REVES

REVES - Revista Relações Sociais (eISSN 2595-4490)

Assessment of the causes of educational decline in the Maghreb countries

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Abstract. The education systems in Maghreb countries, including Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, are experiencing significant deterioration due to a mix of internal and external factors. Internally, challenges such as outdated curricula, poor teacher training, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate infrastructure undermine the quality of education. These issues are worsened by administrative inefficiencies and insufficient investment. Externally, socio-economic problems like high unemployment, political instability, and limited funding further strain the education sector. Additionally, the rapid pace of globalization and technological advancements outstrip the capabilities of these education systems to adapt. Cultural factors, including societal attitudes toward education, also contribute to the decline. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive reforms, such as updating curricula, investing in infrastructure

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and teacher training, and shifting cultural perceptions to prioritize education as a cornerstone for national development.

Keywords: Education deterioration. Educational system. Educational planning Quality of education**.**

1. Introduction

Given the rapid growth of the youth population on the African continent and the Global Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2015; Zeleza, 2017), the situation of higher education is poised for significant change. Overall education trends in North Africa highlight a significant transformation of the region's education systems between 1999 and 2017, particularly in higher education. In countries such as Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, enrollment rates at different levels of education, from pre-primary to higher education, have seen remarkable growth. Algeria, for example, increased its tertiary enrollment rate from 14% in 1999 to 47.72% in 2017, while its secondary enrollment increased from 58% to 99.65%. Similarly, Morocco and Tunisia have recorded substantial progress, albeit at varying rates (Oussama, 2020). In North Africa as a whole, the proportion of young people in tertiary education is now close to the global average, with 36% of the relevant age group, in stark contrast to sub-Saharan Africa, where only one in ten young people have access to tertiary education. The rapid increase in tertiary enrolment in Algeria, from 30% to 45% in just one decade, and in Morocco from 15% to 35%, reflect a broader transformation in higher education, where the student population has quadrupled in two decades. These trends underscore the growing role of education in the region's development strategies, even as challenges such as disparities in pre-primary enrolment and persistent external socio-economic pressures continue to impact the overall quality of education. Data reveal that despite progress, gaps remain and need to be addressed through targeted reforms, both to improve access to education at all levels and to ensure that education systems can keep pace with global standards and local needs (Meyer, J.-B. *et al.*, 2022).

Despite significant progress in higher education in North Africa, the issue of exclusion from education remains a major challenge, particularly at the primary and secondary levels. A recent report highlights alarming statistics regarding the proportion of children out of school or at risk of dropping out of school in Algeria. A research study explores the evolution of education systems in the Maghreb, particularly in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, with a focus on their achievements over the last 40 to 50 years. Despite the weak educational legacy left by French colonialism, these countries have managed to build strong formal education systems in a relatively short time. The progress made is in line with international trends, reflecting the growing importance given to education as a driver of development. Comparisons are made with other developing countries with similar economic levels, highlighting the Maghreb's achievements and challenges. However, significant challenges remain, including persistent gender inequalities and high youth unemployment, which continue to pose serious problems for the region (Akkari, 2008). The report reveals that 7.90% of children at various levels of education are currently out of school, with the situation being particularly severe among pre-school children, where 33.40% are not enrolled in any form of formal education. This figure highlights a major gap in early childhood education, a critical area for laying the foundation for future academic success. Furthermore, 3.00% of primary school-aged children and 6.50% of lower secondary school-aged children are also out of school, indicating that exclusion from education extends well beyond the early years and into the middle stages of the education

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system. The risk of school dropout among students already enrolled in school is another cause for concern. The report shows that 2.60% of primary school students and 15.30% of lower secondary school students are at risk of dropping out of school. These figures illustrate the challenges Algeria faces in ensuring not only access to education but also retention throughout the schooling process (UNICEF MENA Regional Office, 2015).

The decline in educational standards has recently become a pressing topic, not only in the Maghreb countries but also in many Arab nations, as the current state of education is increasingly alarming, and its crisis is becoming more complex day by day amid the deterioration of human resource development in these countries. The most affected victims are generations of learners who understand little of what they are taught and perhaps do not learn what is beneficial under current conditions. This makes the educational system a subject for review and reconsideration, and calls for exploring other factors that have led to the declining educational level in the Maghreb countries and the Arab world in general.

This research aims to comprehensively analyze the decline of Arab education by examining both direct and indirect causes through two main axes. The first axis looks at internal factors, such as structural deficiencies in the education system, outdated teaching methods, inadequate resources, and governance issues that have led to inefficiency and stagnation. The second axis explores broader external influences, including economic pressures, social inequalities, political instability, and the impact of globalization, all of which have further exacerbated the decline. By addressing both internal and external factors, this study aims to provide a holistic understanding of the problems facing Arab education and offer avenues for potential reform.

2. Internal Factors Affecting the Educational System

2.1. Causes Originating from the Educational System

The educational system represents a framework of the social structure that includes roles and social standards that facilitate the transfer of knowledge from one generation to another. This knowledge encompasses values and patterns of social behavior, forming an integrated structure of interacting parts where each influences the other. The educational system, with its human and material components, aims to instill social and cultural values in individuals and contribute to societal development (National Institute for the Training of Education Personnel, 1998; Ahmed, 1984; Nasreddin, 2005).

The educational system encompasses several aspects:
- Values and Goals: These are characterized by change and derive from the nation's past and present.
- Technical Aspect: This includes the technology used, which consists of two types:
  - Infrastructure and Equipment.
  - Content and Programs.
- Human Aspect: This includes the behavior of individuals within the educational system, such as teachers, learners, administrators, and workers, and the nature of interactions between them.

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- Organizational Aspect: This refers to the structure or form of the educational system.
- Administrative Aspect: It encompasses the various functions practiced by the administration, such as leadership, guidance, planning, monitoring, and follow-up.

2.2. Characteristics of the Educational System

- The educational system consists of interacting parts that perform specific functions.
- Positive interaction between the elements of the educational system can result in positive elements like the curriculum and learners. If the learner comprehends the curriculum, positive outcomes are achieved; otherwise, the opposite occurs.
- The educational system aims to achieve predetermined objectives set within the educational policy, defined systematically and strategically.
- The educational system has various authorities and multiple responsibilities to achieve its objectives.
- Every educational system has an environment that affects and interacts with it. Some environmental obstacles can hinder the educational system's progress.
- Every educational system has a hierarchical structure that connects its elements to the surrounding environment.

When any characteristic of the educational system is compromised, it negatively impacts its effectiveness and productivity. The crisis of schools in the Maghreb countries, in particular, and most developing countries in general, is primarily due to planning issues, leading to poor academic achievement among learners (Lakhal *et al.*, 2009; Al-Qamaz, 2014; Abu Tahoun, 1964; Naseer, 2005).

2.3. Challenges in Educational Planning

One of the most significant problems related to the educational system in the Maghreb countries, and applicable to other Arab countries, is the issue of educational planning. Planning has become a scientific necessity for human resource development, especially in the context of the educational system. This leads us to understand the concept of educational planning as a comprehensive and systematic process within a specified time frame. It involves monitoring all influences, variables, and criteria—political, social, economic, etc.—studying the needs of the educational system, predicting potential issues and changes that may arise, and developing plans to address these challenges and solve them (Al-Azzi and Abbas, 2015).

It aims to develop humans and invest in them, enhancing their roles across various fields through educational and personal development. It is a dynamic and ever-changing process that anticipates and embraces future advancements to ensure continuous improvement across different aspects of life. Educational planning can be defined as "the rational direction of education towards the future, by preparing a set of decisions based on research and study, enabling education to achieve its intended goals in the most effective ways, utilizing time, material, and human resources optimally."

However, the reality of education in developing countries reflects a departure from planning and sound educational policy. Although there have been considerable efforts in modern times to improve and activate it, many obstacles remain, primarily

the inconsistency of authorities in decision-making and their monopolization of educational policy. This is due to the absence of suitable individuals in appropriate positions, leading to another issue that has further complicated matters: bureaucratic laxity, which is common across all government administrative departments. This is evident through the prevalence of certain behaviors among employees, such as lack of responsibility, neglecting duties, and the exchange of benefits among administrators, with a tendency to exploit the administration for personal gains at the expense of state institutions.

Leadership often rests with those close to the governments or those belonging to specific families, parties, factions, or sects, placing the strongest individuals in the background while the weakest are at the forefront of decisions. "This mirrors the state of fragile educational curricula in the Arab world in general, as they are merely governmental curricula that represent the views of the ruling authority, which is connected to many agreements and protocols with central countries, always seeking their approval to legitimize their ruling system."

Some Arab countries have even adopted foreign curricula that have no connection to their social realities, such as French and American curricula, which are admitted by their own creators to be outdated compared to Japanese curricula. Furthermore, their organization, philosophy, and content are isolated and distant, built on foreign social, cultural, and psychological foundations that do not align with the specificities and needs of Arab societies. This has widened the gap between what the educational system offers and the reality of life, in the absence of coordination between social institutions and the educational system, and a lack of integration between them, particularly in forming educational policy.

Figure 1 outlines the internal factors affecting education, which are rooted within the educational system itself. These factors include challenges in educational planning, characteristics of the educational system, and causes directly originating from within the system. Together, they represent structural and systemic issues, such as poor planning, rigid curricula, and ineffective teaching methods, which can hinder the overall performance and adaptability of the education system to meet evolving needs.
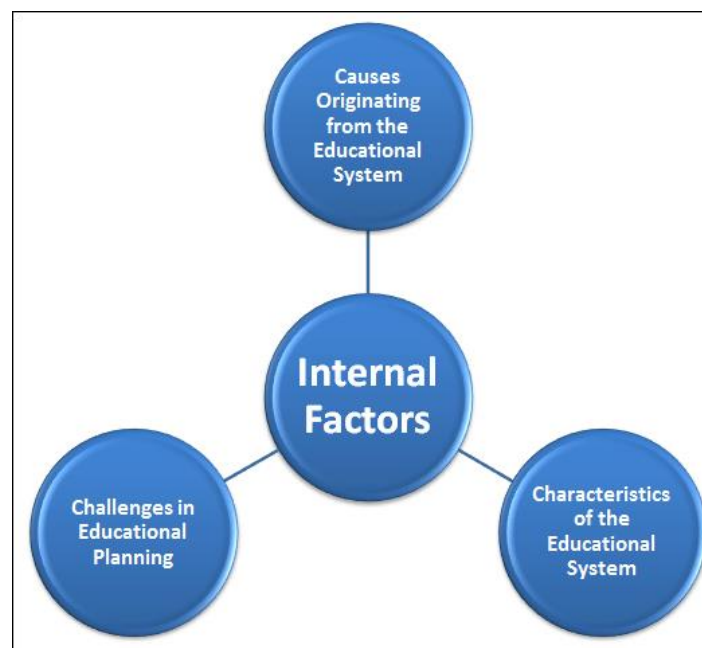
Figure 1. Internal Factors Affecting the Educational System

3. Causes and External Factors

The crisis in education within the Arab world is not confined to the educational system alone; it is also influenced by the surrounding environment on all levels. This includes the reality of those who manage educational institutions and their adherence to professional ethics, as well as the condition of learners and the fertility of the environment in which they live. Several external factors contribute to the poor quality of education in the Arab world, which can be summarized as follows:

3.1. Weak Religious and Moral Orientation

Many teachers and administrative managers no longer adhere to the professional ethics expected of them. Education is a purposeful mission where teachers aim to "instill moral, cultural, and scientific education in students and develop their cognitive and skill frameworks." When teachers lack a sense of ethical responsibility and do not appreciate the religious value of their mission, and if their role is limited to transferring information and filling students' minds with facts, the educational system will fail to achieve its goals. At the learner level, the traditional Quranic schools (Kuttab) that were prevalent in many Arab regions played a significant role in providing early education, teaching proper Islamic principles, memorizing parts of the Quran, and various religious texts. This foundation facilitated the transition to formal schooling. However, the decline in these institutions, partly due to cultural and ideological invasions, has led many Arab children to enter school with minimal knowledge of Arabic and only a limited vocabulary acquired from their families and communities.

This discrepancy between the child's pre-school language skills and what is taught in schools has created a "major linguistic and educational problem," with two language levels within one country leading to complex challenges in education. This issue has caused many students to disengage from early education, which is crucial as it lays the foundation for subsequent educational stages. Additionally, this situation has led to a rise in negative phenomena such as violence and cheating among learners, with cheating becoming a widespread norm, utilizing the latest communication technologies without any religious or legal apprehension.

3.2. Insufficient Funding and Weak Investment in Education

The quality of education is closely linked to the level of funding and material support it receives. In the Arab world, there is a notable lack of investment in education and research, with most Arab countries spending less than 2% of their GDP on education, as reported by the Human Development Report of 2002, compared to over 5% in most developed countries. This gap highlights the significant difference between the educational systems in European countries and those in the Arab world, which still suffer from a shortage of teachers relative to the number of students. The problem is not a lack of qualified individuals but rather insufficient financial positions, leading to overcrowded classrooms and negatively impacting educational outcomes. The financial constraints prevent the establishment of sufficient schools and educational institutions and result in low teacher salaries, which do not align with the importance of their role and do not motivate creativity or excellence. Additionally, the use of outdated methods and tools, far removed from technological advancements, hampers the effectiveness of the educational process. Quality education cannot be achieved in an

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environment lacking essential educational elements such as libraries, laboratories, computers, and various educational and recreational tools (High Council for the Arabic Language, 2012).

3.3. Media Role

The era of globalization has brought significant advancements in scientific and technological media and communication tools. However, these developments have become more of a curse than a blessing for both teachers and students in the Arab world. Social networks and other electronic distractions have consumed much of the teachers' time, who have not effectively utilized these tools to benefit their profession, leading to a lack of seriousness and creativity. Teachers are frequently seen distracted by their electronic devices during work hours, and many students face similar issues. Media and television programs, which are consumed by children before and during their early learning stages, often fail to deliver constructive messages. This "disorder" in programming and the prevalence of irrelevant content has created a chaotic media environment. Even animated content for children has shifted to fantastical and unrealistic themes, leading to confusion and negative impacts on their thinking, physical, and mental health. This has been reflected in increasing violence and social withdrawal among students, as well as other maladaptive behaviors within educational institutions.

3.4. Poverty, Lack of Security, and Instability

The educational environment is highly influenced by the political, social, and economic conditions of a country. Recent fluctuations in many Arab countries have significantly impacted the quality of education, leading to increased dropout rates and students seeking work opportunities instead of continuing their education to ensure their livelihoods. As hope fades and frustration sets in, students' planning becomes short-term, in line with the bleak conditions they face and the uncertainty of their future.

3.5. Spread of Social Problems

The prevalence of cheap and widespread drugs negatively affects education, schools, and students. It leads to deteriorated academic performance, increased absenteeism and dropout rates, and declines in mental and physical health. The presence of drug use contributes to the spread of antisocial behaviors such as violence and vandalism, negatively affecting students' social relationships with peers, teachers, and families. Drug use reduces students' ambition and academic prospects, weakening their motivation to progress and succeed, and fosters a negative culture that normalizes drug use among peers

Figure 2 highlights the external factors affecting education, focusing on weak religious and moral orientation, insufficient funding, the role of media, poverty and instability, and the spread of social problems. These factors, which are outside the control of the educational system, create barriers to effective learning. A lack of ethical guidance, financial investment, and stability, combined with negative media influence and prevalent social issues, collectively hinder the quality and accessibility of education in the region.
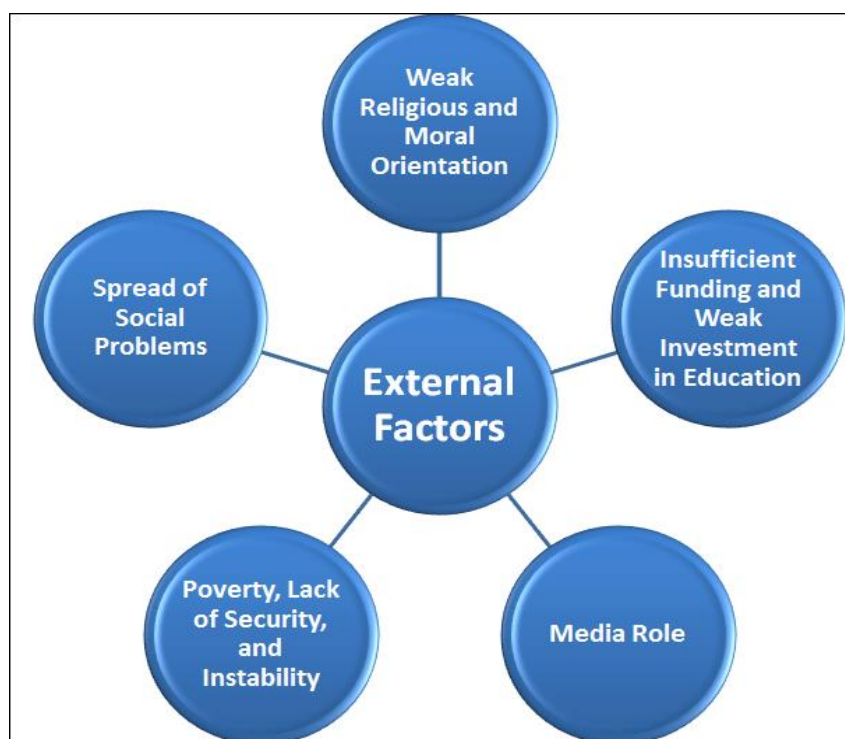
Figure 2. External Factors Affecting the Educational System

4. Comparison analysis

4.1. Comparison between the Maghreb Region and Singapore

The education system in the Maghreb region faces several key challenges affecting its quality and effectiveness. The region struggles with inadequate infrastructure, limited financial resources, and imbalanced educational opportunities between urban and rural areas. The educational approach in the Maghreb is often traditional, emphasizing rote memorization rather than critical thinking. Additionally, teacher training is not always sufficient, which impacts the quality of education provided.

In contrast, Singapore is a leader in education due to its substantial investments in developing a high-quality education system. The Singaporean education system is characterized by its flexibility and high standards, with curricula regularly updated to meet digital age requirements and job market needs. Teachers in Singapore receive advanced training and benefit from favorable working conditions, which enhances their motivation and performance. Furthermore, Singapore emphasizes modern educational techniques, such as project-based learning and technology integration, making the educational experience more interactive and comprehensive.

4.2. Comparison between the Maghreb Region and Finland

Finland's education system is renowned for its innovative approach, offering a holistic educational experience. The Finnish system is flexible, allowing students to choose their areas of study based on personal interests, which boosts motivation and engagement. Education in Finland focuses on developing critical thinking and creativity

rather than rote learning. Finnish teachers receive high levels of training and are highly valued, which positively impacts educational quality.

In contrast, the Maghreb region faces challenges related to funding, educational facilities, and resources. Despite efforts to improve the education system, there are significant disparities in educational quality across different areas. Compared to Finland, the Maghreb education system often lacks emphasis on critical thinking and self-directed learning. The Maghreb countries could benefit from adopting aspects of the Finnish model, such as policies that enhance teacher well-being and support student skill development, which could lead to improved learning outcomes and greater innovation in the educational process.

5. Conclusion

The decline in the quality of education in the Maghreb countries and the Arab world, in general, is attributed to various factors, including both those directly related to the educational system and external factors that impact educational quality and academic performance. These factors can be summarized as follows:

Internal Factors:
- Weak Planning and Lack of Effective Educational Policies: Inadequate strategic planning and absence of well-developed educational policies hinder the development of a robust educational system.
- Imported Curricula: The adoption of foreign educational programs that do not reflect the realities of the Maghreb society or align with its needs.
- Constant Changes in Educational Policy: Frequent, immature attempts at reform disrupt the stability and effectiveness of the educational system.
- Lack of Coordination and Integration: Insufficient alignment and cooperation between the educational system and other sectors.
- Theoretical Emphasis: A dominance of theoretical curricula focused on rote learning, neglecting practical applications.
- Curriculum Overload: Overburdened programs and curricula lacking recreational aspects.
- Outdated Educational Tools: Primitive teaching aids that fail to keep pace with scientific and technological advancements.

External Factors:
- Weak Religious and Moral Guidance: Both teachers and students lack strong ethical and religious foundations.
- Insufficient Funding: Limited financial resources allocated to the education sector stifle creativity and excellence.
- Technological Lag: Failure to keep up with scientific and technological advancements, and a lack of libraries, laboratories, and supportive equipment.
- Negative Impact of Media: Ineffective and distracting media that often does not support educational principles.
- Lack of Security and Stability: The recent conflicts in many Arab countries have led to a lack of security and stability, adversely affecting education.
- Poverty: The widespread phenomenon of poverty and the inability of many students to continue their studies.
- Prevalence of Social Issues: The frightening spread of social issues, such as cheap and accessible drugs among students, exacerbates educational challenges.

These factors collectively contribute to the decline in educational quality and performance, highlighting the need for comprehensive reforms and improvements within both internal and external dimensions of the educational system.

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