

Book Review

Alayan, S., Rohde, A. & Dhouib, S. (2012). *The Politics of Education Reform in the Middle East: Self and Other in Textbooks and Curricula*. New York: Berghahn Books.

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Samira Alyan's, Achim Rohde's and Sarhan Dhouib's (2012) edited volume *The Politics of Education Reform in the Middle East: Self and Other in Textbooks and Curricula* comprises an analytic discussion of major trends, scope and limitations of education reform in the Middle East and North African (MENA) countries. This is attempted by discussing findings of case studies on select reforms and an analysis of textbook deployment in a number of MENA countries. In terms of genre, the book's discussion critically engages with educational and policy reform as well as teaching methods and materials

to build on and expand the existing body of research...contribute to the political and scholarly debates... (take) stock of major trends in the area of school education and textbook development...(and) (assess) the scope and the limits of educational reform initiatives undertaken in recent years...with an eye towards the dynamics of identity politics reflected through representations of 'Self' and 'Other'... (Rohde & Alayan, 2012, p. 6).

In so doing, this book is comparable to other works in the genre of educational and policy reform (such as Berry & Adamson, 2011; Wang, 2013) since most case studies - such as Iman Farag's (2012) discussion of "Major Trends of Educational Reform in Egypt" (Chapter 4) - examine driving forces and contributing factors to success of education reforms (Wang, 2013). Whereas tensions, challenges and outcomes of reform arising at the interface of policy and implementation, and implementation and student learning (Berry & Adamson, 2011) are critically addressed in Mohammad Khalil Abbas' (2012) discussion on stages and characteristics of educational developments in Jordan from the 1950s until present times (Chapter 3). As opposed to other works in this genre (such as Wang, 2013), Alyan's, Rohde's and Dhouib's (2012) volume does not prioritize an account of how the discussed educational policies respond to global challenges in the twenty-first

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century; nor does it explicitly prioritize a comparative approach at MENA and/or global level. On the other hand, chapters in this volume - such as that written by Salha Abdullah Issan (2012) - acknowledge broader stakeholders in education in addressing the concerns and needs of "different societal groups and government and civil institutions" (p. 40). Similarly, Abbas (2012) discusses the deployment of "all available educational expertise and aids to carry out different educational experiments" in Jordan's 1989-1997 pilot-schools.

The book is also comparable to other works in the genre of general teaching methods and materials when discussing strategies and resources for differentiating instruction (such as Karnes & Bean, 2009); as well as the ways in which 'official' textbook knowledge "represents current and past struggles over...ideological tensions..." (Apple, 2000, p. xxiv). This is particularly evident in Atef Botros' (2012) chapter on history, memory and ideology in Egyptian history textbooks between 1932 and 2009 (Chapter 6); Jonathan Kriener's (2012) chapter on "Different Layers of Identity in Lebanese Textbooks" (Chapter 7); as well as Massoud Daher's (2012) synthesis that history and its study "must avoid projecting the past onto the present or the present onto the past" (p. 106).

A leitmotif throughout the case studies that weaves through the central argument of the volume is a critique on how, in MENA educational discourse, the politics of Self and Other come second to "economic indicators and quantifiable levels of socio-political 'modernisation' as measuring sticks of a country's education system" (Rohda & Alayan, 2012, p. 1). This argument broadens the relevance of a critical inquiry into the neoliberal agenda framing education systems in the West to the MENA region. Abbas' (2012) discussion of Jordan's educational policy between 1998 and 2008 (Chapter 3) portrays developments as framed by an unquestioned knowledge-based economy. This raises issues concerning the subjection of education to the economy (Apple, 2000; Borg, 2013; Mayo, 2013; Borg & Mayo, 2006; Mayo 2004) that is further implied in the chapter's conclusion emphasizing "the relationship between curricula and society's needs...shifting focus...towards the development of skills in advanced thinking...solving problems... (and)...the production of curricula and textbooks based on the knowledge economy..." (Abbas, 2012, p. 76). Thus, the volume's discussion invites the reader to question the nature of 'religious' forces at play by casting evidence of a "*religion of the marketplace* (italics in the source)...whereby market forces are considered too sacred to be touched by local and social concerns" (Shor, 2005, p. viii). Indeed, Abbas (2012) signals out social concerns such as projects related to special needs and child labour; as well as the relevance of students' involvement in debate and discussion and teachers' role as critics, leaders and innovators. Nonetheless, these social concerns are marginally discussed and vaguely contextualized. This calls for a critical readership of this volume -

one that questions the nature and extent of neoliberal influence on the reforms and textbooks discussed since “(p)edagogical activity is discussed not in a vacuum but in a context of an analysis of power and its structural manifestations” (Mayo, 2004, p. 3).

The volume’s enterprise goes beyond discussing MENA countries as politically unstable and/or deficient societies (Angrist, 2013; Long, Reich & Gasiorowski, 2010; James & Springborg, 2000) with volatile economies (Abu-Qarn & Abu-Bader, 2007). The volume’s analysis also goes beyond the sociological and pedagogical dimensions of the case studies to uncover links between the countries’ natural assets and their political systems; as is the case of the discussion on how Oman’s wealth of natural resources is linked to its monarchic, party-less government (Rohda & Alayan, 2012; Frayha, 2012); and on how Jordan’s human resource abundance impinges on its management of international donations for investment in education (Rohda & Alayan, 2012; Abbas, 2012).

The contributions to the volume, the volume itself and its translation into English mirror the editors’ efforts to positively exploit and disseminate efforts and research findings linked to their research fellowships at the Georg-Eckert Institute. Indeed, the Institute advocates an “application-oriented, multidisciplinary research (approach) into textbooks and educational media, informed by...history and cultural studies” (Georg-Eckert Institute, n.d.). The volume’s coverage of education in conflict zones, totalitarian states and review of anti-Semitic policies reflect the editors’ personal and professional biographies and how these overlap with contributors’ background; as is the case of Muhammad Khalil Abbas’ headship of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNWRA’s) Committee of Human Rights; Iman Farag’s expertise in forms of political mobilisation; and Nemer Mansour Frayha’s headship of educational infrastructure and curriculum development (Alayan, Rohde & Dhouib, 2012).

Noteworthy are some authors’ discussion on the value and purpose of history, particularly in Chapter 5 when Daher (2012) builds a case on how History education of Lebanese society by means of the representations of its ethnicities may be deployed to motivate “interest in public affairs and political practice...understand...the relationship between citizens and their government...foster a spirit of resistance against oppression and aggression” (p. 106). In this light, the reader may question Daher’s advocacy of “a national consensus regarding the standardisation of history textbooks in Lebanon” (p.110). Moreover, Daher is more preoccupied with the impossibility of having “a unified history textbook” (p. 109) under a central arbitrary administration rather than the likelihood of “distorting the culture of alterity” (Borg & Mayo, 2006, p. 154) through suppression and/or misrepresentation of subaltern voices in a unified text. Despite the marginality of address to

projects related to special needs and child labour, the list of recommendations that concludes the chapter addresses a comprehensive range of social concerns such as illiteracy, gender gap and governance.

The volume also features a remarkable critique of Egypt's educational policy that questions size of service and expenditure as indicators of equality of access (Farag, 2012). The discussion also delves critically into the country's policy ambivalence between empowerment and discipline; although it does not account for situations when empowerment "becomes a strategic discourse... (with) no democratic decision-making process, no collaborative or self-directed learning (Inglis, 1997, p. 4).

In conclusion, this book is successful in addressing policy and textbook review through rigorous, academic documentary research-based evidence in a time when

education reform thinking is being shaped less and less by books. As we are seeing in other policy areas, blogs, articles, and other new media are displacing books as the primary means by which intellectual policy movements are formed and sustained (Greene, 2011, p. 78).

Indeed, engagement with this text yields to a better-informed debate on processes and outcomes of policy reform and textbook adoption in general, as well as with special focus on the MENA region. In turn, this may profit readers interested in expanding the inquiry into other issues and/or other countries in the same or different region, possibly through a comparative approach.

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