Educational policy in Algeria: The Incessant/ Improbable Quest for Quality

السياسة التربوية في الجزائر: البحث المستمر / غير المحتمل عن الجودة

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Abstract:

This article addresses the topic of quality education in Algeria and in the world at large. It endeavors to find out what quality education is and if it is ever achievable. The article argues that the notion is a misconception and a losing battle, as the true goal of its godfathers is completely at odds with their stated claims. The article in no way denies the existence of quality but simply recommends that countries, such as Algeria, aspiring to improve the performance of their education should follow their own path, taking into account their realities, their potential and their goals, and not blindly emulate the experiences of other nations.

Key words: Algeria, Education, Misconception, Quality, System

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ملخص:

يتناول هذا المقال مسألة جودة التعليم في الجزائر وفي العالم بشكل عام. يسعى المقال إلى معرفة ماهية التعليم الجيد وما إذا كان يمكن تحقيقه على الإطلاق. يجادل المقال بأن الفكرة مجرد مغالطة ومعركة خاسرة لأن الهدف الحقيقي لعرابيها يتعارض تمامًا مع ادعاءاتهم المعلنة. المقال لا ينفي وجود جودة التعليم بل يوصي بأن تتبع البلدان، على غرار الجزائر، التي تطمح إلى تحسين أداء نظامها التعليمي، مسارها الخاص، مع مراعاة واقعها وإمكانياتها وقبل كل شيء أهدافها، وعدم محاكاة تجارب الدول الأخرى بشكل أعمى.

كلمات مفتاحية: الجزائر، تعليم، مفهوم خاطئ، جودة، نظام.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The quality of education is one of the objectives that most countries in the world say they seek to achieve. While some countries like Finland and Singapore, to name but a few, are held up as role models for providing quality education to their children, other nations are working hard to catch up. Still, there are countries where the concept of quality of education, if not entirely absent from their agenda, is only present in the rhetoric of officials. In post-independence Algeria, due to certain objective circumstances, emphasis was primarily placed on educating as many people as possible using the very few means available at the time. The concept of quality was not on the agenda as it would seem like an illusory dream. However, as the country matured, the discourse on quality gained momentum and became more and more present in the debates of actors in the

education sector. The successive governments set the objective of achieving quality education as a priority but the endeavor has so far failed to fully materialize despite the huge investments in human and material resources. The failure is due in part to the lack of clarity of the rationale and the objectives sought from the reforms. Oftentimes, reforms are either introduced just for the sake of reform or a foreign school system impresses the education officials who hasten to implement it regardless of its relevance to the country's social and cultural realities and, more importantly again, to its real needs. The failure is also due to the sharp ideological conflict between the Algerian elites, more precisely between the self-proclaimed advocates of modernity and the self- designated defenders of identity. Each party seeks to impose its vision on how to achieve quality in education. Any attempt at reform made by one party is promptly distorted and rejected by the other, making hope for an improvement in the performance of Algerian education system illusory, at least in the short run.

2. A Historical Overview: the Genesis of Algerian Education

At independence, the literacy rate among native Algerians did not exceed the derisory figure of 10% (Heggoy, 1973). As for formal education, it was highly exclusive and oriented towards the training of the French colonial elite (Clark, 2006) and the perpetuation of the European cultural pattern. When the French left Algeria in 1962, the education system was in complete disarray, and enrollments in primary schools ranged between 700,000 and 800,000 (Entelis 2016). Teachers were hastily trained or recruited from abroad and classrooms were

improvised, many in the vacated homes and premises of former French residents (Education, 1993).

In the higher education sector, the picture was no less bleak. The newly independent nation inherited only three higher education institutions based in the towns of Algiers, Oran and Constantine. Some of these institutions were installed in former French military barracks. There were less than 2,000 students, of whom only 1% were women (Nabeel, 2022), and a total of 250 teaching staff. Obviously, access to university was almost impossible for students living outside the three above-mentioned cities because of poverty and the lack of accommodation; there were no or not enough hostels of residence to accommodate all the students, however few they were.

Faced with this situation, the leaders of independent Algeria set about to redesign and reform the national education system to bring it in line with the country's new realities and needs. The creation of the Ministry of National Education in 1963 marked the birth of Algerian National Education and the beginning of a long and arduous journey to achieve a national educational system. Likewise, the creation of the Ministry of Higher Education in 1970 announced the birth of the Algerian university which had hitherto been merely a subsidiary of the French universities both in the language of instruction and in the programs taught.

Contrary to some misconceptions, and to give everyone their due, the leaders of independent Algeria considered education as an issue of utmost importance. They saw it as the locomotive of the reconstruction and the development of the country, especially with the massive exodus of the French cadres

and the urgent need to manage the affairs of the various sectors of the nascent state. Hence, Algeria made rapid and significant financial investments and carried out a series of systemic reforms, making education free, entirely centralized and compulsory for all children aged 6 to 15.

Concretely and succinctly, the Algerian State's commitment to education is reflected in the budget allocated to education. The latter has always more or less approached a third of the state budget (Metz, 1994). Even in times of economic crisis when the different governments routinely resort to freezing construction projects, schools and hospitals continue to be built despite financial difficulties. This commitment is also reflected in the benefit for all students, without discrimination, from the university scholarship and from free housing in the universities' hostels of residence. This is unheard of in most countries.

In the long run, these investments and efforts have paid off. Everyone, including the international institutions, which rarely issue reports favorable to Algeria, agrees that the country has made tremendous strides in education at all levels (Singh, 2015). The figures speak volumes. Algeria which had less than one million children in school now totals more than eight million. The higher education system is no exception. Today, it has over 1.7 million students, 60% of whom are women, for a total teaching staff of 54,000. The university network represents over 130 higher-education institutions, which include universities, institutes of higher studies and national schools (The Higher, 2019).

The figures, if any thing, testify to the impressive efforts made by the country's leaders and to the great importance they attach to education, especially given the high rate of population growth in Algeria during this time. The country's population more than doubled between 1970 and 1990, and the number of students enrolled in school increased from less a million in 1962 to 7.6 million by 1998 (ONS, 1998). The figures also testify to the state's success in establishing a national education system independent of that inherited from colonialism. However, it is clear that if Algeria has largely won the bet of quantity, there are complaints that quality still leaves something to be desired. But what is quality in education? Does Algeria really need it? Will it be of any use to it?

3. Quality Education: the ins and outs of an idea

Interestingly and, above all, very revealing, the concept of quality education did not emanate from the educational community, but originated and developed within the economic and financial circles related to industries and products. As the latter have no other objective from any endeavor but material profit and nothing else, we, as educators, are entitled to question the genuineness of the idea and its long-term implications for the educational process.

Chronologically, the concept of quality education appeared for the first time in 1981 at the hands of the US Secretary of Commerce, Malcolm Baldridge, who called for the implementation of the concept of total quality not only in the sector that he represented, by virtue of his official position, but extended his action to education. Following Baldridge's call, or rather his order, Terrel H. Bell, Ronald Reagan's first Secretary

of Education, immediately acquiesced and appointed an 18-person commission to examine the state of American schools and come up with solutions to address their shortcomings.

Bell tasked the commission with addressing what he called "the widely held public perception that something is grossly negligent in the US education system". The commission included twelve administrators, one businessman, one chemist, one physicist, one politician, one conservative activist and one teacher. No students or recent graduates. No everyday parents. No representatives of parents' organizations. With just one practicing teacher and not even a single academic expert in education, the commission would examine and decide what should be done on the issue in the absence of the people concerned (Babones, 2015).

At the end of its two-year meetings, the committee, of which only one teacher was a member, presented its report to the Education Secretary, who in turn referred it to the President. The report, titled: 'A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform', painted a bleak picture of the American school, going lengths to equate it to a threat to national security (Scherer, 1983). Regardless of the validity of the conclusions of the report, many of which are pertinent and do apply to the education systems in many countries, no keen observer would fail making the following remarks:

That the initiative to "reform" education did not come from the concerned department namely, the Department of Education but from another body that had nothing to do with the issue. The second remark is that the Department of Education, assuming

reform was necessary, failed to do what it should be doing, had to wait to be told what to do, and was quick to respond. The icing on the cake was the composition of the commission set up to diagnose the flaws in education. Out of 18 members, there was only one teacher.

No sooner had the results of the report been published than the educational community around the world caught up with in the idea. The quality of education and how to achieve it has since become a source of great concern for those working in the field of education. But, what does quality mean in the context of education? There are many definitions, testifying to the complexity and versatility of the concept. Nonetheless, there is a broad but vague consensus that quality education should be inclusive and equitable, characterized by quality learning, promoting lifelong learning and relevant to holistic development (Stabback, 2016).

Like any new idea, quality education has been controversial and has divided the educational community into two opposing camps. On the one hand, its proponents, citing Finland, Singapore and a few other countries as role models to follow, argue that access to poor quality education is tantamount to no education at all. They hold that there is no point in providing the opportunity for a child to enroll in school if the quality of the education is so poor that the child will not become literate or digital, or will not manage to acquire critical life skills (Quality, 2014).

On the other hand, the opponents reject the concept of quality education as empty rhetoric, rather a fallacy. They argue that while the environment in which the learning takes place can

significantly facilitate or hinder the process, the learning outcomes are based on three main factors: how naturally talented the learner is, how much effort he puts into his learning, and how optimized his learning process is. To them, obtaining a good education depends on the exclusive effort of the learner himself (The Factors).

As for highlighting the models of Finland, Singapore and other small-scale countries as examples to follow, the recommendation lacks rationality and genuineness, not to say it is just an oversimplification of things. These small countries have taken advantage of their low demography, their relative wealth and most importantly their position as vassal states to introduce revolutionary approaches to teaching and learning. But how many countries in the world can afford the luxury of quality education the Finnish or Singaporean way? Many of them struggle to meet the basic needs of their population. Even in the United States, the most powerful and developed country in the world where the concept of quality education originated, educators have come to realize that the Finnish or Singaporean experience did not suit their country. In the words of Jason Culbertson, managing director of Insight Education Group:

Walk into an education conference or join a social media chat today and you may notice, as I have, a bit of a Finnish Fatigue or a Singapore Slump. Educators are realizing that exporting these models to a large country of 50 states, thousands of local education agencies, and a diverse mix of students and social challenges doesn't always work (Culbertson, 2017).

There are educators who go far in rejecting the concept of quality education, seeing it as a ploy, a veneer that hides goals that are harmful to the right to education in the long run. For Greg Wieman, a retired educator with a doctorate in instructional leadership from Eastern Michigan University, the target of the concept of quality godfathers is to dismantle public education. He accuses them of deliberately creating negative perceptions of institutions and ideas, without logic or reason. Dismissing their claim that public education fails American students as a big lie, he argues that public schools have always served students well and fulfilled their purpose (Wieman, 2022).

Along the same lines, Salvatore Babones, an American sociologist and an associate professor at the University of Sydney, asserts that the education reform from which the concept of quality arose is nothing but a war declared by the American right on public schools. According to him, "Pro-business conservatives see U.S. public education budgets as pots of gold to be mined for private gain" (Babones, 2015).

Better still, David Franklin Noble, American historian and critic of technology, science and education, maintains that behind the concept of quality hides a desire to do away with democratic higher quality education, which, , by the way, has never ceased to exist before the advent of the new concept. He warns that in the future quality higher education will be the privilege of the well-to-do and the well connected. In his words:

Quality higher education will not disappear entirely, but it will soon become the exclusive preserve of the privileged, available only to children of the rich and the powerful. For the rest of us a dismal new era of higher education has dawned. In

ten years, we will look upon the wired remains of our once great democratic higher education systems and wonder how we let it happen. That is, unless we decide now not to let it happen (Noble, 2002).

Noble's warning seems to have come true as opportunities for higher education for ordinary people have been considerably shrinking ever since. Sara Dahill-Brown, associate professor in the politics and international affairs at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, asserts that:

Evidence suggests that access to higher education in the United States has become more stratified in recent decades, with a growing concentration of wealthy students attending the most selective of colleges and access to the best institutions of higher learning increasingly constrained for low-income college hopefuls (Dahill-Brown, 2016).

Far from the conspiracy theory, one is tempted to wonder if the whole story of quality education is not aimed at doing away with education itself. It is worth noting that educational reforms aimed at achieving quality education have had disastrous results in most countries, including developed ones. The more there are reforms, the less performing the learners are. By way of example, more than 50% of young French pupils studying in sixth grade do not read well (Toscano, 2022). Still in France, some studies indicate that children who made "less than 5 mistakes during dictation were 31% in 1987 and today they are only 8% (Conruyt, 2022).

From the foregoing, we can conclude that the concept of good education is not and should not be a valid ready-made

recipe that the countries of the world, especially developing ones, should take at face value. All that glitters is not gold, the saying goes and the nations that aspire to improve their educational performance must do so from within according to their priorities, potentials and needs. There is no harm in seeking inspiration from outside experiences, but these must be adapted to the realities of the country and not the other way around.

4. The Algerian School Today: the crippling burden of ideology

There is a broad consensus that education in Algeria has taken a big leap from where it was during the first post-independence decade. There is as large a consensus on the fact that despite the huge investments in the sector, the Algerian school has soundly failed to fulfill its mission, which is to contribute to the development of the country, by providing, among other things, well-trained managers, teachers, doctors, etc, or at least by producing good citizens. There is an almost unanimous agreement that this failure is largely due to the ideological conflicts that have always plagued the educational process and prevented it from carrying out the task entrusted to it.

As a matter of fact, the ideological conflict in and around Algerian education dates back to the early years of independence. The leaders of independent Algeria at that time, after they settled the struggle for power with former comrades-in-arms in their favor, viewed and used education as an effective tool for consolidating their political power. They believed that “it could help facilitate the inculcation of certain ideals about the national state and Algerian identity into the impressionable

minds of young people" (Cheriet 1996). However, the real and major ideological struggle over the Algerian school since independence is that which opposes the Arabist current to the French-speaking current.

That an educational system is the embodiment of an ideology is hardly news. All countries in the world design their school system according to their ideology (Siddiqui). The school is supposed, in parallel with its primary mission of providing knowledge, to transmit, albeit in a subtle way, the political and ideological values upon which the political system of the country is based and to inculcate them into the learners' minds to ensure the sustainability of the system and the state. This has always been the case and is unlikely to change.

If so, why don't ideological differences affect education as negatively elsewhere as they do in Algeria? The answer lies in the fact that elsewhere there is a consensus among the different ideological currents on the type of society and therefore the type of school. Any ideological differences often revolve around relatively minor details such as the freedom of the learners and its limits or the budget that the government should allocate to public schools. As to the identity of the school, its mission and the language of instruction, there is no or little disagreement on that. This is not the case in Algeria. Here the struggle is about the basics and not the details.

Indeed, the school bears the brunt of the failure of the Algerian elites to agree on the project of society which must prevail in the country. At independence, two main antagonistic ideological currents emerged. On the one hand, there is a large

Arabic-speaking current which calls for a conservative Algerian society drawing on Arab and Islamic heritage. On the other hand, we have a predominantly French-speaking current that calls for a modern state based on universal values. Since independence, education has been one of their main battlefields. Both parties seek to impose their visions on how to achieve an Algerian school that is in tune with the country's expectations as they understand them.

Every aspect of education is a point of contention. From textbooks to the programs to be taught, including the language of instruction and the hourly volume granted to each subject, the two parties hold irreconcilable points of view. The feud is intractable and oftentimes takes on the nature of one-upmanship. Every initiative taken by one party is immediately denigrated and rejected by the other party. This state of affairs has made the Algerian school a captive of ideological tensions and plunged it into a regrettable state of randomness and mediocrity.

5. CONCLUSION

Quality education, as put forward and as it is being carried out, is one of those lofty but shallow slogans that have no aim but preserving the privileges of the well-to-do and the well-connected in the countries where the concept originated, namely western capitalistic countries. As such, developing countries like Algeria should shy away from it and treat it as a non-issue. They have enough true problems with their education systems and these should be the focus of their attention. There is an urgent need for the authorities to bring to Algerian education the changes that will allow it to be in tune with the main challenges facing the country. As all previous attempts at reform have failed

to improve education performance, there is room to try something new, a sort of shock therapy formula that in the long run might hopefully end the lethargy that has set in at school. First and foremost, we must end democracy in education in its current form because it has harmed education, the country, and, above all, the learners. Democracy in education, especially higher education, must be linked to the principle of meritocracy. Like it or not, higher education is elitist and enough is enough with populist practices which, in the name of democracy, have trivialized the whole educational process and made education the laughingstock of the whole society, including uneducated people. Then, we must link education to the labor market. There is no point in students spending five years "learning" and once they graduate they will be unemployed. Even if some of them are lucky enough to get a job, they quickly find out that what they had "learnt" is of little or no use in relation to the work they have to do, hence the need for education and training programs adapted to the needs of the would-be workers, employers and eventually the country. Last but not least, we must distance education from ideological squabbles. The state must make understand and compel the amateurs of ideological conflicts to seek other battlefields and to leave education alone. If these measures are not taken and implemented seriously, education in Algeria will continue to suffer until further notice.

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