

Book Review

Hicham Alaoui and Robert Springborg, eds. *The Political Economy of Education in the Arab World*, ISBN: 978-1-62637-935-0, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 297 pages

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This edited volume on education in the Arab World sets out by questioning the need for yet another book on education in the region, despite the general consensus that more indigenous research on education within the region is essential. The volume highlights many critical education challenges as well as opportunities of and for education in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region. The book refers to the countries in question as 'limited access orders', highlighting the lack of participation in the process of education planning and delivery. It consists of eleven chapters and is divided into two parts, the first on case studies and the second on comparative perspectives.

The volume raises several points that are central to any discussion on the political economy of education in the MENA, beginning with the recurring challenge of data scarcity and inaccuracy. Within the context described as limited-access, statistical data often does a

disservice to lived experiences, which are fascinating and uncovered through empirical qualitative research. The chapters by Diwan and Benstead provide examples where new empirical data were used to ask further questions. The lack of reliable data in the region makes it difficult to evaluate the context rigorously. Available data paints a dire picture but remains opaque enough to leave many questions unasked and unanswered.

The degree of inquiry within these states is questioned through the presentation of case studies. Limited access orders, as referred to, means involving stakeholders is scarce, complicated, and in the opinion of the contributors, remains the biggest obstacle to reform. The degree to which it is welcome is also questionable but worth exploring in more depth. The case studies present empirical data illuminating how stakeholder voices were incorporated into curriculum and policy. These contributions span the Arab World, with a chapter from Meijer on citizenship in textbooks in Egypt, Tunis, and Morocco, a chapter by Kohstall on university reforms, one by Springborg on education in Egypt under Sisi, and one by Davidson on the US campuses in the Gulf.

From a comparative point of view, the authors highlight the vast differences between contexts within the region and the spectrum of political systems. The differences allow for many valuable cross-contextual comparative studies both within the Arab States and internationally. Jones' chapter on lessons from Asia as well as Grindle's on lessons from Latin America, illustrate this. Hamaizia and Leber's chapter comparing scholarship programmes in Saudi

and Algeria also demonstrates that despite different contexts, highlighting similarities allows insight into where particular political agendas converge.

Perhaps most importantly, the book illustrates that, despite the constant attempts of many management consultants, no one size fits all, and context is paramount. When considering the political economy of education, we are at the outset thinking about the returns on the investment of education in the form of more productive populations. While successful education systems are measured in some contexts through how engaged, innovative, or entrepreneurial citizens are, the book highlights how for much of the Arab World, it is estimated through how compliant citizens are at fulfilling agendas set at the top. The price of excluding stakeholders from the education agendas is a grave one. As the authors present, we have seen Arab spring uprisings as well as the lack of specialisations and expertise. The response to these tensions has led to some reform. Still, the initiatives continue to be conceived by actors that are contextually removed, often based on successful experiences in very different contexts. As Grindle rightly points out, the actors must lead the change, but other stakeholders can illuminate many obstacles; their voices should be included in the change process.

Several researchers highlight the focus on the ‘knowledge economy’ rhetoric. Diwan reminds us that there are potential socio-political returns in the form of freedoms and values beyond economic returns– but these values are not produced through education

systems in the Arab World. Other chapters highlight the hegemonic potential of education and focus on its role in establishing nationalism and obedience and how education can be used for clientelism and soft power.

The reluctance to change structures that stifle these ideals stems from nightmares of the past – revolutions in one of two directions – more freedoms or more religion. This is a tricky balance, and without a profound understanding of educational actors, systems, and spaces, recommendations for changes in the education system will be limited, if not regressive.

This leads to another question related to the role of international actors in setting policy. Whether from the World Bank or management consultancies, they tend to gloss over how power politics of the past continue to haunt the potential to move forward. Assumptions about why education endeavours are successful in some contexts can and do lead to adopting the wrong blueprints without input from education experts. There are many examples throughout the book where these attempts have either fallen short or have yet to prove successful.

The scholarship project in Saudi Arabia and Algeria highlights the value placed on learning from experts outside the Arab World. Hamaizia and Leber discuss this in-depth, but it is important to highlight an area where the scholarship programme in Saudi can begin to move away from reliance on external expertise. The policymaking context within Saudi Arabia, a country abundant in

resources, is much less siloed for those returning from abroad today and, therefore, provides an opportunity to seek systematic reforms and push against management consultants who need to be more attuned to values and context. Despite the residual patronage politics, the authors discuss, other more technical scholarship approval conditions create bigger obstacles to accessing these, such as a narrow list of approved specialisations, acceptance only in top universities, and strict minimum grade point averages.

Furthermore, the emphasis on performance is a similarly wicked problem. Benstead highlights how this plays out in patronage politics in Tunisia, for instance. Prioritising successful performance is guided by an obsession with enhancing test performance to overcome deficiencies – further contributing to a very narrow definition of educational success. Increasing reliance on international standardised tests such as PISA and the like will increase unequal access to quality education. Classroom organisation and pedagogy often mirror (exclusionary) social and institutional structures, meaning that the best performance is often a result of privileged opportunities and upbringing. Even with the eye on meritocracy in selection for scholarships or university acceptance, those most privileged will outperform others and replicate this across communities. This raises questions about structure and agency. The relative social position of a person at the beginning of their career trajectory is not only the outcome of their individual educational attainment but also of the organisational structure in which credentials have been awarded.

Therefore, it is imperative that we explore transitions between different educational levels to really establish the kinds of opportunities that are created or constricted.

The emphasis on credentials has led to a focus on tertiary education improvement. However, the much more complex change would need to happen earlier in the process, or else states continue to kick the can down the road. Unintended consequences include the modularisation of qualifications, leading to poorer quality education and less specialisation. Even if STEM subjects are increasingly prioritised as essential for advancement, the bite-size stem will not create the knowledge necessary to excel economically. Similarly, soft skills are also absent from fast-track training that could circumvent longer bureaucratic credentialing processes. The focus on technology in terms of specialisations and delivery continues to gain momentum as a lucrative solution.

And finally, a quick note on ed-tech. As rightly pointed out in the book's conclusion, ed-tech is not a solution alone. While it has allowed students to continue schooling amidst a pandemic, which in fact, bolstered its legitimacy, it has also highlighted mass levels of digital exclusion. Challenges that have long-blighted education systems globally are persistent and will remain even with the introduction of tech. Focusing on digital skills problematises individuals and makes them more responsible for their societal position, ignoring bigger structural issues. The content on edtech platforms is still produced through the same exclusionary mechanisms, with even less control from stakeholders on the

frontlines that understand the challenges of delivering education. It can further perpetuate the imbalance of power structures (with now even more input from the profit-driven ed-tech industry) that define what education means and a focus on infrastructure and access rather than quality and reform. Education technology can be harnessed for good. A narrowing digital divide means a conversation about global citizenship values online, which can bridge local values with global ones, for instance.

Globally, this has been a period where populism is on the rise, and the value of science is in decline. Regionally, the recent changes to social and economic governing structures have raised the level of awareness about shortcomings. This book provides an opportunity to engage more critically with these themes. It highlights the need for more empirical evidence to understand the region's education opportunities better. Above all, it showcases how imperative it is that the scope of education research and focus is broadened beyond that which international organisations produce to address the challenges effectively. More scholars from the region need to be involved in these conversations.