

Education in the Middle East: Introduction

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Education is a unique tool of inquiry for the social scientist for the very simple reason that the kernel of meaning and values in society are embedded in education. Indeed, it would be difficult to overestimate the centrality of education in society.

Education—the body of texts, ideas, and concepts transmitted in the educational system—forms people’s intellectual and cultural perspective, their value system, their worldview or *Weltanschauung*. Education is not only a body of knowledge, but also the manner of arriving at knowledge. It encompasses not only technology and science, but also more fundamentally, knowledge of the more general and all-encompassing sense of culture and tradition, morality and religion, history and politics, philosophy and cosmology.

These “realities” of “knowledge,” however, are neither random, inevitable, nor all-inclusive. Rather, education is subject to “created” parameters—of which traditions are *excluded*, of which theories are *invalid*, of which ideas are *unacceptable*, of which gender roles are *immoral*, of which versions of the past are *inaccurate*, of which religious understandings are *unorthodox*.

The educational system transmits, confirms, validates, and perpetuates the knowledge, ideas, and concepts that have emerged as dominant, central, and “true.” However, the educational system masks the competition that this entails—intellectual competition, but also competition for hegemony amongst the political, social, historical, cultural, and religious actors who have a stake in the outcome. While portraying certitude, the educational system and larger field of intellectual actors are the creators, or at least shapers, of all of this seemingly “true knowledge” or “reality.” One cannot, and must not, therefore divorce the educational system as the purveyor of these created sets of knowledge, from the larger socioeconomic, political, and cultural contexts in which it operates. As such, education is a fertile hunting ground for historians and other scholars eager to track down the fields, relationships, and competing powers in society. The study of education uncovers the footprints of the social values and interactions in society.

The educational system, as the site of contested “realities,” is the central stage on which the discourses of power play themselves out. Education may perpetuate the status quo, providing the training or at the very least, the educational credentials and/or certification, to confirm status, yet it is also the handmaiden of revolutions—providing access to those who had been kept outside the halls of power and validating a change in power. The educational system is as frequently called on to create and legitimize historical traditions, as it is to debunk them in favor of others. It has often worked hand-in-glove with the Church and/or the religious establishment to purvey notions of religious orthodoxy and a religious-based morality; yet education, once wrested from the monopoly of the religious establishment, may challenge these func-

tions and promote secular-based morality (or, more often than not, some combination of both). It is essential, therefore, to examine not only *which knowledge and worldview* the educational system is promoting, but also in *which ways* they are connected to their social, economic, political, cultural, intellectual, gender, and religious actors, and how this struggle, in turn, is one of establishing dominance of some intellectual constructs over other, excluded ones.

There are many fruitful avenues of inquiry into the realm of education. Much attention has been paid to elite educational projects, investigating how elite statesmen and political leaders have attempted to construct educational systems to serve their various needs. Such studies focus on how various theories of education come to be manifested in an educational system and how the educational system serves to promote the goals engineered by the political elite. The inquiry into the gradual crystallization of educational theory into practice and the politics of education at the highest echelons of power are important and necessary subjects of study.

It is also crucial to investigate the ways in which these dominant educational theories and institutions impact and are themselves impacted by other actors—the religious establishment, reformers, women, and provincial elites, to name a few possibilities. For example, the construction of gender, a growing topic of inquiry, turns out to be integral to society and “tradition” in ways that we are only beginning to uncover. Likewise, the study of education provides critical insight into attempts to more fully understand notions of modernity, the “new citizen,” and the modernizing projects that envisioned them.

However, other angles of inquiry deserve attention. For example, while it is important to analyze intentions and goals, projects and visions, it is equally crucial to study how these projects were actualized, mediated, and manipulated. We must compare goals with their results, projects with their effects, and visions with realities. It is essential that studies of education look not only at how institutions were intended to work, but also at the actual results that they engendered and how results varied in different contexts: geographic, temporal, ethnic, religious, political. More often than not, educational institutions had unintended results, unanticipated effects, and looked substantially different in their local interactions in practice than they did on the sultan or president’s drawing board.

This volume of *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* is devoted to education. The articles are important new contributions to the study of education and represent a broad spectrum of approaches and topics available to the social scientist. The book reviews cover some of the most significant recent books on education. This volume is thus intended to draw together the most recent methodology, topics, and work in the field of education.

The articles cover a wide geographical and chronological spectrum: from Egypt to Indonesia, India to England; from Istanbul to Albania, the Ottoman Empire to Republican Turkey and Egypt. Taken together, they illustrate the facility of education to illuminate the scene behind the scenes, the line between the lines, the discourses of power that constantly contest and are contested by society, culture, tradition, religion, and politics. All of the articles challenge simplistic and unidirectional versions of history, forcing us to re-consider and re-complicate our understandings.

Betty Anderson charts the gradual formation of a Jordanian nationalist identity through a close examination of school textbooks. She explores the ways in which this identity in turn suggested certain political and social stances towards Middle Eastern politics, history, and tradition.

Isa Blumi rejects the current understanding of the Hamidian educational project's effect on Albanian religious and ethnic identity. He forcefully argues that state-led education was mediated in Albania itself by local elites and various religious, linguistic, and ethnic groups and that its effects in the local context varied dramatically from Istanbul's presumptions.

Michael Fisher provides a close-up view of how social and cultural status were conveyed and contested in the British-Indian colonial experience. Drawing on the experiences of a number of Indian teachers of Persian in British government training schools in England and India, he demonstrates the paucity of essentialist conceptions of "colonialism," "ethnicity," "language," and "class" in understanding the Indian-British relationship in the colonial period.

Benjamin Fortna examines social and cultural attitudes towards the phenomenon of reading in the Hamidian and early Republican period in Turkey, focusing not only on the status of the reader, but also on the social function of reading itself. He concludes that this transitional period defies strict categorization, instead arguing that as a vision of a "new world" emerged, identity, ideals, and notions of religion, polity, and society were in flux.

Vickie Langohr compares religious reform groups in Egypt and Indonesia in order to highlight the ways in which these groups co-opted and undermined colonial educational projects. She thus illustrates the more complex nature of colonialism and rejects the strict dichotomies of "state" and "society" in the educational context.

Mona Russell uncovers the debates surrounding schooling in Egypt in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and tracks how these debates shaped the educational institutions in different ways for boys and girls. She rejects a simple reading of Egyptian educational goals as either "colonial" or "nationalist," instead arguing that elite politics and interests in both periods were both more fluid and had more intersections than has been allowed.

Barak Salmoni illustrates how the figure of the school-teacher came to epitomize the Turkish Nationalist project, with the state schools serving as "societies-in-miniature." He demonstrates how the tensions between authoritarianism and democracy, control and liberty in the political context, played themselves out on the stage of educational theory and practice.