

XVI Convegno SeSaMO

Università degli Studi di Cagliari
Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali

3-5 ottobre 2024



SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITOLO/TITLE: Exploring Transformations within Educational Spaces

PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S: Nijmi Edres

ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

Since the beginning of the 2000s we have witnessed a growing interest in education as a topic for academic research. These studies looked at the interplay between political, societal, and economical debates and education, highlighting intense transformations in the educational landscape of the middle east (Abi-Mershed 2010, Herrera 2022). A first category of studies (specially produced by international institutions, such as the World Bank) focused on the requests for economic development in the Arab world. While stressing the need for institutional and pedagogical reform and pointing at the weak contribution of education as an economic sector, these studies prized reforms in the direction of the elimination of gender gaps and increasing university enrollment in recent years (The World Bank 2008). Another prominent line of studies has historically looked at education against the backdrop of nationalism and citizenship formation (Andreson 2001). These studies stressed the role of education as an ideological battlefield and its relevance in citizenship formation and nation building processes in the Arab world (Alayan, Rohde, Dhouib, 2012). While most of the studies produced by scholars of the middle east within this realm focused on the analysis of educational material (both textbooks and curricula) for the study of Arabic language, history and citizenship education, critical voices challenged the understanding of a “knowledge society” as a national community. In this sense, a growing necessity to broaden the perspective to the interplay between local and international actors in the context of globalization (Adely 2012)(for example investigating inequalities in knowledge production and consumption between actors in the global north and in the global south)emerged. A last stream of academic works focused on Muslim students specifically, and on debates about identity formation in educational settings, in Europe and elsewhere. Such studies have often been driven by an approach that looked at education prominently as a security concern, especially after 2001 and 9/11, and at religious education as the main topic for analysis and reform (Doumato & Starret 2007). In parallel to these studies, research from the early 2000s highlighted a tendency towards the decentralization of religious knowledge production and dissemination (for example through the expansion of informal networks of religious teaching) (Adely and Starrett 2011, Mahmood 2005). Together with other factors of recent transformation, such as the impact of privatization (Sobhy 2023) and the new markets for international schools and universities (Brunell 2019) and the role of technology (internet and social media) in fostering formal and informal knowledge production and dissemination after 2011, informal practices of learning have not yet been explored thoroughly. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of education, this panel encourages contributions that comprehensively encompass formal, institutionalized education and informal learning processes, and various educational levels. Education, in its broadest sense, extends beyond traditional classroom settings and includes the diverse ways knowledge is transmitted across locations, generations and communities. As such, the panel invites explorations into how educational institutions, as well as informal learning environments, contribute to and are shaped by societal transformations in the MENA region. Understanding the synergies and tensions between different educational forms and spaces as essential for comprehending the holistic impact on societal changes (encompassing shifts in cultural norms, economic structures, and social dynamics), the panel invites contributions focusing on different types of educational learning experiences and environments. Focusing on children, adolescents, or adults, contributors are encouraged to delve into the dynamic role of educational institutions and spaces in catalyzing and

responding to processes of change and contamination within the region and beyond. The term "contamination" is employed here as a lens to examine transformative processes influencing and/or fostered by educational institutions in a broad sense. As such, the panel is open to contributions exploring the interplay between educational spaces and processes of change at the socio, cultural, religious, and economic level, including across:

1) Educational practices

as educational institutions evolve, they become crucibles for the intermingling of perspectives and methodologies. From traditional pedagogies to modern approaches (such as alternative education), the panel is open to papers that scrutinize how educational practices in the MENA region are evolving, how they are influenced by local, regional, and global trends, and how they, in turn, contribute to societal transformations.

2) Class mobility

by analyzing the impact of educational policies, access to quality education, and the role of vocational training, the panel seeks to identify the dynamics that shape class mobility in the region, as an integral facet of societal evolution. As such, the panel encourages contributions looking at how educational institutions serve as both facilitators and barriers to class mobility, transforming the socio-economic landscape of the region.

3) Identity and cultural shifts

cultural transformations are tied to education, shaping and being shaped by the values transmitted through educational institutions and in educational spaces. The panel is open to contributions that delve into how cultural practices and identities shape transformations in the educational landscapes and, vice versa, into how they transit and undergo shifts within educational realms. This includes, for example, the examination of language policies, curriculum development, and the role of cultural exchange programs in both responding to and fostering societal transformations.

4) Alterations in religious practices or approaches

religious practices and approaches represent another layer of contamination that crosses the educational realm. The panel is open to contributions exploring the influence of educational centers in transforming and transmitting religious beliefs, rituals, and values. This includes an examination of the changing role of religious education, the approach to secularization and the emergence of alternative religious discourses within educational spaces across the region and beyond.

5) Mobility with/without migration

mobility plays a crucial role in shaping educational landscapes, as individuals move across borders for educational opportunities. While being particularly pertinent in the MENA region, where a significant number of Arab students engage in regional and transnational mobility, this aspect remains understudied. The panel welcomes contributions that explore the impact of migration on education, including the challenges and opportunities faced by students and educational institutions involved in the migration process. This may involve examining the role of international educational hubs that host Arab students, exploring the dynamics of cultural exchange, and understanding how migration contributes to the evolution of educational practices and identities. Additionally, the panel encourages discussions on policies that facilitate or hinder the educational mobility of individuals within the region and beyond, aiming at broadening our understanding of how mobility influences and is influenced by educational institutions in the context of societal transformations in the MENA region.

The panel is open to contributions addressing the role of national educational institutions in the MENA region, as well as to papers addressing the broader context of Arab students' regional and transnational mobility, considered as a cross-cutting theme in the panel, and especially looking at international educational hubs hosting Arab students across the Middle East, North Africa and beyond.

Methodologically, the panel will aim at fostering a dialogue that transcends disciplinary boundaries, offering insights that are relevant to scholars interested in the complex interplay of education, culture, and societal transformations. As such, contributions relying on interdisciplinary perspectives and case studies will be particularly welcome.

Short bibliography

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PARTICIPANTS:

- **CJ Davison and Anke Reichenbach (Zayed University Dubai): "Exploring the Dynamics of Co-Education in the Gulf"**

Our paper explores the dynamics of gender segregation and co-education in institutions of higher learning in the Gulf. Focusing on the UAE and particularly on Zayed University, we will investigate how educational policies contribute to and are shaped by broader societal transformations, and how they impact Emirati students' learning experience.

Zayed University is a federal university that was established in 1998 exclusively for female students. During the 2000s, the UAE witnessed the spread of gender-mixed private universities and international branch campuses. The UAE government, meanwhile, remained committed to supporting gender-segregated higher education for Emirati citizens. ZU's policy on gender segregation started to change in Fall 2021 when the co-educational College of Interdisciplinary Studies was launched. From Fall 2024 on, all undergraduate programs will shift to co-education.

We investigate how these transformations respond to and promote broader societal changes, given the UAE's demographic situation and its efforts at establishing a knowledge economy. Moreover, we explore how the transition impacts the learning experience of Emirati students. Based on observations and interviews, we will argue that students largely accept the official discourse focusing on "employability" in a competitive job market, even though they sometimes experience unease and discomfort when crossing gender boundaries.

- **Giacomo Iazzetta (Ca' Foscari, University of Venice): "Language policy and socioeconomic inequalities in Tunisia and Morocco"**

The mastery of languages most in demand in the labor market undoubtedly bring socioeconomic advantages (Tochon 2009) while the study of a subject in a language other than the mother tongue causes greatest difficulties (Zhao 2019). These elements are even more evident in multilingual and postcolonial contexts such as Tunisia and Morocco where language policy can, mainly through education, influence students' socioeconomic status. This paper analyzes the relationship between different levels of language policies (Hornberger & Johnson 2011) and the socioeconomic status of university students in these two North

African countries. It will be noticed how language policies elements such as practices, ideologies, and management (Spolsky 2012) reflect socioeconomic hierarchies.

– **Giulia Navab Daneshmand (Universität Hamburg): “Educational Policies and Minority Identity in Pahlavi Iran: The Intersection of Authoritarianism and Cultural Dynamics”**

Education has long been recognized as a tool for nation-building, identity formation, and promoting cultural assimilation. In Iran, particularly during the Pahlavi era, educational policies using linguistic standardization as a strategic tool played a crucial role in promoting state-led programs and marginalizing minority identities. This article analyzes the specific cases of the Iranian Jewish and Kurdish communities during significant periods of migration, particularly towards the Mandate of Palestine. It examines how educational policies employing linguistic standardization served as strategic tools impacting the identity, migration decisions, and cultural preservation of these communities. Aimed at unifying the nation under a monolingual identity, these policies often led to the suppression and controlled tolerance of regional identities through the imposition of the Persian language and uniform cultural standards. The article also analyzes the cultural mission of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) and its schools, which aimed to bring Western civilization to Eastern and North African Jewish communities where the language issue had significantly influenced the educational environment. The research employs a historical-comparative methodology, utilizing primary and secondary sources to provide a comprehensive analysis of the topic. Primary sources include archival documents from the National Library and Archives of Iran and issues of the "Bani Adam" journal. It also considers personal accounts, such as those of Elias Eshaghian, whose experiences as an educator in the AIU, including in Iranian Kurdistan, help shed light on the influence of French modern educational methods. Secondary sources include academic articles and historical accounts that offer valuable insights and contextualization. This broader perspective addresses the need to understand the interaction between local and international actors in knowledge production, particularly focusing on identity formation among Jewish and Kurdish students and viewing educational systems as potential sites of security concern. It also describes the efforts of the Jewish and Kurdish communities in maintaining their cultural and religious identity, participating actively in cultural and educational projects even under restrictive conditions.

– **Eftychia Mylona (Leiden University): “Arabic Teaching in Diaspora: The case of Greeks in Egypt, 1950s-1970s”**

This paper discusses the role of the Ellēnikē _Koinotēta Alexandrias (EKA, Greek community organization of Alexandria, established 1843), as both a local and diasporic institution, in matters concerning Arabic education. In particular, it focuses on its changing attitude towards the teaching of the Arabic language during the periods of rule by Egyptian presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954-1970) and Anwar Sadat (1970-1981). Gamal Abdel Nasser’s and Anwar Sadat’s policies were quite antithetical with regards to Arabic teaching in foreign schools. By examining the EKA’s concerns, actions and policies around this topic, this paper argues that the shift from Nasser’s strict educational policies to Sadat’s more lenient ones reaffirmed the EKA’s privileged position, allowed it to negotiate its position on education, and maintained its right to imagine and fashion the community’s identifications and belonging. In addition, this paper demonstrates the many layers of autonomy within the Greek community, by showing the EKA’s role and decisions in relation to education vis-à-vis the Egyptian government. As such, this case study highlights the significance of Arabic language pedagogy for different interests in the Greek communities of Egypt in the 1950s to 1970s, considering how Arabic was viewed by a segment of the mutamassirun (Egyptianized foreigners) population after the Free Officers’ coup (1952) and how such communities might interact with state language and education policies in such an environment, interlaced with debates over Arab and Egyptian nationalism, citizenship and discourses of belonging.

SHORT BIOS OF THE PARTICIPANT PANELISTS:

- Dr. CJ Davison is an experienced educator, holds an EdD in Adult Learning from University of Calgary, Canada. With 25 years of experience spanning Canada, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, she is a dynamic facilitator, emphasizing the crucial role of student engagement. Dr. Davison has mentored 125 faculty to attain Fellow/Senior Fellow status in the Higher Education Academy, reflecting her commitment

to enhancing the educational experience. Her research expertise lies in student engagement, adult learning, educational development, digital teaching approaches, and active learning pedagogies.

- Dr. Anke Reichenbach holds a PhD in Anthropology from Leipzig University, Germany. Dr. Reichenbach is well-versed in Gulf ethnography, urban anthropology, and Middle East studies. Her extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Syria, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates informs her research on gendered urban spaces, heritage and identity, and forms of belonging in Gulf cities.
- Dr. Giacomo Iazzetta is an Early Career Researcher at the University of Venice, Ca' Foscari. He pursued a PhD in Sociolinguistics at the University of Essex and a Master degree in Languages and Civilizations of Asia and Mediterranean Africa at Ca' Foscari, University of Venice. His research focuses on understanding the role of language policy in the construction of identity in postcolonial Tunisia and Morocco.
- Giulia Navab Daneshmand is currently pursuing a master's degree in "Languages, History, and Cultures of the Near East" at the University of Hamburg, with a research interest in sociolinguistics, bilingualism, multilingualism, and interlingual contacts. She concluded her Bachelor program in "Languages, Cultures, and Markets of Asia" at the Alma Mater Studiorum, Università di Bologna, with a thesis on Iranian literature, from a female perspective.
- Dr. Eftychia Mylona is a Lecturer at the Bachelor Program of International Studies (BAIS) at Leiden University, Netherlands. She holds a Ph.D. in Middle East Studies, from the Leiden Institute for Area Studies (LIAS), and a M.A. in Arabic Language and Culture, from Leiden University, The Netherlands. Her research focuses on issues of identity and belonging of the Greek communities of Egypt. Among her recent publications the articles "Maintaining Philanthropy: The Greek Alexandrian Institutions After the Exodus of the Early 1960s" in *Diasporas, Charity and the Construction of Belonging: A Connected History of Practices of 'Goodwill' in Egypt During the Imperial Age (19th–20th centuries)*, edited by Angelos Dalachanis and Annalaura Turiano. *Diasporas*, no. 42 (2023) and "Greeks in Egypt: Negotiating Presence, Identity and Belonging After the 1960s" in *Cultural Exchanges in Eastern Mediterranean: Asia Minor, Cyprus and Egypt*, edited by Stelios Irakleous, Michalis Michael, Athanasios Koutoupas. (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022).

PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

Nijmi Edres is Assistant Professor in Islamic Studies at the University of Bern. Previously, she held post-doctoral positions at the Universities of Bergen (where she was part of the project CanCode), Exeter and Göttingen (where she joined the international team working at the project USPPIP, Understanding Sharia: Past Perfect Imperfect Present) and at the Leibniz Institute for Educational Media (GEI), in Braunschweig. She obtained her PhD from the University of Rome, Sapienza. Her scholarship looks at Palestine and Israel in the 20th and 21st centuries, paying special attention at Palestinian minority rights, Palestinian women's rights and at the legal debates developed by Palestinian Muslim judges with Israeli citizenship. Her research also looked at political Islam and the Islamic Movement inside Israel, at the connections between Islam, Arabic language and national (Palestinian and Jordanian) identity, and at educational policies in Jordan, in relation to gender inclusion and representation.

INDIRIZZO/I EMAIL/EMAIL ADDRESSES: nijmi.edres@unibe.ch