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Investigating Schools in North Lebanon as Professional Learning Communities



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Mireille Farah, Nemr Frayha

PhD Student, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Saint-Joseph University, Beirut, Lebanon

PhD, Full Professor at the Saint-Joseph University, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Beirut, Lebanon

ABSTRACT: The value of Professional Learning Communities is well-emphasized in the literature as a productive form of professional development (DuFour et.al, 2008, 2016). The following research study aims to investigate how Professional Learning Communities (PLC) emerge in the school settings in public and private schools in North Lebanon. Following a mixed method approach, this research focuses on evaluating PLCs as a means of job-embedded professional development. The participants of the study included teachers, principals, and staff members from eleven schools in North Lebanon. Data collection was done through the Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised (PLCA-R), which allowed the researcher to identify the dimensions of each school. The findings of the study revealed that participating schools function as professional learning communities although the level of their maturity could not be clearly identified using the data. It was also concluded that the schools participating in the study did have a job-embedded process of professional development that was very well aligned to the characteristics of professional learning communities identified by research. Dimensions 3 and 5 of the PLCA-R were found to be the strongest dimensions in participating schools in both sectors, private and public.

KEY WORDS: Professional Development, Teacher Training, Professional Learning Communities, Communities of Practice, Professional Learning, Job-Embedded Professional Development

I.INTRODUCTION

Background and Need for the Study

In this constantly changing educational setting, the demands of the real world are different from before; therefore, it is eminent that the role teachers play in shaping learners' minds matches this evolution. If teachers are going to help students to develop certain skills, they need to experience them firsthand. The quality of teachers is one of the main factors that affect students' learning. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to ensure teachers are knowledgeable, experienced and competent within their field since every one of their decisions is based on theories, on the unique constitution of their classroom, and on the needs of their local community. Professional Development (PD) is defined as the development of a teacher's personality in the school context through continuously collected experiences and ongoing analysis of their own pedagogical activities (Glatthorn, 1995; Mukan & Kravets, 2015). Since the value of Professional Learning Communities is well-emphasized in the literature as a productive form of professional development (DuFour et.al, 2008, 2016) and since the situation is a step forward in various schools in Lebanon to sustain ongoing professional development, it is of exponential importance to examine whether current PD practices in Lebanese schools enable them to be considered professional learning communities as a way to promote proper teachers' professional development. The aim of this research study is to examine the role of professional learning communities as a form of job-embedded professional development. It examines how schools function as PLCs and at how PLCs emerge in specific school settings in the research area.

Problem Statement

Teachers play a pivotal role in developing students and shaping the minds of generations of students. Therefore, it is important to understand the culture behind teachers' attitudes. For teachers to thrive in the increasingly demanding



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school contexts, they must have the readiness to adapt to the diverse students' needs through adjusting themselves to new pedagogical approaches, education policies, and educational reform efforts (Jimoyiannis, Gravani, & Karagiorgi, 2014). In this regard, teachers need ongoing professional learning and development through PD opportunities to deepen their subject content and pedagogical knowledge and to enhance their teaching skills (Jimoyiannis et al., 2014). Therefore, it is crucial to consider an evaluation of current practices in public and private school communities in Lebanon, in order to plan and incorporate an update of the functions and capacities of teachers by identifying areas of strengths and areas for improvement in the schools functioning as professional learning communities where the skills, competencies and practices of the teaching workforce meet current students' needs. Professional learning and development are ways to improve the quality and efficacy of teaching (Fullan, 2013). The current situation in Lebanon is one where public and private teachers are facing numerous challenges because they are not well-formed to play their roles constructively. Thus, there is a great need for self-development in terms of knowledge and skills of teaching. It is therefore essential to investigate how Lebanese teachers are prepared and equipped with the necessary tools, skills, and training to help transform the learning environment into a more vibrant and collaborative one while on the job. Provided with appropriate training, teachers can enhance professional learning and collaboration that ensure better quality education for students to succeed.

II. SIGNIFICANCE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Purpose and Significance of the Study

Studies on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in the US, the UK and Canada prove that when educational reforms are considered, PLCs are brought to the forefront (Lee et al., 2013). In the past years, schools in the north of Lebanon have shown an involvement of teachers in certain forms of onsite communities of learning to address challenges with teaching and learning and to improve school communities. Many of them have initiated an onsite investment in their teachers, establishing a small community of learning that is maintained and implemented through the coordination of key persons. It is within this context that this research study examined Professional Learning Communities as a form of job-embedded, structured, collaborative program where teachers work together and learn from one another to improve instructional practices, to increase involvement and collaboration and to build effective communities of learning in their schools as part of their routine. Due to the scarcity of studies conducted in Lebanon on CPD, this study is considered to make an addition to the existing literature on teachers' PD and a guide for administrators, teachers and educators as well as schools and universities on the role of teachers' ongoing professional learning in enhancing collaboration amongst teachers and keeping them abreast of the latest pedagogical approaches of the 21st century. It serves to provide a model of changing schools' cultures and structures by bringing the best in teachers. It also aims at providing a framework for the assessment of schools in North Lebanon as learning communities specifying what essential factors can pave the way for Lebanese schools to transform into Professional Learning Communities while identifying factors that may hinder the process. The proposed research study will offer a view of schools as professional learning communities to meet the demands of the changing educational outcomes, learners, and environments. It will focus on examining the dimensions that each school is immersed in as a PLC.

Research Questions

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1 Do CPD practices in private and public schools in the research area qualify them to be considered PLCs?
- 2 What dimensions of a PLC are Lebanese schools in the research area mostly immersed in?

Limitations of the Study

Limitations are "potential weaknesses or problems in quantitative research that are identified by the researcher" (Creswell, 2008). They represent flaws within a research design which may influence the results and outcomes of the study. The study adopted an explanatory mixed methods design, which is a two-phase sequential model (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Unlike the triangulation design, there is no necessity to integrate two different forms of data as the researcher obtains quantitative results and further elaborates on the qualitative aspect. This study comprised possible weaknesses or limitations due to personal bias (Creswell, 2012). The researcher's personal beliefs and experiences might have influenced the way qualitative data was interpreted to further refine the outcomes of the quantitative data. Also, the fact that the study was focused on one geographical area in the country where the study was conducted may



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influence the applicability of results and generalization of findings to another context. Limiting the scope of this study to a small geographic area might have impacted the research, thus making the results less applicable to schools in other geographical areas. The study was run starting in the academic year 2019-2020. In the second half of the academic year, there was an imminent need to shift to online teaching due to the Covid-19 outbreak, and the entailing pressure for teachers to move to a full online presence with all the challenges that came along the way. Prior to that, there was a lot of instability and insecurity due to the health, financial and political situation in Lebanon since the revolution in October 2019, which might have impacted teachers' responses. The disparity in quality practices between schools in the private and public sectors might have been worsened due to the pandemic-imposed lockdown affecting the findings of the study. The shift to online teaching during that period might have influenced teachers' views of their participation in a Professional Learning Community. Another limitation was related to the study sample including schools and participants.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teaching is at the basis of all careers as it is the building block for all other professions in the various work fields. Teacher quality is found to be closely linked to students' results. There is a strong correlation between students' achievement and teacher effectiveness (Carey, 2004; Haycock, 1998). In general, students' high performance seems to be strongly linked to the high quality of teachers who would provide the best education possible to prepare their students for life and the workplace. In today's knowledge-based societies, it is important to prepare teachers that are qualified and able to equip their students with different skills needed in the market through various onsite training or external professional development sessions. Several studies were conducted to investigate the factors that impact teachers' participation in professional development, leading to unwanted consequences. Of the obstacles that may have a negative impact on the effectiveness of professional development programs and on teachers' participation in these PD programs are personal, technical, or logistical (Donaldson & Donaldson, 2012). The personal obstacles involve the participants' beliefs in the added value and benefit behind joining a certain PD program (Gumus, 2013). Moreover, as Van Veen & Slegers (2006) found, teachers seem to lack the commitment to invest in improving their experience and knowledge, which affects their engagement in PD program. However, the most dangerous "enemy" or personal hindrance is isolation (DuFour, DuFour and Eaker, 2008) which causes teachers to avoid any teamwork, collaboration or exchange of experience (Frost, 2008). On the other hand, technical or logistical causes include the lack of an allocated time for PD as well as the lack of a proper follow up after the training (Darling-Hammond and Richardson, 2009). Al Fayez (2016) mentioned that the unavailability of required resources to accommodate all participants can have a negative impact on the quality of training and on teachers' readiness to participate in the training. The intent of this study is to examine teachers' capabilities in schools, and whether professional development processes involve professional learning communities that meet the diverse needs of students and teachers alike. Schools can no longer continue to educate students in the same old manner. Schools must prepare students and teachers who are adaptable to the fast-paced world they live in.

Professional Learning Communities

Widely known as Communities of Practice (CoP) or learning communities (LC), Professional Learning Communities (PLC) emerged among educators and researchers as early as the 1960s as a form of job-embedded professional development. It was Hord (1997) who coined the term Professional Learning Communities as a central community of discussion and learning. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are commonly defined as "educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (DuFour, DuFour and Eaker, 2008, p. 27). Key elements to this are the roles of "collaboration" and "collective inquiry" that emphasize the roles teachers play in professional growth, learning and achievement. Professional Learning Communities foster collaborative learning among people within the same work environment to organize them into groups of effective professional learning that leads to improvements (Goddard et al., 2000). PLCs are found to eliminate teachers' isolation replacing it with a more collaborative approach (Stegall, 2011). In her study of 78 schools in the United States, Rosenholtz (1989) concluded that the transformation from "learning-impooverished school" to "learning-enriched" schools through the PLC, helped in creating a wider teacher's collaboration which, in turn, led to increased teacher efficacy and commitment that resulted in a wider and higher focus on students' achievement. PLCs are renowned as the solution to teacher isolation and an effective means for raising teachers' efficacy and collaboration, stimulating students' achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006; Hord, 1997, 2004). To learn in this increasingly changing world today, teachers need to work together for



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ongoing, sustainable improvement, and the PLC is described in the literature as a model that serves this fundamental continuous professional development.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Research Design, Participants and Instruments

The two-phase explanatory mixed methods research design was utilized for the purpose of this study because it allows the researcher to use a pool of instruments to collect data for questions which cannot be answered by employing a single method (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

Research methods included data collection from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The dimensions of each school as Professional Learning Communities was based on the Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised by Olivier, Hipp, & Huffman (2008) to evaluate the schools as PLCs. Following this, qualitative data was collected through interviewing one or two teachers and one principal in each of the representative schools. The tools were made available in English, French and Arabic and were run through validity and reliability. All permissions were sought prior to the start of the study, and ethics protocols were observed throughout the study to warrant the transparency to and the protection of study participants. Accordingly, the target population included school principals, administrators, and teachers in 11 schools within the North Lebanon District. Among these schools, there were middle schools and high schools where students consisted of both genders. The data resulting from this study were gathered from teachers with varied levels of professional experiences and academic achievement. The researchers asked all principals and teachers to complete the questionnaires. For the qualitative part, the researcher selected one principal per school and 2 teachers to participate in the semi-structured interviews. For the interviews, the researcher tried to select study participants from different demographic backgrounds to ensure adequate representation of participants (Creswell, 2005). To safeguard the involvement of public schools in the research area, the researcher sought permission from the Ministry of Education to run the study with the selected schools detailing the aim and duration of the study always guaranteeing ethical considerations and safeguarding privacy and discretion. Approval to run the research with private schools was secured through individual schools. Official formal meetings were arranged with each of the school's principals explaining the scope and aim of the study. Study participants were given a Consent Form detailing the aim of the study. Consent forms were signed by participants before any data collection occurred. There were no identified risks to participants, and all information was to be kept anonymous and confidential.

Data Collection

The study was initiated in the academic year 2019. This was a year of different restless times in Lebanon with the onset of the people's revolution in October. A few months later the outbreak of Covid-19 followed imposing the lifechanging lockdown that carried with it great influence on the data collection procedures with its impact on teachers' participation in the study. This caused a challenge to the quantitative data collection which had initially been planned to run over a period of two terms of the academic year 2019-2020 in the eleven private and public schools in the North of Lebanon District taking part of the study. Although the tools were initially distributed in print format to the different schools participating in the research study for participants to complete on paper, the researcher resorted to recreating each of the tools in the three languages into online forms following the sudden pandemic-induced lockdown as a Microsoft form, through which responses were collected as a downloadable excel sheet. All the responses in the three languages on the same tool were consolidated into one main excel sheet, and the researcher engaged into unifying the language of use, so the data is clean for entry on SPSS. The questionnaire data was analyzed through descriptive and analytical statistics while the interviews were investigated by identifying and documenting emergent patterns and themes. All terminology was transferred into the English version or its equivalent. For the qualitative data collection, approvals from school principals and teachers were sought before the interviews were conducted. Some were conducted in person; others were conducted virtually either via WhatsApp call or Zoom call. The interviews lasted from 15 to 20 minutes and were all audio recorded. During the interviews, the researcher used English as the main medium of communication, but the interviewees resorted at times to the Arabic language, which required the researcher to listen to the recording and translate all the transcripts into English.



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V. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This study utilized a mixed methods design to obtain the opinions of the respondents. The data analysis revealed findings as detailed below.

Research Question 1: *Do CPD practices in private and public schools in the research area qualify them to be considered PLCs?*

In order to answer this research question, the researcher employed the Professional Learning Communities Assessment Revised, and derived the results from the frequencies of agreement on the statements under the dimensions of the PLCA-R. Looking at the overall percentages of respondents who either agree or strongly agree with the 52 statements on the PLCA-R, it can be noted that generally, there is a strong agreement that schools in the research area adopt professional development approaches that enable them to qualify as professional learning communities. On each of the dimension, the respondents agree and strongly agree that the statement describes the practices at their school. This is evident in the high percentages of teachers and staff responding with agree or strongly agree on the majority of the 52 statements under the PLCA-R. Staff members perceive their school leadership as being shared and supportive in that they feel they are involved in discussions and decisions, and that their voice is heard by the principal who takes advice from staff. Staff feel that there is a distributed leadership and authority which encourages them to use different sources of data and engage in decisions that impact teaching and learning with 91% of the respondents agreeing to this statement. This is further supported through the interviews where interviewees mentioned that *“there is strong support from the administration who encourages the sharing of information formally and informally.”* Teachers in the research area are found to be involved in mutual learning and collaboration, trying to solve real problems that they face at the school they work in, which is confirmed by Darling-Hammond (2005, 2009), and by Fullan (1993) who finds this kind of practice to be the building block of postmodern societies. It is noteworthy here that the percentage of agreement and strong agreement is oddly the lowest of all dimensions on Shared Personal Practice, which is an indicator of the lack of readiness of teachers in the research area to share personal practice with others openly, something that is key to the improvement of teaching and learning. A closer look at the results shows that time, proximity, scheduling, fiscal resources as well appropriate instructional materials and technological devices have the lowest agreement. This indicates that there is a general challenge to secure these resources for staff development. Considering that there is a high percentage of respondents who either agree or strongly agree with the 52 statements on the PLCA-R under the six dimensions, it can be proposed to address research question number 1 confirming that schools in the research area adopt professional development approaches that enable them to qualify as professional learning communities.

Research Question 2: *What dimensions of a PLC are Lebanese schools in the research area mostly immersed in??*

The PLCA-R was administered to teachers in eleven schools in the North of Lebanon District at varying grade levels and has assisted the researcher to determine the strength of practices in these schools within each dimension. Chi-square was used for significance of correlation between the two factors: school sector and PLCA-R Dimensions.

Based on the findings, the schools participating in the study did indeed have a job-embedded process of professional development that was very well aligned to the characteristics of professional learning communities identified by research (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, Hord, 1997). The analysis of the mean scores on the PLCA-R revealed that professional learning communities were implemented with a good level of fidelity at the participating schools. The school with the highest cumulative mean score was school I, a private school while school B, also a private school, scored a 3 (which is a neutral score). Generally, participating schools demonstrated a high importance on the dimension of Supportive Conditions – Relations, which shows that there are strong ties between teachers and a culture of trust and respect. Likewise, Collective Learning and Application was identified as a dimension with high fidelity. The second dimension where all schools scored the highest was Collective Learning and Application with a cumulative mean score of around 4.1. This indicates that there is a high level of collaboration between staff in the schools with collegial relations that reflect commitment to the school efforts of improvement. Statements 21, 22, 23 and 26 were rated the highest which proved that staff members work together to learn new strategies and apply them. This data suggests that informally sharing ideas and suggestions for improving student learning is the most evident practice all schools use to learn and apply new strategies collectively. Teachers seem to collaborate to collectively learn new methods to engage learners of diverse needs. The findings from the mean scores are further supported by the qualitative data collected through the interviews, where participants in schools stated that *“the strength of their school as a PLC lies in sharing experiences through detailed discussions.”* Others affirmed a freedom in *“sharing experiences and expressing ideas openly, which improves teachers’ abilities.”* Professional development clearly targets teaching and learning in all schools. Research has long illustrated the power of teacher teams working together to improve instructional practices.

Therefore, Dimensions 3 and 5 were found to be the strongest dimensions in participating schools in both sectors, private and public. Although Dimension 5 (Supportive Conditions _ Relations) was identified as the one with the high average mean score in both sectors, there was a notable difference based on the sector on Dimension 3 as per the Pearson Chi-square analysis of mean scores conducted. Looking at the overall frequencies on the 52 statements of the six dimensions of the PLCA-R, a great agreement was identified among participants in the research area confirming their schools function as professional learning communities with the percentage of responses under “agree” and “strongly agree” on the six dimensions ranging between 83.6 to 90.2 percent. The table below shows the average mean scores by school and by dimension on the PLCA-R.

PLCA-R Means by School and by Dimension							
PLCA-R Means by school	mean Shared and Supportive Leadership	mean Shared Values and Vision	mean Collective Learning and Application	mean Shared Personal Practice	mean Supportive Conditions-Relations	mean Supportive Conditions-Structures	Average of Means
School A (pvt)	4.13	4.28	4.28	4.14	4.36	4.21	4.24
School B (pvt)	3.50	3.65	3.64	3.14	3.49	3.43	3.48
School C (pvt)	3.61	3.74	3.86	3.79	4.07	3.84	3.82
School D	4.06	3.92	3.86	3.58	4.07	3.54	3.84
School E	4.11	3.87	4.10	3.94	4.12	3.62	3.96
School F (pvt)	3.83	4.08	4.17	3.86	4.01	3.79	3.96
School G	3.99	4.11	3.98	4.05	4.27	4.07	4.08
School H	4.06	3.87	3.97	3.60	4.11	3.64	3.87
School I (pvt)	4.37	4.64	4.60	4.51	4.58	4.51	4.54
School J (pvt)	4.18	4.35	4.41	4.12	4.34	4.33	4.29
School K	4.30	4.13	4.06	3.86	4.46	3.83	4.10
Mean Scores by Dimension	4.01	4.06	4.08	3.87	4.17	3.89	4.02

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Conclusion and Study Implications

This research study investigated the status of the dimensions of the professional learning community (PLC) model as a form of job-embedded professional development in eleven private and public schools in North Lebanon.

Using teachers’ perceptions of the current professional development practices and their school functioning as PLCs indicated that although training was made available for them internally and externally, there was not enough structure and follow up on the training outcomes.

The need to train and educate teachers is an investment in the future generations since teachers are the main catalysts for change in educating students and improving their learning experiences. Therefore, it is first essential for ministries to ensure a plan is organized according to the schools’ needs and the teachers’ needs building on the local capabilities of teachers within the schools and then expanding from the school community to the other schools in the same area or district. This means moving from a small-scale professional learning community to a wider scale community of ongoing learning which builds a web of shared practices and distributed knowledge. This proposed bottom-up approach serves to identify skilled professionals who may be able to be the main training providers and representatives of the schools. A more negotiated approach to training is needed while at the same time ensuring the governing of the



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ministry to oversee the quality, implementation, and evaluation of the PD plans. The educational approach of delivering the training, to a structured training inhouse under the PLC (that is each school) must be considered. The program should be flexible enough to allow various media of instruction, physical or virtual to compensate for the opportunities lost due to school closures for whichever reason that might be. Thus, a proper evaluation system of the training itself and then ongoing evaluation and follow up of the training are key, and these must be linked to a national framework that should be created for the purpose of assessing schools and evaluating teachers' performance yearly. Such a framework will require schools first to create their yearly school improvement plans which are closely connected to their practices as PLCs and must include professional development as a key component. A new Staff Performance Evaluation must be established to be linked to a Teacher License. Another impact of such a suggestion would be on Higher Education Programs that would offer courses in the form of qualifications that would help teachers maintain their teacher license following engagement in through participation and implementation of a certain number of training hours. The evaluation framework should be linked to financial benefit in that the ministry must plan a set budget for the purpose of investing in schools and in building human capacities within schools to expand on that human capital reaching the wider community. This entails in it revisiting teachers' salaries and benefits in both private and public sectors.

Recommendations

Building a professional learning community and sustaining it has the potential of reaching all members of staff at a school. Information gathered through this study can be used by researchers to acquire more information needed for areas that need to be addressed in the process of the PLC creation. It can assist teachers and school leaders in the planning and implementation of effective PLCs in different schools in Lebanon. The current research study has provided data which describe teachers' perceptions of professional development. The dimensions of the PLC model were compared in eleven schools, public and private. Recommendations for future research are placed forward by the researcher to further enrich the experiences of schools aspiring to establish PLCs, and to add to the knowledge and to the body of research on PLCs in Lebanon and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

1. Based on the findings of the current study, it is recommended to conduct research at a larger scale with a larger sample to increase the statistical power of the results.
2. Further research is recommended into the impact of PLCs on teacher collaboration in different regions and the role of the socioeconomic factor in actively engaging teachers to participate in PLCs.
3. Given that the focus of this study was on teachers' knowledge and learning, further research is needed to determine the impact of PLCs as a form of ongoing professional development on students' learning and achievement.
4. Additional research is recommended on PLCs through virtual means or online, namely that this study was conducted during a period of time where people were in quarantine mode.

Findings from the current study confirm the literature and add to the research and practice of professional learning communities as a form of job-embedded professional development that supports increased student achievement (DuFour& Eaker, 1998, Hord, 1997, Lee, Smith & Croninger, 1995). The perceptions of teachers on professional development and PLCs may be analyzed to determine strengths and weaknesses, which could support the implementation of PLCs in other schools.

Given the current economic situation in the country, PLCs are proposed as worth being promoted in public and private schools in Lebanon as they offer educators a chance of developing a more sustainable professional development. Learning about the cultures of schools successfully implementing PLCs presents an addition to educational research in that it identifies the practices that support the success of these schools by investigating them through the conceptual framework of the PLC (Blackblock, 2009). Using PLCs may support schools to build on and maximize their use of limited resources to increase teachers' collaboration and learning so school cultures change. What is needed is a reculturing of teachers' beliefs over time so they question what they know and change their beliefs to acquire knowledge (Fullan, 1993, 1999). This reculturing is seen to create learning environments where fears of being judged are overcome through the localized PLCs as a human investment.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Mireille Farah

Mireille is a passionate, learner-focused educator with long years of teaching experience. She is an English Language specialist who is dedicated to creating positive learning environments and nurturing lifelong learning. Keen on enhancing the use of technology for educational purposes and improving teachers' ongoing professional development, Mireille is interested in 21st century learning, teacher training and innovative learning experiences.



Professor Nemer Frayha

Nemer Frayha holds a PhD in Education from Stanford University, USA, and is currently engaged with doctorate students at the Lebanese University and Saint Joseph University. He has a long experience in teaching, administration and consultation in Lebanon and abroad.

His writings and research interest are mainly in education. Some selected publications: Failed Teaching, Failed Education. Beirut: Dar Al-Jadid, 2019.

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