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Manifestations of Neo-Liberalised and Politically Incapacitated Societies: Educational Response to the Pandemic in the Arab Region

Nidal Al Haj Sleiman

Abstract: *This paper offers a commentary on the response to the pandemic in the Arab region and an analysis of pre-existing gaps and deficiencies in the educational systems. Due to the shortage in empirical studies in this area, this commentary was written based on current observations and an analysis of relevant literature and scholarly work, mainly Freire (1970) and Giroux (2011). This critical paper paints a gloomy picture but also offers hope for education in the Arab world. It concludes by discussing how the engagement and empowerment of teachers, students and parents can contribute to a possible reinvention and redesign of the educational system.*

Keywords: Arab region, neoliberalism, private sector, public education

Response to the Pandemic: The Digital, Economic and Social Divide

The COVID-19 outbreak has caused a major education crisis, resulting in school and university closure and disruption across the globe. Education in the Arab region is one of the sectors mostly affected by the pandemic (UNESCO 2020a). In a fragile educational system where 13 million children and youth were already out-of-school due to political and economic reasons, an additional 100 million learners (El-Kogali & Krafft 2019) are now affected by school and university interruption. Despite a series of reforms, the region remained stuck in a low learning-low skills level and poor outcomes compared to average international rates (El-Kogali & Krafft 2019). Arab education regimes have been described as tenuous, stuck in low attainment levels, and traditional; thus, struggling with serious gaps long before the pandemic (Ghanem et al. 2013). Although different countries have developed solutions and strategies to face this interruption, their response can be described as insufficient due to persisting gaps (UNESCO 2020b).

While this paper focuses on educational responses to the pandemic and the major underlying gaps in the educational systems in the region, it will not be possible to discuss educational problems in isolation from political, economic and societal realities. Understanding the context surrounding educational regimes provides a wider lens to view the problematic nature of education in the region. Response to the educational lockdown has strongly mirrored pre-existing structures and ruptures in educational organisations as well as issues of accessibility and digitisation. Only a limited number of schools in the region might have responded adequately by transferring their academic programmes into online platforms through fast-paced solutions and an effective communication process. The community associated with this group of schools mostly belongs to a minority of middle and upper middle class families or the wealthy population who could provide their children with suitable working spaces and the needed tools to connect with their academic programmes. The remaining majority was divided into three tiers:

The first tier includes for-profit medium- or small-sized private schools that provide minimal to adequate services during normal circumstances. They serve low middle class communities which have enduring economic and social difficulties, and are not entitled to governmental or corporate financial support. Their reaction to the crisis was mainly focused on coping mechanisms and cost-reduction; thus, responding with limited capacity to the crisis. Many of these schools had difficulties managing remote teaching and learning, and consequently, struggled to provide quality training and resources. Others struggled with maintaining consistent wages.

The second tier of schools belongs to the impoverished public sector which encompasses a large portion of the student body across the region except in Lebanon (Rugh 2002). Public schools and universities have been least responsive to the COVID19 crisis with a teaching body that has been enfeebled and undermined for decades. Response to the pandemic was limited to delivering content through online platforms in the most fortunate areas with limited interaction and attendance, while in other areas this was not possible due to limited or no accessibility. Some teachers used social media applications to share instructional material, whereas others used short messaging systems due to lack of connectivity in their areas (O. Al-Barghouti, *Coping with the pandemic*, Manhajiyat, 2020). In Lebanon, Tunisia and Iraq, for instance, governments allocated a TV channel to present lessons for key subjects and higher grade levels. This one-sided delivery model was available to those who were lucky to have electricity but it lacked any form of interaction, assessment or feedback. The relationship of teachers and students was completely disconnected.

The third tier includes hundreds of thousands of refugee students who were completely 'robbed' of their education due to the COVID-19 outbreak (Shuayb 2020). Refugees, who can't afford school fees in the host countries (Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq) are usually admitted to public schools where international donors pay the governments to educate them or, rather, to keep them in the region (Shuayb 2020). They are not mixed with local students due to high rates of racism and xenophobia (Shuayb 2020); instead, they are squeezed into afternoon

timings with part-time teachers, ambiguous recruitment policy and unclear guidance for instruction and curriculum, poor or no assessments, in addition to limited resources. Palestinian refugee students, on the other hand, are mostly enrolled in UNRWA funded schools, mainly in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. These have been poorly functioning due to severe budget cuts since 2018 (UN 2018). Refugee students have limited accessibility to devices, connectivity and electricity. They live in crowded houses, rooms, or tents with no adequate working spaces. In some areas of Yemen, Libya, Syria, Palestine, Sudan and Iraq where millions of people are internally displaced (GEM 2019), the discussion of educational response is poor or non-existent due to the daily concerns around safety and survival. The schools that host them are little more than conventional, poorly managed, and in many cases corrupted (Shuayb 2020). These students are now neglected in dehumanising camps among vulnerable communities where education is the least of their concerns.

Response

Given the circumstances, the educational response to the COVID-19 crisis over the last six months mirrored the existing divide. Most private schools were busy finding ways to cope and train their teachers to adjust to new models of schooling. Their leadership and teachers redesigned new forms of relationships with students and changed their academic conduct. Also, due to the economic crises caused by the pandemic, enrolment rates for 2020-2021 dropped; a situation that was remedied by cutting wages or dismissing teachers. No official response to this situation was reported so far.

On the contrary, public schools' response seemed to take place below adequate lines. The response divide was beyond digitisation, academics, and wellbeing. Teachers worked with limited facilities and limited or no training, and many of them worked based on personal initiatives. Families, however, hardly questioned this situation and official educational authorities seem to be helpless or completely absent. The intense division between private and public schools was striking and represented a history of marginalisation of a whole community that is more concerned with urgent needs. While different countries in the region might have different educational problems and deficits, the narrative of under-performing public schools and universities is mostly homogenous across the region with the exception of a few Gulf countries.

As a matter of fact, many families are destitute and helpless or absorbed in self-blame for not enrolling their children in private schools instead of demanding the right to accessible quality education before and amidst this pandemic: an Arab version of Katz's (1989) notion of the underserving poor, where people are blamed for not engaging in the system. A trope of individual responsibility and neoliberal citizenship can describe the social scene in most Arab societies. With welfare state devolution, retraction, decomposition and intrusive political apparatus (Wolford & Nelund 2013), education is not in good shape. The neoliberalisation of education has been widely normalised among most social groups whereas conversations of

the broad picture of educational goals and outcomes have been ignored. The notions of good education for a better quality of life, democracy, and social wellbeing seem to be domineered by sermons of education for employability and social status. Nonetheless, an economically deregulated private educational sector that is better structured than the public sector has not resulted in improving educational quality. According to the 2016 Arab Human Development Report (cited in Muasher & Brown 2018), overall, the quality of education is poor and student learning is disappointing, both by national and international standards. 'Education by rote learning is still in fashion in much of the Middle East' (Doyle 2018: para. 6) and youth unemployment is relatively high (Rugh 2002). Responding to the 2020 pandemic has been just another version of the pre-pandemic reality: investing in technology and communication platforms and enacting these in daily teaching processes while deeply ingrained rifts and problems are still persistent.

Historical Context

Modern educational systems in the region emerged through the colonial era (1940s-1960s) and continued to develop within the agendas of national liberal movements that soon turned into neoliberal structures forcing the constitution of new social, economic, and educational identities (Nicholls 2010). Constant political turmoil continued to impact different areas of the region; persistent occupation, civil wars, sectarian regimes, corrupted or militarised systems to name a few. At the moment, public schools occupy a large portion of the population in different countries and suffer from sluggish development and constant deficits in funding, management, training, and outcomes (Nasser 2018: n.p.). Public education continued to operate in outdated structures while private organisations were flourishing since the 1990s under different names; international, religious, sectarian, and elite schools. Currently, most private schools and universities are engaged in corporate investments, partnerships with the public sector, or with politicians, and benefit from existing or relaxed legislations which made them too powerful to be questioned. The notions of quality control and evaluation were non-existent or ceremonial. The only exception to this reality were the 'Gulf states where governments have lately invested in educational reform' and a mechanism for overseeing private schools, nonetheless, 'it is too early for them to show educational gains' (Nasser 2018: n.p.).

This complicated political reality can be described as a hindrance to the development of educational systems. Despite the development of some reputable private organisations, it should not be understood though that privatisation is necessarily equated with quality. The existing neoliberal economy supported by politicians and the socio-economic elite not only created business-like models of education, but gradually debilitated the general belief in the significance of public education especially when paralleled with an incapacitated public sector.

Neoliberalism fostered the conception of exchangeability and allowed notions of service and consumerism to dominate the social structure. It is now an inherent belief that schools offer services and that teachers serve their employers and get paid for their service. The widely accepted notion that you get what you pay for in education is a dangerous one. Families who view themselves as clients in a business-like school system, or as incapable citizens in outdated schools and societies have been deprived of social agency. The absence of educational accountability and political responsibility and the lack of social agency contributed to a declining trust and a rising sense of despair; a situation that is highly legitimised or probably misrecognised (Bourdieu 1977), due to constant turmoil and exhaustion in the Arab world.

Marginalisation and Political Alienation: Prevalent Issues of Education, Politics and Society

Decades of neoliberal economy and political instability lead to fragmented societies that are not only impoverished but politically alienated with no form of democratic participation and no hope in reform. 'With neoliberal agendas shaping the future of education many of the Arab publics are pessimistic' (Thomas 2017: n.p.), due to a stagnant political culture and immutable political structures that characterise much of the Middle East (Zayani 2014). Their engagement in political life beyond election is rather low or hardly exists (Thomas 2018). Issues such as educational quality, equity and accessibility are not a part of public conversations. Amidst all of this, educational discussions and demands of improvement seem to be a privilege; in many cases these demands were politicised and blue-pencilled.

What Does the Educational System Look Like?

The socio-economic and political state of the region resulted in a poorly governed public sector that is constantly drained and disempowered where teachers were vulnerable bearing the cost of working in a defected system or facing the threat of unemployment. The private sector, on the other hand, is totally or partially owned by the political minority or their partners, whether local or multinational corporations, and serves corporate or combined corporate and political agendas. Their staff and teachers are trained to teach towards ensuring high test scores that are advertised to secure high enrolment rates of those who are willing to identify with a specific social class or simply reproduce their status. Conformity and compliance as well as service and survival are the norms. Leaders and teachers are expected to comply rather than to lead. Leading is minimised to managing and reproducing rather than functioning as reflective 'public intellectuals who contribute to creating critical consciousness or social development' (Nicholls 2010: n.p.). Their role is confined to content and product-delivery rather than promoting critical thinking and social identity (Freire 1970). Decades of denying productive dialogues with teachers and leaders and reducing the scope of educators' and families' engagement to one of demand and supply have resulted in the absence of an

educational identity, ideology and direction. The fact that this reality is not problematised in the Arab world is highly concerning.

The teaching profession has been a victim of multiple policies which consistently de-empowered teachers by censoring or restricting their unions, if they ever existed (MEE 2020). Decades of privatisation and neoliberalism aligned with the impoverishment of the public sector and insignificant public accountability systems, as well as poor democratic infrastructure, fragile laws, low income and minimal professional development created a sense of despair. On the other hand, private schools were supported in different ways, through political or economic partnerships, particularly, in terms of training, technology, and digitisation (Nasser 2018: n.p.). However, the same neoliberal discourse governing the private sector made teachers economically insecure, exposed to harsh management decisions, performative work styles, payment cuts, overworking, or being randomly dismissed. This is particularly dangerous in countries where social welfare systems are absent, and political accountability is missing. As a result, most teachers in the private and public sector alike were left to face this pandemic alone with no professional bodies to rely on.

Why Does This Matter?

The general absence of a collective interest in improving accessibility to modern education, teaching quality, curriculum, and educational outcomes in the region reflects a perilous inclination towards marginalising education and relegating freedom and human development. According to Freire (1970), education that does not promote critical social consciousness is eventually harmful because it transforms people into subjects rather than agents. The more critical part is subjectivising teachers and leaders, deprofessionalising them, and denying their social agency.

Although the pandemic did not reveal unknown facts about educational systematic gaps in the Arab world, it contributed to expanding the learning crises by maximising the size of the marginalised population and reducing the margin of the privileged minority. 'While neoliberal fascism' and political corruption are 'circulating' around most Arab societies and their 'harmful impacts have been normalised' (Giroux 2020: n.p.), a contextual understanding of educational issues is needed as well as a thoughtful review of the reasons leading to the side-lining of educational problems as trivial issues. Marginalising educational discussions around national curriculum goals and priorities, key learning gaps, and disconnecting schooling from broader social goals cannot be incidental. It is a major problem that has led to an educational crisis in the region for many years and has resulted in detrimental influences economically, socially, and politically. It is also a critical indicator of what the region will look like over the next few decades. While educational reform is strongly needed, it should not be only based on school improvement, funding, and digitalisation; it should also focus on citizen engagement, stability (Doyle 2018) and social justice.

Is There Hope?

While the tone of this commentary might seem anxious and pessimistic, it is through this anxiety and critique that we can imagine a new reality and conceive a sense of hope. Education that is based on critical thinking, cognitive engagement and dialogue is key to the development of our educational systems. It is also a matter of planning, funding, digitisation, accessibility and teacher training. A path that empowers teachers, students and families is strongly needed where they can act as ‘critical agents who can hold power accountable and work in the future to eliminate the economic, political, and educational conditions that allow such pandemics to erupt in such death dealing forms’ (Giroux 2020: n.p.). While we need to acknowledge the complicated situation, a serious conversation can help to revive education as a means of social and human advancement. ‘A pedagogy of denial will not be helpful’ (Nicholls 2010: n.p.). Raising these difficult questions might be a starting point to addressing complicated educational problems in the region. According to Giroux (2020: n.p.) ‘a discourse of anxiety should give way to a discourse of critique and a discourse of critique should give way to a discourse of possibility, and a discourse of possibility means that you can imagine a future very different from the present’.

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