

Assessing the Quality of Education in the Euro-Mediterranean Region

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Assessing Quality of Education

To properly assess the quality of education, one needs to first of all define what 'quality' in education actually is, and the extent to which this can be measured, if at all. If by 'quality' one refers to student attainment in standardized tests in such subjects as mathematics, science, language competence, and so on, then the news from the Euro-Mediterranean region has been somewhat disheartening. Statistics generated by organizations comparing achievement across a range of 'core' curriculum areas and competences have consistently shown that students from the Arab states underperform when compared to other students from countries with a similar GDP. This is true, for instance, for the results obtained in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA – a triennial international survey of reading, maths and science skills and knowledge involving more than half a million students from 65 economies), and in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS – conducted every four years to assess proficiency in mathematics and science of 9-10 and 13-14 year olds), which is coordinated by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

These assessments include the Gulf States beyond those in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in their purview. However its contours are defined, the region is clearly performing below the level expected given the participating countries' per capita income. In the TIMSS study of 2007, none of the MENA countries scored at or above the global average and most were clustered at the bottom of the table with countries that had much lower levels of per capita income. TIMSS 2011 showed some improvement for 13 countries, while seven had deteriorated. Using such international statistical evidence to compare eighth graders in MENA at different levels of achievement to an international benchmark, the World Bank notes that in absolute terms, MENA countries fail to raise even half their student population to 'low' levels of learning. While MENA has a large number of low and very low achievers, it has few high performers at the other end of the scale (see, *inter alia*, World Bank, 2008, and Gatti et al., 2013).

Another indicator of quality is the ability of the education system to positively respond to the needs, interests and characteristics of individual students, such that it succeeds in keeping them engaged in learning rather than pushing them out. Several aspects of schooling have an impact on systems' capacity to give an adequate response. These include qualified teachers, suitable student-teacher ratio, educationally sound resources, appropriate language of instruction, and so on. While there are many potential causes of student disengagement,

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high dropout rates also suggest that schools may not be adequately responding to student needs, interests and characteristics, with youths and their parents deciding that it is not worth their while to invest in formal education. While UNESCO reports that average dropout rates at the basic school level in MENA shrunk from 9.3% in 1999 to 5% in 2009, the rates for secondary level schooling remain high, with the Brookings Institution (Steer et al., 2014) reporting that in many countries in the region, more young people are dropping out of this level of compulsory age schooling than a decade ago.

Key Challenges for Education in the Euro-Mediterranean Region

On the basis of these and similar statistics, most commentators agree that education in Arab countries is in dire need of reform (Mazawi & Sultana, 2010). Criticisms are generally levelled at all levels of formal education; kindergartens are said to be either non-existent, or mainly available in urban areas and only for the professional and middle classes. Where early childhood education is provided by the State, it tends to be poor in quality with classrooms ill-equipped to implement the playful learning strategies that are most suitable for children up to five years old (Sultana, 2009). From primary right up to the end of compulsory schooling, many education systems in the Arab states are said to be hampered by inadequately trained teachers whose low salaries can hardly serve as an incentive, leading many to reserve their 'spare capacity' for after school employment which helps them make ends meet. Across the education system, the system is marked by an approach that emphasizes coverage of the curriculum over mastering it and by end-of-cycle examinations – such as the notorious *Tawjihi* – that demand rote learning rather than interactive and innovative pedagogy. This dated educational paradigm further feeds into the private tutoring 'industry,' which creates a shadow education system that has a major impact on equity (Bray, Mazawi & Sultana, 2013). Arab education also suffers, say its critics, from centralized and bureaucratic management that tends to discourage, if not squash, initiatives that respond to local needs. Most education systems in the Arab world, as elsewhere, reflect

broader social divides, so that access to better educational methods – and sometimes to formal education of any sort – depends on one's social class and gender.

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With a few notable exceptions, technical and vocational training is generally seen across the region as an educational sector for low achievers, so that it suffers from a negative image instead of being seen as an opportunity to create skilled labour. Yet at the same time, the increasing numbers of students staying on beyond compulsory school age means that many Arab universities now suffer from 'academic drift' and are overcrowded and ill-equipped, with a divide between the medical, engineering and science faculties that are considered to be the 'royal road' to higher incomes, and the lower-status humanities. The result of all this is that demand for graduates with marketable skills far outstrips supply, with many Arab governments forced to allow local and foreign investors to establish private universities, whose standards are not always of an acceptable level either.

Beyond Statistics and Bad News

The 22 Ministers of Education of the region have acknowledged these and other challenges and have, in November 2010, collectively endorsed the Doha Declaration on Education Quality. Several international agencies are offering support in this endeavour, including the World Bank. The latter has contributed to the development of the Arab Regional Agenda for Improving Education Quality, which operates as a network connecting initiatives together

for greater impact in areas as diverse as early childhood education, teacher education, the use of ICT in teaching and learning, and so on. Some of the most promising initiatives started at individual universities but have become regional in scope, as is the case of the important movement towards the use of action research in order to improve schools, currently driven by ARAS (Action Research on Accredited Schools – see <https://arasproject.wordpress.com/page/9/>) in Egypt, and TAMAM (*Al Tatweer Al-Mustanid ila Al-Madrassa*, or ‘School-Based Reform,’ with the acronym also meaning ‘all is well’ or ‘complete’ in Arabic – see <http://tamamproject.org/>).

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When considering both the disappointing results and the encouraging initiatives highlighted above, three comments need to be made. First, one must not forget the *starting point* from where the different education systems under consideration commenced. Much of the educational provision in the Arab states had stultified during the colonial period, due either to neglect or to strategic manipulation by colonial powers to ensure widespread ignorance among the populace, while cultivating the sympathies of a small local elite that was schooled in loyalty to the metropole in language, values and culture. Education, therefore, had a long way to go when these countries gained independence, and indeed much has been achieved. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has in fact increased the average level of schools by a multiple of four since 1960. Nine of the top 20 countries in the world that have increased the average number of years of schooling between 1980 and 2010 are from the MENA region. Illiteracy has been cut down by half since 1980, while almost attaining total gen-

der parity for the primary education sector. For a region not particularly known for gender equity, girls outperform boys in maths from Grade 4 to Grade 8 – a surprising finding that bucks the international trend. Net enrolment ratios for the primary sector rose from 86 to 94% between 2000 and 2010, while those for the secondary sector rose from 62 to 70% over the same period. The average public investment in education across the region as a percentage of GDP is above 5.3% – a very respectable figure.

Second, a ‘*regional*’ approach tends to indiscriminately lump together countries, and regions within countries, that are widely disparate. Jordan and Tunisia, for instance, are not Yemen or Morocco. The problems of war-torn Syria, post-revolutionary Libya, or occupied Palestine are not the same as those of Lebanon, a country with 4 million people trying to cope with an influx of over 1 million refugees. While, generally speaking, these countries share similar histories, language, majority religion (or rather, versions thereof), a youthful demographic structure, and a broad range of cultural practices, the differences are often equally striking, inflected as these are through recent political processes, internal and external influences, and popular movements that have shaped the provision of education. In the Maghreb, the language of instruction is a major problem, with many students ending up proficient in neither Arabic nor French. In Lebanon, conflicts over identity and history are major stumbling blocks. Jordan, Tunisia and Palestine have all made major strides in ensuring women’s access to education, while Morocco and Yemen still trail far behind. Educational achievement also differs greatly between different parts of the same country: students attending schools in coastal cities of, say, Tunisia, are likely to get a different quality of educational service than those registered in schools in the rural and remote interior of the same country, such as in Kef and Kasserine. Such differences are exacerbated when there are no policies in place to ensure that high quality resources – such as trained and committed teachers, and suitable textbooks – are shared equally and fairly across all regions, with priority given to the poorer and more vulnerable sectors.

Third, general statistics – such as the ones provided by the international student assessment exercises referred to earlier – tend to mask the differences

between types of schools. Some of the private institutions available to the upper middle class and elite in such countries as Lebanon and Egypt, for instance, stand in stark contrast to the mainstream government schools, in terms of all the indicators of quality associated with education provision, such as attractiveness of school premises, high level of training of school leaders and teachers, appropriate educational resources, including digital infrastructure, innovative pedagogies, and so on. Some of the schools I have visited in the region would actually put many schools in the wealthiest European countries to shame. Quality education, however, is not restricted to private, fee-paying institutions: some state-funded schools in the region provide an excellent example of the kinds of learning spaces that encourage students from modest and even poor backgrounds to invest in studying. I have had the honour

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and the pleasure of visiting several such schools in the region, from the highly impressive community and 'girl-friendly' schools across several governorates in Egypt (Sultana, 2008), to UNRWA schools for Palestinian refugees across five fields in the Middle East (Sultana, 2007). These kinds of successes are, unfortunately, rarely captured in statistical evaluations, and can only be witnessed through more time-consuming, and expensive qualitative research, of which there are few examples in the region.

Conclusion

So, while there is much to be concerned about when considering the quality of education in the Euro-Mediterranean region, there is also much that gives hope. Particularly encouraging are the number of home-grown initiatives that draw on local re-

sources to ensure that children and young people have access to knowledge that transforms communities and lives. If we have learnt anything about educational dynamics after a century of reforms internationally, it is that education systems can only change if the social and political structures that have produced them are also transformed. The epochal shifts that we are witnessing in the region, which have fuelled as much disillusionment as hope, will play themselves out over the coming decades. The outcome will shape not only the landscape in which citizens live their lives, but also the institutions they will inhabit. And that also holds true for the quality of education we will bequeath to the next generation.

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