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## **RETROSPECTIVE AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS ON EDUCATION IN MOROCCO BY AN ENGAGED OBSERVER**

*Q. Tell us a little about who you are...*

Born in the countryside my father, who was a small landowner, stems from a maraboutic family (*shorfa*). Eleven of my grandfathers and close paternal relatives have small or big shrines built on them. One of them constitutes a sanctuary where people come from all over the region of *Abda* for its veneration. This is one of the features of popular Islam. Popular and formal Islam were always intermixed in Moroccan traditional society. The status of being genealogically descendent from the prophet Mohammed's family lineage bestowed on my father important symbolic power and prestige from his surroundings (Sabour, 1993, 2011). My father enjoyed great respect although, like my mother, he was illiterate. Some believed strongly that he was a bearer of *Baraka* (spiritual power, holy blessing) and brought their sick children or relatives to be treated by him. Many were convinced that his consultation provided them with comfort and his blessing cured their diseases and alleviated their pains. I am supposed to inherit some symbolic capital from him in this matter. But as I have a sceptically and rationally quenched mind, I believe that the *Baraka*, if it does exist, can only be achieved through an individual's deeds and achievement and not through lineage or inheritance.

*Q. What have been some of the most formative moments in your own education?*

Although my father was illiterate he believed strongly in the virtue and importance of learning and knowledge. But as a devout, traditionalist Muslim and a nationalist Moroccan, and due to the French assimilationist educational policy, he refused to register me in the French school at the beginning of 1950s. Instead he put me in a Koranic school (*masjid*). There was my first initiation to literacy and Arabic and where I learnt to memorise and recite verses (*surat*) from the Kuran without understanding their content and meaning. The teaching was non-pedagogical, violent and frustrating. I was unhappy and frightened every day that I had to go to the *masjid*. Rare were the days when I was not physically punished for 'incorrect' behaviour, inattention or for mere indiscipline. Because I did have a good memory in reciting the Koran I was quite often asked by my father to entertain our numerous guests.

My father was immensely proud that I was reciting out of memory in front of his guests. Despite the attention and the warm praise I got from them these 'entertainment' sessions, they were a torture for me because I was afraid of making mistakes or of not meeting the expectations of adults. I was only five or six years old at that time.

With the advent of Morocco's independence, my father, who never liked the rural lifestyle, decided to give our land for rent and moved the whole family to Casablanca. That was the beginning of urban life and the first contact with the European French culture for me. In fact, at that time, Casablanca was the most European city in the country. But for me the change was not that significant because my father put me in a Koranic school instead of the new established French-like 'modern' elementary school. Thanks to a 'Europeanized' uncle, who fought as a volunteer soldier in Indochina with the French Army, and against the reticence of my father, I was enrolled in a bilingual school. This uncle convinced my father that '... the road to a better future for the children passes by the European educational system...'. At school we studied some subjects (such as calculus and biology) in French in the morning, other subjects (such as history and religion) in Arabic in the afternoon. But the whole structure and pedagogy was typically French. Compared to the *masjid*, the school was more appealing and 'humane'.

*Q. Can you please locate and position yourself within the socio-political and historical events that define who and what you are, and where you 'stand'?*

The political situation in post-independence Morocco has often been tense and even explosive. The French-run Lyceum where I was among the privileged-few to be selected for continuing my study was an institution sensitive to political matters. Our discussions were vivid but discrete because of the very repressive *système sécuritaire* that was implanted at all levels. Often my history professor, who was very active in the Socialist Party, gave me leaflets to be distributed in various corners and classes in the institution or an assignment for transmitting various information and organizing secret meetings with other active students. Convinced of the right cause, I took big risks by being involved in this activism. Indeed, I could easily be jailed and/or dismissed from school altogether. In this atmosphere, I participated actively in the students' uprising in the mid-60s in Casablanca and especially after the assassination of *Mehdi Ben Barka*, the legendary symbol of the Socialist movement.

During the period of what was called the *années de plomb* ('Years of Lead')—i.e. 1960 to 1970—a decade characterised by arrests, imprisonments, torture and assassinations against opponents to the regime, the intellectual and political life was stifling (see Daoud, 2007). Very attracted by reading and well-honed arguments, I was always interested by *res publica*. In a certain period in my life I was fascinated by a juridical vocation because I thought naively that by knowing and mastering the law I would be able to defend myself and to defend others as well. But I realised later on that knowing the law in a system, which does not respect it, couldn't change much.

Like many others around me, I was convinced by socialist ideology, and avidly followed progressive movements, both in the region and internationally. We admired Che Guevara, and celebrated the military successes of the Vietnamese over the ‘imperialist’ Americans. We exchanged forbidden newspapers, revues and books that had been secretly introduced into the country. Moreover, we were supporters of Pan-Arabic ideology and followed and participated in many debates on the Palestinian cause and the Middle-East conflict. We were perhaps utopians or dreamers, but we strongly believed that we could change the world for the better. In fact, in the prevalent stifling circumstances, we did not have any choice other than to act against the oppressive and authoritarian system. If we were unable to resist and change things physically or violently we did it intellectually and behaviourally.

*Q. Can you tell readers about the individuals, movements, organisations, etc that were most influential in shaping your development as an educator/scholar/citizen?*

Although it was against my will, I found myself embarking on a technical career. My father’s philosophy was that ‘technical orientation leads up to a certain profession. Any profession is good, because if it does not make you rich it could at least secure your basic means of subsistence.’ But I was always attracted by and interested in philosophy and social science. I recall my French professor of philosophy saying, on reading my essays on democracy, social justice and power: ‘Mr Sabour, what are you doing with us in the technical courses? ... Your place is in social sciences or the humanities...’.

This was to be realised many years later. By a conjunction of unexpected circumstances and as a result of the socio-political situation mentioned earlier, I decided to expatriate myself to Finland. It was the period when left-wing radical ideas dominated, or at least were tremendously influential in most of the discourse in political, cultural and academic fields. In fact, it was the golden age of social sciences. Finland was well connected to the ambient mainstream thought. Joensuu, where I resided, was one of the ‘bastions’ of radical left-wing thinking. The orientation of professors and researchers in Joensuu during the 70s and 80s was such that historians of social sciences in Finland designated the city’s university as the ‘red university’ of the country.

As a student of sociology, psychology and education, I integrated the academic world in this atmosphere, which would significantly enrich my perception and knowledge of many things. I however kept a room for manoeuvre that enabled me to have a leeway of autonomy of judgement and disagreement with the dominant ideological paradigm and perception of things.

*Q. Which authors/texts would you single out as being of utmost importance if one wishes to understand educational dynamics in your country? 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.*

Having been always interested in the role of the intelligentsia and the *forces culturelles vives* in society, I was drawn to the thought of Pierre Bourdieu as early as the 1960s. Three of his books—namely *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relations to Culture*; *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, and *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*—were a revelation for me and inspired many things later.

The initiation to his sociological thinking was to take an unexpected turn when, due to a combination of circumstances, I met one of his friends, a professor at the university of Marseille, who was lecturing at our university and who was slightly surprised to find a North-African researcher working on Arab intellectuals and living 'close' to the polar circle, geographically behind 'God's back'. I gave him two of my publications, which he showed to Bourdieu after his return to France. A few weeks later I received a letter from Bourdieu where he mentioned that if I ever were to pass by Paris, he would be pleased to discuss my research with me. He ended up supervising my Ph.D., and we were later to cooperate closely on many projects. His thought and acquaintance have profoundly influenced my intellectual endeavour and subsequently my career.

I do not agree with all of Bourdieu's sociological thinking, but it goes without saying that he has offered some efficient instruments for analysing the mechanisms of power in society and in the academic field. I have always thought that the exposure of injustice, domination and authoritarianism sociologically calls for a strong argument, a credible methodological approach, a well-honed theory, and an analysis that simultaneously conveys rigour and conviction. In my view, Pierre Bourdieu offers this possibility.

*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?*

In the Maghreb countries, and especially in Morocco, an immense effort has been made during the last five decades—i.e. since independence—in spreading literacy and in universalizing access to formal education, including in rural areas. Given the high rates of illiteracy at the start of the process, as well as the disjuncture between demand and supply due to the country's limited economic means, Morocco has nevertheless been able to chalk up some respectable achievements. Unfortunately much of this progress has remained statistical and quantitative in scope. The quality, the efficiency and the equity of the education on offer leaves much to be desired.

In fact, when we look at the official policy of enrolment at the various levels of the education system, and the resources invested, the numbers cannot fail to impress. However, when we check the outcome of educational policies in terms of school success and failure, of drop-out rates, of the percentage of those who graduate after enrolment, of graduates who are gainfully employed, of the exclusion or marginalisation of female students in school in rural areas, and so on, we are confronted by a critical situation. From primary schooling right through to

university, the educational system in Morocco lives a serious structural, pedagogical and vocational malaise.

Morocco has been able to carry out aspects of the ‘modern’ nation-building project from scratch, has managed to establish a ‘functioning’ society with its own administration and infrastructure, and has succeeded in securing some basic aspects of the welfare state for its people. This suggests that the country is far from being held hostage to lethargy, and has dynamic forces that propel it forward. One of the basic elements that give the country its drive is formal education, which has been the midwife of important changes in society. However, given that education is the reflective and reflexive image of the society which gives rise to it in the first place, the educational system(s) in Morocco is/are characterised by several dysfunctions, deficiencies and lack of foresight.

Due to various conflicts related to, among other things, political legitimacy, the division and exercise of power, economic constraints, democratic representativeness, internal upheavals and colonial cultural heritage, Morocco has often been concerned by—and faced with—pressing, short-term and urgent problems. Responses and solutions have often been formulated under pressure, mostly to tranquilise social movement demands, to untangle political crises, and to deal with urgencies and emergencies. Such action was not conducive to balanced, long-term and carefully thought-through policy required by an efficient educational system worthy of its name. In these circumstances, educational policy has often been marked by improvisation, stopgap measures, plastering over major crevices, and provisional solutions—what I have elsewhere referred to as the ‘enduring temporary’ (Sabour, 2003). In many instances changes and plans in the field of schooling and research look more like a *simulacrum* than a real, well-intentioned and credible educational policy. The simulacrum is exemplified by the way in which the different actors (e.g. policy-makers, planners, decision-makers, politicians, educationalists, and bureaucrats) put up pretence by formally articulating flashy slogans and glittering ideals—but all this half-heartedly and without much if any conviction at all. Many of these actors speak emphatically about the glorious past of Moroccan civilisation (e.g. the University *al-Qarawiyyin*), and about the creative ability and aptitude of the Moroccan educated population. But deep down they have little respectability for and faith in the quality of formal national education in Morocco, from primary school to higher education. Their contradictory attitude is exemplified by the fact that most of the ruling and political élites do not educate their offspring in Moroccan schools or universities, but rather send them to private or foreign academic institutions either in the country or abroad.

As I noted earlier, the fate and development of education is tied to that of the society that shapes it. The development of both relies mostly upon the ruling political élite that plans, assesses, legitimizes and implements the developmental policy and ideology. But the key element for all this is how the process of decision-making that produces this policy and ideology is democratically shaped. Here, as I have stressed elsewhere (Sabour, 2007), and as is the case in many Arab countries, the process of

decision-making in Morocco suffers from many deficiencies, including lack of professionalism and efficiency, an inhibiting bureaucracy, dissent amongst those who administer the system and teachers who have to implement policies which they find incompatible and lacking in legitimacy. As a consequence, teachers have low motivation, a factor which deals a death blow to quality in education as a whole. The facts speak for themselves.

The Moroccan government is not sparing expense in investing in education, and indeed, the percentage of the national budget dedicated to this sector is one of the highest in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. The survival rate to Grade 5 in 2002 reached 75.6 percent; the repetition rate is 13.8 percent in primary education and 16.4 percent in secondary education (World Bank, 2008). As a result of this inefficiency, only 12 out of 100 students who enrol in primary education reach the university. Out of these 12, no more than five receive a diploma (Achy, 2002).

Statistically, the masses of pupils and students have increased tremendously during the last three decades, but as outlined by Zouhar (2005, cited in Elmeski, p.10), in comparison with other countries in the MENA, 'Morocco has one of highest illiteracy rates in the region... [and] 43 percent of the population aged 10 and above is illiterate. 60.5 percent of this population is in rural Morocco. 54.7 percent of the illiterate population is female and 74.5 percent of them are concentrated in rural areas.'

Furthermore, according to Boudarbat (2005, p.12), there is serious discrepancy between the content of the educational system, the learners' aspirations, and the expectations of the labour market. He describes the situation in the following way: '...[H]igh illiteracy rates, an underperforming educational system, and very limited investment in research development of Morocco's largely small and medium companies have created a supply and demand situation where the educational system is not adequately prepared to supply highly skilled knowledge workers, and where the labour-intensive market has not developed enough capacity to switch to knowledge intensive production. In such an environment, it is hardly surprising that amongst the educated active population, the unemployment rate in 2002 reached 34 percent for active population with a high school diploma and 32.2 percent for university graduates. Amongst these graduates 40% are holders of bachelor's degree.'

This bleak situation is made even worse by the deplorable state of infrastructure. As Ahmed Akhchichine, the Minister for National Education, himself acknowledged, '75 percent of schools lack drinking water, 60 percent lack electricity, and 80 percent of schools lack adequate latrines' (Elmeski, 2008, p.10). Moreover, he estimates absenteeism amongst elementary and secondary school teachers to have reached 2 million days of absence, which represents a financial leak that is enough to build 100 lower secondary schools. This damning verdict is an indicator of the scope of disrepair of the Moroccan public education system.

I insist, once more, that an educational system can be changed only through the change of the political and social structures that have produced it. Without that we can only carry on playing simulacrum instead of making real and significant reforms and changes in the sector of education. So far, although few positive improvements

have taken place in some fields (such as engineering, for instance), the path that has been hitherto followed presages, in general, an educational policy full of uncertainty and haziness.

In addition to the political and ideological factors there are some social and economic facts and realities that have to be taken into account when we analyze the situation of schooling and the educational system in Morocco. After its independence over fifty years ago, Morocco finds itself without cadres, without a compatible and working educational system, and without the required economic means and infrastructure. With the majority of its population illiterate, Morocco used the 'skilled' manpower and resources at hand. In Koranic schools, *fqih* were enrolled as teachers in primary schools, even though they had no formal modern pedagogical training. French teachers, working as 'cooperants', for a while satisfied the crying needs for education in large urban cities such as Casablanca, Fès and Rabat. Unskilled teachers made up the rest of the education workforce. The rural area has in most cases benefited less from this 'universalisation' of education.

The two decades that followed independence witnessed a massive growth in population, and a tremendous demand for education. The rural exodus and the transformation in the population's aspirations and activities have aggravated this situation. The means and the prevailing policies were far below the qualitative and quantitative demands. It goes without saying that those possessing economic means and social capital enrolled their offspring in the best schools and in private institutions. The rest had no option but to content themselves with underfunded and overcrowded public schools. The State has been always falling behind in meeting the increasing demands of a demographically burgeoning population. This shortage has only been amplified with time. By the mid-1980s, the phenomenon started becoming visible at the level of higher education as well. The massification of universities, especially in socio-economic and juridical sciences, placed an unbearable strain on already poor infrastructure and facilities. Overcrowded auditoria and mediocre teaching standards produced bookish knowledge-bearers and ill-educated graduates. As noted earlier, this bad situation has been made even worse by the mismatch between the skills provided by the education system on the one hand, and the expectations of the labour market on the other. Furthermore, the inconsistency in the policy regulating the language of instruction, together with the continuous shifting in some subjects from Arabic to French during the academic life-course of students between primary school and the university make it pedagogically and didactically very difficult for those students to assimilate knowledge, in either of the two languages. This can be exemplified in the feeble command of spoken and/or written Arabic and/or French at the university level.

What are the solutions? The reform of Morocco's educational system represents a huge challenge. And many reforms were tried during the last few decades. Despite some improvements in the domain of governance, the orientation and autonomy of the educational system, starting from the primary level right through to higher education, is still suffering from acute structural problems. One approach is to strive

to provide sound basic education for all the population. Then we have to promote a rational and realistic attitude and expectation from formal education by developing an efficient system of vocational guidance. This may help pupils and students become aware of their abilities and dispositions to various occupations and professional activities. This would also help in directing individuals towards appropriate career tracks that correspond to their aptitudes and where their activity is more effective. At the moment, this sort of guidance is non-existent and the majority of students are often mainly motivated in their educational and professional choices by personal aspirations and unrealistic ambitions. One of these unrealistic ambitions is to get a job in the State sector. In the past, because of the shortage of educated manpower and the weakness of the private sector, the State has been the main recruiter and employer of graduates. This sector is relatively saturated at the moment but it is still targeted by many, even if their skills and aptitudes can be invested more effectively elsewhere. This can be explained by the job security and the prestige bestowed on by some domains in the public sector.

The inclusion of women will certainly not only correct a long-standing deficiency in gender equality and human rights, but in the long run it will also provide the ground for a more civilized and developed society. A society with educated women is in a better position to foster an open-minded attitude, to raise children who invest in and perform well at school, and who have a tolerant attitude towards gender differences. Indeed, research in Morocco has showed that female students who perform well at school often have educated mothers.

Given the different issues and realities I have mentioned above, there is clearly no quick-fix solution for the woes that prevail in the educational sector in Morocco. However, despite the acute pressures and demands, I think we should ensure that all the population does have access to basic education. This is not only an important investment in human capital, but also a question of fundamental rights for all citizens. When it comes to higher education, a preference should be made in favour of quality based on meritocracy, rather than pursuing an open door policy that ushers in mediocrity—the outcome of which is not just economic waste but also the creation of false expectations and bitter disappointments among a large and badly prepared mass of students. The disappointments and broken dreams of these students, whose ambitions and expectations are beyond their capacity, readiness, and academic dispositions, run the danger of being converted into countercultural hate and anti-establishment radicalism. This is already visible in many campuses among some student factions.

While I place an emphasis on meritocracy, I would also like to underline the fact that we should provide the support, means and opportunity to all pupils and students to fulfil their potential and to reach the highest academic levels that they can possibly attain. In other words, we should give room and opportunity for learning and academic success not only to those from privileged background, who are born in favourable circumstances and who are in possession of a large number of economic assets, but also to those from deprived and dispossessed classes and origins.



Meritocracy should thus reward individual achievement and ability, rather than favour pupils or students whose families have social influence, fame and an illustrious name. This is a question of primordial importance, key to promoting social cohesion among students, to enhancing their belief in the credibility and fairness of the educational system, and to alleviating some of the recurrent frictions and dissensions in academia. But, can we achieve that in the academic field before reaching it in the political sphere and social domain?

*Q. Which authors/texts would you single out as being of utmost importance if one wishes to understand educational dynamics in your country/region?*

Paulo Freire's approach can be very useful in assessing how the spread of literacy and the increase of people's awareness can give birth to an empowerment that enhances their will for changing their social reality. The sociological thought of Pierre Bourdieu could be also helpful in understanding the mechanisms of power structures obtained through the educational system as well as the process of the reproduction of élites and the hegemony that it is involved in. Freire's thinking provides insightful means of practical modes of actions, while on his part, Bourdieu offers a sophisticated analytical tool for assessing how power is explicitly and/or implicitly used, abused and imposed through material and/or cognitive structures.

*Q. Which recent developments/innovations in the education sector in your country fill you with hope in terms of furthering the agenda of democracy, and of equity?*

In the course of the last ten years there is an expressed will from the top ruling élite in promoting democracy, human rights and gender equality. One of the cornerstones of this policy has been the improvement and universalisation of formal education and the improvement of its quality. Many decisions and political gestures confirmed this good will. But the difficulties related the educational system are tremendously vast and structurally and economically multidimensional. This is made worse by the crippling bureaucracy, the loose accountability and the lack of efficiency and competence. Morocco has been pointed out by many international institutions, such as the World Bank, as an underachiever in education in comparison with its neighbouring countries and inside the Arab League, in general. A new policy that emphasizes the development of human resources has been initiated and a large budget has recently been allocated to support educational reform. But in the light of previous experience, one can only be cautiously optimistic and only the future will show the extent to which these projects are successful.

*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?*

Globalization, in its various economic, cultural, mediatic, scientific and other dimensions, has put more pressure on developing countries like Morocco. As these

forces are mainly based on a (neo)liberal and market-driven ideology, Morocco does not enjoy a comfortable position in the new global environment. It is rather more a policy-taker than a policy-maker, experiencing globalization as a shaping pressure rather than as a field it can influence or have an impact on. Globalization calls for competitiveness, efficiency, productivity and excellence for meeting the requirements of international standards in many fields. One of these fields covers education and knowledge. In this regard, given its insertion in the global mainstream and due to its close cultural and educational ties with Europe, Morocco opted to adhere to the Bologna Process and to impose on itself the benchmarking of its higher educational system to European and international criteria. Through various projects and reforms, and in consultation with many European institutions, Morocco has embarked on internal and external evaluations for assuring the quality and accreditation of its educational system. The processes of Europeanization and globalization have been a positive incitement to take a hard look at the education system, to consider quality issues seriously, and to promote a culture of evaluation and self-evaluation.

As things stand at the moment, Morocco has reached satisfactory levels of self-sufficiency and self-reliance in some fields—such as agronomics and medical sciences—but is trailing behind in others—such as a number of engineering branches, and educational sciences. A long path lies ahead before reaching European and international quality standards. Morocco is increasingly feeling the pressure to rise to the challenge of meeting the requirements of a global knowledge society. To secure a place under the sun in this society and to be a creator-contributor member instead of being only a receiver-consumer of research and knowledge, Morocco is obliged to develop and establish an education and learning system that is compatible with international requirements. Many indicators suggest that decision-makers are aware of the urgent, pressing need for change, but it remains to be seen how determined and able they are to make this change happen.

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