



Where to Now for Primary Education in Tunisia?

This paper aims to shed light on the reality of primary education in post-revolutionary Tunisia at a time when much importance has been given to reforms in some sectors as a response to sectoral demands. Yet, in the meantime, decision makers are less concerned with the education sector, and mainly the primary education. Henceforth, this policy brief is an attempt to present a reform proposal that would improve the reality of primary education in Tunisia.

I- Primary Education in Tunisia: Reality and Horizons.

After independence, the Tunisian government have invested well in education, which has been offered free-of-charge in all various levels, and for all school age learners. Tunisia has been always in line with international conventions, for instance, Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that the State's duty is to ensure that primary education is free, and Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights highlights the fact that elementary education shall be free.

In fact, in Tunisia, education is compulsory for kids aged 6-16, as compared to the international system that limits compulsory education to primary school kids aged 6-12.

Primary Education in Tunisia?

This interest in education does not come out of scratch, but bears witness of the State's willingness to encourage and generalize education in all Tunisian regions and for all social categories. This reflects a strong belief that educational attainment guarantees social progress; a characteristic that has been quite noticeable in the Tunisian society.

1- Primary Education in Tunisia: General Overview.

Today, despite the evolution of the Tunisian educational experience, there is still a challenge of the extent of the educational system ability to respond to the requirements and variables of the time, and to the needs of the labor market. The question arises as to whether it is possible for Tunisia to follow the steps of countries that provided good examples of successful educational systems, at a time when some people speak of "the school of tomorrow," or "smart school", that has entered into force in some neighboring countries, (while it is a project under implementation in Morocco, for example).

- The Ministry of Education's budget represents 14.9% of the total state budget in 2014-2015, as compared to 13.2% in the academic year 2005-2006.

As has been previously mentioned, the primary education that extends over 6 years starting from the age of six is the focal point in this paper. According to 2013 statistics of the Ministry of Education, there is 1.0148 million enrolled pupils. Primary education enrollment ratio for six-year olds is 99.4% as compared to 90% in the 2001-2002 school year. The current enrollment ratio for the 6-11 age group, that is, the age for primary school kids, is 99% as compared to 97.3% in the 2001-2002 school year. It should also be noted that girls' enrollment rate has jumped up to reach 48.1% as compared to 44.5% in the 1986-1987 school year.

- **Primary education in Tunisia between the hammer of demands and the anvil of eligibility**

Many fields in Tunisia have enjoyed a great margin of freedom in the aftermath of the revolution that has brought about amendments and revisions of the regulations in force. The field of education remains tightly confined in the framework of professional demands, which could be summarized in asking for greater freedoms and privileges without taking into consideration the interests of the pupils or parents. In the meantime, there are no steps taken to review, evaluate, and reform the educational system in Tunisia, and this was quite evident,

especially, during strikes witnessed by the elementary schools, the reluctance of the educational staff, and the Labor Union threat to delay start of school for the 2014-2015 school year.

- The social dialogue in education was launched, but has not been activated yet. This initiative is meant to create a neutral space that brings together all the concerned parties despite their divergent views and opinions. It puts priorities on education, and stays away from the professional demands, and the political pressure of the current phase. It also seeks to incorporate any party that pertain to the field of education, for instance, educational staff, civil society, trade unions, and experts. Additionally, it seeks to put emphasis on involving parents and pupils in the deliberations of the social dialogue, while taking into account inequality among the regions. In short, the goal of this initiative is to create a road map that provides accurate diagnosis of the reality of education in Tunisia, and find ways to ensure the development of education for the benefit of the pupils.

2- The Problems of Education in Tunisia

• Failure and Dropping out in Primary Schools

Despite the improved success rates in the primary education, which reached 91.7% in June 2011 as compared to 85.5% in June 2001, dropout and failure rates reflect to a large extent the decay and ineffectiveness of the educational system. In spite of the decrease in the failure rates, which amounted to 7.3%, dropouts was estimated to reach 0.8% in 2012. The problem that arises here is the future of the students who dropped out at this level, as there is no specialized training for dropouts. School dropout is more prevalent in the interior regions. Dropout statistics are evident in Kairouan and Kasserine (2.6% and 2.2 %), followed by Sidi Bouzid (1.6%).

Although there have been multiple analyses and interpretations to study the causes for this phenomenon (for instance, the study conducted by the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights in 2014), we can safely limit the main reasons, be it voluntary or forced, to the educational system as a whole, and to the family and social environments.

Moreover, it is likely that the leading cause of school dropout is the issue of development in these regions and the prevalence of poverty and unemployment. Many children choose to drop school to work and support the family, or because of their inability to attend school on a daily basis, in addition to a decline in confidence in the role of educational attainment in social progress and the possibility of finding jobs depending on the level of education.

- **Relationship between parents and School**

Based on interviews, we can safely say that the relationship between the parents and the teachers is often characterized by tension. In public schools, especially in the popular neighborhoods, parents often accuse teachers of their negligence and inability to encourage pupils to learn. One parent said that although his son is one of the most brilliant pupils in his school, he feels reluctant to go to school, and he expresses hatred towards school and instructors alike.

Teachers are also accused of being less experienced. In some instances, private lessons are a resort for some pupils, while others refuse to take them or they are unable to pay for them. Teachers, however, refuse to get the blame for the decline of education. They say that parents are the ones to blame, because they do not take care of their kids, and they often interfere in the lessons. Due to overcrowded classrooms, teachers claim that they find difficulties in giving each pupil ample time for further explanation and interpretation. Referring back to the statistics of the Ministry of Education, we notice that the average number of pupils per school is 224, and the current average number of pupils in one classroom is 21.9 as compared to 32.9 in the 1986-1987 school year, that is, 17.2 students per teacher.

- **Level of Infrastructure and Equipements**

Many schools today lack health facilities, recreational spaces, and Internet facilities (39% Internet connection rate) and the least recorded rates are in Kairouan, Kasserine, and Sidi Bouzid, where rates range between 9.3 and 14.5%. There is even shortage in drinking water in some schools (90% of schools have a access to water supply network).

Distance

According to the estimated average distance between home and school, the percentage of pupils who walk 3 kilometers to reach their schools is 12.3%, and the highest rates are recorded in the governorates of Siliana and Kairouan (32% and 26.5%). This explains the creation of privately owned restaurants, especially in the above-mentioned areas and in other rural ones that require pupils' mobility; (69.5% of the pupils get access to those restaurants in Kef, 49.5% in Kasserine, and 48.9% in Siliana).

The above-mentioned statistics highlight the existence of a causal relationship between these shortcomings and the educational output. In fact, there are many failures and differences in the manifestations of equality in the educational services, which is largely linked to school failure and early dropout. This has been noted in the same governorates (that is Kairouan, Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid and Siliana). The latter are less fortunate in terms of management and development of school facilities and the largest in terms of the number of dropouts and repeaters.

3- Employment at the expense of education equality in Tunisia

Undeniably, employment represents the biggest and most annoying problem after the revolution. The National Institute of Statistics states that unemployment rate is 15.3% , that is approximately 609,9 thousand of the total population; 31.9% of whom are university graduates who represent 242, 300 unemployed (according to 2014 figures).

Due to the growing demands in employment creation. The people in charge of this issue from the Ministry of Vocational Training and Employment and politicians have had many attempts to reduce these rates. In this regard, we can mention the competitions in the field of education.

This point has been criticized and put into question. In fact, education responsables and politicians face one of the following options: either to sacrifice the formative level and quality of education at the expense of controlling unemployment, or not to bow to pressures of the claims that call for the creation of jobs, at the expense of pupils' interests and educational levels. Joining the teaching staff follows a direct hiring competition to university graduates. It is worth of mention that, in the aftermath of the revolution, participation in the national competitions has bowed to many conditions, for instance, total candidate's scores, which are determined according to years of unemployment (preference for those who have more years of unemployment), marriage, number of children, number of family members, number of unemployed in the family, age, etc.

We face a paradoxical situation: How can a long-term unemployed who may be lacking experience in being an instructor protect the future of a generation? As many materials require presence and constant knowledge about pedagogy since teaching methods usually require large expertise and knowledge of child psychology, ability in handling them and making them interested in education. Possibly this is what explains the complaints about the ones who fail to do so.

II. Recommendations

1- On the Regional Level

- Immediate and urgent review of the educational facilities in the interior regions and the generalization of the principle of pedagogy welfare and provision of the necessities for the success of the educational process, and ensure parity in the training and the results:
- Provide an environment that encourages knowledge, taking into account the climatic environment and the geographical region, maintenance of schools, and provision of the necessary utilities, for instance, the coordination with the Ministry of Agriculture to provide schools with drinking water in rural areas and coordinate with the Ministry of Interior to secure schools in the border regions.
- equip a computer room in each school.
- Equality between people in the interior regions and the rest of the regions in education, which requires coordination with the people who are in charge of the development and social affairs: the need to find alternative solutions to limited-income families, which would reduce the proportion of school dropout because of social and family reasons. This could be done by proposing scholarships for students from low-income families, providing free school transport and housing in addition to school aid that is assigned at the beginning of the school year.

2- On the pedagogical level

- Review of assignments in the field of education and creation of a special educational structure to train them instructors competently without relying on national competitions.
- Put control on private lessons and replace them by unpaid support classes within the school.
- Review of the distribution of the lessons and the number of teaching hours.
- create an alternative teaching pedagogy based on the participation in the planning of the lesson and dialogue within the school.
- The need to encourage and provide recreational and scientific clubs that develop pupils' skills and their ability to communicate.

- create training sessions for the benefit of instructors, especially in the field of child psychology and teaching methods in order to further improve their ability to communicate information and deal well with the pupils.

3- On the “central” and national levels

Accelerate the launch of the social dialogue on education and ensure that:

- The unique objective of the dialogue is to develop and improve the level of primary education in Tunisia only.
- involve all designated parties without exclusion in the educational process.
- All parties should abide by to the implementation of the dialogue outputs.
- Assessment of the educational process and evaluation of reforms.
- Develop an institution for revising education like other institutions, such as the National Council for Education, in order to preserve the neutrality of the educational facilities.

Finally, primary education is a mainstay of pupils’ careers and training. Children’s socialization starts within the educational space as they spend ample time in their schools.