

Educational and Pedagogical Challenges in the Arab World

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Abstract---Nations that are educationally and pedagogically backwards are, by necessity, socially, culturally, economically, and civilisationally backwards, and their morals are in decline. Since morality is one of the fundamental pillars of building and advancing nations, education constitutes the principal means of teaching morals, rooting them deeply, and applying them within the conduct of both the individual and the community. Moreover, it stands as one of the essential foundations of construction, renaissance, and civilisation. Indeed, morality is inseparable from education because, through education, humankind has transmitted ethics, values, knowledge, art, law, and culture throughout history. A revolution in education must accompany a cultural, moral, and economic renaissance in the Arab world. As we plan to reform education and pedagogy in our countries, we must design a project that clearly defines the ultimate purpose of education, the means and methods enabling us to attain that purpose, and the foundational basis for the reform process while establishing the vision, mechanism, tools, and methodology. The foundation of renaissance, development, and progress in any nation is not merely economic growth and military strength but, above all, education and pedagogy. There can be no renaissance, development, or progress before the reform of education and pedagogy. In my view, the process of reform must begin with a fundamental issue, namely, "understanding the laws governing society and the environment in which we seek to bring about a cultural, intellectual, and moral revolution," on the one hand, and "understanding the spirit of education," on the other hand. However, before addressing these issues, we must first scientifically identify problems in education and pedagogy to find appropriate solutions. Accordingly, we ask: What are the most serious problems and obstacles that hinder and obstruct the establishment of an educational and pedagogical renaissance and revolution in the Arab world?¹

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Three Texts: Reflections on Education; What Is Enlightenment? What Is Orientation in Thinking?* Translated by Mahmoud Ben Jamaa. Sfax: Muhammad Ali Publishing House, 2005, 17.

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Introduction

The governments of the Arab world have made significant efforts to reform their educational systems at both the primary and secondary levels. Indeed, some of these governments have spent several times more money on education and scientific research than many other nations do. They have achieved respectable positions in the global rankings of educational systems. Nevertheless, their schools and universities have failed to produce minds capable of generating knowledge and technology or of forming and graduating individuals who are creators and producers of knowledge and innovation. They have also failed to disseminate and entrench scientific culture within the thinking and behaviour of citizens, thereby eliminating magical or naïve modes of thought. Furthermore, they have been unable to instill moral values within the conduct of individuals and society or to realise the ultimate purpose of education itself. Where then, does the deficiency lie?

The deficiency lies in the presence of problems and obstacles that prevent schools and universities from fulfilling their assigned missions, an array of difficulties that obstruct the success of education and pedagogy in the Arab world, as well as the success of repeated reforms over time. For this reason, we must analyse the reality of educational and university systems in Arab countries before discussing any strategy or process for reforming schools and universities or placing educational and scientific advancements on the correct course within these nations. All officials and reformers in the Arab world must diagnose problems before initiating any reform process. Here, I point to some of these problems, although not all, because the nature of an academic article does not allow many, let alone all, problems to be mentioned. What, then, are the principal problems that hinder the success of education and pedagogy in the Arab world and obstruct the reform process?

1 – The major deficiency in planning the reform project of the educational and university system, accompanied by the absence of clear vision and a comprehensive project for the reform of schools and universities:

The root of this problem lies in the error of defining the *ultimate purpose* of education and pedagogy, as well as in the failure to establish a genuine *national* educational project. The absence of a clear educational policy, a coherent social philosophy, and a consistent pedagogical approach within the Arab world compounds this issue. The reform project of schools and universities in Arab countries suffers from a serious problem: the lack of a genuine linkage between that project and the social and educational philosophy. Moreover, the reforms experienced by the educational, pedagogical, and university systems in these nations are, overall, reforms that lack a *civilisational foundation* and a *comprehensive strategic vision and planning* that aims to connect the school and the university with society, the state and its institutions, culture, civilisation, and history, and even with life itself. There is also a lack of consideration of the *question of meaning* in education.

It is not sufficient merely to import curricula and teaching methods or to introduce the concept of educational quality into institutions and scientific academies, nor is it enough that our universities produce holders of degrees and specialists in sciences, literature, and the arts. Educational curricula and programmes must themselves be productive, capable of enabling graduates to generate knowledge, engage in creativity and innovation, activate our intellectual and technological engines, and set civilisation in motion.

No one denies the outcomes of schools and universities in the Arab world, as scientists, thinkers, writers, and experts in various disciplines attest. However, these outcomes are either scarce or incapable of producing minds that are creative and inventive in generating laws, theories, and technology. What

we desire from our educational and university systems is the capacity to produce, *autonomously*, theories, formulas, laws, and machines; for the other, we will never grant us that, nor could he ever do so. He may be willing to build schools and universities for us; to export curricula, programs, and teaching methods; to train teachers, students, and researchers; and to invest in our countries to achieve development, construction, and modernisation. However, he will never bestow upon us the secret of producing knowledge and technology, even though that secret is indeed solvable and decipherable.

2 – Hastiness and Improvisation in the Reform Process Accompanied by the Absence of the Concept of Indigenisation:

Reforms in the Arab world are characterised by improvisation and haste; they also lack coordination among political figures themselves, as well as between them and intellectuals.² In most cases, later reform projects abolish those that preceded them.³ The hastening and acceleration of the pace of reform without proceeding with rational steadiness, precise scientific study, and a comprehensive plan constitute a grave error committed by officials and reformers as they attempt to lay the foundations for educational, cultural, and intellectual renaissance. Accordingly, instead of such an approach, the reform project must be studied with rationality and deliberation, taking into account the cultural, social, psychological, anthropological, and economic structures of our societies.

I advise all those who hold responsibility for the reform of education and pedagogy in our countries not to hasten the reform process but rather to treat education merely as a means to achieve immediate or temporary goals. However, when I call for prudence in the reform process, I do not mean by this the rejection of the idea of "leapfrogging stages," which I consider a historical necessity for progress. However, the leapfrogging stage is one thing, whereas the hastiness of applying the laws of reform and renaissance is quite another.⁴

Those in charge of educational reform in the Arab world have done little more than copy and apply Western educational and scientific ideas and theories within a short period and in a hasty manner, without considering the decades of reflection, research, investigation, and cautious experimentation that these ideas and theories required in their own environments. Meanwhile, those entrusted with the task of reform in our context have taken these educational theories, curricula, and teaching methods directly from their original environments and imposed them forcefully and with alarming speed, without consideration for our own natural, cultural, and social environment, and without regard for the temporal factor required by the processes of experimentation, verification, and maturation. The result has been the grave dysfunction and disorder now evident in our schools and universities.

The process of planning the reform of the school and university system in the Arab world lacks one of the most essential standards of reform, namely, *indigenisation*. Political leaders and those entrusted with the reform process in the Arab world tend to transfer experiences in the fields of education, pedagogy,

² This does not imply a denial of the will of politicians in the Arab world or of their good intentions regarding the advancement of education and pedagogy. Only a resentful or obstinate person would deny this. Unfortunately, however, the will and intentions of Arab politicians toward reform are confronted, on the one hand, by the will of corrupt individuals working within educational institutions, and on the other, by the opposition of the great powers to reform and renaissance projects. No rational person can deny the pressure exerted by those powers upon the Arab world, nor their refusal to allow genuine reform, renaissance, and the production of knowledge and technology.

³ Hence, we call for the completion of what earlier reformers began in the process of construction and correction, and for the coordination among ministries directly concerned with education, pedagogy, and scientific research (such as the Ministries of Economy, Labour, and Culture), based on rigorous scientific studies. Issues concerning schools and universities should fall within the remit of every ministry established within the state.

⁴ Al-Jabiri writes: "Leapfrogging stages, and moving from a state of miserable backwardness to an advanced one that permits continued growth at a high rate, can only occur within the framework of a well-integrated and carefully designed plan in which all material and human resources are mobilised in an atmosphere of genuine democracy that enables the masses to participate, create, and innovate, and to bear, as well, all necessary sacrifices with enthusiasm and zeal." Muhammad Abed Al-Jabiri, *A Progressive Vision of Some of Our Intellectual and Educational Problems*. Casablanca: Moroccan Publishing House, 1977, 204.

and scientific research from the developed world, applying them hastily to schools and universities. They are driven, on the one hand, by the desire to "catch up with the ranks," and, on the other hand, are deceived by the prevalent Western notion that insists on the necessity of linking "the school to society" and "the university to the labour market."

Indeed, the issues of catching up, leaping stages, and establishing an organic connection between the school, the university, society, the state, the lived reality, and life itself are crucial points in the strategy of renaissance. However, have we studied these issues scientifically and rationally? Do the nature of the citizen, the nature of the environment, the nature of society, the nature of the economy, the nature of educational and university institutions, and even the nature of the state and its institutions in the Arab world truly resemble their counterparts in the advanced Western world to the extent that we can call for linking educational institutions with society, the state, and life and proceed to replicate Western educational and scientific reform experiences mechanically?

Thus, we understand the cause of the failure of reform experiments in schools and universities across the Arab world: these reforms did not arise from the very essence of this world's identity, nor did they respect the societal, historical, and anthropological laws governing that identity and its context. Imported educational theories and pedagogical methods alone are insufficient; they must be adapted and indigenised to the environment into which they are introduced. These theories and methods originated within societies with their own objective factors, laws, and specific conditions, as well as their own contradictions, struggles, and equations, which reflect the singularity and uniqueness of the human phenomenon.

"The essence of every educational system is that it should reflect the philosophy, history, development, and objectives of its society, for success in education and pedagogy cannot be achieved through mechanisms, philosophies, and aims unrelated to their context of implementation, nor through frameworks that fail to embody the aspirations and visions of those who constitute and participate in the educational process."⁵ We need a social and pedagogical philosophy of our own.⁶ Moreover, education must be linked to various dimensions, including anthropological, sociopsychological, and economic aspects, among others.

When John Dewey presented his philosophical project for the reform of the *school* and wrote of the necessity of linking the school to society, he was speaking from within the context of *advanced American society* a milieu, culture, and civilisation marked by immense development and a democratic, capitalist, liberal state whose politicians and citizens alike possessed long-standing traditions in political and economic practice, in democracy, and in human rights. Similarly, when Rousseau, Kant, Madame Montessori, Russell, and others wrote their reflections on education and devised practical and experimental approaches to pedagogy and instruction, they all proceeded from social, cultural, and civilisational environments profoundly different from our own.

Similarly, when Western thinkers and philosophers wrote and spoke about the necessity of linking "the university to the labour market," they did so from within the womb of advanced societies that possessed and still possess strong economies and long-established traditions in economic practice and in the ventures of capital, not to mention the nature of the human being within those societies, whose cultural and civilisational mentality had evolved and adapted to the political, economic, and cultural systems created by minds that emerged from the very core of those same societies.

⁵ Abdel-Jalil Ameen et al., *The German Renaissance Experience: How Germany Overcame the Obstacles to Progress?* Beirut: Nama Centre for Research and Studies, 2014, 47.

⁶ See:

Abd al-Da'im, Abdullah. Toward an Arab Educational Philosophy: The Educational Philosophy and the Future of the Arab Nation. 2nd ed. Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, (2000), 11.

Nassar, Nassif. On Education and Politics: When Will the Individual in the Arab States Become a Citizen? Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a for Printing and Publishing, (2000), 108–9.

In brief, what I wish to assert here is that, before considering the question of linking the school to society, we must first understand the nature of that society culturally, civilisationally, and environmentally so that we may establish a school aligned with its spirit and structure. Society itself must be reformed, and the prevailing ideas within it must also be reformed if they are reactionary. Likewise, before speaking of the necessity of linking the university to the labour market and to economic institutions, it is essential to first build that economy.

3 – Educational Institutions and the Nature of Educators:

Many countries in the Arab world suffer from a limited number of schools and universities,⁷ and many⁸ public schools and universities are often underfunded, despite government efforts to introduce modern technology and ensure the quality of education within them.

In numerous cases, unqualified individuals who lack competence and merit are employed and often suffer from psychological difficulties. Many of them choose the teaching profession out of compulsion, merely to obtain a job, and spend their working years in a state of dissatisfaction and continual resentment. They perform their duties devoid of desire, love, or dedication,⁹ viewing teaching solely as an occupation and a source of income. For parents, the overwhelming majority care only about the success of their children by whatever means possible.

We must recognise that reforming education must coincide with reforming society as a whole. In other words, the reform of education necessarily requires the reform of society as a whole. The issue extends beyond the educational and pedagogical systems to encompass a comprehensive reform of society and the state's institutions. Even if one were to design an advanced educational and university system, the outcomes of that system would inevitably collide with a reality steeped in ignorance, backwardness, and a near collapse of values. When I call for the reform of the educational and pedagogical system, I mean by it the reform of the human being himself, a vast undertaking that demands willpower, effort, time, and cooperation. Gustave Le Bon writes: "There is no path to reforming education unless the teacher, the pupil, and the family are reformed."¹⁰

Education and pedagogy do not begin with school, as the vast majority of people generally believe; instead, they begin in the earliest years of a child's life. Plato emphasised this point in his works, most notably in *The Laws*.¹¹

4 – Educational curriculum:

For a school to reproduce itself and society, maintaining its current state year after year through educational curricula that time and science have proven to be inadequate curricula that fail to cultivate intelligence and creative imagination, that stifle innovation, and that hinder the rooting of values in learners' behaviour, this is precisely what must be remedied. Our educational curricula require profound reform. They are curricula in which the theoretical predominates over the practical and applicable, and where quantity is valued more than quality.

In general, memory is employed as the primary tool in both literary and scientific subjects alike, and this is one of the chief causes of the decline of education in our region and the regression of our educational systems. Our pupils and students memorise enormous amounts of information across various fields of knowledge. However, they are often incapable of applying what they have learned in real life because

⁷ Muhammad Abed Al-Jabiri, *Problems of Contemporary Arab Thought*. 2nd ed. Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1990, 69–70.

⁸ In addition to the destruction of educational institutions in those countries where the machinery of war has operated or continues to operate.

⁹ I do not, however, generalise this judgement; there are competent teachers and educators, yet their number remains small compared with the whole.

¹⁰ Gustave Le Bon, *The Spirit of Education*. Translated by Taha Hussein. Cairo: Hindawi Foundation for Education and Culture, 2012, 88.

¹¹ Plato, *The Laws*. Translated by Muhammad Hasan Zaza. Cairo: The Egyptian General Book Organisation Press, 1986, 317.

our curricula tend to focus on rote memorisation and recitation rather than analysis, synthesis, inquiry, exploration, and the transfer of theoretical knowledge into practical applications. Education, in our context, is based on cramming minds with a variety of sciences and facts recorded in books and on instructing learners in a collection of knowledge and solutions to problems, merely to reproduce them on the day of the examination.

If you fill the minds of pupils and students with an overwhelming mass of knowledge and then demand that they memorise and recall it at the end of each term, you thereby deprive them of the freedom to think. By doing so, you create only passive minds that accept whatever informational content is presented to them without discussion, analysis, or critique. You strengthen their powers of memory at the expense of understanding, critical thought, analysis, and creativity. You turn them into *heritage-bound beings of the past* who understand neither the present nor the future nor the living reality, as it is subject to transformation and change, except through the categories of the past: permanence, immobility, and reliance on all that is old and archaic.

When you fill the minds of pupils and students with a vast quantity of data and knowledge and demand that they memorise it by heart, you thereby kill within them the faculties of judgement and critique, implant in them a sense of inferiority, and strip them of the awareness of being free beings. Memory functions only to reproduce what has been imprinted and entrenched in the brain through rote learning, habit, and repetition. In contrast, judgment, critique, and thought represent living, kindled memory and creative imagination. They signify synthesis, transcendence, creation, and the invention of new ideas; they imply the expansion of the mind's horizons and the fusion of thoughts and knowledge to generate and create new concepts. This can be achieved only through nurturing and developing the skills and abilities of the child and the student, granting them a wide margin of freedom in learning, inquiry, and exploration. In our schools, as in our universities, memorisation and rote instruction, regrettably, are given greater prominence than intelligence and creativity are.

I do not deny the bright aspects of the educational systems in the Arab world or the knowledge, sciences, ethics, and literature contained within our school and university textbooks and educational programmes. Only a resentful person would deny such merits. However, one of the most serious problems in our educational systems is the curriculum itself. Educational curricula in the Arab world are *hybrid* in nature:¹² They rely on rote instruction, memorisation, and repetition; the absence of a practical dimension is evident, and the dominance of the theoretical over the applied, as well as of quantity over quality, is unmistakable. They are concerned primarily with abstraction, through which knowledge and sciences are taught in ways that alienate the learner from real life and practical reality. These curricula separate the theoretical from the practical curricula and are incapable of keeping pace with the progress of reason and the developments of science and technology.

Another characteristic of our educational curricula is their disregard for the *psychology of development* and the intellectual and mental growth of learners. They also lack genuine instruction in foreign languages, which hinders students from keeping up with scientific advancements. Moreover, another serious problem arises from the fact that students receive education and knowledge throughout the three educational stages in their mother tongue. However, upon entering university, they are confronted with knowledge and sciences presented predominantly in English or French.

The same applies to educational programmes, which contain much outdated information and knowledge that the modern age has long surpassed, some of which even exceeds the pupil's intellectual

¹² Al-Jabiri wrote in the 1980s: "Education in all Arab countries lacks the necessary degree of unity and coherence, which makes it reinforce the phenomenon of cultural schizophrenia and duality. There exists in no Arab country a truly national Arab school; there are only schools that reproduce one or another model the English or the French model, or a mixture of both on the one hand, and the old Islamic model on the other...." Muhammad Abed Al-Jabiri, *Problems of Contemporary Arab Thought*, previously cited, 70.

capacity and developmental stage. These programmes are overcrowded and dense, filled with obsolete material that no longer corresponds to contemporary realities and with ideas and data that the human mind has transcended. Pupils' and students' minds are inundated with vast amounts of information and knowledge, most of which prove useless in practical life. Our educational programmes lack sound planning, organisation, and coordination among subjects, and they rely excessively on mechanical and monotonous methods.

The abundance of programmes does not measure proper education; the number of hours, days, and weeks; or the quantity of knowledge and sciences transmitted and completed within a prescribed timeframe. Instead, it is measured by its ability to produce a citizen balanced in body, mind, and morality—a virtuous, knowledgeable, and rational citizen—and by its capacity to generate knowledge. This can be achieved only through sound curricula and educational programs. As one sage expressed, *the value of education lies not in filling students' minds with a multitude of facts but in training their minds to think.*

Those responsible for education in our countries seek to turn pupils and students into encyclopaedia repositories of knowledge and information and consider success in examinations, rather than success in life, to be their ultimate goal. Someone might object to my statement: "Do you deny that our education has produced experts in the experimental sciences, mathematics, politics, economics, literature, and the arts, as well as many great minds who hold prestigious positions in the developed world?" That is true. However, I am referring here to a higher level of formation: the development of minds capable of *generating knowledge and technology*. Our sons and daughters have been educated in ways that prevent them from becoming producers of knowledge and makers of machines, and those capable minds that do emerge often remain in countries that do not benefit from them. Instead, they turn to the developed nations, which receive from us our intellects, ideas, and technologies. Thus, we return to the issue raised at the beginning of this essay: the absence of a genuine *national project* in the field of education and pedagogy.

Conclusion

The foremost task in building the state and advancing the nation is the moral and intellectual formation of the human being and the cultivation of a sound character; this can be achieved only through education and effective pedagogy. It was not without reason that Plato insisted that the Minister of Education should be the *first minister* in the city-state. He, along with other philosophers and educators who theorised about the state and society, affirmed the necessity of making education the cornerstone of civilisation. Kant went so far as to declare, "Man can only become man by education. He is nothing except what education makes of him."¹³

Thus, when thinkers and politicians formulated general strategies for advancement and progress within the project of nation-building, renaissance, and development, such as determining the nature of the economic and political system the state sought to adopt, addressing questions of national security and military organisation, and seeking entry into the sphere of civilisation through history, they linked all of these endeavours to the project of education and the formation of the human being.

Regrettably, education and pedagogy have not received the highest share of investment in our countries, under the pretext that wealth creation and social development essentially derive from industrial and agricultural revolutions. While no rational person can deny this proposition, the entire issue hinges on the *centrality of education and pedagogy* to development, as well as to economic, social, and intellectual revolutions.

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *Three Texts: Reflections on Education; What Is Enlightenment?; What Is Orientation in Thinking?*, previously cited, 14.

The political leaders of the Arab world have exerted considerable efforts toward reforming education and pedagogy; however, our educational and university systems have succeeded, except in sporadic instances, in producing neither creative, innovative citizens nor those capable of generating knowledge. I am not here referring to the mere graduation of experts and specialists in the exact sciences or in the social and human sciences; such outcomes certainly exist, and no one denies that our educational and university systems have achieved them. Instead, I address a matter of the utmost importance and gravity, one directly related to the project of renaissance: the question of *knowledge production*, along with its corollary issues, such as the *discovery of laws and theories* in both the exact and the social and human sciences.

The cause of the failure of our educational and pedagogical systems lies in a series of problems, of which I have mentioned but a few. Therefore, before embarking upon the much-desired process of reform, we must first identify and study the remaining problems and impediments that hinder education, pedagogy, and reform itself.

The process of education is not merely about constructing schools and institutes, introducing new technologies, or continuously changing curricula and teaching methods. Nor is it confined to the science of education alone. It is an intricate and interwoven process encompassing numerous other dimensions: psychophysical, social, anthropological, environmental, aesthetic, historical, economic, and civilisational. These dimensions must be taken into account when designing any school or university, when drafting any programme or curriculum, and when authoring any book within the framework of reform.

All those entrusted with the task of reforming education and pedagogy in the developed world consider the nature of the human being, the surrounding environment, and the natural and social resources available to the state while also maintaining prudence and rationality in the processes of implementing and evaluating such reforms. Accordingly, before schools and universities are constructed or reform experiences are transferred, a general strategy must first be established, outlining the overarching aims and objectives to be achieved through education and pedagogy. This must be accomplished by founding a genuine *national project* in education, accompanied by a precise and scientific definition of educational policy, social philosophy, and pedagogical philosophy in the Arab world.

The following questions must be posed: What type of individual do we wish to form? What is our ultimate goal in educating and raising the new generation? Moreover, what kind of society do we aspire to create through this renewed pedagogy? Reform must emanate from the very essence of the Arab–Islamic environment: recalling the environment, culture, and social laws of the Arab–Islamic world; drawing upon Arab–Islamic educational references; linking schools and universities to society and to life; and, beyond all, reviving the *spirit of education and pedagogy* and cultivating the *will to produce knowledge*.

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