN, initiated a project to support research on school leadership practice and development in five non-OECD countries, including Lebanon, India, Kenya, South Africa, and Morocco. This particular article centers on the data collected within Lebanon to examine the Ta'theer program. Data were collected from Ta'theer members, leaders, and teachers over the course of three days in April 2019. Participants were selected using a convenience sampling method (Creswell, 2013), in that we interviewed individuals who were available during the time of data gathering. We conducted one focus group lasting two hours with six Ta'theer founding members, and a second focus group lasting two hours with teachers and school leaders who underwent Ta'theer leadership training. To strengthen our understanding of the Lebanese context and the Ta'theer program, we conducted two additional semi-structured interviews with the Director General of the Lebanese Ministry of Education and a professor from a local Lebanese university. We also conducted multiple (between 7-10) informal, conversational interviews (Gray, 2009) with the President of the Ta'theer training program. Finally, we engaged in analytical memoing (Birks et al., 2008) and document review of evaluation feedback from educational leadership program attendees to strengthen analyses.

To analyze the data, all interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Given that the goal of this piece is to provide an overview of the Ta'theer program and Lebanese educational leadership context, rather than answer particular research questions, we did not engage in traditional qualitative data coding processes. Instead, we examined the data at a high level, looking for key learnings that could inform understandings of the Ta'theer program and the Lebanese context in general. In particular, we sought to learn how practices and lessons learned from the Ta'theer program could inform other similar non-OECD contexts across the globe. In the following section we present key findings from the data.

The Ta'theer Program

Program Goals and Development

Ta'theer—also sometimes referred to as the Lebanese Association for Educational Leadership—is a Lebanese NGO that is dedicated to supporting "educational leaders, [who are] effective in their community, [work] on developing and empowering sustainable and ambitious educational vision that will produce generations of leaders." Its key offering is a nine-month school leadership development program, which is described more below. Ta'theer was developed in response to the continued decline in quality of the Lebanese educational system as well as a general civic decline within the country, which occurred following war, corruption, and a lack of central educational quality standards. Given the importance of school leadership in relation to what occurs within school buildings, Ta'theer seeks to support the development of highly-effective school leaders who can foster the growth of Lebanon's future moral and civic leaders; as program documents say, "Leadership to create impact." In particular, the program seeks to build school leaders' ability to promote school-wide, distributed leadership by empowering school staff through the use of professional learning communities called

pedagogical leadership teams (described more below). In addition to the program goals listed above, the developers of Ta'theer sought to begin to fill gaps in Lebanese leadership development programs throughout the country, as there are very few university- or NGO-run projects that support capacity-building of public school leaders in Lebanon.

Ta'theer is led by a group of seven individuals committed to supporting educational leadership within Lebanon. The organization was founded in 2017 by Ms. Hanadi Jardaly Jotob, an educator and school leader whose theory of action posits that schools are a key lever for reform within the country, as schools can influence how new generations of citizens think and perform. Alongside Ms. Jotob, the Ta'theer program was developed and nurtured by a group of six other like-minded Lebanese educational and leadership experts who have worked as teachers, school leaders, consultants for international educational research and development organizations, and universities. In their bios, many of these program leaders describe feeling called or deeply personally-committed to their work at Ta'theer.

Program Funding

The Ta'theer the program has not received funding from the Lebanese government or other NGOs. As mentioned above in the discussion of the Lebanese educational context, the Lebanese government is unable to provide adequate resources to schools, let alone offer additional funding or grants to support programs like Ta'theer. Typically funding for educational programs like Ta'theer could come in the form of small grants provided through international aid agencies, but representatives from the Ta'theer foundation indicated that there are limited international aid agencies and philanthropic organizations that have prioritized leadership development in Lebanon. Thus far, the Ta'theer program has had to rely on funding from current Ta'theer leaders/staff, contributions collected from participating schools and program attendees,

and small donations from business and banking organizations with which Ta'theer staff have personal connections.

Program Participants

The primary program participants include formal school leaders, such as principals, department chairs, and teacher leaders from schools that have voluntarily opted-in to participate. As mentioned above, these participants are also asked to pay a nominal fee to support program activities. While Ta'theer is located in Beirut, Lebanon is a relatively small country meaning that the program is able to work with school participants across the nation. To date, participants have primarily come from two Lebanese cities—Saida and Beirut. Multiple formal leaders from each participating school attend the program (i.e., the school principal, department chairs, and teacher leaders all attend). The program is run in a cohort model, meaning that the same group of individuals from the same schools engage in program activities together. (Program activities are described more below.) In its first cohort, Ta'theer participants came from five schools and included five school leaders and 97 individuals working in other school leadership roles (as described above) within those schools. In addition, the program's reach extended to 490 teachers 5,400 students within those schools. Ta'theer has not held any cohort activities since 2020 because of Covid-19.

Program Design

Ta'theer provides a multi-element leadership development program that combines site-based, monthly learning experiences for school-based leadership teams with large group networking meetings that connect and engage leadership teams across a number of participating schools. The program lasts nine months and each month of the program Ta'theer staff travel to participants' schools to provide workshops or other learning opportunities in which staff

(described more below) present new information to participants. These workshops are a key informational delivery mechanism and include topics such as building professional learning communities, promoting a positive school culture, engaging in instructional leadership, and planning, implementing, and monitoring school improvement. Monthly meetings also feature more informal discussions that foster collective learning through which program participants reflect and make sense of new information. Additionally, across the nine months participants collect data from their school and work toward the creation of a professional learning community within their own school. School-centered program activities and data-driven approaches help to ensure that participants are learning to develop leadership teams in the context of their own school and school needs. In other words, program activities are highly relevant and tailored to individual participating schools. While program activities are typically provided within participants' schools, once per academic year all program participants across schools come together in a central location to engage in a half-day networking meeting through which they share reactions to the program and engage in joint reflection with colleagues.

Through the program activities listed above, program participants are trained to develop and work within school pedagogical leadership teams (PLTs) that focus on promoting positive student outcomes and transformational learning. These PLTs lead the process of teaching and learning within the school and, within the school building, help to develop and support professional learning communities (PLCs). The PLCs consist of school teachers and other staff members working directly with students. While the PLTs focus on leading teaching and learning, the PLCs focus on improving student outcomes through improved teaching practice. Therefore, by developing participants' ability to form PLTs, Ta'theer also extends its reach directly into schools through encouraging the PLTs to form and support PLCs.

Program Staff

Program staff who lead activities include the Ta'theer program leaders as described above, experienced practitioners working in the field (i.e., school leaders), and guest speakers and experts. Related to guest speakers, while the program aimed to bring in individuals working within the Lebanese context, it struggled to locate these individuals.

Program Challenges

Ta'theer program officers report facing a number of challenges in achieving its vision. One key challenge has been the fact that the sectarian nature of many schools in Lebanon fosters school leaders who tend to be more absorbed by managerial and administrative tasks, and less concerned with promoting instructional change within their schools (this is also supported by the literature referenced above, e.g., Mattar, 2012). Additionally, Ta'theer reports these leaders tend to shy away from distributive or collaborative models, which is what the Ta'theer program promotes. This results in a struggle to find participants who would be willing to engage in program activities. Interestingly, Ta'theer reported that some teachers working within sectarian schools have actually connected with Ta'theer on an individual basis without the knowledge of their school leaders.

Outside of the sectarian nature of Lebanese schools, the general educational context of Lebanon has presented a challenge to Ta'theer. Maintaining collaboration amongst participating schools has been a challenge primarily because schools in Lebanon tend to be competitive, meaning that sharing is not necessarily encouraged within the country. The country has also undergone a financial crisis that has motivated some leading and promising educators to emigrate to other countries that can provide more adequate financial support; this drains the country of talent, and, from the program's perspective, potential trainers and program leads.

Finally, Ta'theer has faced financial challenges. While Ta'theer is self-funded currently, locating additional support from other organizations or the government could bolster the resources and reach of the program. However, locating funding to support the program has been difficult given the poverty faced by citizens, including educators, living within the Lebanese context.

Program Impacts

Ta'theer has not yet developed a formal process for investigating impact data, as the program is relatively new and has been interrupted by Covid-19. However, focus group data gathered for this study provide some insights related to program participants' anecdotal experiences. Focus groups with program participants revealed that some had experienced a change in perspective in terms of how they view the role of schools and school leadership. For example, one teacher remarked: "Ms. Hanadi has contributed to my development drastically, that has transformed me as an innovative leader. I now believe that my role as an educator is to create a meaningful impact to create a community of students as future global citizens." Similarly, another participant stated that:

> Our ultimate goal is to change the behavior of our new generation…So we start from school, building a strong professional learning community and every school, uplifting their leadership skills and their knowledge and expose them to the new knowledge and education…When you change a school, you are changing a community—a community of parents, of children, of teachers—so you aren't [just changing the mindset of the leader]. You are changing the mindset of the community around him.

In each example participants discuss how Ta'theer has impacted their thinking of schools in relation to community, both by creating future citizens and by shaping the general community around a school. While there is not specific data related to these impacts, the change in these participants' perspective—seeing the far-reaching impact of schools beyond academic outcomes—is notable.

Participants also reported that the Ta'theer program has impacted their understandings of teaching and leadership practice. One participant stated that:

> Throughout these programs, I can now understand how much a leader can influence a school culture and the success of teaching and learning processes. It is really crucial when it comes to leaders because many times you see teachers who are very eager to introduce change, very eager to be creative, very eager to reach out to community, but the principals who are supposed to be leaders are only administrators and are not willing to give way to those new ideas and changes. You see lots of bureaucracy when it comes to leadership…We need more leaders in the school, not only at the top but everywhere in the classroom. Without it we cannot make a change.

In this example, the participant describes how, through the Ta'theer program, he/she has learned about the importance of school leaders in enabling and facilitating change processes. While traditionally school leaders in Lebanon, as described above, tend to be more administrative and bureaucratic, the Ta'theer program has made it clear that leaders who hope to see improvements and innovations in their schools need to take a more active role. Another participant stated that "being exposed to many [leadership] models across the region…is much needed." Through Ta'theer, participants are being exposed to multiple leadership models, strategies, and ways of thinking that enriches their own leadership practice.

Discussion

It is clear that there is a great need for supports for school leader development in Lebanon, and Ta'theer is an example of a program that has been designed and enacted to attempt to meet this need. In particular, in its work Ta'theer has attempted to promote a "lattice approach" to school leadership which "infuses a school with multiple leadership positions that can adapt to emerging problems of practice within unique school-based contexts" (Korach & Cosner, 2017). Other authors have referred to a "multilevel distributed" approach to leadership that views school leadership as extended across individuals and organizations within and outside of schools (Spillane et al., 2019). This extension includes teaching staff, meaning that leadership

within the school building comprises teams of teachers rather than just formal school leaders. Ta'theer's use of these leadership approaches is in contrast to the more hierarchical and authoritative approaches to leadership that tend to be favored in Lebanese schools.

There are important lessons that could be extracted from this case that could prove vital to NGOs seeking to promote collaborative approaches to leadership in similar contexts. For example, examination of Ta'theer reveals the importance of a program champion as well as a coalition of committed program leaders whose shared vision can help to drive program activities through any challenges that arise. Additionally, Ta'theer has not yet been able to secure funding from the government or other NGOs and philanthropic organizations, so it has formed partnerships with local businesses to help meet funding needs. Finally, Ta'theer has also centered its activities around the needs of individual schools by holding program activities at school sites and by engaging schools in analysis of their own data. Although Ta'theer has served just five schools thus far, each of those schools received intentional support relevant to their contexts.

Related to challenges, this case also reveals the sorts of challenges that other non-OECD countries may anticipate and consider how to navigate. In particular, the lack of consistent funding for such an initiative can make it challenging to support the activities necessary to involve more schools in the program. Without financial resources, program staff may have a difficult time locating and recruiting schools able to participate. The fact that participating schools also are required to pay participation fees could be a barrier for some schools. Other organizations may consider how investment could support program reach, sustainability, and scalability. This is particularly true given that relying upon contributions from program staff and program participants may be a challenge in contexts of poverty. While Ta'theer has not yet been

able to secure government or NGO funding, other organizations would do well to investigate all possible avenues for funding in their own contexts.

Additionally, the Lebanese educational context is not necessarily conducive or receptive to the distributive and collaborative models of leadership that Ta'theer promotes. Without more centralized government support advocating for schools to incorporate collaborative leadership models, it is likely that Ta'theer will have difficulty recruiting program participants. Other organizations might consider how they will encourage participation from school leaders who tend to play an administrative rather than instructional leader role, as it is likely that other non-OECD countries do not strongly encourage collaborative and instructional leadership. Organizations could consider how they may help local school settings and broader government bodies to understand the value of leadership team development, particularly as it relates to instructional leadership. Organizations would also do well to consider seeking out partner organizations or assistance of government bodies that already maintain relationships with multiple schools. This could help to identify and maintain relationships with participants, further the reach of development activities, and also provide an infrastructure for communication.

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