

Cultural Sociology of the Middle East 1920 to the present

Educational Reform

Educational reform in MENA has historically been instituted in response to larger political movements or events, most notably states' colonization and subsequent independence. However, national educational reforms have also been initiated by other political events, including conflict and the rise of a new leader. Earlier waves of reform focused narrowly on establishing and expanding modern school systems and nationalizing official texts. More recent waves of reform have focused on improving educational quality through curricular changes, professional development and privatization.

Prior to colonization, schooling in the MENA region took the form of Islamic education, which consisted of reading and writing the Arabic language, memorizing the Qu'ran, and studying the traditions of the Prophet Mohammed (*ahadith*) and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Islamic education was reserved for boys only, who were taught in multi-age groupings under the tutelage of an Islamic scholar, often in mosques or religious schools known as a *madrassa* (plural: *madaris*).

Colonization, during which most MENA region nations were under the control of either Britain or France, transformed traditional religious schooling in the MENA region and established the roots of modern MENA educational systems, based on the European model of secular public schools. The colonial powers created age-grade schools with instruction in the colonial languages, sciences, history and math. Although colonial schools served only a small number of MENA region students, as the colonists' primary aim was to create and sustain a local bureaucratic class capable of implementing the colonizers policies, in many ways, these colonial schools were responsible for modernizing MENA educational systems and setting the foundation for future expansion.

Post-Independence Era Reforms

After independence, colonial educational systems were adopted and adapted to local needs. The post-independence era of educational reform had twin goals. First, MENA region governments focused on forging national identities and emphasizing distinct cultural heritages through nationalizing school curricula, specifically history and citizenship texts, Arabizing of all levels of schooling, and promoting religious education to emphasize cultural identities as distinct from those of the colonizers.

Second, MENA region nations attempted to expand access to primary school to all citizens. National governments made primary schooling free and compulsory for all children, with a focus on girls and students in rural areas. Reforms emphasized primary school construction, hiring and training local teachers and attracting students. By the turn of the millennium, approximately five decades after their independence, many MENA region nations have neared a 95% net enrollment rate in primary schooling. However, on average, only 86% of boys and 81% of girls of the relevant age are enrolled in primary education in Arab States.

Additionally, despite a huge gender gap in educational access, MENA region nations have worked to equalize educational opportunities for girls and boys. In approximately half of all MENA countries, female primary school attendance rates are equal or greater than boys'. In nearly all others, the female to male attendance ratio is greater than 90:100. The exception is Yemen, where only 75 girls attend primary school for every 100 boys.

Arabization has been one of the most important and controversial educational reforms in the MENA region. Arabization aimed at reclaiming MENA nations' linguistic heritage and re-establishing Arabic as the primary language of instruction at all levels of the education system. However, initially after independence Arabization policies contributed to nations' lack of teachers, as many local teachers had been trained in the colonial languages and were not prepared to teach in Arabic. More recently, students' lack of fluency in European languages, and specifically English, has often been criticized as an impediment to scientific development and global integration in many MENA nations.

More recent waves of educational reforms have turned the focus to improving the quality of student educational outcomes. Recent reforms include seeking to reduce repetition rates and increase high school graduation rates. Additionally, many countries have sought to improve the relevance of the curriculum and the quality of teaching through a focus on professional development. Others have revised textbooks to make them more student-centered.

Higher Education Reforms

In nearly all MENA nations, excluding Palestine and Lebanon, national universities have historically been free and open to all high school graduates. However, reforms instituted in the late early 1990s as part of larger economic restructuring and liberalization, introduced private higher education institutions in many parts of MENA, including Jordan, Tunisia and the Gulf. The trend of privatization is growing rapidly today, as many countries seek to offset the costs of universities, and as citizen demand continues to put pressure on governments for greater access. Other cost-sharing innovations in MENA higher education systems include instituting fees for certain fields, establishing open or weekend-based courses, and creating virtual universities. In addition, recent reforms in North African nations have focused on degree restructuring to a Bachelors-Master's-Doctorate system that aligns requirements to those of Europe.

See also: School Day

Further reading:

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