Education in the Middle East and North Africa

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Abstract

This article analyzes the educational systems in the Middle East and North Africa and highlights the similarities and specificities of countries in the region. The first part describes the structures of the educational systems. The second part identifies the characteristics of the educational systems in four distinct groups of countries in the region with common challenges. The third part analyzes the development of access to different levels of education in the region and discusses the development of mass schooling and higher education. The fourth part deals with the impact of education on societies in the region, analyzing the high rate of youth unemployment and the persistence of illiteracy. The place of religion and cultural diversity in the educational systems of countries in the region are addressed.

Introduction

The region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA (The MENA region does include Iran. The educational problems of this country are in some ways similar to those of the region. However, this article focuses on the educational situation in Arab countries.)) is characterized by its sociopolitical diversity. The region consists of 22 countries with diverse political regimes (republic, monarchy). The level of educational development varies between those countries with low school enrollment and those which manage to get all of their children into school. Despite disparities in income and literacy level, the region enjoys a fair degree of homogeneity in other respects and is well integrated historically and culturally. A common language (Arabic) and religion (Islam) connect the vast majority of the region's population (Salehi-Isfahani, 2010).

Arab countries concentrate a heavier expenditure on education, as a share of gross domestic product, than the world's average. They have made great strides in eradicating mass illiteracy; in boosting primary, secondary, and university enrollment; and in reducing gender gaps in education. Yet, two recent reports published by the World Bank and the Rand Corporation point out that Arab schools continue to propose programs that are irrelevant to the socioeconomic needs of the population and that do not effectively prepare students for the global economy of twenty-first century (World Bank, 2008; Gonzalez et al., 2008). The teaching approach is mainly based on rote learning and little links exist between school curricula and work settings. The region is very youthful, with 60% of the population aged under 30 years and one-third under 15 years. This demographic fact is both an asset and a challenge. Education, it must be kept in mind, is vital to shaping societies and governments in the near future. Thus, investing in educational reform, today, would encourage democratic citizenship and would help the current quest for an Arab democracy.

The Structures

Contemporary educational structures in MENA countries are linked to colonization. Indeed, prior to European colonization of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, education in the region was mainly linked to religious Koranic schools, with the exception of the Mediterranean cities where large Jewish minorities and European inhabitants were living. In cities like Tunis, Cairo, Alexandria, Beirut, and Damascus, some modern, Western-style schools emerged before European colonization, offering classes including sciences and foreign languages.

The independence of the Arab countries in the middle of the twentieth century has seen the emergence of educational structures inherited from the former European colonial powers (United Kingdom, France). North African countries (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Mauritania) and the Levant (Lebanon, Syria) have copied the structures of the French educational system with the use of Arabic as a language of instruction, at different degrees of intensity. Postcolonial bilingualism (French–Arabic) in North Africa has given rise to much debate and controversy until now. The rest of the Arab countries have adopted the structures of the British system with Arabic as the main language of instruction.

Current educational structures of the MENA countries are characterized by the coexistence of public and private institutions. The private sector has, in many contexts, the monopoly of schooling the elites, and reaps the benefits of the associated social prestige.

Another feature of educational structures is the deep centralization of educational structures. Textbooks, teachers, and school legislation are set at the national level. Educational reforms require good governance. Unfortunately, this notion is lacking in the region at the level of the central government, regional administration, and school. Ministries of education assume a highly centralized role and are dominated by top-down authoritarian management systems. Furthermore, most ministries lack long-term vision, appropriate strategic planning, and competent human resources.

Because of wide disparities in income, MENA forms a heterogeneous group of countries from the standpoint of per capita income and educational development. Therefore, it is important that the discussion of their education systems, of which income is one of the most important determinants, be conducted with three groups of countries in mind: (1) High income, oil-rich countries of the GCC (The Gulf Cooperation Council: Oman, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait,

and Saudi Arabia), and Libya. For these countries, infrastructure and school coverage are similar to those of developed countries. Enrollment rates are high at all levels of schooling. In these countries, higher education is marked by the strong presence of foreign, for-profit universities. A lack of qualified local teachers and managers is observed. (2) Middle income, mainstream MENA countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq). The educational systems of these countries have a decent infrastructure and enrollment. Residual problems exist in some areas (rural and remote regions). Enrollment rates are high at primary and secondary levels and increasing at the tertiary level. (3) Low-income, periphery MENA countries (Sudan, Mauritania, Yemen, Somalia, and Comoros). These countries need to address the problem of educational infrastructure. Challenges exist at different levels of the educational system such as illiteracy rates, children not in school, and the gender gap.

Quantitative Expansion of Education

Arab countries have gradually improved their school enrollment in the last three decades. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) statistics, access to primary school has become the norm for most children in the region. Thus, on average, 87% of boys and 82% of girls at each relevant age are currently enrolled in primary education in Arab countries. This has led to significant progress toward universal access to school.

Another element to measure the development of education is to examine school life expectancy. According to the Institute for Statistics (2012), school life expectancy is 14.5 years in Tunisia, 13.7 years in Saudi Arabia, and only 5.1 years in Djibouti. According to UNESCO (2007), the average years of schooling in 2005 exceeded 12 years in half of the Arab countries, and exceeded 10 years in the majority of countries.

This improvement in school enrollment in the region is related to two main factors. The first is linked to the building of the postcolonial states. National elites in positions of power saw education as the top priority, believing that a well-instructed nation can access economic development and reach technological independence. The second factor is linked to oil revenues that have enabled many states in the region to invest in the construction of schools and teacher recruitment.

By national law, most countries in the MENA region offer an average of 9 years of compulsory education, while it is 12 years in the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) countries like the United States and United Kingdom (Figure 1).

Despite progress in schooling, 6 million primary school children remain out of school, the majority of whom are girls. Between 1999 and 2005, Yemen, one of the world's poorest countries, witnessed a large increase in enrollment. However, in 2008, it recorded over 1 million out-of-school children, the highest number in the region (UNESCO, 2011). This increase in children out of school has slowed over the past few years. However, that number could increase again as a consequence of the resent political revolts in the country.

The Problem of Educational Quality in the Region

While government expenditure on education in some MENA countries, such as Tunisia (6.9%), Jordan (4.9%), Saudi Arabia (5.6%), and Morocco (5.6%), is higher than in the OECD countries (5.4%) and North America (5.1%) (Al Masah, 2011), all MENA countries have weak educational outcomes:

> Qualitative criteria that deal with such issues as the quality of teachers, curricula, teaching methodologies, facilities, evaluation tools, guidance and counseling services, special services for individuals of special needs, and the nature of out-of-class activities. They also include the extent to which life-long educational services and facilities are available, especially within non-formal education. The progress achieved in the Arab countries according to the qualitative criteria has been modest.
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> Masri, 2009: p. 134

If the problems of educational quality in the region are not new and are partly related to the legacy of weak colonial

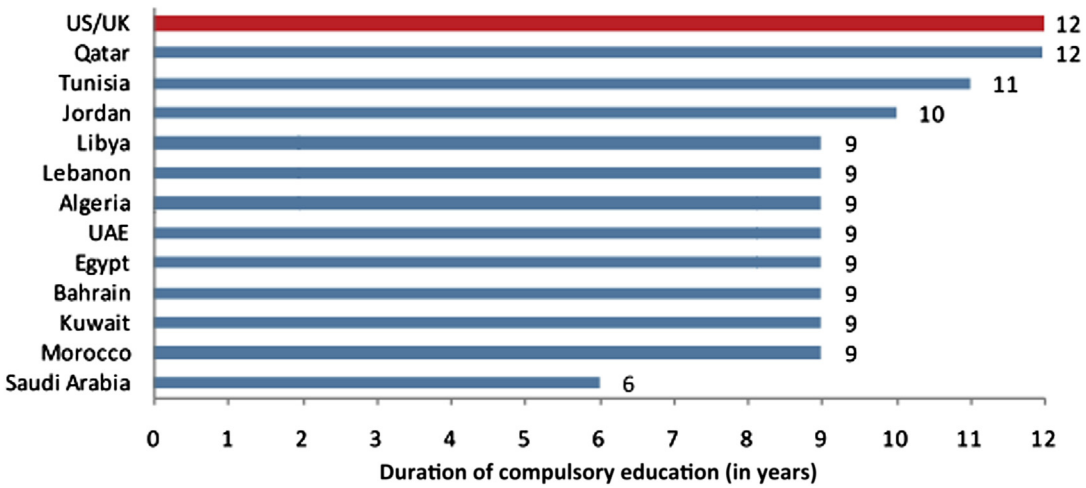

Figure 1 Duration of compulsory education.

schooling (Akkari, 2010) and poverty (Rebouha and Pochet, 2011), what is worrying is the persistence of this situation in comparative perspective (Heyneman, 1997). All of the countries in the region are facing a serious problem, that of the quality of education provided in schools. One of the most convincing indicators to realize the existence of this common challenge is to analyze literacy rate in the region. Most Asian and Latin American countries do better.

Illiteracy rates are particularly high in densely populated countries such as Egypt, Morocco, and Yemen. The illiteracy rate for women exceeds 50% in Mauritania, Morocco, and Yemen. While the literacy rate has been rising in the region, it has not risen fast enough to meet the population growth. The number of adult illiterates is still rising, reaching 60 million in 2008, 18 million of whom live in Egypt. Women have been disproportionately affected in most countries, with women representing over 70% of illiterates in Yemen, Libya, Jordan, and the occupied Palestinian territories. Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories all had literacy rates above 90% (UNESCO, 2011; **Table 1**).

Another way to approach the quality of education in Arab countries is to situate their ranking in international comparative surveys. When looking at this indicator, even rich Arab gulf countries need to improve the quality of educational institutions at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. A common problem that arises across the region is that the educational institutions do not teach young people the skills necessary to succeed in the private sector (Davis and Hayashi, 2007).

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, an international comparative study of the reading literacy of young students, ranked all Arab countries, including the rich Gulf States, among the worst performers. In Morocco, for example, a majority of students had not acquired basic reading skills after 4 years of primary education (UNESCO, 2011).

Table 1 Adult (15+ years) literacy rate

Country	*Literacy rate (%)*
Algeria (2006)	72.6
Bahrain (2009)	91.4
Egypt (2006)	66.4
Iraq (2009)	78.7
Jordan (2007)	92.2
Kuwait (2008)	93.9
Lebanon (2007)	89.6
Libya (2009)	88.9
Mauritania (2009)	57.5
Morocco (2009)	56.1
Palestine (2009)	94.6
Oman (2008)	86.6
Qatar (2009)	94.7
Saudi Arabia (2009)	86.1
Sudan (2009)	70.2
Syria (2009)	84.2
Tunisia (2008)	77.6
United Arab Emirates (2005)	90
Yemen (2009)	62.4

Source: UIS. 2012. Data Centre: UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

A survey called Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, which comes out every 4 years, revealed in its latest report, in 2007, that out of 48 countries tested, all 12 participating Arab countries fell below the average. More disturbingly, less than 1% of students aged 12–13 years in 10 Arab countries reached an advanced benchmark in science, compared with 32% in Singapore and 10% in the United States. Only one Arab country, Jordan, scored above the international average, with 5% of its 13-year-olds reaching the advanced category. Education in the Arab world lags behind that in other regions. The region had not witnessed the positive changes seen in Asia and Latin America, particularly in literacy rates (World Bank, 2008).

Internationally comparable reading test scores at grade four show that, in Kuwait, Qatar, and Morocco, over 90% of the students scored lower than the minimum benchmark, which indicates that the students have not acquired basic reading comprehension after at least 4 years of schooling. The results do not improve over time either. Math and science scores for grade eight show that the majority of students in Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Qatar are below the minimum threshold (Adams and Winthrop, 2012).

The low quality of education in the region is directly related to teacher quality. However, the number of trained teachers and their professional development are still neglected by policy makers:

> The current shortage of qualified teachers, especially at the primary and secondary levels, is due to several factors. These include low teacher wages and inefficient school management, which do not entice the best and the brightest to enter into the academic profession.
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> Maroun et al., 2008: p. 14

UNESCO pointed out that the future shortage of quality teachers threatens the goal of education for all, and requires that the Arab States create 450 000 new teaching posts, mainly in Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia (UN News Center, 2006). Furthermore, the causal link between the recruitment of female teachers and girls' enrollment and retention is direct and very significant. There is also evidence that the lack of a school close to the home raises concerns for the safety and security of girls (Alim, A., et al., 2007).

A pedagogical revolution is needed to improve the quality of learning because teaching in most Arab states continues to be highly didactic, teacher-directed, and not conducive to fostering analytical or critical thinking. As pointed out by Whitaker (2009), if this makes young Arabs well equipped for anything at all, it is how to survive in an authoritarian system: just memorize the teacher's words, regurgitate them as your own, avoid asking questions – and you will stay out of trouble. In the same way, the suppression of the critical faculties of the students turns some of them into gullible recipients for religious ideas that would collapse under serious scrutiny while making them ill equipped for roles as active citizens and contributors to their countries' development.

Despite the inability of Arab education to develop critical thinking among young people, the year 2011 saw the mobilization of youth to challenge many ossified political powers. The contribution of information and communication

technology including social networks has been crucial. Now, as large parts of the Arab world (Bahrain, Syria, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia) start the long process of democratization, a self-evident but often ignored fact is that democracy will thrive only in a culture that accepts diversity, respects different points of view, regards truths as relative rather than absolute, and tolerates – even encourages – dissent thinking. Schools hold particular responsibility on this issue.

Youth Employment, Minority Languages, and Religious Education

The issue of youth employment, minority languages, and religious education will guide the possibilities of improving educational systems in the region over the coming decades.

Education is often suggested as a solution to unemployment, but in MENA, educated youth are often less likely to be employed than the less educated. For example, in Egypt, those with the lowest education have the lowest unemployment (El-Hamidi and Wahba, 2006).

Current youth unemployment levels in the region are approximately 25%. First-time job seekers, mostly between 15 and 24 years of age, make up more than 50% of the unemployed – the highest regional average worldwide. Young people with secondary and postsecondary education face special challenges. The average duration of unemployment for youth with university or vocational education is relatively high. In Morocco, it is 3 years and in Egypt, it is two and a half. In the past, a secondary school degree made graduates eligible for a public sector job with lifetime security and social protection. Today, secondary degrees are at best guarantors of an informal wage job, demonstrating a dramatic devaluation of educational credentials and, as a result, tremendous dissatisfaction among the educated (Dhillon and Yousef, 2007).

In the twenty-first century, a typical youth in the Middle East spends an average of 8 years being educated, followed by a period of unemployment, or 'wait-hood,' which can last several years. During this period, however, pathways to independent life become unpredictable and inaccessible (Dhillon and Yousef, 2007).

Singerman (2007) argues that "the consequences of the youth bulge in the region can only be fully understood by an examination of the political economy of youth through the lens of the 'marriage imperative'." Economists speak of the phenomenon of 'wait unemployment,' of enduring long periods of unemployment in order to secure a high paying 'permanent' position with good benefits. In a similar vein, many young people in Egypt, and throughout the region, experience 'wait adulthood' or 'wait-hood' as they negotiate their prolonged adolescence and remain single for long periods of time while trying to save money for marriage. The author argues that there has been silence around the economic dynamics of marriage. Thus, many youth and parental attitudes and decisions, as well as policy interventions surrounding the school-to-work transition, make little sense without incorporating marriage into the equation. Policy makers must, therefore, consider the school-to-work-to-marriage transition when designing strategies to improve the lives of young people.

It is important to emphasize that the issue of lack of employment cannot be solved simply by schooling or education. At the same time, it is necessary that the economy of the region can be more dynamic in terms of job creation. Therefore, it is the overall development strategy that must be revised entirely if one hopes to find a solution to the problem of youth unemployment.

For decades, the main linguistic and ethnic minorities in the region had no right to use their language in schools. However, the two main linguistic minorities (Tamazight and Kurds) have seen their language rights improve during the last decade.

Until recently in Morocco, Berber languages, such as Tamazight, were not used formally in school and were only used in informal settings in areas where people considered themselves ethnically Berber:

> After independence, Berber was excluded from schools in the name of state-building and in search of a unified national identity. This forced a whole generation of children to enter school in a language they had never spoken before, contributing to a higher dropout rate among Berber children. Trouble for Berber-only speakers did not stop in the educational system. Many continued to face other difficulties communicating in hospitals and the court system, where Arabic and French dominated.
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> Ennaji, 2009: p. 19

In the year 2000, King Mohammed VI established the National Charter of Education and Training, providing for reforms in the area of education. The Charter acknowledges the existence of Morocco's linguistic issues in Act 9, Article 110, where the stated goal is to strengthen the teaching and use of the Arabic language, empower foreign languages, and be open to the teaching of Tamazight (Daniel and Ball, 2009). In 2007, nearly 300 000 students – native Arabic speakers as well as Berber speakers – were enrolled in Berber courses, according to the Ministry of Education (Errihani, 2008).

In Iraq, article 34 of the Constitution of 2005 stipulates that education is a fundamental factor for the progress of society and is a right guaranteed by the State. Article 4 specifies that the Arabic language and the Kurdish language are the two official languages of Iraq. The right of Iraqis to educate their children in their mother tongue, such as Turkmen, Assyrian, and Armenian, shall be guaranteed in government educational institutions (UNESCO-IBE, 2011). Today, Kurdish children in Kurdistan Iraq are taught Kurdish as their means of instruction in all subjects (Taylor and Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009).

The question of religious education arises at several levels in the MENA region. First, because of the religious origin of traditional educational institutions before colonization, religion is present in schools. Some reports point to the importance of the amount of time devoted to religion compared to other subjects and compared to the situation in other developing countries. Primary schools in Saudi Arabia devote 31% of the classroom time to religion (Rivard and Amadio, 2003), compared with just 20% of time allotted to mathematics and science. Furthermore, research has shown that the time spent on academic tasks is one of the key factors in learning outcomes. In fact, if the countries of the region want to improve their performance in international comparative studies, they must reflect on the time allocated for each subject including religion.

Another more controversial issue in religious education is related to the content of this teaching. Groiss (2003) focused

on the biased attitude that Saudi Islamic education textbooks construct about topics such as Judaism and Christianity, Western civilization and imperialism more generally, and the way certain historical events such as the Crusades and the Palestinian struggle are taught. Yet, as rightly suggested by Labidi (2010), Groiss addresses with great simplicity the complex issues that lie beneath the question of Western representation. The relationship between the West and the Arab World are shaped by complex colonial, geopolitical, and historical factors.

> In order to improve Arab education, mutually deconstruct Arab/Muslim and Western stereotypes, diffuse the tension between the West and Arab populations, and put both sides on better grounds of negotiation, over simplifications, inaccuracies, distortions, and decontextualizations of certain facts ought to be addressed. Teaching a selective and sanitized history that centers on oppression, silence, and denial leads to ignorance and naïve judgments.
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> Labidi, 2010: p. 213

Conclusion

Education in the MENA region has undergone vast changes in recent decades. Access to school, which was limited in the aftermath of independence, has now become the rule for most Arab children. However, this quantitative leap has not been followed by the desired effect. Not only the quality of young Arabs' learning, which is not well rated by international standards, but also the expected benefits of schooling, have been slow to materialize. The unemployment rate for graduates is even higher than for those who did not attend school. Structural changes are urgent. Educational governance of the education systems of the countries of the region is inevitable. Consequently, reform of the teaching profession should be a top priority.

See also: Affordable Private Schools in Developing Countries; Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Education: The United States and Beyond; Bilingual Education: International Perspectives; Comparative Research in Education: Iea Studies; Cross-National Comparisons in Education: Findings from Pisa; Early Education and Care in the World Regions; Education in South Asia; Education in Sub-Saharan Africa; Gender and Education; International Organisations and Education.

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