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TRANSFORMING EDUCATION, TRANSFORMING LIVES IN THE MENA REGION

Q. Tell us a little about who you are, about some of the most significant milestones in your personal/professional life, and your most noteworthy achievements as an educator/scholar/citizen. Locate and position yourself within the socio-political and historical movements that define who and what you are, and where you 'stand'.

Nothing is as important as to be able to situate oneself when one is responsible to educate others and enter into an ongoing dialogue. Contextualizing oneself is as important as contextualizing the other in order to construct the realities that shape our world and our everyday life. We are the products of the political economies in which we exist and also the historical moment during which our consciousness was shaped. We are the product of our gender, our class and the disciplines that shaped the lenses through which we perceive the universe.

I am an Egyptian woman who grew up in the sixties of the previous century and hence belongs to that very particular generation that was shaped by the years of hope, transformation, revolution and change. I belong to the third world that was colonized and later rendered even more dependent through a myriad of intertwined interests between exogenous and endogenous actors. I have also been influenced by the more progressive components of the Mediterranean and European culture; a culture that has been rich with economic anthropologists, philosophers, Arab nationalists and materialist historians.

I also carry an international identity that focuses on the struggle for rights, justice and the abolition of discrimination and poverty. I believe in human dignity/respect and the fundamentals of goodness. I adhere to the universal declaration of human rights and the various rights based movements that are in fact all spiritually founded.

My intellectual foundations are transnational and eclectic. My background covers political economy, social anthropology and education. I come to the realm of education through a human development perspective one that views the ultimate goal of education as human liberation.

As an educator the achievements I am most proud of is the contributions made towards Community Education with a rights and empowerment framework in Egypt and the Middle East and North Africa Region. The first in-depth experience in community based education and girls' education began in the early nineties in

Egypt (Zaalouk, 2004; Sultana, 2008). Since 2005 concerted efforts were exerted to propagate rights based education in the form of Child Friendly Schools and Girls' education in the whole MENA region. Other agendas that were pursued in the region were focusing on Early Childhood Education and Development (Sultana, 2009) as well as fostering education during emergencies in several countries in the region notably the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Iraq, Sudan, Lebanon and Yemen as well as beyond the region proper as defined by UNICEF, namely Afghanistan. All these contributions were achieved during the time I worked for UNICEF in my capacity as Country Officer and later as Regional Adviser for the MENA region.

I believe I have influenced others and continue to do so in my current position as academic educator at the American University in Cairo Graduate School of Education. I believe in transformational education and have myself been influenced by the works of Dewey, Freire, Green, Torres, Lambert and the many community educators I have worked with. I think if I claim to belong to any of the educational movements it would be critical education and liberation education. Those blends of education that strive to sharpen people's consciousness, to enhance their capabilities and foster their life opportunities towards an empowered existence; the kind of education that recognizes the context but strives to change it; an education of the heart, soul and mind that can potentially bring about justice and allow children and adults to grow to their full potential.

Q. What have been some of the most formative moments in your own education? Here you can also tell readers about the individuals, movements, organisations, etc that were most influential in shaping your development as an educator/scholar/citizen.

My school as a child was an amazing one. Coming from a privileged background gave me access to the best school in the country. It shaped me as a researcher from a young age, as a leader and social being. We were organized in 'houses' which enhanced collective behaviour and identity as well as early citizenship. We had an amazing library with encyclopaedias and other interesting books. We also had very large and well equipped playgrounds. Friendship was hugely important.

At the American University in Cairo where I did my undergraduate studies I was greatly influenced by Black American students who had come for a year abroad in Cairo. They gave me a very different insight and perspective into American society and also introduced me to radical revolutionary black literature. My interest in social justice grew even stronger as I acquired a deeper understanding of racism and exploitation.

As a graduate I became more fascinated with issues of justice and exploitation and delved deeper into questions of class relations as my readings and understandings of political economy expanded. My graduate years in England in the University of Hull were truly formative. These years constituted the backbone of my intellectual existence and equipped me with many life skills amongst which the power of reflection. Many powerful intellectuals mentored me at the University of

Hull in the department of Social Anthropology such as Ian Cunninson, David Booth and Talal Asad. Both David Booth and Talal Asad had strong influences on my intellectual development. Asad, who was my thesis supervisor and now a dear friend, is one of the best analytical brains I have yet to meet.

Back home in Egypt I became engaged with rights organizations and feminist movements. I believe the collective regional work we developed as Arab women was a landmark in my perspective. Many great women influenced my vision and also led to a keen interest in girl's education in my later years.

Joining UNICEF was a breakthrough as a practitioner and policy analyst. It allowed me a huge dent into education and development, comparative education and most of all it allowed me to develop pedagogically. These were glorious moments of achievement and enlightenment as I mounted a whole initiative on community schools, girl's education and many other pathways to equity. What was most challenging and dynamic in my UNICEF experience was the possibility of self-learning and the great opportunity to mingle theory and praxis. It was also a great insight into educational leadership. The regional dimension showed how peer learning and cross fertilization could have huge potential in moving several agendas forward particularly on rights based education.

The Education for All (EFA) movement has quite an important global impact. It has the power of engaging policy makers and governments into a global dialogue that supports universal basic education, quality learning and equity. It raises concerns on issues of educational governance and marginalization. The movement has indeed mobilized more resources and efforts towards the six EFA goals overtime. The Global Monitoring Report, a serious EFA publication, has through its eleven volumes tracked the progress made. Although huge gaps remain it is still impressive to see how an advocacy movement has indeed made a difference. A very powerful leading component of the EFA movement since Dakar has been the Girls' Education Initiative and through many partnerships it has managed to make a difference for many girls in the region. The new format of advocacy adopted by the EFA players is one that is evidence based. It has created a good working partnership and symbioses between educational research and policy analyses and recommendations. It has allowed academia and researchers to shed light on best practices and to assess policies that work.

I have had the honour to have participated in both the EFA movement and the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) at the regional and global levels. During my engagement I have come across many a devoted champion and advocate.

Q. What are some of the key educational 'problematics' that currently preoccupy you? How are these linked to the broader preoccupations you may have about society? What is your response to these problematics and preoccupations, as a scholar and as a citizen?

I am currently very preoccupied with the quality of education in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Although many important improvements have

been achieved in the level of schooling and enrolment, the quality leaves much to be desired. In addition to the very large numbers who are still out of school on the regional level—some have estimated they are at 7 million—there are many more that are out of learning. They are either not learning at all or learning that which is not relevant to the needs of a country in transition striving to make a developmental break through. The most pertinent entry point selected for a reform agenda in quality education is to work on the professional development of teachers and to promote teacher education in a number of ways.

The teacher reform agenda entails working on research with regard to teacher profiles and also how teacher institutions function and support their professional development. An ongoing concern in this reform initiative is bringing the efforts of faculties of education and teacher professional institutions closer to schools. More specifically, this entails making school-based reform a reality through the establishment of teacher education programmes in schools and allowing schools to develop their own research and monitoring agenda. These activities need to be done in partnership with academia, research outfits and faculties of education. Our graduate programme at the American University in Cairo is currently joining a regional initiative that aims at fostering an action research partnership between faculties of education in a number of MENA countries and surrounding clusters of schools.

The reform agenda on teachers also involves putting in place policies and programmes that create opportunities for empowered teachers in the region that are rights holders/claimants (those who claim certain rights) as well as duty bearers of rights (those who safeguard the rights of others). These policies need to observe incentive systems as well as other social-economic services for teachers that enhance the status of the profession.

Another important dimension of teacher professional development and enhancement is the development of teacher standards, indicators and rubrics that are rights based and perfectly capable of measuring teacher performance but more importantly of guiding teacher education and preparation. Teachers in our region are mostly prepared technically. They are coached on subject matter and teaching techniques mostly of a traditional nature, very little is offered in the way of empowering teachers to develop their students to their full potential through care, confidence building, exploration, enquiry and active and hands-on learning.

The reform agenda on teachers is one that revolutionizes the methods of teacher education with an emphasis on ways in which the practicum is conducted. Schools need to be strong partners of teacher preparation and assessment. In order to foster such partnerships there needs to develop strong institutional mentorship and regulated methods of overseeing a smooth transition from teacher academic preparation to praxis jointly managed by faculties of education/professional teacher academies and schools.

Another equally important problematic is that of equity, in terms of narrowing the disparity gap and breaking the vicious cycle of poverty. This agenda entails reviewing educational policies to tilt towards resourcing the most deprived and

ensuring the hard-to-reach are not only reached but are reached through quality learning. I am currently involved in establishing quality assurance mechanisms that are mostly self-managed for community education.

Another important approach towards the equity agenda is to create opportunities for economic empowerment for community based education. This will not only alleviate and support the cost of education but will also result in a very smooth school-to-work transition. A model of cooperative education is being developed to allow economic livelihoods to mushroom around schools and become the foundation for a rich educational experience similar to the Dewey Chicago schools.

Finally it is important to study and research the extent of which education continues to be an equalizer in certain contexts. This is a research question that aims to analyze the possibility of social mobility through education. Moreover foreign and international schooling needs to be studied as a potential constraint to disparity reduction and the reproduction of class divisions.

Q. What are your reflections about the major forces that are shaping educational practice in your country/region? What are the dynamics and interests that underpin these forces, and what kinds of challenges do they represent for the articulation of an education project in your country/region?

Many forces are at play in the region. A very significant factor that has shaped education has been the dearth and misallocation of resources. While it is true that most allocations to education budgets in the region range from 5-6% of the share of national income in countries, it is still not enough if we really want to improve on quality. More of the same will simply not do. The cost of poor quality education is exorbitant and quality although seemingly more costly balances itself out with the returns on every investment made to improve on teaching and the learning environment. Most investments are made in the direction of quantity and infrastructure. To date investments in education have not shown clear returns in any of the development spheres. It has not enhanced citizenship nor has it spread a true culture of rights and participation. Moreover it has not resulted in economic growth nor have the investments created an expanding economy with an absorptive job market. Finally education has not brought about an equitable society.

Other forces that have shaped education in the region are the spread of emergency situations and the absence of security. This has led to a rapid erosion of past gains. Iraq, once so well reputed for a powerful educational system, is now suffering from high rates of illiteracy, school drop outs and a growing gender gap. Palestine, that had the highest quality of educated young people in the region, is now on the decline with reports of deteriorating achievement. More girls are suffering from the security conditions.

Hand in hand with the emergency landscape is the situation of violence in schools. Violence is so widespread that many children fear school and refrain from going based on stories overheard from siblings, neighbours and friends.

In addition to all the above are external influences such as the ideologies upheld by many a World Bank professional that will vastly reduce educational reform to

employment generation. This reductionist approach is not only fallacious but also adds to the general lack of vision most educational systems manifest. This lacuna in vision is largely behind the stalled reform efforts.

The political reform landscape in the region is also replete with interest groups that are struggling for immediate gains. Long-term development investments such as education will not secure the power positions they aspire to; hence it is not a priority. There is also insufficient political will or knowledge amongst these political interest groups to bring about the much needed educational reform. In line with this perspective little effort and time is spent in reflection and adequate planning whilst much time is wasted in not well thought out implementation strategies that end up costing more and resulting in wastage.

Monitoring and evaluation are not part of the norms in the development of policies. A culture of inspection presides with a great deal of finger pointing as opposed to the objective analyses of enhancing and constraining factors. Moreover innovations are not easily tolerated or encouraged.

A generalized culture of accountability is not well developed which makes schools and/or educational systems not answerable to the general public or communities. Schools are answerable to a bureaucracy all of which aggravates the situation and does not allow for the development of a change and or transformation impetus that is led by knowledgeable educational leaders.

Very few communities of praxis and/or of learners exist since cooperative learning is not the norm. Most achievements are not done in team but tend to be individual. The one value that is repeatedly heard over and over in the region is the need for making the educational systems competitive.

Finally there is very little respect and or investment in education research in general and much less respect for qualitative research that may result in educational theory and/or the development of strategies that work at the classroom or system level.

Q. Which authors/texts would you single out as being of utmost importance if one wishes to understand educational dynamics in your country/region? How do you use these authors/texts in your own work? Feel free to cite an extended passage, and to comment on it in ways that add further insights into your own thinking.

I believe Freire continues to be very relevant to the situation of education in the region if one were to understand the very large levels of disparity as a reflection of deep seated power relations. Most countries in the region have very different levels of investments in education, from a minimalist approach in Sudan to a far more lavish mode of expenditure in the Gulf area. Moreover, within national boundaries, most countries suffer very large levels of disparity; the North Eastern parts of Syria, the South in Egypt, the Beqa'a of Lebanon, Darfur and the south of Sudan are certainly far less privileged than the capitals and other large cities.

Voice accorded the underprivileged in the region is still not the norm. Pro-poor policies in education are not taking off sufficiently and as private education expands

the level of marginalization and disparity is made even more significant and takes on deeper dimensions as new élites emerge with a culture quite alien to local societies and where mother tongue is less and less respected.

Authoritarian power relations permeate the educational systems of most countries in the region. Centralization and total student subservience to teachers is common practice. The culture of teacher respect to students and or schools that foster trust and respect is hard to find. Some countries have chosen to adopt a transformation path towards respect of rights, yet as Freire cogently put it:

'Transformation is not just a question of methods and techniques ... the question is a different relationship to knowledge and to society ... liberatory education is fundamentally a situation where the teacher and the students both have to be learners, both have to be cognitive subjects in spite of being different ... both have to be critical agents in the act of knowing' (Shor & Freire, 1987, pp.33, 35).

Thus the trajectory is none too easy and one that requires a context and many structures that support transformation not just in schools but in society at large. It is not education alone that can effectuate change and development, although it can trigger much of it. This region is not offering the kind of pedagogy and or establishing the structures that will bring about a paradigm shift since much of the reform agendas are fragmented and not in tune with the needs for personal growth and enlightened development and change. Very little is done in making the system truly accountable. Meanwhile the vast majority of existing structures are totally archaic—separate examination and curriculum centres, inspectorates and Ministry of Education; centralized directorates managing heavy and hierarchical bureaucracies and traditional training centres—and do not lend themselves to a holistic approach with very little harmonization and coordination around a transformation vision.

Moreover most changes are affected from above. A number of countries in the region have indeed developed strategic plans, examples of which are Egypt, Jordan (through Educational Reform for the Knowledge Economy—ERFKE), Morocco, Iraq, and Sudan. Expanded national dialogue has not been part of the equation nor has consensus building towards overarching goals and outcomes of learning been the practice. Many countries have built their own measurable standards for quality education and teacher performance but the question is who was consulted and how wide-ranging was the consensus.

Education in the region needs to be treated as a social project. One that answers the critical questions many a philosopher posed centuries ago both in the west and east: What society are we aspiring to and hence what characteristics should its citizens be endowed with? As long as these reflections are not made we will continue to regard education as a vehicle that will enhance our *competitive* position within a global economy that is unkind to most citizens of the world rather than question its very existence. We will further more continue to reproduce the existing disparities that are visibly the result of the tenacious power relations most countries in the region are party to.

Q. Which recent developments/innovations in the education sector in your region fill you with hope in terms of furthering the agenda of democracy, and of equity? Which recent developments do you feel most critical of, and why?

Despite some of the bleak reflections made earlier on the MENA region, there is scope for hope as some national initiatives in the region are truly innovative and some regional initiatives as well. On the regional level I would like to highlight two initiatives that I believe leave us with a lot of hope; an initiative on teacher professional development is now at the third stage of its evolution. In the first stage a guiding framework for teachers' performance was developed to emphasize a humanitarian and rights based approach as opposed to a bureaucratic technocratic one. It introduced many of the standards and competencies rights based type of teachers in child friendly schools might want to live up to. Caring, supporting and endearing children were in the forefront of what was being sought. Empowered and autonomous teachers capable of reflection and self-assessment are what the framework strives for. A second phase of the initiative aimed at developing policies and programmes that would successfully support the approach. The framework, along with the policies and programmes, were presented to all ministers in the region in a conference in Oman in March 2010 and were endorsed by all.

A third phase of this initiative is now being conceived. Centres of excellence for teacher professional development are being reinforced and their capacity developed. Two such centres have been identified and selected for the region: the Professional Academy for Teachers (PAT) in Egypt and the Queen Rania Academy for Teacher training in Jordan. The two centres will be developing regional agendas to promote participatory approaches to reform and the development of teacher standards as well as strengthening the school and higher education institution partnerships. This will be a first in creating consultative mechanisms in countries in the region for the development of professional standards for teachers. This will widen the possibility of voice and democratic practices in the way reforms are developed. Moreover schools will become more and more the subject of research, reform and professional development as opposed to being merely the objects. This will certainly reinforce the process of decentralization and hence the movement towards more democratic practices.

A second innovative initiative in the region is one that is covering Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt and is entitled TAMAM. The initiative is one that reinforces the partnership between higher education institutes and schools though reflective and action research. These various pilots can of course all be linked to the functions of the regional centre of excellence PAT in Egypt. Moreover this initiative is one that will enhance the power of teachers to become researchers and design their own teaching strategies. It will democratize knowledge and allow teachers to be part of the construction of knowledge. Teachers who are normally not regarded as the intellectual force of a nation can now be seen as a producer of theory in education through classroom observation, reflection and analyses.

Trends that are certainly not too encouraging in the education scene are the proliferation of two phenomena: increased violence in schools is a reality in the region

and is a reflection of much frustration on other fronts. It is part of the inequity of the increased powerlessness at all levels of society and that gets acted out in the classrooms.

Another very serious emerging trend is the proliferation of private education for profit that is creating disinterested élites in each of the countries in the region. Young graduates from such schools are increasingly aspiring to emigrate to a large number of countries, having neither a sense of belonging, nor any aspiration to join the various development initiatives or reforms. Contrary to the idea of choice, the proliferation of privatized for profit schooling is more an obstruction to the democratization of education, and is based on a philosophy of exclusion and the building of cultural capital among a select few to the detriment of the remaining national populations.

Q. What comments would you care to make about the impact of globalisation and/or regionalisation (e.g. Europeanisation) on educational development in your country/region?

I have a few reflections to make in response to this question. In my view, globalization is introducing too much of the technology-driven type of culture in the realm of education. Although technology is a most welcome innovation, it is increasingly becoming an end in itself and a status symbol. It has acquired the 'magic wand' status and hence it is anticipated that with the broad brush of technology all educational systems can be 'modernized' and changed to the better. Linked to this is the trend to establish open universities in the region, even if the courses they offer are not really affordable to the vast majority of the population.

Across the region we notice that business and corporate interests are increasingly becoming involved in curriculum reform, in order to cater to the needs of the labour market, with education increasingly being reduced to vocational training. This vocationalist ideology is also apparent in the way 'standards' have become part of a fashionable discourse in education, with standards being not so much a tool for improvement but as a first step towards accreditation and other forms of market-oriented quality assurance mechanisms in a competitive world. How can accreditation work within incentives that are not market generated? Most countries in the region are in state-led types of educational systems with the exception of Lebanon, which is not really market-driven but is more driven by religious factions and ethnic groups.

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