

**Arab Thought Foundation (ATF)-  
American University of Beirut (AUB):  
Project for Research on School-based Educational Development in Arab Countries**

**Project Paper  
Updated January 2007**

The American University of Beirut (AUB) and its Department of Education have played an important role in the region in the field of education for many years. We have trained thousands of teachers, curriculum designers, subject coordinators, and administrators; revised school curricula in many countries in the region; and have consulted on a number of educational initiatives. The goal of this project is to identify initiatives that have been implemented in the region to learn what does and does not work—and why. There is a critical need for an institution that will provide this link between academia and the classroom—a place that focuses **on research to practice**. We believe that AUB is uniquely well placed to play this role for the region.

There is widespread agreement that educational systems in the Arab world need to be improved. The UNDP's 2002 Arab Human Development Report states, "there is evidence that the quality of education [in the region] has deteriorated, implying a decline in knowledge acquisition and analytical and creative skills".<sup>1</sup> The World Economic Forum's Arab World Competitiveness Report 2002-2003 echoes the conclusions of the UNDP Report and urges the nations of the Arab world to "thoughtfully consider how education can be better organized to assure the development of a sustainable capacity to compete in a changing and evolving global economy".<sup>2</sup> Both reports, and the more recently issued Arab Human Development Report 2003 note the importance of "incorporating new knowledge and skill needs into current learning and teaching activities".

We believe that educators in the region are interested in improving the quality of education in their countries. There are also well-intentioned scholars who share the same goal. All too often, however, these two groups are working separately—sometimes even at cross-purposes. To be useful, research must be grounded in the classroom. It must be informed by what is already taking place in schools throughout the region and must address the issues that are most important to educators in the region.

## **Our Proposal**

### ***Philosophy***

The project will be structured to promote a "top down support for bottom up change". In other words, we will analyze local "success stories" to identify the human and material factors and practices that made these initiatives successful. The results of this analysis will then be communicated to policymakers who will be encouraged to use the results. We will also disseminate the results of our research by producing training materials that can be used throughout the region, publishing in national and regional journals, and making information available on a web site that we would launch and update regularly.

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<sup>1</sup> Arab Human Development Report 2002.

<sup>2</sup> The Arab World Competitiveness Report 2002-2003, p. 218.

## ***Purpose***

Our project has three goals:

- *to develop a school-based grounded theory of educational reform in the region that will provide policymakers with research-based recommendations for implementing educational reform in their countries.*
  - Design case studies for three schools in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Lebanon
  - Conduct the studies using different methods of disciplined inquiry
  - Produce case study reports on each of the nine schools and on each country.
  - Produce a report on the three countries
  - Develop a tentative local grounded theory on the three countries
  
- *to train men and women to plan and implement activities relevant to educational reform using training materials based on research results generated in the Arab world.*
  - Involvement of individuals in leadership positions at the Ministry, University, and school levels and teachers in the following:
    - Discussions of research types, aims, questions, and philosophies.
    - Discussions of the role of research in reform at their own school and at national level.
    - Involvement in research methodology workshops (especially in workshops and activities that involve qualitative research methodologies)
    - Involvement in research activities such as collecting data in their own schools using action research and other methodologies.
    - Involvement in professional development workshops (as participants and presenters)
    - Involvement in development and use of professional workshop materials based on research results.
  
- *to encourage a culture of research-based policy decisions.*
  - Mechanisms that can encourage research based decision-making at the classroom and school levels
    - Sharing research experiences with others in their school, among the three schools in each country in conjunction with the university and ministry. Additionally, share research experiences with schools not involved in the project.
    - Promoting the values of evidence-based decisions through a variety of means within their school and among the three schools in each country in conjunction with the university and ministry. Additionally, promote evidence based decisions in schools not involved in the project.
    - Sharing research experiences and reports through a website, publications, and conferences.
    - Promoting the culture of inquiring communities within and among the schools.

## ***Research Question***

Specifically, the Project will attempt to answer the following question:

*How do change agents, processes, and contextual factors interact in an Arab school to enable or handicap sustainable innovation and increase students' abilities and improve attitudes for lifelong learning?*

### ***Methodological Approach***

The methodologies to be used in the research will be evidence-based and inductive, built from analysis of what is actually happening in schools that are implementing reform activities. They will be integrated, including both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A school-based grounded theory of educational reform will be built from study of the interactions of change agents, processes, and contextual factors in each of nine innovative schools, three in each of three Arab countries. Tests will be given to gauge students' abilities and attitudes for lifelong learning..

All data will be used to identify trends that lead to a school-based grounded theory of educational reform but will not be associated with any particular school or individuals.

### ***Assumptions***

The Project has the following assumption

- School reform or development is very complex and involves interactions among change agents, processes, and contextual factors.
- Successful school reform is characterized by innovations of sustainable activities that enhance students' abilities and attitudes for lifelong learning.
- Knowledge about specific developmental efforts resides in individuals in specific schools.
- The locus of school reform is in individual schools.
- Change agents in the school have a powerful effect on reform efforts there.
- Contextual and cultural factors have a significant influence on the change processes in schools.
- The purpose of ministries education is to improve schooling.
- One purpose of government policy is to provide guidance and support needed for positive development to take place in individual schools.
- Governments need more reliable and credible information about the kind of guidance and support that is needed to help schools improve.

### ***Participants: Roles, Benefits from Participation, and Criteria for Selection***

#### **1) Participating Schools:**

##### **a) Roles in the project**

- i) Create a team to implement the project composed of three staff members, one of whom is the school coordinator, including the principal or his/her representative and two teachers who are going to be given release time to work on the project (approximately 4 periods per week). Responsibilities of the team:
  - (a) to collect data by doing the following:
    - (i) Conduct the interviews
    - (ii) Conduct the observation of classrooms
    - (iii) Coordinate the testing of students
  - (b) Prepare field notes
  - (c) Participate in data analysis
  - (d) Attend the training with AUB either in Beirut or in Amman (5 days each in the summer of 2007 and in January of 2008)
  - (e) Present their experiences with others in their school and/or give training as needed
  - (f) Promote the values of evidence-based decision making

- (g) The school coordinator will coordinate with the AUB team and with the Ministry Representative and University Professor
  - ii) Cover the costs to the school of participation including release time of participating personnel and the purchase of the computer programs needed.
- b) Benefits to schools for participating in the project:
- i) Pride of helping improve education in the Arab world.
  - ii) Gaining capacity for improving own school through:
    - (a) Study of the results of this project within the school;
    - (b) Training of its own personnel in skills of research, analysis, training and leadership that will enable them to help guide future improvement projects;
    - (c) Acquisition of tools needed for future internal action research
  - iii) Enhancing its reputation as an innovating school through:
    - (a) Being publicized as an innovating school selected to participate in the project because of its improvements efforts
    - (b) Being publicized in a variety of announcements and publications about the project through the Arab Thought Foundation as well as in refereed journals in Arabic and English.
    - (c) Participation in conferences for educators in which the results of the research are presented.
- c) Criteria for selection of participating schools:
- i) The school is private
  - ii) The school does not result in profit to individuals; any surplus funds are re-invested in the school.
  - iii) It has been an innovating school for at least three years, i.e.:
    - (a) Uses innovation teaching practices
    - (b) Has continuing improvement efforts with at least one project going on at the time of the study;
    - (c) Focuses efforts at improving student learning.
  - iv) The school is generally regarded as effective by members of the community; parents tend to choose it because they perceive it to be better than others.
  - v) The school follows the local, national curriculum although is not necessarily limited by it.
  - vi) The majority of its personnel are Arabs.
  - vii) School has to be willing to provide time release and bear the expense inside the school.
  - viii) School is willing to provide members of the project team with the time to carry out the task in school and also to attend training 2-3 times and conferences as needed.
  - ix) School is willing to give appropriate personnel release time to be interviewed.
  - x) School is willing to test students using a variety of instruments tests provided by the project and submit the results for the use of the study.

**Note:** Total group of schools should include at least two at each of the three levels (elementary, intermediate, and secondary). In Saudi Arabia, and possibly in Jordan, the group can include one school that has separate sections for boys and girls + 1 boys' school + 1 girls' school.

- d) Criteria for selection of teachers as members of the team:

- i) Are Arabs who can work in Arabic;
- ii) Have the potential, interest and willingness to be trained to do research;
- iii) Are willing and able to travel to either Beirut or Amman for one week of training during the summer and again in the middle of the year;
- iv) Can read and take training in either Arabic or English;
- v) Are ready and able to make presentations about the research to others;
- vi) Have research experience (Preferred).

## 2) Ministry Representative

### a) Role:

- i) Attend and contribute to the training with AUB in Beirut or Amman (5 days in the summer of 2007 and again in January of 2008);
- ii) Attend country-wide meetings;
- iii) Assist in obtaining necessary permissions;
- iv) Participate in conferences;
- v) Facilitate meetings with the Ministry as needed;
- vi) Interface with the Ministry as needed.

### b) Benefits for participation in the project:

- i) Pride of helping improve education in own country and in the Arab world.
- ii) Listed as a participant in a variety of announcements and publications about the project through the Arab Thought Foundation as well as in professional journals in Arabic and English.
- iii) Will have gained skills and experience that will prepare him/her to help guide the design of Ministry policies that support future school improvement projects.
- iv) Making presentation in conferences for Ministry personnel and educators.

### c) Criteria for selection:

- i) Can be expected to continue for several years in the ministry;
- ii) Has enough weight in the Ministry;
- iii) Has some research background;
- iv) Is bi-lingual in English-Arabic;
- v) Is able and willing to make presentations on the project;
- vi) Can attend meetings or conferences outside own country.

## 3) Local University Professor

### a) Role:

- i) Participate and contribute to the training with AUB either in Beirut or in Amman (5 days in the summer of 2007 again in January of 2008)
- ii) Supervise and improve practices in all collection of data
- iii) Analyze the data and/or supervise the members of the school teams in helping analyze the data in accordance with guidelines provided by AUB Team.
- iv) Participate actively in making preparations for and conducting country-wide team meetings.
- v) Write reports and papers and submit them to other members of the national team and to AUB team.
- vi) Coordinates with AUB to write the final report and deliver presentations on the project according to need.
- vii) Give training to other persons on research methodology in coordination with AUB Team.

- b) Benefits of being selected to participate:
  - i) The pride of helping improve education in own country and in the Arab world.
  - ii) Listed as a participating researcher in a variety of announcements and publications about the project through the Arab Thought Foundation as well as in professional journals in Arabic and English.
  - iii) Gaining training and experience in skills for both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.
  - iv) Making presentations in conferences for educators.
  
- c) Criteria for selection:
  - i) Can be expected to continue for several years at the University.
  - ii) Is bi-lingual English-Arabic
  - iii) Can attend meetings outside own country
  - iv) Has research experience (preferably including qualitative research)

### ***Implementation***

The project will be implemented in phases, starting small and expanding gradually so that subsequent stages can be informed by the knowledge that is gained during previous phases of the project.

### ***Duration***

We appreciate that any serious effort to reform the educational systems of the region will take many years. Phase One will require three years: one year for preparation and two years for implementation, evaluation, and planning for Phase Two.

We will initially launch the project in three countries: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Lebanon. These three countries differ in important ways: in terms of the size of the country, the type of educational system, the language of science and math instruction, and the reputation of the educational system. In addition, AUB has worked in all three countries and established a network of individuals and institutions that will facilitate the proposed research and development activities.

### **YEAR ONE**

Selection of the schools: A three-person team will develop criteria for selection in consultation with researchers and private and public education personnel and then select two or three schools in each country that will participate in the first phase of the study.

Formation of working teams: There will be an AUB team composed of two faculty members from the Department of Education who will coordinate the project. They will have primary responsibility for the design of the research proposal and for developing and conducting training workshops. In addition there will also be a full-time research assistant at AUB who will be responsible for the administrative work and be available to assist with research.

There will also be a team in each participating country that will include a coordinator and one or more university faculty members. The country teams will work with the AUB team to develop the research proposal, and will be responsible for conducting research in their country, participating in data analysis, and writing research reports.

Each school selected for participation in the project will also be asked to form a research team.

We will also draw on the experience and expertise of researchers in the three countries as needed.

Training and brainstorming: All team members (from AUB and from participating countries and schools) will be invited to attend a workshop at AUB to ensure that they:

- have the qualitative and quantitative research skills they will need to participate and contribute effectively.
- share a common language and understanding of the research methodologies that they will use.
- are given the opportunity to participate in defining the mission, modalities, and responsibilities of the different participants.

In addition to the team members, we would like to invite each participating school to send someone, who would work closely with the AUB-based research assistant, to come to AUB for training. Although we would initially limit this program to individuals from participating schools, we believe that it is important to the long-term sustainability of educational reform efforts to develop expertise at this level as well.

Research design: The AUB team will develop a research design proposal based on the discussions that take place at the workshop. The proposal will detail the types of data to be collected, the instruments to be used for data collection, and the methods of data analysis. The AUB team will consult regularly with all team members, primarily by e-mail, throughout this process to reach a common understanding and broad support for the research activities.

## YEARS TWO AND THREE

Research and development activities: Team members will meet to discuss how research should be conducted and analyzed. After conducting the research, team members will meet to discuss the results and how they should be disseminated and implemented.

Dissemination: We think it is important that all research be available in English and Arabic both via the internet and in print form. The AUB team will also develop and conduct workshops at non-participating schools in the region to share the results of the research and discuss how the results might be used to change current practice. Members from the respective country and school teams will also participate in these workshops. We believe that these workshops will be more useful and interesting if, for example, Saudi educators who have been involved in the project from the beginning play a prominent role in workshops to disseminate the results of the project to other Saudi educators. This will also serve to build local capacity in each country, to develop a network of men and women who are committed to educational reform and engaged in “action research”.

Assessment: The project will be assessed at the end of the first phase. The results of this assessment will be used to develop plans for the second phase the project.

## **Our Track Record**

AUB has been active in the field of education for many years. For almost 20 years, its Department of Education has organized non-degree, professional development programs for

teachers, school administrators, and curriculum specialists to introduce them to new methods of teaching and management. The one- to three-day workshops are offered twice a year and attract an average of 350 teachers and administrators per year. In addition to these workshops that are held at AUB, we have conducted workshops in Arabic and English in many countries in the region including Jordan, Egypt, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia.

The Department of Education offers a Diploma in Educational Management and Leadership and a master's degree in Educational Administration and Policy Studies for men and women who are interested in pursuing careers in educational administration. To qualify for the one-year Diploma in Educational Management and Leadership program, students must have completed an undergraduate degree and have at least one year of relevant professional experience in an educational setting. Students who are interested in pursuing a master's degree must first complete the one-year diploma program.

In addition to our training activities, faculty members at AUB's Department of Education have been active in educational research in a variety of areas such as the teaching of English as a foreign language, mathematics education, science education, school leadership and administration, educational testing, educational psychology, educational reform, and higher education. This research has been published in international and regional journals and in edited volumes in Lebanon, the region, and internationally. Many of our faculty members have also conducted research on issues related to educational reform in Lebanon and the region.

### **The University**

AUB has a student body of more than 7,200 students and a faculty of 640 full-time equivalents (FTEs). Although AUB's student body is primarily Lebanese, almost one-fifth of our students attended secondary school or university outside of Lebanon before coming to AUB. In recent years, the number of undergraduates from the region (the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, and Kuwait) has increased steadily.

The University now includes six faculties: Agricultural and Food Sciences, Arts and Sciences, Engineering and Architecture, Health Sciences, Medicine (which includes the School of Nursing), and the Suliman S. Olayan School of Business. AUB currently offers programs leading to the bachelor's, masters, and MD degrees. We hope to introduce a limited number of PhD programs in the next couple of years. The University's student body is 52 percent male and 48 percent female.

Throughout its history, AUB has embodied the efforts of literally thousands of men and women who believe in the importance of promoting mutual understanding between peoples in the Middle East and the West.

### **Conclusion**

Although we are proud of the role that our faculty and graduates have played in educational reform efforts in the region, we know that there is still a lot of work to be done. We are seeking your support to launch this project to identify, develop, raise awareness of, and implement "best practices" that have been shown to be effective in the classroom. We are interested in working side by side with educators in the region to conduct research that is meaningful and produces results in the classroom.